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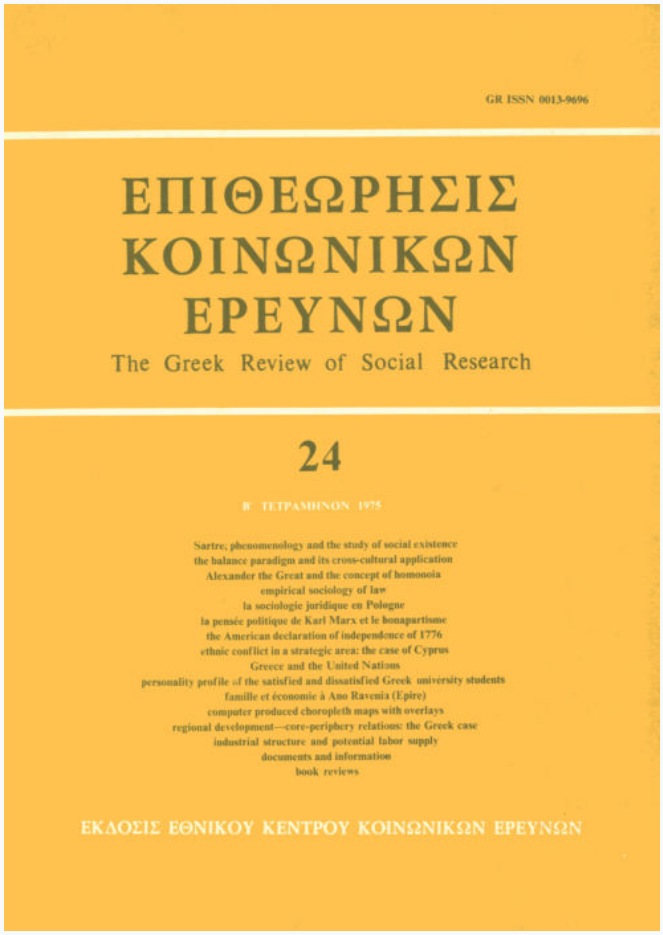
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Sartre, phenomenology and the study of social existence

by

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The following discussion is concerned with the presentation and critical evaluation of the major themes which Jean-Paul Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique* has contributed to the growth of a radical phenomenology.[1] The present work is based on a lengthier study,[2] which, on the whole, conflicts with the great majority of commentaries addressed to the *Critique*. Our contention here is that Sartre has undertaken a critical reconstruction of the meaning of social existence at its most immediate level for the purpose of revealing that the praxis of concrete historical subjects can be the only foundation of the materialist dialectic.

The term «revealing» is used here in a double sense: First, it designates the essential function of phenomenology which is to render phenomenal, or bring to light the meaning of human existence hidden underneath social and/or intellectual schemata. And secondly, this process of revelation is applied to the dialectic of history which has always presupposed the need for understanding man but which has grown increasingly impervious to his truth. Phenomenology then serves Sartre as a critical tool for freeing the historical dialectic from the quasi-metaphysical distortions generated by deterministic Marxism and for identifying the quest for historical knowledge and truth with the study of «praxis,» i. e., of man as a social being, the producer in history and *of* history under definite circumstances. In Sartre's own words:

> In the last analysis I consider the materialist dialectic as the only mode of conceiving historical evolution. If I have written a book on it, it was not in order to modify it but in order to try and see whether I could liberate it from a much too often erroneous usage and how I could restore to it its clarity, that is essentially the transparency—yet unseen though postulated—between man and man.[3]

In different terms, without disputing the significance of the socio-economic forces and relations comprising

1. Jean-Paul Sartre, *Critique de la raison dialectique* (précédé de «Questions de méthode»), Tome I: *Théorie des ensembles humains* (Paris: Gallimard, 1960). «Questions of Method», the opening section of the book, is the only part that has been translated into English under the title *Search for a Method.* H. Barnes, trans. (New York: Vintage Books, 1968). For purposes of convenience, most references to the English text are cited here as *SFAM* while those from the main body of the *Critique* are cited as *CRD*.

2. Eleni Mahaira-Odoni, *Sartre's Contribution to the Phenomenology of Marxism* (unpublished Ph. D. dissertation, Department of Political Science, Boston University, January 1974).

3. From a conference given by Sartre in Rome in 1961, published only in Italian as «Soggettività e marxismo» by the philosophical review *Aut Aut*, No. 136-7 (luglio-ottobre 1973), p. 157. My translation.

the historical dialectic, our contention here is that Sartre attempts a phenomenological examination of the meaning and the «constitution» that praxis must encompass in order that the root of the dialectic be not an abstract «Reason» or «History» or «Nature» but man himself.

This point of view is clearly opposed to that of the literature addressed to the *Critique* from a hermeneutic angle which is largely prescriptive. With the exception of minor disagreements as to the success of Sartre's undertaking, most critics concur that the purpose of the *Critique* is to synthesize Marxism with his previous existentialism. They claim that Sartre seeks either to commit the individual to social action and/or to build an alternative prototype to Marx's revolutionary model.[1]

In contrast, the position outlined here draws its support from Sartre's methodological point of departure which has been largely ignored by the foregoing lines of interpretation. Our thesis is that unless the relationship between phenomenology, as an existential *method*, and historical materialism is placed in a proper perspective, the scope and the content of the *Critique* become completely incomprehensible.

It is impossible to do justice to the wealth of issues treated by the *Critique* in an essay of this size. Accordingly, this study will undertake a discussion of some of the basic questions raised by the *Critique* in conjunction with the phenomenological approach to the study of history and social existence. We will begin first, with an exposition of the relationship between phenomenology and the historical dialectic in order to provide the general framework of Sartre's inquiry. Then we will turn to the idea of scarcity and its effect upon the simplest conceivable life-world. Following a short discussion on Sartre's theory of alterity which is a theory of practically oriented consciousness, this essay will close with some brief observations on class-existence in the light of the alterity hypothesis.

