Sartre's Pure Critical Theory

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Man is nothing else but that which he makes of himself (Sartre, *Existentialism and Humanism*).

The struggle aims not to restore the past, but to create the future (Russell, "Opening Statement," the second session of the Vietnam War Crimes Tribunal).

The future will only contain what we put into it now (A slogan from May '68).

[I]t is of crucial importance that we know what impossible goals we're trying to achieve, if we hope to achieve some of the possible goals (Chomsky, *The Chomsky-Foucault Debate*).

The aim of this paper is to present Sartre's early philosophical anthropology and later existential Marxism as the development of a radically pure Critical Theory that with respect to its content primarily, but also with respect to the context of its production, informs a trajectory that runs through the events of May '68. Both Sartre's pure Critical Theory and the events of May '68 share deep commitments to possibility, to agency, and to ethics. Both stand against actuality and for the construction of a better world. A different trajectory that runs through May '68 is the post-humanism of Foucault, which both contrasts directly with Sartrean Critical Theory, and traces useful boundaries around it and its application. In the twenty-first century, significant elements of a Critical Theory that remains committed to possibility, agency, and ethics, but that pays heed to Foucaultian boundaries, may be seen in the contestation of mainstream politics that at the same time stands on its own as an activism best exemplified by the alternative press. The

contestation of propaganda is possible, and its completion requires that agents pit subjects against subjection on the way to a better future.

“Since May, 1968,” Lévi-Strauss said in a December 30, 1969 interview, “[t]he position of the youth corresponded ... to that of Sartre” (Hess 415). Indeed, one of the most prominent student leaders from the events of May ’68, the controversial Daniel Cohn-Bendit, claimed: “Some people have tried to force Marcuse on us as a mentor: that is a joke. None of us has read Marcuse ... Nearly all the militants ... have read Sartre” (Hirsh 143). However, as with so many other claims about Sartre and politics, these too are contested. For Annie Cohen-Solal, in her influential biography of Sartre, the latter’s “connection with the student riots of May 1968 is an invention of the press, pure illusion” (453). On the one hand, Sartre was read by most of the May ’68 militants, and the views of the youth corresponded to his; on the other hand, Sartre contributed little or nothing to the events. To find a path between this apparent disagreement, we may admit that Sartre’s direct participation in the events of May ’68 was exaggerated by the press without denying that his writings of the previous three decades gave conceptual expression to some of the essential political challenges of the time, so that significant elements of the project of the militants corresponded with Sartre’s writings. We may also suggest that Sartre had been read by many of the militants, and that it was their reading of him, rather than his direct participation, that connected him to their uprising. If this is accurate, we should be able to find in Sartre the expression of a project that corresponds with significant elements of May ’68. Indeed, if we read Sartre as the kind of theorist for whom the possibilities of progressive action are fundamental, and if we do so with some attention to the contexts within which his view developed, especially the wars in Indochina, we reach the real sense of possibility that briefly but radically challenged actuality in the spring and summer of 1968 in France.

The Critical Theory of the Frankfurt School, especially in the person of Marcuse, is a useful starting point for discussions of May '68, which is why some commentators make of him the militants' mentor, but Sartre also developed a Critical Theory, and it is that theory which best illuminates one of the most important trajectories of May '68. I shall begin with Horkheimer's programmatic statement of the Frankfurt School's conception of Critical Theory, and then sketch the development of the Sartrean view, which begins with very Sartrean premises and arrives at what I call a pure Critical Theory—a Critical Theory according to which virtually anything is possible.

Another important trajectory of May '68 involved the post-structuralist movement that would eclipse Sartre and existentialism in the final decades of the twentieth century. If May '68 involved a great birth of possibility, the child did not survive its first summer. Sartre's analysis of the failure did not stray from the ground of his existential Marxism, but for a post-structuralist like Foucault a different trajectory would inaugurate a radical critique of the possible, problematizing the latter and liberation itself, thus constituting an external limitation of the pure Critical Theory of existential Marxism. Indeed, it is interesting to read May '68 as a Janus-faced coin between existential Marxism and Foucault.

I. Preliminaries

In 1937 Horkheimer published "Traditional and Critical Theory," a programmatic essay for the early Frankfurt School. Horkheimer defined "Critical Theory" as an alternative to "traditional theory," the latter, broadly speaking, being the objectivism of the modern scientific tradition. Because social and political formations are both fundamentally dynamic and, more importantly, at least partially determined by human action, traditional theory, argued

Horkheimer, is not correctly applied to them (251). It is a conservative “intellectual technology” (194, 196, 206, 216, 231, 233). Bent on the discovery of the determinate laws of its fundamentally unchanging object, it is blind to any social and political formation’s possibilities for transformation, the actions that might encourage or discourage those possibilities, and their ethical desirability. On the other hand, possibility, agency, and ethics are at the forefront of a proper Critical Theory, which consists of an “existential judgement” (227), which is the analysis of an existing social and political formation with respect to its actual possibilities for progressive transformation. The given “basic conditions of ... existence” are conceptualized as “a function which originates in human action and therefore is a possible object of planful decision and rational determination of goals” (207). Critical Theory’s “goal is man’s emancipation from slavery” and the “happiness of all individuals,” not the discovery of apparently objective laws (246, 248). Taking as its object the social and political whole as changeable by human action, and guided by an emancipatory concern, Critical Theory thematizes a relation of influence between its own activity and what is the case, and discloses potential avenues for progressive transformation. Thus Critical Theory, as opposed to the conservative force of traditional theory, directly contributes to the practice of progressive transformation. Theory and practice are interwoven. Horkheimer begins “a radical reconsideration ... of the knowing individual as such” (191), in an attempt to jolt intellectuals into the awareness that whether they are practitioners of traditional or Critical Theory, they are agents having effects on the nature of their polities. Their theoretical activities are active elements of the material, dynamic, and corrigible social and political whole.

A fundamental condition of the possibility of Critical Theory as Horkheimer defines it is that humans must be able to shape their social and political reality even if the conditions under

which they might attempt to do so are not of their own choosing. If what is the case may not be changed by the intentional actions of humans, Critical Theory is a myth. Sartre may be read as developing one serious account of the philosophical anthropology required for the possibility of a robust Critical Theory. It is common to read that Sartre began his philosophical career with an extreme view of the scope of human agency in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), but that later, after a conversion to some sort of Marxism, he was forced to limit that view in *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960).¹ This reading is misleading in at least one interesting respect, because Sartre may be read as actually developing and deepening his commitment to agency between the two works. It is certainly true that in the *Critique* he squarely faced and conceptualized the possibility of significant constraints on agency, but the constraints themselves are disclosed in such a way that they do not exceed human determination in the last instance. Thus the scope of agency in *Being and Nothingness*, which is already wide enough to include the subject of torture, as we shall see, is actually expanded rather than limited in the *Critique*, creating the fundamental resources for a Critical Theory in which virtually any aspect of social and political reality is subject to intentional transformation by human beings.

The *Critique* is a prime example of what has been variously called “philosophical humanism,” “anthropologism,” or “the philosophy of the subject,” according to which it is the acts of human subjects that constitute the nature of social and political reality. Post-humanism developed largely in the structuralist and post-structuralist movements that would boil over and largely displace philosophical humanism during the final decades of the twentieth century. The humanist paradigm was to be swept away in a flood of approaches for which the generality or universality of language became paradigmatic. Post-humanists took themselves to be beyond the discursive horizon of philosophical humanism. The human subject’s agency required radical

critique, for social and political structure constitutes subjects, not subjects the social and political structure. The post-humanist perspective will be kept in view throughout what follows, at first on the horizon, in order to subject the sketch of Sartre's Critical Theory to a basic post-humanist question: is it possible that any of our practices is ultimately beyond our control as subjects? By keeping that question in view, Sartre's deep philosophical humanism and pure Critical Theory will be made evident. After sketching the whole of the Sartrean pure Critical Theory, I traverse paradigms and sketch the Foucaultian alternative. However, this will not be to dispense with the Sartrean view, but rather to provide constructive external limits to it. Certainly there are good reasons to follow in the footsteps of the post-humanists, but because there are also good reasons to continue to think through the age-old suggestion that we can make our own politics, my principal aim in the discussion that follows is to re-trace Sartre's footsteps. To show that Sartre's view is not utterly unlimited theoretical fantasy, I also advance some suggestions by means of which the theory might be able to limit itself, on its own terms, and point the way toward a genuine critique of Sartrean pure Critical Theory.

