

On a Train, Reading Sartre: What My Teenage Self Can Teach Me About International Relations

Written by Lucian M. Ashworth

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LUCIAN M. ASHWORTH, MAY 5 2024

How do you write about existentialism and the field of International Relations? I had been invited to contribute to a special issue on the topic, and I jumped at the chance, mainly because it is a question that has been at the back of my mind since I was an undergraduate student. Not that I had formed any clear ideas about it back then, but during my undergraduate degree in International Relations (IR) I had often struggled to link what I was learning with my other intellectual interests and experiences that I had inherited from my time before going to university. One of these experiences had been my encounter with existentialist literature.

Perhaps, though, I need to back up here. There was a particular context to why I was reading existentialists in my teens, and it is something I develop further in the article that eventually appeared in the special issue (Ashworth 2023). My parents had moved to the Netherlands, while I continued to attend the last two years of my high school in Portsmouth. This required lots of travel by train and ferry throughout the year, and since this was the early eighties, entertainment had to be low tech. An avid reader, I required a large supply of books to keep me from hours of travel-induced boredom. Early on in the process I had discovered Jean-Paul Sartre's *Roads to Freedom* trilogy. Its themes – of impending war, individual angst and finally the experience of war – meshed with the early eighties' souring of relations between the United States and the Soviet Union that seemed to threaten the destruction of civilization in a thermonuclear war. Even before starting my IR degree, I was reading *Roads to Freedom* as an IR text.

And this was how I intended to write my contribution to the special issue. I would explore existentialism in IR by looking at Sartre's trilogy as an IR text. At the same time, I was aware of Sartre's own view of literature: for him all prose was political, and it was the reader that completed the text through their active engagement with it. With this in mind I did not want to just write an IR theory analysis of the trilogy, I wanted to write it in a prose style that copied much of the approach of the work, while also bringing me, as the reader, into the discussion. As a consequence, I planned the article as a three-way engagement between the text, my first reading of the trilogy forty years ago, and me as the author now. Interestingly, there was some temporal symmetry here: The events depicted by Sartre were set four decades before I had read the books, and it was the same amount of time between my first reading and my re-reading of *Roads to Freedom*. This, then, was also a personal journey that took me back to my first serious engagements with the world of international affairs. Underlying it all, though, was the question I had first pondered during my degree: why is there no existential IR theory?

Of course, the question is wrong. There is existentialism in IR theory – as the other contributions to the special issue show – although a more accurate way of phrasing it would be: why does existentialism have such a low profile in IR? I personalized this question to 'if existentialism was so important for my turn to IR, and to my understanding of IR when I started my degree, why have I never cited existentialist writers until now?' By the end of the article, I had an answer to this. For dramatic effect, I will leave discussing this point to the end.

The *Roads to Freedom* trilogy is many things, one of them is an anatomy of a foreign policy crisis. In the first book, *The Age of Reason*, this theme is in the background. The main storyline follows Mathieu as he tries to find the money for his lover's abortion. The on-going crisis, which we know will end in war, is in the background, and only erupts into Mathieu's consciousness occasionally. In contrast, the second book, *The Reprieve*, takes us to the Munich Crisis,

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where the threat of war is central to the story. Sartre expanded the characters beyond those found in the first book, although they are all still there. New fictional characters are joined by fictionalized representations of real political figures engaged in diplomacy. *The Reprieve* is also written in a different style, with scenes shifting between protagonists in mid-paragraph, giving the feel of a jumble of different stories linked by a common threat. The last book, published in English as *Iron in the Soul*, jumps to the fall of France in 1940. The number of characters narrows, and the figures from the first book once again take centre stage. The longer first part covers the different ways that the main characters face the fall of France, while the shorter second part (without paragraph breaks) tells the story of Brunet's experience as a prisoner of war.

