

## Depoliticization as impotent *praxis*: A Sartrean perspective

The phenomenon of depoliticization has been a central cause of concern within contemporary political philosophy (Lefort, 1986, 1988; Marchart, 2007; Mouffe, 2006, 2009; Rancière, 2006; Schmitt, 2007). Whilst appearing under different names, the problem of the foreclosure of political alternatives has animated multiple attempts at rethinking politics and the political.<sup>1</sup> For Claude Lefort (1988) for instance, writing in the second half of the twentieth century, depoliticization primarily presented itself in the form of the totalitarian logic with a leader substantively embodying the will of a national people or a universal class. Heading into the new century, Chantal Mouffe (2006, 2009) theorized her version of agonistic democracy as a response to the convergence of left-and rightwing parties around a neoliberal agenda and a politics aimed at consensus rather than competing political alternatives. For both, these phenomena constituted a danger because they delegitimized political contestation, turning adversaries into moral enemies (Mouffe, 2006, p. 72-76) or saboteurs and parasites (Lefort, 1986, p. 290).

For these theorists, the concept of ‘the political’ has been key to theoretically understand and combat depoliticization (Lefort, 1988; Marchart, 2007; Mouffe, 2006). Theorizing the political served the function of revealing the extent to which society is historical, contestable and changeable. Understood in a broad, ontological sense, the political refers to the ‘political institution of society’. Society is instituted through political acts that order the relations between the social spheres, defining rights and duties, modalities of inclusion and exclusion, the separation between the private and the public sphere etc. A focus on the political reveals that behind the ‘ontic’ differentiation of the social spheres lies an ‘ontological’ politically *contingent* grounding of this differentiation (Mouffe, 2006, p. 8-9).

Depoliticization (in both its totalitarian or post-political embodiment) becomes an attempt to hide the original fact that society is contingently grounded. Lefort reformulated the concept of ideology in this sense, as a discourse which actively conceals the contingency of the institution of the social (1986, p. 196). Not dissimilarly, Rancière (2006, 2015) turned towards ‘the police’ as the symbolic figure of depoliticization. According to him, the logic of the police distributes the roles and functions in society such that ‘each is assigned his part.’ If everyone is convinced that they occupy a prescribed role in society, this effectively covers up the fact that there exist alternative ways of instituting the social according to different, potentially more egalitarian or democratic symbolic logics.

Furthermore, these theorists identified democracy as the antidote to depoliticization. Democratic institutions symbolically acknowledge the unpredictable and open-ended character of society (Lefort,

---

<sup>1</sup> Among others, depoliticization appeared under the concepts of the ‘post-political perspective’ (Mouffe, 2006), the ‘logic of the police’ (Rancière, 2006) or the image of society as an organic body (Lefort, 1988).

1988; Laclau & Mouffe, 1985). Because it permanently keeps open the possibility that previously naturalized domains of social life become politicized, democracy is the type of society open to politicization *par excellence*. Democratic elections and the parliamentary institution symbolically reveal that political decisions are not derived from immutable social, moral or theological logics but from one that is properly *political*. Democracy thus counters the depoliticizing effect by making visible the political institution of the social.

These 'post-foundational' accounts have been crucial to philosophically deepen our understanding of democracy and the phenomenon of depoliticization. However, the focus on the political as a symbolic institution of society has helped to obscure a form of depoliticization that is not symbolic, but material. Marchart for instance argues that post-foundational theory aims 'to rejuvenate political practice in order to open up spaces for, precisely, challenging patterns of subordination.... Sensitized by such an ontology [of the political], social analysis will be prompted to search for modes of the political in the most unexpected places' (2018, p. 12). In Marchart's view, post-foundational political ontology is politically effective because it can make us aware that a particular situation is the product of contingent decisions which involved a dimension of power and the exclusion of alternative possibilities. But what if moments arise where it becomes clear for all that a particular situation is the product of contingent political decisions, but that those who find themselves in it are from the outset incapable of changing them? What if the symbolic pretense of the immutability of a social situation is removed but there is still no capacity to act politically, with the result that some participants' efforts to do so are doomed from the outset? This presents a problem for theorists of the symbolic ordering of 'the political', because it points to the fact that depoliticization can remain operative even when the contingency of a situation is widely acknowledged.

The post-foundational framework is particularly unhelpful to analyze such a situation for two reasons. Firstly, its almost exclusive focus on the symbolic conditions of society tends to disregard that symbolic and material conditions do not necessarily overlap. Material developments exist in tension with symbolic conditions. The example given above captures the potential contradiction which this tension can produce: symbolically, a society can acknowledge that it exhibits an openness towards the future, but material impossibilities can make this exclamation mute or meaningless. In other words, within a particular socio-political configuration, material and symbolic conditions can push in opposite directions, causing a disjunction (or a *décalage* in the Althusserian terminology) to occur between both.

Secondly, post-foundational theory has tended to reduce the social sphere to a passive realm, that is, to the mere outcome of prior political decisions and struggles. To quote Ernesto Laclau, 'the social can

consist only in the sedimented forms of a power that has blurred the traces of its own contingency' (1996, p. 103). The domain of activity therefore clearly lies with the political actions that institute society. But, as we shall argue, socialized matter is much more active than post-foundationalism claims. Whereas Laclau reduces the social to the order of geology, this 'sedimentation' can, in an almost magical fashion, become active itself, prescribing ways of acting and proscribing future possibilities.

This paper develops a notion of depoliticization that is not primarily symbolic, but practical and material. It aims to grasp how social materiality can actively steer or even dominate political action, decisively reducing its capacity to transform social relations. It argues that the Sartrean concepts of the 'practico-inert', exigency, and seriality, developed in his work *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (2004) can provide the conceptual tools that we need. Written in 1960, the *Critique* is a relatively forgotten work in the history of philosophy. Instead of inaugurating the strand of phenomenological Marxism that Sartre wanted to champion, its chaotic style and hermetic conceptual framework rang its death, quickly ceding the way to more fashionable structuralist currents.<sup>2</sup> However, Sartre's conceptual framework still provides rich resources to analyze social situations, especially for our purpose of providing a materialist account of politics and depoliticization.

