

On Maoism—interview with Jean-Paul Sartre¹

1 Originally published in Number 28 of *Actuel* and reprinted in *Tout Va Bien*, Number 4, February 20-March 20, 1973, pp. 30-35. It was conducted by Michel-Antoine Burnier. English translation is by Robert D'Amico. FROM: **telos**, Summer 1973, vol. 1973, no. 16, pp. 92-101. Transcribed by V. S. Contren, December 2022.

For more than two years you have been director of *La Cause du Peuple*. You have sold the paper on the streets, you write militant articles, you work on the new daily *Liberation*, and you have participated in many of the Maoists' meetings and actions. You seem much closer to them and more engaged with them than you were previously with the Communist Party and with liberation movements such as the Algerian FLN. How do you explain this, and did you make this decision at the outset?

Sartre: I accepted the directorship of *La Cause du Peuple* after the arrest of the two preceding directors in the spring of 1970. The Maoists did not think they had a base of support broad enough to carry out the clandestine operation which the government tried to force them into. To meet both this process and repression, they came and asked me to help them. That represented, moreover, a new attitude on their part of interest in intellectuals and in finding out how intellectuals could be of service to them. They mistrusted "super-stars" but, at the same time, they appealed to well-known intellectuals who could avert Marcellin's attacks. They turned to the notion of "celebrity" back against the bourgeoisie—and they were right. I feel that the well-known writer has a double role: he is himself, and also the public thing called a celebrity over which he has no control unless he recovers it to serve in a completely different ways. That is what I did with *La Cause du Peuple*.

At the beginning, it was clear that I was not in agreement with the Maoists, nor were they with me. I took a legal and not a political responsibility. I simply gave my name so the paper could continue and the militants could act and write as they intended to. In the same way, I accepted the directorship of *Tout Va Bien*; and under the same conditions I

was a witness at the trial of militants from *Vive la Revolution* and of Roland Castro. Through a series of actions and struggles since then, I have been drawn progressively closer to the conceptions of *La Cause du Peuple*.

Then you disagreed with the strategy of the proletarian left in 1970, that a new resistance had to be launched against employers, considered as new Nazis, and against revisionists, considered as new collaborators.

Sartre: I have never shared this analysis; and although traces of it remain, *La Cause du Peuple* itself has partially renounced it. For the last two years the problem for its militants has been to really adapt the Maoist strategy to France, not to transpose it lock, stock and barrel. The cultural revolution was unleashed in China well after the seizure of power. It is impossible to copy it or to be directly influenced by it in our situation. The French Maoists speak more willingly of an ideological revolution: liquidating the belief in capitalism among the workers, notably by kidnappings, by teaching resistance, braving repression, and rising above the deference inculcated by the dominant class. At the start, I agreed with the Maoists on almost nothing: not against them, but quite apart from them. But little by little, they have won more than legal protection from me. I met often with them and linked myself to them: little by little a convergence developed.

You have hardly explained the meaning of this action. In 1952, when you were reconciled with the Communist Party, you wrote three long articles "*Les Communistes et la Paix*." Separating yourself in 1956 from the French Communist Party which had supported the Soviet intervention in Hungary, you published the "*Fantôme de Staline*."

Today, you stick to brief articles, an open letter to the President of the Republic, and interventions at meetings. You have definitely broken with the French Communist Party's system of thought—which in general you accepted, despite reservations, until about 1965-1966—without clearly saying why and without giving reasons for your present close involvement with the Maoists.

Sartre: In 1952, American politics, the submission of the French government to imperialism, and above all, the repression of the demonstration against "*Ridgway la peste*" moved me quickly toward a position of solidarity with the Communists. It was very necessary that I explain my action. As I told you, I arrived at my present position much more gradually. First, in May '68, like most people I did not understand the significance or import of the movement. Neither did the Maoists, who immediately left the universities for the factories without evaluating a student revolt whose importance they now recognize. I felt estranged: one day a celebrity, the next day an old combatant. At the Sorbonne, to which I returned two or three times, my presence created some opposition and I was received a little coldly. I remember a meeting on the university situation at the end of 1968 or the beginning of 1969, at which students and professors had to decide their response to the Degar Faure law. Mounting the rostrum, I found a note on the table: "Sartre, be brief!" I understood immediately that I was out of it. The other speaker's ideas were close to mine, but they had seen the struggle they were talking about and could advance concrete proposals. I had no proposals to offer, simply a general analysis—which had little significance. After the ebb in 1969, I felt farther away again. In 1970 everything changed. The government's persecution of *La Cause du Peuple* led me to take sides and go much further than I had originally imagined. A revolutionary movement has its

requirements; you accept some and refuse others, but it draws you in. Especially when its leaders take into consideration outside critiques they regard as well-founded. Here, theory is in gestation and the movement remains largely empirical, I would dare say, almost experimental.

