

**THE RELEVANCE OF SARTRE AND SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR IN OUR
TIME: SARTRE, SIMONE DE BEAUVOIR AND THE DESCENT INTO
BARBARISM IN OUR TIME**

OR

**Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and the Problem of Resistance to Torture in Our
Time.**

When I thought about what topic to present at tonight's **Existentialist Society** I had a number of thoughts running through my mind. At first I thought of presenting a paper entitled, '**Sartre and the Question of Biography**', something that is of immediate relevance to me at present because I am embarking on a biography of Isaac Deutscher, a great Marxist historian of the twentieth century, who contributed to Sartre's and Simone de Beauvoir's journal, *Les Temps Modernes*, and who had a very substantial influence on Sartre's writing of *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, his multi-volume biography of Flaubert and Sartre's late philosophy concerning the dialectic between the individual and society. Another paper that I was thinking of presenting was going to be entitled, *Existentialist Psychoanalysis and the Deconstruction of Psychiatric Diagnosis*, something that I had already written on quite extensively during my training as a psychotherapist. There was yet another topic I was contemplating which provisionally was going to deal with the misrepresentations of Sartre's relation to the French Communist Party and the Soviet Union because lately I have been very concerned about the heightening of vilification directed currently towards Sartre from a number of quarters.

For me, dealing and refuting this vilification of Sartre is of utmost importance and the reasons, I hope will become apparent to you, as my talk progresses. Indeed, a few weeks ago, during the Melbourne Writers' Festival, I noticed that *The Age* reviewed Clive James' latest book, *Cultural Amnesia: Notes in the Margin of Time*. James as you are all probably aware is widely published in the Anglo-American world and regarded as a kind of oracle for the *bien pensant* members of our society. The essay by James in this book dealing with Sartre is not only ignorant and philistine but deliberately malicious and slanderous, in a way, not atypical of much of the massive disinformation propaganda being waged against Sartre by the current liberal and neoconservative establishments. Let me give you a taste of James on Sartre:

“Radiating contempt for its bourgeois liberal conformity, Jean-Paul Sartre (1905–1980) looms in the corner of this project like a genius with the evil eye. In my view, Sartre is a devil's advocate to be despised more than the devil, because the advocate was smarter. No doubt this is a disproportionate reaction. Sartre, after all, never actually killed anybody excused many who did, and most of those never actually killed anybody, either. But he excused many who did, and most of those never actually killed anybody, either: They just gave orders for their subordinates to do so...opponents of civilization. Like Robespierre, he had an awful purity. He turned down the Nobel Prize. He was living proof that the devil's advocate can be idealistic and even self-sacrificing”.

And here is more from Clive James: *“As a philosopher, to escape history was Sartre's chief concern. There was almost no salient truth about the occupation period that he*

was able to analyse directly at the moment when it might have mattered. When it was safe to do so, he nerved himself to say that anti-Semitism was a bad thing”.

When I first read this diatribe I must confess that the first thing that came to my mind was that James’ invective sounded very much like the denunciations and attacks of prosecutors in the infamous Moscow Trials of the 1930s and the trial of Sophie Scholl and her comrades in Nazi Germany in 1943 that I recently watched. I am not sure if any of you have seen the recent German film about Sophie Scholl. Sophie Scholl was a member of the German Resistance group, The White Rose. She was tried and executed when she was only 21 years old. The film deals mainly with her capture and the subsequent trial in a so-called Nazi People’s Court. I urge you to see it because not only does it speak volumes about that time in Nazi Germany, it has also parallels in terms of denunciatory language used by the chief judge of the People’s Court and Clive James and about the time through which we are now living. I would also urge you to read Isaac Deutscher, the historian whose biography I am embarking on, who analyses this kind of barbaric language—so freely and adroitly used by Clive James that it makes me wonder whether in his past he was a Stalinist—that oppressors throughout the world utilise. Here, then, is what Deutscher says about the prosecution of Bolsheviks, Lenin’s associates, by the chief prosecutor, Vyshinsky at the Moscow Trials—I am sure you will not fail to connect the parallels: *“As the proceedings went on, it became obvious that the trial could only be the prelude to the destruction of an entire generation of revolutionaries. But worst of all was the manner in which the defendants were dragged through the mud, and made to crawl to their death amid indescribably nauseating denunciation and self-denunciations. Compared with this*

