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# SARTRE IN CUBA—CUBA IN SARTRE

William Rowlandson



## Sartre in Cuba—Cuba in Sartre

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Sartre in Cuba—Cuba  
in Sartre

palgrave  
macmillan

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## FOREWORD

This is an account of Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir's trip to Cuba at the start of the revolution.

It is an account of their accounts of the trip.

It is an account of Sartre's account buried by its author only months after publication.

It is an account of Sartre's other account of the same trip that only existed in note form, abandoned by its author and shelved in a dusty library archive until its rediscovery and publication five decades later, thirty years after his death.

It is an account of a scholar of revolutions, an advocate of revolutions—a revolutionary—coming face to face with a revolution in full swing. A revolution whose revolutionaries were praising him not only as a fellow revolutionary but also as an inspiration to the revolution.

It is an account of the tumultuous early years of the Cuban Revolution seen through Sartre and Beauvoir's eyes, their account of Cuba, Fidel Castro, Ernesto "Che" Guevara, economics, political tension, justice and injustice, violence and terror.

It is also an account of other people's accounts of Sartre and Beauvoir's trip to Cuba, and an account of other people's accounts of Sartre and Beauvoir's accounts of the trip to Cuba.

Sartre's Cuba accounts have been ignored and understudied.

They have been denounced as blind praise of Castro, "unabashed propaganda."

They have been criticised for “clichés,” “panegyric” and “analytical superficiality.”

They have been called “crazy” and “incomprehensible.”

Sartre was called naïve.

He was rebuked as a fellow traveller.

He was, in the words of Cuban author Guillermo Cabrera Infante, duped by “Chic Guevara.”

This book questions these accusations.

Were Sartre’s Cuba texts propaganda? Are they blind praise? Was he naïve?

This book sets out to explore the complex relationship between Sartre and the revolution, his knowledge of Cuba prior to the 1960 trip, his Cuban friendships, his road trip across the island with Fidel Castro, his meeting with Che Guevara, his knowledge of Cuban history, his assessment of the need for revolution, his defence of the revolution throughout the 1960s, and, ultimately, his misgivings about Castro and the emerging methods of the revolutionary regime.

This book assesses the impact of Cuba on Sartre and of Sartre on Cuba.

Canterbury, UK

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# The Invitation to Cuba

*You have no right to ignore the Cuban Revolution.*<sup>1</sup>

Some years ago I was working on a project about the mythologisation of Ernesto “Che” Guevara. In charting the journey of the famous photo dubbed by its author Korda *guerrillero heróico*—the defiant Guevara staring into the distance—I learned that it was one of a series taken on 5 March 1960 at a memorial service for the victims of the French cargo ship *La Coubre*, which had exploded in Havana harbour the day before whilst 76 tons of munitions were being unloaded, killing more than seventy-five people.

Standing with Guevara, listening to Fidel Castro’s long speech in which he blamed the explosion on the CIA, were Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir. This intrigued me. Coincidental with the Guevara project, I had been exploring the horrifying history of state use of torture, and I had recently read Sartre’s 1958 commentary of Henri Alleg’s *La Question*, a book that contains personal accounts of the French use of waterboarding in Algeria. Two separate projects thus came together in a photo, and, accordingly, I set about exploring the historical trajectories that brought Guevara, Sartre and Beauvoir to be standing so solemnly and so resolutely together.

Of course, they are not separate stories but networks crossing and recrossing the historical landscape. Sartre was well read in Cuba: his philosophical ideas were debated, his fiction was influential and his plays were performed. Guevara was an attentive reader of Sartre. Sartre was familiar with the pressures long cooking in Cuban history. He visited in 1949 after visiting Haiti with his partner, Dolorès Vanetti, and was shocked to see the economic power of the United States in Cuban affairs and the culture of corruption, subordination and dependence it produced. It was on this trip, he tells John Gerassi in 1971, that he first understood the full imperial might of US economic interests in Latin America, declaring flatly “Cuba back then was a completely corrupt American colony.”<sup>2</sup>

Sartre had been following closely the developments in Cuba throughout the 1950s, disheartened by Fulgencio Batista’s coup d’état in 1952. He recognised the revolution as a struggle against colonialism, which, although differing in many respects from the Algerian crisis, nevertheless shared many characteristics. Thus his responses to both conflicts are critical of colonialism and sympathetic to the resistance it engenders.