The guiding concern of the *Critique* is to understand how society is the product of human actions or *praxes* that are always mediated by matter or the 'practico-inert'. At the root of all social developments lies human *praxis*, but this *praxis* can be dominated by matter, which can steer it towards an outcome that matter already 'prefigures'. This paper argues that Sartre's analysis of the complex dialectic between *praxis* and matter is the crucial starting point for renewing our conception of depoliticization. By relying on Sartre's conceptual framework, we will claim that depoliticization is a product of the inability of human *praxis* to transcend the objective or structural conditions in which it finds itself. Individuals become depoliticized when their actions are steered towards non-political ends. But depoliticization also manifests itself in political action itself, as individuals or groups engage in conflicts that have been emptied of tangible political significance. Individuals and groups can continue to engage politically, but they do so within the objective limits prescribed by practico-inert structures,. Within such a state of depoliticization, free *praxis* is forced to undergo the imperatives formulated by the practico-inert. This account not only complements the post-foundational view of depoliticization but also corrects it by shedding light on the material, but not necessarily symbolic conditions of depoliticization.

---

<sup>2</sup> One could argue its impact can only be sensed negatively, in the persistence with which these structuralist currents opposed Sartre's attempt to anchor social reality in subjective *praxis* (Althusser, 2005 p. 117-128; Lévi-Strauss, 1969).

## Freedom in situation

To understand how matter can actively impose its directionality on human action, we must first get into view Sartre's unique account of human freedom. It should first be made clear that for Sartre, matter (objects, structures or the 'practico-inert' more generally) never refers to the brute materiality of an object 'in itself'. Neither does materialism designate a crude Marxism which posits a foundational material base, with human actions being its mere phenomena. Instead, free action (or *praxis*) is immediately intertwined with matter. Matter only exhibits its materiality in interaction with free action and vice versa. A useful starting point for our investigation is therefore Sartre's first major work, *Being and Nothingness* (1969), where he outlines a theory of freedom that will continue to play a crucial role in the *Critique*.<sup>3</sup>

The phenomenological investigation of *Being and Nothingness* takes *consciousness* as its object of enquiry. The defining feature of this consciousness is that it does not contain anything substantial in itself. Instead, Sartre empties consciousness of content. Consciousness is primarily a consciousness of things, others and the world. It contains nothing, but is an intentional projecting-outwards towards the world. Consciousness also is not a reflexive act operated at a distance or at a 'second degree', for instance when one consciously thinks about where one is situated now, doing this or that particular action. Rather, consciousness is always already present ('non-thetic') self-consciousness, as permanently being conscious when one performs particular actions 'in the act'. Sartre therefore affirms the ontological priority of the pre-reflexive *cogito*.

What does Sartre mean when he claims that consciousness is nothing but intentionality? First of all, it indicates that consciousness never confines itself to itself, but that it concerns itself with what exists outside of it. Importantly, already in his phenomenological framework does Sartre give intentionality a *practical* meaning. Consciousness is not merely a matter of perception (in the sense that consciousness is being conscious of things by way of perception), but it operates through projects that are always practical (Scott, 2020). Human beings exhibit intentionality through their actions: during a football match I am oriented towards the ball, my teammates and opponents with the goal to win the game. I actively engage myself in the present through my actions (running, passing, making a foul, celebrating or swearing in frustration) which are only meaningful in light of my own project to participate in this game on behalf of my own team. Consciousness therefore practically *transcends* its given present towards the future, shedding light on the existing world in and through its own practical project.

---

<sup>3</sup> For an overview of the debate on whether there is a break between *Being and Nothingness* and the *Critique*, see Catalano (1986, p. 6-7) and Flynn (1984, p. xii).

Even more, the objects given in a particular situation do not already contain meaning, but derive it from the projected transcendence of a consciousness (or *pour-soi*). Being-in-itself is solid, absolute positivity which cannot speak of its own, and requires a practical consciousness to provide it with meaning through its concrete actions and decisions in light of its own project. Sartre's example of a rock as an obstacle can clarify this (1969, p. 488-489). Whether I can climb this particular rock that blocks my path on my hiking trip will depend in large part on the qualities of that rock, something which I cannot influence and refers to the brute facticity of that obstacle in front of me. But the fact that this rock appears to me as an obstacle to climb in the first place is based on the initial project of my hiking endeavor and my projected goal of reaching the destination that lies beyond that rock. Without this project, the rock can appear to me as an aesthetic object, an opportunity to rest on or it can simply recede into the meaningless background of the pure in-itself.

These brief remarks set us on the right track to grasping Sartre's concept of freedom. As said, the world only reveals itself through our actions which project a meaning onto it. These actions, however, are animated by our own practical projects; projects that in the final analysis point towards our own fundamental project which we ourselves must choose unconditionally. This choice is necessarily absolute: it depends only on my own decision which I confirm through my actions. Nothing can causally determine how I project myself towards the world. There is no obstacle that could deprive me of my freedom, because my own freedom finds these other-beings as obstacles. To sum up: the *pour-soi* is consciousness, which is identical with intentionality, which in turn is nothing but freedom and the choice of its fundamental project which it continually affirms and re-affirms.

It thus becomes clear that Sartre distinguishes between a vulgar and a truly philosophical conception of freedom (1969, p. 483). In the first, popular understanding, freedom is a quantity that can be measured by the amount of resistance someone encounters when trying to achieve their goals. This popular conception of freedom reaches its apex in the fantasy of a will without obstacles (Breur, 2005). For Sartre, on the other hand, freedom refers to the choices we make in the situation in which we are thrown. Freedom is engaged (*engagée*) 'in situation' (1969, p. 481-553). Confronted by a world which has conditioned us in a myriad of different ways, we are necessarily free to project ourselves towards our goals. One of the scandalous aspects of Sartre's existential philosophy is his emphasis on the responsibility that I have towards myself, the world and my past. An individual is absolutely and irrevocably responsible for a trauma inflicted during his childhood, since he freely chooses to deal with it in this or that way. The responsibility does not derive from the fact that the trauma happened, but that it is taken up, lived and embodied by an individual in the actions that he undertakes.

