

“Albert Camus on Revolt and Revolution”

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In a famous and acrimonious exchange with Albert Camus in *Les Temps modernes*, following publication of Camus's *L'Homme révolté* (*The Rebel*) in 1951, Jean-Paul Sartre writes that, despite the passionate “moral demands” expressed in a work that evokes “our great classical tradition”,¹ he must nevertheless reproach Camus. Focusing his ire on a reprehensible display of “philosophical incompetence” in the book's treatment of Hegel and Marx, Sartre also berates Camus for conflating “politics and philosophy” in his critique of revolutionary violence.² Camus, implies Sartre, is both insufficiently and inordinately philosophical. Worse still, in Sartre's eyes, Camus's philosophical ineptitude leads him to the inexcusable political treachery of adopting “counter revolutionary” tendencies.³

In defending his diagnosis of the pathologies of modern revolution, Camus underlines the special nature of his approach to the subject, and the personal experience which he consciously employs as an indispensable guide to his analysis. Sartre's denunciation mistakenly assumes two things: first, that politics, and especially revolutionary politics, names a distinct activity requiring a special sort of morality higher than and separable from everyday ethics and judgement; second, that Camus's intention was to weigh in on debates among philosophers to arrive at a settled interpretation of exactly what Hegel's and Marx's conceptual systems really meant. In Camus's view it is Sartre and his ilk of professional philosophers who merge politics and philosophy together by deducing the necessity of revolutionary violence from an intellectualized conception of history, one that contrives an intelligible chain of causes leading towards a foreseeable end. This, Camus argues, can be seen in the way Sartre adopts “the Marxist philosophy of history” even though he is “not a Marxist, in the strict sense of the term”. (SC 119, 118, OC III 423, 422) For Camus, then, Sartre's accusations are not merely untenable, since he has no interest in presenting an exhaustive study of Hegel or Marx (OC III 402); they are also dangerous, since they display a philosopher's predilection for viewing political history as an outgrowth of intellectual doctrine. Sartre, the consummate armchair philosopher, has done nothing other “than turn [his] armchair in history's direction”. (SC 126) In this regard, Camus's response to Sartre is consistent with a crucial admission he made in an interview some years earlier: “I am not a philosopher. I do not believe sufficiently in reason to believe in a system. What interests me is to know how to conduct oneself. And, more precisely, how to behave when one believes neither in God nor in Reason.” (OC II 659)

Camus freely reiterated his resistance to being labelled a philosopher on numerous occasions, including shortly after publication of *The Rebel*: “I am not a philosopher, indeed, and I can speak only of what I have experienced.” (O III 309) What is important to note here is Camus does not deny that his writings contain philosophical insights, in the sense that they

¹ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Reply to Albert Camus”, in *Sartre and Camus: A Historic Confrontation*, ed. and trans. David A. Spritzen and Adrian van den Hoven (New York: Humanity Books, 2004), 152, 149.

² Sartre, “Reply to Albert Camus”, 139, 146.

³ Sartre, “Reply to Albert Camus”, 132.

devote considerable attention to the question of human existence and exhibit a robust concern for complex moral, social, and political issues. What is striking, however, is that Camus underscores a distinction between philosophy practiced as an artistic way of life and philosophy as an authoritative profession.⁴ What is philosophical in his work is, for Camus, an outgrowth of his creative engagement with personal and political experience as these actually happen in an absurd world; he writes, as a philosophically-informed artist, from within and for the sake of experience itself. (SC 217-219, OC III 375-377) In contrast, the hallmark of the professional philosopher is to posit some external ideal to which reality must submit, as if the course of human affairs could be deduced from a grand intellectual concept—Truth, Being, Reason, Spirit, History, Progress—that remains superior to the vagaries of ordinary life. Moreover, while the artist writes for the present, concerned above all with the reality of what has happened and what is currently happening, the philosopher writes for what is yet to come, convinced of the eventual triumph of a promised “future of grandeur”. (SC 215, OC III 374) Camus adopts the persona of artist rather than philosopher, therefore, to counter the arrogance of viewing political experience in terms of strict philosophical categories, while also indirectly defending what we may call his “para-philosophical” genres of writing (essays, short stories, novels, plays, and journalism) about the contingent experiences of rebellion. We can describe Camus’s thinking as “para-philosophical” because it implies a mode of reflection and analysis that is philosophical without fitting under a conventional model of philosophy and how it should be conducted. It is akin to and beside but also contrary to or “outside”, any ostensibly authoritative definition of what counts as proper philosophy. Rather than attempting to refute philosophy on its own (especially modernist) terms, Camus is far more invested in envisioning ways of enriching our sensitivities to the uncertain, unsettling yet also beautiful experiences within the everyday—as well as with imagining how we can learn to live in this world critically, yet without deploring its unruly actuality as something that philosophy can surmount. It may be argued, then, that Camus is at pains to show how philosophy can be conducted otherwise, and the artist exemplifies an intimate and open-ended engagement with the world that is deliberately distanced from philosophy’s quest for certain knowledge and definitive answers. This is not to say that Camus’s enterprise is anti-intellectualist and hostile to abstract thought. On the contrary, it is rather that he insists the creative (and especially literary) arts exhibit a mode of thought or intellectual style that foregrounds a heightened sense of the concrete particulars of experience in a seemingly absurd world,⁵ without codifying those experiences into a substantial philosophical system: “Why am I an artist and not a philosopher? Because I think according to words and not according to ideas.” (NB II 113, OC II 1029) For Camus, the critical reflections of the artist remain autonomous from any pre-established philosophical doctrine, and the artist is unconcerned with legislating for history as an ultimate value or guiding it towards a determinate end.

