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Fred H. Willhoite, Jr.

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## ALBERT CAMUS' POLITICS OF REBELLION

FRED H. WILLHOITE, JR.

*The College of Wooster*

“PROBABLY EVERY GENERATION sees itself as charged with re-making the world. Mine, however, knows that it will not remake the world. But its task is perhaps even greater, for it consists in keeping the world from destroying itself.”<sup>1</sup> What is the role of the literary artist in the defense of human dignity against forces which threaten the existence of humanity itself? This is the question which the second youngest recipient of the Nobel Prize for Literature, until his tragic accidental death early in 1960, sought to answer through his life and art. Despite his often-expressed desire to be a writer in the same sense that Mozart was a composer, Albert Camus never attempted to place an “aesthetic distance” between himself and the major political issues of his time. Without becoming identified with any party or rigidly defined doctrinal position, he endeavored to become a witness on behalf of concrete, living, powerless human beings in an age which he saw dominated by social and political depersonalization in general and by totalitarianism in particular.

Although Camus was not a political philosopher by profession, his work has considerable value for the student of political ideas, or more generally, of the political culture of post-World War II France. Camus stands in that great line of French *savants* and literary artists who have decisively echoed and influenced the convictions of many of their compatriots: in this sense he is akin to Voltaire, Rousseau, and Victor Hugo. Although it is difficult to estimate very precisely the impact of Camus' writings on French public opinion, Professor William May seems justified in declaring that “Camus has had a decisive influence on the political convictions of young Frenchmen. . . . (Apparently no book has been as effective as ‘The Rebel’ in persuading young Frenchmen to reject Marxism.)”<sup>2</sup>

Camus was deeply involved — in deeds as well as in words — in some of the major conflicts through which his generation has passed. The political ferment of the Popular Front era, the Resistance movement, the reshaping of French democratic institutions after the second world war, the response to the challenge of totalitarian communism — all these crises elicited his participation and comment. He did not commit himself to any organized political party but stood out as an individualistic champion of decency, modesty, honesty, and compassion in politics. Within the American context, his basically rather simple position might seem unimportant, but in a Europe torn by decades of violent revolution and conflicting ideologies, his attempt to get at and remain faithful to the concrete human foundations of all social policy makes him a significant figure in contemporary political thought.

In order to explicate Camus' basic political ideas, it is necessary first to delineate his vision of the human situation — the meaning, purpose, and pattern of man's life. From his relatively uncomplicated view of the human condition, cen-

<sup>1</sup> Albert Camus, “Camus at Stockholm: The Acceptance of the Nobel Prize,” translated by Justin O'Brien, *Atlantic Monthly*, CCI (May 1958), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Letter to the author, March 3, 1959.

tering upon a few fundamental themes, emerges the key concept of rebellion, central to his interpretation of and prescriptions for politics. The most significant and searching of Camus' political writing consists of a sustained and reasoned analysis of and attack upon totalitarianism, and the discussion of his specifically political ideas will deal primarily with this aspect of his thought. Some attention will be given, however, to the more constructive aspects of Camus' political thought, an area in which, for the most part, he wrote only sketchily and in very general terms.

#### THE HUMAN CONDITION

Camus' fundamental perspective was set forth almost in its entirety in the four lyrical essays of *Noces*, written when he was only twenty-three to record his own most intimate experiences and his impressions of the natural world. Obviously, intense personal crises rather than philosophical reading and speculation stimulated the formulation of his basic ideas, which may be summarized under the headings of man's joy in nature, the total this-worldliness of life, happiness conjoined with absurdity, complete honesty to oneself, and — the concept central to his political thought proper — rebellion.

Camus' viewpoint in *Noces* is radically earth-bound — and so it always remained. His youthful experience of physical nature resulted in a simple and immediate joy so intense that speculation about or belief in otherworldly life seemed irrelevant. He concluded that it is man's role in nature to be a happy creature, but this does not imply that it is possible to overlook the fact of mortality. Life is so good that we desire its eternal continuance. Because the fulfillment of this longing is impossible, we must surmount our trepidation at the prospect of death and, fully cognizant of our fate, affirm the happiness that we can know. The keenness and poignancy of this joy will sustain and enrich our lives if we do not delude ourselves by seeking to transcend the limits of mortality.

Camus' passionate affirmation of the happy life has the effect of intensifying for him a feeling of the absurdity of human existence. If life is joyous, good, and infinitely desirable, it is for man the ultimate absurdity that he should be fully aware of its inevitable extinction. In *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, a more philosophical work written a few years subsequent to *Noces*, Camus seeks to explicate more fully the meaning of absurdity and discovers that it is essentially the product of the incommensurability of man — who desires total comprehension and eternal life — and the universe — which continually offers new mysteries to man's reason and brings about his inescapable death.

