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ALBERT CAMUS: THE NATURE OF POLITICAL REBELLION

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IT IS OFTEN OBSERVED that the modern age is characterized by a decline of belief in supernatural authority or higher law, as well as a growing disillusionment with scientific reason as a means of defining the ethical foundations of political life. This has fostered the growth of relativist, subjective interpretations of political value which has been viewed with both optimism and alarm. On the one hand, it is defended by those who point to the fact that it has meant the emancipation of man from ideological traditions and dogmas which have often been utilized as defense of political injustice and tyranny; it has nourished libertarian, individualist tendencies in modern life. On the other hand, the rejection of belief in higher law or objective moral standards, it is often argued, paves the way for nihilist ideologies, which would enthrone the supremacy of irrational impulse and force as the ultimate arbiter of political value.

Thus a basic problem of modern man is whether or not it is possible to give rational meaning and value to his existence in an age where there is no longer confidence that reason can establish absolute or objective truths. This problem takes on special significance where it is concerned with defining the nature and conditions of political revolt and protest. That is, if man, alone, is the sole creator of his values and purposes, does this mean that his freedom is unlimited? Does it imply the nihilist logic that anything is therefore possible — including revolutionary violence and terrorism? Is it possible, in other words, to recognize limits on the exercise of freedom without appeal to higher law or objective truth? Is it possible to define the positive, humane substance of rebellion, as a protest against injustice and tyranny, without embracing the logical extreme of nihilist rebellion?

It is this problem which has been given significant expression in the writings of Nobel prize winner Albert Camus. What is of special significance in Camus' analysis of this question is his effort to show that political rebellion, as the demand for freedom against tyranny and oppression, is incompatible with the ideology of revolutionary nihilism; and that although rebellion involves the negation of belief in God or higher law, it is not a doctrine that sanctions the nihilist creed that everything is possible — including murder or suicide. For authentic rebellion, as opposed to revolutionary nihilism, is an affirmation, as well as negation; an affirmation that the individual person has a worth that should be respected and valued. Revolutionary movements, by deifying the state or "historical destiny," by justifying political terrorism and violence, thus betray the true meaning of rebellion.

In considering Camus' treatment of this problem it is convenient to consider separately three phases of his general argument: first, his characterization of the human condition as an encounter with "absurdity"; secondly, his discussion of revolutionary political nihilism as a false or perverted deduction from the aware-

ness of the absurd; thirdly, his attempt to reconcile absurdist reasoning with the principle of human dignity and limited freedom.

I

The central concern of Camus is the question of how man can give meaning to his life in an "absurd" universe; where the individual becomes conscious that life has no meaning or objective value. The first step, in attempting to answer this problem, is for the mind to distinguish what is true from what is false, but this proves to be a futile endeavor. It was Aristotle, Camus contends, who has best demonstrated this futility. For by asserting that all is true, we assert the truth of the contrary assertion and consequently the falsity of our own thesis. And if we say that all is false, that assertion is itself false. If we declare that solely the assertion opposed to ours is false, or else that solely ours is not false, we are nevertheless forced to admit an infinite number of true or false judgments. For the one who expresses a true assertion proclaims simultaneously that it is true and so on *ad infinitum*. Today people despair of absolute knowledge. Nor can one place any confidence in science:

You enumerate its laws and in my thirst for knowledge, I admit they are true. You take apart its mechanism and my hope increases. At the final stage you teach me that the wondrous and multi-colored universe can be reduced to the atom, and that the atom itself can be reduced to the electron. All this is good and I wait for you to continue. But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus. You explain this world to me with an image. I realize that you have been reduced to poetry. I shall never know. Have I time to become indignant? You have already changed theories. So that science that was to teach me everything ends up in hypothesis, that lucidity founders in metaphor, that uncertainty is resolved in a work of art.¹

Thus man is confronted with an absurd universe; a horde of irrationals has sprung up and surrounds him until his ultimate end. And what is absurd is the confronting of this irrational, and the wild longing for clarity. The plane of history, declares Camus, illustrates the essential passion of man torn between his urge towards unity and the clear vision he may have of the world closing in on him. "The absurd is born of this confrontation between human need and the unreasonable silence of the world."²