On the contrary, it seems to me that the Maoist ideology is very rigid, with energetic sloganeering.

Sartre: When the question is a precise action at a given moment. But the militants of *La Cause du Peuple* do not constitute a party. It is a political group [*rassemblement*] which can always be dissolved. A strike committee with broad recruitment can absorb the committees for struggle organized by the Maoists in the factory. This procedure allows a way out of the rigidity in which the Communist Party has imprisoned itself.

Isn't there, paralleling this, another reality of Maoism, namely the first Maoists of 1965 at *L'Ecole Normale Supérieure* who formed a hard sectarian nucleus and survived the organizational changes? The real decisions were made secretly, apart from the mass of militants and allied organizations such as *Secours Rouge* or the *Vérité-Justice* committees with which the leadership maintained relations of subjugation and infiltration somewhat comparable to those that link the peace movement to the Communist Party.

Sartre: There has been that But you cannot define the leaders as a sectarian group. They have nothing to do with the Politburo of a Communist Party. For a communist, a non-communist is a diminished individual whom one rejects or uses. Communists have relations of reciprocity only with Party members. Others are placed in negative or instrumental relationships. The Maoist leaders, on the other hand, state as

a principle that non-Maoists can have a point of view as interesting as the Maoists' and that it must be listened to. If there is an authoritarian tendency, it is constantly questioned in any case by the Maoists' actions.

Then, how do you explain the disappearance of *J'accuse*? That paper wanted to be democratic and open, and then one fine day it turns up integrated into *La Cause du Peuple* under the sole direction of Maoists.

Sartre: *J'accuse* essentially failed for financial reasons. The paper did not sell enough, and it turned out that the more militant formula of *La Cause du Peuple* was better for circulation. In a certain way I regret this. Today, with Liberation, we are trying out the experience of a democratic daily paper in which Maoists encounter each other, and in which we also pose a certain number of problems—sexuality, the condition of women, everyday life—including those which raise contradictions in the heart of the people.

It is clear, for example, that the majority of the working class, whatever the feelings or behaviour of individuals, remains hostile to certain forms of sexual liberation and to homosexuality. You know this story about an event that occurred several months ago: using an air pump, some garage workers pumped up one of their comrades who was a homosexual and killed the fellow. Liberation will also intervene in these questions to promote development. It accepts the risk of occasional unpopularity and of eliciting violent reactions or indifference.

All the anti-hierarchical and libertarian ideas must gain recognition in the paper through a confrontation in which the Maoists' experimental tendency prevails over the authoritarian side. Will Liberation be a melting

pot? Will it necessarily lead to a new synthesis? As yet I don't know. Take the example of women's liberation. Representatives of MLF [*Mouvement de la Liberation des Femmes*] participated again yesterday at a meeting to prepare the paper. They think that there is a proper feminine dimension in the revolutionary struggle: otherwise people relapse into the traditional schemas that safeguard sexism even in victorious revolutions, such as 1789 and 1917. Now here is a group, composed of workers, but also bourgeoisie, who see themselves as revolutionary in referring first and foremost to the condition of women. On the contrary, the Maoists proceed from class struggle, and consider the proletarian revolution a priority which will eventually entail the liberation of women. Can these opposed views be reconciled? If the unification is made in favour of the Maoists, women will represent a minority tendency in a male party; if the women prevail, the idea of proletarian revolution will give way to a fermenting anti-authoritarianism. Will a new path be found to deal with both these demands?

You give the impression that the Maoist movement is composed essentially of males.

