

**Give Me Liberty or Give Me Bad Faith: Anarchism
and Existentialism in Conversation**

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In this paper I contend that the doctrine of anarcho-communism, as expressed through the writings of Mikhail Bakunin and Peter Kropotkin and demonstrated through the praxis of organizations such as the CNT of Spain can answer many of quandaries laid out in the Critique of Dialectical Reason by JP Sartre. In the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* Jean Paul Sartre outlines an analysis of human society, and that of revolution. When discussing revolution Sartre talks of the series, the fused group, the pledged group, and the institution. The transition from the first to the second is the main catalyst for revolutionary change. However, Sartre believes that the fused group is largely untenable for extended periods of time, leading to the transition of the pledged (organized) group. Tensions within the pledged group between individual and common praxis lead to a political and social ossification, and thus the institution. I contend that the pessimistic and teleological conclusions that some draw from the CDR are incorrect. As Sartre clearly states, the dialectical nature of the human events allows for constant capacity for change. Further, if we analyze the transition from fused group to institution, we can see various points at which action can forestall, or weaken, forces of institutionalization, and strengthen forces that can reignite common praxis.

To understand the problem of the fused group and its decomposition we must first start with Sartre's basic social ontology. Sartre talks first of "need." Our physical needs are what first define our praxis within the physical world (Excerpts, 112). This

biological lack is also modified through forms of scarcity, either real (pre industrial revolution) or created by social forces (post industrial revolution) (Excerpts, 114). The key to understanding humanity and its praxis lies in need as mediated through scarcity. Sartre admits that without scarcity, History and Humanity as we know it starts to fall apart (Excerpts, 114). This need-through-scarcity dynamic changes the nature of our social ontology and thus our interpersonal relations. For even though we see the Other as “the same,” (another human) the reign of scarcity forces us to view the Other as an existential threat. Thus we see another human not necessarily as another human, but as some species of demon, an anti-human goblin, sent to consume us and take our stuff (Excerpts, 114). It is against this background scarcity, and mutual terror that social relations operate.

Now that we have set the social stage we must address the matter of interest.

Personal interest *does not* factor into the fused group or the revolutionary struggle.

Sartre views interest as a by product of seriality and isolation. The central assumption of this concept is that we as individuals do what is most beneficial for our personal interest. Yet Sartre does not think that this exists as an a priori fact that we can all comprehend. If we understood our proper interests a priori, then capitalism would never exist to begin with, as the vast majority of the human race would realize what scam it was. (Excerpts, 117). Rather “it is not the diversity of interest which give rise to conflict, but conflicts which produce interests,” (Excerpts, 117). Thus personal interest is really a by product of serialization and ideology, while freedom and necessity drive group confrontation and composition.

Seriality is our first social category; it is from the series that the group is formed. The series is a collection of people all atomized within their separate individual praxis.

The series can look like a group, and even organize around some sort of common interest, but not much more than that. Sartre talks of a bus stop to describe the series.

He states that:

To begin with, it should be noted that we are dealing with a plurality of isolations these people do not care about or speak to each other and, in general, they do not look at one another, they exist side by side along a bus stop (Excerpts, 118)

The people are not unified in any way, but rather wait together, following certain prescribed norms to safeguard their common “interest.” In this case Sartre points to the scarcity of bus seats. In order to keep things running smoothly the individuals agree to a system of rules for ticket distribution. This agreement to a common set of rules attempts to negate the aforementioned problem of Other, but without the negation of the Other entirely within said group (Excerpts, 119). The act of rule following brings in his other concept of the “third party” an individual who by “observing or commanding” controls and sets the rules for a group (CDR, 830). The third party is important in all social ensembles. Through the third party and serial interest the people go about their day to business and no serious change can occur through this ensemble. It is only through the group ensemble that we achieve real social change.

