Regarding the Political Philosophy of Albert Camus

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1. Introduction

Albert Camus is without doubt one of the most important intellectual figures of the 20th century. Although, he was an outsider in the intellectual circles of Paris—being a French-Algerian—he had (and has) significant influence not only in France but across Europe and (something peculiar for a French writer) in North America. One main reason for this is probably his engagement with the most critical existential and political problems of a period characterized by great turmoil in human history. His vast literary production—especially if we consider his untimely death at the age of forty-six—in a variety of genres (novels, philosophical essays, plays, and journalism) is concerned with central questions about the meaning of life, political action and morality. It was no surprise that a writer with Camus’ indisputable talent would indeed become one of the most successful homme de lettres of the French tradition. A success that was confirmed by the Nobel Prize Award in 1957.

However, Camus did not create his works in a philosophical vacuum. Despite the fact that he was certainly not pleased when both critics and readers considered him an existentialist, the influence of figures like Kierkegaard, Nietzsche, Heidegger and Jaspers in his philosophical approach can be refuted with great difficulty. Although we agree that Camus was not an existentialist in the way Jean-Paul Sartre was, certain existentialist concepts are central to Camus’ corpus. Another intellectual tradition that influenced Camus’ perspective was that of the French moralistes of the seventeenth century (Sartre, 1962). In light of this understanding, Hanna (1962, p. 48) considers Camus a “religious-moral philosopher” as he is mainly concerned with issues of morality and how life should be lived in a world without superimposed meaning. Hence, it is no paradox that Camus became familiar with Christian theology

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1 Camus said in 1945: “No I am not an existentialist. Sartre and I are always surprised to see our names associated. We think that one day we may publish a short statement in which the undersigned affirm that they have nothing in common and that they each refuse to answer for the debts that the other may have incurred… Sartre and I had published all of our books, without exception, before becoming acquainted. Our eventual meeting only confirmed our differences. Sartre is an existentialist, and the only book of ideas I’ve written, The Myth of Sisyphus, is directed against the so-called existentialist philosophers.” (Camus, 1968, p. 206).
especially Saint-Augustine) and Marxism, since both of them claim to provide the answers to the question of what makes life worth living.

But, morality and ethics are not simply philosophical issues. They have a deeply political character too. Thus, it is possible to discern throughout Camus’ corpus elements of his political philosophy and consequent principles for political action. In the present essay an attempt to critically engage with the political philosophy of Camus will be made. Nevertheless, we cannot help identifying a preliminary difficulty in this endeavour. Camus, was not in any way a conventional philosopher and far less a political one. As a writer he engages with politics indirectly either through the characters of his novels or through his two philosophical essays. Truly, the second of these essays (The Rebel\(^2\)) is situated in the most critical political debate of his epoch (Cold War and the nature of Soviet Union’s model of socialism) however, it is by no means a traditional treatise of political philosophy. Therefore, although a clear answer is given in the question of how persuasive is the Camusian political philosophy it should be mentioned that some of our arguments rely on a specific interpretation of his novels and essays.

It is rather difficult to locate the political aspect of Camus’ thought in terms of Right and Left. His strong anti-communist stance was praised by liberal and right-wing circles, however, it would be unfair to characterize Camus as right-wing or as a Cold War ideologue. According to his biographer, Olivier Todd (2000) Camus was in favour of a third way between capitalism and communism. Moreover, it should be emphasized that although he had already broken his ties with the French Communist Party by 1937, he collaborated with communists during the Resistance. With the publication of The Rebel it seemed that Camus supported political quietism, reformism and probably conservatism. Since, according to Camus every revolution leads to tyranny, it is legitimate to see him as an apologist of the status quo. In the following sections we will try to indicate that, in spite of the counter-revolutionary implications of The Rebel, Camus’ political philosophy has the potential to provide the framework for a revolutionary ethics of solidarity.