Therefore, and contrary to popular belief, success has nothing to do with freedom. Within a given situation, objects can possess a certain 'coefficient of adversity' which determines whether my project will succeed or fail. As we will see, in his later writings Sartre will deepen his understanding of the interaction between matter and *praxis*. In *Being and Nothingness*, however, he is content to show that the coefficient of adversity inherent in objects emerges within a situation that we have indelibly chosen ourselves. Certain obstacles can indeed thwart our plans when we are incapable of overcoming them. But they can only appear as obstacles by being unveiled as such in our particular projects. Adversity and liberty are not opposing qualities, rather liberty finds the adversity that can cripple the human project. Similarly, I cannot escape certain qualities that define my situation, such as my class, my physical attributes (the fact that I'm attractive or ugly) or my cultural background. Although they form a part of me that I will never be able to transcend, I must still realize them myself in and through my own projects, my choices and hence my liberty. The only necessity is the fact of my freedom.

### **From *praxis* to counter-finality**

We thus see that for Sartre, human freedom is both absolute and engaged 'in situation'. Objects, social conditions and other people can become obstacles in my projects, delimiting my range of possibilities and impossibilities as 'coefficients of adversity' or 'unrealizables', but they can never restrict my freedom to choose myself. It is well known that as Sartre's thought matured, he became aware of the limits of his phenomenological framework to grasp social events and relations (Flynn, 1984). The phenomenology of *Being and Nothingness* reduced the material environment to a coefficient of adversity in my existential project. As Sartre's thought became more explicitly political, this reductive approach towards social objects became untenable. This eventually convinced Sartre to switch from a phenomenological terminology to one oriented around *praxis*, which reaches its full elaboration in the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (2004). The terminological change enabled Sartre to develop a social ontology properly speaking, where he reconstructed the intelligibility of social relations on the basis of individual *praxis*.

In essence, *praxis* refers to the way someone totalizes his environment. Individual *praxis* is faced with a certain *need* which it endeavors to satisfy. It does so by reorganizing the present environment in light of its future goal. As in *Being and Nothingness*, there is a complex dynamic of temporalization at play in this act. A preceding need (e.g. hunger, an income, social standing) is revealed as a need through the decisions an individual *praxis* makes. The particular need that motivates our actions therefore only constitutes itself through our projection towards the future. The present environment is also given meaning by *praxis* when it rearranges that environment towards its projected goal. In and through *praxis*, an individual *interiorizes* the material environment by interpreting it in light of his project (Ally,

2010). It is in this way that a certain object can appear valuable, desirable or dangerous. At the same time, this interiorization is projected outwards, as that individual totalizes the environment and gives it a new, practical meaning. *Praxis* is therefore totalization, and totalization is temporalization.

This analysis remains close to Sartre's phenomenological description. The crucial conceptual innovation, however, lies in Sartre's emphasis on the ability of *praxis* to materially inscribe itself into its environment. The meaning that *praxis* projects onto the environment is no longer of a strictly phenomenological nature, but takes a material quality. *Praxis* does not imprint signification in the environment by means of the 'gaze', but by means of a practical inscription in materiality. Signification occurs when an individual reorganizes its surrounding environment. This exteriorization of *praxis* contains a certain inertia which allows it to persist through time. The moment of exteriorization is therefore essential to *praxis*. Its goal is to stamp a (quasi-)permanent mark on the material environment which remains even after the individual *praxis* has left the scene.

As we will see, the entire logic of the reversal of freedom through domination is contained in the dialectic between *praxis* and matter. The first sign that attests to this is given by the inertia that marks *praxis* from its first active moment. In order to materially change the environment, *praxis* must adopt the inertia characteristic of matter. When totalizing the environment towards an end, *praxis* makes itself into a passive instrument. For instance, when I am sitting on a bus to visit my family, I make myself into a passive vessel that lets itself be carried by the vehicle transporting me. When I eat, I turn my body into a food-devouring machine. At each instance, this *praxis* is absolute freedom, while at the same time being a passive instrumentalization of my own body and actions. That means that in order to materially transform its environment, *praxis* freely subjugates itself to the level of passive materiality. Indeed, without this subjugation no effective *praxis* would be possible.

We have seen that *praxis* imprints signification on the environment through totalization. However, by exteriorizing itself in the material environment, individual *praxis* lets go of the absolute control of the meaning of its own actions. Sartre argues that 'precisely because signification takes on the character of materiality, it enters into relation with the entire Universe' (2004, p. 161). The products of my actions find themselves surrounded by the products of an infinite amount of other *praxes* which inevitably relate to it. These other *praxes*, and their exteriorizations, can reinforce the meaning I gave to my surrounding materiality, but they can just as well divert or distort it. This happens not just at the conscious level of inter-individuality, where someone else uses the finished products of my *praxis* in a different way. My actions are also taken up and distorted at the level of what Sartre calls the 'practico-inert', the inert objects, ideas and structures through which and on which I act.

Take the example of a trade union aggressively bargaining for higher wages in the 1960s. Emboldened by a high demand for labor (itself the consequence of an increasing consumer demand) and state policies guaranteeing full employment, a trade union successfully raises the average wage in its sector. The collective *praxis* of the trade union has its own objectives and it consciously plans its actions in order to reach them. However, the result of this *praxis* (higher wages) again inscribes itself in the practico-inert materiality: it becomes clear that aggressive bargaining has taken place in many different sectors, leading to an overall increase in inflation which becomes a social concern in its own right. This particular collective *praxis* did not aim to raise inflation, but the inscription of its objectifications in the wider practico-inert environment necessarily distorted its initial meaning by adding others onto them. It is not a case of another individual will imposing itself, but of the level of materiality redirecting the signification of the initial *praxis*.