The negation of the serial group is what Sartre calls the “fused group.” The fused group is a “radical impossibility of living, which threatens serial multiplicity,” (Excerpts, 120). The fused group comes together through common praxis, typically

by the imposition mass repression and popular aspirations for liberation. Essentially, when faced with real, bald faced oppression, and the possibility of freedom, popular struggle congeals into the fused group at astonishing speeds. A recent example of this is the quasi spontaneous UC occupation movement, which appeared soon after the UC board agreed on mass layoffs, deep cuts and enormous tuition hikes. This new fused group ensemble is something different in that it contains within itself both the desire for freedom and to need to achieve necessity. Freedom and necessity are collapsed into one another. As Sartre puts it, freedom becomes the “necessity of dissolving necessity” (Excerpts, 120). Sartre elucidates the fused group through the history of the French revolution. He talks of how the fused group is the “direct opposite of alterity” (Excerpts, 121). The Other no longer exists within the group. The group interiorizes a common praxis that becomes the “objectification of freedom” (Excerpts, 121).

Further, the fused group through common praxis takes on an amorphous, almost borg-mind like character. The group is “self elucidating” and can take spontaneous collective action. We can see this with the May 68 protests or the protests of the 01 Argentine financial collapse. However, this almost magical capacity for collective action is nothing more than common praxis taking form. This self regulating character is the core of the fused group. Sartre posits that the fused group operates in such a way that we are all “regulatory third parties” and yet “my action presents itself as the same in the very slight dislocation which derives from the non realization of membership,” (CDR, 408). Thus the fused group posits a paradox, we constitute it and utilize it as individuals, and further our individual actions regulate the function

and activity of the group. But our individual praxis is so imperceptibly different that it becomes a “unification of the diverse in one *praxis*,” (CDR, 408). In practical terms this means that for the fused group “my being-in-the-group is my integration into it through all of the regulatory third parties in so far as it is *the same* free support of a common action within the interiorized multiplicity,” (CDR 408). Without discernible distinction between the regulatory third party and the individual, the group exists with a completely unified praxis, in which reciprocity has collapsed within itself.

But the fused group cannot last forever. As we have seen, the process of common praxis in the fused group does not eliminate the individual, but instead obscures individual praxis with nearly coincident group praxis. These individuals see the fused group not just as a collective change, but a reorganization of themselves (Excerpts, 123). This creates a tension between “unanimous pure sovereignty” and individual sovereignty. Thus once the immediate danger has passed (the barricades have been defended, the czar run out etc.) the common praxis cannot sustain itself as a fused group in perpetuity (Excerpts, 123). Without the omnipresent possibilities of terror and freedom, which kept everyone glued together, individual praxis and individual sovereignty begins to re-assert itself. Thus begins the transition from a fused group to an organized group based on the pledge.

In recognition of the constant danger that remains (the White army, the Franquistas, etc.) the group organizes around “the pledge.” The pledge is fundamentally different from the fused group. The fused group represents a common praxis which is

interiorized in common. The oath is a matter of individuals interiorizing *as individuals* the common goals of the revolution within themselves. The pledge is a “statue of violence” that is designed to guard “freedom from necessity” (Excerpts, 124). This pledge represents a common fear that “inertia” will tear apart the unity built up in the revolutionary period. We have now shifted from a common praxis, in which the individual and group praxis reached quasi-coincidence, to a group where praxis remains more or less common, but is mediated through individual reciprocity (the pledge). The pledge then is a not return to a serial realm but an evolution of the fused group into a group where common praxis and individual praxis begin to come into tension.

The desire for unity against this newfound tension causes problems. As Sartre states that:

the basic contradiction of the group-which is not resolved by the pledge-is that its real unity lies in common praxis or more precisely the common objectification of this praxis. When the community affirms itself as the reign of common freedom, it cannot in fact-whatever it does-either realize the free interpretation of individual freedoms or find an inert being-one which is common to all freedom (Excerpts, 124)

So long as the fused group provides a common praxis that is then interiorized by all members, for our purposes political struggle, the group remains intact. However when the struggle has achieved its aims, the common praxis or at least the “common objectification” of praxis leaves with it, making it impossible to keep the “common reign of freedom.” The pledge then is both a quixotic attempt to enforce unity through an oath of absolute and unmitigated violence and a pragmatic step for the group to preserve itself against dissolution into seriality. Sartre discusses this notion

in his section on “mediated reciprocity.” Here he discusses how a soccer team operates through the regulatory actions of various players, each acting based on the outcome of the previous player (CDR, 578-580). This group preserves much of what Sartre means by common praxis, but the coincidence is gone. The regulatory third party does not dissolve within group, as the individual no longer views her regulatory actions as one and the same as those of another; instead reciprocity, based on individual quasi-sovereignty anchors common praxis.