Even if only some significant social and political practices may be intentionally determined by subjects, the disclosure of practices' possible human determinants is worth developing. It is possible that there are adverse conditions that have generated themselves with or without human instigation but which may not preclude transformation at the hand of human action. Understanding all this is an essential condition of efficacious social and political struggle. In the final section of the paper, I point to a kind of activism today that could be said to continue or echo the relevant significance of May '68. Specifically, as a contestation of mainstream politics in developed states today the critique of propaganda in the developing alternative press is a kind of critical theoretical activity that pits subjects against subjection.

Paying our respects to May '68 with scholarship—which is indispensable—progressive researchers are obliged to reveal sites of possibility, agency, and ethics relevant to the existential judgements we must make today in order to make sure the future will contain what we ought to put into it.

II. Towards Sartre's Philosophical Anthropology

Although the fundamental problem of agency has rarely, if ever, been made more explicit than in the work of Sartre and his critics, interesting conceptions of agency have been around for a long time. In *The Peloponnesian War*, Thucydides has the Athenian general Nicias close an address to his troops in Sicily with: “Men make the polity, not the walls or ships without men in them” (Bk. 7, Ch. 77). A few decades later, quoting Homer at the beginning of Book VIII in *The Republic*, Plato has Socrates ask Glaucon if he thinks “that governments are born ‘from oak or rock’ and not from the characters of the men who live in the cities?” Glaucon replies that he does “not believe ... they have any other origin” (544d-e). If this is right, our polities are largely constituted by what we are, and changes in who we are must lead to similar changes in our polities. Indeed, in Books VIII and IX of *The Republic* Plato gives an elaborate account of how a series of character deteriorations would drag a polity down from an approximation of the ideal, all the way to a tyranny. Each specific kind of dominant character in the series of deteriorations would determine a specific kind of polity. For Plato, the idea was to intentionally pattern the relative characters of individuals according to natural ideals in order to generate the best polity, but not only was chance destined to intervene and bring about the latter's deterioration, establishing it in the first place was probably impossible. Nevertheless, the idea that the nature of a social and political formation is determined to a significant degree by its members is an

important one. The development of an explicit and robust Greek conception of agency was perhaps stalled by deep presuppositions regarding the naturally-ordered cosmos and the human's place within it.² Although the concept of the will developed significantly in Christian speculation it was largely to God, not to man, that it was assigned. Thomas and Dante are often taken to represent the zenith of medieval thought, and for them our ability to improve our social and political conditions depends on God's grace, a position Dante famously symbolized at the end of his *Purgatorio* by representing the worldly paradise as necessarily empty—only with grace may we hope to establish the best possible worldly existence.³ In early modern philosophy it is curious that we find the concept of the human will most fully developed in Descartes and Kant, each of whom severely caged it within his own version of a deterministic world.⁴ Horkheimer's analysis invites us to consider relationships between early modern accounts of agency and determination, on the one hand, and their historically specific social and political conditions, on the other hand (202-205). With respect to Descartes and Kant, we might consider the degree to which freedom is celebrated, but also alienated by various capitalist and administrative constraints, in the modern world.

As a young man, while some of his closest colleagues were engaged in socialist criticism and activism, Sartre worked on an "opposition aesthetics" that championed the individual who was aware of, and broke free from the essentially ungrounded order of bourgeois society. Beginning with his readings of the Cartesian cogito, the Kantian I, and Husserl's phenomenological analyses of consciousness, on the one hand, and Nietzsche as a philosopher of contingency, on the other hand, Sartre developed accounts of awareness and choice as absolutely free, and of the world as fundamentally contingent. Overcoming the dualism of freedom and determinism, in *Nausea*, published about a year after Horkheimer's programmatic essay, Sartre

intertwined radically purified consciousness and a world utterly free of determinism (Duncan, “Sartre and Realism-all-the-Way-Down”). From this beginning, Sartre was to develop a philosophical anthropology that would disclose the world as grounded in human determination in the last instance.

Sartre wrote his first philosophical works during the 1930s, and in these early works—especially in *Transcendence of the Ego* and “Intentionality: A Fundamental Idea of Husserl’s Phenomenology”—he argued that consciousness neither contains anything, nor is it a substance: “consciousness is purified, it is clear as a strong wind. There is nothing in it but a movement of fleeing itself, a sliding beyond itself ... It is just this being beyond itself, this absolute flight, this refusal to be a substance which makes it a consciousness” (“Intentionality” 4-5).⁵ Emptied of every possible content (including the ego), consciousness, the “primary condition and absolute source” of awareness and action, is an impersonal non-substance (*Transcendence* 106). All elements having to do with the personal ego are located in the world of objects and processes, of which consciousness can be conscious. Whereas the ego is empirical or “transcendent,” consciousness, which continuously escapes being anything empirical, is “transcendental” (79-81, 105-106). Only by such a theoretical purification of consciousness can existential phenomenology be kept from slipping into the epistemological swamp of subjective idealism. For if there were contents of consciousness—personal or otherwise—consciousness could not reach external objects independently of those contents (106).

For the early Sartre then, consciousness is transcendental, impersonal awareness of transcendent objects and processes. As such it must be free from any material effects of objects and processes. This freedom is most clearly manifest in imagination, “an essential ... condition of consciousness”—“in order to imagine, consciousness must be free from all specific reality”

(*Psychology of Imagination* 246, 242). Thus consciousness is an indivisible fusion of intentionality (awareness of the transcendent) and possibility (freedom), while the ego is a set of accumulated and alterable features of which one can be conscious. Though this theoretical bifurcation of the human into consciousness as intentionality and possibility on the one hand, and ego as empirical object on the other, seemed originally a compelling explanatory grid, Sartre came to see that his theory needed a way of thickening the pure activity of consciousness so as to provide a better account of the obdurate regularities humans exhibit. The solution to this problem came in large part from his reading of Heidegger early in 1940. Heidegger showed him that “there was nothing beyond the project whereby human reality realized itself. Does that mean I’m going to allow the Self back in? No, certainly not. But though the ipseity or totality of the for-itself is not the Self, it’s nevertheless the person” (*War Diaries* 324-325). Sartre would develop his view of the person as projected freedom in *Being and Nothingness*, written between 1939 and 1943, the text from which will be drawn the bulk of the sketch of the philosophical anthropology that grounds Sartrean Critical Theory.

III. A Philosophical Anthropology for a Robust Critical Theory

In *Being and Nothingness*, human possibility, “[t]he technical and philosophical concept of freedom,” or “the autonomy of choice,” is distinguished from “the empirical and popular concept of freedom,” “the ability to obtain the ends chosen” (621-622). “Of course my freedom to choose ... must not be confused with my freedom to obtain” (648). Thus it can, for example, make sense to speak of enhancing or diminishing Peter’s range of concrete alternatives, his empirical freedom, only if he is capable of choosing among alternatives in the first place, that is, if he has philosophical freedom. If he does not have philosophical freedom, if he is a dead person

or a rock, then enhancing or diminishing his empirical freedom, by unlocking or locking the door to his cage for example, is meaningless. If, however, Peter is a being with philosophical freedom, then unlocking or locking the door to his cage, enhancing or diminishing his empirical freedom, is a meaningful act. For Peter, empirical freedom is always an issue simply because he has philosophical freedom.⁶

Because he has philosophical freedom it is also the case that Peter cannot be a Sartrean scholar, for example, in the same way that a rock is a rock. A rock continues to be what it is without concern or effort. It is a being in-itself. Peter, on the other hand, because he has freedom, is a being whose being is always in question for-itself. He must continue to choose to be a Sartrean scholar, and can always choose to become something different. He lacks the abiding type of being characteristic of rocks. “The for-itself chooses because it is a lack; freedom is really synonymous with lack” (722). “The being which the for-itself lacks is the in-itself” (723). Being a lack of being-in-itself, the human is condemned to an unrelenting *de facto* responsibility for what he or she will become.

The important difference between Sartre’s view before and after 1940 is that whereas in the earlier period freedom was merely directionless possibility, in the later period, being the lack of in-itself, it is a directed freedom. Philosophical freedom then involves the freedom to become something. The abstract formulation of the desire for being-in-itself, as developed from the abstract concept of philosophical freedom, being-for-itself, “in its abstract purity is the truth of the concrete fundamental desire” of the human being (725). As lacks-of-being we are always projects to become something. By taking ourselves to be either mere freedoms or mere somethings we deny the complete structure—freedom-to-become-something—and find ourselves in bad faith. It could be said that Sartre revealed an implication of his earlier

conception of consciousness as inseparable intentionality and possibility. Just as intentionality always involves the awareness of an object, so possibility always involves the freedom to become something. Thus the freedom which grounds us as humans is coloured by a personalising individual directionality or *telos*. Leo Fretz queried Sartre about this in an interview in 1976:

Fretz: Can one say that there is an epistemological break between TE [*Transcendence of the Ego*] and BN [*Being and Nothingness*]? There are great differences between the individuality-concepts in the two works, in the sense that transcendental consciousness in TE is characterised by you as individual but at the same time as impersonal, while in BN the pre-reflective consciousness is provided with a personal structure.

