

SARTRE: DIALECTICAL REASON AND SOCIAL PHENOMENA

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ONE of the central themes of Sartre's *Critique de la raison dialectique* is the assumption of a distinctive form of reasoning which is uniquely suited for an understanding of individual and collective social action and objective socio-historical processes. In general, Sartre adopts Hegel's notion that there is a dialectical method which discovers the process by which categories of thought give rise to each other and enable us to grasp the changeable and transient in the world of finite entities, the movements of which are dialectical in form. Although Sartre has nothing to say about the abstract process by which categories ostensibly "deduce" themselves in rational, dialectical sequence,¹ it is clear that he was influenced by at least one formulation of the sense of dialectics which Hegel presented in *The Phenomenology of Mind*. For, Hegel had, at one point, maintained that

This dialectic process which consciousness executes on itself—on its knowledge as well as its object—in the sense that out of it the new... object arises, is precisely what is termed experience.²

¹ G. W. F. HEGEL, *Science of Logic*, trans. W. H. JOHNSTON and J. G. STRUTHERS, London, 1929, I, p. 65.

² G. W. F. HEGEL, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J. B. BAILLIE, London, 1931, p. 142.

The "transformation of consciousness" which yields a "new object" is presumably not intended to refer to experience as it is ordinarily understood. However, despite the ambiguity of the term "experience" in the context of Hegel's discussion, the concept of dialectic indicated does serve as a general representation of the use Sartre makes of the term in his *Critique*. What will primarily concern me here is (a) an attempt to understand what Sartre means by dialectical reason, (b) a critique of the notion that he has successfully described a unique mode of reasoning distinct from any other and, finally, (c) an interpretation of Sartre's concept of social phenomena in relation to his account of dialectical social processes.

How is dialectical reason possible?

In emulation of the language of Kant, Sartre refers to the hypothetical possibility of dialectical reason in the sense that he is concerned to show the conditions for its possibility. Although this "transcendental" inquiry is not pursued with the tenacity and analytical power of Kant's transcendental deduction of the categories of the understanding in the *Kritik*, some effort is made to show the justification for the concept of dialectical reason. Sartre concedes that analytical reason is appropriate to an understanding of natural and social phenomena and is, in fact, a stage in the dialectical understanding of concrete social processes. But it is possible that there is a type of reason which surpasses every other form of reasoning and is specifically appropriate to a detailed apprehension of complex social and historical processes. For Sartre, the key to an understanding of the speculative exploration of the possibility of, or limits of, a dialectical form of reasoning is his assumption concerning the dialectical nature of experience itself. Basically, he argues that "dialectical consciousness is in fact consciousness of the dialectic" conceived of as a "movement" in objects and in human action.

The development of a critical dialectic which is opposed to the dogmatic dialectic of official Marxism is deliberately initiated by Sartre in a paradoxical way. It is said that one can engage in a critique of dialectical reason only by means of dialectical reason itself. This involves "letting" dialectical reason found itself and develop itself as a free critique of itself and as a movement of history and of consciousness itself. When trying to justify an appeal to dialectical reason, however, Sartre soon drops this rather obscure

way of describing the emergence of the dialectical movement of consciousness. Indeed, he recognizes the basic circularity of the enterprise of establishing a transcendental justification of dialectical reason. In the final analysis, dialectical thought is reducible to a "lived," self-conscious dialectical experience which is intelligible, *qua* dialectical, on the assumption of the operative presence of dialectical reasoning in rational action.

Sartre avers that consciousness in general involves a certain relation to the world which surrounds man. In agreement with critics of Engels' conception of a dialectics of nature (e. g., Lukács), Sartre maintains that if there is a form of dialectical reasoning, it applies solely to the social and historical world. Such a mode of reasoning (if, as Sartre reiterates, it exists) would reveal itself and found itself in and through the concrete action of men who are situated in a certain society at a certain stage of development.³ This notion is closely associated with Sartre's sympathy with a slightly modified form of historical materialism. As a social agent, as a being capable of modifying his environment, man—as Sartre puts it—makes himself into an object, an *être matériel* who finds himself subject to a host of material processes which act upon him. If there is a "law" governing materio-historical change, it must encompass a pervasive dialectic.

The question that underlies Sartre's search for a form of dialectical reason is, under what conditions is a dialectic able to be founded? In a sense, he has anticipated the answer to this question insofar as he agrees with the sociologist Georges Gurvitch that a hyperempirical method of analyzing social structures or social processes will disclose the dialectical form of man's complex socio-historical experiences or relationships. In Gurvitch's sociological theory, the tracing of empirical relations in a society reveals the interpenetrations, reciprocal relations, tensions and interactions in microsociological phenomena. Sartre adopts a version of Gurvitch's sociological orientation insofar as he proceeds from an analysis of man's practical experiences in their most common form (i. e., work) to the assumption of a mode of dialectical reasoning which renders the dialectical form of that experience intelligible to us. Sartre assumes that it is possible to establish the heuristic value of the concept of dialectical reason. He will base his defense of the idea of dialectical reason upon "apodictic experience."

³ J. P. SARTRE, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Paris, 1960, I, p. 129.

In Sartre's view, dialectical processes can be understood "from within," from a subjective perspective which has an objective pole in the world. In general, he adopts the principle that the field comprising the socio-historical world involves the interaction of the subjective and the objective. One does not seek to discover a dialectic in experience on the basis of *a priori* principles, but, rather, on the basis of lived-experience itself. We recognize here Sartre's typical approach to a philosophical issue. That is, his emphasis upon the "how" of concrete, individual experience which leads to the disclosure of transindividual structures of human experiences as such. One could say that, for Sartre, the theoretical elucidation of the concrete is made possible by virtue of an in-depth analysis of the structure of the concrete as it appears to consciousness.

