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Fifty Years on : Albert Camus as Philosopher and Political Thinker

C. L. Starling

Fifty years ago, on January 4, 1960, Albert Camus died in a car accident at the age of 46 when at the top of his fame, having won the Nobel Prize for Literature only three years before. Camus' enduring *literary* repute was secure even before he won the prize, and, if anything, is even greater today. *L'Etranger* and *La Chute*, in particular, are frequently mentioned as classic prose works of twentieth century French literature. On the other hand, Camus' status as a philosopher has been evaluated variously in the ensuing years and his status as a political thinker likewise. On the fiftieth anniversary of his death, it seems to me worthwhile to review the philosophical and political positions of Camus and assess the current "state of play" with regard to his legacies in these domains.

A first question is whether Camus was, in fact, "philosophical." In 1945, he famously declared, after all: "I am not a philosopher. I do not believe sufficiently in reason to believe in a system." ("*Interview A* Servir", in *E,* 1427, my translation).

This is a telling statement, providing as it does a succinct description of how its author conceived of the philosopher (as one who believes in "systems"). For Camus, following Nietzsche, philosophy's failing was that it unduly emphasized and frequently misused reason. Reason had become a plaything of intellectuals bent on representing reality in systems, yet the very act of systematizing could only *misrepresent*. This being so, he stood aloof from the two intellectual currents that dominated French postwar thought. He balked when early commentators persistently linked him to existential philosophy, and he was deeply uncomfortable with Marxism. For all their thematic emphasis on the

immediate and the concrete, both existentialism and Marxism were, in Camus' eyes, like any philosophy, prone to abstract excess. In his own bold epigram, he even goes as far as to declare that "ideas are the opposite of thought" (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, in *E*, 191, my translation).

Spurning such misguided ambition on the part of the "philosopher," Camus would have preferred the more modest designation of "thinker," though with qualifications. "To think," he writes, "is no longer to unify or to render the apparent familiar in the guise of a grand principle." Out, then, with over-reaching abstraction. "To think is to relearn to see and be attentive and is to direct one's awareness. It is to make of each idea and each image, in the manner of Proust, a privileged instance." (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, quoted by Françoise Armengaud in *ACP*, 42, my translation). A philosophy, then, of the unique and of difference.

Throughout his writing career, from such early works as *Noces* to the highly autobiographical and unfinished *Le Premier Homme*, Camus sought to express an immediate, very personal, passionate and sensual apprehension of the world. This may seem on the surface non-philosophical, yet it involved its own assertion of values and took shape as a form of thought in opposition to perceptions of reality and notions of conduct mediated by systems and ideologies. Above all, Camus never lost sight of the individual, who in his eyes could not be truthfully represented in abstraction, and should not be sacrificed to an abstract ideal. Against the rationalist, system-prone philosopher, we see here a writer claiming to stand as an "artist-thinker": "Why," he writes, "am I an artist and not a philosopher? It is because I think according to words and not according to ideas." (*CII*, 146, my translation).

Against abstraction, then, Camus opposes a *concrete* manner of thinking and of depiction, and as we see in the following lines of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, he holds that this form of expression is in fact more genuinely didactic than any abstract explanation: "To

write in images rather than arguments shows up a certain way of thinking [⋯] that is persuaded of the uselessness of all principle of explanation and convinced of the instructive message of the immediately apparent." (*Le Mythe de Sisysphe* in *E*, 179, my translation). In the section of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* titled *Philosophie et le Roman* ("Philosophy and the Novel"), in lines that on the surface chime discordantly with his earlier assertion that he was "not a philosopher," Camus affirms that "the great novelists are philosophical novelists." This is not because they refer to grand principles. Quite the reverse. The great novelists (and Camus counts Balzac, Sade, Melville, Dostoevski, Proust, Malraux and Kafka among them) are those who "create a universe" rather than write according to any preconceived thesis (see *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, in *E*, 178).

Reading Camus' praise of the image, the concrete and the particular, it is hard not to recall his mentor Jean Grenier, and particularly Grenier's 1938 *Essai Sur L'Esprit de l' Orthodoxie*. As one critic has written, "being with and reading Jean Grenier gave (Camus) the conviction that thought could be elaborated outside the adhesion to a dogma or an orthodoxy, and rather in the reflective awareness of daily life." (Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi in *ACP*, 23, my translation). It should perhaps be added that Grenier's young prodigy was already well-disposed to such a conviction, having very early developed his "Mediterranean" *parti pris* in favour of the physical, the sensual, and the immediate.