Viewed in this light we can better grasp the dialectic nature of Sartre’s analysis. Even though he states it so clearly, the linear logic of these groups tend to bias us into a linear conception of these ideas. We naturally view the pledge as the beginning of a “slippery slope” towards that nasty institution. Yet, while there remains a degree of irrational desire for an absent unity, the primary character of the pledge remains common praxis. So long as common praxis exists we are not in danger of returning to an oppressive seriality. Rather the pledged group or the organized group should be viewed as the norm for a social ensemble organized around praxis and freedom. The fused group is an untenable situation long term, and even if it were tenable, it does not strike me as palatable. Near coincidence of individual and common praxis into perpetuity seems like a recipe for insanity.

Nonetheless the pledge can and occasionally will deteriorate, eventually heading into that undesirable land known as institution. Sartre mentions that the institution gets its start in a very similar manner to the pledged group. The institution is seen as a necessary step towards preserving this common praxis, and keeping it from falling apart under the inertia of individual praxis. As he says:

there is a sort of internal vacuum, an unbridgeable and indeterminable distance, a sort of malaise in every community, large or small; and this uneasiness occasions a strengthening of the practices of integration, and increases with the integration of the group (CDR, 583).

This is the paradox which creates the institution. Even as the group becomes more and more integrated, there remains that gap which was lost when they transitioned out of the fused group. This gap is different from what occasioned the pledge in the first place. There the pledge was about safeguarding the group from elimination “by default,” but here the danger to the group exists not as outside force threatening dissolution, but from within, from the excessive recognition of each individual of the contradictory nature that they are both essential collectively and but inessential individually to the group’s function (CDR, 584-585). Thus we get the beginning of a return to seriality, here in the form of a circular model of individual reciprocity, with the member’s quasi sovereignty taken as an obvious fact, but an unspeakable one.

Thus:

the group reacts to this permanent danger, appearing at the level of organization, with new practices; it produces itself in the form of an institutionalized group; which means that...in the framework of institutions, the community tries to acquire a new type of unity by institutionalizing sovereignty and that the common individual transforms himself into the institutional individual (CDR, 591)

This new “group” creates new rituals and norms designed to promote unity, but it does not bring about a perfect community, but “degraded forms of community,” (CDR, 591). Something is missing, and that is that the group based on common praxis no longer exists. The institution is “precisely reemergence of seriality,” (CDR, 600).

The institution develops a hierarchy and its own twisted praxis (either as violence over everyone as appropriated from pledged faith, or as the symbol of everyone’s free

power over the Others) (Excerpts, 125). Necessity now reigns supreme, and in the name of necessity freedom is forgotten or changed in content towards institutional ends (Excerpts, 125). The institution presents itself to the serialized community as the impossible “being-one” that common praxis previously sought, but could not achieve.

Yet the institution cannot ever truly embody praxis. Rather it is both praxis and thing, with an emphasis on the latter, as the praxis is typically “a mere carcass,” (CDR, 600). The institution becomes un-modifiable, as it posits itself as the essence of the new regime, as the embodiment of the old praxis. One need not abstract here, a simple visit to a meeting of the ISO can suffice, as Lenin’s voice echoes through each member as they repeat some version of “Read the leaflets!” The institution dooms itself to seriality, not only because of this ossification, but because it rests not on fraternity-terror, but on terror for fraternity. It seeks to impose the dissolution of seriality through violence and yet this very act of violence reinforces the alterity of the institution (CDR, 615). This violence forces the individual to see herself, as impotent towards the institution, unable to change its praxis or to engage in any other, rather she becomes primarily concerned for her safety from the institution and thus re interiorizes seriality (CDR, 601). To sum up, meet the new boss same as the old boss.