But Camus' belief that life is absurd did not imply for him weary resignation to the whims of an inscrutable fate. For a final significant motif plainly expressed in *Noces* is man's rebellion against whatever oppresses his mind and body — in particular the ultimate oppressor, death. The first clear expression of this theme in Camus' work resulted from an intensely personal experience undergone by the young writer when, faced with the imminent possibility of his own death from tuberculosis, he traveled through Italy attempting to recover from the dread disease.

In Florence he strolled through the graveyard of the Santissima Annunziata, observing that, from the tenor of the epitaphs, it appeared that all those buried

there had willingly accepted death. Suddenly he experienced a moment of fierce rebellion against such placid resignation:

Everything within me protested against this kind of resignation. "One must," said the inscriptions. But I said no, and my revolt was true. That joy which goes about the earth, indifferent and absorbed in itself like a pilgrim — I had to follow it step by step. And as for the rest, I said no. I said no with all my strength. These slabs taught me that this was futile. . . . But today I still do not see what futility takes away from my rebellion, and I feel keenly what is thereby added to it.<sup>3</sup>

In this moment of instinctive rebellion Camus discovered that his love for the earth, for life in its mingled joy and hopelessness, was so powerful that he could not resign himself to the death which his lucidity would not permit him to overlook. The movement of rebellion surged up within him, and he discovered that all the forces of the world which aim at the obliteration of human life must be resisted. His experiential sequence: life is very good though mortal and therefore absurd; yet when the joy of living overwhelms us, we rebel against death and all death-bringers; because our revolt is in the name of life, it leads us to a keener awareness of the poignant happiness that can be ours if we affirm our allegiance to the earth.

This distinctively individual experience of rebellion, later conceptualized by Camus in his attempt to delineate its nature and significance, became in his writings the existential standard by which political ideas and empirical polities are to be evaluated. Whatever of value we may discover in Camus' conception of politics springs ultimately from his own intensely personal reaction to human mortality.

But Camus could not speak meaningfully to the life of man in society until he had passed beyond his own immediate experience of and reaction to the world to arrive at serious consideration of the corporate dimension of man's life. Although his early works contain intimations of such a concern,<sup>4</sup> on the whole it seems true that the chaotic circumstances of the war years provided the matrix for and a stimulus to Camus' development beyond the delineation of personal experience toward the construction of a positive morality for the individual and humane political principles for society.

Camus' experiential approach to the formulation of personal ideas and convictions leads to the conclusion that his active participation in the Resistance (as editor of the clandestine newspaper *Combat*) must certainly have affected his point of view. A profound sense of human solidarity in the struggle against evil and oppression, a visceral contempt for totalitarianism and its treatment of persons, an upsurging faith in the potentialities of human feeling and intelligence — these were some of Camus' attitudes that were either born or reached maturity during the difficult years of the Occupation.

The most moving and effective expression of Camus' newly articulated political humanism is his great novel, *La Peste* (published in 1947), which tells of the

<sup>3</sup> "Le désert," *Noces* (Paris: Charlot, 1947), pp. 88–89.

<sup>4</sup> For example, the "Conqueror," an exemplary person sketched in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, is neither tyrant nor totalitarian. Fully conscious of the ultimate absurdity of life, he has chosen to defend the poor and helpless against oppression as his way of rebelling against evil and death, the handmaidens of absurdity. See "The Myth of Sisyphus," *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, translated by Justin O'Brien (New York: Knopf, 1955), pp. 85–90.

ravages of a bubonic plague epidemic in an Algerian city and of the reactions to this crisis of various groups and individuals. Camus indicates on the title page that this book is allegorical, but it contains several levels of meaning. In the first place it is an allegory on contemporary events, such as the German Occupation and the totalitarian world of concentration camps, terror, and wholly depersonalized bureaucracy. But even more significantly, the characters and events of *La Peste* give evidence of the development and enrichment of Camus' conception of the human condition.

In particular, the necessity and efficacy of action in the social sphere are affirmed, in the guise of a patient and determined emergency public health team led by a stoical young doctor. Rebellion against the plague — death, suffering, and injustice — is presented as the pathway to genuine humanity. The moral solipsism of the absurd man is somehow broken into by a feeling that his personal revolt is grounded in an experience common to his fellows. Happiness remains of central value, but in the sense that furthering the happiness of others becomes a duty for the rebel.

Camus attempted elsewhere to reason out the motivations for the plague-fighters' — and his own — service to humanity, but these intellectual efforts were not in themselves very persuasive. The way that Camus felt toward his fellow men was infinitely more important to him than the way he thought about them. To give hope to the humiliated and the debased was his aim, but — “Not through virtue . . . but through a sort of almost organic intolerance, which you feel or do not feel. Indeed, I see many who fail to feel it, but I cannot envy their sleep.”<sup>5</sup> Camus' compelling personal vision of the human condition thus traverses a difficult route — from its starting-point of life's absurdity to a radically earth-bound and tough-minded humanism, in which instinctive rebellion against suffering, oppression, and death leads to involvement in the problems of human society.