At first sight, this might appear to be contradicted by Camus' act of joining the Algerian Communist Party in 1934, at the age of 21. However, his brief support for Communism and his later staunch opposition to it both derived from the same motives. Far from subscribing to any orthodoxy emanating from Moscow, Camus aspired to *transform* Communist doctrine, to humanize it, in the light of a Mediterranean wisdom that he saw as having humanized Christianity: "⋯the same land that transformed so many doctrines must transform those of our time. A Mediterranean collectivism will be different from a Russian collectivism⋯" (*E*, 1325, my translation). One day there could be, he felt, a "new Mediterranean culture" characterized by a solidarity founded on truth, justice and

innocence. This was, of course, a world away from the day-to-day politics of the Algerian Communist Party, its manoeuvring, dissimulation and submission to the Moscow line. That Camus embarked upon a morally intransigent struggle to reform the Party shows just how passionately he was committed to his personal vision.

One can imagine with what exasperation orthodox Marxists in the party must have striven to deal with this fervent young man and his idiosyncratic conception of Mediterranean Communism. Ultimately, inevitably, he was expelled.

Consistently thereafter, the author of *L'Etranger* kept his distance from Marxism, mocking its grandiose abstractions and disdaining the future it vaunted as being a mere mirage sustained only by cynical calculation and naive faith. His observation of Marxist faith led him to write of the "divinization" of History, most extensively in *L'Homme Révolté* (commonly translated in English as *The Rebel*, though sometimes rendered as *Man In Revolt*). When this voluminous work appeared, the French Left was all but entirely under the sway of Marxist dialectics, so that when Camus spoke up against it, he cut a very lonely figure indeed. In the sharply polarized political scene of the time, he was immediately accused of being an accomplice of the Right, and no more hurtfully than by the Saint-Germain existentialists (Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir at their head) whom he had long considered friends.

In the watershed polemic of 1952 between Camus, on the one hand, and master dialecticians Sartre and Francis Jeanson (at one time Sartre's secretary) on the other, we see most clearly the contours of Camus' philosophical and political positions, and it is worth dwelling on this famous exchange at some length. Those familiar with it will remember that when *L'Homme Révolté* appeared and Sartre read it, he abhorred the book but was reluctant to give an account of it in his revue *Les Temps Modernes* because he knew his unfavourable opinion would be ill-received by his very susceptible long-standing friend. He therefore asked for someone else at *Les Temps Modernes* to take on

the task and it was his youthful managing editor, Francis Jeanson, who volunteered. Jeanson proceeded to write a review reportedly more severe than Sartre had contemplated. Camus, clearly offended, hurled back an indignant letter not to Jeanson, but over his head to Sartre. In turn, Sartre and Jeanson both answered, so that the polemic consists in essence of four texts, although it was eventually prolonged when Camus wrote his *Défense de l'Homme Révolté* (*Defense of the Rebel*) and a further, implicit response to his adversaries in the form of the novella *La Chute* (*The Fall*).

One of the most insistent criticisms made of Camus in this polemic is that he was *incompetent* in philosophy. This already had a history: in his generally praising review of *L'Etranger* (when treating of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*), Sartre had written: "Camus shows off a bit by quoting passages from Jaspers, Heidegger, and Kierkegaard, whom, by the way, he does not always seem to have quite understood." (English translation from *"An Explication of 'The Stranger"* in Bree, 108). Similarly, the analyses to be found in *L' Homme Révolté*, it was held, were too lightweight to be taken seriously: not only did they rely on second-hand readings of thinkers like Hegel and Marx (a failing acknowledged by some sympathetic to Camus), but they were characterized by insufficient logical rigour. In the review that precipitated the polemic, Jeanson patiently outlined how Camus' thought had evolved from the very concrete revolt represented in *L'Etranger* to the notion of historical revolt found in *L'Homme Révolté*. In the latter, Camus had written that at the outset, revolt had wished only to "conquer its own being and maintain it in the face of God." This recalls the episode of the chaplain in *L'Etranger* and the anti-theistic revolt of Rieux in *La Peste* (*The Plague*). However, in a later stage, Camus went on to write, this metaphysical revolt "lost the memory of its origins" and "squarely joined the revolutionary movement," thence setting out to conquer the world in the name of reason and at the expense of murders "multiplied to infinity." In short, "revolution, even and especially that which claims to be materialist, is just a metaphysical crusade that has lapsed into excess." Reading and quoting such assertions, Jeanson inferred that for Camus historical revolt was nothing but a *metaphysical* phenomenon, a consequence of

the degradation of revolt against an unfairly oppressive human condition (again see *La Peste*). The reviewer then proceeded to distil three principles from Camus' argument: first that historical revolt had manifested itself only in the form of revolutions; second that a revolution is a perverted revolt, and third that it is the wish to deify the species that leads revolutions to betray their initial movement of revolt and embrace totalitarianism.