Sartre: Yes, absolutely (Fretz 226).

Given this, it is only in the light of a projected end that objects and processes constitute themselves as meaningful features of the world. In fact, the upsurge of a fundamental project and the revelation of a meaningful world are concretely inseparable. Through “the crystallization of an end across a given and the revelation of a given in the light of an end” every consciousness surges forth, choosing some particular manner of living as a freedom to become something (*Being and Nothingness* 652). Thus a person is most comprehensively understood in the terms of his or her particular, basic project. “My ultimate and initial project ... is ... always the outline of a solution of the problem of being. But this solution is not first conceived and then realized; we are this solution” (596). We are this solution “as the project-for-itself of being in-itself-for-itself” (725). Each human life is an attempted solution to the paradox of being a free project to become a completed and lack-less thing. “Or if you prefer, man fundamentally is the desire to be God” (724), for only God abides as both completely free and freely complete.

Because one’s solution is how one fundamentally exists, each of us, individually, “cannot hope to have an analytical and detailed consciousness of what we are” (596). However, “aided

and guided by a helping hand”—that of the existential psychoanalyst—a person may trace the meaning of his or her everyday behaviours to a fundamental project. This tracing process is “an hermeneutic; that is, a deciphering, a determination, and a conceptualization” (727). Every act is a comprehensible phenomenon since we can decipher each act’s meaning with respect to what Sartre variously calls its “fundamental,” “ultimate,” “original,” “global,” or “initial” project (591). “The comprehension is effected in two opposed senses: by a regressive psychoanalysis one ascends back from the considered act to ... [the person’s] ultimate possible [i.e., to his or her fundamental project]; by a synthetic progression one re-descends from this ultimate possible to the considered act and grasps its integration in the total form” (592). Here we have the foundation of Sartrean biography: “The irreducible unification which we ought to find ... and which we require biographers to reveal to us—this is the unification of an original project” (717). “In our research, we will be guided by this principle: to stop only in the presence of evident irreducibility; that is, never to believe that we have reached the initial project until the projected end appears as the very being of the subject under consideration” (721). Each significant act is to be treated both as a clue to, and as an expression of, a particular person’s solution to the problem of being.

Changing one’s fundamental project amounts to rejecting one’s familiar way of being a person in favour of some other way of being a person. It amounts to moving to the margin of one’s fundamental goal, and so to the margin of one’s world. This is a difficult, uncommon, de-centring and re-centring experience (611, 585, 597-598). Yet such radical conversions do occur.

These extraordinary and marvellous instants when the prior project collapses into the past in the light of a new project which rises on its ruins and which as yet exists only in outline, in which humiliation, anguish, joy, hope are delicately blended, in which we let

go in order to grasp and grasp in order to let go—these have often appeared to furnish the clearest and most moving image of our freedom (612).

Clearly, projected freedom is central to the philosophical anthropology of *Being and Nothingness*. It is both the awareness for which there is a meaningful world, and the freedom by which one may always become something. We have here a philosophical anthropology for which awareness and action are understood ultimately in terms of comprehensible and corrigible choice. At this point then, the answer to the basic post-humanist question—is it possible that any of our practices is ultimately beyond our control as subjects?—would be no.

On the grounds of the same basic philosophical anthropology, Beauvoir argued that although things may never oppress subjects, other subjects may do so:

[M]an is never oppressed by things ... The resistance of the thing sustains the action of man as air sustains the flight of the dove; and by projecting himself through it man accepts its being an obstacle; he assumes the risk of a setback in which he does not see a denial of his freedom (*Ethics of Ambiguity* 81).

A person might misinterpret various aspects of the practical field in which he or she is acting, but the setback to which such a misinterpretation might lead cannot legitimately be called oppression. In such cases the person's intentions are not being turned against him or her as the result of external intentions. However, Beauvoir continues, it is possible for another projected-for-itself to direct one's practices. "Only man can be an enemy for man; only he can rob him of the meaning of his acts and his life" (82). Here we seem to have the possibility of a subject's practices being externally determined, at least in part. However, it is clear that such external determination originates in other subjects. Thus Beauvoir does not thereby open the way for the possibility that any practices are ultimately beyond the determination of subjects as such. The relevant practices are determined or co-determined by other subjects, and so the answer to the post-humanist question remains no.

Furthermore, Sartre's discussion of the subject of torture generates serious problems for the apparently uncontroversial claim that a subject's practices may be determined by other subjects. Maintaining that humans are nothing other than what they make of themselves, Sartre rather notoriously argued that even under extreme cases of oppression, such as torture, a person acts freely. If we imagine that a torturer attempts to physically determine his or her subject's surrender in the same way that a locksmith attempts to physically determine the release of a jammed door-lock—by initiating the requisite mechanical causes—then we might see the practice of torture as causally determining the action of the subject. However, this will not do. Because each of us has philosophical freedom, the attempt to use torture to causally force a human being to act against his or her will is not like the attempt to causally force open a jammed door-lock. The locksmith aims to cause a mechanical effect, whereas the torturer aims to manipulate the subject, subjecting him or her to alternatives worse than surrender so that surrender might be chosen. Therefore, “the red-hot pincers of the torturer do not exempt us from being free,” and “the very impossibility of continuing in a certain direction,” in fact “comes to things by means of our free renunciation; our renunciation is not induced by the impossibility of maintaining the behaviour” (*Being and Nothingness* 649). “No matter what resistance the victim has offered, no matter how long he has waited before begging for mercy, he would have been able despite all to wait ... one second longer. He has *determined* the moment at which pain became unbearable” (523). Not being in-itself beings like door-locks, human beings are fundamentally free, even in those extreme situations where other subjects oppress them by means of torture.

The extreme case of torture takes us back to the beginning of Sartre's philosophical anthropology. The inability of empirical manipulation to determine philosophical freedom

reiterates the basic claim that the empirical ability to obtain the ends chosen is utterly distinct from the philosophical ability to choose. By distinguishing the two in this way, the ability to choose is distinguished from the empirical realm—fundamentally, the ability to choose is nothing, nothing but the radical lack that grounds consciousness amidst a positive world.

Philosophical freedom is a condition of the possibility of torture—one does not torture door-locks. If torture approaches an absolute manipulation of a subject’s empirical freedom, its goal, never guaranteed, is the subject’s exercise of philosophical freedom in the choice to capitulate. The subject of torture must come to terms with his or her situation as he or she projects himself or herself through it—one terrible alternative or another is chosen, and risks are assumed. Therefore, even in the case of torture, other subjects are not able to determine the practices of a subject.

We are left with a philosophical anthropology whose basic principles rule out the possible determination of subjects’ practices both by things and by other subjects. Fundamentally, subjects constitute their own practices. Thus practices are possible objects of “planful decision and rational determination of goals” (Horkheimer 207). Sartre’s philosophical anthropology is a humanism that grounds a robust Critical Theory.

Even if so-called social facts were included in accounts of practices, on the Sartrean view they would have to be explained through a deciphering of the web of the choices of each of the individual social actors involved. They would have to be explained by the actions of individual subjects in the last instance. Where else could social factors originate—“from oak or rock”?

It is interesting to note that Beauvoir eventually looked back on the thesis of radically free agency as problematic: “At every level we failed to face the weight of reality, priding ourselves on what we called our radical freedom ... The mistake we made was in failing to

restrict this concept to its proper limits. We clung to the image of Kant's dove, supported rather than hindered in flight by the resistant air" (*Prime of Life* 15). Nevertheless, in an interesting respect, Sartre's later work actually develops and deepens his commitment to agency.

IV. Indochina and the Field of the Possible

In 1897 an engineering graduate named Jean-Baptiste Sartre joined the French Navy, and was soon taking charge of artillery, navigation, or the helm, as ordered, on board the *Descartes*, a battle cruiser with a strategic role in the battle for the Gulf of Tonkin. Not quite two years after his debut in Indochina, however, Jean-Baptiste was forced to withdraw, to be shipped home. He had contracted enterocolitis, a condition that would begin seven years of alternating illness and convalescence, ending with his death twenty-eight months after his marriage to a cousin of Albert Schweitzer, and just fifteen months after the birth of their only son, Jean-Paul Sartre (Cohen-Solal 3-26).

