

1699 Words

Explain and assess the relation of the work and ideas of Jean-Paul Sartre's
Existentialism to Marxism

Marxism, to Jean-Paul Sartre, is the philosophy through which the material conditions - and in effect, the historical moment, can be best understood and changed (Schweikart 2018, p.8). It would seem that this understanding of Marxism as the philosophical method through which the historical moment is expressed requires an understanding of history as a series of material processes, of opposing forces acting in contradiction, placing economic classes and the socioeconomic interests of these classes as the primary motors of history (Marx and Engels, 1969). This collective understanding of history as class struggle stands in stark contrast to Sartre's conception of the individual as the medium through which meaning is given and created, through which the inherent absurdity of the universe is partly transformed into the comprehensible (Howells, 2009). This contrast between the Marxist understanding of history as class struggle, and the existentialist understanding of the individual's primacy in the historical process raises questions surrounding the coherency of Sartre's philosophy, as he attempts to reconcile these seemingly contradictory concepts. In order to understand the interaction between Sartre's existentialism and his Marxism, the role of the individual as a naturalistic concept should be explored, synthesising a method through which both social and economic freedom can be realised through Marxist-existentialist philosophy. This essay will discuss Existentialism and Marxism and explore the compatibility of Sartre's liberatory Existentialism with Marxism's economic determinism and understanding of class conflict.

Existentialism, as developed within the work of Sartre, posits that existence precedes essence - meaning that individuals exist before the essence of their existence exists, constructing their essence through a constant exercise of freedom. Sartre's Existentialism is a liberatory philosophy, aiming to drive its followers towards liberatory action - whether that be direct political action, or a change of personal habits. Through liberatory action, the individual exercises their freedom, making freedom a key goal for the realisation of Sartre's philosophical aims. Sartre's fascination with freedom remains a key idea of his Existentialism, with the struggle to realise, or the struggle to properly exercise freedom remaining a key idea through large amounts of his work. This focus on freedom and living a meaningful life positions Sartre's philosophy of Existentialism as

one rooted in individualism, attempting to understand how the individual can realise their freedom and live authentically.

In contrast, Marxism, as a philosophy, is a highly collectivist philosophical tendency, rejecting the primacy of the individual and understanding existence in terms of historical forces, understanding social structures - and society as a whole as forming a social totality (Jay, 1984). Marxism understands the individual's experience, beliefs and meaning as a product of the material conditions under which the individual was socialised, with these material conditions a result of contradictory forces acting upon one another. Fundamentally, Marxists understand society as consisting of two dialectical forces, this being the economic base and the superstructure. The material base consists of the means of production, relations to production, and the general material basis of a society's economy. This economic base then goes on to form the superstructure, containing the social relations and cultural factors of a society. The economic base and the superstructure then act on one another in a dialectical manner, with the economic base producing the superstructure, and the social conditions within the superstructure then going on to create economic change, causing the economic base to shift .

A primary point of friction between Sartre's Marxism and Existentialism is the role of the superstructure in reinforcing social values - and the resultant economic determinism. This becomes an issue for Existentialism, as Sartre's understanding of the individual as the source of social values must then be exposed to the social forces of the superstructure. It could potentially be argued that these two standpoints on the construction of social essence and the resultant inter-personal/economic relations are incompatible, with Sartre's Existentialism seeming to take a far more individualist, liberal position on this matter, establishing the primacy of the individual within the historical process. However, Sartre maintains that Marxism remains the "philosophy of our time" (Jean-Paul Sartre, Elkaim-Sartre, 2006). This raises the question - how can the individual remain the architect of their own fate and essence, yet exist in relation to productive forces and the social structures around these productive forces?

One approach to this issue could be to understand the ways in which the individual exists within the social superstructure. The superstructure is not simply a collection of social values that exist as a result of the relation of individuals to production, but instead the framework through which society is constructed and maintained. The superstructure is not just the accidental creation of social values from processes of production and economic relations, but instead exists dialectically, being both created by the material base and creating the conditions under which the material conditions shift.

