On Jean-Paul Sartre’s Hegelian View of African History

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In 1948, when Jean-Paul Sartre published *Orphée Noir* as the preface to a volume of poetry edited by Léopold Sédar Senghor, the *Anthologie de la nouvelle poésie nègre et malgache de langue française*, France was one of the largest imperial powers in the world. Its colonial possessions included lands in Asia, the Caribbean, South America and large swaths of northern, western and equatorial Africa. Cracks in the imperial edifice were beginning to show, but it was as yet inconceivable to many people in Europe and in Africa that most of France’s colonies, including all of its African holdings, would soon be replaced by independent nation states. However, a mere thirteen years later, by the time Sartre published *La Pensée Politique de Patrice Lumumba*, in 1962, this enormous transformation had taken place. This period saw more than the reconfiguration of the political map. Scholars have shown that a major shift in Sartre’s own thinking and writing also occurred progressively over these years during which he became more philosophically and politically engaged with anti-colonial struggle. In the late 20th century, Sartre’s efforts in a series of major publications to interpret Marxism in light of existential philosophy survived neither the critical response of thinkers such as Louis Althusser, Michel Foucault, and Claude Levi-Strauss (more will be said about these responses below), nor political
developments that broadly undermined the credibility of Marxism in France, both within the academy and outside it. Nevertheless, Sartre’s writings influenced anti-colonial thinkers in Africa, the Caribbean, Latin America and Asia of that period and later periods as they posited a relationship between the pursuit of social justice through revolutionary politics and the development of new forms of knowledge.

The outcome of the Second World War initiated a shift in political alignments around the globe. In France, there was a general exuberance at having defeated Nazism that combined with a sense of utopian possibility, particularly among the intellectual Left. The first anti-colonial wars of the period began to take shape almost immediately upon the close of the World War in Europe. In the days following the Nazi surrender to Allied forces, violent French colonial police repression of Muslims in the Algerian town of Sétif initiated an increasingly bitter struggle between settlers and indigenous Algerians. In Indochina, the Viet Minh initiated a rebellion against French rule in December 1946.

In Africa, another generation of African soldiers returned to their homes in European-ruled colonies (their fathers had fought in the First World War) with a changed perception of European power, having witnessed Europeans at their most vulnerable and in their home context. Some had served in Asia where they were able to observe colonial apparatus from a different perspective. In addition to the social dynamic created in Africa by the impact of these returning soldiers, a similar dynamic was taking place in the colonial metropoles of Britain and France through political engagements that developed between Africans and Afro-Caribbeans living there. In Britain, a group of mostly Anglophone African and African diaspora intellectuals, including some future heads of state, met in 1945 at the Fifth Pan African Congress in Manchester, England to call for an end to colonialism. The same year in Paris, Sartre co-founded a journal, *Les Temps Modernes*, which published African, Afro-Caribbean and African American writers whose work further developed anti-colonial, anti-racist Africanist discourse. Two years later, Alioune Diop, the Senegalese professor of literature, edited the first number of *Présence Africaine*, the influential journal which later organized the First International Congress of Black Writers.
and Artists at the Sorbonne in 1956. A constellation of prominent French intellectuals sat on the editorial board of Présence Africaine including Sartre, André Gide, Georges Balandier, Marcel Griaule and Théophile Monod.

For European-held possessions in Asia, Africa and the Caribbean, a wave of decolonization was imminent. Thus Sartre’s essays on colonialism and the black condition, including introductions to seminal works by anti-colonial thinkers from the Caribbean and Africa, provide a mapping of the shifting intellectual currents of the period leading up to political independence. Thematically they move from his concern in Orphée Noir with poetry as a vehicle through which oppressed blacks might recover an ‘authentic’ subjectivity, to his political and structural analysis of colonialism as a system of exploitation, to his controversial advocacy of anti-colonial violence and finally to his assessment, after the collapse of colonialism, of the stubborn imperial economic relationships that remained between Europe and Africa.