During the Second World War French forces fought for their Indochinese territorial interests against the Japanese. However, the end of the war did not bring peace to Indochina, for by the end of 1946 ongoing troubles between the French and the Vietnamese escalated radically, with Ho Chi Min leading a determined offensive against the imperialists. In the fifties—half a century after French imperialism had killed Sartre's father—a communist French sailor in the Indochina campaign named Henri Martin was arrested for anti-war activities and sentenced to five years imprisonment. While the Martin case was still news, and when American general Matthew Ridgeway, the leading proponent of biological and chemical warfare in the Korean conflict, visited Paris, the French Communist Party organized a demonstration. The demonstration was forbidden by the Chief of Police, who said "A communist is a Russian

soldier. Whether he knows it or not, that's what he is." On May 28, 1952 approximately twenty-five thousand people marched illegally in Paris. In the evening Jacques Duclos, the acting secretary of the French Communist Party, was arrested while returning home. A militant from the provinces had given him a gift of a few roasting pigeons, which the authorities took to be carrier pigeons for communication with subversives. Duclos was jailed for over a month. With the McCarthy witch-hunts raging across the Atlantic, Sartre, who had often sparred with the Communists, felt compelled to jump into the ring on their side to defend the likes of Duclos and Martin, and perhaps his father (Cohen Solal 325-329). Criticism of, and activism with respect to, both French imperial aggression, and the development of Western-bloc weapons of mass destruction were legitimate, and they had to be supported, especially if the critics and activists were being jailed. If the leading proponents of classless society were also the leaders of open criticism of dubious French and U.S. activities, and if that criticism was being repressed in favour of international aggression, it was time to openly support the Communists, blemishes and all. Thus Sartre began his four years as a fellow-traveller with the Communists. This lasted until the Soviet Union crushed the Budapest uprising in 1956, at which point Sartre withdrew and began to write *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, which would be published in 1960 (and which will be discussed in the next section).

During the fifties the U.S. replaced France as the major foreign influence in Vietnam. The U.S. aggressively supported the southern part of Vietnam against the continuing revolution (led by Ho Chi Min in the previous decade), now based in the separated north but also pursuing a guerrilla war from within the south. Between 1961 and 1968 American troop levels in Vietnam increased rapidly to their peak. In 1966 Sartre was asked to chair Bertrand Russell's tribunal on American crimes in Vietnam. It met as a body in Stockholm in May and again near Copenhagen

in November, 1967. After receiving a great deal of incredibly damning evidence, the Tribunal severely criticised the U.S., and in 1968 it published *Against the Crime of Silence: Proceedings of the Russell International War Crimes Tribunal*.⁷ A second edition of *Against the Crime of Silence* came out in 1970 with an introduction by Noam Chomsky. In the introduction he later expanded, Chomsky wrote: “The evidence brought before the Tribunal was suppressed by the self-censorship of the mass media, and its Proceedings, when they appeared in print, were barely reviewed” (Chomsky 223). Russell and the members of the Tribunal understood that the Western press had been reproducing little more than the American administration’s sanitized perspective on the war. Indeed the Tribunal was established in order to receive evidence from the ground, to have a panel of diverse, respected, and critical intellectuals analyze it, and to bring that evidence and analysis to the attention of the Western public. The proceedings had effects, but they did not break the hold of the “self-censorship of the mass media.”⁸ “The streets of Europe and the cities of North America remain smug and complacent—with the significant and honorable exception of the student youth” (Chomsky 223).

A couple of months after the Russell Tribunal, and a couple of months before May ’68, beginning in late January the Vietnamese revolutionary forces began a massive coordinated offensive against American and American-supported troops throughout the south. Many Americans, French, and others in the West had been led to believe that such an attack was simply not possible, but the Tet offensive helped make it understood that in this unending distant conflict the underdogs were actually challenging the unprecedented power of the West. “The Tet offensive,” Chomsky wrote, “revealed to the public that government propaganda was either an illusion or a fraud” (Chomsky 62). Were late modern militarism, imperialism, bureaucratism, and capitalism being challenged in Vietnam? Was an alternative to the culture of these -isms

possible? For Sartre, as he said in an interview published in *New Left Review* in November-December 1969, “the origins of May [’68] lie in the Vietnamese Revolution.” “The fundamental impact of war on European or US militants was its enlargement of the field of the possible. It had previously seemed impossible that the Vietnamese could resist successfully such an enormous military machine.” By their resistance the Vietnamese “completely changed the horizon of French students, among others; they now knew that there remained possibilities that remained unknown” (62-63). The mixing of the energies of anti-war, anti-imperialism, anti-bureaucracy, and anti-capitalism stirred up a great anti-establishment refusal. Sites of possibility and agency were newly-established, a better world newly-imagined. The Vietnamese resistance and the anti-war movements in the West during the sixties contributed immensely to the events of May ’68.

V. Pure Critical Theory: Enlargement of the Field of the Possible

In the fifties Indochina drove Sartre to active and open support for the Communists, but after Budapest he withdrew and began the task of developing and writing an existential Marxism. The result, a Marxism for which the future might only contain what we put into it, informs May ’68, which Sartre traces back to Indochina.

Apparently after having recognized its over-commitment to the constitutive role of human freedom Sartre broke from his early philosophical anthropology and moved closer to a Marxist position. In the existential Marxism of *Search for a Method* and *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, we are supposed to be able to find a significant limitation of the earlier thesis of human freedom. It is this limitation that is of interest to me here. Sartre attempted to come to terms with the already established meaningful elements of the social and political field in terms of which projected for-itselfs must choose. He attempted to develop a theoretical approach in which the

social and political field is understood as that within which individuals find themselves but which they have not, in any strong sense of the term, chosen.

Recall that the early Beauvoir rejected the possibility that things can ever divert or steal a subject's intentionality. Part of what Sartre does in the *Critique* is to take seriously the possibility that things in our social and political field can affect our activities in a significant way. Mark Poster puts it well:

Sartre sought to overcome one of the basic difficulties of a phenomenological social theory which was limited to the intentionality of individual consciousness. Now [in the *Critique*] there was an intentionality of processed matter. In *Being and Nothingness* matter had little signifying force of its own. In the *Critique*, on the contrary, the concept of the *practico-inert* enabled matter to come alive with full signifying and alienating powers. Sartre insisted that the basis of alienation was not simply human relationships in their various modes ... It lay instead in the profound penetration of human relationships by scarce, processed matter (285).

The practico-inert is the field of meaningful, non-subjective things—the field of already meaningful objects into which an individual is deposited at birth. If we understand action to involve the meaningful manipulation of meaningful materials such as tools, bodies, products, languages, etc., then human action is not possible without a meaningful material context. Subjects can only act on material to the extent that the material field animates and has made itself available to them. “Thus we shall never find men who are not mediated by matter at the same time as they mediate different material regions” (Sartre, *Critique* 71). To be involved in meaningful practices subjects must, through acculturation, interiorize the pre-established social and political field of things.

If human practices presuppose the existence of recognizable meaningful material in the social and political field, we are led to infer that human practices are limited by the available enabling possibilities contained within the field of meaningful objects. The practico-inert is each

subject's set of un-chosen "starting conditions." Here we may have arrived at an opening for a Sartrean affirmation of the possibility that subjects are not the exclusive masters of their practices. To assess whether Sartre exceeded philosophical humanism with this theoretical approach to social and political reality the question we should ask is whether or not a practice that requires the practico-inert for its inception can be characterized as a practice that is indeed significantly beyond the control of subjects. Sartre himself writes that "all men are slaves in so far as their life unfolds in the practico-inert field and in so far as this field is always conditioned by scarcity" (331).