1. Among the many works that have dealt with the *Critique* and have treated it as a fusion of existentialist ontology and Marxism, cf. Aron, R., *Marxism and the Existentialists* (New York: Harper & Row, 1965); Audry, Colette, *Sartre et la réalité humaine* (Paris: Seghers, 1966); Burnier, M.—A., *Choice of Action* (New York: Random House, 1968); Desan W., *The Marxism of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Doubleday, 1965); Marill-Albérès, R., *Sartre* (Paris: Éditions universitaires, 1967); Odajnyk, W., *Marxism and Existentialism* (New York: Doubleday, 1965); Sheridan, J. F., Jr., *Sartre: The Radical Conversion* (Ohio: Ohio Univ., Press, 1969); Jameson, F., *Marxism and Form* (Princeton, N. J.: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971); McBride, W. L., *Fundamental Change in Law and Society. Hart and Sartre on Revolution* (The Hague: Mouton 1970); McMahon, J. H., *Humans Being: The World of Jean-Paul Sartre* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1971) and Molnar, T. S., *Sartre: Ideologue of Our Time* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1968).

II

It seems best to begin with a discussion of phenomenology first, in relation to Sartre and then, to the historical dialectic so that we can move afterwards to some of the substantive results emerging from this approach. There are two reasons warranting this initial excursion into the relevance of phenomenology: first, though the method as well as the philosophical starting point of radical phenomenology—the meaning of concretely lived social existence—constitute the focus of the *Critique*, Sartre mentions phenomenology only once, in a footnote! In other words, Sartre uses many terms to characterize the word— he speaks of a «reflexive» or «comprehensive» ctitique which uses the «ideology of existence» and the method of an «analytical regression» and of a critique which aims at «rational non-knowledge.» These are indeed phenomenological terms, but they are also part of «ordinary» philosophical discourse. As a result, only among phenomenologists in Sartre's work recognized for what it is.[2] However, in support of Sartre's choice of terms, we note that though there is little disagreement among phenomenologists concerning the *methods* of the field, the *scope* of phenomenology is often at issue: Sartre is not interested in phenomenology as a «theory of meaning» but rather in its radical aspect as a «philosophy of being»—a trend that Husserl himself encouraged sufficiently in his late period work.[3]

This brings us to the second reason for considering the importance of phenomenology in Sartre's enterprise. Not only does he use eclectic phenomenolog-

2. Cf. Spiegelberg, H., *The Phenomenological Movement* Vol. II (The Hague: M. Nijhoff (1971), p. 449. Also, Paci, Enzo, *Funzione delle scienze e significato dell'uomo* (Milano, 1964), p. 347 ff.

3. Cf. Natanson, M., *Edmund Husserl: Philosopher of Infinite Tasks* (Evanston, Ill: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973). In support of this transcendental direction in Husserl's *The Crisis of European Sciences*, see Rovatti, P.A., «Marcuse and *The Crisis...*» in *Telos*, No. 1 (Spring 1968), pp. 113-5, and especially the Paci work, *op.cit.*, as a whole. The present work which originated in the USA, had to concentrate heavily on the analytic-synthetic character of Sartre's work before its fruits—subjectivity and the role of alterity—could be approached. The few notable exceptions among North Americans who recognize the validity of the bond between phenomenology and historical materialism cannot fill the gap. Cf. James M. Edie, «Sartre as Phenomenologist and as Existential Psychoanalyst»; Lee, E.N. and Mandelbaum, M., *Phenomenology and Existentialism* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1967); John O'Neill, «Introduction» to Hyppolite, Jean, *Studies on Marx and Hegel* (New York: Basic Books, 1969). In contrast, we find that European philosophers and especially the Italians Paci and Rovatti and the German Klaus Hartmann, have called wide attention to the stature of the *CRD*, perhaps more so than in France where, of course, Sartre has had to share the stage with the structuralists.

ical categories (such as, «the project», «transcendence,» «subjectivity,» the «other», etc.) which are already part of his old existentialist vocabulary; the meager English edition of the *Critique* (1/7 of the original) further complicates matters through an inadequate introduction and a misrepresentation of at least 2 key-terms: critique *réflexive* and *l'intermonde*. «Reflexion», the principle of all phenomenological methodology, is aimed at the study of the stream of consciousness through experiential structures of consciousness itself.[1] We will return to a fuller consideration of Sartre's views on reflexion but for the moment the point is that reflexion is not just another synonym for «thought.»

Also, the phenomenological «intermonde» bears no relation to ancient Epicurean terminology;[2] it refers instead to the «life-world»—what Husserl calls *das Lebenswelt*. The life-world is the everyday world in which we all live and operate, in accordance with an «unscientific» but comprehensive and fairly coherent valuation of our position, needs and deeds. Insofar as the life-world comprises the source of all human pursuits, phenomenological inquiry posits the study of its *constitution* (i.e., how it is shaped by us and what it therefore means for us) as a primary task.

This means that a phenomenological inquiry into the life-world (the «reflexive» procedure) entails a «going-backwards» from the objective world as described by the categories of the social sciences to another level of objectivity, where the world is made by concrete actors according to their own conception of what constitutes their (objective) situation.[3] In Sartre's own words:

> I recognize that I have sought to elaborate a philosophy of reflexion, not in a sense where reflexion would be the spirit reflecting on itself, but rather a philosophy which, through the mediation of reflexion, seeks to define, at the level of some distance from it, the person and the social group in their objectivity by starting from subjectivity. In fact, this is an analytical regression which must afterwards lead to the synthetic progression, to history and thus to the real and specific role of subjectivity.[4]

It is now almost certain that Sartre will never perform the «synthetic progression» he had planned as a second volume of the *Critique* since he now seems to have lost his eyesight.[5] Nonetheless, our goal here is to show that as it stands, the *Critique* represents a valuable example of «oriented» phenomenological analysis; that is, a regression into the meaning of the life-world—into the constitution of what men perceive as the material and ideational content of their world in the course, and within the framework of a history that evolves dialectically. Moreover, insofar as this composite phenomenological-materialist approach is aimed at understanding human consciousness, Sartre's *Critique* and many of his subsequent writings stand as constant reminders of the one dimension that social science has practically forgotten—man himself.