In order to indicate what dialectical reason is not, an attempt is made to distinguish the linear development of analytical thought from the cyclical, paradoxical form of dialectical reasoning. Analytical reason, it is said, is clearly appropriate to domains in which there are external relations. Analysis involves the breaking down of a complex whole into the simple elements out of which it is ostensibly composed. Or, again, in analytical reasoning dynamic relations or processes are converted into static logical forms in order that they may be clarified. In its positivistic form analytical thought is typically reductionistic. The stumbling-block for analytical reason is, according to Sartre, irreducible novelty, the emergence of "the new" which cannot be explained in terms of known facts.⁴ Insofar as analytical reason "quantifies itself" (or is expressed in quantitative form), it is analogous to the process of objectification which Sartre believes is typical of the "practical organism" in general. In this sense, it is incorporated into Sartre's thought as a "practical moment of dialectical reason." Aside from attempting to accommodate his theory to the obvious value of analytic reason, Sartre suggests that analytical reasoning is a form—perhaps an ineluctable form—of *praxis* which is an expression of a stage of dialectical reasoning.

In order to illustrate the plausibility of the (possible) existence of dialectical reasoning, Sartre does not describe the nature of such a mode of thinking as distinguishable from inductive or deductive reasoning, but, rather, he appeals to the nature of human experience in its actuality. That is, he tries to persuade us of the dialectical

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

nature of human *praxis* or the immanent dialectical form of the totalizing (or synthesizing, unifying) activity of individual agents. While analytical thought is appropriate to an understanding of a mechanical order, to an understanding of phenomena conceived of as things or objects, dynamic or emergent socio-historical experience seems to have its own appropriate mode of *compréhension*. This comprehension (which is reminiscent of Dilthey's notion of *Verstehen*) involves an understanding of phenomena "from within," from the interior perspective of lived-experience. The point of this emphasis is to indicate that in concrete reality "the dialectical method is not distinguishable from the dialectical movement."⁵ This is, of course, a questionable notion insofar as it assumes that "a method" for the interpretation of a certain class of phenomena is, in some mysterious way, immanent in a "movement" in the concrete world. It is as if one were to say that the method of behaviorism is implicitly 'present' in the concrete behavior of individuals.

The reality of the dialectical movement is, Sartre argues, at first a *consequence* of a multiplicity of concrete intentional unifications (totalizations) in the social world *across* a material realm. This movement is a "living logic of action" which is discovered precisely in the intelligibility of *praxis* (the paradigm of which is work). Dialectical social processes are created anew through intentional action and are expressed theoretically when they are discerned as transparent to self-reflective agents. Dialectical reason is presumably manifested in the totalizing or synthesizing activities of individuals seeking to realize their projects in a socio-material field. The total dialectical process is not present to any one observer since no one stands outside the totalization *en cours*. Ostensibly, as the rationality of action, dialectical reason is itself nothing other than the consciousness of the dialectical process of action. Sartre has, in effect, so described *praxis* (including the intentional activity of totalization) that it is necessarily imbued with a dialectical form.

The immanent dialectical movement is described as a "singularized universal" (corresponding to Hegel's notion of a "concrete universal"). It is singular insofar as it is manifested in particular circumstances, under particular conditions, and in the singular course of individual lives. It is universal in the sense that its particular expressions give rise to principles and laws of intelligibility which can be applied to similar phenomena. Unfortunately, Sartre

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 132.

is unable to produce any *bona fide* "laws" (with the exception of his own so-called "law of totalization") which state dialectical relationships even though his description of a social dialectic does include a set of generalizations which would be useful for interpreting social phenomena.

It is held that "dialectical bonds" or relationships are produced by the "movement of dialectical reason." Although this sounds as though Sartre is hypostasizing dialectical reason, this is not the case. For, he is concerned to argue that dialectical reason is immanent in the synthesizing activity of social agents, in their intentional social action. Thus, dialectical reason is a "movement" which pervades socio-material relations (i. e., social relations across a material field) if we but analyzed them in sufficient detail or in terms of their structures. In this sense, dialectical reason is never purely contemplative. Structures, relations and significations not accessible to analytical reason must be revealed in order to substantiate the claim that there is an intelligibility in the socio-historical world which is accessible to dialectical reason alone.⁶ If there is a dialectical reason (or, more precisely, a dialectical rational *praxis*), then it is necessary that it define itself as the intelligibility of "irreducible novelty" insofar as it is such. Paraphrasing what he says about nothingness in *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre remarks that "the new comes to the world through man." That is, man creates novelty by means of concrete action, sustains this creation through the reorganization of practical fields and brings it into being through the "universal technique" of thought. Novelty is said to be immediately intelligible in man's productive activity itself and is the essential characteristic of the dialectical reason which is, for Sartre, the unification of theory and practice (or the ideal promulgated by the Marxists). Insofar as thought is *praxis* or a moment of *praxis*, it is primarily the grasp of the new. Dialectical reason, then, is immanent in the actions of *agents dialectiques* who create a dialectical process in a practical field and are subject to the dialectical relationships (created by the projective action of others) impinging upon their existence in the socio-material world.

The two basic forms of dialectical movements in social and historical existence which Sartre identifies are the "constituted dialectic" and the "constituting dialectic." The intelligibility of the former is based upon our understanding of the latter. Both comprise

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 147.

a dialectical circularity which characterizes action in society. Thus, for example, a loosely structured assembly (series) of individuals can produce a group and a group can produce a series. Or, again, the individual constitutes an assembly through his practice and the group constitutes the individual as a social or historical agent. An entire totalizing movement will be comprised of tensions, oppositions and interactions which illustrate dialectical experience. In the process of the emergence of new social movements there can be discerned numerous relations sustained simultaneously by a constituting or determining dialectic and by a constituted dialectic. Such is the abstract form of all significant social relationships. In general, then, dialectical reason may be defined as constituting and constituted reason applied to practical multiplicities. Sociological or historical totalizations or synthetic progressions are characterized by a dialectical tension of freedom and spontaneous free *praxis* and a submission to an encompassing totalizing process into which social agents enter insofar as they work to achieve an end in the socio-material realm of "exteriority." From the perspective of each dialectical agent his work involves an exteriorization (or objectification) of the interior and a corresponding interiorization of the exterior. This is the essential feature of dialectical experience.⁷ Following in the wake of the purposive intentionality of the social agent in *praxis* is the overt action which is a material, dialectical process. That is, man acts in the world as a material agent or organic individual in order to attain his projects. In work he transform matter into "worked upon matter" and is, in this sense, a productive agent in a material field. But transformed matter rebounds upon man's free practice and limits or circumscribes his existence. This opposition is continually resolved and reborn in man's objectification of himself and his projects in society. Dialectical experience is precisely this socio-material dialectical process.