Unsurprisingly, Jeanson took Camus severely to task over the notion that revolt was primarily, if not uniquely, metaphysical. Where the latter claimed in *L'Homme Révolté* that his purpose was not to review the historical or economic causes of the great revolutions, but rather to trace within revolutions the logical consequences of metaphysical revolt, the former saw Camus as in fact allowing *no place* for the historical and economic. In Camus' scheme of things, wrote Jeanson, the concept of "revolution" was reduced to that of "divinization of man," which amounted to suppressing history itself. What, Jeanson asked, of those who are hungry and struggle against those they see as responsible for their hunger? Camus, he concluded, did not believe in the existence of infrastructures.

In the next phase of his review, Jeanson noted how Camus blamed Marx for the supposed degradation of revolt into metaphysical revolution, and emphasized that Camus' concept of Marx's thought as being determined absolutely by exterior reality was simplistic and erroneous. According to Jeanson, Camus was in any case wrong to blame Marx. Any consistent vice in revolutions he should rather point to in the "concrete structures of revolutionary action." Blaming the Stalinist consequence of Marxism on Marxist theory, Jeanson contended, presented two problems. The first was that Marxist theory was an imperfect representation of Marx's thought, and the second was that the *concrete* motivations of revolution were, again, neglected.

While acknowledging these major flaws in Camus' argumentation, one can still see in it an important warning. Making revolutionary efficacy the dominant ethical criterion

enables justification of myriad dubious acts in the name of revolution, and thus perverts almost inevitably what Jeanson called the "concrete structures of revolutionary action" (see Arthur Koestler's *Darkness At Noon* for a compelling illustration of this phenomenon). In a word, whatever shortcomings exist in Camus' starting point and argumentation, the tyranny that he warns of is a logical outcome of the revolutionary equation of ends and means. An over-reaching struggle for justice leads to a greater injustice. It is a scenario that the world has seen time and again.

It is to avert such tyranny that Camus argues for restraint and advocates "revolt," for revolt is faithful to the real where revolutionary thought "leaps" from the real to a fallacious and dangerous ideal. Here again, Camus' thought shows a long-standing consistency. In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, he had written: "To know how to maintain oneself on that vertiginous ridge. That is honesty; the rest is subterfuge." In this stance, of awareness and of revolt, we live "the subtle moment that precedes the leap." The leap is to a longed-for but fallacious coherence, whether that proposed by chaplain or priest, or that sketched by those Marxists who believe in (or mendaciously proffer) a blissful end to class struggle. Both these "solutions" to human woes are for Camus illusory and immoral, the one a "sin against life" and the other a glib justification of violent means. As Daniel Charles has pointed out, this preference for the subtle moment that precedes the leap of faith explains why Camus admires a painter like Balthus. This latter "does not deform nature; he petrifies it." (Charles, 244, my translation). For Camus, religious or ideological interpretations indeed *deform* rather than depict fundamental and authentic humanity.

The above argument challenges the Marxists and their fellow travelers to focus with unremitting honesty on the issue of revolutionary violence. It is an argument with powerful rhetorical appeal. Yet, as we have seen, it offers no practical solutions for those who have ultimate recourse to revolutionary action. Predictably, Jeanson and Sartre continued to press the point: what relevance did Camus' noble and measured revolt have

for the workers of Billancourt (a poor suburb of Paris) or for those oppressed by colonialism? Was not the refusal to "get one's hands dirty" by responding to violence with violence just a comfortable pose that amounted to complicity with the oppressors?