Having mentioned these obstacles, we should now comment on how we intend to examine the political dimension of Camus’ work. As a necessary step we will begin with his concept of the absurd. Then, we will identify some political interpretations of his three major

\(^2\) Published in 1951.
novels (*The Stranger*, *The Plague*, *The Fall*) and Camus’ relationship with nihilism. In the final section we take a closer look at *The Rebel* and the following the publication of this book-quarrel between Camus and Sartre. From our perspective, the bitter end of the friendship that these two great minds had for almost a decade is indicative for how significant was the political message of *The Rebel*.

2. **The political dimension of Camus’ thought**

According to many commentators (Braun, 1974; Novello, 2010, p. 2) Camus cannot be identified as a political theorist. It is not only that he does not write as a political philosopher but also the way he approaches political issues is through an ethical and humanitarian lens that a point of view not found in conventional accounts of political philosophy. Moreover, it is true that the political dimension of Camus’ work was never exposed by him in any systematic way and the argumentative force of his views is rather weak. Nevertheless, even from his very first major works (*The Myth of Sisyphus* and *The Stranger*) political conclusions can be drawn. Central to both of them is the notion of the absurd.

The concept of the absurd is used in Camus’ work in order to identify both the world and the human condition. The world is absurd because it is not inherently meaningful or good (Srigley, 2011, p. 17). This understanding of the world means also that the human existence has no transcendent meaning (Sprintzen, 1991, p. 59). More specifically, the “absurd is born of th[e] confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world (Camus, 2000a, p. 32). For Camus, the human need is simply the desire for happiness and for reason (Camus, 2000a, p. 31). Instead what the world has to offer is the irrational and the meaningless. It is important to emphasize that the feeling of the absurd is not just an unconscious intuition (Hayden, 2016, p. 27) but what is felt when the individual tries to comprehend the reality of the cosmos, while metaphysical and moral foundations are destroyed (Hayden, 2016, p. 43). However, the lack of transcendent meaning does not imply that Camus is a nihilist who endorses suicide. He clearly says:

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3 Published in 1942.
4 Published in 1947.
5 Published in 1956.
6 Published in 1942.
“I see many people die because they judge that life is not worth living. I see others paradoxically getting killed for the ideas or illusions that give them a reason for living (what is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying)” (Camus, 2000a p. 2).

Having identified the question of suicide as the only serious philosophical problem, Camus claims that life is worth living especially when man revolts against the absurdity and futility (Hayden, 2016, p. 43) of the human existence and tries to create his own values. This is the meaning of the myth of Sisyphus. Man is in a continuous struggle to create meaning in a meaningless world and although he is bound to fail (seeing the rock falling down again and again) he should not despair since it is the struggle that makes life meaningful. Therefore, “the realization that life is absurd cannot be and end, but only a beginning” (Camus, 1968, p. 205).

*The Stranger* provides an excellent literary expression of how Camus perceived the relationship between absurd and revolt7. Meursault, the main character, unable to mourn for the death of his mother, is put on trial because he shot an Arab (who Camus leaves nameless in the whole novel). Quickly, the magistrate and the court almost ignore the crime of Meursault and focus on his personality, his inability to feel like a human being (he is held responsible for the death of his mother, for whom he did not shed a tear) and his atheism. Despite the political connotations that exist in the fact that in the colonized Algeria the murder of an Arab by a *pied noir* is not a serious crime, our point of emphasis should be on how Meursault revolts against the bourgeois values of his age. For Tarrow (1985) “the Stranger constitutes an attack on the accepted norms of bourgeois society” (p. 66). While for others (Zaretsky, 2010, p. 53) the main