Sartre’s work is also of course marked by the major philosophical and theoretical concerns debated in Europe, which were significantly influenced by the intellectual legacies of Hegel and Karl Marx (himself influenced by Hegel). As a philosopher, Sartre had concerned himself with identifying the central characteristic of being human in his book Being and Nothingness (1943). In that work, Sartre rejected the formulation by Karl Marx in the Eighteenth Brumaire that individual consciousness is historically determined. Rather than arguing for an absolute historical determinism, Sartre sought to combine the notions of subjectivity and individual agency within totalizing structural concepts. Sartre reformulated Descartes’ cogito with an emphasis on the individual and the active condition of being alive: “I am my choices” and “I am freedom.” Sartre viewed power in dialectical terms with colonized and colonizer locked in a mutually contingent relationship, a position that accords with the master/slave dialectic proposed by Hegel and built upon later by Marx. Left largely uncontested by either Sartre or Marx, however, was the teleology implied by Hegel’s dialectical view of history as a dynamic process moving toward a particular resolution (ie., the ‘end of History’). Nevertheless, Sartre employed his modified Marxist analysis throughout a series of critical reflections on the social
condition of black people under colonialism.

*Orphée Noir*, Sartre’s introduction to the anthology edited by Senghor, did much to establish the concept of Négritude (a neologism already coined by the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire) at the center of francophone discourse about black identity. But it also allowed Sartre to philosophically engage his quest to understand the workings of individual subjectivity within a Hegelian concept of dialectical power by analyzing ‘the black condition’ as he understood it to have evolved in the mid-20th century. Sartre’s debt to Hegel is evident in the opening section of *Orphée Noir*, in which he employed the Hegelian notion of “recognition” to assert that the anthology’s publication in Paris represented a shift in power relations between “black” and “white” peoples. Having long drawn power from their observation of others, whites were themselves falling under the critical gaze of those whose ancestors their ancestors once enslaved or who were then held by them as colonial subjects. For the “colonized,” this gaze turned upon the colonizer effected the development of an authentic “subjectivity” or prise de conscience that stood against their objectification by colonizers. Black writers, Sartre argued, were then at the vanguard of a necessary process of self-actualization which must first attempt to access a subjectivity throttled by the colonial experience and even the colonizers’ language. In keeping with his rejection of Marx’s determinism, however, Sartre argued that the search for an authentic self involved a process of active choices rather than a quest for a pure pre-existing essence. Neither the outcome of this quest nor its particular consequences could thus be fully predicted. This black prise de conscience was distinct from that of the working class, generally, because blacks gained consciousness first through the concept of race (that is, through “un synchrétisme psycho-biologique” drawn from their shared experience of exclusion from the category of ‘human’ in the western world). The disdain of white society for blacks went deeper than that of the bourgeois class for workers and therefore required a more profound response.

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As a Hegelian Marxist, Sartre envisioned the black *prise de conscience* in stagist terms, of which the first stage was a “racist antiracism” that would eventually give way to a more mature stage: the awareness of class consciousness and a broader attack on the economic structures upholding unequal social relations. Abiola Irele cautioned against reading Sartre’s use of the term of “racist antiracism” as a contradictory embrace of fascism, rather that it was only part of an attempt to broadly conceive and envision the subjectivities of African and African Diaspora populations in the world. Sartre’s embrace of the Hegelian notion of historical process is at the core of his argument about Négritude, which he clearly sees as part of a process unfolding to resolution. He noted the commonality of the black struggle for consciousness with that of humanity itself. He cited nationalist struggles in Europe in which groups such as the Hungarians and the Irish prioritized reclaiming their language as an essential part of not only attaining independence, but of synthesizing a group experience and constructing a group or national identity. For blacks, the experience of suffering initiated a process of self-discovery. Or rather, what initiated that process was a fundamental refusal to accept suffering which opened the way to revolt and to freedom. It is this process of suffering and refusal that constituted the pivot between race and historicity, or the possibility for an alternative history of humanity to emerge along with alternative genealogies and epistemologies of the past.

La race s’est transmuée en *historicité*, le Présent noir s’explose et se temporalise, la Négritude s’insère avec son passé et son avenir dans l’Histoire Universelle, ce n’est plus un état ni même une attitude existentielle; c’est un devenir; l’apport noir dans l’évolution de l’Humanité.

