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**JÜRGEN HABERMAS ON THE
LEGACY OF JEAN-PAUL SARTRE**
Conducted by Richard Wolin

THE ENSUING INTERVIEW with Jürgen Habermas was conducted in Frankfurt am Main in October 1990. It was originally commissioned by *Les Temps Modernes* for a special issue commemorating the tenth anniversary of Sartre's death. However, due to difficulties in preparing the French translation, the interview did not appear in *Les Temps Modernes* until August 1991.

The interview was originally conducted in German. The translation and notes are the interviewer's. It appears here in English for the first time.

Wolin: *In what ways, if any, has the philosophy of Sartre played a role in the course of your own intellectual development?*

Habermas: As a student in the years following the Second World War, I encountered Sartre the playwright. This was in the period before my Abitur (1949). It was at this time, for example, that I saw the fabulous Gründgens production of *The Flies*, with Flickenschild in the main role. In Germany, this play gave rise to profound metaphysical interpretations. But the other plays, for example, *No Exit*, enabled us even then to become acquainted with the political Sartre. At that time, Sartre was truly in vogue: his ideas, but even more, the pathos of his ideas, were virtually omnipresent [*drangen durch alle Ritzen*]. As a young student around 1950, I became familiar with Sartre the philosopher along with Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*, which in our limited academic circles provoked heated discussions.

My reading of *Being and Nothingness* was very important for my understanding of *Being and Time*. Sartre helped us to read the early Heidegger — which was the only Heidegger we knew at the time — as a work of transcen-

dental philosophy. One could read this work, following Sartre, as a humanistic philosophy of freedom. I found Heidegger's attempt to distance himself from Sartre in the "Letter on Humanism" to be rather surprising. I did find it interesting, though, that existential ontology wanted to be something other than anthropology. Already at that time I viewed Heidegger's attempt to distance himself from modern humanistic thinking, which followed from the "Letter," as a continuation of themes of precisely that German ideology from which the younger generation wanted to free itself. For this reason, Sartre was important, at least in the case of my own intellectual biography.

Wolin: *In your own philosophy there has been a distinct break with the traditional, monological "philosophy of consciousness" in favor of a philosophy of intersubjectivity or communicative reason. Prima facie, there occurs a similar move in Sartre's philosophy away from the egological framework of Being and Nothingness and toward a theory of groups, socialization, and history in Critique of Dialectical Reason. Do you consider Sartre's move in this direction to be fruitful?*

Habermas: In retrospect, Sartre was as little able to solve the problem of intersubjectivity in the third part of *Being and Nothingness* as was Husserl in the *Cartesian Meditations* or Heidegger in *Being and Time*. With Sartre, in the last analysis, all interactions remain something akin to the attempts of world-projecting subjects to objectivate one another, that is, to mutually overpower one another. If one begins with the premises of transcendental philosophy, one cannot comprehend mutual understanding, the commonalities of an intersubjectively shared language, tradition, or life-world. The later Sartre interested me chiefly as a theorist of literature and as a great literary psychologist, whereas the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* came too late for those of us who were already familiar for some time with critical theory in order to exert a profound influence. I also do not believe that Sartre's appropriation of Marx along essentially transcendental phenomenological lines would have changed things for us. Even later, "intersubjectivity" remained something, if not entirely foreign, secondary for Sartre.

Wolin: *In recent years, the role of the traditional "universal intellectual," of which Sartre was perhaps the ideal incarnation in our century, has increasingly come under attack, for example, by Foucault, who proposed a theory of the "specific intellectual" in its stead. Where do you stand with reference to this debate on the role of the intellectual in contemporary society?*

Habermas: Certainly, Foucault sharply criticized Sartre's self-understanding as a political intellectual; however, retrospectively, one must say that the two perceived an entirely similar role for intellectuals. Foucault correctly furthered the demystification of the intellectual; he made it clear that today philosophers and literati share this role with other experts who step forth into the public sphere: all have become "specific intellectuals" who set forth their professional expertise in their spare time in public debates. Thus no one can understand him- or herself as a privileged spokesman. In Germany, conversely, we have the problem of countering a deeply rooted hostility to intellectuals; thus today, the dismal heritage of a cultural conservative mandarin tradition merely hides behind the justifiable skepticism vis-à-vis the type of sectarian intellectuals who take their bearings from the certainties of the philosophy of history. The *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung* is conducting a campaign against ghosts, as one sees in the case of Christa Wolf.¹ In point of fact, today there are no longer any intellectuals who are not guided by a fallibilistic consciousness.

