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**William McBRIDE****SARTRE AND AMERICA**

*The article is devoted to the North American Sartre Society, which was founded in 1985. The author as its co-founder develops his point of view presenting during panel discussion of Sartre's relations with the United States on the 2015 meeting. He devoted a lot of papers and books to Sartre's philosophy. Some of them are presented in the references. The author reflects at a somewhat deeper level on Sartre's attitudes towards USA in the context of its history and international relations, saying about philosopher's contradictions, the strategy and tactics of his self-disinvitation. The author traces Sartre's transition from one myth of America to another in later life. Sartre's initial experiential encounter with the American reality was by no means entirely positive, but he did like New York City, feeling a sense of freedom in the midst of its crowds that he retained as an important part of his picture of America when back in France. Freedom, an open future, almost unlimited possibilities, and a lack of a sense of history of the sort by which Europe is shackled. Several events of the postwar world history such as Korean war, then Vietnam war paved the way for Sartre's most salient later attitudes towards America. Meanwhile, Sartre had accepted an invitation to present lectures at Cornell University in 1965. But after American massive bombing of North Vietnam in 1965 Sartre responded by disinviting himself from Cornell by way of protest. Recounting these events, the author of the paper recalls so-called "Cornell Lectures", which were saved in unfinished manuscript form and have been given the title "Morale et Histoire". A serious interest in American political life is shown on Sartre's and Beauvoir's visit to Cuba as guests of Fidel Castro and Sartre's participation in Lord Bertrand Russell's independent War Crimes Tribunal.*

**Keywords:** Sartre, USA, America, France, Society, Beauvoir, philosophy, history, freedom, genocide, ethics, politics.

In 1985 I co-founded, along with the late Phyllis Morris, the North American Sartre Society. I arranged for our first meeting to be held at The New School in New York City, an institution that had been established in the 1930s to accommodate intellectuals who had left Nazi Germany, and at which Hannah Arendt, among others, had been a professor. Our first keynote speaker was the late Hazel Barnes, the person who had translated Sartre's *Being and Nothingness* into English, and who had also written extensively about Sartre's thought. The Society, which was and remains interdisciplinary, now meets once a year. The 2015 meeting, which took place in Bethlehem, Pennsylvania, included a



panel discussion of Sartre's relations with the United States, at which I spoke. This is the lecture that I gave there.

Actually, I don't believe that Sartre was ever in Bethlehem, although no doubt he should have been at some time or another. On the other hand, he may be thought to have made an effort to go there, or at least to express a wish to go there, when he wrote his Christmas play, "Bariona", while in the German prisoner-of-war camp. But of course he did visit the United States, enjoyed some jazz here, had a rather serious love affair here, and came to look on this country, later in life, with a very jaundiced eye. In Volume 3 of the eight-volume collection of articles on *Sartre and Existentialism* that I edited, entitled *Sartre's Life, Times, and Vision du Monde*, there is one of only two articles in the entire collection that had not already appeared in English and that I therefore translated – not from French, however, but from Italian. It is entitled "Sartre and America," which is actually the sub-title in Italian, the first part of that title being "Esistere per Miti," to exist through myths. The author, my friend, Giovanni Invitto, who has written a great deal about Sartre, does a remarkable job, relying on the title of one of Sartre's plays, in tracing within a few pages Sartre's transition from his childhood myth of America as the Good Lord to "the myth of the Devil" in later life. Recall that, as Sartre emphasizes in his attenuated autobiography, *Words*, he was greatly attracted to stories about cowboys and Indians, the stories of Buffalo Bill (who was a cowboy) and Nick Carter (who was not) especially. Then, as Invitto goes on to recount, Sartre during the 1930s was captivated, as were many other European intellectuals of the time, by American literature – with the figures of Dos Passos, Hemingway, and Faulkner looming particularly large.