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7 In the Notebook V (September 1945-April 1948) we see another comment about how absurd and revolt are connected: “Relation of the absurd to revolt. If the final decision is to reject suicide in order to maintain the confrontation, this amounts implicitly to admitting life as the only factual value, the one that allows the confrontation, that *is* the confrontation, “the value without which nothing.” Whence it is clear that to obey that absolute value, whoever rejects suicide likewise rejects murder. Ours is the era which, having carried nihilism to its extreme conclusions, has accepted suicide. This can be verified in the ease with which we accept murder, or the justification of murder. The man who kills himself alone still maintains one value, which is the life of others. The proof is that he never uses the freedom and the terrible power granted him by his decision to die in order to dominate others: every suicide is illogical in some regard. But the men of the Terror have carried the values of suicide to their extreme consequence, which is legitimate murder, in other words collective suicide. Illustration: the Nazi apocalypse in 1945.” (Camus, 2010, p. 149).
hero of *The Stranger* is unable to lead his life according to a meaningful narrative. The violent outburst against the chaplain in the prison is the individual revolt *par excellence* against a world that is perceived as meaningless. However, it is rather legitimate to ask whether the individual revolt of Meursault is not just a nihilist rejection of the world. Although it may seem so, Meursault seems to have a relationship with elements of the natural world (the sun, the sea) forming a “Mediterranean” way of thinking which Camus will praise later in his work. Therefore, we claim that Meursault does not reject *the* world *in toto* but especially *this* world. This attitude according to Hayden (2016, p. 26) is at the same time negative and positive. Experiencing the self as foreign to norms of society may lead to marginalization. But, being an “outsider” creates the necessary critical distance to these norms.

Camus’ relationship to nihilism is rather complex. Seemingly, Camus writes and thinks as a nihilist. Nevertheless, we could also suggest that his attitude towards nihilism resembles Nietzsche’s relationship with nihilism; that is a recognition of his age as nihilist and perception of their personal project as an attempt to go beyond this logic. In an age of nihilism what the individual feels is a dissonance between what consists of his experience and the available systems of signification. Nihilism, however has a certain political dimension. Camus understands the German and Russian revolutionary movements of the early 20th century as nihilist, as they show “an appetite for total destruction -of authority, moral values, tradition, life- and an instinct of death” (Novello, 2010, p. 6). Also, “Camus identifies nihilism in the systematic use of criticism denigration and spitefulness that are employed as a form of political action (Novello, 2010, p. 12). The main mode of nihilist attitude is the feeling of contempt (resentment), a tendency to exercise verbal and physical violence towards an opponent, excluding them from the order of the human (Novello, 2010, p. 13). The Camusian morality, although begins with the recognition of the absurd, rejects nihilist political action since it is this feeling of absurdity that constitutes the common fate of humanity.

Despite the groundbreaking value of *The Stranger* the concept of revolt in this book is developed in individual terms. Individuals do not leave in solitude but always in a society with other individuals. How, then, can individuals react collectively to the absurdity of the world? Moreover, evil cannot be attributed only to nihilist attitude, it must be explained. The answer to these problems is provided by Camus in the next major novel, *The Plague*. Written during the Occupation of France by the Nazis *The Plague* can be read on three levels (Tarrow, 1985, p.121): as a simple narrative, as an allegoric description of the Occupation, and at a more abstract level, as an explanation of the existence of evil in an absurd world. The plot of the
novel is quite simple. An Algerian city (Oran) is struck by the plague and a group of men from
diverse backgrounds collaborate under the power of circumstances in order to fight it. The
narrator is Dr Rieux although his identity is revealed at the end of the book. As Camus
mentioned in a letter that he sent to Roland Barthes in 1955:

“compared to The Outsider, The Plague does represent, beyond any possible discussion, the
movement from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles
must be shared. If there is an evolution from The Outsider to The Plague, it is towards solidarity
and participation” (Camus, 1970, p. 202)

The Plague is rightly considered as an allegory of German Occupation, and the disease is
simply another name for Nazism. The choice of a disease as the signifier of Nazism was
heavily criticized by Sartre, de Beauvoir and Roland Barthes as an a-historical perception and
description of what Nazism actually was (Foley, 2008, p. 50-51). Their criticism was plausible
since the plague is undoubtedly a natural phenomenon. In contrast Nazism was an episode in
human history for which responsible were certain men and women. Camus’ reaction to this
critique was that since everyone understood that he was talking about Nazism, it is easy to
comprehend that also the protagonists of The Plague are symbols of the European Resistance

The antifascist element of The Plague seems to obscure the anti-Christian and the anti-
communist element of the book. A clear indication of Camus’ rejection of institutionalized
religion is the description of the Jesuit priest Paneloux and especially the conversation between
him and Dr Rieux after they had both watched the helpless, torturous death of a child because
of the plague. Paneloux is deeply upset by the spectacle of a dying child, however, he accepts
his death as an expression of the will of God. In contrast, Dr Rieux is enraged: “Ah! That child,
anyhow, was innocent, and you know it as well as I do!” (Camus 1948, p. 183). Then a less
intense exchange follows in which Dr Rieux rejects the Christian response to the absurd.