Sartre explained this ‘sudden’ emergence of black consciousness

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2 Ibid., 175.
4 Ibid.
as part of a process that itself performed a role within a larger ongoing process of human “History” as a totality. Because of its alterity in relation to oppression, this developing black consciousness was positioned to play a decisive part in the overall process. In one sense, Sartre's essays on colonialism and on the responses of black peoples to it represent a continuum of French intellectual engagement with societies and individuals outside Europe, the production of knowledge about these peoples and the challenge that encounters with these ‘others’ represented for European self-awareness and knowledge about the world. Sartre's evocation of the black ‘race’ clearly stems from Enlightenment era conceptions of the term that associated social characteristics with biological phenomena. Some of this thinking also informs the work of Gottfried Herder, the 18th century German philosopher whose concept of national cultures WEB DuBois reconfigured to argue for “Pan-Negroism” in his 1897 essay, “The Conservation of Races,” which in turn influenced the development of a Pan-Africanist movement that engaged Negritude writers Sartre knew personally. In another sense, however, *Orphée Noir* demonstrates Sartre's willingness to push this Enlightenment tradition to its theoretical limits, in some ways demonstrating its weaknesses and failures and thus preparing the groundwork for its deconstruction by writers both influenced by and reacting against him.

“Colonialism is a System”

As mentioned the conflict in French colonial Algeria was an increasing preoccupation almost from the close of the Second World war. Sartre was an outspoken critic of the colony in Algeria that was first established in 1830 but throughout the 1950s was plunged into a struggle for its survival with a small but effective guerilla insurgency. Sartre's essay, “Colonialism is a System” developed from a speech he gave in 1956 that outlined his opposition to the French policy of pacification in Algeria. Sartre's first goal in the essay is to get below the level of reformist discourse that suggested the problems in Algeria were superficial and transitory. Sartre brushed aside these arguments in order to expose what he saw as an underlying cause of the dilemma, namely a structure.
“... qui fût mis en place au milieu du XIX siècle, commença à porter ses fruits vers 1880, entra dans son déclin vers la Première Guerre mondiale et se retourne aujourd'hui contre la nation colonisatrice.”

For Sartre, the situation in Algeria represented the clearest distillation of the colonial arrangement, which, regardless of the good intentions of some of its actors, could only lead to the calamity then unfolding. Showing the influence of Marx, Sartre argued that colonialism was a laboratory in which the workings of capitalism could be observed in their most undisguised form. In arguing against this state of affairs, what was at stake for him was not only the freedom of Algeria but that of France, burdened by the contradictions between the ideals it fought to establish at home and the incompatibility of those ideals with the requirements of the colonial enterprise. In the historical narrative underpinning this argument, the colonialism that had become untenable in mid-century Algeria was not imposed as a mature concept but rather evolved gradually over time. Algeria was initially viewed by the French state as a convenient offshore location to ship unwanted peasants and retired soldiers. Gradually, French business interests saw an opportunity to profit using this small population across the Mediterranean. Sartre described a process in which these companies used these settlers as a new market for French products; in turn, the settler population would sell Algerian grown produce (including wine) at favorable prices on the French market. Colonial and business interests viewed local Algerian Muslims as culturally incompatible with the French and pushed them ever further away from desirable agricultural land, where they were to remain marginalized and exploited only for labor. These practices were supported ideologically by a discourse in which the native was viewed as less than human; a discourse that conceptually froze Muslim Algerians in a time warp of archaic underdevelopment outside the boundaries of civilized humanity and thus outside the reach of

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human rights. Notions of race and racial difference between European settlers and indigenous Arab and Berber groups also informed this discourse. The political and economic structures of the colony maintained a hierarchical relationship and spatial separation between racial groups over time. That is, until the Algerians, pushed past a certain point, inevitably revolted. They would attack first at the political (ideological) level where they were being effectively marginalized and where France, having just fought a war for the humanistic ideals of freedom, was most vulnerable.

