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Symmetry and Solidarity in the Settler Colony Revisiting Albert Camus's Algerian Writings

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1. In a striking and important passage from his book *Murderous Consent: On the Accommodation of Violent Death*,¹ the French philosopher Marc Crépon writes: “We know how complex and diffuse is the sentiment of consent, whose infinitely variable forms give shape to the course of history and engender a geography of mourning – a history and geography that charts the difference between the deaths that affect us and the disappearance of those who do not. The problem of consent is the line of separation that it draws”.² My aim in this essay is to appraise Crépon’s suggestive exploration of Camus and justice in Chapter 1 of the book, and especially to think through something the chapter touches upon but does not explore at length, namely the settler-colonial location (“French Algeria”) of some of Camus’s most pained (but also most conflicted or contradictory) pronouncements on the partisan justification of murder and the rebellion against murderous consent – defined by Crépon as “any accommodation with violent death, any habituation to murder, any compromise, in reality untenable, with principles ... that should forbid even the slightest exception, *regardless of who the victims are*”.³ While I shall focus on Camus, I suggest that thinking through the political and ethical repercussions of settler-colonialism and its racial regimes, its “lines of separation”, also inflects or counters some of Crépon’s claims, allowing us to explore in a situated way what he rightly underscores as the

¹ This paper was originally delivered at Symposium on Marc Crépon’s *Murderous Consent: On the Accommodation of Violent Death*, trans. Michael Loriaux, foreword James Martel (New York: Fordham University Press, 2019) hosted by the Centre for Philosophy and Critical Thought, Goldsmiths, University of London, 25 October 2019.

² Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 17.

³ Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 2.

incommensurability between modes of consent.⁴ It can, for instance, lead us to interrogate the notion that in desiring to punish perpetrators or beneficiaries of their violation, victims are “biased by their own plight”.⁵ What if such plight provides a profound source of knowledge, a knowledge of justice, rather than a culpable bias? Conversely, what if the realities of settler-colonial violence cast doubt on the notion that “condemning the other to death is always grounded, in word and image, in a logic of necessity”⁶ – that it might also pertain to logics of caprice and indifference, underwritten by a racism that need not require any theory of history (contrary to a prejudice, written into theories of (anti-)“totalitarianism”, which treats the quantity of violence as commensurate to the quality of abstraction or “logic” of an ideology).⁷ What if the inability to define the settler-colonial situation as *one* world ruptured our very notion of being-in-the-world, making murderous consent something that structures a certain phenomenology, a certain occupation of space, rather than any kind of rupture, of world-*un*making?

2. My guiding question is thus the following: in what sense are the ethical and political presuppositions of a “rebellion” against murderous consent affected by the

⁴ Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 23. As Crépon writes: “one of the most difficult issues concerning murderous consent is the necessary distinction between the various forms of consent. They can be neither easily merged nor easily separated such that no blurring of the boundaries separating them would render them undecidable. The murder of the Arab on the beach (*The Stranger*), Caligula’s crimes, and the murderous acts of the Russian nihilists (*The Just Assassins*) are incommensurable. This is also, more generally, the case of the death penalty, of the ‘license to kill’ that is war, of war crimes that transgress or pervert the rules and limits set by international law, and of crimes against humanity— to say nothing of the ‘culpable’ silence that greets such crimes, the passive or active support for them, or their justification or encouragement. Nothing is more worrisome than our willingness to disregard this incommensurability. We do so whenever we submit our relation to the mortality of the other to *one and the same* standard. Nor should we ignore the fact that these books confront this relation in modalities other than that of providing help, support, and care or of *being opposed to, refusing, or being against* the death of others. Any possibilities (*living-with* [*vivre-avec*], ‘solidarity,’ or ‘support’) that exhibit such opposition, refusal, or being- against are suspended, eclipsed, and even erased by the notion that I am trying to understand here as ‘murderous consent.’ Such is the distinctive trait of consent’s violence. It destroys an essential modality of our relation to the mortality of others. The challenge is to understand the importance of this modality and how it is destroyed” (p. 23).

⁵ Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 18.

⁶ Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 21.