Wolin: *Although interest in Sartre's work around the world remains keen, in France such interest seems to have abated as a result of the success of other intellectual paradigms: structuralism, poststructuralism, philosophical anarchism, etc. Do you believe that this move "beyond" Sartre and the fusion of Marxism and existentialism he sought to effectuate has gone too far? If so, which in your estimation are the aspects of Sartre's philosophy that are worth preserving?*

Habermas: During the first three postwar decades, the intellectual clocks were turning in different directions. In Germany, structuralism had a rather late and relatively minor influence. Adorno's critical social theory was viewed as an alternative to phenomenological anthropology and later as an alternative to Sartre's phenomenological Marxism. Consequently, for us the return to Nietzsche and to the later Heidegger, which since the mid-1970s has been consummated as a radical critique of reason, takes place in a different constellation. In this regard, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* contained a hard core of philosophical pessimism upon which "postmodern" readings could base themselves — which allows one to assimilate Adorno to Heidegger and Derrida. Sartre's work does not allow itself to be adapted to deconstructionist tendencies. For this discourse, he represents an adversary who is not easily assimilable. His writings contain ideas that have not only not been surpassed but that also point beyond the historicist and contextualist approaches that are so widespread today. This is true especially for the existentialist understanding of freedom, which — following a trajectory from Fichte

and Kierkegaard — expresses in a pregnant and radical version an undeniable component of the modern self-understanding. I admire the fact that Sartre resisted in an exemplary way the temptation to fall back behind the conditions of postmetaphysical thinking. He resisted the obscure gestures of a rhetoric that, in the form of a philosophically disguised negative theology, always suggested a privileged access to truth.

Wolin: *As you know, since the appearance in France three years ago of Victor Farias's book, Heidegger and National Socialism, there has been much lively speculation concerning the philosophical bases of Heidegger's Nazism. But doesn't the fact that persons such as Sartre and Marcuse — to name only two — received their philosophical inspiration from Heidegger's great work of 1927, Being and Time, lead one to conclude that there is no necessary relationship between Heidegger's brand of Existenzphilosophie and National Socialism? After all, Sartre was able to take these same philosophical premises and make them serviceable for an extremely different set of political ends.*

Habermas: I am of the opinion that the substance of *Being and Time* is not yet affected by the ideological standpoint which, since 1929, imprinted itself more forcefully on Heidegger's work. Of course, one also finds in this book traces of an approach to cultural criticism that was at the time widespread among the German mandarins — for example, in the analysis of the “they,” of “publicity,” of “authentic existence,” and so forth. Thus Marcuse and Sartre (who was at the time an entirely unpolitical intellectual) were able to learn what all of us can still learn from this remarkable work. Perhaps at the time, Sartre didn't know German well enough in order to detect the questionable political overtones in Heidegger's expressionistic style. After 1933, Marcuse energetically distanced himself from his former teacher; he was the one who, among the older generation of the Frankfurt School, stood closest to Sartre. Following the war, Sartre was able to exert a great influence because his version of Heideggerian *Existenzphilosophie* stood in an entirely different context, and because it remained entirely unaffected by the intellectual trope of the “setting-to-work-of-truth,” in terms of which Heidegger, after 1933, stylized the “Führer” and the “Duce” as demigods of the “history of Being” and compared with the great poets and thinkers.²

Wolin: *Your teacher and colleague, Theodor Adorno, once polemicized against Sartre's notion of “engagement.” Yet it seems rather doubtful whether Adorno's own posture of intellectual aloofness, his “resignation” (a charge, to be sure, he once tried to refute), represents an inherently desirable alterna-*

tive. Is it your view, too, that in Sartre's work the necessary tension between "theory and practice" became overly slack?