Sartre: There are women, but in my opinion they don't have equal status because they are too few and often timid. I remember a meeting last year when *La Cause du Peuple* was in pretty bad shape. The women present said nothing, except one who intervened on a minor point of women's demands. I insisted that the militants explain their position on women's liberation and that the women speak. Then an article appeared signed by a woman militant, repeating all the themes of the MLF with no reference to the Maoist ideas she usually developed. This revealed a double standard of

consciousness: internally, the women sustained a feminine revolt which disappeared completely in their militant stance. The article was published; it elicited a lively reaction from workers who saw it as a symptom of agitation that was not very serious—and there the matter remains.

After two or three years of practice, how do you evaluate the strategic course of the Maoists? They placed in the foreground a certain number of essential ideas concerning the situation of immigrant workers and factory production rhythms. But it is also undeniable that their voluntarism and vanguardism [*la fuite en avant*] lost for them, in the long run, many sympathizers and militants who were initially attracted by their brilliant actions. I am struck by the example at Toulouse. For two years, *La Cause du Peuple* had been able to count on a hundred solid militants and several hundred sympathizers—which is a lot. Last year, after the liberation of Geismar, there were only a dozen left, and the *Communist League* had to come to build up attendance.

Sartre: Up to 1970 the strong line rallied a membership chiefly composed of intellectuals and students—a group that the Maoists usually did not control. Except in specific cases, the popular centre has not followed excessively abrupt calls to revolutionary violence. The Maoists had to proceed step by step to find popular sympathy. They immediately squandered their support by hurling themselves into a brutally repressed and misunderstood demonstration. Although they did carry along a fraction of the university and high school students.

The hard line lost some militants this way, and also because the organization let them go. Today, the Maoists criticize and break out of the notion of leftism: they want to be the left and to create a broad political

organization [*rassemblement*]. They have attempted to do this around the *Vérité-Justice* committees in which little by little the notion of revolutionary justice clarifies the application of bourgeois justice, as in *Brugy-en-Artois* or at *Saint-Laurent-du-Point*... The factory committees for struggle no longer depend on Maoists alone: they reject politics—in the sense that groups and parties understand it—in order to root revolutionary action in the worker's demands and daily combat.

The Maoists do not want to deal with mere intellectuals; and for the most part it is intellectuals who have quit. Nonetheless, the line of political democracy they develop corresponds to their need to enlarge their field of action, in factories and with youth disgusted by the culture and labour imposed on them. This vast anti-hierarchic and libertarian movement, which must be taken into consideration, is developing without yet being very conscious of what it wants or what it is doing. This is true both in the high schools [*lycées*] and in the suburbs. In this regard, the increase of thefts in large department stores is significant. This is not habitual theft, which implies a reaffirmation of property—"this object is his; I take it; it is mine"—but theft as a radical challenge to property.

Maoists have long neglected the youth revolt in all Western industrial countries: the underground, the counter-culture, the revolution in individual and collective behaviour, communes, drugs, and rock music—which seems all the more important since it asserted itself as an international language common to university and high school students, and young workers in the U.S. and Europe. By preserving an exclusively political attitude, *La Cause du Peuple* is left out.

Sartre: This was the case up to 1970, when the Maoists conceived themselves as a strictly political *party*. They understood, however, that they were screwed if they did not reconsider their methods and their base of support. We just spoke about this: the committees of struggle, the Vérité-Justice committees, and Liberation express this concern. The anti-hierarchic and libertarian movement goes beyond the Maoist circle, which nonetheless takes it into consideration. But although it begins near the Maoists, it ends up quite far away. We are in sympathy with the underground and the counter-culture—it remains to be seen if all their demonstrations can play a positive role in our direction. Certain tendencies refuse or discourage action, and then I no longer see their utility.

What do you think of the increasingly widespread use of marijuana?

Sartre: On the individual level it appears to me to have no great importance. I have smoked it: I got only a feeling of anaesthesia and some curious and limited sensations. Each has the right to do what he wants; and the State must not object to this. Similarly, in the case of heroin—which, as opposed to hallucinogens, presents real dangers—in the name of what will the law prevent people from committing suicide? For me, the problem here is also to determine if their use of hallucinogens demobilizes militants. I know that the American Weathermen smoked marijuana between militant actions and it let them unwind. But when I see that some consider the recourse to hallucinogens a sufficient affirmation of their freedom, and then excuse themselves from action, I wonder.

