Whilst arguably still the most recognisable name in twentieth century philosophy, pop culture’s most iconic intellectual – Parisian, obscure, politically radical and interminably bleak – there is also no denying that Jean-Paul Sartre has become seriously uncool. Today the name ‘Sartre’ is carelessly (and most often mockingly) dropped rather than seriously studied. Titles such as *Being and Nothingness* and *Nausea* no longer signify their own discursive worlds, but instead remind us of a particular, now bygone generational milieu: the sophomoric preoccupation with the ultimate meaninglessness
of existence and the ersatz revolutionary zeal of 1960s counterculture. These books, along with their author, have become dated; they are relics of a fondly remembered but distant past. In fact, the last time I saw the familiar yellow cover of *Being and Nothingness* was as a prop in some or other Hollywood romcom.

In short, either as a clichéd reference to a romanticised sixties youth culture or as a trope of derision aimed at a self-important, joyless intellectualism, ‘Sartre’ has been reduced for many to a now unreadable author, one who had taken the arrogance of stylised self-negation to such dizzying heights as to reject the Nobel Prize for Literature, and who will finally only be remembered for his one addition to the collected soundbites of modern culture, ‘Hell is other people’.

This pattern of derision and neglect does not apply to all the so-called existentialists. Camus remains the sexy, ever-youthful author of *The Outsider*, truly a twentieth century classic and, along with novels like *The Brothers Karamazov* and *Ulysses*, one of those ‘must-reads’ that still bestows cultural and intellectual capital on the young. Simone de Beauvoir, of course, will always be the symbolic reference point for the emergence of feminism, and her *The Second Sex* is still more than just a passable 21st birthday gift amongst B.A. students. And Merleau-Ponty, similarly, is a die-hard; not as easy to assimilate into popular culture, he has proven indispensable for those who take the embodied nature of conscious and cognitive life seriously, and who have set their sights on traversing the narrow bridge between the humanities and the high-tech areas of artificial intelligence, robotics and complex computational systems.

But Sartre? An ugly, squint dwarf, as well-known Afrikaans novelist, André Brink, recently described him in a newspaper article . . .

How did Sartre come to represent the excesses of intellectualism and armchair ‘philosophy’? And to what extent is it fair to dismiss him thusly? These are some of the questions that are raised, and indeed answered, in this fascinating book by Paige Arthur. It is a book that is absolutely relevant for a (especially critical) psychology audience, even though Arthur is not a psychologist and does not explicitly foreground psychological issues in this work.

Sartre, like Merleau-Ponty, certainly made some significant and direct contributions to psychology. In other words, besides writing works that have proven applicable to theoretical debates in psychology, they have produced original psychological theory. In this regard, according to me, Merleau-Ponty reigns supreme, but in an era that has witnessed the stubborn re-emergence of theoretical concerns with subjectivity, the body and affect, Sartre’s *Sketch for a Theory of the Emotions* and *The Imaginary* certainly remain relevant and at times truly fascinating texts.

In *Unfinished Projects*, however, Paige Arthur is less concerned with the ‘psychological’ Sartre than with the man who became famous (and indeed, infamous) as the original engaged intellectual. It is the political Sartre, the passionate anti-colonialist and so-called Third Worldism’s first and most visible European
interlocutor that is the focus here. Arthur convincingly argues that the scorn with which Sartre is so often regarded today, especially in French intellectual circles, stems at least in part from shifts in political discourse in France from the 1970s onwards. During this time it became increasingly clear that decolonisation was fraught with failure and contradiction, which directly impacted on the meaning of citizenship and civility in a postcolonial France. In the process Sartre was reduced to a political optic overburdened by Cold War ideology and the levelling discourse of ‘totalitarianism’ – if not also by a new, sophisticated racism directed at Africans but increasingly also at Islam.

Arthur is extremely successful in dispelling many of the caricatured readings of Sartre’s political writings, such as the political sections in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* and his famous essays on Frantz Fanon, Patrice Lumumba and others. Indeed, Sartre re-emerges in this book as a principled and coherent critic of colonialism and racism; and moreover, as a thinker who still poses questions and offers observations highly relevant to contemporary debates about post-colonialism, globalisation, and imperialism. Arthur’s aim is not to deify Sartre or to place him beyond critique, but to demonstrate how the discourses that added to his blanket dismissal as a relevant political thinker also aided to obscure and distort political debate about the post-colonial condition and patterns of racism and exclusion in the world today.

In this sense, then, the book is indeed directly relevant for a generation of South African psychologists increasingly interested in the theoretical resources of so-called ‘postcolonial theory’. Sartre, unsurprisingly given the history of derision referred to above, ‘has been written out of the foundational story that postcolonial studies tells about itself’ (p. 228). This, of course, despite the fact that many of postcolonial studies’ foundational references, such as Fanon and Memmi, but also Che Guevara, knew and utilised Sartre’s work in their own thought and practice.

What makes Arthur’s book so fascinating and rewarding is that postcolonial studies are not here infused by a decontextualised body of Sartrean theory; it is instead a discussion of Sartre’s writing and activism both about, and in the context of, specific moments and struggles within the larger story of French colonial and anti-colonial politics. The book works on various levels. It is an intellectual history of Sartre, but also of French philosophy and social science more broadly, against the background of the process of decolonisation and the often contradictory consequences it had (alongside the Cold War) for leftwing politics in Europe. It is a close reading of Sartre’s often misunderstood but still fascinating political texts. It is a powerful critique of human rights discourses and discourses on ‘totalitarianism’ and the ‘new citizenship’ which emerged in the early 1970s and which still dominate political thinking today. All this, in fact, and more; Arthur’s book is one for reading and rereading. It makes it clear that thinking through colonialism and its consequences remains an unfinished project; and that Sartre still has something to say in this project.
All in all, Paige certainly succeeds in reminding us that Sartre was ‘a pioneering anti-racist, staunch anti-colonialist, and tireless defender of individual freedom’ (p. 224), and that he is not reducible to the anachronistic, elitist caricature of the self-serving but masochistic Europhobic intellectual many see him as today. He remains a radical, principled voice. He remains to be read.

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**BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE**

Desmond Painter is a senior lecturer in psychology at Stellenbosch University. He teaches mainly social psychology. He recently obtained the D Litt et Phil degree from Unisa.