

Hurricane Over Sugar

*Consider the luck of imperialism. By the very game of economic domination it creates among the oppressed needs which the oppressor alone is able to satisfy. The diabetic island, ravaged by the proliferation of a single vegetable, lost all hope for self-sufficiency.*²⁶

Once in Paris, Sartre altered his plan of publishing his accounts with *L'Express*, where he had published much inflammatory material in the 1950s, or with his own *Les Temps Modernes* and arranged to publish in *France-Soir*, a magazine with a far greater circulation. The articles, edited and tidied up by Claude Lanzmann (editor and co-founder of *Temps Modernes* and partner of Beauvoir) and entitled collectively *Ouragan sur le sucre: un grand reportage a Cuba de Jean-Paul Sartre sur Fidel Castro*, ran from June 28 to July 15 1960, and were well publicised and widely read. *France-Soir* did, however, cagily declare that their position was not necessarily that of Sartre's.²⁷ "Sartre's prospective audience," writes Ronald Aronson, "was not the usual small Left-intellectual sector, but a popular readership of over a million."²⁸ Sartre was not preaching to the converted.

The Spanish translation rights were immediately acquired by *Prensa Latina*, recently established by the two Argentines Guevara and Jorge Ricardo Masetti, and the Cuban edition, *Sartre visita a Cuba*, which was published by Ediciones R in October 1960 and April 1961, contains the translation of the *France-Soir* articles, his *Lunes* essay "Ideología y revolución", the transcript of the interview with the Cuban writers, and an appendix of forty or so photos of Sartre and Beauvoir throughout their trip.

The articles were immediately published in numerous Spanish editions in Latin America as *Huracán sobre el azúcar* and in English in 1961 more prosaically as *Sartre on Cuba*. Further editions were published in German, Portuguese, Italian, Turkish, Russian and Polish.²⁹ When, later in 1960, Sartre and de Beauvoir were in Brazil, a translation of the articles in Portuguese was rapidly assembled and published, and Sartre and Beauvoir endured an autograph session of several hours in a bookstore after more than 1500 people descended on the bookstore.³⁰

There was, very suddenly, great critical attention of Sartre's writings on Cuba, and he was praised and condemned in equal measure for his praise of Castro and the revolution.³¹ And yet, curiously, having authorised the publication of the Cuba articles in book form in all these translation editions, Sartre barred book publication in French, and he was later keen to bury the texts altogether. Just as rapidly as the book had risen, so it fell away.

Sartre was not only keen to bury the Cuba articles; he also chose to abandon a separate book project on Cuba. Beauvoir recalls Sartre at work on "an enormous work on Cuba" that would occupy him until they left for Brazil in the autumn but makes no further mention of this work.³² In 2007, researchers of the Paris-based ITEM (Institut des Textes et Manuscrits Modernes) discovered in the Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center at the University of Texas, Austin, a handwritten, unedited and incomplete manuscript of 1100 pages written, accordingly, after the June and July 1960 *France-Soir* articles. Gilles Philippe and Jean Bourgault, who made the discovery, were keen to publish the manuscript in book form, but the Sartre estate executor, Arlette Elkaïm (Sartre's adopted daughter) felt that Sartre would not have wanted a book published. Instead, Lanzmann was brought on board, and the material was published in *Les Temps Modernes* alongside a reprint of the original *France-Soir* articles.³³

These notes, published as *Appendice*, are similar to the articles but less refined, less coherent, more raw. The tone is at times more strident, the voice less forgiving, the morality more austere. It seems a personal diary, the space where ideas are knocked around before they appear in print, a space for reflection. They are an invaluable document for deepening our understanding of Sartre's relationship with Cuba and the revolution.

Sartre's disinheritance of *Ouragan sur le sucre* may in part account for *Ouragan* remaining in the margins of Sartre's work, rarely discussed in critical detail. Paolucci notes her surprise that neither the French nor the English studies consider the articles in any detail.³⁴ There is critical

analysis, and biographers and scholars have approached *Ouragan* from a variety of perspectives in a variety of discourses. But when compared to the groaning shelves of scholarly works concerning *Being and Nothingness*, *Nausea*, Sartre's plays or even the difficult *Critique*, it is revealing how understudied are the Cuban articles.

Neither have they been well received. There is a tendency to view them as too gushing in their praise of the revolution and of Castro, too enthusiastic, too opinionated. Cohen-Solal likens *Ouragan* to "the articles he wrote about America, in 1945, and about the Soviet Union, in 1954: the same clichés, the same tendency to panegyric, the same analytical superficiality," and she calls the articles "unabashed pro-Cuban propaganda."³⁵ I disagree. I see Sartre doing precisely what he advocated the intellectual should be doing: observing, researching, deliberating and responding. I see his praise of Castro arising from his scrutiny, albeit enthusiastic, of the man. It is not blind praise—although at times it is gushing—as he is quite prepared to interrogate Castro about the growing cult of personality surrounding the leader, and to question the tension between Castro's declared commitment to individual freedom and the emerging authoritarianism of the revolutionary state.

Ronald Aronson, who dedicates more critical space than most to the Cuba articles, frowns upon the literary language of the articles. I applaud it. The sprightly wit and jaunty language make for lively reading. Bearing in mind that his prime readership was French, it is interesting to consider his choice of simile to describe the influence of the United States over Cuba's affairs: "they had neglected nothing in order to make of the newborn nation a future monster, equal to the geese of Strasbourg, who die slowly in the pains of too delicious a liver."³⁶ Cuban ethnographer Fernando Ortiz likens sugar to a demanding woman. Sartre likens sugar to foie gras.

In such a poetic vein (and I cite the original French to show his language) he refers to the nation as "ce monstre diabétique," and writes that "le pays meurt d'une indigestion de dollars et de sucre."³⁷ The island is an "archipel de feu contre la vitre noire de la mer,"³⁸ rebels' beards are *fleuves noirs*, "black rivers covering the chest,"³⁹ and a sunset that he watched with Simone de Beauvoir is a "tomate sanglante, sur les jeunes plantes de tomates."⁴⁰ There is rich poetic quality to these accounts that in no way detracts from their impact. I do grant that he is not innocent of insult, calling US politicians and merchants puritans, presidents Grau and Prio corrupt and venal, Machado tyrannous,

wicked and avaricious, Batista a chimpanzee and his lackeys monkeys; but such punchy language seems pertinent to his analysis, and certainly animates a text focusing in its early chapters on the potentially dry themes of economics, trade regulations and agricultural production.

Sartre's disinheritance of *Ouragan sur le sucre* may in part account for the lack of new editions; in addition to the 2008 *Temps Modernes* journal re-edition, the two book editions that I am aware of are a 2005 Italian edition, edited and introduced by Gabriella Paolucci,⁴¹ and a 2005 Cuban edition, with essays, edited by Eduardo Torres-Cuevas.⁴² To my knowledge there is no English language re-edition. "Who today," asks Lanzmann in 2008, "remembers a text of the great author entitled *Ouragan sur le sucre*? It's nowhere to be found, not in publishing houses, bookshops, nor even the stalls of the *bouquinistes* [book sellers along the Seine.]"⁴³ Even with the Spanish, French and Italian re-editions, Sartre's Cuba articles remain marginal. The time is right, I deem, to bring them in from the cold.

Sartre in Cuba-Cuba in Sartre

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