It is the concept of the absurd which is the foundation for Camus' analysis of the nature of political rebellion. In his book *The Rebel* Camus attempts to show how the awareness of the absurd (in its perverted and destructive form) becomes a sanction for political nihilism. Camus notes two types of destructive rebellion; metaphysical and historical. Examples of metaphysical rebellion are illustrated in such figures as the Marquis de Sade; the character of Ivan in *Brothers Karamazov*; and in Nietzsche. Sade embodies the absolute negation in the name of nature; the lawless universe where the only master is inordinate energy and desire; the law of the world is nothing but the law of force. Sade preaches

¹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays* (New York: Vintage Books, 1959), p. 15.

² *Ibid.*, p. 21.

the morality of an aristocratic class who would keep the majority in total subjection. Thus, two centuries ahead of time, Sade extolled totalitarian societies in the name of unbridled freedom.

With Ivan Karamazov, declares Camus, the history of contemporary nihilism begins. "If there is no virtue, there is no law. Everything is permitted."³ In Nietzsche nihilism becomes fully conscious for the first time. Rebellion begins with "God is dead." Christianity is decadent: socialism and humanitarianism are degenerate forms of Christianity, betraying life and nature; substituting ideal for real ends; enervating both the will and imagination. Rid of God and moral idols, then man is alone; without a master. Man thus must create his own values; he becomes a heroic superman dominated solely by the will to power. At this point, Camus contends, metaphysical rebellion proves disastrous to freedom and leads to the justification for tyranny and servitude. It is then that the spirit of metaphysical rebellion openly joins forces with revolutionary movements. For revolution, according to Camus, is the logical consequence of metaphysical rebellion. "Every action of rebellion expresses a nostalgia for innocence and an appeal to the essence of being. But one day nostalgia takes up arms and assumes responsibility of total guilt, in other words adopts murder and violence."⁴ Rebellion in itself is limited in scope; it is no more than an incoherent pronouncement. Revolution, on the contrary, originates in the realm of ideas. Specifically it is the injection of ideas into historical experience, while rebellion is only the movement that leads from individual experience to the realm of ideas. Here we have the attempt to shape actions to ideas to fit the world into a theoretical frame.

It is the phenomena of *historical* rebellion which Camus believes is the characteristic quality of revolutionary political movements of the modern world. The year 1789 is the starting point of modern times, because men of this period wished to introduce on the historical scene the forces of negation and rebellion which had been the essence of intellectual discussion in the previous centuries. Rousseau's general will became the gospel of revolutionary impulse: "the new religion whose God is reason confused with nature and whose representative on earth, in place of the king, is the people considered as an expression of the general will."⁵

Rousseau, according to Camus, is the first man to justify the death penalty in a civil society, and the absolute submission of the subject to the authority of the sovereign. The year 1789 became the enthronement of Rousseau's principle: the infallibility of the general will as the expression of truth and virtue. State terrorism, in the name of the general will, becomes legitimate and necessary. No dissension of factions can be tolerated. "A patriot is he who supports the Republic in general; whoever opposes it is a traitor."⁶

In Hegel we find the fullest embodiment of historical rebellion. German philosophy substituted for the abstract reason of Rousseau, which soared above

³ Albert Camus, *The Rebel* (New York: Vintage Books, 1956), p. 57.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 105.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 115.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 126.

the phenomena related to it, a reason incorporated in historical events. Revolutionary movements of the twentieth century have borrowed from Hegel this vision of history without any kind of transcendence, dedicated to perpetual strife and struggle of wills bent on seizing power. Although twentieth-century ideologies have rejected the idealism of Hegel, they have borrowed from Hegel the emphasis upon history as the ultimate arbiter of good and evil, and the absolute state as the incarnation of historical destiny. "Cynicism, the deification of history and of matter, individual terror and state crime, these are the inordinate consequences that will now spring, armed to the teeth, from the equivocal conception that entrusts to history alone the task of producing values and truth."⁷