We must ask why the institution perpetuates itself from there. If it is capable of such violence and collective harm, we should see the error of our ways, and plot a new chart towards common praxis. This dilemma provides the groundwork for the answer to our larger question. As Sartre states, the institution is not harmful to all, but quite

useful for the “institutional group” and that as much as it represents a departure from freedom, and the re-emergence of minority control/exploitation, these institutional actors all came from somewhere and that somewhere was the original group (CDR, 603). The group produced institutions because regulatory third parties came to take on certain powers in greater and greater concentrations. Yet the real strength of the institution lies in its very alterity. As an object of ossified power, it can and will represent itself as previous praxis. Its actors will claim the mantle of revolutionary purity and act as if they are “put to the test” they will always side with the people (CDR, 604). Yet simply by passing said test these actors would put in jeopardy all that. Thus the institutional individual is marked by her ability to co-opt and devour popular struggle and excrete a serialized false facsimile.

My question then is “what is to be done?” If we accept the negative reading of Sartre then revolutionary struggle appears futile. This of course is quite silly. Sartre appears as pessimistic and teleological in his conclusions, only because he structures his analysis in a linear fashion, as he claims this is the easiest way to understand the concepts (CDR, 583) I believe that if you read the text closely, you can see that there are several “outs.”

I must reiterate that nothing in his argument is teleological. Sartre admits that this is a dialectical process which can shift and change (Excerpts, 112). He even asks “Is there not a perpetual double movement of regroupment and ossification?” (Excerpts, 128). The double movement of dialectics shows that we can move both away and towards a fused group and anything in between. Sartre makes this abundantly clear

when he states that “on account of dialectical circularity-any form can emerge either before or after any other and that only materiality of the historical process can determine the process,” (CDR, 583). These groups then are not tied to any formula or linear narrative, but something more akin to a Tarantino film. So long as the conditions make a form possible, this form can exist. We can also assume that the conditions for a multiplicity of social ensembles exist at any given time. The dictatorship of the Party is not set in stone once the forces of popular power have been obliterated, nor is the power of popular assemblies assured after the revolution, rather all of these forms exist within a contingent space. Still, that pessimistic reading of the *Critique* may yet yield, the thought that the institution has to “eventually” arrive, and that when it does, this institution will ensconce itself with enough power, so at the very least, it will cause some serious problems.

I don’t agree with this argument, nor does Sartre. Again, the dialectic privileges no particular form, and if the conditions for a particular type of social ensemble exist, then it is just as plausible as any thing else. The strength of the institution and the ossification of popular struggle are that way because material and social forces made them that way. I don’t think we have adequately taken up the right tools with which to defeat these forces, and have not coupled these tools with a proper analysis. The better we understand this process of ossification, the more likely we are to arrest institutionalization at certain stages of group formation and transition. Just as there are a multiplicity of forms so too is there a multiplicity of techniques that we can use to attack this problem. Each adds a little to a common revolutionary praxis that we will arrive at via synthesis.

The most obvious and most naïve strategy is to keep the fused group from ever defusing. Then, there is no ossification and institutionalization as there is no transition to the pledge and mediated reciprocity. The pledge exists primarily because of the danger of reaction and counter-revolution. But the old slogan has always been “global revolution,” not national revolution. Perhaps the greatest failing of revolutions past is the isolated character of these revolts. Their inability to link up and globally extinguish their opposition inevitably set the stage for the pledge. That does not hold water though. No revolution, no matter how globally successful, can avoid mass conflict and struggle. No one would want to relive that *Gottterdammerung* again, so of course the pledge would take form. Even if the enemy was weak and depraved, that’s no excuse to drop the ball as “those who make revolution half way, dig their own graves.” Moreover while the enemy may not have armies, it still “exists” as a virulent ideology that won’t just disappear. The remnants of feudal ideology still exist today, even in the height of capitalist accumulation.