Where to begin to plot these historical trajectories? How far back does one go? To place the Cuban situation in its well-known context, we need only relate that in December 1956 Castro’s rebellion had launched itself from the mountains of eastern Cuba, had grown and absorbed other resistance movements and had defeated Batista’s army. Batista fled on New Year’s Eve 1958, and the rebels marched victoriously into Havana in January 1959. The ensuing months saw radical processes of transformation unfold, with numerous revolutionary projects dismantling, reforming or creating afresh structures of state across the island.

Carlos Franqui, director of the once-clandestine newspaper *Revolución*, visited Paris in October 1959. He was in France to drum up support for the revolution amongst intellectuals, and he was keen in particular to engage with Pablo Picasso, André Breton, Le Corbusier and Sartre.<sup>3</sup> Franqui visited Beauvoir and, with the help of an interpreter, urged her to visit Cuba. “He told me authoritatively,” she writes, “that it was our duty to take a look with our own eyes at a revolution actually in progress.”<sup>4</sup> Stealing a moment of Sartre’s time during an interlude of his play at the Odéon, Franqui impressed Sartre not only with the organic nature of the revolution—not communist nor Marxist—but also with news of Sartre’s popularity in Cuba, which according to Franqui

astonished him. Franqui also recommended that they visit Havana during the carnival so as to experience the island in full celebration.

Sartre and Beauvoir demurred for some weeks, both engaged on other projects, both unmotivated to make the trip: "I wonder," Beauvoir recalls Sartre saying to her, "whether it's not just physical exhaustion that stops us, rather than moral fatigue."<sup>5</sup> They later accepted the invitation "to shake ourselves out of our inertia,"<sup>6</sup> and, on 22 February 1960, they stepped down from the plane into the hot, humid, noisy, energetic and energising Havana: "'It's the honeymoon of the Revolution,' Sartre said to me."<sup>7</sup>

It had been a hard few years for Sartre. Well, all his years were hard: his commitment to writing was at times suicidal. His review of Alleg's book, entitled "Une Victoire," is sad and angry, reflecting his low spirits as witness of the crisis in Algeria. It is, I can concur, dispiriting to learn about the use of torture by one's own state and its allies. It is dispiriting to see torture normalised to the extent that its use is defended by a nation's politicians. *La Question* was seized by the authorities, as was the issue of *L'Express* (6 March 1958) that included Sartre's review. He was censured and censored, and he responded by having the text distributed clandestinely as a pamphlet (which was promptly seized), publishing it abroad and even printing it on a tiny scroll to be read with a magnifying glass.<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, his ongoing abhorrence of Stalinism and critique of the Communist Party had earned him rebuke from the left.

In addition to the play that Franqui caught in Paris, Sartre had been most occupied with the first part of *Critique of Dialectical Reasoning*, a book that demanded so much of him that he had been taking a staggering daily cocktail of amphetamines, barbiturates, alcohol and tobacco, impoverishing further his already poor health.<sup>9</sup> He suffered a liver infection and a cardiac crisis, yet neither ordeal seemed to affect his tireless productivity (nor his self-medication); Beauvoir recalls writing shifts of twenty-six hours.