⁷ Incidentally, how – unless we improbably claim for it some kind of transcendental primacy, flying in the face of human history and anthropology – is the commandment “thou shalt not kill” not abstract, not also a “dogma or rule” (p. 27)? Conversely, it seems historically improbable to treat murderous consent as linked to nihilism, when it appears grounded instead in passionate if partial or partisan beliefs in the world.

specific forms that murderous consent takes within settler-colonial relations, as well as through the political subjectivities of settlers? How does settler-colonialism as an ongoing process and an embedded structure of feeling indissociable from racial regimes of domination – with their geographies and lines of separation – affect the very possibility of a humanist discourse of revolt, with its claims for solidarity and commonality? To stay with the powerful quote from the ‘Thought at the Meridian’ section of *The Rebel* – with its reflections, drawn from the experience of resistance, about “a morality which, far from obeying abstract principles, discovers them only in the heat of battle and in the incessant movement of contradiction”⁸ – can we take “the mutual recognition of a common destiny and the communication of men between themselves” as a real possibility in a situation, such as that of colonised Algeria, where geography and subjectivity have been formed for over a century by a racial regime of separation and supremacy? Where do we find the “cosmopolitan” or “universal” bonds in the settler-colonial condition? Shouldn’t we rather reverse the argument here, and propose that in these circumstances commonality or universality are a precarious invention or construction based on “ruptures, interruptions, and suspensions” of a primary and underlying condition which is systematically devoid *by design* of any true solidarity beyond paternalism or charity.⁹ Why would we want or need to accord nonviolence “foundational anteriority”?¹⁰ And in what sense can we speak of the “mutual complicity of men” in a situation in which the very notion of a “unity of the human condition” is thwarted or forbidden, not just by the institutions of power, but by the very structures of perception and everyday life that methodically dehumanise the native in the eyes of the settler? Note too that the extreme violence of the settler-colonial condition can easily do without “absolute laws of history” or a “planned vision of the future” – there suffices for its violence a reactive, miserable sense of racial privilege that defends, tooth and claw, a daily practice of

⁸ Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 26. This passage resonates with Claudio Pavone’s searing and profound reflection on the morality of the Italian resistance in *A Civil War: A History of the Italian Resistance*, ed. Stanislao Pugliese, trans. Peter Levy (London: Verso, 2014).

⁹ This invented complicity could be found, for instance, in the figure of Noël Favrelière, the French paratrooper who defected to the Armée de Liberation Nationale in 1956 with a prisoner who was about to be executed, participated in the resistance struggle while not shooting at his former comrades, and ended up directing the Musée d’Alger in the mid-60s. See his account of his desertion and resistance, banned and confiscated upon its initial publication: *Désert à l’aube* (Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1960).

¹⁰ Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 41.

dispossession. Again, under these conditions “our relation to the mortality and vulnerability of *all others*” is something that could be produced, but it is never a given, nor need it be. And why should a politics aimed at the elimination of murder need to make *foundational* claims about the human condition?

3. Crépon writes that “as soon as the recourse to force becomes necessary, *something is lost*. What is lost is our undeniable faith in the unity of the world, as promised by the dream of a ‘mutual complicity’ between people”.¹¹ But what compels us to take that unity as given? How much off-screen violence, so to speak, is necessary for any experiential coherence to hold? Fractured and soldered by inequality, exploitation, race, sexual difference, etc., are social worlds ever really “unified”? We can definitely accept the relational character of existence, and even the fact that relationality subtends all morality and all politics, without thereby presuming that this is a relation of unity or concord; unsociable sociability, structural antagonism, conflict over scarcity, all can make strong claims to the status of being primary relations for beings, such as ourselves, constitutively out of joint, and for whom relation and negativity, including death, are indissociable. This seems to be acknowledged when Crépon affirms that solidarity and mutual complicity are relationships or connections that need to be *invented*, but in such a way that they “tolerate no exceptions or exclusions”.¹² The entire discussion of Freud and the drives in Chapter 2 of *Murderous Consent* attests to our deeper, unconscious entanglements with the acceptance of the other’s violent death as something which co-defines our being-in-the-world. But it remains telling that Camus’s arguments are rather exempt in themselves, and in Crépon’s recounting, from any systematic consideration of what we could call the dark side of our political anthropology – as evidenced by the French writer’s repeated characterisation of those who carry out violence against French settler civilians as “mad” (interestingly, as far as I can tell, not a characterisation levied at torturers, or indeed those who perpetrate military massacres, which Camus frequently euphemises as “repression”¹³).

¹¹ Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 35.

¹² Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 38.

