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Ressort: Special interest

The Century of Delusions

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The feeling that 2019 was the last normal year, and ever since, it feels like we've slipped into some alternate reality where nothing makes sense, everyone is on edge, time moves too fast yet too slow, and the world we knew just doesn't exist anymore.

The French post-war intellectual culture systematically rewarded those thinkers who aligned themselves with totalitarian projects, while marginalizing those who identified and criticized these projects early and clearly.

Sartre supported Stalin during the Gulag. Sartre supported Mao during the Cultural Revolution. Sartre wrote a preface for Fanon in which he transformed anti-colonial violence into a form of mental hygiene ('to kill a European is to hit two targets with one stone'). Sartre went to the Stammheim prison in 1974 to visit Andreas Baader and emerged as the terrorist's defender.

In 1977, Sartre, together with Beauvoir, Foucault, Derrida, and Barthes, signed the petition calling for the decriminalization of sexual relations between adults and minors from the age of 13. Sartre's enthusiasm for Khomeini's 'spiritual revolution,' which he shared with Foucault, must be added to the list. One has to pause for a moment over this catalogue, because it has no equivalent in the intellectual history of the 20th century. There is not a single major totalitarian or criminal upheaval of the last century that Sartre did not, at some point, justify, excuse, or refuse to condemn.

If the century produced a nightmare, Sartre held the door open for it. His ashes at the Montparnasse cemetery are a pilgrimage site. 'Existentialism Is a Humanism' is taught to eleventh-grade students as if it were the Bible. The scandal is not Sartre. Sartre is merely a human being, with his cowardices and his fanaticisms. The scandal is that an entire civilization collectively and silently decided that systematically siding with the executioners does not disqualify someone from becoming the great intellectual of a nation.

Raymond Aron was right about everything: about Stalin, about Mao, about the Gulags, about totalitarianism, about decolonization, about the Cold War, about the market economy, about Europe. About everything. He wrote 'The Opium of the Intellectuals' in 1955; thirty years before the French Left sheepishly discovered that Solzhenitsyn had not, in fact, been lying. Aron possessed the clarity of an entire century, condensed into a body of work of luminous lucidity, written in French of surgical precision.

**Redaktioneller Programmdienst:
European News Agency**

Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
Telefax: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.661
Email: contact@european-news-agency.com
Internet: european-news-agency.com

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Aron is not on the curriculum. No street is named after him. When people speak of Aron, it is with that little shrug that means: ‘yes, interesting, a bit cold, a bit right-wing, you know.’ Sartre, by contrast, is the ember, the commitment, the youth, the flame. Merleau-Ponty’s famous sentence remains: ‘Better to be wrong with Sartre than right with Aron.’ It is not harmless. It is the decisive admission.

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Annette-Kolb-Str. 16
D-85055 Ingolstadt
Telefon: +49 (0) 841-951. 99.660
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