So far, the transformation of signification that occurs when *praxis* inscribes itself in materiality has not affected the initial *praxis*. Matter remains the product of the signifying *praxis*. However, matter is not merely the passive imprint of *praxis*, like wax that takes the shape of a seal when stamped. In turn, matter can itself become *active*. It does so by returning the products of *praxis* back to the latter, in a different form. Sartre calls this active dimension of matter 'counter-finality' (Sartre, 2004, p. 161-198; Turner, 2014). Counter-finality designates the process by which the practico-inert objects which have been worked by different *praxes* can 'turn back' on these *praxes*, in such a way that it forces them to conform to its own demands. Matter, in a word, becomes 'inverted *praxis*', where a material phenomenon takes the appearance of being the product of an intentional *praxis* imposing itself on other *praxes* whereas no single conscious author has occasioned it. How is this possible?

Sartre illustrates the concept of counter-finality with the example of the floods which the peasant population in China brought upon itself through its systematic deforestation of the surrounding environment. 'If some enemy of mankind had wanted to persecute the peasants of the Great Plain, he would have ordered mercenary troops to deforest the mountains systematically' (Sartre, 2004, p. 162). No such enemy exists, yet this deforestation took place, producing the same existential threats to the Chinese peasants who occupied them. In reality, it was *these peasants themselves* who systematically removed the trees, creating the material conditions for floods. The products of their separate individual *praxes* unified themselves in the material environment in order to become one single material phenomenon. What finally turned this phenomenon into a counter-finality is that it was interiorized by the living *praxes* of the Chinese peasants in such a way that they had to devise new strategies and plans in view of their needs. The floods became a counter-finality because they threatened the livelihoods of the Chinese peasants, forcing them to interiorize them as a threat to be



combated. Matter can thus obtain an active dimension in and through the living *praxes* which have produced it.

According to Sartre, counter-finalities arise in a context in which a multiplicity of human *praxes* are connected through their mutual involvement in the same material environment, without being unified in a common undertaking. The social relations, mediated by material structures, are marked by 'seriality': the condition of mutual and interconnected atomization, where every other *praxis* appears as Other than oneself. The specific characteristic of seriality is the impossibility of everyone to transcend this condition of mutual estrangement vis-à-vis the others towards a common goal. In seriality, *praxis* is contained within an untranscendable condition of isolation vis-à-vis other *praxes*, at the same time as they are united in the same material field. In other words, the unity of the Chinese peasants that is objectivized in the common process of deforestation, is *false*: it appears that they produce a single result through a common undertaking, but their real condition is one of necessary separation and alterity from one another. What unifies their serial environment is the common material object (i.e. deforestation), which can itself produce new, singular results different from the countless *praxes* that compose it.

For counter-finality to occur, therefore, three conditions need to be present (Sartre, 2004, p. 161-162). First, matter needs a certain *disposition* which renders it susceptible to becoming a phenomenon that backfires onto *praxis*. For inflation to destabilize the economy, the systems of money circulation and capital accumulation must possess specific characteristics without which it could not become a possibility. Second, as we have argued, *praxis* needs to take on the material inertia of the tool, systematically exteriorizing itself into the material environment. Thirdly, matter must absorb the serial practices of countless human labors into one unified result. On this basis can matter become an 'inverted *praxis*', an active passivity in the sense that it is the product of human *praxes* which will actively impose a new directionality on those *praxes*.

The preceding discussion of freedom and *praxis* can help us understand the specific character of the active dimension of matter. Sartre does not assign matter with the same agency that belongs to human beings. Matter becomes a counter-finality when *praxis* is forced to subjugate itself to the demands of matter within its own practical project. Stated differently, matter becomes active when the specific directionality of a *praxis* is imposed by a counter-finality from outside, but freely taken up and projected towards the future by human beings. The counter-finality that assumes a shape in matter is not an active agent with its own conscious *praxis*, but takes a quasi-human form. Counter-finality imposed its own directionality in the free projects of the Chinese peasants, who creatively adapted their social and political organizations in order to save themselves. For Sartre, *praxis* is goal-oriented

action. Paradoxically, counter-finality strips *praxis* of its freely chosen goals by confronting it with its own products distorted into monstrous forms, *in and through its own free projects*.

### **Exigency and domination**

Counter-finality becomes a form of *domination* when it takes the form of an 'exigency' or imperative to which man must conform. Exigencies, according to Sartre, cannot come to man through human relationships of reciprocity, but must necessarily be imposed by matter (2004, p. 187). Whereas human relations work through reciprocal expectations and understandings, an exigency takes the shape of a unidirectional categorical imperative. It is a call from the material environment which must be obeyed. As Sartre writes, the exigency of the object 'designates its man as one who is expected to behave in a certain way' (2004, p. 186). In effect, exigency marks the fundamental reversal of roles: whereas *praxis*, at the superficial level, signifies matter through totalization, exigencies produce a situation where matter signifies *praxis*. Human beings are not dominated by other human beings (or only indirectly so), but by material imperatives to which they must conform.

Sartre first analyzes exigencies at the level of individual behavior. He takes the example of the exigency of the industrial machine at a factory which imposes a certain rhythm and a specific set of tasks on the worker that has to operate it (2004, p. 186-188). The lever has to be pulled at a certain tempo and strength, requiring a prescribed amount of exertion and attention from the worker. The two essential elements of exigency come to the fore in this example. First, the exigency is a demand that comes from *outside*, therefore not originating in any deliberate choice of an individual among a field of possibilities. It is an imperative that comes from the material object. Second, the exigency reduces individual *praxis* to a passive action. Of course, the action to be performed is still a *praxis*, but the latter does little more than obey whatever task is to be performed. The meaning of the resulting *praxis* is prescribed by the exigency of the machine and the specific totalization of the material field is already sketched out beforehand. Exigencies reverse the order of priority characteristic of *praxis*: whereas *praxis* initially instrumentalized the material field through his actions, the object now instrumentalizes the individual, which, as it were, becomes the tool of the object.