From this standpoint Camus interprets modern totalitarianism as the tragically corrupted offspring of the rebellion of men against their condition—rebellion which is itself essential for the realization of true human dignity. The experience of rebellion holds the center of the stage in Camus' reflections on political life and thought, as he seeks to show how it has gone awry in modern times and calls for renewed fidelity to true rebellion as the only hope for a just and humane social order.

#### REBELLION AND REVOLUTION

In *L'Homme révolté* Camus attempts to go to the experiential root of that kind of rebellion which is especially relevant to politics. Initially he seeks to answer the question, how does rebellion, insofar as its corporate implications are concerned, originate and become actualized in the individual life? It first occurs when some oppressed individual, for example a slave, finally utters an instinctive “no” to a demand made upon him which he feels simply goes too far in debasing his person. In this act, which may well precede conscious formulation of values applicable to the situation, the oppressed one, in his negation of the command addressed to him, tacitly affirms certain human rights and values. There springs

<sup>5</sup>“The Artist and His Time,” *The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays*, p. 211.

up in his consciousness the awareness that within his very being as a living person there is something "with which man can identify himself, if only for a time."<sup>6</sup> In effect, the human conscience comes to light in the experience of rebellion, which in itself proclaims that there are certain limits to the ways in which human beings may legitimately be treated. If the rebel becomes willing to die for the sake of the values implicit in his revolt, this indicates that these values transcend the individual; thereby the rebel emerges from his solitude and is given a reason to act.

Camus' analysis of revolt suggests to him that there is in fact a common human nature: "Why rebel if there is in oneself nothing permanent to conserve?"<sup>7</sup> The slave who adjudges a command to deny something fundamental in him feels in the same moment that this something is of genuine significance because it is common to all men. Rebellion, although it originates in individual experience, is not essentially an egoistic movement; individuals will rebel against falsehood and the oppression of others as well as against personal suffering. Rebellion stakes everything on the degree in which it invokes that which is common to the community of men. The rebel who defends the oppressed does not so act because he identifies himself with them either in a psychological or in a calculating manner: "There is only the identifying of destinies and the taking of sides."<sup>8</sup>

Human solidarity is founded upon this positive kind of rebellion and the values which it discloses as applicable to all persons. Rebellion which goes beyond the limitations within human nature which it reveals becomes untrue to its own experience, destroys human solidarity, and thereby becomes itself pretentious and oppressive. This latter variety of rebellion has forgotten that when one revolts against suffering, injustice or absurdity, the resultant experience of human solidarity is best expressed in a neo-Cartesian postulate, "I rebel, therefore *we* are."<sup>9</sup>

For Camus, rebellion means not only an individual and collective refusal of death and absurdity in the name of nature and happiness; it comes to imply resistance to physical or political oppression as well — for such oppression is on the side of death and misery in negating men's freedom and happiness. Camus' basic intent at this point is to establish that there are intrinsic limits to the kind of treatment which may be meted out to human beings, if their essential humanity is to be preserved.

In his attempt to understand the political situation of our time, Camus seeks to trace the history of rebellion during the past century and a half. Reinforcing and often equivalent to the fundamental level of personal experience of rebellion shared by many individuals in modern times are what he terms metaphysical and historical revolt. The former evolves into the latter, as the World of revolt becomes the Flesh of history.

Metaphysical rebellion is "the movement in which a man sets himself against his condition and the whole of creation."<sup>10</sup> It is a Western phenomenon, for it could occur only in conjunction with Christianity. It is in fact a rebellion

<sup>6</sup> *L'Homme révolté* (Paris: Gallimard, 1951), p. 26.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 29.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 39.

against the image in much of Christian history of the authoritarian God who metes out rewards and punishments, despite what Camus sees as His own guilt in allowing injustice, cruelty, and death to reign in the world. Metaphysical rebellion is not essentially atheistic; rather it is blasphemous in its denunciation in the name of unity and justice of the God who is the father of death and the supreme scandal.

But as this explication implies, a frontal attack upon the absolute God was not possible so long as Christian faith remained dominant in the West. Medieval Christendom believed that it was only just that some men should be masters and others servants, that man's lot was by nature and by right not an easy one on this earth; for God Himself had come into history and suffered as a man, showing that man was created to suffer: "If everything, without exception, from heaven to earth, is bound up in sorrow, then a strange kind of happiness is possible."<sup>11</sup> But as soon as the Age of Reason had for many undermined the validity of Christian theology, religious faith could no longer justify the master-slave relationship. If Christ were believed to be merely human, God was in fact responsible for suffering and injustice without Himself participating in these woes. Such a God, to men who rebelled against oppression and falsehood, was an abomination; hence they denied Him.