Russian nihilism of the 1860's is viewed by Camus as a further example of historical rebellion. It enthroned reason and self interest as ultimate values. But instead of skepticism, it chose to propagate a doctrine and embraced socialism. Like all adolescent minds, they simultaneously experienced doubt and the need to believe. Bakunin embodies this contradiction. He rejected Hegelianism, but his passion for religious freedom led to an emphasis upon revolution as the incarnation of good. The statutes of the International Fraternity which he edited in 1864-67, established the absolute subordination of the individual to the central committee. He hoped to see the liberation of Russia produce a strong dictatorial power, supported by an elite of enlightened partisans — thus anticipating Leninist doctrine. In Russian terrorist doctrines of the 1870's one finds an expression of totalitarian gospel of the twentieth century. For those who dedicate themselves to revolution, according to Nechaev, everything is permitted. "Revolution must have neither romantic relationships nor objects to engage his passion. Every part of him should be concentrated in one passion: the revolution."⁸

All modern revolutions, Camus points out, have ended in the reinforcement of the power of the state: 1789 brings Napoleon; 1848, Napoleon III; 1917, Stalin; and later Mussolini and Hitler. Fascist ideology, however, does not merit the title of revolution, for it lacks the ambition of universality. This is because fascism deified irrational elements of the nihilist inheritance, instead of deifying reason. This is to be found in its extolling of the elemental forces of the individual; the dark power of blood and instinct, the biological justification of all the worst things produced by the instinct of domination. Yet Mussolini makes use of Hegel, and Hitler of Nietzsche, and in this sense, fascism belongs to history of rebellion of nihilism. "They were the first to construct a state on the concept that everything is meaningless, and history is only written in themes of the hazards of force."⁹

But it is Marxism, rather than fascism, which represents the fullest expression of revolutionary ideology in the twentieth century, with a doctrine and movement based on definitive revolution and final unification of the world. Marx destroys, even more radically than Hegel, the transcendence of reason, and hurls it into the stream of history. Marx was genuinely concerned for the dignity of man. He rebelled against degradation of workers to the level of a commodity

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 146.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 160.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 178.

and of objects. But the Nietzschean tragedy is evident again in Marx. The aims and prophecies are human and liberal, but the reduction of every value to historical terms leads to dire consequences. Marx thought that the end of history would be moral and rational. "But when good and evil are reintegrated in time, and confused with events, nothing is either good nor bad, but either premature or out of date."¹⁰

It was Lenin who shaped Marxism into a revolutionary weapon which repudiated the limits of formal morality, identifying revolutionary action with the strategy and expedience for seizure of political power. This led Lenin to justify the repressive power of the state to achieve the aims of communism. Thus the regime of Russian Stalinism, as an implementation of Leninist principles, witnessed the establishment of a totalitarian political system in which all ideological dissent was crushed, police terrorism enthroned, and private relations subordinated to an inhuman abstract world of power and calculation.

II

Camus' analysis of revolutionary political movements show how negation of belief in transcendental values leads to the justification of political tyranny and totalitarianism. Revolutionary ideologies of the modern world are the expression of a moral nihilism which proceeds from the logic that since there are no objective values, then everything is permitted, including murder. Thus, the awareness of the absurd, when we first claim to deduce a rule of behavior from it, makes murder seem a matter of indifference. If we believe in nothing; if nothing has any meaning; if we can affirm no values whatsoever, then everything is possible. There is no pro or con; the murderer is neither right nor wrong. But Camus attempts to show that absurdist analysis, in its most important deduction, finally condemns murder, and repudiates the logic of revolutionary political nihilism. How does Camus arrive at this conclusion? The initial premise is that where one accepts the concept of the absurd; where he confronts it squarely and honestly he cannot, without being contradictory, embrace the logic of murder or suicide. Why? Because in being fully conscious and aware of the absurd, I am aware of the impossibility of reducing the world to rational solutions; this is the only thing that I know: my appetite for unity and the impossibility of reducing the world to rational principle. As such, this constitutes commitment to the absurd as a principle; I cannot mask it, escape it, or deny any one of its terms. Therefore, I cannot accept the logic of murder or suicide, for this would, in effect, drown the absurd; it would nullify and destroy its very meaning. From this conviction, I am led to the recognition that human life is the only good, since it is precisely life that makes the absurdist logic possible, and since without life, the absurdist wager would have no basis. "To say that life is absurd the conscience must be alive. . . . From the moment that life is recognized as good, it becomes good for all men."¹¹