In September 1959 he spent ten lonely days in a Georgian mansion in Ireland as guest of Hollywood director John Huston, who had commissioned Sartre to write a screenplay about Freud. The two did not get on. Huston was alarmed at this "little barrel of a man as ugly as a human can be" who was forever writing, forever popping pills, who seemed to wear the same suit every day, who did not flinch when a local dentist pulled an abscessed tooth and whom he could not dominate.<sup>10</sup> Sartre, for his part, did not understand Huston (Sartre never spoke English well) and

could not relate to him in any way, calling him in a letter to Beauvoir, a lonely romantic whose “emptiness is purer than death” who “refuses to think because it saddens him.”<sup>11</sup> Those autumn days in Ireland read like a scene from Sartre’s play *Huis Clos*: awkward characters stuck together awkwardly in an awkward environment.

Sartre was also dispirited by the return to power of Charles de Gaulle following the November 1958 general election, by the lingering presence of fascism in French society, and by the ongoing tension in French Indochina, a conflict that would lead in the following decade to the Vietnam War. In addition to all of this, in January 1960 Albert Camus, Sartre’s friend and antagonist, died in a car crash. His death put Sartre and Beauvoir into profound gloom. Even their stopover in Madrid en route to Havana was, according to Beauvoir, dismal.

I picture all these stories set against the Paris winter of cold drizzle, runny noses and heavy tobacco smoke lingering in the twilight cafés, suddenly swept away by the turbulence of a tropical island in revolt. It is this sudden transition that catches my attention as I am familiar with the dazzling discord of flying from a dark British winter into the heat, noise and smells of Havana. Everything is suddenly so different; home and home affairs seem distant. “After Madrid, after Paris,” Beauvoir writes, “the gaiety of the place exploded like a miracle under the blue sky.”<sup>12</sup>

The trip was a lively one. They were given separate rooms in the “fortress of luxury” Hotel Nacional. “My millionaire hotel room would hold my Paris apartment,” Sartre writes, and he turns up to the maximum the air conditioning to experience “the cold of the rich.”<sup>13</sup> It was, as Franqui promised, carnival time: “On Sunday evenings,” recalls Beauvoir, “troupes of amateurs appeared in the streets, joyfully putting on shows they’d spent the whole year preparing; costumes, music, mimes, dances, acrobatics—we were dazzled by the taste, the invention, the virtuosity of these *comparsas*.”<sup>14</sup> They were shown around the city, introduced to different figures of new official roles in the revolution, and instructed in different revolutionary initiatives.

Sartre was interviewed by journalists and appeared on the Cuban television. They were celebrities, Beauvoir recalls: “after he’d given a talk on television, everyone recognized him. ‘Sartre, it’s Sartre!’ the taxi drivers would shout as we went by. Men and women stopped him in the street.”<sup>15</sup> Perhaps Beauvoir modestly forgot that she, too, was recognised and cheered in the street; Carlos Franqui recalls the crowd shouting “*Saltre, Saltre, Saltre. Simona, Simona, Simona*” and that their

names quickly became a refrain of the carnival rhythm: “¡Salte, Simona: un dos tres! /¡Salte, Simona: echen un pie!”<sup>16</sup> There are photos taken by Castro’s official photographer Alberto Korda that show Sartre and Beauvoir jostled by a lively crowd of beaming faces. Cold Paris must have seemed a world away.

They were entertained by the writers of *Lunes*, the weekly cultural supplement of Franqui’s *Revolución*, and an edition of the journal was promptly dedicated to him, complete with photos of the pair.<sup>17</sup> On 14 March, Sartre presented to students at the University of Havana, where he was asked by one of the students about the relationship between ideology and revolution. He responded in brief but was so concerned with the question that he later explored in greater detail and published as an article in *Lunes*, “Ideología y Revolución.” The article was printed the day before their departure. On 21 March, the director of *Lunes*, Guillermo Cabrera Infante, arranged a meeting in the journal’s offices where Sartre spoke with a gathering of writers and intellectuals.