⁴ For astute discussion of whether and in what ways Camus’s thought may be considered philosophical, see Matthew Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe: To Return to our Beginnings* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 18-47.

⁵ Albert Camus, “Art and Revolt”, *Partisan Review* Vol. 19, No. 3 (1952), 268-281.

Hence the urgency with which Camus delimits the attitude of the artist from that of the philosopher is provoked by the systematic pretensions of those forms of philosophy that claim sovereignty over knowledge, truth, beauty, love, and even life itself. Similarly, *The Rebel's* critique of "pathetic philosophers" (SC 207, OC III 367) who willingly sacrifice love and life to a transcendent history is motivated by a desire to break the "magic spell" cast by philosophical discourse over human experience; at the same time, it is practically and politically motivated. For Camus, "purely historical philosophies" are symptomatic of an age that deifies totalizing ideologies that supposedly give politics its *raison d'être*. (SC 209) Camus consequently sets out in *The Rebel* to disenchant modern revolutionary ideology by exposing its sacralisation of the idea of history. In the great revolutionary narrative, history figures as the supreme catalyst that both makes possible and renders intelligible the development of human progress. Camus's counter-narrative is not only para-philosophical because he wants to challenge the notion of taking history as a privileged vantage point for revolutionary progress; it is also because, on his account, modern philosophy and revolutionary ideology are fatally disconnected from the dynamic "tension between revolt and revolution" that keeps rebellion from succumbing to absolutist doctrines of organized violence and terror. (SC 212, OC III 372)

The Critique of Revolution

The Rebel opens with a bombshell: "There are crimes of passion and crimes of logic. . . . We are living in the era of premeditation and the perfect crime. Our criminals are no longer helpless children who could plead love as their excuse. On the contrary, they are adults and they have the perfect alibi: philosophy, which can be used for any purpose". (R 3, OC III 63) The source of the murderous totalitarianism that Camus witnessed under the shadow of world war is not merely the institutional forms of Nazism and Stalinism; it surfaces already in the idea of dialectical history, which, he declares, "confounds itself with perpetual movement" and "exalts destruction for its own sake". (R 134-135, OC III 175-176) The key to this bold claim lies in the meaning of the term "revolution". It refers neither primarily nor exclusively to the historical convulsions in France of 1789 and in Russia of 1917, but rather to a more general frame of meaning that philosophically transforms the human relationship to time and provides a "rational foundation" enabling human beings to exercise greater mastery over themselves and their collective fate. As John Dunn observes, the "missing element in the ancient understandings of politics which precluded the appearance of the modern conception of revolution was a secular understanding of the history of the world as a single frame of human meaning with a determinate direction of internal development".⁶

Thus construed, from the late eighteenth century onwards the meaning of the word "revolution" markedly shifts from its original astronomical connotation of celestial bodies returning cyclically to their point of departure, into the modern worldview of purposefully creating a new social and political order through a radical act of destroying the old and

⁶ John Dunn, *Interpreting Political Responsibility* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 87.

allegedly obsolete order.⁷ This development, in turn, spawned the idea of the “revolutionary” as the intentional (and exceptional) agent of revolution. What is decisive about the modern notion of revolution is the way it is understood in relation to temporality; the collapse of old regimes and the emergence of new systems of rule is conceived in terms of an underlying unity of historical time that assimilates the whole of humanity into an inexorable linear process of rational evolution. Setting themselves resolutely against an anachronistic past they are determined to eradicate, the philosophers and practitioners of revolution came to view their enterprise as charting a “progressive” transition to the future—even when it involves sacrificing human lives “in the endeavour to speed the collapse of the old and the reconstruction of the new”.⁸ The other side of revolution, then, is the concept of progress, treated as the pinnacle of the modern age. With this in mind, Camus takes issue with two related aspects of revolutionary ideology primed by philosophical historicism: first, it is steeped in romantic assumptions of a unidirectional movement through time in which cumulative change progresses toward some idealized end state; second, it is calibrated to a metric of instrumental necessity that presumes certain means will cause the change leading predictably to some idealized destination, and which justifies the use of violence under the pretext of hastening progress.