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8 Interestingly, the Nazis in France were known as la peste brune.

9 Indeed, Camus considered The Plague as his most anti-Christian work (Foley, 2008, p. 50)

10 From a Camusian perspective both Marxism and Christianity can be considered forms of religious
systems of belief. In a letter to his friend Claude de Freminville (1934) “I have a deep-seated attitude
against religion, and for me, communism is nothing if not a religion” (Todd, 2000, p. 29).
It is rather impressive that the anti-communist element of *The Plague* was not noticed by Camus’ contemporaries. However, it should be reminded that this book was published a little after the legendary sequence of articles in Combat under the title *Neither Victims nor Executioners* (Camus, 2008). There we find for the first time Camus’ formulation of the problem of murder which was going to be the central axis of *The Rebel*. As far as *The Plague* is concerned a discussion between Dr Rieux and Tarrou who is a left-wing militant is very interesting. The latter seems to have a guilty conscience over his political engagement:

“And thus I came to understand that I anyhow, had had plague through all those long years in which, paradoxically enough, I’d believed with all my soul that I was fighting it. I learned that I had had an indirect hand in the deaths of thousands of people; that I’d even brought about their deaths by approving of acts and principles which could only end that way. Others did not seem embarrassed by such thoughts or anyhow never voiced them of their own accord.”(Camus, 1948, p. 209)

Then, the concept of murder emerges again: “today there’s a sort of competition who will kill the most. They’re all mad over murder and they couldn’t stop killing men even if they wanted to.” (Camus, 1948, p. 210). It is important to emphasize that already from *The Plague* Camus claims that both Nazism and communism are murderous ideologies.

Is it then, just to consider *The Plague* as a reactionary or a counter-revolutionary work? The answer must be negative. As we will see in the following section Camus’ hostile attitude towards Marxism and communism should not lead to hasty conclusions. In *The Plague* we have a wonderful example of what we term as revolutionary ethics of solidarity. One hero of the novel is a young journalist, Rambert, who arrives in Oran for professional reasons. Nevertheless, after the outbreak of the plague he is compelled to stay in Oran (as every other citizen of the town). Rambert at first makes several futile attempts to leave the town legally in order to meet the woman he loves but finally resorts to illegal means. He says to Dr Rieux that he is not willing to play the hero. The doctor, although he does not deter Rambert, replies that what he is doing is not heroism but “common decency” (Camus, 1948, p. 142). When asked what it the meaning of this he responds by saying that for him “common decency” consists in doing his job. This discussion leads Rambert to reconsider his decision and stay in Oran. The main mechanism here is the feeling of shame. Rambert would be ashamed of himself if he left. Dr Rieux, who is also deprived of his wife, claims that there is nothing to be ashamed of when one chooses to be happy. The young journalist partially agrees but mentions that “it may be
shameful to be happy by oneself” (Camus, 1948 p. 174-5). From our perspective this is the great ethical lesson of *The Plague*. Real happiness is a collective emotion as soon as the confrontation with the absurdity of the world is also the common fate of human beings. The group of men that fights an almost futile battle against the plague has the absolute experience of solidarity just like the various citizens from different political backgrounds that formed the movements of Resistance against the Nazis. Happiness is only valued when it is shared with other people, a conclusion that certainly has revolutionary implications for our individualist times. Of course, there is a possibility that Camus would be ambiguous whether this formulation is revolutionary, but since it challenges the core mentality of the status quo it is difficult to find another way to describe it.