At one point in the *Critique* Sartre equates dialectical reason with the notion of *compréhension* he introduced in his *Question de méthode*. For, comprehension is described as the translucidity of *praxis* to itself. This form of understanding is a mode of thought which is appropriate only to *les sciences humaines*. It is the practical agent's grasp of his action in the process of action itself. Sartre restricts comprehension to the intelligibility or rationality of *praxis* itself in order to avoid using it to refer to irrational intuition or sym-

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 157.

pathetic understanding. All intentional actions of individuals or groups is accessible to comprehension. This follows from Sartre's earlier statement that comprehension provides the most viable access to a knowledge of purposeful human action. The dialectical relationship among human need, organic function and *praxis* is comprehensible because it is experienced dialectically. The fundamental material need of man reveals the most primitive dialectical characteristic of human existence insofar as it is a "negation of negation." That is, the experience of need "denounces itself" as a lack (*manque*) in the interior of the human organism. Whereas in *Being and Nothingness* Sartre had held that the primary lack of human reality was consciousness, he now claims that the primordial lack which man experiences is organic need. This indicates a shift in his thinking from a concern with abstract consciousness to a concern with the material and bodily existence of man in a socio-material world. The experience of need in relation to a material or social world is also dialectical.

Building upon his previous descriptions, Sartre presents a social phenomenology of serialities, groups and organizations which reveals the universality of dialectical movements in society and history. The condition for the possibility of dialectical reason, then, is the dialectical nature of man's critical or selfconscious social experience. Sartre's argument seems to have the following form: if an interpretation of individual or group action (and of the original dependent relationship between man and the material world) on a dialectical model is plausible, and if it is possible to grasp the complex reciprocity of social relationships and show their intelligibility, then dialectical reason is possible. Sartre is quite aware that he has not *demonstrated* the existence of something called dialectical reason. Rather, he has attempted to persuade us that it is only dialectical reason—immanent in intentional *praxis*—which can comprehend novelty as novelty or follow the process of *dépassement* in the synthesizing acts of social agents. The synthesizing comprehension of a process involving the paradoxical exteriorization of the interior and the interiorization of the exterior is a paradigm of dialectical thinking. Although Sartre suggests that there is an identifiable distinction between analytical reasoning and dialectical reason as modes of thought, his attempts to show this distinction are unconvincing. Thus, it is not shown how our ability to understand opposing processes differs in any significant way from abstract reasoning in general. The grasp of the paradoxical is as much the province of the logician or

the philosopher of mathematics as it is of the "dialectical thinker." What is shown in Sartre's analysis is that a dialectical *interpretation* of social or historical processes does seem more appropriate to the nature of the phenomena described than a quantitative, analytical model. At no point in his discussion does Sartre clearly show that dialectical reason in its abstract expression differs from rational intuition or discursive reasoning in general. In point of fact, the very dialectical exposition of his own analysis of the "dialectic of *praxis*" is clearly accessible to analytical reason.

If, as Sartre says, "the principle of dialectical evidence must be the grasp of a *praxis* under way in light of its end,"⁸ he cannot indicate a significant distinction between dialectical reason and analytical reason in terms of a mode or form of reasoning or thinking insofar as analytical reason is a form of *praxis* in Sartre's view. All that Sartre actually managed to do is to suggest the heuristic value of a dialectical orientation toward social phenomena which does not require a unique form of reasoning, but indicates a plausible way of construing the complex network of relations manifested in social existence. The most plausible feature of Sartre's lengthy descriptions of *praxis* is his account of the dialectical form or nature of human *experience*. Apart from an exceedingly self-reflective and self-conscious social agent's comprehension of all of the ramifications of, and constitutive features of, his *praxis*, the notion of dialectical reason seems to add nothing to our understanding of Sartre's description of dialectical social processes. If Sartre's conception of *compréhension* serves the purpose which dialectical reason ostensibly serves, why is it necessary for Sartre to engage in a speculative exploration of the latter's possibility? Granted that there are "contradictions" in the social world (or, more accurately, contradictory tensions), oppositions and conflicting projects, is it necessary that there be a specific form of "reason" which is uniquely suited for an understanding of such phenomena? Social and historical processes are complex and multidimensional, are characterized by conflicting movements, by contradictory tensions and a "reciprocity of perspectives." It certainly can be granted that Gurvitch's and Sartre's notion that social and historical processes *are* dialectical in form is persuasive. Indeed, Sartre's *Critique* is a heroic attempt to persuade us of the dialectical form of human experience in the socio-historical world. But in the final analysis Sartre has not validated the notion

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 152n.

of dialectical reason in the sense of showing the condition for its possibility. What he seems to have done is to have fused the abstract and the concrete, the general and the particular in his account of *praxis* in order to illustrate his own understanding of what the unity of theory and practice would be like. The emphasis upon the primacy of practice, the description of human action as dialectical in form, are persuasive and are supported by convincing representations of the reciprocal relationships between the individual and the socio-material world, the individual and others, the individual and groups and groups and counter-groups. One can admit that there may be a "plurality of dialectical movements," dialectical agents, a dialectical relationship between human need and the external materio-social world, a social dialectic manifested in numerous processes without assuming that there is a distinctive dialectical 'reason' capable of understanding such complex processes. It is not dialectical reason which Sartre actually justifies, but, rather, "the dialectical structure of individual action" which he believes is the sole basis for a historical dialectic.⁹ Despite his intentions and his persuasive arguments, he has not adequately provided a transcendental justification of dialectical reason in the *Critique*. What he has presented is the viability of a dialectical interpretation of individual *praxis* and social processes. The creation of "the new" through rational action is a real feature of human social existence even though it may be more due to the creativity, imagination and innovative powers of man than to a mysterious dialectical reason. The sociologist can penetrate, to some extent, the reciprocal relations amongst individuals or groups without presupposing a special faculty of dialectical reason.