III

Sartre's turn to the phenomenological method as an instrument for concretizing the general categories of historical materialism resulted from the dilemma of finding himself caught between two idealisms—those of a rootless existentialism and of a mechanistic, deterministic Marxism. On the one hand, by the late nineteen-forties Sartre was already disenchanted with the manner in which the ontology of *L'Etre et le Néant* had treated the problems of subject-object dualism. On the other, having rejected the positivist point of view, he became convinced that there was little in common between Marx's ideas and the ideologically frozen, «scientific» brand of materialism that French-speaking Marxists were dispensing.[6]

In the hands of Soviet-practice apologists and neo-naturalists, Marx's heuristic approach toward the abstract categories of political economy was remolded into a «science» of immutable laws and processes. Thus, the major thrust of historical materialism, i.e., the idea that behind pseudo-concrete categories lay

1. E. Husserl, *Ideas*, 78a. Trans. by W. R. Boyce Gibson (New York: Collier Books, 1972). H. Barnes translates Sartre's *réflexion* and *réflexive* as «reflection» and «reflective.» The terms are not incorrect but I prefer reflexion because it seems freer of contemplative implications--as the case of a «reflexive verb.»

2. In translating *l'intermonde*, H. Barnes gives the... *Larousse* definition of «an Epicurean concept of space between the two worlds»! *SFAM*, p. 76. P. Piccone summarizes the Husserlian *Lebenswelt* as follows:

«The *Lebenswelt* is that domain of experience which is both precategorical and categorical.... It involves the preconceptual apprehension of reality, the sorting out of concepts needed to abstract certain crucial features of that reality, and the conceptualizing of those features of reality deemed relevant, i.e., determined as essential in relation to some *telos* itself given to us as need in the *Lebesnwelt*.... It is also the domain in which concepts are invented and historical projects are formulated.... All of Husserl's account is meant to uncover the transcendental subjectivity which generated these concepts and which is constantly repressed in *mundane* experience, i. e., the alienated experience of every day life under certain socio-historical conditions». In «Phenomenological Marxism,» *Telos*, no 9 (Fall 1971), pp. 21-5.

3. On the synthesis of the phenomenological-regressive method, cf. *SFAM*, p. 52n.

4. From the 1961 Rome conference on «Soggettività e marxismo», *op. cit.*, p. 158.

5. «Sartre at Seventy: An Interview,» *The New York Review of Books*, Vol. XXII, No. 13 (August 15, 1975), p. 10.

6. «There are two ways to fall into idealism: the one consists of dissolving the real in subjectivity; the other in denying all real subjectivityi n the interests of objectivity.» *SFAM*, p. 33. Cf. also pp. 18-21.

nothing other than real, human, socio-economic relations, was reduced to an idealist dogma that ignored entirely the need for deeper understanding of human praxis and consciousness.[1] In effect, says Sartre, Marx himself used the phenomenological method in regressing from the superficiality of economic concepts to the network of actual social relations that such concepts presupposed.[2] In other words, as a number of social scientists have suggested, the validity of Marx's philosophical concepts—human essence, objectification, alienation, etc.—was grounded in his concrete, i.e., economic research which was actually premised on such concepts.[3]

Sartre's insight into the problems generated by the ideology of «orthodox» Marxism was by no means original. The need for revitalizing the humanist dimension occluded by determinism had already pointed to phenomenology as one of the most crucial mediations since Marcuse's work in the late nineteen-twenties.[4] And yet, in Sartre's case, the persistence of the deterministic-idealist climate among French intellectuals[5] moved him even farther from trying to understand the real meaning of the historical dialectic. Already a practicing disciple of Husserl (however idiosyncratic[6]), he used phenomenology's preoccupation with reality to absolutize and, thus, render existentialism's inquiry into human reality abstract.[7]

Eventually, in the nineteen-fifties Sartre came to the realization that on the one hand, existentialism as an ideology should be superceded while on the other, the only way that existentialism could wither in this *Aufhebung* was through its «inoculating» the equally hopeless historical materialism which had initially bred it.[8] In other words, the «ideology of existence» and its phenomenological method was to serve as a mediation for divesting historical materialism from the abstract, «commodity-type» character it had acquired.[9]

But this is not the only role that the method of existentialism was called upon to play. Sartre was not alone in believing that,all theoretical aberrations aside, Marx's work itself was in earnest need of further concretization with respect to its «real-life» or «anthropological» foundations.[10] Sartre concedes that positivist-oriented social sciences as well as structuralist anthropology and sociology have contributed greatly to the understanding of a historical process marked by human products and objects of all types. Yet, the social sciences have still to really teach us something about the men who make objects and whose lives are in turn shaped by them. Thus,

> The true role of the «ideologies of existence» is not to describe an abstract «human reality» which has never existed, but constantly to remind anthropology of the existential dimension of the processes studied. Anthropology studies only objects. Now man is the being by whom becoming-an-object comes to man. Anthropology will deserve its name only if it replaces the study of human objects by the study of the various processes of becoming-an-object.[11]

Precisely because historical materialism provides the «only possible anthropology which can be at once historical and structural»,[12] it must come to terms

1. Cf. the contrast between «Marxists» and Marx in Sartre's following statement:

«Marxist formalism is a project of elimination. The method is identical with the Terror in its inflexible refusal to *differentiate*; its goal is total assimilation at the least possible effort.... Marx was so far from this false universality that he attempted to generate his knowledge dialectically in man, rising progressively from the broadest determinations to the most precise.» *Ibid.*, pp. 50-1.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-51. Cf. also, Paci, E., *op. cit.*, pp. 410-11, 414. On Marx's regressive method with respect to the study of history, cf. also, Domarchi, Jean, *Marx et l'histoire* (Paris: Editions de l'Herne, 1972), p. 47.