But then Sartre actually traveled to America after World War II, first in the role of a reporter working for Camus and the newspaper *Combat*, as well as for *Le Figaro*, and then to spend time with his "contingent love", who for a time was on the verge of losing her contingency, Dolores Vanetti. Indeed, as Invitto points out, Sartre was in this country from January 1945 to April 1946 except for the second half of 1945, and that is really quite a long time – nearly a year of his life. It was, of course, Simone de Beauvoir rather than Sartre who made a coast-to-coast tour of the country, combining tourism and lecturing, and wrote about it all in her long book, *L'Amérique au jour le jour*. Invitto says, of Beauvoir, that "her first impression [of America] was negative on all levels." That is an exaggeration – although in support of this he cites some comments that she made in her autobiographical work, *La Force des choses*, rather than the long travel text. (Incidentally, in studying that text recently I found that there were some very disturbing omissions in the English translation, especially but not exclusively of some pages having to do with racist attitudes and practices and of other pages dealing with news of the time when she was traveling, such as

the anti-labor legislation in Congress and the U. S. intervention in the Greek civil war – in all, some thirty elisions, some relatively short and others as long as 16 pages. This fact reinforces, in my mind, the perception that the period in question – her trip occurred in 1947, and the U.S. translation appeared in 1953 – was even more chilling in maintaining an atmosphere of fear and repression than it had seemed to me as a child.) Beauvoir’s American experiences were much more extensive and varied than Sartre’s, culminating in her affair with Nelson Algren and its bitter aftermath as played out between her account in *Les Mandarins* and Algren’s angry reaction.

But let me return to Sartre, although I consider this digression concerning Beauvoir to be very relevant to the story of Sartre and America, since the two of them shared so many views and were in almost constant contact over the years. All right, Sartre’s initial experiential encounter with the American reality was by no means entirely positive, but he did like New York City, feeling a sense of freedom in the midst of its crowds that he retained as an important part of his picture of America when back in France. Freedom, an open future, almost unlimited possibilities, and a lack of a sense of history of the sort by which Europe is shackled.

(Incidentally, and this really is a digression, Invitto writes about this in his article and summarizes the assumption about America’s lacking a sense of history, which was shared by many European intellectuals at that time, in a quotation from Giame Pintor, “America has no cemeteries to defend.” When Invitto visited me and we traveled through Indiana and Illinois – this was his first and so far only trip to the United States – I think that his greatest single shock came from seeing that we have so many cemeteries. At least, he kept referring to this and commenting on how wrong Pintor had been. I can’t think of too many Sartrean references to cemeteries anywhere except for the conclusion of his short story, “The Wall”.)

Several events of the early 1950s paved the way for Sartre’s most salient later attitudes towards America. There was, first of all, the Korean War, which he originally thought had been precipitated by a provocative visit to the border between North and South Korea by the fiercely anti-Communist U. S. Secretary of State, John Foster Dulles, although it was indeed the army from the North that actually began the war by crossing that border in 1950. This was to be of major importance in bringing about the rift between Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, but probably of less long-term importance in the saga of Sartre and America than were the complicated manoeuvres of the French government and military that led to its decisive defeat by the North Vietnamese Communists at Dien Bien Phu in 1954. Sartre had already become involved in issues surrounding Vietnam by virtue of his defense of a French Communist sailor, Henri Martin, who had been imprisoned for distributing pamphlets advocating French with-

drawal from that country, and he seemed to have been vindicated by events. (Incidentally, once again, Henri Martin was an invited guest at one of the annual meetings of the Groupe d'Etudes Sartriennes in Paris about twelve years ago.) During the next few years, while he was composing the *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Sartre's greatest political preoccupation, like that of most French people, was the disastrous war in Algeria – one in which, for a refreshing change, the United States was not directly involved. However, the U.S. government during that time decided to disregard the treaty whereby France and its allies had renounced all future intervention in the affairs of Vietnam, and to come to the aid of the weak and corrupt government of South Vietnam against the North Vietnamese. As many of us remember well, President Kennedy committed himself, at first somewhat hesitatingly, to what was to become known as the escalation – *l'escalade* –, and then President Lyndon Baines Johnson continued this and escalated far beyond Kennedy's dreams after the latter was assassinated. The Gulf of Tonkin incident, which, as is now rather widely admitted, was staged by "LBJ", produced an open-ended resolution in Congress giving the President virtual *carte blanche*. This was in the summer of 1964, less than a year after Johnson's accession to office, and was well designed to imbue him with an aura of aggressive anti-Communism during the fall election campaign against Barry Goldwater. Meanwhile, Sartre had accepted an invitation to present lectures at Cornell University in 1965, and he began working on them during that same fall. Johnson began his massive bombing of North Vietnam in February of 1965, and Sartre responded by disinviting himself from Cornell by way of protest. For him, this would have been one more trip to America, perhaps his last, but it never took place.

