

Sartre and Marxism: An Ontological Analysis

Haosen Liang

International Department, The
Affiliated High School of SCNU,
Guangzhou, China
Corresponding Writer: lianghs.
harry@gmail.com

Abstract:

This paper analyzes why Jean-Paul Sartre's ontology in Being and Nothingness necessitates its historical realization in a political and philosophical engagement with Marxism. After briefing the historical context of Sartre's Marxist stance in the first part, the paper begins the second part by demonstrating the core of Sartrean ontology: the being-for-itself as a negation condemned to radical freedom. It then, in the third part, presents how this negative freedom becomes systematically alienated in capitalism. The alienation, under Sartre's analysis, dialectically generates a pressure towards its own overcoming realized in Marxist praxis. The fourth part of the paper addresses possible objections from Alfred Betschart and Althusserian structuralism. In conclusion, the paper argues that Marxist revolutionary praxis represents the only coherent historical vehicle for the Sartrean realization of authenticity, for it fulfills the ontological imperative of negation by the collective destruction of the structures that alienate human freedom in capitalism. To be an authentic person in the modern epoch is, therefore, to adopt a Marxist stance.

Keywords: Sartrean ontology; Freedom; Marxism; Alienation.

1. Introduction

The political trajectory of Jean-Paul Sartre from the Second World War to May '68 was an elegant curve that started from a stance of unaligned critical independence to the infinite approach to the communist movement and an idiosyncratic embrace of Marxism. Based on this well-documented history, scholars have meticulously traced his evolving alliances with the French Communist Party, his polemics with Camus, and his activism in conflicts from Algeria to Vietnam. However, this paper doesn't intend a major focus on Sartre's biography, for it only presents the

phenomenon of Sartre's relationship with Marxism. Sartre's entire corpus can be read as a lifelong project to reconcile the radical freedom of the individual consciousness in his philosophy with the oppressive structures of capitalist society: from the tension between the individual freedom and the situated individual existence with the Other in Being and Nothingness to the collective liberation of the human species in communism against capitalist society dominated by scarcity in Critique of Dialectical Reason. Therefore, this paper will focus on the philosophy of political life inherent in Sartre's existentialism.

Sartrean existentialism locates the necessary arena for this historical practice in Marxism through the internal reason of its ontology. This journey from the abstract for-itself to the communist militant is a philosophical necessity arising from the structure of human reality itself. Through an analytical interpretation of Sartre's core ontological commitments, this paper will reveal how a being defined by negation and projective freedom is compelled to seek its realization in the revolutionary negation of class society within the specific historical situation of capitalism. The argument for this philosophical reason will start with the delineation of the fundamental tenets of Sartrean ontology in Being and Nothingness that establishes the for-itself as a negative freedom situated between facticity and transcendence. The concern then flows to how these ontological structures pressure toward a historical dialectic, wherein the systemic alienation of capitalism becomes the definitive situation that freedom must negate in the theoretical and practical framework provided by Marxism. Following the analysis, the paper will address and refute major charges from Alfred Betschart in his article Sartre was not a Marxist and Althusserianism against it. In conclusion will affirm the necessity of the synthesis that for the Sartrean subject that has been condemned to freedom, Marxist praxis emerges in the modern era as the ultimate form of authenticity.

2. The ontology of Sartre's existentialism

The objective of this part is to briefly demonstrate the Sartrean ontology that Sartre delineated in Being and Nothingness, which would later function as the ontological foundation of his Marxist theory and praxis. In this sense, this part argues that Sartrean ontology presents the human being as a dynamic and perpetual dialectical tension between its facticity and its transcendence. This internal dialectical conflict, rooted in the very nature of consciousness as a "nothingness," is the ontological source of negation that characterizes the human being.

2.1 The Fundamental Binary: Being-in-Itself vs. Being-for-Itself

Sartrean ontology begins with a distinction drawn between two modes of being: being-in-itself and being-for-itself. The former, being-in-itself, depicts the mode of existence of non-conscious objects. "Being is. Being is in-itself. Being is what it is" [1]. In the Sartrean sense, this mode of existence is always predetermined by its essence that has been paved before its being. Therefore, being-in-itself is entirely self-identical. Its lack of inner conflict keeps it in its solid form of being; its completeness renders its

being static. In a more severe sense, being-in-itself is contingent— "de trop" (superfluous)—as it appears without reason or necessity.