Again, Hegelian historicism helped Sartre in this essay to provide an explanation for the seemingly chaotic events unfolding around him that connected to an ongoing process developed over time. Because colonists (and the French military that supported them) were incapable of promoting humanistic ideals antithetical to their own position as colonists, anti-colonial resistance by the oppressed was an inevitable outcome.

**Le Dénouement**

Given the succession of dramatic political transformations that occurred in the five years between 1957 and 1962, it is easy to imagine that Sartre might have believed we were watching the climatic results of the evolutionary socio-historical process for which he consistently argued. Beginning with the independence of the Gold Coast, now renamed “Ghana,” these years also witnessed the Cuban revolution, the conclusion of the Algerian war with independence from France, the beginning of an anti-colonial war in Angola, and the independence of two dozen other European colonies in Africa. These are the years during which Sartre published new essays as introductions to Fanon’s *Les Damnés de la Terre* (Wretched of the Earth) 1961 and to *La Pensée Politique de Patrice Lumumba* (Lumumba Speaks: The Speeches and Writings of Patrice Lumumba) 1962. He was directly connected to the events described in the essays, through his friendship and critical influence on Fanon and through his political support of decolonization in the Belgian Congo, of which Lumumba was a principal protagonist.

Sartre began the introduction he wrote for Fanon by succinctly restating an argument elaborated in *Le Colonialisme est un Système*,
which contrasted the relative social positions of colonizing and colonized peoples generally. The former group represented a minority of human beings entitled to rights and choice while the latter was a “native” majority (created through colonial processes of marginalization), lacking precisely in both rights and choice. The systemic relationship between these binary poles was structured to the economic advantage of the Metropole and supported rhetorically through a deliberately inconsistent embrace of Enlightenment humanism.

Sartre’s denunciations of colonialism had sharpened in tone since his publication of *Orphee Noir*, and Merleau Ponty famously criticized him for the “ultra-Bolshevism” of his politics. However, it was also the case that the tone of anti-colonial critiques coming from writers like Fanon had become more strident, a development Sartre attributed to the arrival of a new generation impatient with its predecessors. Now accompanied by the demand for independence, this new tone was an open rejection of European political culture and values in as much as they might be characterized as a lust for power, wealth and technology derived from colonial exploitation. Sartre reports this critique by directly addressing the perspective of the Metropole on its erstwhile colonial subjects.

Les pères… [étaient] vos créatures… Les fils vous ignorent: un feu les éclaire et les réchauffe qui n’est pas le vôtre… les zombies c’est vous.⁶

Fanon personally embodied not only the episodic shift towards decolonization in Africa but also many of the ideas Sartre had been exploring throughout the period. It was Aimé Césaire, who had interacted with Sartre in Paris, and became Fanon’s teacher in Martinique, who introduced Fanon to the poets of the Négritude movement. Fanon experienced the multiple contradictions of colonialism during the Second World War both in Martinique and in Algeria where he had gone to work as a psychiatrist for the French

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⁶ Ibid., 174.
military. He later left the colonial military to become an active member of the Algerian resistance movement. Fanon gave psychological counseling to Algerian victims of torture by French soldiers, published critical essays in French and in North African newspapers and served as an ambassador of the Front National de Libération to Ghana for the All Africa Peoples Congress in 1959 where he met Patrice Lumumba.

As a francophone activist intellectual moving between the Caribbean, France (the Metropole), North Africa and West Africa, Fanon was greatly influenced by Sartre's existentialist writing, drawing on it heavily for his Peaux Noires, Masques Blancs (Black Skins, White Masks). Nonetheless, Fanon critiqued Sartre’s romantic assessment of Négritude (he also dismissed much of the poetry in Senghor's volume as not revolutionary, and as well as for implicitly inscribing it within a European worldview by “making an Orpheus out of... th(e) Negro looking for universality.”) For Fanon, the gaze between colonizer and colonized was not only assymetrical in terms of power, it was historically constructed through the European practice of classification based on phenotype. Fanon's training as a psychiatrist and his theoretical emphasis on psychology also added a new element to Sartre's critique of the social and economic structure of colonialism, that the exploitative relationship between colonizer and colonized was first established through violence and that it was sustained by means of a psychological struggle at the individual level which had damaging effects on both sides of the colonial divide. Whereas Sartre had posited the development of a radical “black” subjectivity as a stage in a process toward revolution and universal freedom, Fanon's response in Black Skins, White Masks denied that the black prise de conscience could necessarily be understood in universal terms already defined by European experience.