¹³ See Olivier Gloag, ‘The Colonial Contradictions of Albert Camus’, *Jacobin*, 10 October 2020, <https://jacobin.com/2020/10/colonialism-albert-camus-france-algeria-sartre>

4. How do these ethical and philosophical questions play out in Camus's response to Algerian resistance and to its war of independence against French colonial domination? While Crépon is largely correct to say that Camus engages in "uncompromising denunciation of France's colonial policies," the author of *The Plague* clearly does not undertake an uncompromising denunciation of French colonialism *as such*, nor indeed of all its policies. This is evident in his support for the Plan Lauriol, which, in aiming at a differential federalist integration of the Arab population, perpetuated an *a priori* refusal of self-determination. Notwithstanding a valiant effort to analyse the nature of colonial oppression in his texts from 1939 and 1945, an unwillingness to fully confront the systemic and symbolic violence of over a century of settler-colonialism \ vitiated Camus's approach to the "two forms of violence and their symmetrical effect" – (settler-)colonial and anti-colonial, French(-Algerian) and Arab-Algerian. Is any refusal of this *symmetry*, any accounting for the history of settler-colonial violence and the balance of forces in the war of independence, necessarily, as Crépon intimates, a "casuistry of blood"? Is distinction, *discrimination* between cases – for instance between the weapons of the strong and those of the weak – one that "establishes an inconstant and biased relationship toward injuries, suffering, injustice and death"?¹⁴ Or is it possible *both* to accept the principle of a limitation of violence *and* to reject symmetry? In the case of Algeria, it was not the differential counting of the dead and wounded that cast aside "dreams of unity and complicity" – but the glaring fact that those dreams were radically impeded by a material and psychic geography that had inequality as its first and last word. This is not to say that settler-colonial realities are ones in which complicity, unity, solidarity are entirely impossible, but that these are exceptions, inventions, suspensions of a world whose very phenomenology is divided and divisive.

5. Camus tries to wend a third way, a kind of gradualist sublation of settler-colonialism without true rupture or any forthright recognition of the racial regime underlying French presence and domination. This is evident from the preface to *Chroniques Algériennes*, where he opposed both a "conservative and oppressive

¹⁴ Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 45.

policy” and “a policy of surrender, which would abandon the Arab people to even greater misery, tear the French people of Algeria from their century-old roots, and do nothing but encourage the new imperialism that threatens the liberty of France and the West, to no one’s benefit”. Note that there is nothing post-ideological about the references to the West/Occident or indeed to Arab/Soviet imperialism, whatever one may think of their merits.¹⁵ It is only on the basis of a primary solidarity with one’s own that Camus thinks a critique of the unacceptable aspects of French repression is legitimate:

When one’s family is in immediate danger of death, one might wish that it were a more generous and just family and even feel obliged to make it so, as this book will attest, and yet (make no mistake!) remain in solidarity against the mortal threat, so that the family might at least survive and therefore preserve its opportunity to become more just. To my mind, this is what honor and true justice are— or, if not, then nothing I know is of any use in this world. Only on this basis does one have the right and the duty to say that the armed struggle and repression that the French have undertaken are in some respects unacceptable ... we must refuse to justify these methods on any grounds whatsoever, including effectiveness. Once one begins to justify them, even indirectly, no rules or values remain. One cause is as good as another, and pointless warfare, unrestrained by the rule of law, consecrates the triumph of nihilism. Whether intentionally or not, this takes us back to the law of the jungle, where violence is the only principle. Even those who have heard enough talk of morality must understand that even when it comes to winning wars, it is better to suffer certain injustices than to commit them, and that such actions do us more harm than a hundred enemy guerrillas. When, for example, these practices are used against those in Algeria who do not hesitate to massacre the innocent or torture or excuse torture, are they not also incalculable errors because they risk justifying the very crimes

¹⁵ In this respect, I would emphatically dissent from Crépon’s description of Camus as “foreign to all ideological commitment” (p. 26).

that we seek to fight? Can a method really be “effective” if its result is to justify the most unjustifiable actions of one’s adversary?¹⁶

There is a strange play of false mirrors in Camus’s text, where the claim about symmetrical violences is based on the demand not to surrender the unity of France and Algeria, and in which morality is articulated with patriotism. The double condemnation of torture and terrorism is a peculiar dyad, as though Algerian civilians were not routinely killed by French forces and torture was the only form of military violence. This mutilated dialectic of symmetry and asymmetry is deeply conditioned by the fact of the settler-colony, not least perhaps by the impossibility for the Algerians to be French patriots, or indeed citizens. Consider this passage, also from the Preface:

The Right has thus ceded the moral response entirely to the Left, while the Left has ceded the patriotic response entirely to the Right. France has suffered from both reactions. The country needed moralists less joyfully resigned to their country’s misfortune and patriots less willing to allow torturers to act in France’s name. Metropolitan France has apparently been unable to come up with any political solution other than to say to the French of Algeria, “Die, you have it coming to you!” or “Kill them all, they’ve asked for it.” Which makes for two different policies but one single surrender, because the real question is not how to die separately but how to live together.¹⁷

The entire reasoning, which is not incidental to Camus’s demand for a truce or his rebellion against cruelty, depends on the inability to allow the notions of *nation*,

¹⁶ Albert Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, ed. Alice Kaplan, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2014), p. 29.

¹⁷ Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, p. 29.

patriotism or country to be ascribed to Arab or Muslim Algerians, and sets the frame for any future justice as necessarily *French*:¹⁸

I ask those who might be vexed by these words to set their ideological reflexes aside for a moment and just think. Some want their country to identify totally with justice, and they are right. But can one remain just and free in a nation that is defunct or enslaved? Is not absolute purity for a nation identical with historical death? Others want their country to be physically defended, against the entire world if need be, and they are not wrong. But can a people survive without being reasonably just toward other peoples? France is dying because it has not been able to resolve this dilemma. The first group of people wants the universal at the expense of the particular. The second wants the particular at the expense of the universal. But the two go together. Before we can discover human society, we must know national society. If national society is to be preserved, it must be open to a universal perspective. Specifically, if your goal is to have France rule alone over eight million silent subjects in Algeria, then France will die. If your goal is to sever Algeria from France, then both will perish. If, however, the French people and the Arab people unite their differences in Algeria, a meaningful future is possible for the French, the Arabs, and the entire world.¹⁹

¹⁸ It is interesting to note that the steadfast refusal to grant existence to an Algerian nation (which bears significant parallels to contemporary refusals to accord national status to Palestinians), was compatible in Camus, with an affirmation of the *political existence of the Arab people of Algeria*: “As for the political dimension, I want to point out that the Arab people also exist. By that I mean that they aren’t the wretched, faceless mob in which Westerners see nothing worth respecting or defending. On the contrary, they are a people of impressive traditions, whose virtues are eminently clear to anyone willing to approach them without prejudice. These people are not inferior except in regard to the conditions in which they must live, and we have as much to learn from them as they from us.” ‘Crisis in Algeria’ [1945], *Algerian Chronicles*, p. 90. See also the same theme in the article ‘A Clear Conscience’ (from a series in *L’Express* from 1955-56): “In politics, moreover, nothing is ever expiated. Errors can be repaired, and justice can be done. The Arabs are due a major reparation, in my opinion, a stunning reparation. But it must come from France as a whole, not from the blood of French men and women living in Algeria. Say this loud and clear and I know that those settlers will overcome their prejudices and participate in the construction of a new Algeria.” *Algerian Chronicles*, p. 127.

¹⁹ Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, p. 29.

The disavowal of ideology is even more painful in the concluding claim of the preface:

I have tried to define my position clearly in this regard. An Algeria consisting of federated communities linked to France seems to me unquestionably preferable from the standpoint of justice to an Algeria linked to an Islamic empire that would subject the Arab peoples to additional misery and suffering and tear the French people of Algeria from their natural homeland. If the Algeria in which I invest my hopes still has any chance of coming into being (as I believe it does), then I want to help in any way I can. By contrast, I believe that I should not for one second or in any way help in the constitution of the other Algeria. If, contrary to French interests or remote from France, the forces of surrender were to converge with the forces of pure conservatism to consolidate a double defeat, I would feel immense sorrow, and along with millions of other Frenchmen I would have to draw the appropriate conclusions.²⁰

6. It should be noted that the theme of a continuity-in-reform of French Algeria – a theme marked even in its most self-critical or progressive moments by a modernising paternalism that might be the unshakable core of French colonial ideology – is emphatically present also in the journalistic texts of 1939 (in *Alger républicain*) and 1945 (in *Combat*) where Camus is most forthright about the crimes and misdemeanours of French colonialism vis-à-vis the indigenous population. Thus, in his vivid social reportage on ‘Misery in Kabylia’, Camus will write:

If there is any conceivable excuse for the colonial conquest, it has to lie in helping the conquered peoples to retain their distinctive personality. And if we French have any duty here, it is to allow one of the proudest and most humane peoples in this world to keep faith with itself and its destiny. I do not think I am mistaken when I say that the destiny of this people is to work and to contemplate, and in so doing to teach lessons in wisdom to the anxious conquerors that we French have become. Let us learn, at

²⁰ Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, p. 35.

least, to beg pardon for our feverish need of power, the natural bent of mediocre people, by taking upon ourselves the burdens and needs of a wiser people, so as to deliver it unto its profound grandeur.²¹

In the wake of the revolt and administrative massacres of 1945, in which French liberation clamorously coincided with the brutal repression of the indigenous population, Camus will take the rare stand among the *pieds-noir* of recognising the political existence of Algerian Arabs, only to pose the issue of the “political awakening of the Muslim masses”²² in terms of a problem of republican integration, disturbingly articulated in the language of a “second conquest” – an index of what has been termed Camus’s “colonial humanism”:

In a sense, the French have to conquer Algeria a second time. To sum up my impressions from my visit, I should say that this second conquest will not be as easy as the first. In North Africa as in France, we need to invent new recipes and come up with new ways of doing things if we want the future to make sense to us. ... The world today is dripping with hatred everywhere. Violence, force, massacre, and tumult darken an atmosphere from which we thought the poison had been drained. Whatever we can do in service of the truth— French truth and human truth— we must do to counter this hatred. Whatever it costs, we must bring peace to nations that have too long been torn and tormented by all that they have suffered. Let us at least try not to add to the bitterness that exists in Algeria. Only the infinite force of justice can help us to reconquer Algeria and its inhabitants.

The famous remark he made to an Algerian student after receiving the Nobel Prize for literature—“I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice”—is often taken as proof of his refractory settler-nativism, his determination to protect the *pied-noir* community at all costs. But Camus’s stubbornness seems more attributable to his faith in what has been called “colonial humanism.” This was a new

²¹ Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, p. 83.

²² Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, p. 91.

strategy of rule developed by France in the interwar years, when, as historian Gary Wilder writes, “care became a political instrument for the colonial state.”²³ Whereas France’s longstanding *mission civilisatrice* had justified economic exploitation on racist grounds, colonial humanism defended its more subtle management of indigenous populations on the basis that it provided natives with welfare and economic development. “The most obvious crisis afflicting Algeria is an economic one,” Camus had declared in 1945. In an article entitled ‘The Colonist of Good Will’, Thomas Meaney has proposed that it is on this question of economic justice—not the flashier and more fervid debates over anti-totalitarianism and terrorism—that Camus and the postwar history of Algeria still speak to us.²⁴ But, as Olivier Gloag as incisively argued, unlike his erstwhile friend and nemesis, Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus abhorred any systematic analysis of racial colonial capitalism – indeed, it may even be argued that an aversion to thinking through the nexus of class, race and capitalism was over-determined by his dogged need not to question the roots of French settler-colonialism and his own *pied-noir* identity. In political as in economic questions, Gloag observes, “Camus was not an anti-colonialist but rather a shrewd defender of the colonial system, who put forth a vision of humanist compromise to defend the French presence in Algeria and elsewhere”, and his remained an “ultimately impossible task: drafting humanitarianism to the rescue of colonialism.”²⁵

7. “Justice” returns over and over in the *Chroniques Algériennes*, but often as something which is accorded to Algerians, rather than autonomously claimed and defined by their collective insurgency. In ‘The Adversary’s Reasons’, Camus will make a pained address to Algerian militants in these terms: “My only hope is that any Arab militants who read me will at least consider the arguments of a person who for 20 years, and long before their cause was discovered by Paris, defended their right to justice, and did so on Algerian soil, virtually alone.” But he continues by once

²³ Quoted in Thomas Meaney, ‘The Colonist of Good will: On Albert Camus’, *The Nation*, 27 August 2013, available at: <https://www.thenation.com/article/colonist-good-will-albert-camus/>.

²⁴ Meaney’s title borrows from an article by Albert Memmi (whose first novel had been prefaced by Camus), in which the Tunisian author critically but sympathetically anatomised the ‘impossible’ ethico-political predicament that Camus found himself in: ‘Albert Camus ou le colonisateur de bonne volonté’, *La Nef*, 12 (1957), pp. 95-6.