The political dimension of Camus’ thought is also detectable in the third major novel of the French-Algerian writer. *The Fall* is rather different from the two previous fictional works of Camus since its psychological complexity, its dark content and ironic self-sarcasm puzzle commentators (Srigley, 2011, p. 81). Sartre, in his obituary of Camus said that *The Fall* is “perhaps the finest and least understood” (1962, p. 173) of his books. Indeed, the main character of Clamence is considered a landmark of psychological mastery (Barchilon, 1968, p. 386). Jean-Baptiste Clamence was a successful lawyer in Paris until one day his life changes as he witnesses a woman suicide falling from a bridge into a river. Clamence, passed by and did not try to save her. It is evident that this description alludes to the attempted suicide of Camus’ wife. Camus felt just as impotent to help her. The novel is in fact a monologue in which Clamence provides a narrative of his life as a quest for power, recognition and honour. Finally, he understands the lack of meaning of his endeavour and adopts the peculiar role of judge-penitent. *The Fall* is inherently political through its moral -critical stance. As Merton describes “*The Fall* portrays the curious mixture of solipsism, self-hate, moral impotence, pseudo-lucidity, and despair which afflicts alienated and individualistic man in mass society.” (Merton, 1967 p. 768). All these pathological features of modernity lead to a dead end. Nevertheless, Srigley (2011, p. 12) disagrees with Merton’s suggestion that *The Fall* signifies

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11 However we should never forget what Camus once said that "a character is never the writer that created him. However, there are occasions when a writer is all his characters simultaneously." (Camus, 2000b, p. 15)

12 There is a clear connection with the Fall of Man from the Garden of Eden.
also an impasse in Camus’ artistic production, since in Srigley’s approach this book is an indication of a new direction in Camus’ thought.

Despite the differences that exist between Camus’ three novels we could consider them as parts of an overall philosophical project. *The Stranger* portrays the story of an individual that confronts the absurdity of the world and rejects the available narratives about the meaning of life. He remains an outsider. *The Plague* signifies the collective struggle/revolt against the absurd where human beings create shared values and construct their own narratives. However, *The Fall* can be considered as a pessimist account of the futility of the struggle. The rock of Sisyphus will eventually fall back down and the revolt should be continuous. There is no eternal happiness or infinite grace. The philosophy of the absurd which Camus tried to formulate has no illusions about the human condition.

Having seen the political aspects of Camus’ three major novels under the axis absurd-revolt it is necessary to consider in a different section the most political and most controversial of his books, *The Rebel* and the debate that it initiated.

### 3. Revolt and Revolution

Sartre and Camus were close friends (and both have written reviews for the books of each other) for almost a decade until the publication of *The Rebel*. The reader of the book has no wonder why it led to probably the most famous intellectual quarrel of the 20th century. Camus criticizes vehemently not only Marx, Hegel, Lenin (intellectual figures that were of god-like status in the French Left) and the Soviet Union but also the French Revolution. What was even more problematic for Sartre and his associates was Camus’ rejection of the idea of revolution. But what was Camus’ main argument?

According to the writer of *The Rebel*, every revolt is legitimate up to the point it does not become murderous. From his point of view contemporary ideologies (both revolutionary and reactionary) are murderous. The only exception to this limit is when the rebel is willing to die in exchange of his crime as was the case of the Russian revolutionaries in 1905 which Camus portrays in his play *The Just Assassins* (1958). This play uses the story of Kaliayev, an idealist that refuses to kill the Grand Duke when he thinks that by killing him he will also kill the children accompany him, as a symbol for how Machiavellian revolutionaries (in this case Stepan) exhibit no limits in order to pursue their objectives. The essential problem of the
revolutions is that they deify man and excuse everything\textsuperscript{13} in the name of history. Hence, unlimited political violence is legitimized as it may lead to a utopian future. Camus identifies this tendency in the work of Hegel (especially in the Phenomenology of Spirit) (Duvall, 2005, p. 140). In contrast Camus favours revolt\textsuperscript{14}—an existential “no” to the violation of the limits—against the violence of fascism and other forms of nihilism (Duran, 2007, p. 365). Camus rejects any absolutes and recognizes only limits (Tarrow, 1985, p. 66) and revolt is nothing else that the affirmation of a limit (Hayden, 2016, p. 43).