What stands out in Sartre's dissection of the crisis is his lack of interest in causes, and consequent concentration on effects. As a field, IR usually focuses on causes. The search for causes, as I discuss in the article, are problematic for Sartre. Instead, what interests him are the multiple effects that flow out of a crisis. Central to Sartre's exploration of the crisis is luck, something that was also of concern during the 1980s nuclear balance of terror. Interestingly, and in keeping with this downplaying of cause in favour of effects, the trilogy skips over 1939 and the start of the war. Instead, we go from 1938 in the second book to 1940 in the third. With the emphasis switched from causes to effects, this makes sense. It also ties in with the work of the historian David Reynolds, who has written about 1940 as the fulcrum of the twentieth century (Reynolds 2003, ch. 2). There is a tendency in IR, especially in the potted histories found in textbooks, to present the past as a story of structures, where events have clear causes. Indeed, there are many attempts to make the Fall of France understandable from a structural point of view, as I explore in the article. Yet, Sartre and Reynolds challenge us to see 1940 as the product of luck, and on top of that a luck that has profound implications for the future. This, perhaps understandably, rang many bells for my early 1980s self reading the trilogy for the first time.

Perhaps, though, it was the way that fiction allows the author to populate a crisis with people that also drew me to the trilogy. This was a common theme in the often scientifically literate fiction on a possible thermonuclear war that peppered the bookstores and air waves of the early 1980s. From Raymond Briggs' graphic novel *When the Wind Blows* (Briggs 1983) – following an elderly couple, after a nuclear strike, as they try to understand what has happened – to the two classic films of the era: 1983's *The Day After*, which frightened President Reagan, to 1984's *Threads* that worked the idea of the nuclear winter into its scenario and consequently told a much bleaker story. Like Sartre, none of these were particularly concerned with the causes, concentrating on the devastating multiple effects.

The marked contrast in 1983, though, was between the way that fiction used scientific information to explore a nuclear war, and the way that defence intellectuals presented it. The latter presented a world of abstract data, and structural realities that followed a logic devoid of people. This was the world in which the nuclear deterrent was reduced to abstractions and acronyms that allowed for a dispassionate thinking about the unthinkable, and was well explored in Carol Cohn's 1987 article 'Sex and Death in the Rational World of Defense Intellectuals' (Cohn 1987). From a Sartrean point of view these defence intellectuals, by trying to make thermonuclear war abstract and clinical, were engaging in bad faith: using their freedom to deny their freedom of action. Or, put another way, acting as if we did not have freedom of action outside of a structural and abstract logic. In the trilogy it is the communist Brunet who behaves like a defence intellectual. Secure in his knowledge about the true structures of the world.

Brunet behaves as though he has all the knowledge he needs to understand what is happening in the world. The other characters spend their time trying to piece together what is happening. In the first book, *The Age of Reason*, Brunet's answer to Mathieu's problem of finding funds for his lover's abortion is to suggest he joins the Communist Party. The narrative of the book itself contradicts Brunet's easy solution to Mathieu's malaise. We see the conversations between the protagonists from a third-party position, but the characters, possessed of limited knowledge and often estranged from the other's position, struggle to understand each other. This reminded me of something. In the early 1990s I had completed a reading course on diplomacy as part of my PhD coursework, organized by the late Gilbert R. Winham. The interactions in the trilogy, but especially in the first book, reminded me of classic works on diplomacy. What is more, it had a strong resemblance to the interpretation of diplomacy as the mediation of estrangement found in James Der Derian's 1987 book *On Diplomacy*. This should not come as a surprise, given that Der Derian's use of alienation, which underpinned his view of diplomacy as the mediation of estrangement, was developed from sources that included Sartre (Der Derian 1987).

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What follows from this, though, is that, to an extent, IR has already had an existentialist approach hiding in plain sight. Interpreting diplomacy as the mediation of estrangement, we could argue that the classic study of diplomacy, with its origins in early modern texts, has been existentialist at its core. I explore this more in the aforementioned article.

Which brings me to the question: why, given the influence of existentialism on my choice to study IR at university, did I never quote existentialist figures until now? Again, you will need to read the article to get a fuller answer out of me, but my initial finding is that the answer is in the nature of existentialism itself. For me at least, the influence has been more of an ethos than an easily quotable source. It is the sense in the back of the mind that we should not stop at the obvious and parsimonious answer, like Brunet and the 1980s defence intellectuals do. Rather, there are always a more complex and plural stories behind the structural abstractions. This has led me to explore the complexities behind IR's origin stories, the lost feminists of IR's past, and, recently, the racism behind early twentieth century international thought (Ashworth 2014; Ashworth 2011; Ashworth 2022).

It is the sense that IR cannot be reduced to abstract structural arguments based on clear causal relationships, and I suspect that I am not the only one writing IR under this existentialist influence.

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