

ON SARTRE'S *RÉFLEXIONS SUR LA QUESTION JUIVE* (1946) AND ITS POSTERITY

Helge Vidar HOLM (University of Bergen)

When Jean-Paul Sartre published his essay *Réflexions sur la question juive* in 1946, only a year after the ending of World War II, the essay was met with a large scale of different reactions, from Jews as well as from non-Jews. In this article, I shall be looking at some of these reactions. I will also take into account various reactions to the essay about 50 years later, when a seminar was held to celebrate the anniversary of its publication (under the title *Antisemite and Jew*) in the US in 1948.¹ Inspired by the Bakhtinian notion of polyphony, I shall discuss some controversial aspects of the essay and its reception, which I will analyze in relation to Sartre's hegemonic position at the time, as a famous, non-Jewish intellectual.

The greater part of Sartre's essay was probably written between October and December 1944. Its first and largest chapter was first published in December 1945, in Sartre's and Simone de Beauvoir's newly founded journal, *Les Temps modernes*, under the title "Portrait de l'antisémite". The American translation of the complete essay came in 1948 under the title *Antisemite and Jew*. Michel Rybalka has an interesting comment on the choice of title for the publication in the US:

(...) the French title was discarded in favour of *Anti-Semite and Jew*, a descriptive and concise wording that avoided the somewhat controversial 'question juive' (Rybalka 1999: 164-165).

Rybalka also tells that Sartre's first title proposition was "La situation des Juifs en France", but when and why the title was changed, we do not know. On the whole, we know little about the genesis of this essay, but the assumption is that most of it was

¹ Twelve articles based on papers from this seminar are published in the MIT journal *October* 1999, No 87, Season Winter.

written during two or three months just before the end of the year of 1944.

Thus a rough draft of complete essay might have been more or less finished about one year before the first part of it was published in *Les Temps modernes* in December 1945. As the original manuscript is lost, we are not able to tell which modifications Sartre made before he sent it to his editor in France in the autumn of 1946. However, in the letter which was enclosed in this manuscript parcel, Sartre notes: “Here is the text massively reworked (...). The printed pages (from *Les Temps modernes*) can be reused.” (Rybalka 1999: 168). And we know from other sources that Sartre removed about 50 pages from the part of the manuscript he published in 1945 in *Les Temps modernes* (Rybalka 1999: 171). These were pages treating what Sartre calls “the inauthentic Jew”, and he removed them after having let some Jewish friends read this manuscript.

Regarding the original French title, *Réflexions sur la question juive*, there is little doubt that talking about “the Jewish question” in 1945 implied a politically and ideologically ambiguous polyphony, in French as in English. In German, as in Norwegian, *die Judenfrage* or *Jødespørsmålet*, would at the time, just after the war, definitely be related to the Nazis’ use of the word, and thereby also to the Nazi «solution» to the question, the final solution – *die Endlösung*. I find difficult to believe Michel Rybalka’s presumption that Sartre must have been unaware of such connotations. I think Sartre knew, but most likely he was not really opposed to the idea that this title might create debate and provoke some of his readers be that as it may. The title given by Sartre in accordance with his French editor was certainly not innocent, neither in 1946, nor later, as we shall see. However, before entering that discussion, I would like to present the main ideas of the essay. I would also like to point out that the polyphony that I shall comment upon, is not exactly the kind of polyphony discussed by Mikhaïl Bakhtin in his famous study on the novels of Dostoyevsky (Bakhtine 1970). This is because an essay does not present characters in the same way as does a novel. An important aspect of the essay genre is, however, to vary – and sometimes weaken – the author’s position as the dominating voice, to let other points of view have a voice of their own, which in turn

the author comments upon. This is exactly what Sartre is doing in *Réflexions sur la question juive*.

He bases his analysis of the Jewish question on the four following paradigmatic models: The antisemite, the democrat, the inauthentic Jew and the authentic Jew. Through his discussion of the antisemite's characteristics and position, Sartre points at an attitude which in my view is quite typical and probably still dominating among Frenchmen, the tendency to look upon oneself as a typical representative of the Universal Human Being, and on the Others, be they Jews or, for instance, Arabs or other Africans, as representatives of different, less universal communities.

Paradoxically, as Sartre shows us, this attitude is quite typical of the tolerant democrat. For the Jew, the tolerant democrat is thus a dubious friend, as he refuses to accept the Jew as a Jew, but sees him or her as a representative of the universal human being, just like himself. I shall come back to this in my presentation of the four paradigmatic models in Sartre's essay.