3. Cf. also, Mandel, Ernest, *The Formation of the Economic Thought of Karl Marx* (New York & London: Monthly Review Press, 1971), pp. 209-10 *et passim*; Mészáros, I., *Marx's Theory of Alienation* (London: Merlin Press, 1972), pp. 230-2.

4. For a concise exposition of this trend, cf. P. Piccone, *op. cit.*, pp. 7-8. He continues with a brief sketch of theorists from Marcuse to Kojève, Kosik, Tran duc Thao, Henri Lefebvre, Merleau-Ponty, etc.

5. Among them, Sartre includes Lukács and comments incisively that the latter's objective idealism (as opposed to his own subjectivist brand) was equally incapable of renewing historical materialism. *SFAM*, p. 21.

6. When Sartre claims affinity with Husserl and a dissociation from Heidegger (*ibid.*, pp. 38-9; 15), he still stands on their difference on the issue of the «pure ego». Of course this does not make him less than a good phenomenologist: in H. Spiegelberg's opinion, in phenomenology Sartre «outranks any other French thinker,» *op. cit.*, p. 449. Cf. also, James M. Edie, *op. cit.*, pp. 141-9; A. Gurwitsch, «Problems of the Life-World» in M. Natanson, ed., *Phenomenology and Social Reality* (The Hague: M. Nijhoff, 1970), pp. 39-40.

7. Cf. *SFAM*, pp. 18-21, 28, 31, 37, 52-3 and 136.

8. *Ibid.*, p. xxxiv, 8.

9. *Ibid.*, p. 179. The notion that ideas too can function as commodities when they are produced in the interest of a ruling ideological or scientific system and are thus devoid of all human content and value is one of Sartre's most incisive formulations. He calls these idealist constructs «idea-objects» and returns to them again in the main body of the *Critique* (cf. also, *SFAM*, p. 33n, 68, 83, 163 and *CRD*, pp. 301-2, 343-5). Therefore, P. Piccone's comment about the supposed «underdevelopment» of this notion in the text remains unwarranted. *op. cit.*, p. 17. Notice also that Sartre's point of view closely parallels Husserl's critique of «the crisis of European sciences» for identical reasons.

10. *SFAM*, p. 52 ff., 133, 137, 143, 165, *et passim*. In this connexion, witness the works of Rovatti, Paci, H. Lefebvre and Kosik among the many Marxist-oriented theoreticians seeking to ground the validity of the historical dialectic in the life-world and especially in daily life.

11. *Ibid.*, p. 174.

12. *Ibid.*, pp. 174-5.

with the pre-categorical foundations of political economy, i.e., with the structure of the parameters within which human praxis creates decisions, values, needs and history itself. «The *methodological* principle which holds that certitude begins with reflexion in no way contradicts the *anthropological* principle which defines the concrete person by his materiality,» explains Sartre.[1] Phenomenology is admirably suited to stand as a «moment» in the renewal of the dialectic, to the degree that it aims at «constituting the causes» of praxis, that is the internal dependencies encountered and created by subjects in the course of praxis that seeks to unify its world.[2]

At this point it becomes obvious that in his *Critique* — and since then, upon numerous occasions — Sartre is voicing some crucial philosophical objections regarding the scope and method of the social sciences, or what he calls «anthropology».[3] More specifically, the structuralist approach to the human sciences, insofar as it claims a positive contribution to the elucidation of a dialectical human history, remains until today Sartre's main object of attack. Against the structuralists (from Lévi-Strauss, Althusser, Pouillon, to Lacan, Foucault, the «Tel Quel» and the «Quinzaine» groups), Sartre has counterposed a consistently Marxian point of view which, in essence, defies the reduction of praxis to an object, no matter how alienated in its result. In other words, despite the fact that in our history praxis is more often than not «detotalized»—stripped of its unity and its organic relation to a projected *telos*— and becomes engulfed in all kinds of socio-economic «structures,» praxis is the backbone of historical events.[4] To ontologize totalities (structures) because they lend themselves to «scientific» (analytical) study and to remove the living subjects from the analysis of processes à la Althusser *et al.*, is to disregard the fundamental claim of historical materialism whereby men make circumstances to the same degree that circumstances make men. As a dialectic, history makes sense only if human praxis is a totalization, interiorizing the external and re-exteriorizing the internal: this can only mean that the relationship (dialectical) between «conditions» and «actors» *in* history does not originate *from* History or Matter (Nature) but from man in his necessary relation to Nature.[5] In sum, structures do not make history, neither do economic contradictions; men make it and if indeed they make it «badly,» if their totalizations are lost in petrified structures and processes, then men and, above all, their consciousness are the great unknowns.[6]

In this connexion, Sartre holds that the relationship between exteriority and interiority in history is predominantly «anti-dialectical.»[7] This means that human consciousness (interiority) is strongly deflected from a clear perception of its needs and goals because of a faulty awareness of the precise meaning of its objective condition; as a result of this exteroconditioning from surrounding processes, human consciousness, which is dependent upon exteriority for its direction translates itself into praxis which both reproduces *and* alters the internal complexion of such processes. Thus, «praxis-process» is «anti-dialectical» in the sense that it results in a minimal realization of human *telos*.[8] Nonetheless, precisely because human consciousness is indeed engraved in the constitution of all social objects, categories and processes, when the latter are labeled as «structures» they defy all further effort into understanding their composition. The idea of «structure» has grown into an analytical-functionalist category into which events are fitted without question as to their provenance so that, in essence, whatever happens is *attributed* to the existence of «structure.»[9] The absence of an

1. *Ibid.*, p. 32, n. 9.