Another tendency of counter-culture: ecology...

Sartre: That is equally part of the project we wish to undertake with Liberation. I don't think the society which will be born of a revolution can be a society of growth. To produce for people, of course, but no longer try to produce bigger and better markets. Without regressing, the nature of commodities and their mode of production will have to be profoundly transformed. Luxury objects or dangerous manufacturing will have to be eliminated, a human and ecological equilibrium will have to be recovered. In industrial countries production need not be increased to satisfy needs: it is sufficient to suppress profit and waste and to alter the ends of the economy and the distribution of wealth. Only socialism provides a solution if it doesn't end up in productivism and Soviet centralism.

China is not economizing. The Chinese magazines we receive in the West exalt the machine, growth and industrialization—which seems legitimate for a country just moving beyond the misery of poverty—but it doesn't define a radically different model of development.

Sartre: It isn't that simple. To me, the construction of small factories in the heart of rural communes is an interesting experience, and an original way to abolish the division of labour and limit the spread of cities and pollution.

Then how do you assess the political situation in China since the end of the cultural revolution and the disappearance of Lin Piao?

Sartre: China re-established order under the direction of the Party. That was predictable, since the cultural revolution was made by the base but under the authorization and control of a section of the ruling

apparatus. Once the situation opened up and Mao's power was re-established, the movement was stopped by calling in the army and then reorganizing the Party. Externally, China has abandoned a strictly internationalist politics—aiding all revolutionaries wherever they are—referring the power politics of a great nation. This was evident in Ceylon and Pakistan, when Chinese diplomacy relied on the governments in power rather than the popular insurrections.

Even during the cultural revolution, the leaders never publicly discussed the great questions on which they were in disagreement. Other than some late and fragmentary information, we are ignorant of the terms of the debate among Mao Tse-tung, Chou En-lai and Lin Piao. Do we even know whether Lin Piao was eliminated as an over-ambitious army chief or as a representative of the Left?

Sartre: Probably both. The disappearance of Lin Piao undeniably corresponds to a retreat. Yet, the cultural revolution was an intrusion of the masses into political life; and the past can never return. Some day the movement may reappear. The way they have abandoned it for hope in the slogans of the time necessitates a succession of cultural revolutions.

Do you think a revolution can take place in France in the near or not too distant future?

Sartre: Ten years ago I didn't believe so at all. Now I do: capitalism and its institutions have deteriorated so badly that a revolution appears probable. I am not sure at all if it could survive against the hostility of other countries. Despite famines and blockades, Soviet Russia succeeded and developed. But taking into account internal counter-revolution and foreign

pressure I don't see how a country like France can be self-sufficient in the same way as an immense, mainly agricultural country. However that points to a more general problem. There is still no Marxist theory of revolution and the revolutionary State in developed countries. A long time ago—before the war—I had already seen proof that the Communist Party did not truly desire revolution since it had not engaged in any serious study of what would happen if it took power. For revolutionaries today, this ideological and scientific work seems to be a high priority even if it is still restricted to experts and intellectuals.

In the U.S., in Germany and Amsterdam, communes and groups of militants are trying on a small scale to create counter-institutions or alternative ways of life, an embryonic new society. Although this experience has sometimes fallen short, it has been very useful in helping form those who participated in it. In France, the Maoists hardly favour the development of counter-institutions, except judiciaries with popular tribunals. At Bruay-en-Artois...

Sartre: At Bruay, there never was a popular tribunal.

No, but the Vérité-Justice committees had finally taken that role in openly accusing, with circumstantial evidence, that the notary Leroy had murdered the young girl Brigitte. *La Cause du Peuple* violently demanded the punishment of the supposed culprit. Was this a judicious battle? Don't you think the Maoists have taken risks and gone too far?

Sartre: Probably. For me, the execution of Leroy without trial would be the same as a lynching, pure and simple; and at the time, I expressed my reservations in *La Cause du Peuple*. But even if the Maoists got carried away

with polemics, they were fundamentally correct. The point was to denounce the scandal of class justice: the press demanded that the millionaire notary be released on bail, even though it never worries about the accused Algerians who rot for months in preventive detention. *La Cause du Peuple* especially wanted to expose the class struggle at Bruay-en-Artois: the opposition between this big bourgeois with his secrets and his power, and the life of the miners.