There is a possible objection to this description of exigency as a form of domination. If an exigency (such as a machine) prescribes a fixed mode of behavior without necessarily using force, is the individual *praxis* not free to refuse it? If that is the case, is this still a form of domination, and not merely one possible way of acting among others? The early Sartre seems to corroborate this: an individual is ontologically free, even in the most violent circumstances, because it is always possible to choose suicide (1969, p. 554). The machine prescribes a certain behavior, but I am always at least minimally free to refuse operating it. Sartre's forceful response in the *Critique* refers back to *need*, as

the originary impetus for totalizing *praxis* (Sartre, 2004, p. 190). Within a practical situation with definite historical and social conditions, when a worker refuses the exigencies of the machine he (or she) accepts losing the income which provided the means of subsistence for himself and his family. From an analytical perspective such a choice is indeed possible, but in the lived reality of the worker the exigency becomes a non-negotiable categorical imperative. Thus, in contrast to *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre now chooses to speak of the 'deviation' and 'inversion' of freedom itself (2004, p. 340). In the context of the exigencies caused by the system of wage labor, freedom 'does not mean the possibility of choice, but the necessity of living these constraints in the form of exigencies which must be fulfilled by a praxis' (2004, p. 327).

The example of the exigency of the machine also makes clear that an exigency immediately relies on the broader structures of social relations to be effective. An exigency can only operate within a materially unified and serialized environment: the machine stands in a material relation to other machines that have to operate at that tempo in order to maximize production. This process is itself controlled and surveyed by fellow workers and supervisors who stand in a serial relation to the worker in question. What is more, the exigency is the product of the previous *praxes* of employers who invested in this fixed capital with the aim to impose the exigency on the worker they would hire to carry out this task. Of course, ultimately, the employers do not necessarily act out of malevolence towards the workers, but must themselves obey the exigencies of a competitive market that compels them to invest in productive machinery at the expense of the worker. At all levels, what enables these exigencies to dominate *praxis* is the latter's inability to collectively change these structures. Instead, each is at the mercy of the other, mutually reinforcing the structures of alienation and atomization. Seriality therefore acts as the essential structural background against which exigencies operate.

Although Sartre's first example remains at the individual level of the domination of the worker by the machine, his really intended object is the exigencies at work in broader social processes. What he wants to explain is how one can correctly make such quasi-anthropomorphic statements such as that during the period of industrial capitalism, 'steam power *fostered* the tendency toward large industrial plants' (2004, p. 159). The answer, according to Sartre, lies in the way matter forces *praxis* to accommodate its exigencies. In Sartrean terminology, one sector of materiality compels individuals and groups to reconfigure other sectors of materiality according to its exigencies (2004, p. 191). Under the pressures of competition, for instance, employers need to search for new technologies that can improve the productivity of their machines. At the level of social processes, exigencies again make *praxis* into an inessential mediator between different sectors of materiality. It is the human being who serves the imperatives of matter.

In a final step, Sartre argues that exigencies operate as the laws that define our 'social being' (class position, gender, social status, etc.). In a passage on our 'class being', which explicitly references his phenomenological work, he asks the question how it is possible that *praxis* is absolutely free, whereas we are destined to occupy our class position. In *Being and Nothingness*, Sartre argues that one *is not*, but *makes* oneself a bourgeois or a proletarian. We have seen how Sartre's account of *praxis* as freedom remains faithful to this existentialist position. The dimension of the practico-inert now enables him to add that 'in order to make oneself bourgeois, one must *be* bourgeois' (2004, p. 231). In other words, an individual still transcends the given situation towards his possibilities, but at the level of the practico-inert, he can do so only by filling in the place assigned to him by material structures. From birth, matter can therefore assign to the individual the place he will fill in throughout his life.

Sartre again insists that the class position 'sketched' by materiality is not merely a passively structured field of possibilities: in the domain of the practico-inert, *praxis* is first and foremost subordinated 'to the direct and lifeless exigency of a material ensemble' (2004, p. 228). Of course, even within a particular social class alternative choices are possible. A worker can decide to work for this or that factory, stay at home or resort to clandestine activities. But within his practical project, and based on material factors (proximity of the factory, skills required, physical and mental attributes of the worker) *in view of his needs*, these alternatives will confront him with the character of a necessity to which he must conform. In this way, through the material exigencies that dominate him, the worker freely fills in the place which matter has prefigured for him.

This brings us to the essence of the meaning of exigencies: they are the active practico-inert conditions which a transcending *praxis cannot transcend*. They are the practico-inert materialities (objects, structures, fixed behaviors, modes of thought) which a free *praxis* must live as his untranscendable destiny, since the attempt to transcend them would risk his very being-in-the-world. In temporal terms, the future is *prefigured* by past *praxes*, stripping away the capacity of *praxis* in the present to realize new possibilities (Lievens, 2021). Past *praxes*, in effect, have produced a state of affairs which continue to hold sway after they themselves have left. In the present, meanwhile, *praxis* remains free activity: it can still plan, predict and orient itself in view of existing circumstances. But this *praxis* can only freely bring about the sentence passed onto him by past labors which have crystallized themselves in practico-inert structures of domination.

### **The materiality of politics**

Before addressing the question of depoliticization, we should ask which model of politics corresponds to this analysis. It is evident that there is no room for political action in a state of seriality, where each member of the series is relegated to a form of alterity towards himself and the other. At the level of

the domination of the practico-inert over men, mutual relations of alienation and dependence make it impossible to transcend the conditions in which every individual *praxis* finds itself. In effect, seriality constitutes *the condition of impossibility* of political action, since it designates the impotence of every other to alter the structures that condition them. However, our investigation has shown that even the most dominating structures rely on free *praxis* to be effective. At the heart of every structural form of domination lies freedom, which has been alienated, distorted and inversed, *but never annulled*. This entails that all structures are necessarily haunted by the threat of insurrection: since practico-inert structures are dependent on free *praxes*, there is an ever existent possibility that *praxis* transcends them. Free transcendence is both the necessary condition of structural domination and the secret it wishes to efface, since it is impossible to *a priori* restrict free *praxis* from transcending any particular material condition.