In the *Critique*, historical processes are founded upon humanity's struggle to secure from its environment the things it needs to survive and flourish. The confrontation between human need and the environment constitutes a general situation of scarcity. Although Sartre's philosophy of history winds its way into many complexities from the contingent foundation of scarcity, its basic theme may be characterized as follows: Humans are projected freedoms engaged in "*praxis*," which "is primarily an instrumentalization of material reality" (161). "[H]uman relations ... are reciprocal," which is to say that humans do, or at least always have the capacity to recognize each other as projected freedoms, thus ensuring the permanent possibility of human solidarity (131, 258). However, because of material scarcity each of us is necessarily forced to turn himself or herself into a kind of practical material which, in competition with every other individual, works the material environment in order to satisfy needs. Furthermore, scarcity inaugurates the development of tools and systems of production intended to ease the pressure of scarcity and promote the possibilities of reciprocal solidarity. Unfortunately, from the beginning of history, reciprocity has been negated: "[A]s Marx has shown, the passive materiality of the machine ... interposes itself between labourers to precisely the extent that it is

indispensable for their work; the living solidarity of the group is destroyed even before it can take shape” (186-187). Only if scarcity is transcended will the social and political field, as negated reciprocity, be negated. This negation of the negation alone can affirm a general reciprocity of free subjects which will inaugurate a different sort of history than the one to which we are accustomed (186-187).⁹

Because we have material needs we must work the material field and by so doing we transform and organize it—we infuse matter with “significations,” which “are composed of matter alone” (178). The inert *praxis* permeating matter transforms natural material forces into quasi-human practices—that is, into “*passified actions*” (161).¹⁰ These passified actions which make up the practico-inert field in terms of which subjects shape their practices are transmissions of reified *praxis*. But then, in the final analysis, the entire practico-inert field is reducible to the intentional manipulation of matter performed by past subjects. Although it may seem that with the notion of the practico-inert Sartre “enabled matter to come alive with full signifying and alienating powers” (Poster 285), in actual fact he described how matter may carry reified human intentions through time. The extent to which matter may determine my practices is the extent to which other subjects have worked it so as to make it into signifying things I encounter. This is the principle of the practico-inert. “The future comes to man through things in so far as it previously came to things through man” (*Critique* 178). The principle of the practico-inert is for Sartre “the crucial discovery of dialectal investigation,” “that man is mediated by things to the same extent as things are mediated by man ... This is what is called dialectical circularity” (79).

Sartre argued that it is at the level of projected free for-itself that we must look for the production and intelligibility of history. As each of us works out our lives in terms of the practico-inert, our starting conditions, we make some small bit of history. The spiralling

movements of the effects of the practico-inert on subjects and the subsequent effects of those subjects upon each other and upon the practico-inert is the dialectical movement of history. The comprehension of this movement requires dialectical totalization without a totalizer. Not a dialectics of rationalist conceptual contradictions, nor a dialectics of economistic laws, but a dialectics which requires a regressive analysis and a progressive synthesis to explain the totality of an evolving field of living, experiencing, projected for-itself.¹¹ How this gets worked out in detail is complex, but with respect to my purposes here, the key point is that every mode of force in social and political history is reduced to the fundamental projects of subjects, either directly, or indirectly via the practico-inert.

Only the project ... can account for history ... This solution alone enables us to base the movement of totalization *upon the real*. We must look for dialectic in the relation of men with nature, with “the starting conditions,” and in the relation of men with one another. There is where it gets its start, *resulting* from the confrontation of projects. The characteristics of the human project alone enable us to understand that this result is a new reality provided with its own signification (*Search for a Method* 99-100).

If Sartre’s central notion of the projected freedom, in his early work, kept him from accepting possible external determinations of practices, it is this same notion, in his later work, that grounds their origin and intelligibility. External, non-subjective determinants of practices are disclosed as reified subjective intentions from the past. In fact, by grounding the origin and intelligibility of external non-subjective determinants in (past) subjective intentions Sartre digs himself deeper into philosophical humanism.

Sartre does discuss a “work without an author,” but he is adamant that the way to understand such a social fact is to trace it back to the relevant interactions of the many co-constituting past projects of individuals whose philosophical freedom always enabled them to freely “surpass” their situations—that is, to come to terms with and choose one alternative over

another (*Search for a Method* 100). Ultimately there are no acts without agents; there are only acts without present agents. The source of social and political reality is human action.

Critical Theory requires that significant aspects of social and political reality may be determined by human action. Because Sartre's theory reduces the determination of virtually any aspect of social and political reality to the intentional activity of subjects in the last instance, his developed philosophical anthropology grounds a pure Critical Theory. Insofar as we find it compelling, we ought to consider Sartre's developed philosophical anthropology, as I have sketched it, to be the ground of a serious critical theoretical approach to the progressive transformation of virtually any aspect of social and political reality. One of Sartre's most sympathetic commentators, Ronald Aronson, puts it this way:

[W]e can only be struck by Sartre's courage ... his indefatigable insistence on seeing human action and intention, however deviated, as the world's source. If we are indeed to survive and flourish, it will probably only be by a concerted intellectual-political practice paralleling his own: of deconstructing the fixed, frozen, menacing entities ... created by us but placed beyond our control by determinate and *comprehensible* human intentions and institutions, and of reconstructing the world so that the human intentionality insisted on ... prevails with as few deformations as possible. The only hopeful politics for today and the future will seek to return this world gone mad to its human source (xiii).

Sartre's view constitutes a pure form of Critical Theory: social and political reality is possibility-ness all the way down. As we have seen, it is this sense of the possible that informs Sartre's reading of May '68, as well as its origins in the Vietnam war. The May '68 militants imagined that their actions could change a world gone mad into a world of their choosing.

However, the events of May '68 did not complete themselves—they did not lead to a complete revolution. For Sartre, the students' uprising amounted to a crucial cultural refusal, contesting the late modern culture of militarism, imperial exploitation, reification and commodification. However, this refusal did not complete itself in an effective refusal of the

underlying conditions of that culture. “French youth during May wanted a cultural revolution—what was missing for them to achieve one? The ability to make a real revolution” (Sartre, “Itinerary of a Thought” 62). The uprising was ultimately checked by the Communists, who would not carry through the “radical contestation of every established value” (62). Overcoming the culture of late modern capitalism requires overcoming late modern capitalism, and that requires a proletarian revolution, but “as long as the French Communist Party is the largest conservative party in France, and as long as it has the confidence of the workers, it will be impossible to make the free revolution that was missed in May” (62-63).

After Sartre had withdrawn his support for the Communists in 1956 he wrote the *Critique*, in part, to show that a Marxism supplemented by existentialism could avoid such communist party errors as Budapest—a lesson no less applicable to May ’68. Of course, while he was sparring with or supporting the Communists, Sartre was also engaged with the non-communist left—progressive authors such as Camus, Lefort, and Merleau-Ponty, who were critical of both the Communists and elements of Marxism. In part, what makes the *Critique’s* Marxism less likely to crush a Budapest or fail to support a May ’68 may be traced back to some of their criticisms. For example, in *The Rebel* (1951) Camus argued that the modern discovery of revolutionary meaning within the historical process suggested that the strategic removal of those who stood in the way of a better future for all was justified. However all futures are speculative, and if we are seduced by their utopian promise, we shall sacrifice real individuals to what may never be, which amounts to political murder. Generally speaking, other progressives made similar criticisms of Marxism and Communism. In the *Critique*, a genuine Marxism may not surpass the basic requirements of respect for actual subjects on the way to political expedencies sanctioned by speculative philosophies of history because an appropriately existential

understanding of the material mediation of proletarian subjectivity only arrives at the past subjective generation of structures via the practico-inert. Within the parameters of this philosophical anthropology, orthodox meta-narratives cannot get off the ground. Since the Communists fail to see this, and since many workers follow them, “it is necessary to pursue the struggle, however protracted it may be, with the same persistence as the Vietnamese” (“Itinerary of a Thought” 63). Making the real revolution—the existential Marxist revolution—might take a very long time.

VI. Towards a Critique of Pure Critical Theory

It is now necessary to determine the boundaries of Sartrean pure Critical Theory—first the external boundaries generated by post-humanism, and second boundaries rooted in pure Critical Theory itself. Certainly a trajectory of post-humanism runs through May ’68, it has Foucault at its centre, and it is relevant to Sartre’s pure Critical Theory. In traversing paradigms, as it were, and sketching Foucault’s view, which may be read as a direct alternative to pure Critical Theory, the goal is not to reject the Sartrean view, but rather to provide it with constructive external limits. Then, after discussion of the external boundaries I advance some suggestions by means of which the Sartrean view may be able to limit itself, pointing the way toward a genuine critique of Sartrean pure Critical Theory.