One can take that position—which is just—without the outrageous vocabulary which the Maoists used. For example, I was shocked by the headline of *La Cause du Peuple* the day after the execution of Buffet and Bomtems: "The guillotine, but for Touvier!"

Sartre: That headline was criticized in the next edition. The Maoists favor the execution of exploiters and enemies of the people. But it was an error to refer to the guillotine which, for the French, symbolizes bourgeois repression.

Without discussing street fighting or overt force, are you personally a partisan of political execution?

Sartre: Yes. In a revolutionary country, when the bourgeoisie has been driven from power, those who foment uprisings or conspiracies deserve the punishment of death. Not that I would feel the least anger toward them. Reactionaries naturally act in their own interest. But a revolutionary regime must eliminate a certain number of individuals who threaten it; and I see no means but death. One can always get out of prison. The revolutionaries of 1793 probably did not kill enough and therefore unintentionally served the return to order and then the Restoration.

I had the impression, instead, that they killed too many, and that above all they massacred each other. No revolution has succeeded in establishing a clear demarcation between the counter-revolution and the political opposition. That is the whole history of the French and Soviet revolutions: under the pretext of putting down reaction, they ended very quickly by killing those considered most dangerous in the heat of action and sectarianism: that is, the other revolutionaries who disagreed with them. This occurred in France in 1793, in Russia during the Moscow trials, and in the Spanish Civil War when the communists massacred the anarchists. Once unleashed, terror makes no distinctions. As the militants' terror turns closer on itself, they eliminate each other and democratic debate disappears. Finally, the revolution destroys itself, giving way to Thermidorian reaction, Stalinist repression, or fascism...

Sartre: Of course, I oppose anything which could resemble the Moscow trials. But revolution implies both violence and the existence of a more radical party which imposes itself to the detriment of other, more conciliatory groups. Can one conceive of Algerian independence without the elimination of the MNA by the FLN? and how can the FLN be reproached for violence when for years it confronted daily repression, torture, and massacres by the French army? Inevitably, the revolutionary party ends up striking at some of its own members at the same time. I believe this is an historical necessity which we can do nothing about. Find me a way to avoid this and I'll subscribe to it at once. But I don't see it.

Is it necessary to take sides so simply? Can't the problem be posed before the revolution, in seeking to escape this necessity?

Sartre: That won't amount to much. During the revolution everyone is determined by the evolution itself. At most, one can find heroes capable of

intervening to stablish respect for democratic debate between the revolutionary forces and to maintain free discussion. One cannot say or desire more.

Now, we come to your activity as a writer. In less than five years, the old language of Marxist orthodoxy, which has stamped us all and in which you were debated during a good part of your life, has finally broken up. Revolutionary debate and analysis is being reborn after fifteen years of repetition and sclerosis. We witness the appearance of a new thought with Marcuse, Foucault and Deleuze, and also in millions of people—whether militant or not—who suddenly feel concerned with a theoretical debate which had been reserved to several hundred specialists. Here we find the best elements of Marxism, and also new ideas: anti-psychiatry and a reintegration of the data of ethnography and anthropology. Your 1952 work, *Saint Genét, comédien et martyr* was ahead of its time: by way of social analysis and a certain conception of psychoanalysis you treated problems which have especially concerned us in the last two years: delinquency, prisons, homosexuality and the forging of morals and social values. Today, you have apparently removed yourself from this debate, torn between your appropriate militant actions and your work on Flaubert, a nineteenth century author, and whatever interest this study generates.

Sartre: I don't believe I am absent from this debate, and my books on Flaubert claim to participate in it in their own way—first, by the basic question I intend to pose: in the present state of our knowledge, how can one know a man today? If I succeed, I will have clarified a method which goes far beyond the situation of a nineteenth century writer.

But, for example, the life of Nizan—who was your friend and whom you can speak about more easily than about Flaubert—also poses the question of the relations of man with history and of the writer with society. Nizan is still our problem: here is a revolutionary intellectual and writer who cried out his revolt and affirmed his freedom, who engaged in militant action and was destroyed by Communism. Through self-serving manipulation of his ideas and struggles, Stalinism installed its apparatus and its terror, and basically abandoned the revolutionary project. Generations of intellectuals and militants suffered this alienation: the worst there is. Probably it is not limited to Stalinism—we still see it at other levels. Isn't there an analysis to be done here as a preliminary to future action? Then why Flaubert rather than Nizan?