Habermas: In Adorno's case, there was in fact a great tension between his theory and the tenor of his many radio commentaries, public lectures, and discussions. These well-nigh popular-pedagogical efforts were thoroughly reformist. Sartre's political engagement, which involved him in many errors such as his support for the [Baader-Meinhof] terrorists in Stammheim prison³ must be explained in a French context — for example, the strong role of the Communist Party. Given the proximity of the German Democratic Republic, in Germany as a committed leftist one could, conversely, have few illusions about Soviet communism. Perhaps the intellectual role that Sartre assumed has not been sufficiently demystified: that is, not yet clearly enough marked by the consciousness of a division of labor and differentiation between what one defends professionally in scholarship and the basis upon which one intervenes in the public sphere without being able to claim special authority for one's subversive opinions. As I have already indicated, the demystified intellectual is an entirely normal citizen who makes public use of his or her specialized knowledge. Toward the end of his life, Foucault returned with good reason to Kant's text, "What Is Enlightenment?" He thereby remained more faithful to the spirit of Sartre than to that of an unpolitical and noncommittal postmodernism.

Wolin: *In his introduction to the Critique of Dialectical Reason, "Questions of Method," Sartre refers to Marxism as the "unsurpassable philosophy of our time." Elsewhere, he once opined, "It is not my fault if reality is Marxist!" After the collapse in Eastern Europe of "really existing socialism," can one still argue for the methodological validity of Marxism as a philosophy or as an analytic tool?*

Habermas: What really needs to be explained instead is the "infinite conversation" about the crisis of Marxism that has been going on for two decades. This type of navel gazing is only the mirror image of an as yet unsurmounted dogmatism. As far as Marxism as a theory is concerned, we should relate to it as we would to a theory is concerned, we should relate to it as we would to a normal research tradition: that is, as one that can be kept alive only by way of critical appropriation and constant revision. For the most part, it is the type of questions posed and not the answers that turn a past author into a classic, that is, into someone who still has something to say to us. Now, as before, sociologists can learn something from Marx if they see how he was able to relate historical events and systematic processes to one another. The concept of the reification of social relations, which Marx

conceptualized through the category of “real abstraction,” is, now as before, instructive. These are only two examples.

Wolin: *It is striking that in the postwar period, there was so little intellectual contact between the leading representatives of “Western Marxism” in Germany and France: for example, between the Frankfurt School (Horkheimer, Adorno, etc.) and Sartre. How can one account for this missed opportunity?*

Habermas: I’ve already referred to the uneven character of intellectual development in France and Germany. If I am correct, only since the end of the 1970s does there occur a significant overlapping of contexts in which the discussions take place in the two countries. Today, it is even easier to know and identify the same themes when one is discussing the same thing. Nevertheless, the rhetorical traditions remain different enough; capital and politics, even the trade unions, have an easier time crossing cultural boundaries — and considering the same things to be relevant — than we do. One sees this with reference to the fate of European journals — for example, “Liber.”⁴

NOTES

1. Christa Wolf is a prominent East German writer and feminist who, in the fall of 1990, was criticized by certain figures of the German conservative press for not being radical enough in her criticisms of the German Democratic Republic.

2. The “setting-to-work-of-truth” is a prominent theme in Heidegger’s writings of the early 1930s that first appears in his pro-Nazi 1933 rectoral address, “The Self-Assertion of the German University.” For a discussion of Heidegger’s theory of a new aristocracy of “leader creators,” in terms of which his belief in fascism is grounded, see Richard Wolin, *The Politics of Being: The Political Thought of Martin Heidegger* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1990), pp. 123ff.

3. In 1977, Sartre made a highly controversial visit to members of the Baader-Meinhof terrorist group in Stammheim prison. See Annie Cohen-Solal, *Sartre: A Biography* (New York: Pantheon, 1988).

4. A European-wide review of books that ceased publication early in 1991. It began again six months later under the direction of Pierre Bourdieu.