From a postmodern perspective existential Marxism is both philosophically radical and conservative. It is philosophically radical because, without positing any dubious, metaphysical laws of history, it analyzes the actual, material mediations of subjects. It is philosophically conservative because it folds those mediations into nothing other than subjects in the last instance. This was criticized by Heidegger, Derrida, and Foucault, amongst others. Husserl and

Heidegger, the fathers of phenomenology, to whom Sartre owed a great deal, established important theoretical horizons and pathways that led beyond the centrality of the subject, as Heidegger made clear in his 1947 “Letter on Humanism,” largely a critical response to Sartre. For Heidegger, “Sartre expresses: ... We are precisely in a situation where there are only human beings ... Thought from *Being and Time*, this should say instead: ... We are precisely in a situation where principally there is Being” (213-214). Derrida picked Sartre’s work—outwardly a critique of traditional humanism and metaphysics—to mark the unthought of early twentieth century French philosophy: in the wake of Kant, and alongside anthropologic readings of Hegel and narrow readings of Husserl and Heidegger, existentialists and others failed to notice their complete circumscription by an anthropologism articulated by Foucault (Derrida 115-116). Nevertheless, it is precisely this philosophically conservative aspect of existential Marxism that generates a fundamental requirement of political agency, and so makes it *politically* radical. If, in the final analysis, social and political practices are rooted in subjects, then attempts to reform them may be efficacious. If, on the other hand, social and political practices are wholly determined by extra-human forces, then subjects will be hard-pressed to ease even the birth pangs of progressive change.

Among the post-humanists, Foucault, most prominently, argued that practices could be determined by forces other than subjects. As he said in an early interview, he did not try to explain disciplines “from the point of view of the practico-inert.” “Rather ... I try to formulate an analysis from the position of what one could call the ‘theoretico-active’” (*Foucault Live* 2). For example, each of us had to learn the practice of the discipline we eventually found ourselves pursuing. Since the set of essential characteristics that constitutes the discipline—its rules, customs, and nomenclature—precedes subjects who have yet to learn the discipline, the agency of the

practitioner as such is determined by the pre-existing discipline's essential characteristics. From the philosophical humanist's perspective, such determination would limit the agency of the free subject—at least in the first instance. According to the post-humanist however, since only particular, limited subjects seem to exist, perhaps the fully free existential subject is a fiction. Because each discipline has irreducible characteristics peculiar to itself, and because the condition of existence of the practitioner of a discipline is that he or she espouse and enact the discipline's relevant characteristics, the practitioner's agency is not limited by, but rather produced by the relevant determinations. Thus, in the history and philosophy of disciplines one will find theoretically rich disciplinary practices that must be said to actively produce agency by producing the practitioners who categorize, manipulate, and order the relevant objects. Piecing together the “regularity”—that is, the systematicity—of the practice of a specific discipline would be “to formulate an analysis from the position of what one could call the ‘theoretico-active.’” This is the sense in which the rules of regularity of a “discursive formation” or an “apparatus” are not negative, but rather “positive” or “productive.” It is not that discursive formations and apparatuses are positive in the sense of being beneficial; rather, they are positive in that they do not negate or limit agency, practices, and objects, but rather produce them.

It is not that the past was better, or that we should go back to it, but that we should open much less anachronistic pathways to the study of past disciplines, bracket the presupposition that current disciplines are necessarily progressively reformed past disciplines, and show that past and present disciplines are sets of regular, rational, social, and political practices. With one foot in the historical archive, piecing together aspects of past disciplines, and the other in the present, putting in perspective various features of what we have become, Foucault's controversial

“histories of the present” played original and radical reconstructions of the past against apparently indispensable presuppositions of the present.

In *The Order of Things* (1966) Foucault provided an analysis of three distinct disciplines during “the classical age” (roughly the period from the middle of the seventeenth century to the end of the eighteenth century)—those that dealt with life, labour, and language. He argued that the regularities between the three disciplines of natural history, analysis of wealth, and general grammar radically exceeded regularities between any one of the disciplines and the versions of itself that either preceded it in the Renaissance or followed it in the nineteenth century. The classical disciplines exhibit a regularity of practice that operates within the presuppositional space of epistemological taxonomy. That is, the dominant mode of analysis espoused and enacted by practitioners in these particular classical disciplines was the representation of objects in what amounted to complex tables of classification. In the nineteenth century, the dominant mode of analysis shifted. The taxonomical representation of objects was succeeded by analysis rooted in the human subject. The discursive concept of “man” as the very ground of knowledge was born, inaugurating the philosophical humanism that the structuralists, Foucault, and others would challenge in the twentieth century. In an interview first published in 1969, Foucault said that

[S]tructuralism is inscribed today within a great transformation of knowledge in the human sciences ... directed less toward the analysis of structures than toward the putting into question of ... the status of the subject ... [M]y method is inscribed within the framework of that transformation in the same way that structuralism is—along side of the latter but not in it (*Foucault Live* 55).

The epistemic regularities of the classical age, of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and of the epoch beginning in the mid-twentieth century have all preceded and exceeded the intentions of subjects. What makes some of us believe they are all the results of the intentions of subjects (including antecedent subjects) is the lingering trace of the discursive concept of man.

Foucault's work is directly relevant in another respect. Along with Deleuze and Guattari's two-volume *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, the preface for which was written by Foucault, his *Discipline and Punish* and the first volume of the *History of Sexuality* can be read as formidable challenges to what were during the middle decades of the twentieth century influential articulations of Marxism and psychoanalysis. Althusser combined psychoanalysis and structuralism within a Marxism that certainly influenced Foucault, particularly with respect to the analysis of the productive determination of subjects. However, in the first chapter of *Discipline and Punish* Foucault distinguished himself from Althusser, for whom capitalism is maintained in large part by two apparatuses that produce "good subjects": the repressive state apparatus (for example, the police), and the ideological state apparatus (most importantly the education system and the institution of the family). For Foucault, however, agency after the classical age is neither largely the product of repressive violence, nor of ideological indoctrination, and its determinations are not to be found exclusively within a few institutions such as the police or the school. Taking the modern birth of the prison as his point of departure, Foucault argued that penal practices before the nineteenth century, which often involved torture, were misunderstood by traditional historians, who saw in them nothing but a brutality that was criticized by late eighteenth century reformers, resulting in progress to the much more humane penalty of generalized imprisonment. However, Foucault argues, seventeenth and eighteenth century torture consisted of rational and regular practices, its brutality was not the chief target of criticism for the reformers, and the models endorsed by the reformers excluded generalized imprisonment. To explain the rapid proliferation of generalized imprisonment as the standard penalty in Western Europe and North America in the nineteenth century, Foucault argued that these regions underwent a basic social and political transformation between the mid-eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries in which a new political

technology emerged in education, patient care, military training, the organization of work, and the reform of criminals. This transformation and these political techniques, not a narrative of reform, account for the prison. The new political techniques consisted in isolating each individual within its population, collecting knowledge about the individual, and turning that knowledge to good use with respect to the relations of power by which the individual's circumstances and options might be modified, with the goal of re-forming the individual according to a graded hierarchy of achievement. These techniques were applied to bodies—for example, exercises imposed on the isolated and monitored inmate or student, in his cell or at her desk respectively. The techniques were applied to bodies via carefully organized spaces and times, from the prison's cellular architecture and the duration of the inmate's sentence to the school's dispersion of desks and classrooms, its student records, and its graduated terms of study. The techniques were applied in order to render bodies both docile and useful—but also to identify and manage recalcitrant bodies—producing the reformed criminal, the good student, the cured patient, the trained soldier, or the productive worker. Neither repressive violence nor ideological indoctrination, but rather relations of knowledge and relations of power applied to the body are what distinguish the determination of modern agency.

History of Sexuality turns the analysis that begun with the prison toward aspects of the wider population as an object. In the middle of the twentieth century the sexual liberation movement often found intellectual credentials in fusions of Marxism and psychoanalysis, in authors such as Marcuse. It is precisely because of the explicit call for sexual liberation during May '68 that Marcuse has often been made its mentor. Apparently a response to Victorian sexual repression, sexual liberation was actually, Foucault argued, much more of a process in which sex was made an object of knowledge. The resulting knowledge was turned to good use with respect to the relations of power by which populations are reproduced and maintained. Foucault began with

historians' claims about Victorian repression—that there was a general interdiction against expressions of sexuality—but, he argued, in fact there was a proliferation of discourse about sexuality at the time. The analysis here is roughly analogous to that in *The Order of Things*, according to which the discursive concept of “man” became the very ground of knowledge in the nineteenth century. According to *History of Sexuality* it is “sex” that becomes a ground of libidinal expression. Of course, humans and sex have been around for a long time, but not as the presupposed grounds of knowledge, action, liberation, or expression. Although humans have always had sex, the view that there is something called “the sex drive” or “the truth of sex,” that it has been repressed, and that it ought to be liberated is both something new and something that has been a perfect mechanism of incitement to generate knowledge about sex. In the hands of appropriate practitioners such knowledge enables the manipulation of behaviours and the reproduction of healthy populations. This even involves such issues as eugenics, racial purity, and the like, which became more than mere possibilities in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The deployment of sexuality was a set of strategic practices, but it could not be reduced to the intentions of subjects—it was “intentional but non-subjective,” roughly analogous to what Foucault called the “theoretico-active” ten years earlier (*History of Sexuality* 94).