In Camus' eyes, the central philosophical figure in the rebellion of modern men against God and the human condition is Friedrich Nietzsche, in whose thought the nihilistic elements latent in metaphysical revolt are clearly articulated for the first time. For Nietzsche the death of God means that there is no law superior to or apart from man nor any lawgiver but man — no external standards transcend human values. But this very absence of eternal law does not mean solely that "everything is permitted"; it means that nothing is allowed apart from human denial or permission. No liberty is possible except in a world where both the permitted and the prohibited are delimited. Since man must create his own values, Nietzsche proposes to replace all value judgments with "a single yes, a total and exalted adherence to this world. . . . Total adherence to total necessity, this is his paradoxical definition of freedom."<sup>12</sup> In effect, fate becomes divine and the world, as the ultimate, is god. As part of the world, men, by wholeheartedly accepting and affirming its reality partake of the divinity: "To say yes to the world repeatedly is to re-create the world and oneself at the same time, to become the great artist, the creator. . . . Divinity without immortality defines the freedom of the creator."<sup>13</sup>

Camus indicates that Nietzsche's nihilism implies that man lives without restraints, except for those he places upon himself; that he can re-create the world in whatever image he desires. And though Nietzsche did not so conclude, it is possible to use his ideas to justify, as did the Nazis, the conclusion that to say yes, unqualifiedly, to the world, includes affirming the legitimacy of murder. Nietzsche goes beyond nihilism in leaping from the negation of the ideal to its

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 53.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 98.

secularization: he concludes that since men cannot attain to salvation through God, their salvation must come through their own efforts on earth: "Philosophy secularizes the idea. But tyrants come, and soon they secularize philosophies which put them in the right."<sup>14</sup> This was the fate of Nietzsche's thought at the hands of National Socialism.

As Camus views the recent past, metaphysical rebellion and nihilism have continually revealed the visage of human protest against the injustice and absurdity of Creation and the human condition. Nihilism concludes in declaring the solitude of all earthly creatures and the nothingness of all morality. But few have been able to live with these conclusions; most rebels have sought to re-create the world and its values in their own image, often by unleashing personal desire and the will to power, ending in suicide, madness, murder, and destruction.

But in its essence, Camus asserts, true rebellion can never be other than a protracted protest against death, the fact of man's mortality, which seems to deprive life of all significance: "Rebellion demands, not life, but a meaning for life."<sup>15</sup> Rebellion that remains faithful to its inspiration seeks to create this *raison d'être* for humanity by struggling against evil in the form of unjust suffering.

The rebellion against God as the creator and preserver of an evil and absurd world is, as Camus sees it, the beginning of both tragedy and triumph for modern man. In his revolt man pledges himself to build the only kingdom — that of Justice — which can replace the realm of Grace, to reunite the human community upon the debris of the divine community: "Kill God and build a Church — this is the constant and contradictory movement of rebellion."<sup>16</sup> The tragic side of this effort to build the Church of Rebellion is contemporary totalitarianism, the joint product of metaphysical revolt and political revolution. It is the totalitarians who have carried into effect the dictum of the nihilistic rebel, who adds to the "I rebel, therefore we are" of the original experience of revolt a second postulate, "And we are alone."<sup>17</sup>

The principles of metaphysical rebellion were first actualized in historical form, Camus contends, in the events of the French Revolution. The year 1789 saw more than a revolt against tyranny; the principle of divine right and the legitimacy of the Kingdom of Grace were attacked in the name of absolute Justice. A civil religion was established by Jacobins who believed themselves to be disciples of Rousseau. All were required to worship at the altar of Truth, Justice, and Reason, the new triune godhead. But abstract principles are inherently of feeble attractive powers, and "to worship a theorem for a very long time faith is insufficient; thus a police force becomes necessary."<sup>18</sup> The Reign of Terror was employed in a quest for the total realization of a virtuous national unity.

In Camus' view, the most important thinker in the onward march of historical rebellion is Hegel, in whose thought all values, even the shadowy Jacobin

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 104.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 129.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 131.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 155.



triumvirate, lose their transcendent status and become wholly incorporated into the flux of history. But inasmuch as Hegel asserts that certain values are capable of full realization in the course of the historical process, they become absolute ends or goals and no longer serve as landmarks or guides for the regulation of means. The good and true become that which survives the inexorable process of the historical dialectic; in other words the successful, the efficacious. The only ethical guide to the choice of means is then a purely pragmatic criterion, as the end of history becomes an all-consuming passion, justifying any means that will lead to its realization: "One must act and live in terms of the future. All morality becomes provisional."<sup>19</sup>

Hegel's only suggestion for a provisional ethic was conformance with the customs and spirit of the times. Camus points out that more revolutionary spirits than Hegel were to accept his basic premises but reject his conformism in the name of a more "active fatalism" which sought to help along at break-neck speed the "inevitable" movement of history toward its sublime consummation. To the Jacobin legacy to totalitarianism — the principle that the state as the incarnation of virtue may be protected and aggrandized by terror — Hegel adds immeasurably by reinforcing the principle that the end justifies the means. If no values transcend the flux of history, and if one knows that history is proceeding tortuously but inexorably toward a future incarnation of virtue perfected in all mankind, who can adjudge one guilty if he employs any means — murder, concentration camps, total regimentation of human lives — in passionate dedication to the consummation of the glorious future?