While numerous intellectual trends contributed to the emergence of modern historicism, Camus credits the philosophies of Hegel and Marx with exerting the most profound influence on the revolutionary zeal for grandiose doctrines of a universal historical process driven by a singular human purpose. One can begin to piece together Camus's critique of historicism by examining the lecture, “The Human Crisis”, delivered in the United States in 1946. There he presents many of the central themes that are to orient the argument of *The Rebel*, and fixes his critical gaze on Hegel (and Marx). Camus castigates Hegel's “detestable” philosophy for affirming that history “obeys an infallible and deadly logic”, according to which “all humanity is on the march, moving by rational means” towards “some definable goal”. He further objects that Hegel's rationalism is the mirror image of nihilism, for “if History has meaning, that meaning must be total or nothing at all”.⁹ This introduces perhaps the most fundamental element of Camus's critique. Camus explains that Hegel's philosophy not only conceives of particular human beings as instrumental means through which the transcendent is incarnated in a world historical process, it also amounts to a form of violence that locates the meaning of events in terms of efficiency. (HC 25, OC II 741) If progress is the ultimate aim of modernity, then the achievements of history may be obtained at any cost provided they propel humankind toward the accomplishment of some overarching purpose. Camus rejects nihilistic historicism because rather than alleviating the suffering and anguish of today, it conceals such experiences behind some lofty meaning about the prosperity and emancipation of tomorrow.

When Camus later reflects on revolutionary ideology in *The Rebel*, the Hegelian-Marxist philosophy of history continues to serve as his central reference point. The

⁷ For more on this theme, see Hannah Arendt, *On Revolution* (New York: Viking Press, 1963).

⁸ Dunn, *Interpreting Political Responsibility*, 86; Camus, *The Rebel*, 106.

⁹ Albert Camus, “The Human Crisis”, *Twice a Year* 14 & 15 (1946-47), 25, OC II 741. Hereafter in text HC.

“slaughter-bench” of world history, as Hegel puts it,¹⁰ develops through seemingly senseless “evil, error, and suffering” (R 78 OC III 128), which nonetheless play their part in facilitating the dialectical movement of universal reason or spirit (*Geist*). Evil, in other words, is the momentarily destructive yet ultimately positive fuel that drives the motor of historical progress, no matter who must be dragged along in the torrents of blood thus shed. Hegel's philosophy transfigures cruelty and injustice into the “cunning of history”.¹¹ This line of thought furnishes the violence of the French Revolution with an intellectual apology, allowing the redemptive Rights of Man to wash away the sins of the Jacobin Reign of Terror. (R 133-148, OC III 174-187) Camus argues that for Hegel the deification of man mirrors the deification of history, on the belief that the totality of history is more amenable to rational explanation than transitory individual experience. Through the progressive unfolding of history all darkness is illuminated, every event is justified, and the course of the world as a whole is rendered inherently meaningful. Moreover, the rational truths of the prophesied “end of history” then become more “real” than what actually occurs in present circumstances. To Camus, Hegel's historicism brutally “justifies every ideological encroachment upon reality”. (R 135, OC III 176)

Camus further suggests that the “ideological encroachment upon reality” appears most prominently in the thought of Marx. Although Camus appreciates that the Marxist tradition did not lead inevitably to twentieth-century totalitarianism, he argues that its insistence on the necessity of revolutionary violence to destroy the inherent contradictions in bourgeois society exerts a formative influence on the association of revolutionary politics—on the “left” as well as the “right”—with the capacity to achieve a totality of long-range goals. Marx revises Hegel's philosophy, however, by turning the meaning of history from the evolution of spirit to the evolution of matter, defined as class-determined political conflict. He does this by claiming there is little to be gained in attempting to reform the present socioeconomic system. To deliver emancipation, it is necessary to reject the current order so that the past can give birth to a future classless society. The last historical stage of communism can be established only by transforming the social order in its entirety as a single material context encompassing all of culture, society, economics, and politics. Yet Camus also points out that Marx's materialism is “impure”, because shaping material reality is dependent upon the supremacy of human will. (R 198, OC III 230-231) By imposing its untrammelled will upon the world, through the mediation of the self-determining revolutionary, humanity can control, master, and manipulate objective reality. With Marx, the violent revolutionary is confirmed as the intentional agent and author of history.

For Camus, philosophical historicism furnishes faith in the revolutionary dogma that the end always justifies the means; even murder can be excused as “rational” if it may lead to the “kingdom of ends” to come. (R 206, OC III 238)¹² As long as violence is at the service of a historical mission whose meaning transcends individual lives and actions, then any crime

¹⁰ G. W. F. Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, trans. J. Sibree (New York: Dover Publications, 2004), 21.

¹¹ G. W. F. Hegel, *Lectures on the Philosophy of World History*, trans. H. B. Nisbet (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976), 89.

¹² See Camus, “The Artist and his Time”, at MS 209, OC III 453.

involved in revolution can be justified in the name of progress. The progressivist logic of historicism becomes all the more imperative whenever history is deemed to be “going too slowly”, and the human will must impose itself on all creation. (R 217, OC III 247-248) In Camus's narrative of modernity, revolutionary ideology culminates in totalitarianism and the concentration camps, and collapses into contemporary nihilism—“pure movement that aims at denying everything which is not itself”, simply to maintain the appearance of a continuous process of social transformation. (R 224, OC III 254)¹³ Thus interpreted, the philosophical positing of history as evolution towards the best of all possible worlds can degenerate into the revolutionary belief that power and violence are ends in themselves. The spectre of a zeal to “kneel before history” (R 79, OC III 128), Camus laments, hazards a ruinous end to human equality and freedom.