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 209.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

It is on the basis of this reasoning, then, that revolutionary political actions stand condemned, for it betrays the authentic meaning of rebellion as an affirmation, as well as renunciation. A slave, for example, who has taken orders all his life, suddenly decides that he cannot obey some new command. But by saying "no" the slave is not only making a negation, he is also affirming that there is something in him that is worth while, and that there is a point beyond which an oppressive authority cannot be tolerated. In this sense the rebel affirms something which is the common ground of all men.

It is for this reason that revolutionary action, according to Camus, is not compatible with the authentic meaning of rebellion. Revolution, it was seen, justifies political terrorism and murder. But murder and rebellion are contradictory. For rebellion (in its authentic sense) is a force of life and not death; it is a logic of creation and not destruction. If it is to remain authentic, it must be the father to the "yes," as well as to the "no" that nihilist interpretation isolates in rebellion. Historical revolution, therefore, betrays rebellion, because it supposes the absolute malleability of human nature and its possible reduction to the condition of a historical force. "But rebellion in man is the refusal to be treated as an object and to be reduced to simple historical terms. It is the affirmation of a nature common to all men which eludes the world of power."¹²

Rebellion therefore, is not a claim to absolute freedom. Rebellion, itself, aspires only to the relative. It supposes a limit at which the community of man is established. Its universe is the universe of relative values. It is here, Camus believes, that rebellion cannot exist without a strange form of love.

Those who can find no rest in God, or in history, are condemned to live for those who, like themselves, cannot live; in fact for the humiliated . . . Rebellion proves that it is the very movement of life and that it cannot be denied without renouncing life. Its purest outburst, on each occasion, gives forth to existence. Thus it is love or fecundity, or it is nothing at all. Revolution without honor, calculated revolutionary movements which, in preferring an abstract concept of man to a man of flesh and blood, denies existence as many times as is necessary, puts resentment in place of love. . . . It is no longer either revolution or rebellion, but rancor, malice and tyranny.¹³

III

Camus focuses attention on a basic ideological problem of twentieth-century political thought. What is the value and contribution of his analysis? So far as practical political implications are concerned, Camus' argument cannot be considered wholly satisfactory. Camus recommends political moderation, in contrast to revolutionary political action, and he has advocated socialist planning along the Scandinavian model, as well as the strengthening of trade-union activity. But Camus' views on contemporary political affairs, vigorously expressed in his journalistic writings,¹⁴ embody an uncompromising commitment to moral principle which tends to alienate him from contemporary realities of power politics.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 250.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 305.

¹⁴ Camus contributed actively to the newspaper *Combat* during the period 1944-48. A selection of his editorials has been brought together in a single volume entitled: *Actuelles* (Paris: Librairie Gallimard), 1950. A second volume contains other articles and interviews during the period 1948-53.

This is illustrated, for example, in his repudiation of European governments for acceptance of Franco Spain into UNESCO; his emphasis upon a politics of non-violence; his insistence that the only solution to the danger of atomic war between East and West is the establishment of a democratic world government.¹⁵ Here, Camus is vulnerable to the charge that he is taking refuge in a purist, utopian idealism out of touch with problems of practical politics.