all the nightmares of the French Revolution, the tumbrils, the guillotine, and the Jacobins' fratricidal struggles, looked now like a drama of almost sober and solemn dignity. Robespierre had put his adversaries in the dock amid thieves and felons and loaded them with fantastic accusations; but he had not prevented them from defending their honour and dying as fighters. Danton was at least free to exclaim: 'After me it will be your turn, Robespierre!' Stalin hurled his broken adversaries to unfathomable depth of self-humiliation. He made the leaders and thinkers of Bolshevism behave like the wretched medieval women who had to relate to the Inquisition every act of their witchcraft and every detail of their debauchery with the Devil".

In fact, James is no exception to this vilification of Sartre. Many other writers and so-called scholars present Sartre as a supine acolyte of Stalinism. One has only to pick up most general histories of the twentieth century—such as Tony Judt's recent, ***Post-War: A History of Europe since 1945***—or a history of France and one will find liberal historians making such outrageously false claims.

Just to add a little more spice to this talk let me quote, Richard King reviewing James' book in *The Age* on March 30. King paraphrases James thus:

Ideology is opposed to culture but culture is not opposed to ideology and a theme of this book is the way the Left intelligentsia, in resisting a form of totalitarianism, allowed itself to be seduced by another: Soviet Communism.

Paris under the Occupation makes for a particularly grim laboratory in which to examine this regrettable phenomenon and, indeed, the opposite one: the writers who saw that fascism and communism were variations on a theme.

Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, the beauty and beast of postwar Paris, provide an especially revealing contrast: Camus, the opponent of totalitarianism and courageous, if marginal, Resistance figure; Sartre, the apologist for totalitarianism who embellished his own Resistance record while undermining the real heroes.

As James suggests, Sartre's "underground activities had never amounted to anything except a secret meeting on Wednesday to decide whether there should be another meeting the following Tuesday".

One is grateful for such flashes of humour. A one-man circus, James is adept at the intellectual acrobatics but sometimes you long for the white face clown who contrives to take a spectacular tumble while emptying a bucket of glitter over the audience. Not that the roles are mutually exclusive. Humour, for James, is a form of compression, a way to nail an argument. Remember, the clown is an acrobat, too.

And here I would say unequivocally, that everything in James' rant and that of his admirer, Richard King, is factually and historically wrong, and by historically wrong I am referring to historical interpretation.

Let me elaborate.

First, I want to start with the so-called little facts. As you probably are all aware here—given that this is a meeting of the Existentialist Society—Sartre's personal life was anything but puritan. And Sartre had more than good reasons for turning down the Noble Prize for Literature which is such a terrible crime for a philistine and intellectual careerist like James. The Nobel Prize was utilised as an instrument of the Cold War and Sartre did consider whether to accept it, not so much for the honour and fame lavished upon him by the literary establishment, but because of its substantial

monetary value which, like what he did with his other royalties, he would have given away to friends and radical causes he supported. Yet Sartre refused and made a stand making a statement that when it came to honour and fame this was subordinate—if not totally inimical—to the kind of commitments, engagements and future society he valued and envisaged.