Although I would like to reflect at a somewhat deeper level on Sartre's attitudes towards America in the latter half of this paper, I think that it would be in order to say something here about the strategy and tactics of his self-disinvitation. It was severely criticized in an open letter by one Professor Grossvogel, a Cornell French professor and member of the committee that had proffered the invitation, who happened to be in Paris at the time. One of Grossvogel's principal points, in addition to belittling Sartre's standing among ordinary Americans, was that by coming to Cornell Sartre could have provided support to American opponents of the escalation and the war as a whole. (Actually, come to think of it, these two points are somewhat in contradiction with each other, because if Sartre had really had so little prominence then his *in situ* support of the opposition to the war would have had little effect or importance.) Sartre's response to Grossvogel was perfunctory and dismissive. I have never been entirely clear about the grounds of Sartre's decision, and at the time I regarded it as probably a strategic mistake. He broke an agreement, but the circumstances leading to his doing so were, as he would have argued, such as to

justify the breach. And it was indeed true that the Johnsonian decision to bomb massively was a catastrophic turning-point in an already very bad situation. So, in retrospect, I do not fault Sartre for this, at least not very strongly, if at all. I had been wishing, foolishly, for Sartre somehow to save us by his projected American appearance, but his colleague Heidegger made it abundantly clear that “*nur ein Gott...*”

Before recounting a couple of other salient events in the saga of Sartre and America, let me interrupt my narrative to recall something about those so-called “Cornell Lectures”, which were saved in unfinished manuscript form. Bob and Betsy Stone, who took an early interest in them, have given them the title “*Morale et Histoire*,” and in them Sartre explores the ambiguous relationship between ethics and politics. These two things are neither completely separable nor, as so-called “Orthodox Marxism” appeared at one time to claim, are they one and the same thing, either. One central example that Sartre uses to demonstrate this point is, of all things, the Democratic Presidential Primary election of 1960 in West Virginia, which was an important step in John Kennedy’s taking the lead over his principal rival, Hubert Humphrey. There was a widespread belief in some circles at that time that a Catholic like Kennedy should not be elected President because, so it was said, any such person would be forced to violate the principle of the separation of church and state. West Virginia had a majority Protestant population, and so the odds initially seemed to favor Humphrey. But the latter was himself a person of principle and recognized that it was prejudice, intolerance, that was really at the base of the anti-Kennedy bias, and he refused to play into it. Sartre’s main point was that this episode could not be explained in strictly political, much less strictly economic, terms, because there was also an important ethical element involved – toleration *versus* intolerance. The lesson that I would like to draw from this is that Sartre was showing a serious interest in American political life, gave a reasonable analysis *sine ira et studio*, and had to do a certain amount of research in order to pull it off. There is one small qualification to be made about this last observation of mine: in the manuscript, which of course Sartre never corrected, he refers repeatedly to “Wisconsin” rather than to “West Virginia”, but it is clear from all the details that he meant the latter, and it is the sort of mistake, after all, that a typical New Yorker would make even now.

I suppose that Sartre’s and Beauvoir’s visit to Cuba as guests of Fidel Castro should be taken into account as part of our saga, but I think that it is of somewhat peripheral importance for at least two reasons. First, it took place during the very early months of the regime, after Castro had overthrown the dictator, America’s darling, Fulgencio Batista, but before Castro had declared himself to be a Communist and U.S. hostility towards him had reached the point of intransigence that lasted until two years ago. Second, while Sartre’s

1960 newspaper reports about this trip and Castro were extremely laudatory, this attitude on Sartre's part did not endure, and eleven years later, in 1971, he broke whatever ties he still retained with Castro because of the latter's own obvious intolerance of dissidence.