By the time Les Damnés de la Terre was published, Sartre's restatement of the issue reflected his attentiveness to Fanon’s critique. Sartre controversially argued in the introduction that the colonized

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person finds a cure for his or her neurosis by turning upon Europeans their initial method of conquest: violence. He sees the violence of the oppressed reacting against the colonial system represented, not merely a stage in the dialectic, but the end of the dialectic itself. In a paradoxical move that inscribed Fanon into a universalist discourse emanating from Europe, Sartre called Fanon the first writer “since Engels” to refer to the “end of History.” The essay is suffused with the notion of history as a dynamic dialectical force. It closes with yet another evocation of the broader course of human experience throughout time and the sense that systemic forces will combine to produce a conclusive result. Before closing the essay, Sartre returned to a version of the metaphor used in *Orphée Noir* about the gaze of the colonized upon the colonizer who experienced for the first time what it is like to be observed, a role-reversal.

“…Nous étions les sujets de l'Histoire et que nous en sommes à présent les objets. Le rapport des forces s'est renversé, la décolonisation est en cours.”

**Pensée Politique**

Sartre's critical assessment of Patrice Lumumba came in the wake of the untimely deaths of both Lumumba and Fanon, within months of each other, both at the age of 36. Fanon was deeply moved by Lumumba's assassination in January 1961 shortly after becoming the first democratically elected prime minister of an independent Republic of Congo, according to Sartre who met with him in Rome around the time. Yet Fanon himself had been suffering from leukemia while completing work on *Les Damnés de la Terre* in Accra, Ghana. His worsening condition forced him to seek treatment at Bethesda, Maryland in the United States where he died in December 1961 before the book was published. As an activist intellectual, Fanon was better educated, more widely traveled and arguably more intellectually sophisticated than Lumumba. However, Lumumba had

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8 Ibid., 189.
the advantage of working on his native soil toward the narrowly achievable goal of ending Belgian rule. In that sense, Lumumba might be said to have been more directly engaged in attempting to remake an existing set of political relations with a state than was Fanon. Sartre’s assessment of Lumumba takes this point further by concluding that Lumumba’s fraught struggle to construct a broad political unity in the Congo encapsulated the ambitions of continental Africans more broadly in the face of European and American economic power.

As Sartre relates in the essay, Lumumba’s personal trajectory was deeply informed by the colonial system that shaped his early life and finally produced in him an implacable enemy. Lumumba was born to a family of Catholic rural peasants in the Kasai region. His father began taking the boy to work in the fields at age six, but the young Lumumba’s future became the locus of a struggle between competing European missionaries who wanted to send him to school—the Catholics wanted to make a catechist of him, while a group of Protestants wanted him to learn a trade. It was finally a group of Swedish Protestant missionaries, not his parents, who decided that Patrice would be among the select few to go to school at age thirteen, a life path that would in time take him away from rural life into the city. This was intended to be temporary as the missionaries imagined that, once-educated, Lumumba would eventually return to the village as a proselytizing wage earner, thereby advancing their longer-term goals to remake local societies.

It was not to be. After receiving a basic education, Lumumba got a job as a file clerk not in Kasai but for a Belgian company in Kindu, a mining city on the Congo river. It was in this urban environment that Lumumba first came into direct contact with racial segregation and other forms of racial hostility from whites that he had not experienced in the countryside. Thanks to his literacy, his wage earnings, and colonial urban life at Kindu, Lumumba had completed the transformation from rural peasant to évolué, a class of Congolese elite deliberately produced by the colonial system in order to perpetuate Belgian power in the Congo. Here also began his activism to reform a colonial system in which as a native-born African he would always be relegated to a subordinate status and earn less than a white worker of similar skill.
Through personal charm, skillful oratory and ambition, Lumumba resisted this outcome by transforming himself from a low level worker in a provincial city into a national political leader. For Sartre, the key to this transformation was Lumumba’s status as an évolué. As such, he represented a socio-economic class caught between its pride at having assimilated the religious and cultural values of Europeans and the mass of non-literate Congolese demanding overthrow of the colonial order that held them in abject poverty. This class of évolués asserted its assimilationist values as representative of those of the majority of Congolese. Thus, Sartre argued that the interests of the two groups were actually at odds with one another.