Social phenomena

In his *Dialectique et Sociologie* Georges Gurvitch said that Sartre was correct in holding that *les sciences humaines* (especially sociology) are in need of "the dialectic," but that he is mistaken in assuming that they must be founded upon a "precise philosophical doctrine."¹⁰ This question raises a point that goes to the heart of Sartre's enterprise in the *Critique*. That is, do we disc-

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 279.

¹⁰ GEORGES GURVITCH, *Dialectique et Sociologie*, Paris, 1962, p. 171.

over the nature of human existence by virtue of the application of the dialectical method of interpretation to the phenomena of the human sciences or must we develop a philosophical anthropology which will illuminate the subject-matter of the "human sciences"? This question points back to a central concern of the philosophy of Dilthey, a concern with the creation of an *anthropologische Methode* which would elucidate the relationship between man's lived—experience and the socio-cultural and historical world. Sartre shares with Dilthey a concern with a practical empiricism, an orientation towards concrete phenomena which has led him to seek an integration of philosophy, sociology and history under the guidance of a search for a philosophical anthropology. It is this project and not his sympathies with Marxism which pervades the dialectical explorations of the *Critique de la raison dialectique*. As Sartre expresses it in *Question de méthode*,

In choosing as the object of our study, within the ontological sphere, that privileged existent which is man... it is evident that existentialism poses to itself the question of its fundamental relations with those disciplines which are grouped under the general heading of *anthropology*. And—although its field of application is theoretically larger—existentialism is anthropology too insofar as anthropology seeks to give itself a foundation... anthropology... implicitly demands to know what is the *being* of human reality.¹¹

Sartre's analysis of dialectical *praxis* as a form of practical reasoning is an attempt to contribute to an understanding of the existential situation of man in a social and historical milieu. That is, man's comprehension of himself as a social or historical agent. But throughout his description of man's dynamic "situation" in a social world he presupposes the dialectical form of social existence and convincingly shows the amenability of social processes to dialectical interpretation. It is his description of the dialectical nature of 'critical' (self-reflective, self-conscious) social experience which has heuristic value and not the "dialectical reason" which is ostensibly operative in human *praxis*. That it is Sartre's description of an empirical social dialectic (elements of which are necessarily expressed in abstract terms) which is the viable contribution to a general anthropology is indicated by the absence of any statement of dialectical

¹¹ J. P. SARTRE, *op. cit.*, p. 104.

principles or laws (again, with the exception of the so-called 'law' of totalization). Sartre's emphasis upon concrete descriptions and nominalistic classifications seems to preclude a formulation of dialectical principles. He does not succeed in describing what he believes is a unique form of dialectical reasoning because he is primarily concerned with an immanent dialectical movement in society and in history which can be understood "from within" or as it is "lived" by historical individuals. Of course, even this account of social existence involves the assumption of an ideal type of rational, self-conscious social agent which is clearly a theoretical fiction. Even though such idealization is common in sociological theory, in Sartre's hands it seems to undermine his attempt to remain faithful to actual social processes. At any rate, despite his inability to describe a distinctive form of dialectical reason which is presumably operative in individual and collective action, his descriptions of the complex relationships among individuals and within groups are real contributions to a dialectical sociology.

The account of the dialectic of *praxis* in the *Critique* is opposed to the notion that the dialectic is reducible to the general laws of natural history or of social history. Engels' concept of a "dialectics of nature" is described as an unjustified metaphysical hypothesis which has tended to support a "dogmatic dialectic" which has come to dominate Marxist thought. Although Sartre admits that it is logically possible that physico-chemical processes may "express a dialectical reason," he tends to say that dialectical relations are immanent only in the humanized world of socio-material existence. The description of the social world implies not only an intentional consciousness of that world (or its objects), but an interchange or interaction between man as an organic being and the socio-material reality he acts upon. Sartre's social theory is concerned with a description of social phenomena as they appear to consciousness insofar as they are apprehended in the lived experience of social actors. Man, as a social agent, "inscribes" his being on the socio-material world in which he acts—even the matter he encounters is primarily "worked upon matter" or matter affected by human purposes.

The most fundamental dialectical relationship between man and the world is revealed in *besoin* or need. Even in this need-state the individual is able to relate himself to exteriority by virtue of his free consciousness. Man, as consciousness, is always other than the material world in which he finds himself. A material realm independent of the significations and objectifications of man is never

encountered. The empirical dialectic between man and the material-social world is mediated by the "lived-body" or what may be described as the consciousness-body of man. Since social phenomena are necessarily affected by human *praxis*, they are never encountered as purely objective phenomena. The practical field of "instrumental possibilities" in which social agents act is constituted by intentional projects and the "rationality of *praxis*."

As Gilbert Varet pointed out in his analysis of Sartre's earlier phenomenological ontology, the "reflective method" of *Being and Nothingness* is presented in an entirely dialectical form and the entire phenomenology is carried forward by a movement of progressive synthesis.¹² In addition, Sartre's phenomenological method reveals a movement construed in terms of "the rhythm of a continuous antithesis between the relation of exteriority and of interiority." These relationships are precisely those disclosed in the phenomenology of the dialectic of social existence. The interiorization of the exterior and the exteriorization of the interior—the dialectic of the subjective and the objective—which is described as paradigmatic of critical social experience is an amplification of relations previously described in *Being and Nothingness*. In this sense, there is a continuity between Sartre's phenomenological ontology and his dialectical ontology of the socio-historical world. It is his own phenomenological ontology in association with dialectical sociology (especially that of Georges Gurvitch) which shapes Sartre's basic understanding of the nature of social phenomena.