Personal choice and freedom of choice are fundamental aspects of Sartrean existentialist philosophy. They are understood as a part of the human condition. As responsible humans, we are condemned to this kind of freedom. "L'homme est condamné à être libre", as Sartre says in his famous essay *l'Existentialisme est un humanisme* (Sartre 1946, *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*). Seen from this philosophical platform, anti-semitism results from a person's fundamental choice, a choice which forms that person's relations to other people, to society and to history. It is a decisive choice that implies an emotional state where feelings such as hatred and anger stop rational thinking and lead to an attitude which is beyond argumentation: it is *imperméable*, in Sartre's words. Anti-semitism is completely irrational, and for that reason, it would be wrong to define it as an "opinion", like an idea or an attitude which may be rationally explained. If the Jew didn't exist, Sartre says, the antisemite would have invented him (or his equivalent), as an answer to his own need for a scapegoat. And if the antisemite refuses all rational arguments against his own attitude, it is not because he feels that his conviction is strong in itself, but because he has chosen an *esprit de synthèse*, a synthetic attitude against the Jews,

an attitude where a person's individual personality or characteristics are without any importance, because he/she is a Jew. The *synthèse* (or the dominating feature) is the Jewishness of the person, the rest is of minor, if any, importance.

When we come to the democrat, he is not exactly the friend the Jew needs, because the democrat refuses to understand the synthetic way in which the antisemite sees the Jew. The democrat sees the Jew as a member of a universal humanity, where we all are good and bad to various degrees. The democrat has an analytic attitude, an *esprit d'analyse*, and he is thus on a level of argumentation far beyond that of the antisemite. His ideal, however, is that of assimilation into the universal melting pot, an ideal which is not necessarily that of a Jew. The Jew may be inauthentic or authentic, according to Sartre, and the authentic Jew would most likely refuse the universalism of the tolerant democrat. But, as Sartre quite rightly points out, the choice of being an authentic Jew is a moral decision which may satisfy the Jew on the level of ethics, but which is in no way a solution on the social and political level.¹ The situation of the Jew is this: Whatever he does, it will be turned against him.

According to Sartre, it is the antisemite who has created the Jew, or rather, the idea of the Jew as a different species of humanity. This creation of a *personnage fantôme*, a phantom character, does not really concern the authentic Jew, because he has himself chosen to realize his Jewish condition, he has made the fundamental choice of being a Jew. He knows from the experience given to him by History that he is condemned to be a *paria*, a stranger to those who consider themselves to be universal. And he claims the right to have a Jewish identity, he is proud to be a Jew. In this way, he takes the power of definition away from the antisemite, who no longer can reach him in his right to be what he is.

The existential situation of the inauthentic Jew is different because he sees himself partly as the others see him, because he let the others, and among them the antisemite, have the power of definition. In fact this is how most of us understand ourselves, according to an existentialist (and phenomenological) comprehension of the gaze

¹ Remember the fact that most of the essay was written in 1944.

of the Other. Our self-understanding comes not only from within. The Jew, however, has a sort of a double bind here. Not only has he got to face the others' gaze, or say, the others' impression of his person and his personality, he has to comply with the "phantom character" that he knows is not his own, but which is bestowed upon him by the others. In his relation to other people, the Jew is overdetermined, in the sense that his fundamental relation to others is double, because he knows that he must relate to the "phantom character", no matter what he does in his own life or how he develops his own personality.

This fact puts the inauthentic Jew into an existential situation of permanent guilt. He will always have to prove that he is a better person than the phantom character to which he always has to relate. In addition, he knows that his Jewishness will be used against him, no matter how well he succeeds in life. He has to relate to the possibility that everything may be taken away from him overnight. Even in "normal times", that is when peace and democracy rule the country, the Jew will still be in another situation concerning human and civil rights than the "universal" Frenchman, Sartre points out. What any Frenchman sees as natural, evident rights as a citizen, will in fact be way beyond the reach of a Jew, especially of an inauthentic Jew, who permits these facts to dominate his existence. Sartre puts it this way:

I, who am not a Jew, I have nothing to deny or to prove.
But if a Jew has chosen to refuse the idea of a specific Jewish, non-universal specificity, thus implying that there is no such thing as a Jewish race, it is up to him to prove this (Sartre 1946: 109. *My translation*).

