



Book Review

Colonialism and Neocolonialism by Jean-Paul Sartre (With a Preface by Robert J. C. Young and Introduction by Azzedine Haddour; Translated by Azzedine Haddour, Steve Brewer and Terry McWilliams) New York & London: Routledge, 2001. Pp. xxiv + 200.

Reviewed by Kofi Ankomah

In very recent times it has become fashionable to talk about *human rights* as the basis for international assistance. From their sanctuaries of operations, most Western donor-agency officials profess *human rights* as the most important criterion to be applied in assessing the worthiness of proposed beneficiaries, even under harsh conditions where children are dying of hunger, and a negative decision may deny them life sustaining items. One is made to feel that *human rights* have been the most important idea that has evolved and applied in Western thinking from time immemorial.

Unfortunately, Western praxis does not support such a claim. The story has been told but perhaps needs telling again: How, by Western colonialism, the majority of the world's people came to live in intolerable poverty and in absolute and relative deprivation. In addition, under colonialism, the majority of natives around the globe were subjected to inhuman treatment, whilst the people of the West behaved as if *human rights* did not exist in their vocabulary. Resistance to colonial oppression was met with more oppression and the natives took on the responsibility to fight the oppression with all

the means available to them. They realized that unless they fought to liberate themselves from the intensity of oppression, no discourse on man's inhumanity to man would disarm the oppressors. It was late to come but natives around the globe came to the realization that the route to liberation was in the people themselves.

The practice and theory of *apartheid*, the archetype of colonialism, dubbed by its "archangels" as "separate development," by which a minority of people of European extraction kept in slavery 14 million inhabitants of African or Asian origin or of mixed blood, without any political rights, is fresh in memory. It sought to prevent the awakening of a national consciousness among the natives. This inhumane system confined 75 percent of the population to the Bantustans with only 12 percent of the nation's land, with no rights of ownership, and allotted 86 percent to the people of European descent. For many years, and in their country of birth, these natives could not vote, hold public meetings, or belong to trade unions. Natives were required to carry passbooks for identification even to be allowed to move about in the territory assigned to them. Failure to show the pass-

books on demand was a cause for arrest and subsequent torture. That was oppression *par excellence*.

In short, the foundation of colonialism, though economic - what Ellen Meiksins Wood in her *Empire of Capital* describes as "means by which the wealth of the subject was being transferred to the master" - is racism manifested in many mutually-reinforcing facets of politics and society. It is pervasive in social institutions, modes of production, and exchange/distribution. It is potent in the ways and means it enslaves the thought of people: the colonizers and the colonized. The abuse of human rights is rampant and oppression is pervasive. Poverty, ignorance and resulting dehumanization are the effects of colonialism, with violent resistance the only predictable outcome. Above all else, colonialism is violence in thought and action; it inflicts mental and physical torture on the colonized. Whatever good results from it is unintended. As both Sartre and Fanon have reported, the French experience in Algeria was no exception. Though the natives had allies in the West in their struggles against such oppression, very few had the courage to fight the colonial system openly. Jean-Paul Sartre was an exception. He risked his life to write and speak against colonialism in its many manifestations, in spite of the many serious threats.

Colonialism and Neo colonialism is Sartre's way of showing the French that their practices in their colonies were far from the French belief of "liberty and equality." The book is the English translation of Sartre's *Situations V* first published by Editions Gallimard in 1964. It is his theoretical analysis written as a historical critique of and response to colonial oppression. Most of the articles were written during and about the Algerian struggle against French colonial rule. The book is living testimony to Sartre as a significant anti-colonial figure, with not only an analytic brain but ethical precepts worthy of emulation. The book shows a strong link between post colonial and anti-colonial movements and third world issues. It is an excellent