Political action thus takes place when a free transcendence of these material structures *is* a practical possibility, something which can only come about in group *praxis*. Only by collectively uniting with other members of the series can individuals overcome their mutual statute of impotence. In group *praxis*, everyone strengthens the ability of every other to transform the material conditions that dominate them. Every other becomes 'the same' insofar as they share the same project and reinteriorize each other's presence as a practical force that sustains their own project. By undertaking a common project, these members of the series acquire the strength to *dissolve* the bonds of alterity that held them in captivity: instead of suffering the material exigencies that operate throughout the series, group *praxis* reclaims the capacity to orient itself towards future objectives. Sartre emphasizes how group *praxis* reinforces individual *praxis*: the conditions that were previously lived as an untranscendable destiny become objects that can be instrumentalized and surpassed in a new totalization. In other words, individual *praxis* is not negated in group *praxis*, but finds itself authentically expressed within it. Sartre summarizes this argumentation as follows:

But the essential characteristic of the fused group is the sudden resurrection of freedom. Not that freedom ever ceased to be the very condition of acts and the mask which conceals alienation, but we have seen how, in the practico-inert field, it became the mode in which alienated man has to live his servitude in perpetuity and, finally, his only way of discovering the necessity of his alienations and impotences. ... But against the common danger, freedom frees itself [*s'arrache*] from alienation and affirms itself as common efficacy (2004, p. 401-402).

Politics thus first occurs when a group *praxis* attempts to dissolve the structural relations of seriality. This does not mean, however, that a successful group *praxis* finally inaugurates a state of free floating freedom without constraints. On the contrary, a group continues to find itself submerged in the wider

material environment with its myriad exigencies, counter-finalities and serialized structures. Group *praxis* inscribes its actions within a wider practico-inert environment which will continue to produce effects on the group both in its interior structures and in its exterior results. Let us examine this further.

Sartre identifies a double connection (or 'circularity') between group *praxis* and the practico-inert (2004, p. 676). The first is diachronic: a group *praxis* initially takes on the fleeting unity of a fused group which brings about an 'Apocalypse', that is, it dissolves the series into an active collective undertaking in the moment (Sartre, 2004, p. 357). This new, singular achievement which the fused group has brought about in the material environment is always in danger of disappearing due to internal and external threats. This induces the group members to adopt inert characteristics, such as a pledge of fidelity to the group and the internal differentiation of roles in an organization. This progressive development of the becoming-inert of the group finally reaches its tipping point in the institution, where power is usurped by a single sovereign who relegates all other members of the group to passive seriality as bureaucratic officials. In a sense, the institution is the death and betrayal of the group *praxis*, where individual *praxis* again becomes passive activity, the mere instrument in a bureaucratized structure that negates creative temporalizations. In turn, the becoming-inert of the group paves the way for novel group actions that transcend past conditions in unprecedented ways.

The second connection is static: from the beginning, the practico-inert environment conditions the aim, scope and method of a group *praxis*. The specific characteristics of the situation in which a group finds itself (with its multiple serialities, practico-inert structures and objects, relations of force and possibilities for action) will determine the strategic modalities of the group action. As Sartre states, 'the group's structures and lines of action are defined by the features of the [serial] collective from which it has extricated itself' (2004, p. 676). Crucially, not only will the internal organization of the group be determined by the characteristics of the particular situation, but also the possibility of its *success*. There is always a real possibility that a group cannot transform the conditions that condemn its members to passivity and seriality, since overcoming them is not a possibility inscribed in matter itself.<sup>4</sup> The relations of force that a group has to overturn might be too great to overcome; the group's effective reach and power inadequate for the task at hand. Improvised protests in migrant camps on Greek islands or a local strike at an industrial plant that is put out of activity due to offshore outsourcing can suffer this fate. In these cases, the material environment which a group-formation attempts to reorganize harbors untranscendable structures.

---

<sup>4</sup> It must be repeated that this possibility does not reside objectively in the material situation, but is dependent on *praxis* itself. Any group *praxis* occurs on the basis of a 'practical reading of a possibility inscribed in matter, and which reveals itself ... on the basis of the total project' (Sartre, 2004, p. 412).

Practico-inert structures not only determine the objective chances of the group undertaking, but the latter also interiorizes (some of) the former's inert characteristics. Sartre's famous example of the Parisians storming the Bastille as a pure form of the group-in-fusion creates the appearance that a group can fully dissolve any relation of seriality in the moment of the Apocalypse. Certainly, no practico-inert condition is in principle out of reach of a transcending *praxis*. But the broader narrative of the *Critique* dispels any romanticized picture of group *praxis* unburdened from inert characteristics. In particular, Sartre stresses that a group 'can be organized only on the basis of inert structures representing both a qualification of their action and its objective limit, including *its secret inertia*' (2004, p. 239, my emphasis).

Sartre's analysis of the internal limits of the French anarchist syndicalist movement at the end of the nineteenth century serves as an example of the interiorized inertia a group carries with it as its invisible walls. In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, factories started to make use of a 'universal machine' (such as a lathe) which could only be employed by a highly skilled worker who was assisted by other lower skilled workers. This division between workers expressed itself materially in a host of procedures (education for skilled workers, competition for hiring opportunities, unequal wages,...) flowing from the technical exigencies of the machine. Practically, this division created the idea of a hierarchy on the basis of the dignity and prestige of skilled work. This practical division within the working class proved an insurmountable limit when these workers organized themselves in what became the anarcho-syndicalist movement. Ideologically, anarcho-syndicalism professed a humanism of labor anchored in the dignity of skilled work, privileging the perspective of the skilled at the cost of the unskilled worker (which it often ideologically relegated to the position of a sub-human). Even the organized group *praxis* of the workers could not overcome this division, due to the fact that it was anchored in *praxis* and real relations stemming from the hierarchies introduced by the specificity of the practico-inert: whereas the unskilled workers were too disorganized and impoverished to play a role of significance, the refusal of one skilled worker to operate the machine could sabotage an entire production cycle. The hierarchy produced by the universal machine, inscribed in matter, thus became the untranscendable limit and invisible inertia of the group *praxis* of the worker struggles at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and an invisible obstacle to the goal of universal worker emancipation.