In opposition stands being-for-itself, the mode of being of the human consciousness. The for-itself is defined by lack and negation. Sartre depicts it by its non-coincidence with itself: "The being of consciousness is a being such that in its being, its being is in question in so far as this being implies a being other than itself" [1]. The core of for-itself, or the human consciousness, is nothingness. The nothingness generates negation as a power so that the for-itself exists as a flight from what it was toward what it is not yet. This primordial relation is dialectical: the for-itself is unintelligible except as a nihilation of the in-itself, a rupture in the solid plenum of being from which it arises.

2.2 The Core of Consciousness: Radical Freedom and Nothingness

The activity of the for-itself is nihilation. This active process introduces negation, absence, and possibility into human beings. "The nihilation is the rock upon which facticity founders... it is because consciousness is nihilation that it can be the foundation of its own nothingness" [1]. Consciousness is not a passive receptacle but an active questioning that opens the possibility for negative answers. Meanwhile, to perceive an object is to be aware that one is not that object. This power of negation is the foundation of all significance.

This nihilating power is synonymous with freedom. In Sartrean ontology, freedom is not a property possessed by a pre-existing subject but a necessary inner structure of being-for-itself generated by the nothingness. "We are condemned to be free," Sartre famously declared, "because we are a freedom which chooses, but we are not a foundation of our freedom. We are thrown into freedom" [2]. Freedom is a condemnation, unbearable and inescapable, for being-for-itself is absolutely responsible for a world that provides no justification for its choices. Therefore, the for-itself is this constant, anguished project of making itself in a situation it did not choose.

2.3 The Situation: Facticity and Transcendence

Human freedom is not abstract but always situated. This situation is constituted of two elements. The first is facticity. Facticity is the given facts of individual existence, including but not limited to the physical body, the past, and the social position. In summary, facticity is the individual's "thrownness" into a world not created by the individual. Facticity is the in-itself dimension of the for-itself; it is the weight of the given. The second element is transcendence. It is the power of the for-itself to surpass its facticity toward a future possibility. "Human reality is

its own surpassing toward what it lacks; it surpasses itself toward the particular being which it would be if it were what it is” [1]. This is the projective, self-making movement of consciousness.

Facticity restricts the scope of human freedom, while transcendence drives humans to break through this restriction, and the two together form a dialectical tension. The human being is the synthesis of this dialectical tension. A human being is neither a pure facticity as a determined object nor pure transcendence as a disembodied spirit. It is a freedom that is situated and a facticity that is constantly surpassed. For example, my past as a coward never necessarily determines my present actions. My present freedom gives the past its meaning: I can negate my past by acting courageously at this very moment, and the negation must happen in the courageous action itself, or I can accept cowardice as my definition, thereby falling into bad faith. In summary, Sartrean ontology presents the human being fractured by a fundamental dialectic. The for-itself is a negating activity condemned to freedom. It exists in a perpetual state of tension between the facticity it inherits and the transcendence it must project. This ontological framework that establishes the human being’s structure of being as a negative freedom provides the necessary foundation for understanding how such a being must respond when its fundamental project of freedom is systematically alienated within a concrete historical system. The stage is now set to introduce how capitalism transforms this ontological struggle into a historical one.

3. The Historical Dialectic: From Ontological Negation to Marxist Praxis

Having ontologically established the being-for-itself as a negating freedom condemned to project itself within a situation, the argument shall now discuss the historical dimension of this situation, where the for-itself is thrown into a world of material scarcity. This confrontation forges a necessary link between Sartrean ontology and Marxist praxis. Therefore, this section argues that the systemic alienation of capitalism constitutes the modern situation that the for-itself is compelled to overcome in its mode of being as negation. In this sense, Marxism, as the systemic theory providing the analysis of alienation and the praxis for its negation, emerges as the historical and theoretical fulfillment of this ontological compulsion.

3.1 The Sartrean Dialectic: History Producing Its Own Negating Force

The transition from mere ontological theory to historical praxis is mediated by the dialectic of the “practice-inert”. If, as argued in the second part, the freedom of the for-it-

self is fundamentally a projective and objectifying praxis, then its activity naturally deposits itself in the world through labor, institutions, and social systems. However, this creative activity contains the seed of its own alienation. Over time, these objectifications congeal into an independent reality that Sartre called the “practice-inert,” which then exerts an inverse power over the praxis that created it. For example, the worker’s freedom builds the factory out of nowhere, but the factory, as a part of the practice-inert, subsequently dominates the worker’s life and value. Thus, freedom’s own product becomes its prison, transforming the creator into a creature of its creation. This reversal generates the motor of historical dialectic. The alienated system, or History in its negative weight, does not extinguish the freedom it oppresses. Instead, it generates a profound “need”—the lived experience of ontological freedom itself apprehending its own systemic negation as a lack. Sartre fundamentally reconceives the human subject in the Critique as “l’homme du besoin”—“man of need” [3]. This need is not merely biological scarcity but the ontological condition of freedom experiencing itself as alienated. The oppressed individual or class thereby becomes the embodied “force to negate itself” that the system has dialectically produced [4]. History, therefore, is not a predetermined progression but a “Manichaean struggle” [5] born from the internal contradiction of praxis turning against itself.