They visited Guevara, then director of the National Bank, at midnight, and one of Korda’s photos shows Guevara in battle fatigues leaning forward to light Sartre’s cigar, Beauvoir sitting chicly next to the rugged and bearded Antonio Núñez Jiménez. They tour the island with Castro, visiting cane fields, sugar refineries and tobacco *huertas*, inspecting the emerging effects of the nascent agrarian reform. They visited factories, villages and new tourist developments on the now-public beaches. They visited Santiago, Trinidad, Santa Clara and other cities. They are taken to the Castro brothers’ hideout in the Zapata marshes, which Sartre jokingly calls the “Cuban Rambouillet,”<sup>18</sup> in reality a wooden barrack in a mosquito-ridden swamp. “Castro and his entourage,” as one biographer puts it, “all slept in bunk beds arranged along the walls of a single large room. It was a familiar feeling for a man who had passed through the dormitories of the École Normale and Stalag XIID.”<sup>19</sup> They sped through the waterways with Castro at the helm. They watched Castro fishing by blasting the water with a shotgun and hauling out the stunned fish. Sartre and Castro buzzed around the swamp in a tiny helicopter. They talked and ate and smoked. They slept little.

Sartre was impressed with Castro’s energy and charisma. He was impressed with all the revolutionaries’ energy. He was impressed with the revolution. His spirits improved. “It was,” writes biographer Annie Cohen-Solal, “a real Sartre-Cuba festival.”<sup>20</sup>

At all times, characteristically, Sartre was filling page upon page of notebooks with his observations. Cuban novelist Lisandro Otero, who accompanied them throughout, remembers Sartre constantly writing, deliberating and questioning his comrades, impervious to heat, mosquitoes or physical discomfort, of which there was plenty on their trip.<sup>21</sup> While in Cuba, Sartre was working on a preface to a new edition of his old lycée friend Paul Nizan's *Aden Arabie*, although he admits in the *Lunes* conference that he was struggling to focus on it with his attention drawn to the tumultuous scenes before him in Cuba.<sup>22</sup> Instead he observed, scrutinised and prepared his notes to publish as articles in France.

They left Havana for New York City, which seemed to Beauvoir "after the multicoloured tumult of Havana" to be "bleak and almost poverty-stricken."<sup>23</sup> This was a city familiar to both although they had never visited together. Beauvoir, in particular, was very fond of New York, and yet after their adventures with the rebels in the tropics, the city appeared to her drab and the people "shabby and rather bored." Being in Cuba changed her vision not just of the city but also of the United States as a nation, "no longer in the vanguard of humanity" but "poisoned by lies, cut off from the rest of the world by a Dollar Curtain."<sup>24</sup> It was only the taste of a martini that revived her affection, but the experience was brief as they were bundled into a press conference organised by the Cuban cultural attaché at the Waldorf. "The regime produced by the Cuban Revolution is a direct democracy," Sartre boldly declared. "The Cuban Revolution is a real revolution."<sup>25</sup> Strong words from a historian of revolutions. Sartre and Beauvoir found themselves amongst a lively crowd concerned at congressional hostility towards Castro and Cuba and eager to learn about the couple's observations. Sartre's radical views thus appear in opposition to an emerging and now long-in-the-tooth anti-Castro ideology in US politics.

## Hurricane Over Sugar

*Consider the luck of imperialism. By the very game of economic domination it creates among the oppressed needs which the oppressor alone is able to satisfy. The diabetic island, ravaged by the proliferation of a single vegetable, lost all hope for self-sufficiency.*<sup>26</sup>

Once in Paris, Sartre altered his plan of publishing his accounts with *L'Express*, where he had published much inflammatory material in the 1950s, or with his own *Les Temps Modernes* and arranged to publish in *France-Soir*, a magazine with a far greater circulation. The articles, edited and tidied up by Claude Lanzmann (editor and co-founder of *Temps Modernes* and partner of Beauvoir) and entitled collectively *Ouragan sur le sucre: un grand reportage a Cuba de Jean-Paul Sartre sur Fidel Castro*, ran from June 28 to July 15 1960, and were well publicised and widely read. *France-Soir* did, however, cagily declare that their position was not necessarily that of Sartre's.<sup>27</sup> "Sartre's prospective audience," writes Ronald Aronson, "was not the usual small Left-intellectual sector, but a popular readership of over a million."<sup>28</sup> Sartre was not preaching to the converted.