The above examples indicate that Sartre's conception of politics as collective action in and through material conditions contains a profoundly tragic dimension. The tragic character of politics does not lie in the impossibility of group *praxis*, but in the ever existent possibility that the group is unable to transcend the practico-inert forces that condemn each of its members to servitude. Politics in all its guises (not only insurrectionary) is an attempt to flee from domination by inert forces and serial alienations. But for a group *praxis* to be successful, objective conditions can necessitate that certain

untranscendable structures are overcome, certain insurmountable hierarchies demolished, the material coordinates of a prefigured future redirected. In many cases, however, a group finds itself transcending a given situation, only to realize *after the fact* that its free action only realized the place that matter already designated to it. Even in a group undertaking can *praxis* find its own actions alienated and given meaning by the exigencies of matter, as the latter negatively determines what was possible for it.

This model is reminiscent of the 'tragic clash' in collective struggles which Marx and Engels highlighted in their letters to Ferdinand Lassalle concerning the fate of the German aristocracy in their struggles against the Holy Roman Emperor in the 16<sup>th</sup> century (Marx & Engels, 2010, p. 418, p. 441). The tragedy of the German knights lay in the fact that on their own they could not defeat the Emperor; they could only do so by allying with the German peasantry. However, due to its daily oppression the peasantry stood hostile to the aristocracy, and the latter scarcely considered the possibility to enlist the former in its own plans. For the German knights there thus arose a tragic conflict 'between the historically necessary postulate and the impossibility of its execution in practice' (Marx & Engels, 2010, 441). As a political force, the German aristocracy in the 16<sup>th</sup> century represented a class that could only become victorious by transcending the subjective and objective limits which defined it; a contradiction which it proved it could not overcome.<sup>5</sup>

### **Rethinking depoliticization**

We have reached the point of the investigation where we are able to formulate an alternative definition of depoliticization. As we have seen, for Lefort and Mouffe depoliticization refers to the symbolic effacement of the fact that society is contingently (hence politically) instituted. Even though a certain situation (or condition) has been brought about through political actions and decisions, it is symbolically understood as being devoid of political meaning. Using a Sartrean perspective, we can now state that depoliticization involves not only a symbolic dimension, but also the material dimension of the practico-inert. In this view, depoliticization occurs when the signification of an individual or collective action is emptied of political content because practico-inert conditions divert, undermine or redirect the ability of that action to contest a given situation. In a state of depoliticization, practico-inert structures and serialities that were inscribed by past actions into matter present *an objective limit of untranscendability* for actions in the present. Free individual and group *praxes* continue to take place, but they merely occupy the space that practico-inert and serialized structures have assigned to them.

---

<sup>5</sup> For a Marxist study of tragedy in collective struggles in times of crises and revolutionary transitions, see Toscano (2013).



Depoliticization, as a quality that affects a *praxis*, is the consequence or product of the untranscendability of practico-inert structures. As we have seen, political activity comes about when structures of seriality (which produce their own counter-finalities and impose a myriad of exigencies) are transcended through group action, which can manifest itself as an effective practical power. In this account, political action does not immediately imply political victory. Politics happens when actors are able to engage in a struggle with tangible political stakes. It implies a certain amount of contingency over the outcome of the struggle. Because the end result hangs in the balance, individuals and groups have to make strategic choices, incur risks, fight certain battles and abandon others, forge certain alliances and make other enemies, etc. The shared social field is incessantly totalized in new ways by the actors involved, who try to outplay their opponents in order to achieve the desired result. The contingency of the outcome animates the political initiative, where defeat is a permanent possibility. In contrast, actions become depoliticized when a contingent outcome (which can animate a political conflict) remains absent because individuals or groups are *a priori* incapable of transforming the material conditions in front of them. Unable to contest the inert structures that impose serial exigencies, *praxis* starts to lose its political character.

Depoliticization thus manifests itself is when *praxis* is redirected towards non-political ends. Individuals internalize the exigencies imposed by the practico-inert in a variety of ways, all of which impose the character of depoliticization. One way in which this occurs is by individuals adopting an attitude of resignation, whether in the form of a withdrawal from politics, various forms of corporatism or even a conservative defense of the existing state of affairs. When practico-inert structures resist any attempt at transformation, individuals start to operate within the limits set by the structure itself.

However, even individual or collective actions that understand themselves politically can nonetheless become depoliticized. *Prima facie*, a political scene can remain active: political debates fill the public sphere, citizens organize themselves and parliamentary dynamics take their usual course. However, these free, creative totalizations become emptied of tangible political significance. In a depoliticized mode, these *praxes* cannot actively signify the environment by transcending the given conditions towards an open future, instead being forced to undergo the (negative) exigencies that are inscribed in materiality. What disappears is the possibility of organized group *praxes* to imprint *new* significations in the environment: to transcend the given conditions by inventing novel temporalizations. If politics happens when structures of seriality are dissolved in order for groups to stake a claim on the future of society, depoliticization strips political actions of their 'politicality'. *In a word, politics becomes empty or meaningless*. 'From below', the (largely serialized) crowd faces material obstacles that impede it from transcending the practico-inert conditions that dominate it. 'From above' power holders face insurmountable pressures to adjust their policies in line with the continued reproduction of capitalist

social relations. In the final analysis, both can be understood as the domination of *praxis* by the practico-inert via exigencies that run through structured serialities.

How does this account relate to the post-foundational view that depoliticization refers to the symbolic effacement of the contingent institution of society? A symbolic acknowledgment of the contingency of society is certainly a necessary condition for democratic politics to take place. For people to organize themselves in political parties, protest movements or other initiatives, they must understand their particular social situation as open to change, which democratic discourses and symbols help to express. But in a state of depoliticization, the objective limits of their attempts to transform structural conditions can be revealed to them in and through their political *praxis*. After the *praxis* of political actors has exhausted itself in an unattainable objective (e.g. austerity protests in Greece or Spain, migrant protests in asylum camps in Greece or Italy), they experience the necessity of their impotence: in strictly Sartrean terms, their free organization constituted 'the moment of the trap', which has filled in the place already designated beforehand (Sartre, 2004, p. 337).

In this sense, the exclusive emphasis on the symbolic 'empty place of power' or an appraisal of agonistic democracy for its own sake risks becoming an ideology with which the political powers of a depoliticized society legitimate themselves. Power-holders can flaunt their democratic credentials by acknowledging the legitimacy of political contestations that lack any capacity for signification, that is, any capacity to transcend the given towards the future. Reducing politicization to its symbolic conditions can provide ideological cover for a society whose future directionality is set in stone.