Camus states, however, that before such immanent ends could inspire the totalitarian spirit, Hegel's philosophical idealism had to be materialized, conjoined with rebellion against immediate injustice, and rationalized in terms of the revolutionary aspirations of an age. For contemporary "rationalized" totalitarianism, therefore, Karl Marx is the prophet of truth. But in addition to his heavy reliance upon Hegel, Marx is also greatly indebted to Christianity and to the bourgeois spirit of his time, as well as to the scientific way of thinking.

Initially, Camus asserts, Marx rebelled against the way in which nineteenth-century capitalists treated their workers — as sub-human implements rather than men. This was the genuinely human impulse of the true rebel. But when Marx attempted to rationalize and systematize his rebellion, philosophic, religious, and environmental influences turned his thinking into a prophetic ideology; and his role as a realistic social critic gradually receded in importance as prophecy became a consuming passion.

From Christianity Marx appropriates both the idea of linear history progressing toward a goal and a spirit of totality. From the first of these concepts, Camus avers, Christians had deduced that nature was but the raw material of history, to be worked upon, transformed, and mastered by men in the course of human endeavor. Marx secularizes this idea so that man in his thought becomes not only the master of nature but also the lord of history.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 179–80.

The Christian belief that God is totally sovereign over human life is also secularized by Marx, in whose thought revolutionary ideology claims omniscience and omnipotence. Camus declares that this Christian idea, cut loose from its religious moorings, has become murderous: "Those who claim to know and regulate everything end up by killing everything."<sup>20</sup> This secularized spirit of totality, incorporated into contemporary dictatorships in large measure because of Marx's influence, has been of crucial significance in the development of the institutions of the totalitarian state — for example organized terror, concentration camps, and all-pervasive multi-tiered bureaucracy.

Camus points to the bourgeois ideas of inevitable scientific progress and direct correlation between the course of industrial production and the development of human nature as influencing crucially Marx's thought. This resulted in his retaining what Camus considers the basic error of modern industrial society — to regard human beings as expendable commodities in the onward march of economic and political "progress." This tendency has been most fully realized by the totalitarian regimes which justify themselves as champions of true humanity. Such was not Marx's real intent; Camus indicates that part of the ethical grandeur of Marxism consists in its creator's vehement protest against the indignity and meaninglessness of work in modern society, against the treatment of persons as things.

But Marx shares the fate common to most prophets: his message is modified or ignored by his ostensible followers when it conflicts with their fundamental intentions. And Camus declares that in fact a basic premise of Marx's thought does justify the totalitarians as his heirs. For Marx the single overriding value is absolute justice, and this can be realized only in the classless society — which would come into existence only at the conclusion of violent and bitter class warfare. One does not become overly concerned about the morality of one's tactics when engaged in mortal combat; the end of the classless society justifies any means necessary to its attainment.

Camus indicates that Marxian socialism has become a religion of history — a faith with an immanent *parousia* and a provisional ethic consisting of nothing but the doctrine of success in its most unvarnished form. The victory of Bolshevism in Russia gave the Marxists their opportunity, and Lenin represents a crucial turning-point. In his writings and his active leadership during the formative years of the Soviet Union he showed an overriding concern for the attainment of goals. Forced by circumstances to be more practical than Marx, he formulated the conception of an elite guard of dedicated professional revolutionaries, who would plan the insurrection and govern thereafter — as long as necessary — as representatives of the true will of the proletariat. The result has been governance by a self-perpetuating oligarchy or a dictator — the authority theoretically charged with the obligation to determine what means are most efficacious under given conditions for the final realization of revolutionary aspirations.

<sup>20</sup> "Deux réponses à Emmanuel d'Astier de la Vigerie," *Actuelles: Chroniques, 1944-1948* (Paris: Gallimard, 1950), p. 198.

These rulers have not hesitated to avail themselves of such techniques as mass murder and systematic injustice, perpetrated in the name of justice and humanity.