3.2 The Encounter with the Other: The Fourfold Alienation

This systemic alienation is not an abstract economic law but is lived interpersonally through what Sartre termed the “Look”. The Look of the capitalist or the state official is the phenomenological experience of the entire practice-inert; it is the moment when the systemic violence of alienation is felt as a personal objectification, reducing the free for-itself to a determined thing-in-itself within another’s world.

This Sartrean framework finds its necessary correlative in Marx’s economic analysis. The fourfold alienation Marx outlines in the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844 [6] can be understood as the specific economic structuration of this ontological conflict. For instance, alienation from the product of labor means workers cannot control or lay claim to the goods they produce; alienation from productive activity refers to work becoming an external, forced activity rather than a free expression of human capacity. Alienation from the product of labor is the material basis of the capitalist’s Look, which sees the worker as an instrument. Alienation from productive activity is the enforced bad faith where the worker’s fundamental nature as projective praxis is denied, reduced to a

mere means of subsistence. Furthermore, alienation from species-being manifests as the stifling of our communal and creative nature, reducing life to individual competition; alienation from other people establishes social relations as instrumental and hostile rather than cooperative. Alienation from species-being is the systemic prevention of realizing our essence as creative, social producers—an essence that, for Sartre, is freedom-as-negation. Finally, alienation that alienates person from person is the social totality of the Look, where scarcity and class structure transform all human relationships into a Sartrean hell of mutual objectification and conflict. This synthesis demonstrates that Marx provides the economic theory for the alienation whose lived reality Sartre so powerfully describes.

3.3 Marxism as the Fulfillment of the Dialectic

Given that the for-itself's situation is one of systemic alienation, its ontological imperative to negate its facticity must take the form of negating this system. Marxism is the fulfillment of this imperative because it alone provides the concrete theory and praxis for this total negation.

First, Marxism constitutes the only adequate theory of the practice-inert of capitalism. It scientifically names the system, diagnoses its constitutive contradiction between the mode and relations of production, and identifies the proletariat as the “negating force”—the class whose historical position makes it the conscious embodiment of the system's internal need for its own overthrow. It thus gives a clear, historical consciousness to the anguished, pre-reflective need generated by alienation.

Consequently, Marxist revolutionary praxis is the macro-historical manifestation of the for-itself's negating power. It is the project of the “group-in-fusion” consciously aiming to overcome the alienated objectifications of class society. This collective action represents the “negation of the negation”: where the first negation was freedom's alienation into the practice-inert, the second is freedom's conscious, collective action to destroy that alienating structure. To be authentic—to assume one's condemned freedom lucidly within the situation of capitalism—is therefore to engage in this project. In this precise sense, Sartrean existentialism finds its necessary historical realization in Marxist praxis.

Crucially, following Allan's analysis, this is a fulfillment without utopian guarantees [5]. Sartre “constricts” the Marxist dialectic, arguing that even a successful revolution cannot abolish the fundamental structures of praxis—its partiality, its tendency to create new residues, and the enduring backdrop of scarcity [5]. Alienation remains a permanent possibility. Thus, Marxism fulfills the Sartrean dialectic not by promising an end to history, but by

providing the perpetual, collective vehicle through which the for-itself's endless project of negation must be waged against the totalizing structures of its alienation. It is the historical answer to the ontological problem.

