

# UK Sartre Society

annual conference 2017

Maison Française d'Oxford

Tuesday 18 July

Abstracts for Parallel Sessions

Room 1: 9.30 – 10.50

### **Existentialism and Political Failure: Lessons for Today**

**Michael Sigrist (George Washington University)**

I examine recent failures in liberal democracy by looking to attempts by Sartre, Beauvoir, and Merleau-Ponty to understand the political failures of Marxism. I treat political failures as forms of collective failure. A collective failure occurs whenever individuals fail to cooperate in ways that each ought to desire. Sartre and Beauvoir tend to explain the failures of Marxism as either moral or institutional failures. Explanations for moral failure look to the minds of individual agents themselves (ignorance, lack of resolve, bad faith, etc.), while explanations of institutional failure look to the social and historical situations in which such agents are embedded. Early on Sartre favoured the former, while Beauvoir and Sartre in his later writings looked primarily toward the latter. I argue that Merleau-Ponty outlines yet another source of failure that ought to change our understanding of and expectations for what can be done to address some kinds of failure at the moral and institutional level. I argue that there is a collective body for Merleau-Ponty that influences collective intentions and actions in much the same way as the individual body, and that some persistent types of social and political failure can be explained by this dynamic.

### **Seriality and the Crisis of Democracy. Taking Sartre into Democratic Theory**

**Matthias Lievens (KU Leuven)**

Democracy is in crisis, but democratic theory is struggling to conceptually grasp this crisis and establish the theoretical conditions of its critique. As they tend to consider the market as an 'external' factor, important democratic theorists fail to theoretically account for the disciplining effects of markets and for the way this discipline is internalised within democratic institutions. Sartre's notions of the practico-inert and seriality, and his accounts of the market and the state in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* are crucial tools to address this gap in democratic theory.

Sartre's relation to democracy is ambiguous: a staunch critic of existing democratic regimes, he nevertheless defends the democratic ideal. This paper proposes the integration of important themes from his *Critique* into democratic theory. Starting from a Sartrean critique of Claude Lefort's account of representative democracy, including the latter's defence of elections as a re-enactment of the democratic revolution, the paper aims to show how Sartre's triadic social ontology underpinning his concept of the group can significantly contribute to post-foundational democratic theory. Moreover, drawing a distinction between market seriality, which is centreless and transfinite, and the type seriality characterising the democratic state, which has a visible and therefore contestable centre, it opens a way for a Sartrean defence of democratic institutions.

### **Mindfulness After Existentialism: Through the Mind's Eye**

**Ruth Kitchen, EHESS, Paris**

The paper traces mindfulness techniques, specifically, the experience of being in the body and the world, to their unacknowledged root in existentialist and phenomenological theory.

After outlining some mindfulness techniques, applications and therapeutic benefits, the paper will put into conversation some of the negative/disturbing effects of mindfulness with existential accounts of being in the world, being in the body, and being with others. The paper will examine the reasons for a negative rather than affirmative reaction to this experience.

Secondly, the analysis turns to the question of seeing the self in the world and being seen. According to Kabat-Zinn, professor of medicine and inventor of the mindfulness technique, a meditative exploration of each sense enables an engagement with being in the world and in the body. For Kabat-Zinn, sight has a privileged place in language and metaphor. The discussion examines how Sartre's mental images along with Merleau-Ponty's theory of seeing/being, and Sartre and Beauvoir's understandings of being seen foreshadow Kabat-Zinn's treatment of the sense of sight.

Finally, the paper considers how mindfulness therapies may differ in application and reception for people with a sensory disability, such as deafness. The paper examines potential implications on seeing self / being seen / being in the world.

### **Untenable Positions: Existentialism and the Case Against the Unconscious Mind**

**Ian Scranage**

This paper will take a case study from the musical 'Oliver!' to demonstrate R.D. Laing's mystification of experience. Laing's mystification is a conscious misunderstanding of the other which moves through dyadic relationships into untenable positions, without the need to apply Freud's unconscious mind. Laing's position is supported by Sartre. This mystification can explain the psychology of domestic violence.

Both Sartre and Laing point out that the other negates oneself, one's concept of the self is co-authored via the other. One's identity can be partly possessed by the other. The pure sense of being-in-the-world is partly external, this makes one's identity scarce (Being-for-others), through the 'look' of the other. In domestic violence the abuser attacks the other's place in the world (which they partly own through the 'look') with aggression, leading to violence. The abuser is frustrated with their own scarce identity (Being-for-others), via their victim's 'look'. The abused, feel they can only defend themselves through passivity, an act of submission, because of the co-authorship of their identity (Being-for-others).

This paper will, from this position, dispel the Freudian 'phantasy unconscious' in favour of an existential 'phantasy' of experience through refracted understandings of the victim and the abuser in domestic violence.