2. Sartre asserts that when knowledge is placed once again on the proper anthropological foundation, i. e., on man's praxis, «existentialism will no longer have any reason for being. Absorbed, surpassed, and conserved»—as only a *moment* can be—«by the totalizing movement of philosophy, it will cease to be a particular inquiry and it will become the foundation of all inquiry.» *Ibid.*, p. 181. On the necessity for avoiding a forced synthesis between phenomenology and historical materialism and for confronting the former as a «moment» of the latter, see P. Piccone, *op. cit.*, pp. 11-2.

3. Cf. for example his «L'Anthropologie», *Cahiers de Philosophie*, No. 2, republished in *Situations IX* (Gallimard, 1972) together with other related articles. See also *Situations VIII* (Gallimard, 1972).

4. *SFAM*, pp. 77-8.

5. This is a *necessary* historical relation which entails the dialectic of interiority (conscious, active subjectivity) and exteriority (materiality conditioned by and conditioning praxis). Cf. *CRD*, p. 132, 146, 157 ff. Franco Fergnani suggests that Sartre's idea here is in general agreement with the Marx-Engels notion of historical surpassing. He stresses, however, that Sartre carries this idea further because he starts from an «interior» principle, that is, the definition of the dialectic from the 'inside' or from man himself. In «Soggettività e materialismo in Sartre,» *Aut Aut*, 136-7 (1973), p. 79.

6. On the lack of an adequate Marxian theory of consciousness, cf. *SFAM*, p. 32, 177-81; F. Fergnani, *op. cit.*, p. 72. P. A. Rovatti, «Sartre e il marxismo strutturalistico», *Aut Aut*, No. 136-7 (1973), p. 47.

7. The «anti-dialectic» (or, dialectic «of passivity»), implies an equivalence between alienated praxis and wrought matter (inertia). Sartre further designates this sector of reality as the «pratico-inert». *CRD*, p. 154. F. Fergnani states that, by comparison to Sartre's «pratico-inert», the idea of «structure» betrays a «teleological daltonism» because it denies the difference between the real existence of human ends and the fact that they necessarily or possibly, turn out to be illusions. *op. cit.*, p. 83.

8. *CRD*, *ibid.* Cf. also, Sartre, «Sur moi-même», *Situations* IX, pp. 86-7.

9. Structuralism tends toward functionalism because it is not interested in the explanation of events but, rather, in the

adequate theory of consciousness within the framework of historical materialism cannot be compensated for by the mechanical dismissal of the philosophical problematic posed by the historical subject. The latter is neither a «reflection» nor an epiphenomenon in history and to ignore it in such summary fashion is to misconstrue the meaning of *human* science—not to mention that of philosophy which is anything but «surpassed».[1] It is correct to consider talk about subjectivism as idealistic and abstract. But the fact is that man, who is indeed the most concrete historical entity, has grown into an abstraction for, on the assumption that he constitutes a «known quantity,» the human sciences have hardly studied him.

Yet, if the social sciences were to accept the framework of the phenomenological-materialist synthesis, subjectivity, the starting point of phenomenology as «rigorous science,» would entail an altogether different meaning: as a temporal and transcendental relationship of men with their environment and their past and future, subjectivity becomes indistinguishable from objectivity for it is the foundation of all interhuman understanding and the premise of all scientific communication.[2] In Sartre's words:

> Thus, in *L'Etre et le Néant*, what you could call «subjectivity» is not what it would be for me now, the small margin in an operation whereby an interiorization reexteriorizes itself in an act. But «subjectivity» and «objectivity» seem to me entirely useless notions today, anyway. I might still use the term «objectivity,» I suppose, but only to emphasize that everything is objective. The individual interiorizes his social determinations: he interiorizes the relations of production, the family of his childhood, the historical past, the contemporary institutions, and he then reexteriorizes these in acts and options which necessarily refer us back to them. None of this existed in *L'Etre et le Néant*.[3]

Hence, as long as we are dealing with concrete individuals, i.e., with historical actors related to objectivity on the basis of their intentionality, «subjectivity and objectivity are two moments of the same phenomenon.»[4] In this connexion let us note that the notion of the «individual» has become easy prey at the hands of materialists who assign it (rightly) to positivist bourgeois ideology. Nevertheless we have tried to show that Sartre's position points to an issue that cannot be bypassed either by historical materialism or by the social sciences in general.[5] Phenomenology offers a radical mediation for both by concentrating on the individual as a consciousness objectively related to materiality (past and future) and to others through his body and needs. Any attempt to reduce the individual so conceived to a «statistical average» or to a molecule undergoing the «laws of nature» in Engels' fashion,[6] renders the notion of historical *change* totally unintelligible.

The individual, therefore, must be approached precategorically, that is, in momentary suspension (ἐποχή) and, thus, in abstraction from the economic and social institutions through which the social sciences have so far identified him, though *socially*, the individual is never abstract:

> I take «abstract» here in the sense of *incomplete*. From the point of view of particular reality the individual is not abstract (we might say that he is the concrete itself) but *provided* that one has already found the deeper and deeper determinations which constitute him in his own existence as a historical agent and at the same time, as the product of History.[7]

There are two trains of thought running through Sartre's statement. First, as already indicated, he is saying that man has become abstract because he remains unknown. The second and most important

«discovery of the necessity of the explained element (behaviour, object) in the structure.» J. Topolsky, «Lévi-Strauss and Marx on History,» *History and Theory*, vol. XII, No. 2 (1973), p. 205.

1. Particularly in Althusser's case, the desire to be scientific betrays an implicit fear of philosophy. Cf. *For Marx* (London: Penguin Press, 1969), pp. 125-7, 162. Claude Ambroise points out that this «inferiority complex of non-scientism» among structuralists results in the misuse of scientific formulae and in a naturalism which passes for materialism. Cf. «*L'Idiot de la famille:* una critica letteraria antistrutturalista», *Aut Aut*, No. 136-7 (1973), p. 91.