Reclaiming Rebellion

While Camus always sought distance from the revolutionary excess of modern politics, he did not deny his intellectual affiliation with the tradition of rebellion, broadly understood as the human impulse to revolt against “an unjust and incomprehensible condition”. (R 10, OC III 69) Nonetheless, revolution and rebellion crucially diverge from one another despite sharing a common impetus to protest oppression and exploitation. Although Sartre, Jeanson, and other critics deride *The Rebel's* near-poetic lyricism as a stylistic and political failing,¹⁴ Camus unapologetically acknowledges that his book does not ape the methods of academic philosophy because his aim is to refuse burying the phenomenon of rebellion under any “theory” of historical necessity and progress. (OC III, 411) Rather, Camus's aesthetic-political recourse to the figure of the rebel tries to retrieve revolt as an exemplary yet always unpredictable and momentary event that interrupts the supposedly continuous course of history. The purpose of *The Rebel*, in other words, is twofold: on the one hand, to defy ideological dreams of a harmonious future world that is the inevitable outcome of revolutionary forces set in motion in the modern age; and on the other, to recover the contingent, spontaneous, and non-linear spirit of rebellion that fleetingly yet tangibly bursts forth from within the morally abhorrent and politically repressed circumstances of each unique present. Camus's critique of the revolutionary apologetics for the violent movement of history is, for this reason, meant to induce a defamiliarizing effect in the reader, whereby the spirit of rebellion may be permitted to emerge from the shadows into which it has been cast by revolutionary ideology.

The germ of rebellion can be found in the absurd. Camus understands the rebel as a being who revolts against the strange indifference of the world, yet refuses the false consolation of self-deception regarding the absurdity of the human condition. The absurd describes how the meaning of existence is put into question both by our mortality—the fact

¹³ For more on Camus's severe assessment of many aspects of the modern age, which nonetheless too readily casts Camus as anti-modern, see Ronald Srigley, *Albert Camus's Critique of Modernity* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 2011).

¹⁴ Francis Jeanson, “Albert Camus, or the Soul in Revolt”, in SC 81-82, 87, 101; See Camus at SC 109-110, OC III 414-415.

that all human beings cease to exist—and by the failure of metaphysical, religious, and moral traditions to offer reassuring answers about our bleak fate. In other words, the absurd derives from the conspicuously paradoxical union of a humanity that desires some higher meaning and a universe that has none to offer. (MS 23, OC I 234-235) Consequently, the question of what makes ethics and politics meaningful is tied to the question of rebellion, since the conscious decision to live (rather than commit suicide) and thus to act challenges the perception that personal and collective existence are futile. Rebellion “gives life its value” through “dogged revolt” against the absurdity of the human condition, all the while aware that the freedom to revolt is made possible by the very condition of the absurd “in all its splendour and diversity”. (MS 55, 65, 115, OC I 256, 264, 298) For Camus, freedom begins with the absurd, since it liberates us from the weight of metaphysical and historical necessity. At the same time, limits are introduced since we are delivered into the responsibility—the position of being answerable for our actions—that accompanies the freedom to create purpose for ourselves. Hence, as discussed in the following section, Camus draws an important parallel between rebellion and the notion of measure he attributes to the ancient Greeks. Recognition of the need for measure, Camus says, is the condition *sine qua non* for rebellion, since revolt signifies the affirmation of a limit: saying “yes” to life and “no” to injustice simultaneously.

The Rebel proceeds through a series of rich meditations on various figures and movements—from the Marquis de Sade to Nietzsche, from surrealism to Marx, and from Dostoevsky to the Russian revolutionaries—that decipher how the rebellious passions can be pushed to the extreme of gratuitous revolutionary violence. A brief sketch of two central meditations, which explore “metaphysical” and “historical” rebellion, is worth reprising. Metaphysical rebellion is described by Camus as “the movement by which man protests against his condition and against the whole of creation”. (R 23, OC III 80) In his interpretation, metaphysical rebellion first assumed the form of an individual protest against mortality, a solitary cry of discontent that one is personally offended by “a cruel and capricious divinity”. (R 33, OC III 89) This form of insurrection refuses to accept an order of being that is full of misery, frustration and death, and rejects the very notion of a God that could establish such an abject reality. In rejecting the human predicament, metaphysical rebellion also thereby affirms a positive value judgement, namely, the claim for justice, order, and purpose. Yet a perilous conflation is inherent in this claim. The metaphysical rebel begins by condemning the injustices and suffering to which innocent human beings are subjected in their daily lives, and ends by denouncing the universe itself as the ultimate source of the evils visited upon humanity. Metaphysical rebellion thus presupposes that there is and indeed should be a definitive reason for the order of things, a supreme entity responsible for creation, and a power capable of completing and perfecting all that exists. Metaphysical rebellion believes, in other words, that the absurd is an anomaly amenable to correction, if the source of that anomaly can be conquered by human initiative. In short, at the same moment that one supreme power is denied, another is deified in its place. What began as rebellion, writes Camus, “ends in metaphysical revolution”. (R 25, OC III 82)