The Spanish translation rights were immediately acquired by *Prensa Latina*, recently established by the two Argentines Guevara and Jorge Ricardo Masetti, and the Cuban edition, *Sartre visita a Cuba*, which was published by Ediciones R in October 1960 and April 1961, contains the translation of the *France-Soir* articles, his *Lunes* essay "Ideología y revolución", the transcript of the interview with the Cuban writers, and an appendix of forty or so photos of Sartre and Beauvoir throughout their trip.

The articles were immediately published in numerous Spanish editions in Latin America as *Huracán sobre el azúcar* and in English in 1961 more prosaically as *Sartre on Cuba*. Further editions were published in German, Portuguese, Italian, Turkish, Russian and Polish.<sup>29</sup> When, later in 1960, Sartre and de Beauvoir were in Brazil, a translation of the articles in Portuguese was rapidly assembled and published, and Sartre and Beauvoir endured an autograph session of several hours in a bookstore after more than 1500 people descended on the bookstore.<sup>30</sup>

There was, very suddenly, great critical attention of Sartre's writings on Cuba, and he was praised and condemned in equal measure for his praise of Castro and the revolution.<sup>31</sup> And yet, curiously, having authorised the publication of the Cuba articles in book form in all these translation editions, Sartre barred book publication in French, and he was later keen to bury the texts altogether. Just as rapidly as the book had risen, so it fell away.

Sartre was not only keen to bury the Cuba articles; he also chose to abandon a separate book project on Cuba. Beauvoir recalls Sartre at work on "an enormous work on Cuba" that would occupy him until they left for Brazil in the autumn but makes no further mention of this work.<sup>32</sup> In 2007, researchers of the Paris-based ITEM (Institut des Textes et Manuscrits Modernes) discovered in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin, a handwritten, unedited and incomplete manuscript of 1100 pages written, accordingly, after the June and July 1960 *France-Soir* articles. Gilles Philippe and Jean Bourgault, who made the discovery, were keen to publish the manuscript in book form, but the Sartre estate executor, Arlette Elkaïm (Sartre's adopted daughter) felt that Sartre would not have wanted a book published. Instead, Lanzmann was brought on board, and the material was published in *Les Temps Modernes* alongside a reprint of the original *France-Soir* articles.<sup>33</sup>

These notes, published as *Appendice*, are similar to the articles but less refined, less coherent, more raw. The tone is at times more strident, the voice less forgiving, the morality more austere. It seems a personal diary, the space where ideas are knocked around before they appear in print, a space for reflection. They are an invaluable document for deepening our understanding of Sartre's relationship with Cuba and the revolution.

Sartre's disinheritance of *Ouragan sur le sucre* may in part account for *Ouragan* remaining in the margins of Sartre's work, rarely discussed in critical detail. Paolucci notes her surprise that neither the French nor the English studies consider the articles in any detail.<sup>34</sup> There is critical



analysis, and biographers and scholars have approached *Ouragan* from a variety of perspectives in a variety of discourses. But when compared to the groaning shelves of scholarly works concerning *Being and Nothingness*, *Nausea*, Sartre's plays or even the difficult *Critique*, it is revealing how understudied are the Cuban articles.

Neither have they been well received. There is a tendency to view them as too gushing in their praise of the revolution and of Castro, too enthusiastic, too opinionated. Cohen-Solal likens *Ouragan* to "the articles he wrote about America, in 1945, and about the Soviet Union, in 1954: the same clichés, the same tendency to panegyric, the same analytical superficiality," and she calls the articles "unabashed pro-Cuban propaganda."<sup>35</sup> I disagree. I see Sartre doing precisely what he advocated the intellectual should be doing: observing, researching, deliberating and responding. I see his praise of Castro arising from his scrutiny, albeit enthusiastic, of the man. It is not blind praise—although at times it is gushing—as he is quite prepared to interrogate Castro about the growing cult of personality surrounding the leader, and to question the tension between Castro's declared commitment to individual freedom and the emerging authoritarianism of the revolutionary state.