Secondly, Sartre's opposition to the Nazi occupation of France and his role in the Resistance is well known. Apart from initiating a Résistance group, *Socialism and Freedom (Socialisme et liberté)*, Sartre wrote oppositional plays, leaflets and wrote significant philosophical work during the Occupation much of which was published after the war. As for Sartre's support of 'totalitarianism', it is not only slanderous but flies in the face of reality. The reality is that Sartre published in *Les Temps Modernes* in 1949 the first exposes of the Gulag—Victor Serge's letter about penal labour camps in the Soviet Union and a review by his friend, Collette Audry of Serge's illuminating novel, *The Case of Comrade Tulayev*, which described what went on in the Gulag. Sartre's political position at the time was one of non-alignment between the two Cold War camps. To paint Sartre as a fellow-traveller of Stalinism is to engage in deliberate falsification of history.

You may well ask why Clive James and lesser pundits, like Richard King, engage in such a deliberate falsification. The reason, in my view, is that the current liberal and neoconservative establishment is still very much afraid of Sartre's revolutionary ideas, hence, their campaign to inoculate the current generation against from reading and hearing Sartre.

You may well ask why they would want to do this. After all, during his lifetime, the liberal establishment—both political and cultural—carefully tread around Sartre.

Sartre was even offered the Nobel Prize for literature (the only accurate fact Clive James notes in his shoddy diatribe), which he rejected, and no less a paragon of French political liberal establishment, Charles de Gaulle, stated that ‘you do not jail a modern day Voltaire’ when some members of the French establishment were baying/calling for Sartre’s imprisonment during the Algerian crisis and the May 68 events.

The reason why the liberal establishment wants to inoculate the young generations from Sartre is because they are afraid of him. I say that they are afraid of him because, even though, he has been dead for 27 years his ideas are as relevant and as cutting-edge, nay, perhaps more relevant than they had been during Sartre’s lifetime. I invite everyone in the audience tonight to explore Sartre’s ideas in the future—if you haven’t done so already—not just his philosophy but his entire *oeuvre*, since what Sartre represents to me is the possibility of an alternative future, a future that May 68 in France and the student and worker revolts—including the movement in opposition to the Vietnam war—of the late sixties and early seventies gave us an intimation. As a matter of fact, some historians have called May 68 as a manifestation and explosion of Sartre’s ideas onto the stage of world history. Sartre great service to humanity also involved his support for anti-colonial struggles, perforce his struggle and commitment to the freedom of Algeria and Vietnam.

After this fairly lengthy, although I feel necessary in the present circumstances, preliminary first part of my talk (introduction) I now want to let you know that I finally arrived at a topic which, in my view does full justice to, my original broad topic, that is, **The Relevance of Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir in Our Time**, but

makes it more specific and relevant. It, moreover, does justice to Sartre's and de Beauvoir's spirit of commitment since it is my belief that should they have been still alive today, they would have seen this question as central to their spirit of justice and resistance in the post-9/11 mayhem. The issue or substantive question, then that I want to focus on tonight is: **Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and the Problem of Resistance to Torture in Our Time.**

So, I want to begin the second part of tonight's talk by quoting, Amanda Gordon, the current President of the Australian Psychological Society which, I hope, does not give you too much of a shock. Writing in the APS Newsletter, Ms Gordon states: *"The issues concerning Professor Koocher came to the attention of the APS after he had been invited to be a keynote speaker at this year's APS National Conference. Since learning about the controversy, we have planned a Public Forum at the Conference on Lessons from Guantanamo Bay: Ethical Issues for Psychologists Working in the Military, Intelligence and Detention Facilities, in which Professor Koocher has been invited to participate. We felt it was vitally important to provide members with the opportunity to hear first hand the APA's position on these issues and to consider their application in the Australian context"*.