²⁵ Gloag, ‘The Colonial Contradictions of Albert Camus’.

again trying to tie the cause of justice to the name of France: “I urge them first to distinguish carefully between those who support the Algerian cause because they want to see their own country surrender on this as on other fronts and those who demand reparations for the Algerian people because they want France to demonstrate that grandeur is not incompatible with justice.”²⁶ If Camus’s conception of justice in these texts remains truncated, it is because no thorough moral and political recognition by the settlers of the structure of racial privilege and dispossession that structures their mode of life is ever advanced by him, something that arguably vitiates any notion of *togetherness*, *complicity* or *solidarity*. While Camus recognises in passing an asymmetry in the history of violence in Algeria, between colonial dispossession and indigenous revolt, this acknowledgment never truly affects his thinking about murderous consent.²⁷ It is this whole history, but also the very formation of a racialised settler-colonial subjectivity among the *Français d’Algérie*, which made Camus’s horizon of a “free association” in the midst of war into a pious wish (it is not irrelevant to note that it was during the war of independence itself that majority settler opinion turned towards the same schemes of integration that they had spent two decades fighting). Caught by the imperative to resist the marriage of Soviet-leaning communism and anti-colonialism, Camus is not just bound to plead for the superiority of Western colonial powers to Russia, but his distinction between *reparations* and *expiation* seems to occlude the possibility, which

²⁶ Camus, *Algerian Chronicles*, p. 134.

²⁷ See for instance ‘The Reasons of the Adversary’, where he writes of “two types of guilt, one of which has existed for a very long time, the other of which is of more recent vintage” (*Algerian Chronicles*, p. 134), or, in ‘A Truce for Civilians’: “There is a priority of violence: I know that. The long years of colonialist violence explain the violence of the rebellion. But that justification is applicable only to the armed rebellion” (p. 142). But what if, outside of any justification, the massacres perpetrated against settlers also find their *explanation* in that priority of violence, in the accumulated experience of colonial dispossession and humiliation? What if, for instance, we were to attend to the “clinical” dimensions of Fanon’s observations on violence, suspending their justificatory or prophetic dimension? Camus, we could say, moves *too quickly* from history to ethics, with the effect that he tends to disavow the claims the former makes on the latter (claims that, as he himself recognises, take the form of varieties of redress, whether “expiation”, which he rejects, or reparation, which he advises). After mentioning the types of guilt, he notes: “this is the law of history. When the oppressed take up arms in the name of justice, they take a step toward injustice. But how far they go in that direction varies, and although the law of history is what it is, there is also a law of the intellect, which dictates that although one must never cease to demand justice for the oppressed, there are limits beyond which one cannot approve of injustice committed in their name.” This is morally cogent on its face, but the moment it moves from an absolute ethical demand (ethics of conviction) to a political discussion (ethics of responsibility), and refuses to countenance, with sober realism, the process of decolonization, then it makes itself complicit with that very situation in which the oppressed are more likely to step further toward injustice (which is not to justify but to explain that step).

would appear to be a necessary prelude to any kind of mutual complicity, for the structuring fact of settler-colonial racism and dispossession to be confronted and indeed abolished. In a strange way, Camus seems to propose in these writings on Algeria something like an end of colonialism without a thoroughgoing decolonization – while this may be comprehensible, though not unproblematic, in situations like Martinique, it is arguably a strict impossibility in the settler-colony, notwithstanding legal arrangements (like the Plan Lauriol endorsed by Camus in ‘Algérie 1958’) that seek to establish a kind of federalist separate-but-equal republic of citizens, whose *asymmetry* is clearly rendered by the fact that the Algerian-French would vote on issues of French importance in the metropole, but not the Algerian-Arabs (in the Plan Lauriol, the “metropolitan section” of the parliament tellingly included parliamentarians from metropolitan France *and* from French-Algeria).