In Camus's view, first Dostoevsky and then Nietzsche most vividly crossed from metaphysical rebellion—the refusal to accept the fate of suffering and death—to metaphysical revolution—the elevation of man into the role of supreme being who claims the right to create or destroy. Dostoevsky, for instance, attributes the alienation of modern society to the rejection of religious values that bind individuals together in a meaningful community. The absence of such guiding principles was, for Dostoevsky, tantamount to the loss of any external reason for living. This provided an opening for revolutionary movements committed to the progressive power of reason to fill the moral vacuum with their own absolute principles of universal emancipation. In Dostoevsky's novel, *The Devils* (*The Possessed*), which Camus regarded as one of the “four or five supreme works” in all of literature,¹⁵ the character Shigalyov (Chigalev) embodies the revolutionaries' faith in their ability to direct the course of history towards the realization of an objectively meaningful future:

Having devoted all my energies to the study of the social organization of the society of the future which is to replace our present one, I have come to the conclusion that all the inventors of social systems, from the ancient times to our present year, have been dreamers, story-tellers, fools who contradicted themselves and had no idea of natural science or the strange animal called man. . . . But as the future form of society is of the utmost importance now that we at last are all ready to act, I am submitting to you my own system of the world organization so as to make any further thinking unnecessary.¹⁶

The significance of this worldview is summed up by Camus in a 1951 entry to his *Carnets*: “Dostoevsky's thesis: The same paths that lead the individual to crime lead the society to revolution”. (NB III 94; OC IV 1184) Nietzsche's thesis, however, is that “God no longer exists and is no longer responsible for our existence”, and consequently “man must resolve to act, in order to exist”. (R 62, OC III 113) The reason Nietzsche's thought is so decisive for metaphysical revolution is that with it nihilism for the first time becomes a positive philosophical doctrine. Like Dostoyevsky before him, Nietzsche understood that nihilism was a cancer destroying modern civilization from within. For Nietzsche, however, the only cure possible was to radicalize nihilism through the will to power: to accelerate the destructive process to the point that, when the old world and its banal values had disappeared, a new world with “superior” values could then appear. Only total transfiguration without constraints—beyond good and evil—can pave the way to a future suited to the *Übermensch*. Crucially, for Nietzsche, nihilism is no longer an impotent disillusionment, but a redemptive act of total affirmation that transfigures possibility into necessity: one must will the destruction of all that is in order to give birth to that which is to come. Nietzsche thus places metaphysical rebellion on its most revolutionary footing by insisting that will to power must destroy to create, thereby “consenting to murder” in the name of life. (R 76, OC III 126)

¹⁵ Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: A Life* (New York: Knopf, 1997), 395.

¹⁶ Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Devils* (London: Penguin Books, 1971), 404

The fanatical form of metaphysical revolution that comes to a head with Nietzsche has, Camus tells us, its parallels within the shift from historical rebellion to historical revolution. But where metaphysical rebellion moves on an abstract philosophical plane of thought, historical rebellion—from the French revolutionaries to the twentieth-century communists and fascists—aspire to build the political instruments needed to root out and concretely correct the misery of the world. In Camus's history of modernity, revolutionaries have looked to put into practice the ideas first articulated in the books of thinkers such as Rousseau, Hegel, Marx, and Lenin. The intellectual architects of historical revolution encouraged the enlightenment ambition of creating, and no longer simply waiting for, definitive human salvation. This new and increasingly excessive mode of revolt therefore represents a transformation of the rebellious spirit into the material intervention in and determination of the whole of history itself. It is a call to militant action under the banner of history, “the attempt to shape action to ideas, to fit the world into a theoretic frame”. (R 106, 151) It also marks the passage to a vicious inflationary spiral, with each successive generation of revolutionaries becoming even more violent and doctrinaire than their predecessors.

Camus asserts that the animating principle of revolutionary ideology will henceforth be the ruling, yet ultimately empty criterion of “success”. (R 132, 147, OC III 173-174, 186-187; HC 22, 24; OC II 741, 739) As long as some outcome, no matter how cynical, is achieved, it is possible for revolutionaries to claim the virtues associated with victory. The logic of success at any cost thus initiates a process of sweeping away all moral and political restraints, freeing revolutionaries to embrace the doctrine of “necessary evil” or the “lesser of two evils” to justify terrorism, forced labour, and mass killing as efficacious methods of historical change. Revolution diverges from rebellion, then, in claiming that insurrection in practice must be unconstrained and any means must be at its disposal to increase the odds of delivering a better future. What is important for Camus, however, is that genuine rebellion always acknowledges a line between what is and what is not evil and refuses to cross it; rebellion remains steadfast in its resistance to all dehumanizing acts, irrespective of whether they allegedly are justified by the march of history. The cruel betting of the present on the future reveals that it “would be too dangerous to handle the evil toy known as Progress”. (OC I 572)

Although Camus obviously does not reject the aim of achieving greater freedom and justice,¹⁷ he refuses the concept of the “implacable reign of necessity” as the motivation for rebellion. (R 80, OC III 129) Rather than the goal of attaining the “end” of history, it is the reality of suffering in current contexts that motivates rebellions in the present. Rebellion, as Camus envisions it, seizes the chances for justice in the here and now rather than deferring justice to an ideal future to which judgement and action are subjugated “in order to obey history”. (R 79, OC III 128) Camus in effect calls for permanent rebellion as the always limited confrontations with specific attempts to deny human freedom and dignity. Rebellion,

