

# Editorial

There has rarely been a writer and thinker who saw his writing as more tied to his age than Jean-Paul Sartre. His notion of committed literature argued that writing and thought are anchored first and foremost in their “situation,” the period and context in which they are first produced, disseminated and discussed. One writes for one’s era, he maintained; that is when a piece of writing has its greatest impact. Almost forty years after his death, there is some irony in the fact that Sartre’s writings and thought continue to be invoked in so many different contexts far removed from their immediate cultural moment and situation. And this despite the legion of detractors on both sides of the Atlantic for whom the end of the Berlin wall and Soviet Russia sealed Sartre’s failed legacy and any possibility of his continued relevance.

*Sartre Studies International*’s first issue came out in 1995 as that trend was intensifying. Now on the cusp of its twenty-fifth year in print, *SSI* both refutes that judgment and offers a striking illustration of the expanding range of intellectual, political and artistic concerns to which Sartre’s writings and ideas continue (*pace* Sartre) to be applied. Let’s begin with the political. Perhaps the biggest surprise of our dispiriting historical moment is the fact that we are now seeing in the United States, no less, some real proof of a resurgent interest in democratic socialism. In the wake of Bernie Sanders, running to huge acclaim in the 2016 Democratic primary as an avowed socialist, we have witnessed young congressional candidates like Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez gaining approval and traction as they present themselves to American citizens under the same banner. Against this particular backdrop, David Schweikart’s reassessment of the Sartre-Camus conflict in its relation to Marxism (“Sartre, Camus and a Marxism for the 21st Century”) appears in a new light. As he examines and indicts the most recent phase of capitalism and the unprecedented levels of financial inequality it has imposed (to say nothing of the isolation and alienation it systematically induces), Schweikart argues for a “living Marxism” that not only draws upon Sartre’s existentialist ethics of freedom,

but also incorporates theoretical and political insights from prominent movements in the post-war era, including feminism, anti-racism, anti-colonialism, environmentalism, and the struggle for gay rights.

Very much in line with these concerns, Ronald Aronson's recent book: *We: Reviving Social Hope* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017, reviewed in this issue), declares war on the market and conservative forces that "privatize hope." Aronson seeks in response arenas of "social hope", contemporary avatars of "groups-in-fusion," from which to reunite a fragmented left and forge collective solutions to public problems. Social hope, as Aronson sees it, is both pragmatic and idealistic; it goes hand in hand with social movements and when the two come together, it transforms people not merely in their vision but also in their very being. To be sure, as Matt Eshleman makes clear in his review article of William Irwin's *The Free Market Existentialist: Capitalism without Consumerism*, countervailing forces remain very strong – even attempting to coopt Sartre's thought for conservative causes. Irwin's highly gerrymandered account of Sartre's early view of freedom and subjectivity aims to establish that Sartre's ontology in *Being and Nothingness* stands closer to free market capitalism than Marxism. The importance of freedom and choice for Sartre makes him potentially inspiring for American libertarians, at least until those puzzling political moves during the Cold War!

Focused, for his part, on the political field of ecology and the notion of the *Anthropocene*, Paul Gyllenhammer has broken new conceptual ground by applying the thought of Heidegger and Sartre to current ecological preoccupations. For Heidegger, boredom and anxiety, the dominant emotions of modernity have overwhelmed our relation to *Bestand*, nature's standing reserve; a traditional sense of *techne* and a natural *telos* of responsible appropriation have been swept away by our insatiable consumer societies. Sartre's reflections stress the alienation of human *praxis* in our efforts to regulate the repartition of our planet's dwindling resources. On the brink of disaster, could the threat of the *Anthropocene* be the event that finally brings about a global group-in-fusion?

In a very different but original departure, Dane Sawyer has opened up Buddhist theories of consciousness and the practice of meditation to a phenomenological analysis informed by Sartre's ontology. Meditation famously emphasizes focusing on the present, even as meditators report and lament repeated distraction and the loss of focus, a failure illuminated by Sartre's theory of consciousness as both perpetual spontaneity and perpetual transcendence. Sawyer argues that

the impossibility of maintaining a state of being allows however for the recognition of freedom and even of authenticity as the meditator returns again and again to a discipline she has chosen, so grounded in pre-reflective consciousness.

Finally, in “Too Much of Nothing: Analytic and Sartrean Phenomenological Perspectives,” John Graham Wilson argues that it is beyond the scope of analytic philosophy to account for phenomenological experiences of nothingness, captured by Sartre in the celebrated example of Pierre’s absence at the café. Wilson rejects the analytic assumption that knowing, as an act of consciousness, is necessarily bound up with propositions and argues that Sartre’s phenomenological accounts of our direct, pre-reflective, and pre-predicative experience with nothingness effectively open up a domain of uncharted experience. Wilson extends the analysis to the experience of absence in the case of the death of a loved one, and submits that not only are such experiences unambiguous and verifiable, but they can be seen to have important implications for our existence as beings-in-the-world.

Together with three additional book reviews, we offer this smorgasbord of ideas for the pleasure of our engaged reading public!

John Ireland and Constance Mui