In *What is Literature?* Sartre had said that the human enterprise is characterized by the polarities of success and failure. What was needed for an understanding of history—which is neither wholly subjective nor wholly objective—was a kind of anti-dialectic which is itself dialectic.¹³ Although he will separate the dialectic from the opposing 'anti-dialectic' in the *Critique*, Sartre tried to develop a social theory which would encompass the subjective and the objective features of human existence. In his prefatory essay "Marxism and Existentialism" he had said that one of the aims of existentialism was to discover "concrete syntheses. . . within a moving dialectical totalization which is nothing else but history."¹⁴ Such a moving synthesis would presumably incorporate the dialectic of individual

¹² GILBERT VARET, *L'Ontologie de Sartre*, Paris, 1948, pp. 158-159.

¹³ J. P. SARTRE, "Qu'est-ce que la littérature?", *Situations II*, Paris, 1947, p. 86.

¹⁴ CRD, p. 29.

and group practice he attempts to describe. In actuality, the *Critique* only points to the universal totalization of history. For the most part, attention is given to the description of social processes (with some historical illustrations of the interpenetration of social processes and history) which include both a practical knowledge of things in concrete social situations where there is an interplay of objective factors and the subjective perspective which is a "moment in the objective process" in which there is an "interiorization of the exterior."¹⁵ The actual procedure in the *Critique* is a method encompassing objective descriptions of actual and hypothetical social relations which emerge out of individual action, as well as a projective orientation which is similar to the phenomenology of the world for consciousness in *Being and Nothingness*. Social situations (like *situation* in general) are characterized by the interaction of the subjective and the objective in coordination with a notion of an immanent dialectical movement in social processes. The objective features of the social milieu ultimately refer back to a "lived reality" which is capable of grasping the intelligibility of its action as it takes place. The only freedom with which Sartre is now concerned is "concrete freedom" or freedom in situation: the spontaneous free *praxis* of individuals has replaced the abstract freedom of consciousness or the "for itself."

The social phenomena most commonly encountered in daily existence are described by Sartre as "collective objects" (or "totalities") which are given in their concrete materiality. These totalities are the common objects of daily experience—the newspaper I read, the office in which I work, the money used to purchase food, etc.—the "reality" of which is both contextual and referential. These "detotalized totalities" have a meaning and value which is socially and culturally determined. Social fields are "already constituted" by a host of significations which are cultural objects for members of a society. Man comes to understand himself as a social being in terms of his relationships to others and to the totalities encountered in social fields. In critical experience there is a grasping of the intelligibility of a social field and one's action in it.

In his description of the dialectic of *praxis* Sartre presents a highly idealized portrait of an unusually self-conscious social agent. To my mind, this model is derived from his earlier conception of an ideal worker, despite the fact that he denies that he is writing solely

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 31n.

from the perspective of working class individuals. What is said about the worker in "Materialism and Revolution" is entirely consistent with his depiction of the man of *praxis* in the *Critique*. For, he had said that

what [a worker] becomes aware of, in the course of action itself, is that he surpasses the present state of matter by a precise plan of disposing it in such and such a way; and since this plan is nothing but the arrangement of means in view of ends, he succeeds in fact in redispersing it as he has wished.¹⁶

This model of a self-conscious, somewhat philosophical "worker" is one which dominates the pages of the *Critique*. Concrete action is depicted along the lines of the behavior of the man of action even though there are occasional references to perceptual experiences of social phenomena which could be had by any individual. Sartre echoes his characterization of the "worker" who surpasses and transforms the materio-social world when he asserts that

Man defines himself by his project. This material being perpetually goes beyond the condition which is made for him; he reveals and determines his situation by transcending it in order to objectify himself—by work, action, gesture.¹⁷

A social agent is described as a "material being" because action necessarily involves objectification in the material world. This model of a social agent engaged in surpassing the inertial social or material phenomena in the world indicates that Sartre's picture of social reality is not a purely descriptive sociology. His characterization of social agents as engaged in rational, self-conscious action is not quite convincing. It accounts for the one-dimensional form of his sociological descriptions, the sense that *all* social action has a revolutionary or quasi-revolutionary form. Obviously, Sartre's social thought is dominated by a conflict paradigm of social relations which tends to minimize cooperative social behavior, as well as normal, non-dramatic social life. There is a strong *prescriptive* component in Sartre's sociology which leads him to describe those social phenomena which reveal efforts to overcome social or political states-

¹⁶ J. P. SARTRE, "Matérialisme et révolution," *Situations III*, Paris, 1949, p. 204.

¹⁷ CRD, p. 95.

of-affairs which are construed as repugnant. Although this is not true of all of his comments about social phenomena, it is clearly a theme of the *Critique*.

In his analysis of the encounter with social phenomena Sartre has not changed his mind about the basic form of man's concrete relations to others or to objects in the world since *Being and Nothingness*. For, he had described beings-in-themselves as brute obstacles to be overcome by man's concrete free action and he had described others as alienating realities encountered in a threatening world. The significant shift of emphasis in Sartre's thought is from a concern with the world for an isolated consciousness to the situating of man as a bodily (or material) being in social fields and in a quantitative world of exteriority. To be sure, this emphasis is already implicit in the phenomenological description of man in concrete situation in *Being and Nothingness*.

Given the residual presence of his phenomenological ontology in his social thought, it may be said that Sartre conceives of social facts in such a way as to make them coincide with his ontological schema. Thus, for example, in seeking to show how his own philosophy of human reality is consistent with Marxism, he remarks that

Existentialism, too, wants to situate man in his class and in the conflicts which oppose him to other classes, starting with the mode and the relations of production. But it can approach this "situation" in terms of *existence*. . . it wants to reintroduce the unsurpassable singularity of the human adventure.¹⁸

Man's comprehension of the social fields in which he acts is determined by his existence in reference to his projects and his synthetic acts of totalization. Social phenomena are created and sustained by *praxis* and are transformed by this action. By a process of "transubstantiation" human projects take on the characteristics of things without becoming things as such. In work, man, in a sense, becomes a "thing" or object and transforms material phenomena acted upon into humanized objects. Whatever man acts upon or whatever obstacle he attempts to "surpass" is thereby a *social* phenomenon. For Sartre, the priority of *praxis* is intimately associated with the priority of social existence. This general conception of man's existence in the social world is reminiscent of Marx's view that man is both a product of, and a creator of, society. As Marx expressed it,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