Ronald Aronson, who dedicates more critical space than most to the Cuba articles, frowns upon the literary language of the articles. I applaud it. The sprightly wit and jaunty language make for lively reading. Bearing in mind that his prime readership was French, it is interesting to consider his choice of simile to describe the influence of the United States over Cuba's affairs: "they had neglected nothing in order to make of the newborn nation a future monster, equal to the geese of Strasbourg, who die slowly in the pains of too delicious a liver."<sup>36</sup> Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz likens sugar to a demanding woman. Sartre likens sugar to foie gras.

In such a poetic vein (and I cite the original French to show his language) he refers to the nation as "ce monstre diabétique," and writes that "le pays meurt d'une indigestion de dollars et de sucre."<sup>37</sup> The island is an "archipel de feu contre la vitre noire de la mer,"<sup>38</sup> rebels' beards are *fleuves noirs*, "black rivers covering the chest,"<sup>39</sup> and a sunset that he watched with Simone de Beauvoir is a "tomate sanglante, sur les jeunes plantes de tomates."<sup>40</sup> There is rich poetic quality to these accounts that in no way detracts from their impact. I do grant that he is not innocent of insult, calling US politicians and merchants puritans, presidents Grau and Prio corrupt and venal, Machado tyrannous,

wicked and avaricious, Batista a chimpanzee and his lackeys monkeys; but such punchy language seems pertinent to his analysis, and certainly animates a text focusing in its early chapters on the potentially dry themes of economics, trade regulations and agricultural production.

Sartre's disinheritance of *Ouragan sur le sucre* may in part account for the lack of new editions; in addition to the 2008 *Temps Modernes* journal re-edition, the two book editions that I am aware of are a 2005 Italian edition, edited and introduced by Gabriella Paolucci,<sup>41</sup> and a 2005 Cuban edition, with essays, edited by Eduardo Torres-Cuevas.<sup>42</sup> To my knowledge there is no English language re-edition. "Who today," asks Lanzmann in 2008, "remembers a text of the great author entitled *Ouragan sur le sucre*? It's nowhere to be found, not in publishing houses, bookshops, nor even the stalls of the *bouquinistes* [book sellers along the Seine.]"<sup>43</sup> Even with the Spanish, French and Italian re-editions, Sartre's Cuba articles remain marginal. The time is right, I deem, to bring them in from the cold.

## Sartre and Beauvoir in Havana

*We are living in the fashionable district.*<sup>44</sup>

One important consideration is the ways in which Sartre and Lanzmann structured the articles. The narrative sequence contributes significantly towards the way Sartre constructs the meaning of the revolution in Cuba. We can chart a story line of sorts: it begins in Havana in the present—February 1960—goes back in time to the nineteenth century, then sweeps across the decades and across the island to return to Havana in the present.

Sartre leaps straight in with no preamble, writing in the present tense from “cette ville” that he finds confusing and that he has failed to understand. It could be the beginning of one of the Ernest Hemingway novels that Sartre was so fond of (in 1949 he and Dolores had stayed with Hemingway in Havana. In 1960 Hemingway was away). He goes to great lengths to describe the luxury of the Hotel Nacional, a hotel that demands “fortune and taste” from its clients. “What can one say about it?” he asks. “There are silks, folding-screens, flowers in embroidery or in vases, two double beds for me, all alone—all the conveniences.”<sup>45</sup> It is a curious beginning to a tale of revolution; indeed it is a good review of the Nacional, its elegant architecture, its “nobility” in comparison to the garish skyscrapers that puncture the skyline. It should be on the hotel’s website today, as the Nacional is still a “fortress