I began with this quote because a few weeks ago a psychologist friend of mine alerted me to APA's position on the question of Professor Koocher coming to Australia. Dr. Koocher is a former President of the American Psychological Association who, to put it in a nutshell, supports torture. Under Professor Koocher's presidency the American Psychological Association approved the participation of psychologists in 'interrogations' in the United States so-called 'war on terror'. According to the

American psychologist, Stephen Soldz, a former member of an Ethics Committee of the APA—from which, by the way, he resigned in protest—‘these interrogation techniques amount to torture under the United Nations and indeed common sense definitions’. Koocher, to further quote Soldz, “...used his APA presidency to defuse criticism of the APA’S soft stance on psychologists’ involvement in interrogations that many rightly see as torture. Dr Koocher is criticised by a number of APA members, and also the wider media, because he refused to condemn the involvement, is seen as having helped the APA to exculpate psychologist involved in torture, and to prevent it from endorsing clear and unequivocal rejection of this involvement”.

When I first became alerted to this controversy, it brought to relief a number of questions that I have been mulling over since George W. Bush launched his ‘war on terror’. This, as no doubt you will realize, given that I am an existentialist psychoanalyst concerned and preoccupied me profoundly. My first questions and interrogations regarding this controversy were: ***why would a psychologists association in the United States or Australia want to get involved in torture; what precedents are there for health professionals getting involved in state terror?; how have people mobilized and resisted torture and what can we do to prevent torture occurring in our time.***

I should say here that my interrogations here are not quite neutral, bipartisan or simply out to prove an argument or maintain a position. I have interrogated many of these question from a fairly young age when I first became aware that my mother had survived Nazi concentration camps and that just about all of my extended family on

both my mother's and father's side of our family had been murdered in Nazi extermination camps.

Regarding the first question, then, that is, the involvement of health professionals in torture and possible death of so-called, 'enemy combatants', my immediate association flew to the involvement of many German doctors and psychiatrists in the Holocaust and the extermination of gypsies, homosexuals, the disabled, so-called schizophrenics and generally mentally troubled people who had the misfortune to find themselves in mental institutions in Nazi Germany. (In parenthesis, I should mention here that a number of German psychiatrists became the chief planners of Nazi extermination camps) Of course, we cannot limit the involvement of these mental health professionals to Nazi Germany. Psychiatrists, psychologists and other mental health professionals have been involved in torture in Algeria, Chile, the former Soviet Union, and Franco's Spain, South Africa, Argentina and numerous other countries. It is easy to attribute this involvement to the type of training most of these health professionals undergo to positivism and instrumental rationality, where the Other is objectified and reified, but I think that the key factor is, to paraphrase what the psychiatrist Robert Jay Lifton—who by the way has written the best account of the German medical and psychiatric establishment's collaboration in Nazi extermination programmes—called 'atrocious producing situation', that is 'one so structured, psychologically and militarily, that ordinary people can readily engage in atrocities'. Lifton writing in *The New England Journal of Medicine* on July 2004 about Abu Ghraib and Guantanamo notes that for doctors during the Nazi regime to be involved in atrocities they had to undergo a sequence of socialisations: "first to the medical profession, always a self protective guild; then to the military, where they adapted to

the requirements of command; and finally to camps such as Auschwitz, where adaptation included assuming leadership roles in the existing death factory. The majority of these doctors were ordinary people who had killed no one before joining murderous Nazi institutions. They were corruptible and certainly responsible for what they did, but they became murderers mainly in atrocity-producing settings”.

While American psychiatrists have taken part in so-called ‘biscuit’ torture teams at Guantanamo, Abu Graibh and other what’s known “black sites” around the world, to their credit the American Psychiatric Association endorsed a prohibition on psychiatrists’ participating in torture in May 2006: *"No psychiatrist should participate directly in the interrogation of persons held in custody by military or civilian investigative or law enforcement authorities, whether in the United States or elsewhere. Direct participation includes being present in the interrogation room, asking or suggesting questions, or advising authorities on the use of specific techniques of interrogation with particular detainees."*

Such a prohibition goes part of the way, I think, in if not preventing the participation of mental health professionals in torture, at least stigmatising their involvement with the possibility of individual psychiatrists or psychologist refusing orders to be involved in torture. But this is not enough and I think this is where Sartre and de Beauvoir are extremely relevant for our time.