When understanding how the individual exists within the superstructure, the role of ideology must also be considered. Ideology can be understood as “a set of beliefs or principles, especially one on which a political system, party, or organization is based” (Cambridge Dictionary, 2019): ideology plays a key role within the formation of the superstructure, and acts as a primary method of socialisation into bourgeois social values. The function of ideology within the superstructure in terms of Marxist philosophy can be displayed through Antonio Gramsci’s “cultural hegemony” wherein the ruling class are able to assert their interests and beliefs as the primary interest of wider society, ensuring that the ruling ideology of any social structure remains the ideology of the ruling class (Joll 1977, p.100). Through cultural hegemony, the bourgeoisie are able to maintain a superstructural grasp over the social structure, with their interests and ideological tendencies creating the basis for the social values and narratives of wider society. It is this process of cultural hegemony and its socialisation of bourgeois values that can be considered when attempting to synthesise Sartre’s Existentialism into a coherent Marxist-Existentialist philosophy in terms of the individual’s role within the superstructure. Through this process of cultural hegemony, the ruling class are able to control the social essence of society, creating predefined social frameworks into which individuals are nonconsensually thrown head-first. This process of bourgeois socialisation results in the continuation and reproduction of bourgeois values even in the working class, wherein the interests of the bourgeoisie seem to become the shared interest of the working class - convincing the working class that the interests of their exploiters are also their shared interests, and preventing the birth of a counter-hegemonic socialist ideology.

Sartre's individual cannot exist in philosophical isolation as an a priori conception of humanity, it too is subject to this process of bourgeois socialisation. It is this process that, in Sartrean terms, leads individuals to lead lives of "bad faith" - pursuing endless consumption, bourgeois decadence and aspiring to one day join the ruling class. It is this process of socialisation that prevents Sartre's individual from living a meaningful existence - from exercising their freedom. From this, it could be argued that the most efficient method for Sartre's philosophical aims existing in relation to structural challenges is through Marxist philosophy. Luxemburg (2015) notes that the internal contradictions of capitalist society, containing opposing classes and an insatiable desire for expansion/growth mean that the realisation of socialism via parliamentary reform is not possible. Similarly, Lenin (2015) characterises the state as an "organ of class rule" and so, in order for the realisation of socialism, the state must be made an organ for the political hegemony of the proletariat.

Marxist philosophy understands the proletariat as a class with an inherently revolutionary character in the historical process; they are a political force that - if organised, can overthrow the bourgeois state and capitalism along with it. If the main opponent to Sartre's philosophical aims is the capitalist superstructure, and therefore capitalism itself, then the only way forward for Sartre's Existentialism is through Marxism. Only by overthrowing capitalism is it possible to free the individual of the restraints of bourgeois cultural hegemony and allow individuals to live meaningful lives. Following this, Sartre's Existentialism becomes a sub-ideology of Marxism, a secondary goal - with the primary aim being the revolutionary overthrowing of the capitalist state, and the capitalist superstructure along with it.

However, a secondary issue is the coherency of Sartre's conception of the individual as naturalistic. Following Ludwig Feuerbach, Marx claimed that man is never not a social being (Marx and Jordan, 1986) - man existing alone would not conceive the concept of an individual, nor their own individuality. In order for the concept of an individual to exist, there must be other beings to differentiate oneself from. Man is first a part of the world,

a small component of a much larger constantly evolving structure. In a more metaphysical sense, the individual only becomes the individual through a process of recognising the qualities/characteristics of others - some of which they may have or not have, leading them to reach the conclusion that they are somehow different from other people. The process of conceptualising individuality relies upon alienation, both in the alienation of the proletariat from their exploited labour and social alienation as a result of economic inequalities (Marx and Jordan, 1986). This alienation spans both the material base and the superstructure, alienating the proletariat from their labour through monopolised ownership of the means of production/capital, and alienating the individual from his peer through rampant neoliberal individualism - itself a result of the desire of the ruling class for the expansion of capital accumulation. From this, it can be argued that only through the radical restructuring of the material conditions and the replacement of capitalist hegemony by solidarity and Marxist ideology can Sartre's individual exist as an individual in a naturalistic state, with the seizure of the means of production by the proletariat eliminating - or beginning to eliminate - the economic inequalities that lead to social alienation.

In conclusion, Sartre's Existentialism is not incompatible with Marxism - it can instead be considered a "sub-ideology" of Marxism, with its goals only achievable through the realisation of the proletarian state and the destruction of capitalist cultural hegemony. The individual liberation that Sartre seeks in the realisation of his Existentialist philosophy is only possible via the collective liberation of the proletariat, and in turn, the proletarian.

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