One may note the polyphonic dimension in Sartre's argumentation. He presents the Jewish situation from different points of view, sometimes from that of an antisemite, sometimes from that of a Jew, and again sometimes from what we may think is the speaker's own point of view. This rhetorical position has created a lot of different readings of Sartre's essay.

One of the readers in France at the time when the essay first was published, Robert Misrahi, tells in an article called "Sartre and

the Jews. A Felicitous Misunderstanding” (Misrahi 1999) about his own reaction, as a Jew himself, to the essay, a very positive reaction, as were those of many of his fellow Jews. According to Misrahi, these positive reactions were largely based on a misunderstanding caused by lacking knowledge of the philosophical idea behind Sartre’s discussion of the effect of the gaze of the Other. Misrahi and most of his Jewish friends quite agreed to Sartre’s idea about a “Jewish phantom character”, created by antisemites, but they did not realize that this phantom character had come into being in their own personality, through the effect of phenomenological personality constitution. They looked upon themselves as authentic Jews, or at least, as potential authentic Jews, when in fact they behaved and thought like inauthentic Jews. And the Jews, who disliked the essay at its first publication, were also wrong in their interpretation of it, according to Misrahi. They thought that Sartre did not accept Jewishness, because he was opposed to the *esprit de synthèse*, where Jewishness was the important, dominating factor, not the personality of each Jewish individual. Probably a main reason for these misunderstandings is to be found in the apparent position held by the speaker or the writer; he presents various positions on what he calls the Jewish question, he repeats arguments from antisemites as well as from tolerant democrats, and the various voices that are being heard in the essay are not always clearly defined as to their rhetorical status.

When Sartre repeats commonplace statements like the “phantom ideas” about the Jews, – is he then ironic and marking a distance to these allegations, or is he showing how these characteristics have become part of the personality of quite a few Jews, through their personality constitution, seen from a phenomenological standpoint? The polyphonic aspect of his way of discussing is present in *Réflexions sur la question juive* already in the title of the essay, as we have already seen, and as we shall see from the reaction from one of the essay’s Jewish readers, Susan Suleiman, in two articles, respectively from 1995 and 1999. In 1995, she claims that the French title chosen by Sartre “evoked tens and hundreds of anti-Semitic papers and articles and special issues of

newspapers published in France from the 1880s through the Second World War.” (Suleiman 1995: 204; quoted by Petrey 1999: 120).

Still, Susan Suleiman is quite aware of the positive impact made by the essay on the Jewish readers just after World War II. Commenting on the essay’s first reception, she underlines an important point:

Paradoxically, although his textual addressees were other non-Jews, it was almost exclusively Jewish readers (or, in the case of Fanon, readers who saw parallels between themselves and Jews as an oppressed group) who were transformed by the book (Suleiman 1999: 138).¹

If we go back to Robert Misrahi, his statements confirm the point stressed here by Suleiman:

”What excited me throughout the book was his (Sartre’s) evident good will, his manifest care to render justice, and his desire, in face of the Jew’s great suffering, to address himself to them, to tell them there was someone on their side. And that was not all. *Anti-Semite and Jew (Réflexions sur la question juive)* was a powerful affirmation of sympathy, but even more importantly, it was an effective weapon against anti-Semitism. For though Sartre’s critique was scathing, it was also extremely pertinent. So much so in fact, that after the book’s publication it became much more difficult for anti-Semitism to be publicly expressed. Sartre’s prestige, authority, talent, and philosophy had succeeded in making any anti-Semitic approach or thought an outrage” (Suleiman 1999: 64).

Here we can see that Sartre’s situation as a writing subject implies two dimensions both related to a position of hegemony. Basically he represents the hegemony of universality through his position as a non-Jewish citizen: (“there was someone on their side”). At the same time he incarnates a certain intellectual hegemony

¹ Frantz Fanon (1925-1961), French psychiatrist and author from Martinique, became famous as an anti-colonialist and a coloured, revolutionary leader.

due to his position as a famous writer, as both a philosopher and a politically engaged fictional writer.

However, to Susan Suleiman, Sartre's own position as the author of *Réflexions sur la question juive* is dubious:

Today, after decolonization and after the woman's movement, we know that *who is speaking* matters, and that the oppressed are most fully empowered when they speak for themselves (Suleiman 1999: 138. *Suleiman's own underlining*).