### ***The Second Sex: from idealism to materialism and back***

**Katja Čičigoj (Justus-Liebig-University Giessen)**

By rereading *The Second Sex* through French materialist feminism and the other way around, this paper will argue that Beauvoir's ontological and existential analysis of "the feminine condition" laid out the conceptual conditions of possibility for a radical and materialist feminist analysis. Conversely, it will argue that the materialist feminist critique of sex as a marker of social and political division represents the most direct development of Beauvoir's analysis. This link is supported historically by Beauvoir's close collaboration with materialist feminists around the journal *Questions Feministes*; and theoretically by Beauvoir's subsequent critique of the idealist underpinnings of *The Second Sex* expressed in her memoirs.

Viewing *The Second Sex* in a simply progressivist manner, however, might overlook the conceptual conditions for radical materialist feminism it helped create. Moreover, it might overlook its resources for feminist philosophy after poststructuralism. A rereading of Beauvoir through materialist feminism and the other way around may allow feminist philosophy to both develop a critique of sex as a locus of social and political differentiation qua subordination, and to take stock of the normative resources of Beauvoir's existentialist analysis in order to envision a truly egalitarian society.

### **Beauvoir Outside the Sex-Gender Distinction**

**Emma-Jane McNicol (Monash)**

Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* has as its epigraph Simone de Beauvoir's famous claim, "One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one". Insofar as the discipline of gender studies continues to take Butler's work as its point of departure, Beauvoir's presence is inscribed at the discipline's foundation. Nancy Bauer and Toril Moi have argued that Beauvoir's theoretical feminism is not fully reducible to the sex-gender binary around which Butler's work is organised. Indeed, in this paper I examine Beauvoir's work *outside* the sex-gender binary ensconced in contemporary gender theory.

Toril Moi argues that Beauvoir presents a non-essentialist, concrete and historical social understanding of the body, modelling an intelligent way of reading Beauvoir outside the sex-gender lens. In this paper, I follow and extend Moi's analysis by reconstructing Beauvoir's presentation of the situated body. I claim that Beauvoir's concept of "situation" allows the articulation of experiential possibilities whose multiplicity and overdetermination exceed such binary categorisation. I contend that Beauvoir's concept of the situated body has the capacity to deepen our understanding of the different ways in which multiply-placed subjects relate to and within the set of lived experiences broadly designated as belonging to "woman".

### **The Critique Of Presence: Sartre's influence on Derrida**

Gavin Rae (Universidad Carlos III de Madrid, Spain)

Two of the major topics that define 20th century French philosophy are nothingness and difference. Generally speaking, a defence of the former is the preserve of thinkers earlier in the century, especially those emanating from the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, while the latter is affirmed by later post-structuralist thinkers who uphold difference to depart from the Hegelian-Marxist tradition. This presentation will bring these positions together by examining them through the lens of the Sartre-Derrida relationship. This has traditionally been a surprisingly difficult relationship to understand, mainly because both thinkers directed relatively few comments to one another, most of which stress the incommensurability of their thinking. Contemporary research has started to question that conclusion, mainly by re-assessing the thought of Sartre to picture him as a precursor to post-structuralism/deconstructionism. This paper takes off from this stance to suggest that Sartre and Derrida are partners against a common enemy—ontological presence—, but develop different paths to overcome it: Sartre affirming nothingness and Derrida affirming *différance*. Holding that both concepts are orientated against ontological presence demonstrates that Derridean *différance* entails a radicalisation of Sartre's position rather than a fundamental break from it. For this reason, their relationship is best understood as one of disharmonious continuity.

### **Alain Badiou: A Student of Sartre**

Chingshun J. Sheu ( National Taiwan Normal University)

Alain Badiou has famously called Sartre his "absolute Master," and scholarly attempts have been made to connect his work, which *The Guardian* has called "post-existentialist," with Sartre's. These efforts, however, have mostly either focused on superficial similarities or discussed merely a narrow portion of the large philosophical *oeuvre* of both thinkers.

In this paper, I will show that Badiou's philosophical system is an extension of Sartre's thought, and that the two thinkers complement each other. I will trace a line of ethics through Sartre's and Badiou's thoughts in parallel and draw explicit conceptual links between them. The main extension originating in Badiou is his solution to what Thomas Flynn calls the fraternity-terror problem plaguing the fused group in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* I. Instead of having the fused group pledge to each other, which introduces *exis* into pure *praxis*, Badiou has the fused group continue to seek and oppose an Outside, and the structural mathematics that underlies his system is aimed at delineating how this movement can be possible. In this sense, he takes up Sartre's challenge of formulating a structuralism that accounts for *praxis* and develops concepts that Sartre merely intuitively and sketches out in his later works.

Room 1: 1.40-3.00

### **Authenticity Beyond Existentialism: A Socio-Existential Approach**

**Kyle Michael James Shuttleworth (Queen's University, Belfast)**

How can we impede nihilism? What enables us to impose meaning upon an absurd existence? According to the Existentialists, the means to resolve these predicaments was through cultivating an authentic life. Although Existentialism has fallen out of philosophical fashion, the concept of authenticity has nevertheless been preserved within socio-ethical philosophy. Understanding authenticity to be a modern ethic by which to conduct oneself, socio-ethical philosophers re-envisioned it as an ethical-ideal. Insofar as these two approaches offer alternative interpretations of authenticity and stem from separate traditions, they can be taken to be rivals. However, within this enquiry the aim will be to present a concept of authenticity beyond this dichotomy, and one which merges the positive contributions of both accounts. Here a socio-existential concept of authenticity will be presented which simultaneously offers a meaningful existence and an ethical ideal by which to orientate one's actions.