8. Camus always seemed unable to engage in that exercise of ethical and political imagination that would have allowed him to see the Algerian insurrection as comparable, if not identical, to the kind of resistance against murderous and racist forces of occupation in which he was able, briefly, to countenance the inevitability of violence, however moderated or bridled. But does the language of rebellion or revolt, in its ethical articulation, allow for continuity with a thinking of resistance? “Rebellion cannot calculate or plan in advance, nor can it swear allegiance to a program or organization or to its organizers and leaders”²⁸ – *but doesn’t this make resistance (as opposed to revolution) also unthinkable?* Isn’t the ethical question that of a consequential revolt, one that combines the need to limit and “civilise” violence with an efficacy that can assure minimising brutality and harm (rather than assuaging a good conscience)? Isn’t this also where we can’t but test Camus’s position, both in general and in the Algerian context, against the relation between an ethics of responsibility and an ethics of conviction? In Crépon’s nuanced synopsis, if rebellion “betrays itself if it makes the slightest concession to violence that imperils life – this is the red line that must not be crossed. It is in life, in the case and protection of life, of life worthy of its name, that rebellion finds its justification. I cannot overstate the importance of this red line: it alone dissociates rebellion from power calculations. ... When rebellion becomes murderous consent and turns against itself, it is only

²⁸ Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 26.

because it has been subjugated and perverted from within determined borders, be it the borders of a village or a city, a region or a country, or some circumscribed notion of the ‘international’²⁹. Note that in the letters to his German friend Camus does, in a pained, reflexive, “tragic” sense, *accept* that a certain license to kill may be inevitable for the purposes of justice.³⁰ If it is true that “acquiescing to violence always increases the world’s misery”, that one should entertain the “courage not to harbour illusions about the possibility of building or consolidating a world on such a lethal basis”³¹ (something that Fanon, for instance, also was aware of, *clinically*), we can surely admit that there are situations in which *not* acquiescing to violence increases the misery *more*. Therefore, can we really say then that “*any* recourse to violence contradicts (and jeopardizes) the reasons for the insurrection”?³² Wasn’t the opposition between “German” and “French” modalities of being-in-the-world in the letters also oriented towards a “defensive” murderous consent, namely in the ethical and political imperative of *resisting*? In this sense the idea of violence as an effraction, something done in spite of oneself, *à son corps défendant*, is *not* equivalent to non-violence. We can also reflect here, following the important recent work of Elsa Dorlin on self-defense in situations of gendered and racialised violence,³³ how one of the core drivers of both racism and sexism as systematic practices of domination lies in making the bodies of their targets and victims incapable of self-defense, and to make self-defense illegitimate, or even unthinkable. It could thus be argued that if rebellion is triggered by institutional or legal disloyalty to the human condition then systems that deny a common condition in their very principles of existence, such as racial settler-colonialism, can be the objects of a kind of absolute revolt. Think of Ruth Wilson Gilmore’s powerful definition of racism in this context as “the state-sanctioned and/or extra-legal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerabilities to premature death, in distinct yet densely

²⁹ Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 30.

³⁰ Albert Camus, *Resistance, Rebellion, and Death* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1961).

³¹ Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 34.

³² Crépon, *Murderous Consent*, p. 41.

³³ Kieran Aarons, *Self-Defense: A Philosophy of Violence*, trans. Kieran Aarons (London: Verso, 2022).

interconnected political geographies.”³⁴ This is something that Camus seems to himself ignore by neglecting the centrality and pervasiveness of racism to the settler-colonial condition and entering into ultimately irrelevant and biased disquisitions about whether the Algerians are a “real nation” or indeed whether they are mature for modernisation without France, or whether this is all just a beachhead for Nasserite Arab imperialism and a Soviet encircling of the West, etc. It is telling that it is in denying not just the violent means (which is unobjectionable when it comes to civilian massacres) but the very ends of independence, Camus moves to his own “casuistry.” We can therefore defend the notion of a provisional, rebel violence, of authentic acts of rebellion which “will only consent to take up arms for institutions that limit violence, not for those which codify it,” without taking the step to obliterating true political and historical responsibility for the sake of a non-violent conviction that can never purge itself of the bad faith of a good conscience. In other words, to moderate, to limit violence is also to recognise it. Here we may also ask whether the important question of measure, limitation, proportion, and moderation when it comes to social and political violence can really be conjoined to the “generosity of rebellion,” to its “making no calculations.” Can justice really do without calculation? And weren’t Camus own pleas for justice in Algeria themselves calculated to be both principled and efficacious?³⁵ Weren’t they always hedged by the settler-colonial calculation of how the French nation (the only one whose existence Camus fully recognises in this conflict) could endure, albeit in an expansive, progressive, and *sui generis* post-colonial sense?

³⁴ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (London: Verso, 2002), p. 107.

³⁵ It can of course be argued that the absence of a deeper calculation allowed the project of a truce to founder in the manipulations of both the French metropolitan government and the Algerian FLN.