Discipline and Punish and *History of Sexuality* deepen the criticism of pure Critical Theory, and they do so with respect to leading issues of May '68. They suggest that we have all been subjected to massive political-demographic apparatuses of relations of power and knowledge, and that the reform of education (like the reform of prisons, patient care, military training, and work) or sexual liberation—two issues central to May '68—may themselves be traps. While we believe we are struggling for a reformed or liberated future, actually we may be strengthening the apparatuses of subjection. A subject's struggle against oppression may be the very means by

which he or she is more deeply subjugated. Critical Theory itself may deepen subjection—social and political reality may be subjection all the way down.

Finally, in *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault challenges the privileged critical position long accorded to Marxism, and from which Sartre strayed neither in his pure Critical Theory nor in his analysis of May '68, as we have seen. Even in its existential version, the foundation of Marxism is the economic base, but according to Foucault a base of political technology is at least as foundational:

[T]he question I posed was posed in reference to Marxism, as well as to other conceptions of history and politics ... I was putting forth the hypothesis that there was a specificity to power relationships, a density, an inertia, a viscosity, a course of development and an inventiveness which belonged to these relationships and which it was necessary to analyze (*Foucault Live* 184).

If the economic take-off of the West began with the techniques that made possible the accumulation of capital, it might perhaps be said that the methods for administering the accumulation of men made possible a political take-off in relation to the traditional, ritual, costly, violent forms of power, which soon fell into disuse and were superseded by a subtle, calculated technology of subjection (*Discipline and Punish* 220-221).

Ultimately, for Foucault, “[n]othing is fundamental. That is what is interesting in the analysis of society” (*Foucault Reader* 247). Specific social and political regularities take hold almost as naturally as the self-restoration of the intricate patterns of a colony of social insects after its nest has been damaged. Patterns order new configurations of social and political reality from inside, as it were, before subjects may describe or interpret them. “Power relations are both intentional and non-subjective ... [T]he logic is perfectly clear, the aims decipherable, and yet it is often the case that no one is there to have invented them, and few who can be said to have formulated them” (*History of Sexuality* 94-95).

Foucault’s approach is certainly worth pursuing. It is at the core of a post-humanist trajectory that ran through May '68—a trajectory that rejected existential Marxism, insightfully

challenged the reading of May '68 as a site of possibility and liberation, and became very influential after May '68. However, rather than reject pure Critical Theory from this external post-humanist perspective, in the next section I will argue that we may both admit that some practices may be determined by forces other than subjects, and maintain that some significant practices may be intentionally determined by subjects. Thus the disclosure of practices' possible human determinants remains worthy of consideration, and it is worth re-tracing Sartre's steps, as I have done above.

Having acknowledged possible external limits to Sartrean pure Critical Theory, what remains is to advance some suggestions by means of which it may limit itself, pointing the way toward a genuine critique. A critique in this sense would preclude utopian caricatures of the theory. A straightforward practical limit suggests itself immediately, and a deeper, more metaphysical, limit arises from Sartre's ultimate ground of contingency.

A pure Critical Theory is not necessarily a limitless Critical Theory. Consider Descartes' view in the *Meditations* that the human has absolutely free will, but relatively little power and knowledge, unlike God who has absolute will, power, and knowledge (AT 56-58). The human will may affirm any particular proposition, or chose any particular action, but in so doing it does not know the truth of the proposition or have the power to accomplish the action, and so it will often err or fail, something God would not do. By analogy, in the social and political dimension human freedom is unlimited, but a thorough understanding of the detailed whole of the complex interactions of human freedom in the ongoing constitution of practices will often exceed us empirically—we will often lack knowledge. Furthermore, even in cases where a thorough understanding of the relevant whole is empirically possible, the capacity (for example, financial resources) required to accomplish progressive transformation will often exceed us—we will

often lack power. Pure Critical Theory will often fail to understand reality or accomplish progressive transformation. Within the limits to be defined externally by post-humanist criticism, the comprehension and transformation of any practice always remains theoretically possible but the comprehension and transformation of all practices is certainly not possible, which constitutes a straightforward practical limit to the theory on its own terms.

According to the young Nietzsche, it was Kant who first revealed the limits of knowledge in the terms of knowledge itself—a genuine critique. If knowledge of empirical reality is based on categories but the categories are not applicable to things in themselves, there are limits to knowledge which the knowing subject itself may discover. Beyond the limits are the Kantian thing-in-itself, and the Schopenhauerian will, both of which ultimately undo the illusion that existence is fundamentally both intelligible and remediable. Nietzsche argued that a rebirth of tragedy would help to properly limit a culture dominated by that illusion. Tragically, reality is fundamentally ineffable, and the best response to tragedy is heroic affirmation, not illusory political reform or activism (Duncan, “Culture, Tragedy, and Pessimism”). Sartre’s reaction to the ineffable was largely the reverse of Nietzsche’s. For Sartre, free agency is unlimited, but it arises from fundamental contingency, as do all things. Contingency necessarily and ineffably exceeds us—it is “the perfect free gift,” as Sartre has his protagonist explain in *Nausea* (131).¹² Thus there is a deep sense in which everything, including ourselves and our practices, ultimately exceeds us—everything arises from contingency. However, for Sartre the response to fundamental contingency was neither romantic affirmation nor contempt for activism, but rather a necessarily imperfect and often messy Sisyphean activism uninterested in romantic posturing. Rather than find heroism in the tragic, Sartre repeatedly disclosed the real tragedies that inevitably undo heroism.¹³ Ultimately, within post-humanist limits, even if the comprehension

and transformation of every practice were empirically possible we would not thereby avoid the truth that fundamentally unfathomable reality might undo everything at any moment, which limits deeply, but does not negate, Sartrean pure Critical Theory (Sartre, *Nausea* 158-159).¹⁴

VII. Subjects Against Subjection

What would it be to imagine some elements of a twenty-first century May '68? Given fundamental contingency, the empirical limitations of knowledge and resources, and the possible limits of post-humanism, what contestation or refusal coupled with a robust sense of the possible can we imagine today?

In recent years much has been made of declining participation rates in mainstream politics in advanced Western states. Many people, especially the young, are turning to alternative forms of political activity, or away from politics altogether. Some are turning to forms of activism which include supporting the alternative press. Indeed, publicity, information dissemination, and recruitment for attendance at internationally organized protests and parallel summits would be virtually impossible without the alternative press. In activism—which contests the mainstream—and in the specific activism of the alternative press and its implicit and explicit critique of propaganda, subjection is engaged by radical possibility, agency, and ethics, echoing May '68.

Recall that back in 1966-1970, for Russell, Sartre, and Chomsky the press was merely reproducing the administration's sanitized perspective on the war in Vietnam, and the Tribunal's goal was to end the crime of silence and bring the evidence of war crimes to the attention of the public. Activists in the twenty-first century continue to try to break the self-censorship of the mass media.

Activists contest some significant aspect of what is the case. Governing has to do with maintaining what is the case, and sometimes enhancing it, but always on its own terms and in the near future. Elections are won by those who are willing to govern, which is not to say that election losers are unwilling to govern. In most elections, the leading contenders are willing to govern, but only one may win. From the perspective of activism, there always seem to be losers willing to govern. Almost by definition, those who contest and seek to change what is the case are unwilling to govern.

Those who are unwilling to govern in this sense could not win elections, but not only because the losers alone are supported by elites—that is, by those who benefit most from the structures of what is the case. It is also because although a majority of the population may desire significantly better lives, in general it does so in terms of what is the case. If we think for a moment about the uncountable number of beliefs each of us must acquire before we become subjects sufficiently able to inquire about the appropriateness of any belief at all, we begin to glimpse the depth and breadth of our subjection. For example, we do not learn to speak; we learn to speak early twenty-first century north Toronto English. Since we cannot learn to speak without learning to speak a particular language, since we cannot choose the particular language by means of which we learn to speak, and since we must learn to speak before we become subjects capable of informed criticism, rather than say we acquire a language we should say a language acquires us. Furthermore, this generalizes with respect to virtually all the basic beliefs, attitudes, and customs we learn. If we remained un-acquired by such habits for action, to borrow a term from American pragmatism, we would not become subjects able to act well in our worlds.