With the elaboration of the argument, we have the by now familiar reference to a prise de conscience by the évolués of their class position and the sense that a dialectal process provides the connection for events that might otherwise appear unrelated. In the case of Congo, Sartre saw a disjuncture between the conceptual political models borrowed by Lumumba from Europe—that of the French Revolution, for example — and the specificities of this emerging nation state in Africa where no corresponding process of grassroots political unification had taken place. Instead, political power remained largely in the hands of local chiefs who were bought off by the colonial state, and whose more limited interests were at odds with the centralizing ambition of the political class of évolués who imagined an independent Congo ruled by a national party not governed by ethnicity. This break reflects that between the class imperatives of the évolués, who pushed for a theoretically unified national identity as the way forward and that of the impoverished and unlettered majority which argued for its rights through the fractious matrix of a multitude of local ethnic identities.

À ce moment de son histoire, la formule européenne correspondait mal aux besoins des Congolais; des liens plus frustes et plus solides les rattachaient au sol natal, à l’éthnie. La centralisation ne représentait que la conscience de classe des centralisés, c’est à dire des évolués.º

º Ibid., 226.
Unlike Fanon, whose vision was shaped by his experiences in Algeria, Lumumba rejected violence as a revolutionary method. But Sartre pointed out that this position stemmed from Lumumba’s own shrewd reading of his actual political circumstances rather than from some high-minded philosophical position: he was effectively a revolutionary leader with no army behind him. As a gifted orator, Lumumba was able to powerfully articulate African grievances, but that did not change the fact that he had no claim on the loyalty of the large majority of rural Congolese whose primary political allegiances were to local chiefs, not to him. An appeal to armed struggle would only further empower competing factions and displace the fragile unification Lumumba was trying to stitch together across a vast national territory. Even with this balancing act, the existing conditions were such that the class interests of the masses would inevitably isolate and overwhelm the ambition of the évolutés as represented by Lumumba. Almost immediately upon having become prime minister of an independent Congo, the young leader found himself “seul, sans pouvoir, trahi par tous et déjà perdu.”

The capitalist interests of western countries were prepared to take economic advantage of this internal conflict and Sartre suggested that this agenda explains why Lumumba was so soon hounded from office and murdered. The petite bourgeoisie colluded with foreign companies and traditional leaders to remove the threat Lumumba’s vision of unification represented to their own interests. To this must be added the Cold War calculations of the US government, which feared Lumumba might endanger its access to Congo’s natural resources — such as the uranium that its military contractors used to make nuclear weapons — or make those resources available to US rivals if he were to succeed in establishing sovereign control of those resources.

In the late 19th century, the United States had been one of the first foreign governments to recognize the claims of the Belgian king Leopold on the Congo. A number of investigations have since

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Ibid., 231. For a graphic documentation and narrative of this development, see Raoul Peck’s film, Lumumba—Mort d’un prophète.
shown that during the period of Congo’s independence, the US government funneled money to Lumumba’s rivals in order to topple the prime minister from power, and then maintained the army chief that overthrew him, Mobutu sese Seko, in an infamously tyrannical rule over a divided nation for over thirty-two years. For Sartre, such developments represented nothing less than the shrewd re-establishment of a colonial relationship in Africa within the context of national independence, along the model of what obtained in most of Latin America where weak governments were held in place through an alliance of a thin elite, the army and foreign private capital.