appraisal of French colonialism. It deals with oppression. It is part of Sartre's continuing pre-occupation with the phenomenology of racism, first discussed in his *Anti-Semite and Jew* and *Black Orpheus*. For Sartre, the struggle to end colonial rule is a moral duty for which political action is a *sine qua non*. Without such cultural revolution, individual freedom, which he treasured most and which he strongly advocated, was not attainable. *Colonialism and Neo-colonialism* shows the growth and shift in Sartre's thinking from individual freedom to intellectual and political action. From 1948 onwards he became a major influence on black anti-racist and negritude thinkers. Sartre became involved in the politics of the anti-colonial struggles and a major influence on Francophone thinkers and activists, including Leopold S. Senghor, Alioune Diop (*Présence africaine*), Frantz Fanon (*Black Skin White Masks; A Dying Colonialism; The Wretched of the Earth*; and *Towards the African Revolutions*), and Albert Memmi (*The Colonizer and the Colonized*), among others.

Colonialism and Neo colonialism comprises an excellent "Preface" by R. J. C. Young, an "Introduction" by Azzedine Haddour together with 13 essays by Sartre. The book constitutes Sartre's treatise on colonialism and his passionate appeals for decolonization by all means, including violence. It provides a detailed and massively well-informed insight into French Colonial policies in Algeria. The original articles were written either as prefaces to books (3 prefaces) or as articles in *Les Temps Moderns* (5 articles) and *L'Express* (5). (The preface to Memmi's book was first published as a review in *Les Temps Moderns* and used subsequently as a Preface in a later edition).

Sartre's *Colonialism and Neo-colonialism* begins with "From One China to Another," a Preface to *D'une Chine à l'autre* by Henri Cartier-Bresson and Jean-Paul Sartre (Paris: Editions Robert Delpire, 1954.) It is, in part, a development on the theme espoused in his *Réflexions sur la Question Juive*, 1946 (*Anti-Semite*

and Jew). Sartre is forceful in arguing that practice and ideology create stereotypes and racism. As Young notes in the Preface (P. xi): “Contrary to widespread opinion’, Sartre responded, ‘it is not the Jewish character that provokes anti-Semitism but rather ... it is the anti-Semite who creates the Jew....” In the Chinese case therefore Sartre demonstrates the importance of people detaching themselves in order to give meaning to reality. We become what we are only by the radical and profound rejection of what others have said about us. Sartre emphasizes the supreme importance of the individual and his choices. In line with his *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that man is condemned to be free. Man must therefore choose what he wants to be and how he will go about it because man defines himself by what he does rather than what he is. It is important to remove the blinds we wear in order to see the reality.

What Sartre writes about colonialism has been told by Fanon, Memmi, Senghor and others. But Sartre makes a greater effort to prick the conscience of his compatriots. He writes in “Colonialism is a System”:

We, the People of Mainland France, have only one lesson to draw from these facts: Colonialism is in a process of destroying itself. But it still fouls the atmosphere. It is our shame; it mocks our laws or caricatures them. It infects us with its racism; ... it obliges our young men to fight despite themselves and die for Nazi principles that we fought against ten years ago; it attempts to defend itself by arousing fascism even here in France. Our role is

to help it to die. Not only in Algeria but wherever it exists (p.47).

It is this kind of thinking that motivated Sartre to support the Algerians in their struggle for freedom from France. For Sartre the necessity of freedom is paramount in his thinking. He saw freedom as the central characteristic of being human; hence his advocacy of the duty of violence to gain freedom and to remove social injustice. For Sartre, it is politics first – overcome resistance, smash the framework, subdue, terrorise in order to gain freedom. Plundering of the inhabitants will cease only after independence. But Sartre also warned against neo-colonialism - the system by which black surrogates in the once colonial territory operated for the benefit of their white principals in the *métropoles*. Sartre uses the assassination of Patrice Lumumba to support his case. For Sartre, it is important for the French to be aware of the terrorism, violence, and oppression that colonialism and neo-colonialism unleash. Sartre is convincing in his analysis of the oppressive and violent nature of colonialism and neo-colonialism but it is his advocacy of violence as a response that will worry many. People like Gandhi, Nkrumah, Martin Luther King, Jr., Albert Luthuli, and Nelson Mandela demonstrated that non-violent resistance is just as powerful.

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