Edward Said once remarked after meeting the famed French philosopher that although he was “once the most celebrated intellectual, Jean-Paul Sartre had, until quite recently, almost faded from view.”[1] Said’s unfavorable account of his meeting with Sartre and his withered prominence in Europe and beyond was published in 2000 but recounted a meeting between the two that occurred more than twenty years prior, in 1979. His observation comes as no surprise to those familiar with the postwar French intellectual context in which existentialism had given way to criticisms of humanism, first articulated in the linguistic and philosophical anthropology of structuralism and then, later, in the various currents of thought often bound together by the vague designation “poststructuralism.” But as Said knew well, Sartre’s fame and accompanying dismissal was not unique to continental Europe, but extended transnationally and was intimately connected to global political events in Algeria (Sartre’s support for the Algerian resistance and his foreword to Frantz Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth* [1961] are well known) as well as in Egypt, Palestine, and Iraq.

Said’s negative encounter with Sartre was preceded and colored by a series of important Arab defeats at the hands of the Israeli military, first in 1967 and then in 1973—two events that would drastically reorient Arab intellectuals’ investment in Sartre and existentialism as a philosophical and political practice of freedom in the aftermath of colonialism. Prior to these two moments, especially the Six-Day War in 1967, Sartre had shown sustained interest in the politics of decolonization in the Middle East and the plight of the Palestinians. However, his dedication to decolonization in the region was marked by ambivalence towards Palestinian claims to territorial sovereignty in the face of European guilt for the Holocaust. In the words of Peter Makhlof, Said’s account of Sartre “attempt[ed] to assess the confounding irony that Sartre and his indefatigable mind—moving at ease between phenomenology, literature, and dialectics—could be so obtuse on the question of Palestine.”[2] Sartre’s fear of appearing biased towards Palestinians over Israelis and vice versa was not his alone; notably, Simone de Beauvoir and Claude Lanzmann were also heavily involved in Sartre’s interest in and hesitancy to take a clear, committed position on the status of Palestinian liberation. Yet despite this, Sartre was an important interlocutor with whom Arab intellectuals articulated a notion of “Arab existentialism,” which seemed to suggest an exit from the political and philosophical aporia that plagued processes of decolonization.
Enter *No Exit: Arab Existentialism, Jean-Paul Sartre and Decolonization*, Yoav Di-Capua’s well-researched intellectual history, which tells the story of the rise and fall of Arab existentialism (*wujudiyya*) in the 1950s and 60s. *No Exit* is a history of a generation of Arab thinkers born in the 1920s who came of age intellectually at the end of empire in the midst of the perils and promises of that early twentieth-century conjuncture. Coming of age just prior to the “closure” of colonialism, this new generation (*al-jil al-jadid*) saw the aftermaths of the First World War, the eclipse of Pan-Islamism, the erosion of the Ottoman Empire, and the restructuring of territories through mandates in its wake. The prehistories of decolonization, not explicitly addressed in the book but made amply evident in the archive of biographical storytelling expressed in this work (pp. 13-23), are marked by a collective sense of failure—failure to adequately address the new political and existential crisis of imperial debris and destruction that faced societies around the world, alongside the failure to draw forth a lexicon of liberatory discourses and concepts (freedom, authenticity, autonomy, dignity, etc.) seen as adequate to the decolonial task.[3] Set within the political-discursive framing of Pan-Arabism, Arab nationalism, as well as Third Worldist ideologies of liberation, Di-Capua’s book carefully traces the contours of decolonization and transnational philosophical discourse as interrelated processes in which this “new” generation of artists, activists, and intellectuals took up the questions of “freedom, authenticity, and sovereignty” (p. 9) as central problems in need of theoretical and practical solutions in the crisis of postcolonial subjectivity.

Moving away from intellectual history framed solely through the trope of “encounter,” Di-Capua’s narrative is grounded in a mode of storytelling, which inverts the model of “reception” that privileges Europe as the locus of philosophical production and the rest of the world as the site of consumption. Di-Capua foregrounds the biographical and the generational as spaces of political and philosophical significance, inadvertently echoing and extending the feminist maxim that the “personal is political.” In focusing on the particular life stories, writings, and activities of Arab intellectuals like Abd al-Rahman Badawi, Fayiz Sayigh, Liliane and Lutfi al-Khuli, Suhayl Idris, and others, *No Exit* moves away from Jean-Paul Sartre as the authoritative center of existentialism’s political-philosophical project and shows how theory traveled back and forth between metropole and periphery and was creatively engaged by Arab intellectuals in the conjuncture of decolonial liberation.

Di-Capua’s narrative approach to intellectual history invites the reader to reimagine what counts as the privileged agent of postcolonial cosmopolitan mobility. While the discourse of “commitment” (*iltizam*) and notions of radical human freedom belonged to a Sartrean corpus, it would be a mistake to see the philosophical language and literary imagination of existentialism itself as the only mobile element in the movement of Arab existentialists. By tracing the theoretical commitments of this postcolonial generation through their life stories, Di-Capua shows his readers that what made Sartrean existentialism important to the Arab project of decolonization was the labor of Arab intellectual actors and networks across the Middle East and Europe who read, discussed, disseminated, and debated philosophical and literary texts that spoke to a shared global moment of political and social transformation.

*No Exit* masterfully tells how Arab existentialists of the 1960s, like their counterparts in France, came to reject Sartre and seek a philosophical solution beyond existentialism. This rejection was not only aimed at Sartre’s philosophical commitments, but most importantly at his political hesitancy to unequivocally support the Palestinian cause. In the end, Sartre fell victim to an “ethical need for a hierarchy of otherness” that pitted the demands of the Palestinians against those of the Israelis (p. 248). When he eventually came for-
ward with a pro-Israeli statement in May of 1967, many of Sartre’s Arab interlocutors felt his actions amounted to an “iconic act of betrayal,” not only by Sartre himself, but also by the French Left more generally (p. 249).

As a work of intellectual history, No Exit will be of interest and relevance to historians across a wide range of specialties and subfields, but the significance of Di-Capua’s work extends beyond the historiographical. As a theoretical intervention into the narrative of decolonization, No Exit troubles some of the most stubborn assumptions about who theorizes and who is theorized. It also raises concerns about what theory does as a space for not just thinking politics, but also for intervening into the political, which is after all, comprised of personal relations and intimacies, especially when you consider those intellectuals, like the young Egyptian ‘Ali al-Samman, whose relations with Sartre extended from interlocutor to teacher to friend. To return to Makhlouf’s reading of Said’s encounter with Sartre: “A bizarre discord emerges when one recognizes that Sartre stood by Israel not despite the breadth of his insight but seemingly on account of it. Reckoning, as he did, with the case of Israel/Palestine on the level of abstract philosophy, his political views were lost in the lofty echelons of theoria.”[4] No Exit affords us the opportunity to return to both of these elements—the political and the theoretical—in Arab existentialism as well as in Arab decolonization not as a binary, but as a double movement where theory meets practice on that ground. The archive of Arab philosophers and littérateurs that No Exit makes available in English opens up a space for the historian as well as the postcolonial theorist to return to a moment of decolonial potential and its political-ideological stakes to glimpse acts of political commitment, articulation, hope, struggle, and, ultimately, betrayal that could have been otherwise and, yet, still have much to tell us today.

Notes