2. All human experience and activity as well as scientific objectivity rely on the principle of «comprehension,» or *Verstehen*. The latter «is primarily not a method used by the social scientist, but the experiential form in which common-sense thinking takes cognizance of the social cultural world.» Alfred Schutz, «Concept and Theory Formation in the Social Sciences,» in Y. H. Jung, *Existential Phenomenology and Political Theory: A Reader* (Chicago: Regnery, 1972), p. 95. Cf. *SFAM*, pp. 153-9; *CRD*, p. 160.

3. Interview with Jean-Paul Sartre: «Itinerary of a Thought,» *The New Left Review*, No. 58 (Nov. -Dec. 1969), p. 45.

4. Hwa Yol Jung, «An Introductory Essay: The Political Relevance of Existential Phenomenology,» in Jung, H. Y., ed., *op. cit.*, p. xxvi.

5. A. Gramsci, for example, after stating that man exists in a society of other men and things which are not mechanistically or deterministically interrelated, he says:

«It is essential to evolve a theory in which all these relationships are seen as active and in notion, establishing clearly that the source of this activity is man's individual consciousness, which knows, wills, strives, creates, because he already knows, desires, creates, etc. and conceives of himself not as an isolated individual but rich in the potentialities offered by other men and by the society of things of which he must have some knowledge.» From «What is Man?» *The Modern Prince and Other Writings* (New York: International Publishers, 1968), pp. 78-9.

6. Sartre devotes substantial sections of the *Critique* attacking Engels' views from *Anti-Dühring* and the *Dialectics of Nature*. Cf. *SFAM*, p. 57, 87; *CRD*, p. 129 ff, 147, 168-9. From an almost endless list of works with views similar to Sartre's, cf. E. Mandel, *op. cit.*, p. 103; E. Paci, *op. cit.*, p. 290. G. Lichtheim, *Marxism* (New York: Praeger, 1955). pp. 234 ff.

7. *CRD*, p. 143.

point is that phenomenology proceeds through the method of abstraction to reach increasingly concrete levels of reality.[1] The phenomenological critique of historical materialism comprises, in a sense, a regression within a regression. Marx went backwards «from production to the relations of production to the structures of groupings... to the individual» worker.[2] Sartre's territory covers a «deeper» space which is logically prior to Marx's, i.e., the itinerary from worker to man, from the categorical to the pre-categorical level. But though spatiotemporally regressive, Sartre's method relies on progression. That is, he starts from the man in order to reach the worker, «the historical man.»[3] This implies a maximum «bracketing» of the real world (of categories) for the purpose of reconstructing the internal logic of the «life-world» and at all times «without being unfaithful to Marxist principles» where they are pertinent.[4]

Hence, this progressive concretization consists of several stages. Sartre starts first with the factors affecting interiority and praxis in a minimally complex social setting, in order to ascertain the possibility of an initial «negation» in human history. In this connexion, Sartre puts forth his theory of scarcity which, in turn, leads him to the theory of alterity *(l'altérité)*, i. e., a theory of consciousness in relation first, to scarce materiality and, secondly, to the «serial» social formations that Sartre calls «collectives» *(les collectifs)*. It is important to remember that in investigating the life-world of a simple social nucleus, and later the internal framework of class relations, Sartre is not «explaining» their genesis as historical events.[5] Neither is he presenting them in necessary historical sequence at all times.[6] In phenomenology, the inquiry into the *constitution* or *function* of events implies the reconstruction of the meaning of objectivity as perceived by consciousness from its own experience. Hence, constitution is the structure of consciousness, the way it operates in creating meaning out of its wordly experiences and in organizing and acting upon that meaning.[7] Thus, when speaking of the proletariat, for example, Sartre says:

> ... Our intention will not be to define *this* particular class that we call the proletariat: our only goal will be to search for... the *constitution* of a class, for its *function* of totalization (and detotalization) and its dialectical intelligibility (ties of interiority and exteriority, internal structures, relationship to other classes, etc.). In one word, we are not verging on human history, sociology or ethnography: we would rather claim—to parody one of Kant's titles—to be laying the foundations of «Prolegomena to all future anthropology.»[8]

IV

Sartre's inquiry into the role of scarce matter in shaping praxis is probably the most misunderstood aspect of his *Critique*: regardless of persuasion, his critics have construed scarcity as a substitute for the conflict of classes which a «critique of dialectical reason» has supposedly rejected. But, as already stated, Sartre begins by subscribing fully to historical materialism's general description of history whereby socio-economic formations correspond to modes of production which, from the ancient to the capitalist type, divulge an intensifying division of labour and the final division of society into classes. The problem that Sartre has set forth concerns a different *level* of this proposition; a level which is historical in the sense that it is above all «logical.» Namely, the question is, if we grant that history in a series of «negations» among social strata and eventually between classes, where can we attribute the origin of inter-human conflict? Or, is there an element in human history which can be said to have played a consistently negative role in socio-economic organization? In sum, is it not logical to suppose that the possibility for the eventual institutionalization of socio-economic rifts was inherent to our history since, from its inception, social organization depended upon *negative* material circumstances, i. e., on scarcity?[9]

This is, in fact, the crux of Sartre's theory of scarcity which seeks to render intelligible the man-circumstances dialectic at a stage of human history where we cannot rightly speak, either of «economic contradictions» and class struggles and, much less, of idyllic communal organization.[10] Nonetheless, the recon-