Thus we cannot eliminate the pledge altogether, no matter how global the revolution is. Furthermore, as I previously stated, the pledged group is the norm for group based social ensembles. The fused group is rare thing, an organized group is quite normal and not necessarily problematic, and in that it preserves common praxis. Further, we cannot ignore how different the pledge becomes when it shifts from a pledge largely against Ideology, and some revenants, vs. a pledge against swarming counter revolutionary hordes. That shift in pledge takes away much of the exigency towards institutionalization, because the ultimate impetus towards institutionalization typically

stems from the “defense of the revolution.” The Bolsheviks did it when they created the Cheka and the Red Army, the PSUC did it in Catalunya with the creation of the “popular army” and the May days crackdown, and the Com. for Public Safety did it when they destroyed the enragés.

The shift itself from the pledge to the institution need not happen so swiftly, or much at all. It’s no coincidence that the revolutions Sartre implies (French, Soviet, Chinese, Nat Lib) already contained within themselves complex and highly organized forms of institutional power. The Leninist vanguard, the Maoist cadre, and the bourgeois “democratic government” were all formed prior to their respective fused groups and the revolutions. After the decomposition of the common praxis these institutional aspirants pushed the pledged group into an institutional arrangement. Without an opportunity to cultivate a common praxis then the institutional “being-one” appears as the only option. However, I don’t see a particular reason why the ontology cannot stop at a “mediated reciprocity”. The Terror, the Cultural Revolution, the Red Terror were not popular endeavors, but run through institutions which had usurped the control of the means of political violence, and imposed themselves on a passive serialized populace. Because of this anarchists have always argued that the vanguard group, is the real danger. As Bakunin says in *Statism and Anarchy*:

There are no nobles, no big landowners, no industrialists, and no very wealthy merchants in Turkish Serbia. Yet in spite of this there emerged a new bureaucratic aristocracy composed of young men educated, partly at state expense, in Odessa, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Vienna, Paris, Germany, and Switzerland. Before they were corrupted in the service of the State...these young men distinguished themselves by their love for their people, their liberalism, and lately by their democratic and socialistic inclinations. But no

sooner did they enter the state's service than the iron logic of their situation, inherent in the exercise of certain hierarchical and politically advantageous prerogatives, took its toll, and the young men became cynical bureaucratic martinets while still mouthing patriotic and liberal slogans (25).

Sartre does not address the question of the vanguard until later on in his analysis.

Sartre sees the party's cadre, the nuclei etc. as collectives designed to mediate between the institutional group/sub group and the serialized mass (CDR, 646). But he does not discuss the cadre prior to the stage of institutionalization. He appears to overlook the nature of these institutional aspirants and their relation to the regulatory third party. Sartre focuses on the regulatory third party as a particular individual performing particular functions. Yet we see now that just as the cadre in an institutionalized seriality function as regulatory agents, so too would they during a period of struggle. Members of these mini institutions are not just as part of the revolutionary fused group in a personal capacity, but rather they collectively serve as a regulatory third party group of sorts, for their praxis is unified. The actions of one party member are that of all party members, one only needs to visit an IMT meeting to witness this. Think of them as a group within a group, with their separate, but largely parallel praxis from that of the larger fused group and then the fused group praxis as well. When it comes to matters of immediate struggle the vanguard party can "dissolve" itself into the mass struggle. During May 68, or the Autonomia movement, there were a multitude of Leninist organizations which took part in and provided much energy within these mass explosions of popular power. Yet as regulatory third parties each of these parties had every incentive to eventually push and stress the contradictions of the movement, because the fused group only served

their temporary purposes. Institutionalization was their end goal, because it was necessary in order to establish the power of the vanguard to “direct” the revolution.

Thus during periods of revolutionary activity these institutional actors always limited and constrained the amount of “common praxis” that occurred. They actively sought to quash workplace self management, community democracy, within the movement and during the revolutionary period. Any effective revolutionary praxis requires that the practitioners confront and immobilize these groups, push them out of the movement, weaken them, and stress their membership to the point of dissolution. Rather than see these groups as part of the larger struggle, they should be singled out and put in relief. Thus vanguard groups become another object of opposition to the fused group, separate from the revolution, and unable to infiltrate it, but only threaten it with negative, “by default” dissolution.