However, before talking about the relevance of Sartre and de Beauvoir, I want to emphasise that no such prohibition has been forthcoming from the Australian Psychological Association and there had been no cancellation of Professor Koocher’s keynote address at the APS conference in Brisbane just last week. The above quote

from the APS President Amanda Gordon condones the participation of psychologists in practices of torture, and for me represents anathema to everything we ought to have learned from the Nazi experience during the Second World War. President Gordon's lame excuse for failing to cancel what amounts to approval of perpetrator behaviour on the part of Koocher, is very typical of the countless forms of bystander and collaborative behaviour during the Second World War throughout Europe, when refusal to participate on the part of psychologists, doctors, psychiatrists and other people caught up in the Nazi extermination machine who ought to have known better, would have made an incalculable difference in the number of people murdered by the Nazi regime. In truth, it represents a dereliction of responsibility on the part of someone with a lot of power, which given her position, Amanda Gordon yields and influences a body with a membership of around twenty thousand psychologists. It flies in the face of everything that Sartre wrote about responsibility and manifests bad faith and inauthenticity.

I am sure some of you tonight recall Simone de Beauvoir's and Sartre's extremely brave and courageous participation in organising the resistance to the French occupation of Algeria which involved extensive torture of the Algerian population, including the participation of French psychiatrists and psychologists in the process. Sartre's, de Beauvoir's, Jean Genet's, Francis and Collette Jeanson's, Collette Audry's and Maurice Merleau-Ponty's, Daniel Guerin's, Francoise Sagan's—by no means all of the people from Sartre's and de Beauvoir's immediate circle-- participation in this resistance was exemplary—unlike the approval of the Algerian War by Camus and Raymond Aron, currently lauded by Clive James and others within current pro-Iraqi War neoconservative and liberal establishment—and I want to draw your attention to some salient facts. Sartre wrote a number of articles

including his play, *The Condemned of Altona*, a play about a torturer who tortures and whose conscience is unperturbed, one may say—set in Nazi Germany because as Sartre stated in an interview, ‘no theatre in Paris that would have produced it’ if it had been set in Algeria—to heighten the consciousness of the French population about what was happening in Algeria. Simone de Beauvoir wrote a preface to a book by Gisele Halimi, *Djamila Boupacha: The Story of the Torture of a Young Algerian Girl which Shocked Liberal French Opinion*, a book that describes the torture that included rape with a bottle by the French army of a twenty-one year old Algerian woman—a fairly routine form of torture by the French army in Algeria, formed and chaired a committee that was critical to the mobilisation of opposition to the Algerian War, the *Comite pour Djamila Boupacha*.

Here is what de Beauvoir writes in *Force of Circumstances*:

In 1957, the broken bones, the burns on the faces, on the genitals, the torn-out nails, the impalements, the cries of pain, the convulsion, they reached me, all right...I could no longer bear my fellow citizens...whether I wanted to be or not, I was an accomplice of these people I couldn't bear to be in the same street with.... I needed my self-esteem to go on living, and yet I was seeing myself through the eyes of women who had been raped twenty times, of men with broken bones, of crazed children: A Frenchwoman....I wanted to stop being an accomplice in this war, but how?

During the Algerian war Simone de Beauvoir engaged tirelessly in writing and attempting to mobilize opposition to the war in France. She wrote an essay in *Le Monde*, a veritable literary explosion, in June 1960 that began her public opposition to the war. The strength of her opposition was based on her existentialist commitments and was consistent with her elaboration of existentialist ethics in, *The Ethics of*

Ambiguity. Julien Murphy in an article on de Beauvoir and the Algerian War, states that: *...there is a radical notion of freedom implicit in Beauvoir's writings and that ...is more nuanced than the discussion in her **Ethics**. While her concept of freedom has often been interpreted strictly within either left Hegelianism or Sartrean existentialism, it affords much broader and radical interpretations.*

I draw your attention in parenthesis here that Murphy then goes on to note that de Beauvoir's writings from this period were a form of an epistemological break that provided the possibility of latter Derridean deconstruction theory and feminist ethical theories that stress the interrelatedness of human beings: "One can find a deconstruction of identities within Beauvoir's writings from this period, afforded by her gender, class, and race analyses. The sense of freedom that emerges after such interpretations offers a view of freedom more problematic and better able to address the complexities of postcolonialism".