1. Cf. Marx's statement: «In the analysis of economic forms, moreover, neither microscopes nor chemical reagents are of use. The force of abstraction must replace both.» *Capital*, 1. Cf. also, Paci, *op. cit.*, pp. 410-4.
2. *CRD*, p. 143.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *SFAM*, p. 57. Cf. also Husserl's statement:
«At the phenomenological standpoint...we 'place in brackets' what has been carried out, 'we do not associate these theses' with our new inquiries; instead of living *in* them and carrying *them* out, we carry out acts of *reflexion* directed towards them, and these we apprehend as the *absolute* Being which they are. We now live entirely in such acts of the second level, whose datum is the infinite field of absolute experiences—*the basic field of Phenomenology.*» *op. cit.*, p. 140.
5. *CRD*, pp. 134, 153.
6. Cf. *CRD*, pp. 153, 155.
7. Cf. E. Husserl, *op. cit.*, p. 230. Natanson, M., *Husserl: Philosopher of Infinite Tasks*, pp. 94-5. Paci, E., *op. cit.*, 454.
8. *CRD*, p. 153. My emphasis.
9. «By rendering to scarcity its importance, we do not return to, I do not know what, pre-Marxist theory about the preeminence of the 'consumption' factor, but we reveal negativity as the implicit motor of the historical dialectic and we render it intelligible. *In the midst of scarcity* all structures of a determined society rest upon its mode of production.» *Idid.*, p. 225.
10. Sartre attacks Engels' romantic and un-substantiated 19th-century ideas about the existence of non-alienated primitive societies. *Ibid.*, p. 218 ff. Engels' views in *Anti-Dühring* have

struction of human intentionality under primitive conditions ought to yield the seeds of later historical stages. Hence the examination of scarcity searches for the phenomenological, *not* the *causal* origin of negativity in the form of scarce matter. For the way, that is, in which scarcity becomes sedimented in the historicity of consciousness to affect the motivation of praxes (their needs and means of realization) as well as intersubjective relations.

In this context, Sartre reaches the following conclusions. First, the discovery of an «unco-operative» environment at the moment of praxis alters each man's perception of the other(s) and renders each human a threat to all humans, hence, «inhuman.» In other words, when scarcity is revealed in the course of praxis that seeks to satisfy need, all other similar and, therefore, equally human praxis acquires an inhuman structure.[1] Therefore, scarcity alters the positive meaning that interhuman relations could otherwise have: others are only objects to be used or avoided, not subject-objects reciprocally helping and being helped.[2] Thus, secondly, exteriority becomes the constituting agent for praxis because it provides consciousness with motivation and means in accordance with circumstances as perceived.[3] The third implication for praxis constituted by scarce materiality concerns the creation of an embryonic value system, a future «superstructure»: the other becomes bad precisely because he is human and, therefore, superfluous with respect to one's subjective need, though necessary as a means to its realization. Sartre's point here is that in order that values and ethical standards be eventually incorporated into ideological systems by organized society, their roots must lie in the most logically rudimentary conditions that could affect intersubjectivity:

> What we are trying to show here is that all of the supposed superstructures are already contained in the infrastructure as structures of the fundamental relation of man to wrought matter and other men.... Not one idea, not one value, not one system would be conceivable if they were not already contained at all levels of experience and under variable forms, in all the moments of activity and alienation....[4]

Hence, having started from strictly phenomenological principles («material reality,» says Husserl, as the lowest formation remains in the last resort the foundation of all other realities and therefore undoubtedly *the phenomenology of material nature holds a pre-eminent position*[5]), Sartre reaches classical materialist conclusions. Scarcity is the principle of the most primordial mode of production which shapes human intentions and valorizations at the same time that it is being changed and eroded by praxis itself.[6] In addition, scarce materiality furnishes the intelligibility for the onset of alienation from one's product (man's objectification) and from other men. When the conditions that human activity seeks to integrate toward objectifying need are such that the activities of all others reveal an actually limited field of action, the resulting product is other than envisioned. This is not to suggest that the outcome of praxis is in any way «inauthentic» but to stress that praxis produces *what it can* since its motivation and course are irrevocably tied to the meaning that consciousness reads into objectivity. Thus, this type of alienation (unrelated to exploitation) coincides with the experience of *necessity*: when «we understand that we have in effect realized *something else* and,» when we understand «why, outside of ourselves, our action has been altered, we have our first experience of necessity.»[7] Nonetheless, the experience of necessity, that is, the realization that one's action is irreversible, can only be revealed through the mediation of action itself. Scarcity has no meaning for nature without men; praxis alone can read negativity into its insufficiency, so that «alienation can exist only if man *is action first.*»[8]

V

The phenomenological description of the effect of scarce materiality upon a primitive life-world leads Sartre into examining the mechanism by which consciousness is constituted, i. e., how it understands, organizes and projects within scarcity as an objective condition. Thus, Sartre's theory of *alterity* describes the internal constitution of the moment when man (praxis) can be said to make himself the product of material conditions. Therefore, alterity denotes the relationship that must hold among praxes as a

often been shown untenable, in contrast to Marx's who, as late as in his *Grundrisse*, identifies (social) alienation with the beginning of history. Cf. *Grundrisse der Kritik der politischen Ökonomie* (Berlin: Dietz-Verlag, 1953), pp. 79-80. See also E. Mandel, *op. cit.*, pp. 178-80.

1. *CRD*, pp. 203-7.
2. *Ibid.*, pp. 206-7.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 212 ff. Sartre explains that scarcity has its own dialectic and still remains—in a false and, thus, surpassable form—the organizational principle of today's societies, in the sense that famines go hand in hand with overproduction. Yet, this «relative» scarcity cannot be understood apart from the existence of scarcity from the beginning of human history. *Ibid.*, p. 213, 215.
4. Ibid., p. 303 n.
5. E. Husserl, *op. cit.*, p. 389.
6. «There is, therefore, a dialectical movement and a dialectical relation at the inside of praxis, between action, as negation of matter (in its present organization and from the point of a future reorganization), and matter, as the real and *docile* foundation of the on-going reorganization, as the negation of action.» *CRD*, p. 230.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 282.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 248.

function of the meaning that consciousness derives from its lived experience.

In searching for a «logical» explanation of the claim that circumstances make men, one must establish a necessary bond between, on the one hand, matter which has absorbed human labour and, on the other, materiality as the conditioning initiator of further need and praxis. Therefore, what is needed is a mediation capable of bringing out a necessary (though not causal) relationship between these two forms of materiality, and one which also encompasses the human presence as a *social* entity.