In contrast to this "rational" or ultimate goal-directed terror of the historically actualized Marxian state, Camus discusses the "irrational" terrorism of the fascist (including German National Socialist) state, indicating however that the two types of totalitarianism spring from the same philosophic and spiritual roots. German Nazism was a horrendous vulgarization of certain ideas of Hegel and Nietzsche, but despite (or perhaps because of) its philosophic degeneracy, it was none the less deadly in effecting the premise that the death of God and the impossibility of transcendent values mean in practice that might makes right. Hitler and Mussolini were the first to build "a State on the idea that nothing has meaning and that history is nothing but chance and force."<sup>21</sup>

The fascists did not attempt to escape nihilism by positing an absolute and rational end to history as had Marx, but as in communist theory and practice, so for the fascists, any means is justified, because "the success of an action is set up as an absolute goal."<sup>22</sup> Therefore terrorism and force came to be the accepted modes for achieving any particular end in the fascist states; the application of these means was not justified by any ultimate goal, hence was more "irrational" than the program of communist totalitarianism. Action, force, strength, militancy—these were the genuinely meaningful facts of history from the fascist perspective. Camus believed that this form of totalitarianism also represents a betrayal of man's rebellion. Both the true rebel and the nihilist have been overwhelmed by their experience of the world's injustice and absurdity, but the faithful rebel has continued to struggle against these forces, whereas the nihilistic fascists cooperate with them.

To recapitulate Camus' view of the roots and essential nature of totalitarianism: this diabolical form of society, whether "rational" or "irrational," has come to exist because of the failure of men to be true to their rebellion against absurdity and injustice. In his initial experience of revolt the rebel senses values common to man *qua* man. The primary datum given in this experience is an intuitive awareness of human solidarity—"I rebel, therefore we are." From this knowledge ought to spring a profound respect for the dignity of all individuals, with whom the rebel shares a common fate. All abstract and futurized ideals must be subordinated to a concern for concrete and immediate human needs, to the struggle against present injustice and oppression. Man in his rebellion against an unjust sovereign God should not invest himself with an illusory pseudo-divinity. To be true to himself and to his fellows man must remain fully human, taking into account the limitations placed upon his vision and efforts by finitude and ignorance, employing none but just and humanitarian means in his incessant struggle against present evil. Camus finds totalitarian "revolutions" intolerable on the basis of values which continually oriented his thought: happiness as man's highest good, fidelity to the earth and to concrete persons, and rebellion in the name of life and happiness against death and its cohorts.

<sup>21</sup> *L'Homme révolté*, p. 222.

<sup>22</sup> "Le socialisme mystifié," *Actuelles*, p. 150.

## REBELLION AND POLITICAL MODESTY

As a champion of threatened human values, Camus did not give as high a priority to the elaboration of his political aspirations as to his denunciations of the forces which he feared might obliterate all possibility of a sanely human society. Thus much of what might be termed his political "prescription" consists simply of admonitions to rebel against particular forces of inhumanity. The basic political values that he espoused were rather clearly delineated in his various writings (most of an *ad hoc* nature), but his ideas for incorporating these values into political structures were set forth, on the whole, in general and nebulous terms.

Camus' trenchant critique of totalitarianism does not mean that he was perfectly content with contemporary non-totalitarian society. In fact he consistently attacked the social and economic injustices, conformism, and sterile ideologies of bourgeois society. At the heart of Camus' dissatisfaction with his own society was rebellion against what he considered to be the ultimate injustice—the death penalty. As one who loved and affirmed life and its joys as man's highest good, Camus was implacably opposed to man's taking the side of death. One of the few political "causes" with which he persistently identified himself was the abolition of capital punishment, and he directed his keen intelligence and moral vigor to a rigorous analysis and condemnation of the death penalty as maintained in France.<sup>23</sup>

Camus employs many telling arguments in his demonstration of the evils of the guillotine. But from the explicit perspective of his own presuppositions, Camus' principal objection to the death penalty is its totality and irreparability. No one is wise or good enough to be justified in making ultimate claims upon the lives of others. Society, which claims the right to administer the death penalty to murderers, must itself assume much of the responsibility for their crimes. Camus clearly recognizes that individuals must be held responsible for their acts if social cohesion is to be maintained at all. But the influences of environment make it impossible for anyone to be totally responsible for what he does, and total punishment cannot be justified: "The death penalty, which is satisfactory neither as an example nor as an instrument of distributive justice, usurps in addition an exorbitant privilege in claiming the right to punish a guilt that is always relative with a definitive and irreparable punishment."<sup>24</sup>

Camus argues that justice must become modest if it is to be effectively just. The very finality of total punishment constitutes a pretension to omnipotence on the part of society; there is no assurance that those who are executed are the unredeemable or even the guilty—"justice" has been known to err. Punishment as such should not be abolished but only irreparable punishment; its ultimacy is unfitting to man, a finite and imperfect creature. Sparing a murderer's life makes it at least possible for the most hideous criminal to do some good which may partially offset the evil for which he is responsible. Capital punishment is simply

<sup>23</sup> See "Réflexions sur la guillotine," Albert Camus and Arthur Koestler, *Réflexions sur la peine capitale* (Paris: Calmann-Lévy, 1957).