Because subjects have already been subjected to what is the case—a subjection that necessarily occurs before the development of the capacity for criticism—although majorities of

subjects may yearn for significantly better lives, in general they do so in terms of what is the case. Instead of turning to activism, they elect one loser or another.

Subjection and propaganda are not the same things. Although both processes of subjection and processes of propaganda produce aspects of subjectivity that express themselves in particular, generally predictable habits for action, subjection is a condition of being a subject as such, whereas propaganda is not. The important difference is that subjection acquires individuals in order to produce subjects, whereas propaganda acquires subjects in order to produce specific behaviours of subjects.

In order to be effective, propaganda must be both well produced and properly disseminated, which requires resources. Thus effective propaganda arises from those who have sufficient access to resources, from those who are most intimate with what is the case, from elites. Additionally, because effective propaganda must target a specific demographic, it requires messaging sufficiently in harmony with the relevant subjection of subjects, the relevant aspects of what is the case. So in the end, effective propaganda does not stray from what is the case, and its critique is always on the way to the critique of subjection itself.

“Social reality is generally concealed by the intelligentsia” (Chomsky, in Chomsky and Foucault 102-103). Many years ago, in the thirties, Sartre’s close friend Paul Nizan was perhaps correct to call the academic intelligentsia “watchdogs,” intellectual apologists for what is the case. But as wonderful as it is, Nizan’s analysis collapses in on itself because in its reception it becomes nothing but polemic, a virtual violence that loses sight of practice. *The Watchdogs* is a book that itself seems to bark and condemn threateningly. At best, its audience—academic or otherwise—is momentarily disorientated, but in no time at all the condemnation is returned with

effect from the evident security of what is the case, and the polemicist is incited to escalation on the distant horizon of which is the disaster that is violence.

Of course matters were quite different during the period when there was an enormous popular anti-war and student movement. Within the structure of popular movements there were many possibilities for expressing views that departed from the narrow limits of more or less 'official' ideology, to which the intelligentsia generally conform (Chomsky, in Chomsky and Foucault 103).

In general, and in the absence of such movements, students are subjects and subjects would rather govern than contest what is the case, which is rational. If it remains difficult to pit subjects against their subjection, we must nevertheless avoid the dead-end of polemic and escalation.

Post-humanism in general, and Foucault in particular, help us to understand that subjection is not merely a limitation that negatively conditions a pre-existing subject. Rather it positively produces subjects as such. Subjection is the very source of subjects' identity. To hold subjects accountable for the fundamental ignorance that comes with subjection would be both to miss the mark and to alienate subjects. Generally decent people who have been subjected to structurally limited habits for action are neither deeply accountable for those habits, nor likely to respond well to polemic. Although power lies at the heart of subjection, the very fact of subjection obligates the activist to refrain from aggressive polemics, and for both of the standard reasons: it is ineffective, and it fails to respect the dignity of the individual.

In what is the case, "we live and move and have our being," to borrow and perhaps to turn on its head one of Hegel's favourite passages from the *Acts of the Apostles*.¹⁵ It would seem to be very difficult indeed to radicalize what Althusser called "good subjects," or what Foucault called "docile and useful" subjects—subjects whose subjection by and to what is the case has been virtually total—but since activists are not interested in becoming losers, that is what is to be done. Activism must pit subjects against their subjection, against their very being and milieu.

One of the most interesting critical fronts in recent years has been the explosion of the realm of activist propaganda critique, inspired in many ways by figures such as Chomsky. Critical alternative news and information providers—the leading example of which is perhaps *Democracy Now!*—have emerged and flourished. A significant and growing assemblage of activists and activist sympathizers produces and consumes the alternative press—an incredible dimension of articulate analysis that both critically rejects the mainstream and stands on its own. The fact that this sophisticated dimension continues to expand is an indication that propaganda critique does not miss the mark. It engages growing and significant portions of the population hungry for analysis that exceeds the aestheticization of politics in the mainstream, which after all barely exceeds largely friendly colour commentary on what the losers might be doing. And unlike polemics, it does not bark, but rather bites with engaged critical analysis. Propaganda critique, the alternative press it has generated, and the politicization of the aestheticization of the mainstream are significant sites of possibility, agency, and ethics today. The difference between propaganda and subjection allows a pure Critical Theory to take hold, for it shows that it is clearly possible to intentionally challenge elements of propaganda in social and political practices, as well as to replace those elements with alternative analysis. Furthermore, since propaganda must proceed from and to what is the case, it is related to subjection, and activities that either perform its critique or displace it with alternative analysis actually begin the process of pitting subjects against subjection, the activist's primary project. Finally, if in the end it were subjection all the way down we would have difficulties, but even if that were the case it is very difficult to imagine that we would abandon the critique of propaganda and pursuit of a better press. In these ways, then, activism today continues the project of May '68 by both contesting

what is the case, and seeking the enlargement of the possible so that we might make a better future—the project conceptualized in Sartre’s pure Critical Theory.

Many things seemed possible for the students and other militants during the early summer of 1968 in France (and elsewhere in the same period). For a few weeks, believing in possibility, agency, and ethics, they thought they should and could undo what had been made, and make a different social and political reality. Whether in 1968 or the twenty-first century, our projects are always threatened with the possibility of having been preceded by subjection. However, given the limits of post-humanism, as well as the empirical limitations of knowledge and resources, and fundamental contingency, each of us may choose to understand and challenge propaganda—a contemporary site of pure Critical Theory. To complete the contestation of propaganda, our very subjection must be engaged. We may pit subjects against subjection, beginning with propaganda, and struggle for a future that will only contain what we put into it now, and this is perhaps where Sartre would begin again in the twenty-first century. There are no guarantees, and romantic heroism is of little value, but forty years after May ’68 the Sisyphean task of a pure Critical Theory continues in and around both the contestation of mainstream politics, and the promise of the alternative and activist press.

Notes

¹ For a critical discussion of those who have argued that Sartre broke from his earlier theory of freedom in this way, see Detmer 93-102.

² According to Dihle, explicit conceptions of the will entered Western intellectual history from Judaeo-Christian, not Hellenic, sources (See Dihle). Of course, this does not mean that nothing of choice and agency was understood in the Greek world (see Solmsen 86).

³ The earthly paradise is “the lofty forest glade, / Void” (*Purgatory*, Canto XXXII, li. 31-32) to be filled in God’s realm (see *Paradise*).

⁴ In his *Meditations*, Descartes worked seriously with an account of the human being as a physiological mechanism (AT 84–5), and in *The World* he developed a natural cosmology consisting of an indefinitely extended plenum of materials subject to a few basic mechanistic rules (AT 31–48). For Kant, objective judgments about sequences of events require that the events be the necessary effects of prior causes (A189-A211).

⁵ Also see Sartre, *Transcendence*. Both texts were probably written about the time Sartre was studying phenomenology in Berlin, from September 1933 to July 1934.

⁶ A very sophisticated robot programmed to clean an entire home but caged in a closet might exhibit some behaviours similar to a caged person. Thus determinists attempt to critically reject the necessity of philosophical freedom. Sartre, however, begins with the fusion of freedom and awareness in a fundamentally contingent world, and so both rejects determinism and avoids its various problematic implications.

⁷ See Duffett, and also Beauvoir, *All Said and Done* 365-392.

⁸ Neither with respect to Vietnam in particular, nor with respect to other issues in general. See Chomsky and Herman, especially chapters 5-6.

⁹ “Groups in fusion” (346) are temporary groups of free reciprocity (672) transcending the “seriality” (256) that characterizes the relations of subjects in the situation of material scarcity. But until scarcity itself is transcended groups in fusion always tend to revert to the antagonistic or indifferent reciprocity of seriality (349).

¹⁰ Here I have used Cumming’s translation: Sartre, *Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre* 451.

¹¹ Note the similarities between Sartre’s earlier method of existential psychoanalysis, mentioned above, and his later “progressive-regressive method” in history. See Sartre, *Search for a Method* 85-166.

¹² Also see Sartre, *Transcendence* 98-99; Sartre, *Being and Nothingness* 11, 788; Sartre, “Itinerary of a Thought” 46.

¹³ “There is no such thing as the will to power. Everything is too weak: all things carry the seeds of their own death”—see Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter* 342-343.

¹⁴ Also see Duncan, “Sartre and Realism-all-the-Way-Down.”

¹⁵ See Harris 9.

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