Sartre locates the answer in the insights provided by phenomenology's approach to human existence. It is human subjectivity in its pre-categorical dependence for meaning upon the social and material environment that «reads» into the materiality just reshaped by praxis the orientation of all further action. Insofar as man both does and does not recognize himself in the past product of praxis, the necessity for changing a materiality that appears other than initially projected, endows materiality itself with quasi-human qualities: inertia, socialized by a multiplicity of human praxes, now poses for itself as the signifier of consciousness, i.e., as its supplier of meaning and direction, to impose upon praxes exigencies that they perceive as their own.[1] As a result, essentiality is transferred by consciousness on the side of materiality so that man, argues Sartre, acts not only as other but as *any other*: contained and motivated by the «needs» of this material framework, praxes are robbed of their specificity and unfold in alterity, that is, in hetero-signification where each is defined by another and the next by still another and so on as in the case of a mathematical series.[2] In effect, as it is common phenomenological practice,[3] Sartre makes use of an analogy to illustrate the meaning of alterity. He employs the mathematical theory of *recurrence* which is the relationship between the members of a series composing a Set or Sum. For a trivial example of recurrence, consider the Set Z comprised of number A, B, C... where if $A=1$, $B=A+1$, $C=B+1$... and so on. Thus, in this Set each member is defined uniquely through its relationship to the *others*, i. e., those that precede and/or succeed it.[4]

Therefore, alterity, or a relationship of social recurrence is the working principle at the inside of all «pratico-inert» structures, that is, of all social objects or situations where the scope of praxis and the range of its autonomy are already prescribed by materiality itself.[5] This means that the material and intellectual milieu in which men find themselves is sustained by consciousness as an essential «whole» that praxes particularize, like numbers in a series. For, insofar as individual interest draws its orientation from a common condition, there is an internal equivalence among individual praxes such that, the intentionality of each is that of anyone and, at the same time, of no one.

VI

In the opening section of the *Critique* Sartre had already announced that recurrence must be the only relationship that can describe the disposition of praxes at the internal constitution of «collectives.»[6] Following the phenomenological grounding of recurrence in the notion of alterity as the structure of practical social existence, Sartre undertakes to examine its implications for a number of crucial «objects» such as classes, values, or the market. Since detailed discussions on collective objects obviously lie beyond the confines of the present essay, let us just see what Sartre has to say about the meaning of belonging-to-a-class *(l'être de classe)*, particularly, the working class. The thrust of Sartre's argument is that, whether we speak of a primitive social nucleus or of a contemporary social class, the semblance of social co-operation by no means effaces the structure of scarcity—however transformed—and alterity as its corresponding mode of existence. The fact that workers may cooperate and appear united in their demands to employers does not mean that they have overcome alterity. As long as their cooperation aims at safeguarding their rights and interest *qua workers*, the schema of class is posited as a form of materiality that *cannot be surpassed* and, therefore, as one that circumscribes autonomous praxis.[7] Workers' solidarity entails a reciprocity which is «false» not for lack of sincerity, but because solidarity is limited by itself since it springs from a socio-economic order which actually allows for it. This does not mean that the class framework actually unites into identity all praxes comprising it but that the practical margins and possibilities for individuality are limited by a collective foundation.[8]

From this brief sketch of class existence it becomes apparent that Sartre's formulation sharpens histor-

1. *Ibid.*, p. 285.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 334.
3. Cf. Alfred Schutz, *op. cit.*, pp. 98-9, 106; H. Spiegelberg, *op. cit.*, p. 673.
4. *CRD*, *Ibid.*
5. *Ibid.*, p. 234 ff.
6. *SFAM*, pp. 76-80, 163-4.
7. *CRD*, pp. 264-98. Non-surpassability is the construct of consciousness when confronted with value systems as well. We can only point here to Sartre's lengthy analyses on the type of alterity that sustains «idea-process» and «idea-exis» structures. *Ibid.*, pp. 302-303, 343-6.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 304.

ical materialism's perennial problem of awakening consciousness to the fact that praxis is doing what it has already been *made* to do through the products of previous generations.[1] Of course, this concerns the classic contradiction between «being» and «doing» which cannot be dealt with here in an adequate fashion. However, Sartre's notion of praxis which denotes man's active and conscious relationship with the concretely experienced material and social-world, furnishes us with sufficient information for concluding that whether or not aware of this contradiction, every human life constitutes a surpassing, however partial. Yet, at the same time, as long as the more general and less immediate socio-economic contradictions persist, the structures they engender always seem to be a bit ahead of man, i.e., to be defining his general potential. Upon rare historical instances, men have indeed reversed this trend through real «group» action which we could not examine here. But Sartre's analysis of the group demands special attention particularly in relation to facile ideas concerning social change and the new structures that it tends to generate.

1. *Ibid.*, pp. 279-80, 286-306.

In essence, through the questions raised by phenomenological methodology, Sartre demonstates that the complexity of the historical process goes much deeper than mechanistic and/or scientific tendencies from any ideological camp would like to grant. Unless subjectivity and the real-world problems of consciousness constitute the starting point of all social and historical research, the meaning of «structures», «laws» or «contradictions» will remain unintelligible and, in the last analysis, irrelevant. For, once stripped of the problematic and dialectical relationship between consciousness and materiality, ideational and/or material structures can tell us nothing, either about their origin or about the transformations that they obviously perform and sustain through history.

In sum, the issues raised by the foregoing discussion have attempted to show how Sartre's usage of a historically oriented phenomenology illuminates the necessity for social science to concentrate on the philosophical problems created by concrete social existence. In this respect Sartre's *Critique* contains no solutions: its most valuable contribution lies in its having called attention to the fact that man himself is the only possible foundation of History and of the human sciences as well.