Of greatest importance in the saga of Sartre and America, on the other hand, are his diatribes concerning the war against Vietnam and his participation in Lord Bertrand Russell's independent War Crimes Tribunal. Here, in his essays and interviews accusing the United States government of genocide, defending the work of the Tribunal, and castigating President De Gaulle for refusing, not only to allow a session of the Tribunal to be held in France, but even the issuance of a transit visa for onward travel to Stockholm to the Yugoslavian presiding judge of the Tribunal, Vladimir Dedijer (despite the fact that De Gaulle was critical of United States policy), we find the Sartre whose new image of America Invitto characterizes as that of the Devil. That is very harsh, but Sartre is also very harsh in these writings, which make up the first section of *Situations*, VIII.

Well, what judgment would it be most appropriate to pass on all of this from a distance of what is now more than fifty years? If we take Invitto more literally than he no doubt intended to be taken, we could accuse Sartre of misusing his imagination – that quality of his which Thomas Flynn explores at unusual length in his most recent book – to advance a point of view that both Sartre and Beauvoir frequently criticized in their earlier years, to wit, Manichaeism. The United States in Vietnam was seen by Sartre as embodying something akin to radical evil. At the same time, Sartre and Russell were chided by many for endorsing a kind of impotent idealism: no one expected their tribunal to be at all efficacious, and so the whole enterprise could be seen as a kind of – please excuse the ultra-Americanism of this expression – show boating.

Well, I for one remain proud of Sartre and Lord Russell for what they did and for joining in the court's unanimous condemnation of American aggression. I never thought of the war against Vietnam as having any redeeming value. It *was* genocidal in a very real sense, as the almost countless instances, some widely known, some lost to collective memory with the deaths of all the victims, of civilian casualties inflicted by the American military escalated over the years. (The title of the last of Sartre's *Situations* essays is "Le Gйnocide".) Among the most famous such instances were the slaughter of the entire village of My Lai and the napalming of innocent children, one photograph of which in particular captured the utter brutality of what was being done. (Incidentally – my final incidentally – , there was a recent television story about the little girl in that photograph shown as she was running away, naked and severely burned by napalm. She survived, undergoing many operations, and always suffering severe pain, at least until she recently discovered a new laser treatment for her

skin that has helped. She, like Sartre, was in Cuba for a time, but, unlike Sartre, she has attained a virtual Bethlehem, as a convert to Christianity. She travels around the world, under U.N. auspices, denouncing, precisely, the brutality of war.) What was done in the name of the American people against a poor peasant people was unspeakable, just as Sartre contended.

As for the criticism of the War Crimes Tribunal as ineffectual, I think that what De Gaulle did speaks for itself: the global Establishment defending its own even in disagreement. And ordinary people were of course expected to go along with this ridicule. There was even a serious element of ageism among the critics: the U.S. Secretary of State, Dean Rusk, referring to Russell, snarled that he had no desire to play games with a 94-year old Brit. (I should mention that Rusk, too, eventually became old, in case you wondered.)

Toward the end of his life, Sartre's political energies, such as they were, were turned more toward French domestic issues than abroad. He did not shun Americans – indeed, it would be interesting to explore some of his friendships with Americans, such as his biographer Tito Gerassi, the son of a French painter and of Stefania Avdykovich, daughter of a famous [Lviv](#) candy factory owner. In his published interviews with Benny L'vy at the end of his life he expressed dismay at the reactionary tendencies that he detected in many countries worldwide. But let me conclude with a *tu quoque* aimed at Sartre that only occurred to me, amazingly enough, as I was re-reading Giovanni Invitto's article. Like so many young people, especially young boys, to this day, Sartre was enchanted, as he recounts and we have noted, by stories of cowboys and Indians. But what is the context of those stories, if not genocide? It is the story of the United States *ab initio*; and, as it says on our dollar bill echoing Vergil's tribute to that imperial power of another age, Rome, "*annuit cœptis*" – He, that is, God, has anointed our beginnings. I admit this as one who, in his lifetime, gave a course to a future U.S. President (Clinton), directed a dissertation friendly to Marx by a future Inspector General of the U. S. National Security Agency, and more recently taught a couple of courses, apparently greatly appreciated, to a future chief Constitutional staff advisor to Senator Cruz (of Texas). The Sartrean word for all of us, himself included in the last analysis, is *complicitū*. But what can we do?