The individual *is the social being*. The manifestation of his life—even when it does not appear directly in the form of a *communal* manifestation, accomplished in association with other men—is. . . a manifestation and affirmation of *social life*. . . Though man is a *unique* individual—and it is just his particularity which makes him. . . a really *individual* communal being—he is equally. . . the ideal whole, the subjective existence of society as thought and experienced.¹⁹

Returning to a consideration of man's "original" relation to the world, it is quite clear that the description of the initiation of action in terms of the interiorization of an exterior negation (e. g., need) is not a description of an "empirical discovery," but is actually a reappearance of Sartre's earlier assumption that "action necessarily implies as its condition the recognition of. . . an objective lack or, again, of a negativity."²⁰ What Sartre is arguing is that action requires the "interiorization" of a material lack (e. g., in scarcity) which one then seeks to "negate" or overcome. Basically, he is making the same point that Aristotle made; that is, that action is initiated by desire. No doubt he is correct in holding that the primary needs of man reveal a *dependency* upon the external world. But this does not indicate a "primary contradiction" of the organic and the inorganic.²¹ If it reveals anything, it is simply man's causal dependence upon the natural world for his survival. The primary relationship between an individual incapable of satisfying basic needs (e. g., an infant) and others is one of complete dependence. The negation of the most primitive negation experienced by man is accomplished by other human beings who already exist and function in a society. In order for man to develop, he must undergo a dependent relationship to organic and not only inorganic beings. Although Sartre concedes that the relation between a man-in-need and the inorganic environment is an abstraction in the sense that it is human relations which mediate a material field, a significant insight relevant to his argument is obscured.

It is obvious that the basic need-states of individuals require a social context for their satisfaction. The dependence of the neonate on others for the satisfaction of basic needs is the primitive *social*

¹⁹ KARL MARX, *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844*, trans. M. MILLIGAN, New York, 1964, p. 130.

²⁰ J. P. SARTRE, *L'Être et le néant*, Paris, 1943, p. 508.

²¹ CRD, p. 166.

experience of man even if it occurs prior to the development of a sense of the I. The individual can develop as human in a human community in an original dependent relation to others. It has been suggested that the child originally participates in the unity of a "we experience" which is the primary form of contact with fellowmen.²² Sartre avers that at a moment of "the dialectic" relations between men are conditioned by the inhuman or the inorganic. Despite the validity of this claim, it is also the case that simultaneous with this relation is the individual's passive dependence upon others. What this means, in Sartre's terms, is that the basic needs of man are not 'negated' by an individual's actions, but by a social bond of passivity. The primordial point of departure for man's social existence is not *praxis*, but *passivus*. An already constituted human world must be present in order for an individual to develop a capacity for action. Man, as an organic being, is not related to a material world by means of a "totalization" of a field of *praxis*; rather, his most immediate relationship to a socio-material world is characterized by passive dependence. In Sartre's terms, a man-in-need who is dependent upon a natural environment as well as on a social world resembles a "passive totality." It is by means of a process of physical, emotional, intellectual and social development that the individual becomes capable of surpassing his previous condition, as well as the inertia of the materio-social world. If Sartre seriously desires to provide an empirically rooted account of the "dialectic of social existence," then he cannot forego an analysis of the difficult process of individual development (or maturation) prior to the emergence of a full capacity for rational, intentional *praxis*. To be sure, he does mention that the "surpassing of one's own past is a long and difficult process."²³ Given that he illustrates his discussion of the development of life in "spirals" by references to the life of Flaubert, we may turn to his recent work—*L'Idiot de la famille; Gustave Flaubert, 1821-1857*—for a phenomenological description of the dialectic of the life of an individual. In this study Sartre is concerned to reveal the complete intelligibility of the development of an individual life. In his prefatory essay, "The Progressive-Regressive Method," he anticipated this existential, psychoanalytical and dialectical elucidation of individual development. In addition, he was inchoately aware

²² Cf. S. STRASSER. *The Idea of Dialogal Phenomenology*, Pittsburgh, 1969, Chapter Four, "The Growth of Awareness."

²³ CRD, p. 71.

that the analysis of the origination of *praxis* did point back to prior conditions of existence. In this regard, he remarks that

The given which we surpass at every instant by the simple fact of living it, is not restricted to the material conditions of our existence; we must include in it. . . our own childhood. What was once both a vague comprehension of our class, of our social conditioning by way of the family group, and a blind going beyond, an awkward effort to wrench ourselves away from all this, at last ends up inscribed in us in the form of *character*.²⁴

It is not only our productive capacity which shapes our understanding of ourselves as social agents, but our own psychological individuality as well. The realization of existential projects in the world is expressed in a dialectic of *praxis* which involves a projection of ourselves in an exterior world of socio-material forces. The man of *praxis* is subject to the efficacy of social facts, as well as being the creator of new social facts. Sartre conceives of social facts as things (as Durkheim did) and (as Weber did) not as things. He adopts the paradoxical view that social facts are things in the sense that all things—directly or indirectly—are social facts. The reason why he adopts such an orientation towards the facticity of social phenomena is his insistence that “things are human in the exact measure in which men are things.”²⁵ The social field as the *locus* of the interaction of the subjective and the objective, the dynamic and the inert, the organic and the inorganic, is comprised of “things” which are subject to quantitative analysis, but which are transformed into social phenomena through the action of man. There are “things” or “material objects” with significance only insofar as there is man. Since a social field is comprised of “collective objects,” things or material objects as well as of social relations, the social facts that occur in such a field are “things” subject to causal *and* dialectical processes. On the other hand, human projects, “the teleology of human action,” and human significations imbue “things” with a socially determined meaning. The material world is humanized through the thought, experience and action of man. And, conversely, man objectifies his being in social action in a material world.

