

Camus and the Algerian War

Joseph Frank

Michael Walzer's penetrating article on Camus in the Fall 1984 *Dissent* ("Commitment & Social Criticism: Camus's Algerian War"), is a very convincing defense of that much-maligned writer's position during the French-Algerian war, when he refused to ally himself, unlike the majority of the French intelligentsia, unconditionally on the side of the FLN. This defense, it might be said, coincides with the rehabilitation of Camus's *political* reputation in France in recent years, which had sunk, at the time of his death, to a very low point. Partly as a result of his position on the war, but mostly because of the fierce attack made on *L'Homme Révolté* by Francis Jeanson in *Les Temps Modernes* (Jeanson, by the way, was a leader of the active underground of French sympathizers aiding the Algerian rebels), Camus had lost all the considerable stature he had acquired in the immediate, post-Liberation years. But the present French mood is marked by a sharp reaction to its formerly prevalent infatuation with Marxism; and the ensuing tenderness toward the French Communist party and the Soviet Union—whose interests were considered by Sartre and company, for all practical purposes, to be identical with those of the French working class—has all but vanished. As a result, the influence of Camus has taken a new lease on life.

Let me cite, as one example, a little brochure, *Enquête sur les idées contemporaines*, published as a series of newspaper articles a year or two ago, in which J. M. Domenach attempts to sum up the present cultural scene for nonspecialists:

Ah! Camus [he writes], how Sartre had sneered at his rescue-squad morality [which means, of course, a readiness to come to the aid of victims of catastrophe no matter what the cause]. But now these defrocked Marxists [the "new philosophers," ex-Maoists all, on whom Domenach was reporting] set up Doctors without Frontiers and organized the march for survival aimed at Cambodia.

Much of what the French press reports about the Afghan rebels comes from information furnished by the young doctors sent to aid the guerrillas by the organization that Domenach mentions. And he could also have included among his references the famous meeting on behalf of the Vietnamese boat people, at which two old classmates of the Ecole Normale, Raymond Aron and Sartre (the latter then blind), met after 30 years of political enmity and shook hands. Camus would certainly have been there if he had been alive; and the fact that such a manifestation could be organized at all was a posthumous triumph for his *morale d'ambulancier*.

What this means is that the issue, posed by Walzer, of the *moral* basis of political action (or the attempt to justify political action in moral terms) has now taken on a renewed importance in France—while during the period about which he is writing it had simply been dismissed with an imperious wave of the pen.

Sartre had declared, in a notorious passage of *Saint Genêt*, that in the climate of those postwar years, "every morality that does not present itself *explicitly* as *impossible today*, contributes to the mystification and alienation of mankind." Morality is thus put on the shelf as irrelevant, given the political situation. And while Sartre, like a good Existentialist, does not forget to speak of "a consciousness [presumably his own] . . . living in a state of laceration [because] action has to give itself ethical norms in this climate of insuperable impossibility," there is very little evidence of such "laceration" in Sartre's own career or the picture we derive from the autobiography of Simone de Beauvoir. For such wrestlings with conscience we have to go, rather, to Camus, who genuinely took ethical norms seriously, and, as Walzer writes, refused to subordinate morality (which involves people, not political abstractions) to the left-wing political imperatives of the moment.

There has been a considerable revulsion in recent years against just such a subordination—as witness the title of the first section of a book by one of the “new philosophers.” In *Le Testament de Dieu*, Bernard Henri Lévy writes: “*Limiter le politique pour faire place à l’éthique.*” Directly inspired by Camus’s *Actuelles*, and containing a heart-felt tribute to his example—“one cannot repeat too often how upright a figure he was, and still remains, as an intellectual”—this work contains a slashing attack on the idolatry of History (primarily, though not exclusively, in its Marxist-Leninist guise), which provided the largest part of the French intelligentsia with *their* ethical norms during the past half-century. Nor is such an attack in any way an unfair exaggeration: “Camus was an idealist, a moralist, an anti-Communist,” writes Simone de Beauvoir in *La Force des Choses*; “forced to yield a moment to History, he aspired, as quickly as possible, to withdraw from it.”* The capital H in the text tells the whole story; History was calling the shots; and one wonders, as a result, if the exclusively moral terms in which Walzer depicts Camus and his critics (“love versus justice”) does not tend somewhat to blur the real issue. Camus, who refused to abandon his mother and brother (that is, the *piéd noir* community**), represents love; Sartre is thus cast as the advocate of a more universal law of justice.