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### **Вільям Л. Макбрайд. Сартр і Америка**

Стаття присвячена північноамериканському товариству Сартра, заснованому 1985 року. Автор як один з його засновників розвиває точку зору, презентовану під час панельного обговорення відносин Сартра зі Сполученими Штатами на зустрічі 2015 року. Філософії Сартра присвячено багато його книг, деякі з них наведені в кінці статті. Автор аналізує ставлення Сартра до США на більш глибокому рівні: в контексті історії країни та міжнародних відносин, говорячи про протиріччя філософа, стратегію і тактику його самоусунення. Автор відстежує перехід Сартра від одного міфу про Америку до іншого в більш пізній період життя філософа. Первісна зустріч Сартра з американською дійсністю не була цілком позитивною, але він насправді любив Нью-Йорк, відчуваючи почуття свободи на тлі його натовпів, яке він після повернення до Франції зберіг як важливу частину своєї картини Америки. Свобода, відкрите майбутнє, майже необмежені можливості і відсутність почуття історії, яким скута Європа. Декілька подій післявоєнної світової історії, таких як війна в Кореї, а потім війна у В'єтнамі, зумовили особливе ставлення Сартра до Америки. 1965 року Сартр прийняв запрошення виступити з лекціями в Корнелльському університеті. Але після масового бомбардування США Північного В'єтнаму 1965 року Сартр самоусунувся від Корнелла на знак протесту. Розповідаючи про ці події, автор статті згадує так звані «лекції Корнелла», збережені в незавершеній формі рукопису і які отримали назву «Мораль та історія». Серйозний інтерес до американського політичного життя виявився під час візиту Сартра і Бовуар на Кубу в якості гостей Фіделя Кастро і участі філософа в незалежному Трибуналі лорда Бертрана Рассела з військових злочинів.

**Ключові слова:** Сартр, США, Америка, Франція, Товариство, Бовуар, філософія, історія, свобода, геноцид, етика, політика.

**Вільям Л. Макбрайд. Сартр и Америка**

Статья посвящена северо-американскому обществу Сартра, основанному в 1985 году. Автор как один из его учредителей развивает точку зрения, представленную во время панельного обсуждения отношений Сартра с Соединенными Штатами на встрече в 2015 году. Философии Сартра посвящено много его книг, некоторые из них представлены в конце статьи. Автор анализирует отношения Сартра к США на более глубоком уровне: в контексте истории страны и международных отношений, говоря о противоречиях философа, стратегии и тактике его самоустранения. Автор отслеживает переход Сартра от одного мифа об Америке к другому в более поздний период жизни философа. Первоначальная встреча Сартра с американской действительностью не была полностью позитивной, но он на самом деле любил Нью-Йорк, ощущая чувство свободы на фоне его толп, которое он по возвращении во Францию сохранил как важную часть своей картины Америки. Свобода, открытое будущее, почти неограниченные возможности и отсутствие чувства истории, которым скована Европа. Несколько событий послевоенной мировой истории, таких, как война в Корее, а затем война во Вьетнаме, обусловили особое отношение Сартра к Америке. В 1965 году Сартр принял приглашение выступить с лекциями в Корнелльском университете. Но после массовой бомбардировки США Северного Вьетнама в 1965 году Сартр самоустранился от Корнелла в знак протеста. Рассказывая об этих событиях, автор статьи упоминает так называемые «лекции Корнелла», сохраненные в незаконченной форме рукописи и получившие название «Мораль и история». Серьезный интерес к американской политической жизни проявился во время визита Сартра и Бовуар на Кубу в качестве гостей Фиделя Кастро и участия философа в независимом Трибунале лорда Бертрана Рассела по военным преступлениям.

**Ключевые слова:** Сартр, США, Америка, Франция, Общество, Бовуар, философия, история, свобода, геноцид, этика, политика.

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