¹⁷ See Martin Crowley, “Camus and Social Justice”, in Edward J. Hughes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Camus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 93-105; and Mark Orme, *The Development of Albert Camus's Concern for Social and Political Justice* (Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2007).

for Camus, contains an inherent logic limiting what can be done in the pursuit of freedom and justice. It does not disallow political projects but renders them provisional, partial, and always contestable, subject to an ethical and political imperative of resisting any attempt to project the concept of overarching “progress” onto political goals. Each rebellion has its own specific reasons and outcomes (R 5, 10, OC III 65, 69-70), relative to context and period. (R 19, OC III 76)

Camus argues, then, that contrary to the historicist delusions of modern revolution, it is “day-to-day revolt” that “gives life its value” and constitutes “evidence of man’s sole dignity”. (MS 55, 115, OC I OC I 256, 298)¹⁸ In this vein, *The Rebel* sketches a phenomenology of rebellion that describes what Camus takes to be the actual human experience of being violated and humiliated. The master-slave relationship, for example, exemplifies that in daring to defy the oppression of the master, the rebel urgently “affirms the existence of a borderline” between the tolerable and the intolerable, the dignified and the degraded. (R 13, OC III 71) The rebel both asserts the value of some aspect of his or her being – prior to any theoretical formulation of systematic morality – and condemns any assault on this aspect of self beyond the limit of the tolerable; the rebel thus “says yes and no simultaneously”. (R 13, OC III 71) More importantly, however, the rebel’s simultaneous affirmation and rejection is directed not only at individual enslavement, but at “the condition of slavery” more generally. (R 14, OC III 72) Every act of rebellion contains within it a relative judgement of a particular situation that directs upon it a concretely universal concern for mutual recognition of the freedom and equality of others. Rebellion is an appeal for reciprocal recognition of a common right not to be subjected to conditions of exploitation and oppression, which expresses the sense of “a dignity common to all men” that “must always be defended”. (R 18-19, OC III 75-76) In this way rebellion affirms the positive value of life for all persons and ascribes to others a right to rebel in rejecting the injustices of the world without, however, condemning the world itself. From this Camus concludes that through rebellion the tyranny of the “either/or” in the master-slave relationship is reconstituted as an emancipatory “neither/nor” – neither master nor slave – which can serve as a basis for judging the limits that action must establish for itself. This concurrent expression of both refusal and assent, both “yes” and “no”, constitutes a balance or tension that stimulates the continual interrogation of everyday ethics and politics against hubristic assertions of teleological history and unquestionable progress.

Measure between Revolt and Revolution

For Camus, modern revolutionary thought introduces a deviation from the basis and aims of revolt. Wanting to make determinate justice reign over a deified humanity, it consecrates an absolute value in the form of a transcendent historical process. The failure to set any limits to what is either possible or permissible is the gravest political problem of modernity because, Camus writes, the “logic of history, from the moment that it is totally accepted, gradually leads it, against its most passionate convictions, to mutilate man more and more and to

¹⁸ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 55, 115.

transform itself into objective crime". (R 246, OC III 275) Nonetheless, despite Camus's critique of the development of the modern revolutionary framework it is a mistake to view him as mounting a wholesale denunciation of revolution as such, or of dismissing the noble emancipatory aspirations of many modern revolutionaries. In fact, he argues that revolt and revolution are juxtaposed counterparts, forming a relationship of difference held together by the fundamental asymmetry giving rise to tension between them. According to Camus, the positive force of defiance engendered in revolt can end in the "extremity of solitude", if not counterbalanced by the forms of reciprocity and collective action identified with revolution. Similarly, the positive force of collective action to overcoming group oppression can end in the "nihilism of efficacy", if not counterbalanced by the freedom and anti-authoritarianism identified with the spontaneity of revolt. (SC 210)

Revolt and revolution are therefore bound together in a relation of critique, pushing and prodding each other by asking of rebellion: Which limits must be respected, and which may be transgressed? For Camus, this question must be posed perpetually and reciprocally because the countervailing tendencies of revolt and revolution cannot be entirely resolved or finally overcome. The phenomenon of rebellion straddles both attitudes at once, and its strength lies in holding on to both poles of this non-dialectical antithesis. Indeed, the "severe" yet "fruitful" tension between revolt and revolution can be seen as the fundamental basis of Camus's political outlook. (SC 213, 212) Camus thought that the modern revolutionary tradition sought to confront the hypocrisy of a bourgeois society that celebrates yet also suppresses freedom and equality; but by pinning its faith on a set of doctrines deemed to be rationally tied to the authority of historical progress it prepares the ground for abolishing all limits in the quest for absolute liberation. Whenever revolutionary movements have tried to define political transformation in terms of historical necessity, they have done so by placing revolt under suspicion—denouncing its contingency, unpredictability, and transience—and valorizing revolution as the exclusively legitimate mode of rebellion. Not only this, but in so doing they foster an abstract and instrumental view of human beings, whose value lies in contributing to the fulfilment of the overriding purpose of progress. The desire for unrestricted progress then morphs into the desire for unrestricted power, and revolution becomes the practical spirit of modern nihilism. It is this perversion of revolt in the struggle against oppression that Camus sees as most destructive of rebellion and most conducive to violence and terror. "If we give up our capacity to reject", he writes, "our consent becomes unreasonable, and without counterbalance, history becomes servitude". (SC 215)