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 158.

inconsonant with the human condition as Camus envisions it: "Capital judgment breaks up the only undeniable human solidarity, solidarity against death. . . ." <sup>25</sup>

A basic reason, Camus believes, that capital punishment is retained is that political society itself has been inflated to become the end and purpose of human existence, that its conservation and historical success have become overriding values. The state has become the most pretentious of murderers—actually in certain countries and potentially in all that retain the death penalty. No longer is it men's primary need that society defend itself against uncooperative individuals; rather individuals must now ward off the secularized religious claims of the state: "How can mid-century European society survive without deciding to defend persons, in every way possible, against statist oppression? To prohibit putting men to death would be to proclaim publicly that society and the State are not absolute values, to decree that nothing authorizes them to legislate definitively or to produce the irreparable."<sup>26</sup> The abolition of the death penalty should be the first article in the legal code of a United Europe. This provision would be the first—and most important—step toward a moderate, rational, and genuinely human society.

Camus' opposition to capital punishment was clearly derived from his rebellion against the forces of death. He did not believe that men are justified in shattering intentionally the complicity that exists among them by virtue of their sharing a common fate. The simple existence of physical life was in his view unquestionably good; in fact it is the ultimate of human knowledge and experience. He found himself highly critical of his own society as well as totalitarian ones, because they share a common pretension to a degree of wisdom and virtue sufficient to justify the negation of human life. Camus believed that the first requirement of a society which will cease to create despair in men's hearts is to restrict justice to the modesty and earthly character which epitomize the true rebel—the man who is fully aware of and responsive to the limitations and potentialities of the human condition.

At the heart of Camus' constructive political thought is not a program or a doctrine, but certain values, and above all a spirit of "measure"—a determination to remain faithful to the limits of human nature. The rebel realizes that a quest for total justice inevitably debases men and altogether negates justice. But as a combatant against unhappiness and oppression the rebel cannot resign himself simply to ignoring and living with the injustices of society. The true rebel undertakes the difficult task of finding a middle way between amoral revolutionism and passively immoral quietism. He remains acutely aware that as a finite being located within the historical process he cannot transcend its fluxes and relativities so as to comprehend its total meaning and thereby be justified in attempting to force his fellows into the mold of a universal pattern. Man's enterprises are at best calculated risks, for even the best of intentions are sometimes betrayed into the commission of gross injustice.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 169.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 175.

Political action that truly seeks to realize a greater degree of justice for men in history will be true to the human condition and to the limitations of history if it proceeds in a spirit of consent to relativity, if it seeks only proximate ends. Camus in effect desires a transvaluation of historicist (Marxist or nihilist) values: "The end justifies the means? Possibly. But what justifies the end? To this question, which historical thought leaves hanging, revolt replies: the means."<sup>27</sup> Although the rebel seeks to make society more nearly just by working for human happiness, these ends cannot be attained through the use of means which utilize injustice and increase men's unhappiness.

His values and approach led Camus to the espousal of liberal democracy as the most desirable form of government. He believed that within his experience of revolt the rebel catches a glimpse of human solidarity in a complicity against death and will therefore seek to nurture this complicity by keeping open the channels of communication between human beings. This makes the liberal democratic value of free speech extremely significant, for it alone enables men to realize their common destiny and engage in mutual effort in accordance with their essential solidarity. Camus called for the creation and maintenance of a *civilisation du dialogue*, in which each man would be free to express his views in the common struggle against the injustice of man's lot. But the building of this civilization can only be gradual and painstaking; every democratic freedom realized in practice thus far must be protected to prevent recurrent attacks upon human dignity in the name of absolute justice.

Camus purported to derive from the passionate experience of rebellion such values as empiricism and modesty in politics, the relativity of ends and the inviolability of means, as he sought to bridge the gap between the European revolutionary tradition of the past two centuries (epitomized for him by Marx and Nietzsche) and parliamentary democracy which operates on the common-sense level, such as (proverbially at least) that of Great Britain. Camus was both opposed to political messianisms and distrustful of a bourgeois order which he believed showed little concern for the advancement of authentic social justice.

#### CONCLUSION

Albert Camus' contribution to political understanding consists in large part of his quite individual attempt to interpret the origins of totalitarianism. He approached this extremely involved historical and theoretical problem from the perspective of a sensitive and philosophically knowledgeable literary artist, seeking to communicate to intelligent and morally concerned persons the meaning and potentialities—for good and for evil—of the European revolutionary tradition.