But it may be said, in defense of Camus, that he does not pretend to be a practical politician, and that he should be judged on the merits of his ethical position. Here one may at least concede the general validity of his conviction that authentic rebellion must acknowledge the value of human dignity and freedom, and that these values are betrayed by extremist forms of revolutionary political action. The more basic question is whether Camus has succeeded in establishing that these values can be given a philosophical foundation which does not require appeal to objective or transcendental truth. Now obviously, Camus' contention that matters of political value cannot be given rational or objective certitude is of course debatable (although here he is in company with highly influential intellectual tendencies such as logical positivist analysis). But it is not the point here to debate the issue of whether an objective value theory is possible. What is more important is Camus' reasoning that although it is not possible to define human existence in terms of objective or transcendental values, this does not justify nihilist reasoning that anything is possible; but that on the contrary, it leads to a respect for human dignity and limited freedom. Is Camus entitled to this deduction? Camus suggests that where one fully acknowledges and accepts the absurd; when one makes this into a principle, then one cannot, without contradiction, sanction murder or suicide, since this would nullify or destroy the absurd: one is then betraying his own principles.

But the crucial question is whether Camus is entitled to say that the recognition of absurdity as a logical or factual condition of my existence leads to the recognition of human dignity freedom as a value. In other words, can one deduce an *ought* from an *is*; a *value* from a supposed *fact*. Here Camus is vulnerable to the criticism made by logical positivists, such as Ayer, who contends that Camus is getting involved in what is essentially a metaphysical question about which philosophical analysis is impossible.¹⁶ One does sense that despite Camus' refusal to appeal to metaphysics or to religious faith, he is actually committed in somewhat those terms. That is, one senses that there are two dimensions to Camus for which he does not quite succeed in providing a philosophical bridge. One side of Camus is his attachment to the importance of reason and lucidity. Although there are no objective a priori values which reason can establish, one must, nonetheless, live in terms of what reason can illuminate; one is not entitled to an irrational leap into faith. But the other side of Camus is his obvious passionate and emotional commitment to human freedom and dignity;

¹⁵ See *Actuelles*, I, 160-74; 183-207.

¹⁶ A. J. Ayer, "Novelist-Philosophers," *Horizon*, VIII (March 1946) 155-168.

his hatred of tyranny and oppression. It is this side of Camus where one senses an intensity of commitment which strikes one as something more than a cool logical deduction from his philosophical concept of the absurd.

But such criticism, while it points up an apparent paradox or dilemma in Camus' philosophy, does not do him justice. For if one agrees that objective or a priori values are not possible, then it is difficult to see how one can logically avoid the dangers of ideological nihilism, unless one argues somewhat in the terms which Camus suggests (however inadequate this may be). There are, of course, other alternative positions if one wishes to repudiate the appeal to reason altogether. From the standpoint of logical positivists this amounts to the contention that the kinds of questions Camus is asking are not amenable to philosophical inquiry at all, and that we must accept the fact that value judgments about the meaning of individual existence are ultimately irrational in character. In this case we are apparently left with the choice of either assuming a deterministic explanation in regard to ethical choices (environmental conditioning, childhood training, etc.) or we affirm a religious faith as an alternative to reason. Good arguments can be made for either of these possibilities, but they are not satisfactory where one insists (as Camus does) that one cannot escape or evade responsibility by assuming a deterministic or irrational explanation for individual choice and decision.

It is here that Camus' argument reveals its true merits. Camus insists upon the point that in recognizing the limits of reason we do not therefore negate it. The one thing we do know is our appetite for unity, and yet the impossibility of reducing the world to rational principle. We must live with what we know. We cannot escape into faith, for this would be to retreat in face of what the mind has brought to light. Here we are called upon to adopt the logic of the absurd man, who is conscious that reason cannot give him certainty, but who insists that he must live without appeal.

At a certain point on his path the absurd man is tempted. History is not lacking in either religions or prophets, even without Gods. He is asked to leap. All he can reply is that he doesn't fully understand, that it is not obvious. Indeed he does not want to do anything but what he fully understands. . . . Hence what he demands of himself is to live *solely* with what he knows, to accommodate himself to what is, and to bring in nothing that is not certain. He is told that nothing is. But that is at least a certainty. And it is with this that he is concerned; he wants to find out if it is possible to live *without appeal*.¹⁷

Perhaps Camus does not establish that this is possible. Perhaps it is true (as we are often told) that man cannot live without appeal to religious faith; to higher law, or to some kind of external authority. One cannot say that Camus settles this question, but he has confronted it with imagination, courage, and honesty.

¹⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, p. 39.