The essay, to a greater frustration of the leftist intellectual circles of Paris was critically acclaimed by right-wing newspapers (Jeanson, 2004, p. 78) something which could not constitute a surprise since the book is full of provocations such as the description of Louis XV as “a weak but good hearted man” (Camus 2000b, p. 72), a parallel between Marx and de Maistre (Guerin, & Wood, 1980, p. 366), and of course the identification of communism as a murderous ideology. No one in Les Temps Modernes, a magazine that was established by Sartre and Merleau-Ponty, was willing to write the review until Jeanson, a disciple of Sartre, took over the difficult task. The review was published only after six months (in May 1952) since the publication of The Rebel, and it was heavily critical accusing Camus for quietism. The writer of The Plague replied by sending an harsh open letter to Sartre and completely discrediting Jeanson. Both Sartre and Jeanson replied in the same issue which included Camus’ letter.

There are various issues with regard to this confrontation and certainly the Sartre-Camus dispute is a major chapter of Camus’ political philosophy. Both sides were simultaneously right and wrong. It is legitimate to question Camus’ treatment of Hegel and Marx, not only because Camus was not a scholar in any of them (something that Sartre was aware of) but also because he does the same mistake as that of which accuses Hegel and Marx. By rejecting the idea of revolution based on his perception that every revolution is homicidal, Camus ignores the contingency of human history suggesting instead a revolt when the master

\textsuperscript{13} “The majority of revolutions are shaped by, and derive their originality from, murder. All, or almost all, have been homicidal.” (Camus, 2000b, p. 61)

\textsuperscript{14} Even from the Myth of Sisyphus he claimed: “revolt gives life its value. Spread out over the whole length of a life, it restores its majesty to that life” (Camus, 2000a, p. 53)
violates its limits towards the oppressed. Claiming that since nothing different had happened in human history things will be as always leads to the same conclusion with the orthodox Marxist view of history as subject to iron laws. Moreover, it is true that Camus writes as an idealist not taking into account the specific historical, economic and political background of every revolution. However, we should recognize that Camus was among the first progressive intellectuals to recognize the problematic nature of Soviet Union, whose concentration camps ought to be condemned regardless any strategic concessions by the communist Left. Sartre, although recognized the existence of labour camps in USSR, sided with the regime as the only hope for the world proletariat.

In our view, the value of The Rebel rests not in its theoretical arguments but in its ethical impulse. It is of high importance to recognize the moral limits of political practice and the ethical nature of politics. A noble end does not justify every possible means, and this was a firm belief of Camus, although it costed him a lot. Of course, nobody can hold responsible Nietzsche for the crimes of Nazism nor Marx or Hegel for the Stalinist Terror, as Camus himself recognizes (Camus, 2000b, p. 137). Nevertheless, we cannot help noticing a logical paradox in Camus’ sympathy for the Russian revolutionaries of 1905. It is rather obscene that the writer who valued human life the most, was willing to accept the sacrifice of the life of a terrorist as an excuse for a murder.

4. Conclusion

It would be naïve to answer to the question whether Camus’ political philosophy is persuasive with a simple yes or no. Someone could ask if it is legitimate to conceptualize the political dimension of his thought by using the notion of ‘philosophy’. Despite its limitations, Camus’ perspective on political issues is extremely valuable. By re-introducing the ethical element of political practice he provides an approach of politics as a societal activity that has certain limits. Sartre said that Camus reaffirmed “against the Machiavellians and against the Idol of realism the existence of the moral issue” (Sartre, 1962, p. 173). The end does not justify the means.

In The Stranger he provides a clear description of the experience of the absurd. In The Plague he argues in favour of the collective ethics of solidarity. There is no such thing as individual happiness, since anything that resembles happiness cannot be accompanied by shame. In The Fall, we see a wonderful portrait of the modern man. The same man that saw his fellow human beings dying in Auschwitz or in Kolyma and could not do nothing. In his two philosophical essays he tries to understand the problems of suicide and murder.
However, he was not a political philosopher. His treatment of Hegel and Marx is unfair and influenced by second-hand material. Camus was also the victim of the force he tried to oppose. Through all his short life he fought against realism and Machiavellianism, however, he rejected revolution on the ground that it has always been homicidal, an argument used mainly by realists. Nevertheless, his original humanism justified the quest for a meaningful political action against the absurdity of the human condition.

References


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