In the years since this polemic, Camus' reputation has mirrored intellectual trends at large. As long as the Saint-Germain intellectuals and Marxism were in the ascendancy, Camus was for many, despite his leftist record, a naïve dupe, or worse, accomplice of the Right. Then, as degree by degree, Marxism retreated (with Budapest, Prague, the Gulag and the falling of the Berlin Wall), the author of *L'Homme Révolté* appeared vindicated, even prophetically saintly, while his erstwhile opponents were correspondingly demonized. The polemic, it seemed to many, had at last ended with a KO in Camus' favour··· However, in the light of more sober reflection, the most persuasive emerging view is that Camus and Sartre both had their willing blind spots, their own forms of "bad faith." In the case of Camus, the most telling test is his conduct with regard to the war in Algeria, where both familial bonds and his dogmatic anti-communism prevented him from acknowledging any justice in the cause of that country's National Liberation Front (F.L.N.).

All this is well-expressed by Ronald Aronson in his much-praised book on the Camus-Sartre relationship. Aronson writes:

> What Camus lacked, as did the liberal Cold Warriors who embraced him, was the saving insight that Sartre had been struggling toward since *Dirty Hands:* in many of its key structures our world is constituted by violence. In *The Communists and Peace,* the first part of which he wrote just before breaking with Camus, Sartre confronted the violence of the democratic capitalist system. And when he turned his attention to colonialism in 1956, Sartre showed how, in the colonies, violence created the social order and its people. He proclaimed the reality of Algeria to which Camus had closed his eyes. (Aronson, 221)

(Let us note in passing that Aronson sees Sartre too as flawed insofar as he came to advocate terrorism as a legitimate response to oppression).

Looking back on the polemic and Camus' later political conduct, it is hard to disagree with Aronson's verdict that while he was "half-right" (in speaking out about the dark implications of Soviet-style communism), he was also simplistic in his conception and portrayal of liberation movements such as the F.L.N. and understated or disregarded violence that was not the means of social protest, but its cause. Yet even if he is only "half-right" as Aronson contends, the central point he makes about revolt needing a conscience is of immense value. In his political thought, it remains Camus' most honorable contribution, applicable to all uprisings. Think of the excesses in Cambodia, for example, where a rigid Marxist ideology became murderous in just the way Camus cautioned against.

The central point of Camus' political philosophy thus remained, unremittingly, the individual, here and now. Had he not declared in 1946 (in the second essay of a series published in the newspaper *Combat*) that the important thing in times of strife is to "save the bodies", meaning "save individual people"? The same priority is evident in *La Peste* (*The Plague*) and *Les Justes* (*The Just*). Each human being is a privileged instance of that abstraction we term "humanity".

We return here to the task we set ourselves at the outset. With the evidence now before us, how might we characterize Camus' philosophical and political contributions fifty years on from the night the car in which he was a passenger slammed into a tree in the French countryside? As for the former, we can say that we see above all an unremitting focus on the concrete, on the individual, on the present, and therefore, inevitably, on what has more recently come to be termed *difference*. For sure, this focus occurs within an idiosyncratic framework: Camus' vision is an anti-theistic one, human hope absurdly

breaking upon the silence of a God who —— however much his existence may be denied —— seems to lurk as an impassive, if not malevolent, force. In whatever terms it is framed, however, this focus on difference makes Camus' philosophical lineage and legacy clear. He himself acknowledged his debt to Nietzsche, but with the advantage of hindsight we can now see him as exhibiting a similar focus on difference to that we find in "postmodern" thinkers like Gilles Deleuze who themselves have gladly taken up the Nietzschean heritance.

In this connection, it is evident that the term "philosophy" is used increasingly, as a result of the postmodern critique of Eurocentrism, to refer to modes of thought that are far from privileging the once-sacrosanct *logos* (and in this connection it is pertinent to record the assertion of Daniel Charles that Camus "very probably" got the idea of *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* from Japanese thinker Kuki Shuzo). In short, while in his time Camus often expressed antipathy to "philosophy" (taken in the narrow sense of thought centred on and privileging the *logos*), the very term "philosophy" has since evolved to encompass hitherto marginal or marginalized positions that he could espouse. In this sense, it is plausible now to characterize Camus as a precursor of Europe's postmodern philosophy.

In political terms, too, Camus foreshadows later thought. In postmodern parlance, the modern Age of Grand Schemes may be over, and "revolution" may be a passé word. But postmodernism is aware that only constant vigilance can prevent the emergence of new utopian "narratives of emancipation." In this sense, Camus' *mise en garde* against political movements that turn on Ideas and Abstractions makes him in the political domain too a postmodern before his time.

Abbreviations

CII: Carnets II

E: Essais

ACP: Albert Camus et la Philosophie

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