The Sartreans, if we are to judge by de Beauvoir’s remarks, would not have justified themselves in such terms at all. By this time they had concluded that morality was just the hobby-horse of bourgeois intellectuals. They, on the other hand, wished to be hard-boiled *Realpolitiker* (but not enough to join the Communist party, which would have meant surrendering their own bourgeois liberties), who knew at last where History was going and had jumped onto the locomotive.

Nor am I at all sure that I would accept, as unquestioningly as Walzer seems to do, that Sartre had truly lived up to his own ideal of the social critic, whose mission was to break with his own background and “subject it to an unrelenting anal-

ysis and critique.” So far as such self-criticism involved a hatred of “le bourgeois,” the class from which he came himself, Sartre was hardly breaking with any French *cultural* tradition in subjecting it to merciless criticism. He was merely taking his place in a long-established line going back at least to Flaubert, the writer with whom, and certainly for this reason, he maintained an ambiguous love-hate relationship all through his life. But even in terms of the concrete French social-political situation of the Algerian war years, the stand taken by Sartre did not have that air of lonely and lofty prophetic dignity that Walzer seems willing to attribute to it. To be a social critic in Sartre’s sense, he writes, “is a heroic project; and the result is a hero, standing apart from his fellows, bound to his critical principles.” Whether we are being asked to accept Sartre as such a “hero” is not quite clear; but it is suggested so strongly that a few remarks seem to be in order.

IN THE FIRST PLACE, if this were so, we would have to assume that the French people had actually been heart and soul engaged in defending their colonial enterprise; but this was by no means the case. I spent a good deal of time in France during those years, and I recall being struck even then by how little active propaganda there was for the French Army fighting in North Africa, how little the various governments that succeeded each other seemed to want to remind the people of what was going on—obviously because they knew that such efforts would meet with very little sympathy. The press coverage was neutral at best, hardly drum-beating or rabble-raising; the atmosphere was much like that of the Vietnam war days in the U.S. (without, to be sure, the mass rallies and overt defiance of authority). There was nothing particularly *heroic*—in the sense of braving the anger of an outraged populace—about writing in favor of the Algerian rebels, or against the war, though those engaged in the underground *réseaux* (“networks”) ran very concrete and substantial risks. Sartre, however, should not be confused with Zola defending Captain Dreyfus.

Indeed, if one tries to imagine the “world” of Sartre and Camus (“world” taken in its existentialist sense as a primarily social-cultural environment, not one defined simply as an abstract geographical, national, economic locus), then, it seems to me, there would be some justification for reversing the manner in which Walzer depicts their differing positions. Sartre, in his account, courageously rips himself free from all attachment to his inherited roots; by contrast, and even though Walzer defends

* As regards Walzer’s remark that de Beauvoir’s memoirs are “wonderfully lively and open-hearted.” For the first, yes; but there is nothing “open-hearted” in her depiction of Camus. It is, rather, mean and vindictive, and his motives for differing with the Sartreans are constantly reduced to being only a reflex of his wounded vanity—he was losing in the Parisian popularity contest. This tells us something about *her* motives.

** *Piéd noir* (“black foot”), as Walzer explained in his article, was the mainland name for the French settlers in Algeria, many of whom were poor farmers, imagined, like our hillbillies, as barefoot and dirty.

such a choice, Camus refuses to break so thoroughly with a narrower and more local loyalty to his native community.

Such a juxtaposition, however, tends to forget that the “world” of both was really that of the French intelligentsia, predominantly left-wing and in favor of the anticolonial uprising; Sartre was not risking anything he valued by going along with *them*. On the contrary, he was very eager to keep their favor, and worried about losing the readership of his journal if he ruffled their preconceptions in any way.

A recent solid and very informative Italian book that has come my way (Anna Boschetti’s *L’Impresa Intellettuale, Sartre e ‘Les Temps Modernes’*), studies “*le champ intellectuel*” (the term is used in the sense given it by Pierre Bourdieu) within which Sartre functioned, his relation to the whole social-cultural context from the beginning of his career up through 1957. And one sees here very clearly how closely he kept his eye on the compass of public opinion in this “world,” how eager he was to steer a steady course. Sartre was so determined not to offend his audience that he got rid of Merleau-Ponty when the latter’s growing disillusionment with the Communist line (after the invasion of South Korea) began to be noticeable and to arouse reader protest.