Finally, a materialist conception of the phenomenon of depoliticization can aid us to identify how people subjectively respond to this objective condition of depoliticization (Sartre, 2016). Borrowing the typical Sartrean formulation, how do certain people today 'exist' their depoliticization (Sartre, 1963, p. 180)? The most obvious in this regard is probably the attitude of a resignation from politics itself, which we have mentioned above. Another attitude can be witnessed in the varied array of expressions of discontent that have refused to formulate concrete political objectives, whether in a minimally organized form such as the '*gilets jaunes*' phenomenon (Kouvelakis, 2019), or the urban riots of migrant youth in European metropolises such as Paris, London and Brussels (Badiou, 2012; Balibar, 2007). In addition, Haider (2018) has persuasively argued how certain contemporary forms of identity politics that fetishize race or gender are a symptom of the end of a political climate where social movements (such as the struggle for Black liberation) oriented themselves towards radically reshaping social relations.

This analysis does not imply that in late capitalist democracies, political groups never form who are able to contest their state of impotence vis-à-vis practico-inert exigencies. As mentioned in the previous

section, no practico-inert structure is definitively safe from being substantially transcended by groups, that is, from the threat of insurrection. The conceptual analysis of depoliticization serves to highlight that in *certain specific situations*, with a specific constellation of forces and with specific obstacles, social actors and groups are powerless to do so, as they crash into the limits of their own practical capacities. At a different time, under different circumstances, the situation could open itself up to all forms of political actions and contestations.

In this sense, this analysis has been conceptual and philosophical rather than empirical. Political groups, in fleeting or more institutionalized forms, constantly appear and dissolve at different levels of society. What is more (as Sartre shows in his analysis of the French colonization of Algeria) practico-inert structures and serialities themselves need constant support by groups (e.g. the military or propaganda groups) in order to remain stable (2004, p. 716-734). The only way to identify the state of politicization in a certain context is through conjunctural analysis, with its specific actors, practices, structures and relations of force. In turn, these conjunctural analyses should be situated within a study of history, which puts them in a wider spatial and temporal context. The goal of this paper was only to sharpen the concept of depoliticization as a critical instrument. In this sense, Sartre's contribution to our current predicament hovering between freedom and domination, is to unwaveringly approach it from the perspective of the liberation of *praxis* in its fullest form, the only normative principle he deemed worthy of consideration.

## References

- Ally, M. C. (2010). Sartre's Integrative Method: Description, Dialectics, and Praxis. *Sartre studies international*, 16(2), 48-74.
- Althusser, L. (2005). *For Marx*. London: Verso.
- Badiou, A. (2012). *The Rebirth of History*. London: Verso.
- Balibar, É. (2007). Uprisings in the Banlieues. *Constellations*, 14(1), 47-71.
- Breeur, R. (2005). Le paradoxe de la liberté. In *Autour de Sartre* (pp. 257-283). Grenoble: Millon.
- Catalano, J. S. (1986). *A Commentary on Jean-Paul Sartre's Critique of Dialectical Reason*. Chicago (Ill.): University of Chicago Press.
- Flynn, T. R. (1984). *Sartre and Marxist Existentialism: The Test Case of Collective Responsibility*. Chicago (Ill.): University of Chicago Press.
- Haider, A. (2018). *Mistaken Identity: Race and Class in the Age of Trump*. London: Verso.
- Kouvelakis, S. (2019). The French Insurgency: Political Economy of the Gilets Jaunes. *New Left Review*, 116, 75-98.
- Laclau, E. (1996). *Emancipation(s)*. London: Verso.
- Laclau, E., & Mouffe, C. (1985). *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*. London: Verso.
- Lefort, C. (1986). *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Lefort, C. (1988) *Democracy and Political Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1969). *The Savage Mind*. Chicago (Ill.): University of Chicago Press.
- Lievens, M. (2021). Freedom and Domination through Time: Jean-Paul Sartre's Theory of the Plurality of Temporalities. *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, January, 1-21.
- Marchart, O. (2007). *Post-Foundational Political Thought: Political Difference in Nancy, Lefort, Badiou and Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Marchart, O. (2018). *Thinking Antagonism: Political Ontology after Laclau*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Marx, K., & Engels, F. (2010). *Marx and Engels Collected Works* (Vol. 40). London: Lawrence & Wishart.
- Mouffe, C. (2006). *On the Political*. London: Routledge.
- Mouffe, C. (2009). *The Democratic Paradox*. London: Verso.
- Rancière, J. (2006). *Hatred of Democracy*. London: Verso.
- Rancière, J. (2015). *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1963). *Search for a Method*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Sartre, J.-P. (1969). *Being and Nothingness: An Essay on Phenomenological Ontology*. New York: Washington Square Press.
- Sartre, J.-P. (2004). *Critique of Dialectical Reason. Volume 1: Theory of Practical Ensembles*. London: Verso.
- Sartre, J.-P. (2016). *What is Subjectivity?* London: Verso.
- Scott, B. (2020). From Perception to Action: Sartre's Practical Phenomenology. *Sartre studies international* 26(2), 51-62.
- Schmitt, C. (2007). *The Concept of the Political: Expanded Edition*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Toscano, A. (2013). Politics in a Tragic Key. *Radical Philosophy*, 180, 25-34.
- Turner, C. (2014). The Return of Stolen Praxis: Counter-Finality in Sartre's "Critique of Dialectical Reason". *Sartre studies international*, 20(1), 36-44.

Affiliation: Institute of Philosophy, KU Leuven

Address: Kardinaal Mercierplein 2, 3000 Leuven, Belgium

Email: [lorenzo.butu@kuleuven.be](mailto:lorenzo.butu@kuleuven.be)

Bio: Lorenzo Buti is a doctoral candidate at the Research Institute in Political Philosophy, KU Leuven. He has obtained masters degrees in economics, philosophy and European studies at KU Leuven and the London School of Economics (LSE). His research focuses on rethinking democratic action along insurgent lines, in the face of material conditions that structure the stakes of the political stage.