Suleiman states clearly that she does not regard Sartre as an antisemite outside of this particular textual relation. But to her, the use of *la question juive* in the title of the essay, and the fact that Sartre makes use of expressions like *la race juive, les traits de leur race, un des traits essentiels du Juif*, etc, in his text, made Suleiman furious in 1995. Even if she has calmed down by 1999, she still calls these expressions the essay's "flaws" (Suleiman 1999). She refuses to see such expressions as parts of a polyphonic argumentation, where Sartre is using stereotype anti-Semitic formulations to attack the way of thinking that has created the Jewish "phantom character", which in turn has its effect on Jews' self-image, especially the self-image of those Sartre classifies as "inauthentic Jews".

Suleiman is, however, fully aware of the ambiguity of her own reading, but this does not make her change her position:

Sartre's language and argumentation produce, at certain moments in his text, notably in the long third section where he discusses the 'inauthentic Jew' – a troubling 'anti-Semite effect', all the more troubling because it clashes with his declared meaning and intentions: to combat anti-Semitism and to 'wage a war against anti-Semites' (Suleiman 1999: 131).

Sandy Petrey, himself not a Jew, reacts like this to Suleiman's reading of the essay:

In Suleiman's representation, when Sartre used the language favoured by the Vichy regime and its Nazi overlords, he was producing an anti-Semitic effect and becoming 'in the space of his writing an anti-Semite' (Suleiman 1995: 208). When 'Jewish publications' used exactly the same language

at exactly the same time, their 'use was defensive; it was a matter of countering the Nazi or the Nazi-inspired use of the term' (Suleiman 1995: 204). The same words had an opposite impact according to whether they were uttered by Jews or non-Jews. In the former case, the intent was to counter the Nazis. In the latter, the effect was to reproduce Nazi ideology (Petrey 1999: 122).

The point here is that Petrey sees the "dubious" formulations as parts of the essay's rhetoric. In his opinion, there is polyphony in the French title as well as in many of the stereotype formulations about Jews in Sartre's essay. To him, it is important to understand this rhetoric in the light of a philosophical argumentation that describes how a Jew's self-image is being strongly influenced by the *situation* forming his/her surroundings:

Every statement about 'the Jew' in Sartre's pamphlet designates a situation rather than a condition, and I consider it a fundamental distortion of Sartre's arguments to take such statements as if they manifested a racist concept quite literally unthinkable within Sartrean philosophy (Petrey 1999: 127).

As I see it, Suleiman's negative reactions to Sartre's way of expressing himself in this essay may be linked both to the polyphonic and to the hegemonic aspects of the Sartrean discourse. As for the hegemonic aspects, Susan Suleiman clearly reacts to having her own situation as a Jew explained to her by someone *outside* her group, by somebody "universal" and thus "neutral".

It is of course impossible to measure exactly to what extent the reception of an essay like *Réflexions sur la question juive* is depending on non-textual criteria, such as the author's *situation* in relation to the readers' *situations*. There is, however, no doubt "that *who is speaking* matters", as Susan Suleiman puts it, both on the level of intellectual hegemonic position and concerning the relation to the readers' position. The reception of *Réflexions sur la question juive* over the years tells us clearly that non-textual criteria have been and still will be important to many readers, and for that reason alone such criteria should not be ignored in a discussion of the polyphonic aspects of "dubious" formulations in this essay and in its French title.

Bibliography

- Bakhtine, M. (1970): *La poétique de Dostoïevski*. French edition 1970, Paris: Gallimard.
- Misrahi, R. (1999): Sartre and the Jews: A Felicitous Misunderstanding. *October* 87/1999. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Petrey, S. (1999): Reflections on the *Goyishe* Question. *October* 87/1999. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Rybalka, M. (1999): Publication and Reception of Anti-Semite and Jew. *October* 87/1999. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1946): *Réflexions sur la question juive*. Paris: Gallimard.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1946): *L'existentialisme est un humanisme*. Paris: Nagel.
- Suleiman, S. (1995): The Jew in Sartre's *Réflexions sur la question juive*: An Exercise in Historical Reading. *Nochlin L. and Garb T. The Jew in the Text*. London : Thames and Hudson.
- Suleiman, S. (1999): Rereading Rereading. *October* 87/1999. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press
- Vidal-Naquet, P. (1999): Remembrances of a 1946 Reader. *October* 87/1999. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press