Insofar as social facts occur in the quantitative realm of exteriority, they are things (or may be construed as things). But insofar as

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 68.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 246-247.

man acts upon, or works upon, matter, it is encompassed in a social world in which human significations are ascribed to it. *Praxis*, as Sartre puts it, converts matter into an instrument for human ends and encompasses inorganic entities in a totalizing project. We have a *compréhension* of social facts or social phenomena insofar as they are "inscribed" with the significations of past *praxis*, are accessible in lived-experience and are elements in a totalization in process. Although Sartre does say that some social phenomena ("automations") may escape our understanding insofar as we encounter an "anti-dialectical" limit, his account of social processes is shot through with the assumption of their intelligibility. Even his notion of the "constituting dialectic" being transformed into an *antidialectic* or a "dialectic of passivity" does not indicate a phenomenon which eludes our understanding. For, the antidialectic is the result of "a *praxis* returning against itself" which possesses its own kind of intelligibility which we can discover.²⁶ Just as Sartre assumes that human conduct is, in principle, intelligible so, too, does he assume that social phenomena are, for the most part, entirely intelligible.

Seen from the standpoint of the intentionality of *praxis*, the antidialectic is the rebound of man's activity back upon himself. In effect, it results in a counter-finality which undermines previous intentions—e. g., the Chinese deforestation program which generated flooding, the industrial waste which causes a dangerous pollution of the environment, etc. Such contingent counterfinalities are social phenomena which seem to be immanent counterdialectical processes which ought to be included in what Sartre calls the "dialectical circle." Everything which is "antidialectical" works against the original ends of groups or individuals. In this sense, institutions which, in maturity, tend to undermine the original purpose for which they were established are "antidialectical" entities. The general conception of antidialectical social phenomena seems to be derived from Marx's lament about the objective social relations which emerge out of the actual process of human life and become "forces" which acquire power over men. Indeed, the *locus classicus* for the notion of counterfinalities seems to be the description in *The German Ideology* of

This crystallization of social activity... this consolidation of what we ourselves produce into an objective power above us,

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 154.

growing out of control, thwarting our expectations, bringing to naught our calculations, is one of the chief factors in historical development up till now.²⁷

Marx describes these counterintentional social processes as exemplifications of alienation. And Sartre, too, sees alienation no longer as a purely ontological trait of man as such, but as having its root cause in social reality. He amplifies the scope of alienation by pointing to its appearance in institutions, serial social relations, in counterfinalities, in all of the manifestations of antidialectical forces. One of the outcomes of Sartre's elaborate description of social processes is the paradoxical view that it is the free projective *praxis* of men which creates the material and social forces that undermine, circumscribe or negate human freedom.

There is an aspect of Sartre's conception of the experience of social fields which indicates yet another point of continuity between *Being and Nothingness* and the *Critique*. That is, the notion that the practical fields unified by the totalizing acts of individuals or groups comprise a social space which is hodological. Borrowing Lewin's terminology, Sartre assumes that the life-space in which man acts as a social agent is comprised of an assembly of attracting or repelling vectors which are directed towards or away from certain objects. Lived-space is a psychological field in which one sees a situational totality. The practical knowledge of a situation presupposes an orientation in hodological space which illuminates "concrete totalities." Individual action unifies practical or social fields and reveals the fields as comprised of hodological space.²⁸ The "synthetic conduct" of individuals involves a unification of a field of lived-space in which there are movements towards objects or away from them. In relation to projected goals, objects in social space are seen as instrumentalities for achieving ends or as obstacles to be surpassed. Objects encountered in social experience are significations which are illuminated by the action of others or our own action (in contrast to the view in *Being and Nothingness* that the significations in concrete situations are illuminated by "consciousness") in a social space construed as the real space in which men act. This general conception of social phenomena being encountered in hodological

²⁷ KARL MARX and F. ENGELS, *The German Ideology*, ed. R. Pascal, New York, 1939, pp. 22-24.

²⁸ CRD, p. 97.

space is one that is directly derived from his earlier phenomenological ontology.

The "dialectic" of individual practice in a socio-material world is something which necessarily involves some relationship to others in a social field. The primary form of such a relationship is "dyadic." The amplification of these relationships indicates a series of relations amongst "thirds." When a person is objectively designated by individuals as "the other" (as one who belongs to another class, another profession, another group, etc.), this designation is internalized. That is, one places oneself in an objective milieu in which two other persons may realize their mutual dependence outside oneself.²⁹ Whether one is actively engaged in realizing a project or is merely a spectator of the conduct (in Sartre's illustration, a summer visitor (*estivant*) observing the work of two other men who are separated by a wall) of others, one is involved directly or indirectly in a social field in which these are related "lines" of *praxis*. Each individual is a center of an alternative orientation towards the objective world. Reciprocal and triadic relations are, for Sartre, the basis for *all* social relations. A complete, coordinated reciprocity between men would be possible only in an ideal society. Despite the fact that Sartre holds that social existence is characterized by positive or negative reciprocity, his descriptions of relations between individuals are, for the most part, suffused with antagonistic relations. Although scarcity is said to be the basis for antagonism amongst men, Sartre's conception of individual projected totalization practically entails a conflict of interests amongst social agents. This is clear in his view that cooperative reciprocity requires either that a person sees the other as a means to the realization of a project or sees him as the creator of a project for which oneself is a means. The unity of the reciprocity of two individuals requires the mediation of a "third man." The extended relations amongst a sequence of social agents (each of which may be a 'third' for others) reveals a "lived reciprocity" which is the basic component of social existence. As in *Being and Nothingness*, the third individual is the origin of the constitution of small or large groups. A system of third men becomes a horizontal or a vertical series of social relations. Although there may be reciprocal relations amongst a sequence of third men, there is ostensibly no reciprocal relation between the third man and a pair of others. In terms of the complex dialectical network of social relations the exclusion of this kind of relationship seems arbitrary.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

Presumably, the third man observer changes the reciprocity between one individual and another insofar as the end of their rhythm of activity is now (in a work situation) related to their performances by a third man. This seems to obscure the well-known sociological observation that the presence of observers typically produces a positive response in terms of productive activity. This certainly seems to imply a reciprocal relationship between a third (an observer) and others. The general principle that social reality is an "indefinite multiplicity of reciprocities" seems to include the notion that the third man (though a mediator) is himself in reciprocal relation to others (e. g., a dyad) in a social milieu. If, as Sartre maintains, the sociological observer is himself an element in the social process he is observing, then why is it not the case that reciprocal relations between a "third" and a pair of individuals would not be possible? It is clear, at any rate, that it is the dynamic system of mediated reciprocities which is the basis for the emergence of loosely structured assemblies.