Sartre provides backing for this tactic in the section “Institutionalization and Sovereignty,” where he claims that the institution:

necessarily refers to *authority* as its reinteriorization; and *authority*, as a power over all powers and over all third parties through these powers, is itself established by the system as an institutional guarantee of institutions (CDR, 607).

This authority is unique because prior to the institution it does not exist. We have powers within the organized group, but they remain part of quasi-sovereignty and mediated reciprocity. Authority is different, Authority, relies on the impotence and seriality of the masses and necessarily reproduces itself through the increase in number and size of institutions (CDR, 608). We would be engaging in the height of foolhardiness to think then that these “institutions within groups” are not necessarily pernicious. We can’t ignore them and hope to still achieve that common praxis, and

those liberated ends. For as Sartre makes clear, institutions have no particular interest in preserving liberation, but by their own authority dependant nature, must constantly grow and cover more ground. If we take Sartre to logical conclusion of his ideas, we must see then that any or revolutionary praxis requires a constant vigilance, not just against what a movement currently opposes, but what they may have to fight in the future.

Building on these threads, we can construct a proper synthesis for revolutionary praxis. The fused group is a byproduct of struggle, and struggle does not occur right before and immediately after a revolution. A revolution is a culmination of decades of fused groups composing, decomposing and recomposing, again and again. Further, to only speak of the fused group myopically ignores the organized group, which exists in the gaps between those periods of hyper-struggle. The revolution is less a spontaneous event, but more the culmination of all these previous social ensembles. While common praxis cannot exist into perpetuity, we need not lose it so quickly and hopelessly. Many on the Left have this conception of the “revolutionary moment” as if it were a black pebble in a dark room, and the only way we can get at it is by desperately grasping about the floor, hoping to get lucky at some point. No, the group ensemble, defined by its common praxis, does not just happen, but requires years of deliberate work and struggle. Therefore we should not shiver at the danger of a possible Thermidor, because if we did our jobs right, then we already have the necessary groundwork for a reignition of common praxis against the “Institutionalizers” and for common freedom.

Further, we should remember that it is also at this time of nascent institutionalization, and heightened inertia, that institutions are at their weakest, and new hierarchies are the least legitimate. Stalin's propaganda apparatus put Lenin and Trotsky's to shame, precisely because Lenin was accumulating power in opposition to remaining common praxis, while Stalin had long stamped out any notion of "liberation" in the USSR. At that point, there was no longer any outrage, but merely a sense of serialized impotence. Now we see the dialectic has come full circle. Just as contradiction within the fused group sows the seeds of its own dissolution, so too do the contradictions of the institution; for the declaration of authority reanimates the corpse of popular struggle.

When we gather these new perspectives and possibilities a different picture comes to the fore. Sartre is correct when he examines the accretion and erosion of popular power and concludes that the tension between individual and common praxis causes shifts between group and institution. The dialectical nature of his ontology always leaves open the door for regroupment and change within this framework. While some may think that this regroupment should take years and only after a new ideology and order has formed, there is no evidence for this within Sartre. The danger of institutionalization is something which can and should provide new ammunition for common praxis, leading to regroupment and common struggle so as to eliminate the institution before it gains greater strength. For this reason anarchists have always stated that their revolution was not one that ended in a mere social revolution, leading to not to a

a fixed, self-enclosed social system but rather a definite trend in the historic development of mankind, which, in contrast with the intellectual guardianship of all clerical and governmental institutions, strives for the free unhindered unfolding of all the individual and social forces in life(Rocker, 22)

This struggle is much easier when the post revolutionary pledge is shifted towards a pledge of ideological violence, and institutional aspirants are ruthlessly checked in all organs of revolutionary activity, to the point that they are ejected from the group and defined in opposition to it.

Of course, this dooms us to a perpetual vigil on power; for we must always be willing to pick up the struggle once again. Yet what a drab and sad life it would be, to bring about the eschatological revolution, to solve all human problems and all of human oppression. To have nothing struggle against, and no one to struggle for, is a fate of existential despair.

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