Camus' emphasis on the ideological roots of totalitarian society is scarcely unique, but his approach is highly personal and reveals something of the nature of the individual and social tensions that characterize the life of "post-Christian man." For Camus contends that rebellion by rationalists, romanticists, and moralists against the Christian tradition has been the crucial shaping force in the development of a philosophical and literary climate in which communist and

<sup>27</sup> *L'Homme révolté*, p. 361.

fascist ideas could emerge.<sup>28</sup> But unlike theorists such as Jacques Maritain and Emil Brunner, Camus does not regret the rebellion against God but concurs in it, seeking only to limit its claims and objectives wholly to the sphere of human knowledge and action. Thus he rejects both the trans-historical messianism of communism and fascistic nihilism as creators of new gods to oppress mankind.

Camus, in his personal rebellion against injustice and death, hovered at times on the fringes of contemporary revolutionary movements. His preoccupation with the absurdity of life clearly marked him, in his earlier years, as a potential nihilist. And for a brief period during his youth he was a member of the Algerian Communist party—but commenting on this experience he said, “If I was once a communist, I have never been a Marxist.”<sup>29</sup>

Not only do Camus' personal history and tortuously constructed philosophical viewpoint make for a note of peculiar authenticity in his treatment of totalitarian ideology, but his widespread literary interests bring to the attention of political theorists and historians of ideas the illustrative significance of such artists as the Marquis de Sade, Lautréamont, Dostoevski, and Rimbaud, as publicists of blasphemous rebellion and/or nihilism—creators, in part, of the moral vacuum in which new messianisms could flourish.

In addition to his broad-ranging approach to crucial questions of political development, Camus presented certain quite specific critiques and proposals, for example in his essay opposing capital punishment. In that instance he produced one of the most logical, trenchant, and convincing contributions to the steadily growing controversy surrounding the death penalty. This brief work illustrates his great talent and sensitivity as a social and political moralist, and in particular it points up the relevance to non-totalitarian societies of his denial of the validity of totality as a category for political thought and action.

As repeatedly pointed out in this article, Camus bases his denial of totality, and in fact almost the entirety of both his critical and constructive political thought, on the notion of rebellion against absurdity, injustice, and death. The question which must be asked is whether values may be validly derived from this phenomenon of experience. Rebellion — because it is primarily existential, not conceptual in nature — is an ambiguous term in Camus' writings. But he clearly sought to extend its significance beyond the individual's experience to make of it a social imperative, in order that nihilism might be transcended.

However, in attempting to vindicate rebellion as the source of knowledge of the commonness of human nature and of genuinely humane values, Camus seemed in fact to postulate an unempirical kind of “pure” revolt; in effect he implicitly affirmed certain standards prior to revolt itself by which rebellion and

<sup>28</sup> Cf. Carl J. Friedrich and Zbigniew K. Brzezinski, *Totalitarian Dictatorship and Autocracy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1956), pp. 87–88: “. . . in spite of these sharp conflicts between totalitarian ideologies on one hand and the Christian and Democratic heritage on the other, it is only within the context of this heritage that the ideologies can be fully understood. . . . There is . . . a style of living involved that calls for transcendent explanations of what is right. When the theological explanations become untenable as a result of the decline of religious faith, these ‘secular religions’ then fill the vacuum.”

<sup>29</sup> Quoted by Pierre Aubery, “Albert Camus et la classe ouvrière,” *French Review*, XXXIII (October 1958), 20.

the acts in which it results are to be evaluated. Despite Camus' contention to the contrary, rebellion alone cannot furnish us with values — the rebel acts for the sake of pre-existent norms, though they may be implicit rather than overtly acknowledged. Even Camus' youthful rebellion against mortality was motivated by the love of life and joy in nature that he knew and treasured as the good prior to the poignant moment of metaphysical revolt he experienced in Florence. A particularly discerning critic points up the shakiness of Camus' position:

Certainly, as Camus thinks, all revolt entails a value, but actually values of different kinds: pleasure, excitement, freedom, etc. By choosing the master-slave relationship as the prototype of revolt, Camus can indirectly call upon a long tradition which does not find the justification of revolt in the act itself but in principles of another order which precede it. . . . Camus minimizes the role of egoism in revolt. If revolt, however, is conceived in all its variety, egoism, with its companion miscalculation, is often at the root of it. The purity of revolt is a fiction.<sup>30</sup>

But although Camus' method may not be entirely faithful to the canons of logic — or indeed to empirical reality — he believed that he had succeeded in authenticating certain basic values by building upon the sole foundation of personal experience. And despite the philosophic weaknesses of his approach, his political legacy includes a compelling and relevant justification of liberal democracy, a proximate perspective on political justice, and a quietly authoritative defense of concrete persons against the de-humanizing effects of totalitarian ideology and practice. He sought to demonstrate to his compatriots that their revolutionary tradition has been partially responsible for the betrayal of man in the contemporary world but that it contains resources which, if combined with their own instinctive rebellion against inhumanity, can lead modern Europe to the construction of a civilization in which human nature will be cultivated rather than controlled.

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<sup>30</sup> Kermit Lansner, "Albert Camus," *Kenyon Review*, XIV (Autumn 1952), 575.