Sartre describes the microsociological interactions with social fields as dialectical processes by which man is mediated by material things in the same measure in which things are mediated through men. This gives us an overview of Sartre's conception of the being of social phenomena: proceeding from an individual's relationship to an exterior material field (or a social practico-inert which is a kind of "thing"), we discover reciprocal relations to others *across* a material field or by virtue of mediating third men; proceeding from individual (dyadic, triadic or collective) *praxis* we discover a practico-material field. Although the true social reality is "the singular man in the social field," this reality acts within a complex network of human relations and material forces. Although the free action of individuals is presumably the foundation of socially significant action, once man acts in the world of exteriority he makes himself, as it were into a "quasi-object" in order to be effective. Without the objectification of human energy, projects would remain imaginary phenomena. Emphasizing this aspect of Sartre's description of social existence, one can see that there is a stage of materialization in social action which naturally leads him to describe social phenomena as 'things.' In the movement from individual action to organized action, we may say that social phenomena take on an inorganic form in the sense that all exteriority has a *quantitativ* nature. Sartre is careful to note that this process is dialectical in form. For "each element [in a milieu] is linked to the other ele-

ments, but it is linked *from its place in the series and through its escaping liaison with all* intermediate elements."³⁰ The social action of an individual involves him, then, in a complex network of socio-material relations in which there are constraints and exigencies which comprise *la réalité constante* of social existence.

The dynamic reality of society is comprised of inert matter, inert social entities (practico-inert fields), individual and collective *praxis*, dual and triadic reciprocities, and a host of mediating relations. All social phenomena are "humanized" insofar as they are acted upon, worked upon, lived from within or are instruments for the attainment of projects. Again, a social world is an intermingling of the subjective and the objective, exteriority and interiority, the inert and the dynamic, the inorganic and the organic. The tensions in social existence, in Sartre's account, are manifested in the dialectical relationships between subjectivity and objectivity or the dual movement in which the interior is exteriorized and the exterior interiorized.

In a strict sense, Sartre does not consistently hold that "there are only men and real relations between men in society;"³¹ for, as we have seen, social reality is comprised of encounters with inertial entities in terms of man's *rapport à la Nature*, with quasi-inorganic social phenomena (the practico-inert), with practical totalities (instruments or cultural objects) and with a variety of obstacles. The meaning or significance of social phenomena is constituted by the intentional, synthesizing activity of individuals. Despite the occasional suggestion of a monistic materialistic conception of man's situation in the world, Sartre retains the basic notion that man humanizes what he acts upon and transforms the exterior world through his projects, actions, totalizations and valuations. Social phenomena have no intrinsic significance insofar as their meaning is referential to the goals and purposes of individuals or social groups. The difference between the earlier Sartrean picture of man in the world and the later one is that he had previously stressed the being of man as an isolated consciousness ("for itself") which "illuminates" the factual world and he now seems to say that the insurpassable dimension of human life is found in socio-historical existence. In addition, the previous abstract conception of matter as the "in-itself" is now replaced by a conception of determinate objects having significance in a social and historical context.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 327-328.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 55.

The practical world of social action may not have the translucent intelligibility which Sartre tends to ascribe to it, but his descriptions of the various stages of dialectical processes in social dynamics are often plausible depictions of the complex structure of social existence. However, the irrational contingencies of social life, the stochastic phenomena which undermine social planning or social engineering receive insufficient recognition. Even antidialectical social forces or counterfinalities are dealt with as phenomena which are quite intelligible. In terms of his emphasis upon the rational teleology of individual or group *praxis*, the assumption of our capacity to penetrate the most complex social phenomena, Sartre presents what is predominantly a *rationalistic* dialectical sociology.

Since Sartre is concerned with man "in situation" in the *Critique*, it is not surprising to discover that man's existence in a spatio-temporal practical field is conceived of as that of a "material reality" or "organic being" which ascribes human functions and significations to material objects.³² The individual or the group engaged in realizing projects through action attempts to surpass the passive unity of objects which determine the material circumstances in which man finds himself. This general conception does not entail the adoption of a new ontology (e. g., that of materialism) which is alien to the earlier phenomenological ontology of Sartre. Rather, it involves the incorporation (with some modifications and shifts of emphasis) of that ontology into a theory of social reality. The concrete freedom of man in situation has consistently involved organic "being-in-the-world" insofar as the concrete and contingent existence of man in the midst of the world is manifested through the bodily facticity of the individual in relation to what Sartre had described (in *Being and Nothingness*) as "an indefinite multiplicity of reciprocal relations." Man's engagement in the world of social action reveals the coextensivity of his body with the world. The body is a "center of reference" which situates an individual in a world comprised of a multiplicity of instrumental complexes or "practical totalities." All that Sartre has done is to have incorporated the following aspects of his phenomenology into a social theory: factual or bodily existence, being-in-the-world-in-the presence-of-others, concrete relations with others, the conception of the "third man" mediator and situational freedom. The phenomenological description of a social dialectic is pervaded by the ontological conceptions of *Being and Nothingness*.

³² *Ibid.*, p. 248.

The latter are synthesized with a dialectical orientation toward social processes which is similar to that of a dialectical sociology which sought to preserve the reality of human freedom in the midst of a variety of emergent social micro-determinisms and partial determinations. And, as we have seen, the nature of social phenomena is disclosed not by the powers of a "dialectical reason," but by virtue of a dialectical interpretation of such phenomena which relies upon many of Sartre's earlier ontological determinations.

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