Camus thus aims to keep alive the critical spirit of revolt and not simply abandon the idea of revolution per se, provided the latter is shorn of any historicist pretensions used to justify exceeding the limits, moral and political, of what is permissible in a dignified human existence. In doing so, he proposes a move to human nature and measure inspired by classical Greek thought, to revitalize a more nuanced approach to rebellion. An appeal to human nature is a way to subvert the sacred aura surrounding the idea of teleological progress, and rearticulate the experience of a manner of being that is given *in* time but not *to* history. Camus 'deteleologizes' humanity by turning to the ancient Greeks for a counter-model of historical time. In sharp contrast to modernity's cult of linear historical development, a

progressivist account of history was foreign to the Greeks. "Greek thought", he says, "is not historical" in the modern sense. (AJ 49, OC II 1061) Historical time for the Greeks was cyclical and incomplete (R 189-190, OC III 222-223), meaning that each present "now" was not a transition to a steadily perfected future but simply to another alternating "now". In short, the Greeks offer us a sensibility of existing in time that nonetheless refuses to acknowledge that history is everything. (R 28, OC III 82) But if that is the case, then all talk of a progressive history as that which endows life with meaning and goodness rings hollow. Camus agrees with the ancients that the "end" of history and the "ends" of human beings are not the same. Insofar, then, as rebellion is not to be concerned with a totalizing history, its guiding interest is the ground of existence itself. On this point, Camus argues, rebellion "reveals the part of man which must always be defended", something "permanent in oneself worth preserving". (R 20, 16, OC III 77, 73-74) Without this "something", why would anyone rebel and how could we account for rebellion's continual recurrence as an experience in and of the present across vastly different periods and situations? Viewed in this light, the analysis of rebellion "leads at least to the suspicion that, contrary to the postulates of contemporary thought, a human nature does exist, as the Greeks believed". (R 16, OC III 73)

With this Greek inflection to his phenomenology of lived experience, Camus's minimalist conception of human nature describes the facticity of human existence rather than a metaphysical essence. For Camus, facticity refers not only to the temporal and material conditions of a pre-existing world into which we are thrown, but also to the embodied consciousness from which the self is constituted yet which is not of our choosing. The mutable surface aspects of the self—language, race, gender, culture, class status—presuppose some given aspect of our being that is itself untouchable and inviolable. If the entirety of our being was indeed capable of being "fabricated" by human activity, then the last remaining vestige of human dignity would be effectively neutralized by historicism. According to the logic of historicism, since the world is thoroughly historical, so too is the human being that operates within it. When conjoined to modernist revolutionary doctrine, historicism releases humanity from the limits of any given nature. Yet at the same time, Camus suggests, it also dissolves the basis for meaningful and responsible rebellion. If humans have no nature of any kind—something that is non-identical to history—then conceivably they can be made and remade in every possible way, and they are quite literally nothing independently of the process of assembly. Although historicism opens up the dream of ever-new dimensions of human freedom, it ends in the nightmare of a total power imposed on life.

Unsurprisingly, Camus contends that the historicist way of defining humanity as pure plasticity misses the essential question of revolt, the question of what it is that makes innumerable individuals refuse and resist any attempt to reduce them to mere objects or ideals. Yet Camus remains attuned to the absurd predicament of the human condition. We are entitled to the "suspicion" that human nature exists, but we should not conflate this with a "theoretical confidence" which is able to see through the mists of phenomenal reality in order to decipher with certainty a timeless essence divorced from the concrete determinations of existence. (R 16, O III 73) Thus, the validity of the notion of human nature is not proven, but it is imputed or presupposed; existence implies both being and becoming. In acknowledging

that there is something given as a condition for the possibility of experience and not purely invented in human being, rebellion discloses some clues about the possible existence of a human nature that otherwise cannot be objectively demonstrated. Whether or not there is a human nature can never be known indubitably, therefore, but something like it can be described negatively through the transgressive excesses that violate our integrity. Perhaps most significant of all, by reference to human nature, we can circumscribe a primary value of dignity from which to impart certain limits to our actions. (R 281, OC III 301-302)

The revolutionary abandonment of any sense of human nature, and with it a radical unbalancing of rebellion, leads Camus to embrace the notion of measure (*mesure*). “Rebellion”, he declares, “at the same time that it suggests a nature common to all men, brings to light the measure and the limit which are the very principle of this nature”. (R 294, OC III 313) Measure and limit are interconnected terms for Camus. Where “limit” refers to the boundary between both poles of a non-dialectical contradiction, such as the “yes” and “no” of rebellion or the freedom and equality of justice, “measure” refers to the appropriate balance, harmony, or proportion struck between the two poles (a notion that echoes the Greek virtue of *sōphrosynē*).¹⁹ Measure accordingly has a stronger prescriptive connotation than the more descriptive sense of limit. Camus emphasizes that the failure to achieve *mesure* results in *démésure* or “excess” (disproportion), which destroys the situated fields of tension upon which human existence and rebellion depend. Given this ramification, it is important to search for ways of moderating yet not extinguishing the rebellious impulse. The challenge here is that the human condition is characterized by constant vacillations between two poles, and thus their limit varies according to situation. According to Camus, however, ethics and politics arise from and must remain rooted in this conditional ground insofar as political action and political responsibility originate as interrelated polarities in human experience. Rather than fixing ourselves entirely to one of two poles, which is what we do in the throes of extremism, by way of measure we endeavour to establish a fragile equilibrium or balance that must of necessity remain approximately—that comes as near or approaches as closely as possible (*proximus*)—halfway between them. (SC 213-216, R 290, OC III 309-310) Camus describes this type of “intermediate reasoning”, embodied “in an active consent to the relative” where “contradictions may exist and thrive”, as a mode of “thought at the meridian”. (S 216, R 290, 279, OC III 310, 300) This is a process of thinking that remains situated in the “erratic arc” or relational measure between two poles and which, through the tension of their interaction, becomes imbued with the features of both, thereby regenerating the rebellious freedom from which they originate. (R 294, OC III 313)