Apart from their intense involvement in mobilising public opinion against the war both Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and many of their comrades faced death threats by the OAS (Organization Armee Secrete). The OAS in fact tried to kill Sartre, bombed and obliterated his flat—fortunately he was not present—and this resulted, to our great loss and the loss of posterity in the destruction of many of Sartre's manuscripts. The main slogan of the French Right during this period at rallies organised by them in Paris and other cities throughout France was "Kill Sartre".

Sartre's journal, *Les Temps Modernes*, campaigned continuously against the war in Algeria. It not only informed the public what was happening there, it also urged conscripts to oppose orders, desert and rebel against officers. Sartre was also instrumental in initiating the Manifesto of the 121, published in a number of big

circulation newspapers throughout France, in September 1960. The impact of this Manifesto could be compared to a wild fire—like the activities of Simone de Beauvoir it galvanized opposition to the war. Collette Audry, a philosopher and a close friend of Simone de Beauvoir in her autobiography relates tongue in cheek this episode: “Lefort, Merleau-Ponty and I were chewing over all this—that is, their involvement in the movement against the war—before splitting up. Merleau-Ponty stopped in the middle of the road and said: ‘Bloody old Sartre! Suddenly we saw ourselves and the mess we had got into. We looked silly, even if we were right’”

I want to conclude tonight’s lecture by reflecting on my topic, Sartre, Simone de Beauvoir and the Problem of Resistance to Torture In Our Time, and what I have just presented.

We are currently living in a time not dissimilar to the time Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir lived through in the late 1950s and early 1960s. The difference, I suppose, is that the so-called War Against Terror is being waged on a world scale by the United States, a nation with vastly greater resources and power than France’s war against Algeria in the 1950s and 60s. We have witnessed unspeakable atrocities in this war, committed by the so-called Coalition of the Willing, including torture, murder, kidnapping at numerous centres around the world, including the so-called black sites in Eastern Europe. According to our leaders, such as George Bush and John Howard, this War Against Terror will be long and protracted—they both have given a figure of at least 30 years.

It goes without saying that during this talk, I tried to convey that torture is only possible if so-called democratic leaders—who behave no better than dictators—and tyrants can harness the cooperation of broad layers of the population. Missiles,

bombs, tanks, fighter jets, nuclear tipped tank shells and bombs and all the paraphernalia of modern warfare are insufficient to subdue and enslave Third World nations like Iraq. You need cooperation of substantial layers of professionals of all kinds in order to do that. Not only professionals, but also ordinary people who acquiesce in their government's action because everyday reality here in Australia or the United States is 'not too bad' and after all the war is very far away.

Many observers of the Iraqi situation have noted that what is happening in Iraq now amounts to genocide. This is why it is important to alert people in professions such as psychology and psychiatry—but not only those—to the unacceptability of any forms of collaboration in this immoral war against the Iraqi people. It is also essential that we publicise that the Australian Psychological Society has invited a keynote speaker who supports torture and that that is unacceptable. Finally, I urge everyone here to get involved in the opposition to the Iraqi war, whether joining a protest march, becoming a member of Amnesty, writing letters to the press, ringing up talkback radio, finding out if their professional organisations or workplaces are involved in any way in the war--because this is a matter of extreme urgency, of life and death for many Iraqis. If we get involve in opposition to this war we will pay homage to the courage and spirit of resistance of Simone de Beauvoir, Sartre and their friends, an honourable commitment in my view.