4. Possible Objections and Responses

4.1 The Historical-Philosophical Impossibility: “Sartre Was Not a Marxist”

A compelling school of thought, articulated by scholars like Alfred Betschart and echoed by Sartre's contemporaries, argues that “existential Marxism” is a *contradictio in adiecto*—a contradiction in terms. This position holds that Sartre was never genuinely a Marxist, for several reasons. First, his core philosophical commitments are irreconcilable with Marxism: his radical, ontological freedom clashes with Marxist determinism (“freedom as the insight into necessity”); his axiom that “existence precedes essence” opposes the Hegelian-Marxist dialectic; and his rejection of a dialectics of nature severs the human world from the materialist monism central to Marxism [7]. Second, his political theory replaces the Marxist primacy of class as the agent of history with the group-in-fusion, a volatile and ultimately self-destructing entity prone to “terror-fraternity” [7]. Finally, biographically, Sartre showed little interest in Marx's economic theory, was more focused on oppression than economic exploitation, and in his final years, returned to his early anarchist leanings, stating that his philosophy and Marxism were ultimately “quite separate” [7].

This objection powerfully highlights the real tensions without dissolving the synthesis. The argument of this paper is not that Sartre became an orthodox Marxist, but that his ontology pressures toward a Marxist praxis as its most coherent historical expression. The cited incompatibilities are real but exist at the level of totalizing philosophical systems. The synthesis occurs at the level of the historical situation. Sartre's own declaration that Marxism is the “unsurpassable philosophy of our time” [8] is not merely a *captatio benevolentiae* but a recognition that Marxism alone provides the comprehensive analysis of the capitalist “practice-inert” that systematically alienates the very freedom his ontology describes. As Thomas Flynn argues, while Sartre may have “failed the test for membership in the Marxist family” on doctrinal grounds, his work constitutes a “Marxist existentialism” by forging “a philosophy of freedom that takes the Marxist challenge with utmost seriousness” [9]. The shift from class to group does not reject revolutionary action but reconceives its micro-foundations, describing how collective agency actually emerges from seriality. This aligns with George Allan's analysis

that Sartre, by “constricting” the Marxist dialectic, does not abandon it but rather grounds it in a more rigorous account of practical agency, which makes the movement of history a product of human action rather than a metaphysical guarantee [5]. Ultimately, the synthesis is not one of pure theory but of a “situated ethics”: within the specific historical situation of capitalist alienation, the Sartrean imperative of authenticity demands a project of total negation, for which Marxism is the only available, coherent vehicle.

4.2 Althusserian Structuralism

The most sophisticated challenge comes from Louis Althusser, who categorically rejected Sartre’s existentialism as a “theoretical humanism” [10]. For Althusser, the very concept of an autonomous, self-making subject is an ideological product of the bourgeois epoch, a pre-scientific myth that cannot found a real political science. Marxism, in his view, is a science of history’s impersonal structures and laws, from which the “subject” must be expunged. To center the human subject, even an anguished one, is to remain trapped in the ideology that Marxism seeks to analyze and overcome.

While Althusser correctly identifies the human subject as Sartre’s philosophical starting point, he mischaracterizes its nature. The Sartrean subject is not the sovereign, self-transparent cogito of Cartesian tradition. It is, from the outset, a lacking, anguished, and responsible being, whose freedom is a condemnation, not a possession. Sartre’s humanism is not a bland, celebratory humanism but an ethical imperative born from the recognition of our shared condition of freedom and the hell of mutual objectification. As Thomas R. Flynn notes, “Sartre’s ‘humanism’ is primarily a moral stance in favor of the oppressed” [9]. The goal of this humanism is to create a world where humans are no longer alienated from their creative praxis and from one another—a goal that orthodox Marxism, for all its scientific claims, implicitly shares. The Sartrean subject, far from being an ideological fiction, is the very site where the contradictions of the structure are lived and, ultimately, negated.

5. Conclusion

The philosophical journey in this paper reveals a profound and necessary synthesis. The path from the abstract, nihilating for-itself to the committed communist militant is not a betrayal of Sartrean principles but their fullest and most coherent historical realization. The negation that lies

at the very heart of consciousness, the very source of its anguish and its dignity, finds its true, concrete vocation in the collective negation of class society. The ontological struggle between facticity and transcendence achieves its historical clarity in the Manichean struggle between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie, between the force of creative praxis and the inertia of the capitalist practice-inert. The enduring power of this synthesis is its compelling, if demanding, conclusion: to be truly Sartrean in the twentieth century—to lucidly assume one’s condemned freedom within the specific situation of advanced capitalism—one must ultimately become a Marxist. The revolutionary project, with its understanding of alienation and its praxis of total negation, emerges not as one political option among others, but as the highest form of authenticity. It is the historical answer to the ontological problem, the collective project through which the for-itself’s endless, anguished project of self-making finally confronts and seeks to dismantle the totalizing structures of its alienation. In this light, Marxism is the necessary political life of Sartrean freedom.

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