Thought at the meridian is, we might say, a measure of equality, whereas excess is a kind of “immoderate” thought that finds no other equal. Although the ethic of measure cannot provide a formal system of rules and fixed guidelines by which to determine unequivocally the most fitting course of action in all circumstances, it does disclose a basic “law of moderation” that “extends to all the contradictions of rebellious thought”. (R 295, OC III 314) The law of moderation teaches through the trial and error of example, which stimulates

¹⁹ Sharpe, *Camus, Philosophe*, 297-301.

the imaginative capacity to envision as many alternative positions as possible in order to come to the appropriate balance for a given situation. Arriving at balanced political decisions and actions requires revolving around the limit between contending viewpoints as well as the primary limit of human nature. Of course, striking a balance between measure and action risks remaining precarious. Yet without an appeal to these limits, one becomes blind to other possibilities and other voices, which may then prove fatal if one loses one's balance. On this point Camus discerns a recurrent existential motif in the classical Greek concern with the tragic character of measure, "symbolized by Nemesis, the goddess of moderation and the implacable enemy of the immoderate". (R 296, OC III 315) In Greek myth, Nemesis is the goddess who maintains equilibrium in human affairs by distributing both happiness and suffering, ensuring that neither one become too frequent or excessive. As the dispenser of "what is due" (*némein*), she further personifies inescapable retribution, avenging those who recklessly pursue excess and upset the world's balance through their hubristic disregard of limits, thereby restoring just measure or equilibrium.²⁰ This is why, Camus notes, the "constant theme of classical tragedy . . . is the limit that must not be transgressed. On either side of this limit equally legitimate forces meet in quivering and endless confrontation. To make a mistake about this limit, to try to destroy the balance, is to perish" (LCE 301-302). Camus in effect proposes that the extreme will to transgress the limit of human nature vis-à-vis the revolutionary culmination of historical teleology increases the likelihood that systematic atrocities will be committed with impunity. The deification of history disguises humanity's mortal condition and, with it, the reason for valuing the dignity of each human life in and of the present. (R 289-293, OC III 306-313)

Conclusion

The central theme of *The Rebel* is that under the sway of historicism, we have lost the ability to distinguish between means and ends. In modernity, means and ends commonly are collapsed as part of the historical process by which the gap between the ideal and the real is thought to be progressively closing. Camus's commitment to balance and his respect for the integrity of limits constitute a deep rebuke of the philosophic and revolutionary hope that we are moving inexorably towards a definitive solution to all conflict, alienation, or injustice. The danger here lies in the possibility that striving for a revolutionary destination may require lethal violence and, to that end, a corresponding suspension of ethical restraint. If we think the revolutionary *telos* is a tenable historical project, Camus warns, it may well be that we cannot resist the temptation to hurry it along with drastic methods vindicated by "authoritative" philosophical justifications. For Camus, the conjectural projection of freedom into the future fosters revolutionary offspring who lack a proper discernment of measure (in the sense of an appropriate balance between means and ends) regarding freedom in the present. Revolutionary ideologies and the messianic philosophies of history from which they take their inspiration are misguided because they reach too far, too wide, and ultimately lack

²⁰ Cf. NB II 156, OC II 1082: "Nemesis—the goddess of measure. All those who have overstepped the limit will be pitilessly destroyed". Cf. LCE 149, OC III 597.

the “measures” for how to judge respectable political actions given the indeterminacy of temporal experience. Camus therefore decries revolutionary extremism, and contrasts it with what he considers the modest “power of rebellion” (SC 216), to demonstrate how a well-balanced rebellious impulse can be more accommodating of the rich contingencies that mark human existence, more open toward multiple pathways of historical time, and more imaginative about inclusive political spaces for debate and negotiation, agreement and disagreement. These considerations in turn lead Camus to mount a surprisingly strong defence of something like human nature, but not one governed by historicist philosophy. This is because, he contends, in the face of totalizing ideologies intoxicated by the prospect of finally conquering history, we must hold onto the sense that we share a common existence and affirm, without any guarantees, the ongoing possibility of cultivating a dignified life here and now. These “para-philosophical” commitments to revolt balanced by limits and measure are, for Camus, indispensable to sustaining rebellion without adding “to the injustice of the human condition”. (R 285, OC III 305)

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