Sartre: What interests me about Flaubert is precisely that he refused to go to the limit. He supported the idea of an aristocratic bourgeoisie and rose up against the 1848 insurrection and democracy. I try to show why he acted that way, speaking of his childhood, his family, history, how he chose the imaginary, and his alienation. After this, the method will have to be able to serve for other analyses; and that seems as important as circumscribing the anti-hierarchic and libertarian movements.

You mention Nizan and seem to think I am in a privileged position because I knew him. That is false. Real relations between people certainly take place through communication, but never entirely: they are complicated by some magic. It is necessary to abstract on self from this magic (man is a sorcerer for man, etc.) and to treat the subject under study through documents and witnesses, as if one had never known him. It can be said, moreover, that what we felt or guessed in our relations with one another must appear to us as one source of evidence among others, as ours. The problem remains of the intellectual as he can be considered

today—and not by way of Nizan. For me, there are two sorts of intellectuals. The classic intellectual, who lives the contradiction between the universal and the particular, and the new intellectual, who is no longer content to sling his conscience over his shoulder but puts himself to the test by entering the factory. I will cite the case of a friend, an old electrician, who passed his *baccalauréate* by himself and is now an active degree candidate in philosophy. He no longer relates his knowledge to his own subjectivity but to his proletarian life and his craft instead. I think he represents a new kind of intellectual who tends to abolish—somewhat as in China—the division of labour imposed by capitalism. But I am 67 years old and can't go to work in a factory, so I remain a classic intellectual and write on Flaubert.

On the other hand, aware of the definitive urgency of the present situation, I participate in a political movement and in *La Cause du Peuple*. There, I don't think I have to dispense counsel and truth *ex cathedra*. Today, that is no longer the intellectual's role. Maoists understand this and I agree with them. One doesn't have ideas all alone: truth comes from the people. It is no longer a question of giving ideas to the masses, but of following their movement, going to search them out at their source and expressing them more clearly, if they consent to it. In *Liberation*, for example, I can present an idea which will be both a group's and mine. But I wouldn't dream of writing a book which will determine everything from beginning to end. As for theorizing and analyzing the present situation, as you ask me to do, I don't believe this period lends itself to such analysis. The movement is vast and contradictory—why Maoists, why MLF, and what can their relation be? You would have to devote years to it, which doesn't make sense in a moving situation.

What do you think of the elections? Will you vote?

Sartre: I will not vote. Universal suffrage is a way to separate the workers, to break class solidarity. The isolated individual abandons his voice with neither control nor a chance for opposition. Here is my sovereignty, do with it what you will, you can implement your program or not I voted for Guy Mollet in 1956 thinking I would declare myself for peace in Algeria. I was very surprised at the result. I can conceive of direct democracy only: each assembly voting by a show of hands and delegating strictly limited powers to one of its members. Those elected do not represent their assembly but *are* their assembly in a certain sense. They simply present their assembly's demands to the employer, for example, because it isn't practical for 2,000 people to do it. But the elected member is always controllable and removable at any time. On the contrary, if you try to put Marchais in place of Messmer after a rivalry which can only pit two similar individuals against each other, you are just replacing Messmer with Messmer.

The Trotskyists are running candidates. They are going to vote for the unified left on the second ballot because they think a defeat of the UDR can precipitate a crisis.

Sartre: I call that the Machiavellian vote. It takes the vote for the opposite of what it is: voting for the Socialists and Communists because you hope that Pompidou will dissolve the Assembly and that, in deflecting these leftist parties, you will participate in the struggle which will have to follow. But that has every chance of working against you. The imponderables are such that you risk finding yourself with a government you don't want.

It is not necessary to enter the system. A vote, whatever the ballot, is a vote for the vote, an acceptance of the institutions. How can legal action—the Communist Party's, for example—overthrow the law? It will necessarily destroy itself in contortions so absurd as to be improbable. This is one reason I am drawn to the Maoists: I believe in illegality.