...La solution néocolonialiste...consiste, au fond, à acheter les nouveaux maîtrés, les bourgeois des pays neufs, comme le colonialisme classique achetait les chefs, les émirs, les sorciers. L’impérialisme à besoin d’une classes dirigeante qui soit assez consciente de sa situation précaire pour lier ses intérêts de classe à ceux des grandes sociétés occidentales.11

With the death of Lumumba, the historical denouement of capitalism, and its contradictions of class formation would continue in the “post-colonial” Congo; only now with its eventual collapse pushed further into the future. Sartre ended the introduction to Lumumba’s speeches with another suggestive allusion to Latin America in which he evokes the Cuban revolution that had taken place only a few years before. Just as the invocation of the 19th century independence martyr Jose Marti served as a unifier for Castro and his followers, Sartre claimed that someday the memory of Patrice Lumumba would serve as a signpost for future revolutionaries who would inevitably confront the same congeries of neo-colonial power in Congo.

Conclusion
National commemorations of fifty years of independence have recently taken place in states across the African continent. But for

11 Ibid., 244.
all the pomp of official public celebrations, these occasions have also often been greeted with sober indifference by average people confronted by the difficulties of daily life and open frustration at the failure of post-colonial governments, to make good on much of their early promise. In Congo, the 32-year dominance of the Mobutu regime (reliant upon outside political, financial and military support) was followed tragically by the impotence of the national state when confronted with the transnational violence that exploded into mineral-rich eastern Congo from Rwanda in the 1990s, claiming millions of lives. Elsewhere, the reach (and ambition) of independent governments has been limited, as relatively small numbers of political and economic elites have hoarded resources to themselves at the expense of large pluralities of citizens, in many ways reflecting the neo-colonial relations that Sartre foresaw at the start.

The development of Sartre’s own thinking shows the interaction between himself and the anti-colonial intellectuals whose work he sought to contextualize within a longer narrative of humanistic knowledge production and social change. Sartre had become increasingly radical politically throughout the period. Merleau Ponty criticized Sartre on the basis that his “Bolshevism” had overwhelmed careful analysis of historical and social change. More damaging critiques came from structuralist writers like Claude Levy Strauss and post-structuralists like Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida whose work generally rejected the Hegelian dialectic as a workable formula. The structural anthropologist Claude Levy Strauss for example rejected the notion of one History as a total form of knowledge as inherently ethnocentric, while Louis Althusser, another structuralist, Marxist critic similarly challenged Sartre’s assumption that contingent events must necessarily be part of a transformative process, thinking he viewed as teleological.

In the same period, the greatly expanded academic production of African history has helped to decenter the universalist narrative

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that was implicit in much of Sartre's own thinking about historical change. The context of this production of knowledge about Africa, which began to occur in African, European and North American universities from the 1950s, was the political struggle against colonialism. This knowledge production has of course been characterized by huge inequalities with scholars in African universities suffering the limitations imposed by political dysfunction and deteriorating economic conditions. However, one of the general contributions of Africanist scholarship in this period has been to cast doubt upon the European-derived categories once taken for granted as measures of human progress and “civilization” that were used analytically to portray Africans and other “peoples without history” as fundamentally exceptional in negative terms. 13 The Hegelian argument (and its traces in Marx) that Africa’s political institutions were historically static, undifferentiated and frozen in an early evolutionary stage of development has long since been superseded. This development has had major implications for conceptions of “race”, which have been revealed to be anything but stable across time and space—sometimes even lacking coherence when read against other social categories such as gender, class, religious identity, nationality, etc. Contemporary historians seek to construct “multi-centric” versions of the global past that can account for a variety of temporalities and subjectivities in Africa and elsewhere, versions that resist being subsumed within a singular narrative of progress. 14 Instead the focus has shifted to the varied ways people over time have used (including strategically deploying discourses such as “race”, “ethnicity”, class identification or a religious affiliation) to achieve certain outcomes, often with unintended and unanticipated results.


Sartre's impassioned advocacy for blacks was part of a legacy, inherited from radical French intellectual stretching back at least to the abolitionist Abbé Grégoire of the 18th century. Though limited by its embrace of Enlightenment-derived theories of racial difference and its universalist assumptions related to the direction and purpose of History, Sartre's advocacy represented an engaged scholarship that highlighted the relationship between knowledge production and social justice while significantly advancing the pursuit of both.

References