### **Inauthenticity and Violence: The Case of Antisemitism**

**Dror Yinon (Bar-Ilan University)**

In the closing lines of *Being and Nothingness* (1943) Sartre famously announced a future work on ethics. Shortly after that announcement, at the end of WWII, Sartre had an opportunity to make good on his promise of taking up the task of constructing existentialist ethics with his account of antisemitism in *Anti-Semite and Jew* (1946). Yet, Sartre offered an analysis of the phenomenon of antisemitism, or rather, the character of the anti-Semite, based on his notion of authenticity. Sartre remained, then, within the phenomenological-ontological framework of *Being and Nothingness* without expanding it to the moral plane.

Sartre's thorough analysis of violence in his *Notebooks for an Ethics* (1983 [1947-8]) constitutes a promising direction at this conceptual expansion: in the notebooks Sartre develops a framework where a negative relation towards others is interpreted directly as a threat to their freedom rather than as a reflexive relation of one towards oneself, disguised as a relation towards another, as presented in the case of antisemitism. This reading of Sartre's notion of violence and its application to antisemitism (and other kinds of racism) will add, I hope, to the growing interest in Sartrean ethics and its research.

Room 2: 1.40-3.00

### **The Existential Subject and Freedom in Learning: a dialogue with Sartre**

**Miranda Matthews (Goldsmiths)**

The subject with free-will, able to make life choices and to struggle to transform the contingency of the given situation is central to Sartre's existentialist ontology. This expression of free subjectivity can be related to transformative pedagogies that locate the centrality of agency in productive learning processes. I identify Sartre's form of existentialist freedom in learning through the basis for proactive subjectivity in his ontological triad of being-in-itself, being-for-itself and being-for-others, and with reference to the free-will of the learning subject with social responsibility. A Sartrean position will be paralleled with concepts of learning and subjectivity, as proposed by theorists who state divergence from existentialism. Foucault set out to circumvent existentialism in his power/knowledge work, by challenging the phenomenological constituent subject, but can be seen to form a rapprochement through the 'technologies of self'. I will also refer to Rancière, who rejected the intellectual presence of Sartre to reconfigure an egalitarian learning subject. I argue that these divergences have sought prior historical sources for their philosophical investigations, but can be seen to form a dialogue with the motivating principles of existentialism. Theoretical discussion will be contextualised in contemporary society with reference to my practice-based research in Educational Studies.

### **Sartre's Conceptions of Agency and Its Value for the Philosophy of History**

**Sina Talachian (Kings College London)**

Sartre's philosophy, both in its early existentialist and later Marxian phases, is strongly infused with a concern for the historical. It serves both as a source and testing ground for some of the main philosophical concepts he develops, furnishing the background that allows them to be formulated and explicated. A central aspect of Sartre's lifelong philosophical project—particularly reliant on and important for the historical dimensions of his work—is his concern for freedom, agency or subjectivity as against the overwhelming influence of structures. This overlaps in many ways with the recent trend in philosophy of history, which aims to bring to the fore the role of practices in historical analysis. This new trend has thus opened up the possibility of reexamining the relevance of Sartre's work for the field of historical theory, and it is my aim to do exactly this in this paper. I begin by explicating the main contours of Sartre's early conception of agency as laid out in *Being and Nothingness* before moving to his later conception of it as developed in *Search for a Method*, *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and *The Family Idiot*, and conclude with a brief demonstration of its value for contemporary historical theorists and historians grappling with the subject of historical agency.

Room 1: 3.30-4.10

**Sartre's Theory of the Author-Reader Relationship: a case of multi-directional influences**

**Marieke Mueller (University of Paris Nanterre)**

My paper will focus on the later Sartre's contribution to approaches to authorship and readership, in particular in *L'Idiot de la famille* (1971-72). The paper will demonstrate firstly Sartre's interest in reading and reader-figures, as evidenced by his analysis of reading processes in *L'Idiot*. It will be suggested that the various reading mechanisms that Sartre identifies are reminiscent of Roland Barthes's distinction between 'readerly' and 'writerly' texts, developed in his *S/Z* (1970). The paper thereby highlights an inflexion in Sartre's theory of literature that is redolent of the intellectual developments taking place around him.

The paper will then review Sartre's later account of the relationship between writer and public, highlighting considerable theoretical advances in comparison to *Qu'est-ce que la littérature?* (1948). Here, it will be suggested that Sartre develops an approach to literature which foreshadows Pierre Bourdieu's account of the literary field in *Les Règles de l'art* (1992).

The paper thereby seeks to contribute to the conference theme by highlighting the question of authorship and readership as an issue which is configured as a network of conversations and influences throughout recent French thought – a conversation to which Sartre made a contribution that is far less idiosyncratic than is often assumed.

*followed by*

4.20-5.30

**Keynote Address**

Christina Howells  
(University of Oxford)