Camus lived and wrote in the same “world” and

functioned in a very similar “*champ intellectuel*”; but his response was considerably different. It is to him that we must turn for an example of genuine independence, of a willingness to risk unpopularity for principle. True, he refused to alienate himself totally from the community from which he came and, in allying himself with its enemies, to wash his hands of responsibility for its fate; but he knew very well that in doing so he was in danger of losing the prestige he had acquired in the “world” of French cultural life. At the same time, as Walzer points out, he also refused to accept the values of the *piéd noir* community so far as they conflicted with his conception of justice. As a result, he alienated everybody, and stood truly alone at the end of his life in defense of what he believed to be *both* love and justice. This required more courage than Sartre ever exhibited, since he never “broke” with anything that would endanger his influence, or whose abandonment caused him the slightest inner struggle.

These remarks, I hope, are amply clear, and in no way meant as criticisms of Walzer’s admirably sensitive reevaluation, with whose conclusions I am in thorough sympathy. But they are suggestions for extending even further his defense of Camus, and refusing to accept the traditional image of him, largely established by his enemies, within whose boundaries Walzer still stakes out his vindication. □

Lionel Abel

Much of what Michael Walzer has to say about Albert Camus in *Commitment & Social Criticism: Camus’s Algerian War*, in the Fall 1984 *Dissent*, is true and unexceptionable. All the same, Walzer’s emphases seem to me to be off key, and this for two reasons: (1) Walzer’s characterization of Camus seems to me wrong (apparently, he never knew Camus personally), and (2) I am unable to determine what Walzer means by “the democratic left” for which, he says, Camus has become an important myth.

Let’s take Camus the individual, the person, first of all. Walzer writes: “. . . we know what he stood for: he was a man of principle, a ‘just man.’” But was he? Now I knew Camus quite well, but I do not myself know what principles he stood for. Trying to give a political slant to the “principles” he supposes Camus to have had, Walzer writes in the very first

sentence of his piece: “For men and women of the democratic left, Albert Camus is an exemplary figure.” Now Camus may be an exemplary figure for “women of the democratic left,” but he can hardly be that for *women*: too many women he was involved with either tried to commit suicide or considered committing suicide when Camus’s interest in them turned elsewhere.

But didn’t he stand for something? Not, I think, for a set of moral principles. Moral principles—and not just absolutist principles—Camus thought were absurd. What is true is that he was a *moraliste* in the French sense, but let’s understand what that sense is. As understood by the French, a moralist is someone with a gift for insight into action, which he may show by crossing up our conventional moral expectations; he may do this by finding arguments for bad actions and strong objec-

tions to good ones. Walzer also says of Camus that he was “a connected critic.” The term is strange to me, but I suppose what Walzer means by it is that Camus connected various moral and political judgments into an ideological whole. And if this is what Walzer means, he is simply wrong. Camus was not an ideologist, any more than he was a just man.

About ideology: what could Camus’s ideology, assuming he had one, have been? Here I would call Walzer’s attention to a very interesting remark by Max Scheler that I found in Raymond Aron’s *Mémoires*: “In the intellectual empyrean there are very few ideologies.” Aron himself believes that there could be no ideology after Marxism. I should say, then, that there can be no “connected critics” or “connected criticism.”

I have said that Camus was not a just man. In fact, he was something quite different. While not good, he was noble.

He reminds me of the French mathematician Evariste Galois, whom Edward Teller has called the greatest mathematician ever. Galois died at the age of 21, killed by his adversary in a duel. But on the night before the duel that was to end his life, he developed the Theory of Groups, which we still use, and he did this so as to leave something to humanity. Now was this use of his mind by Galois in the circumstance he was in particularly moral? I do not think so. I do not know anything about Galois’s ethics, or his sense of the ethical. But what Galois did was certainly noble, and what Camus did in the French resistance was noble. He had the gift of looking at things “from above,” as Stendhal said of Fabrice de Dongo. I am not saying that a man noble as Camus was does not belong in the democratic left—if I only knew what that was. I am saying that a man like him may very well find himself at different times being of service to other groups. A man who is noble is not one whose political position we can be certain of at all times.

ON THE ALGERIAN QUESTION, Camus happened to have been wrong, and it was a question about which it was not impossible to take a proper view. Walzer argues that Camus’s position was somehow better than that of those who criticized it, but the only critics of it he mentions are Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre, and it is easy for Walzer to show what was wrong with their views. Simone de Beauvoir and Sartre were quite simply pro-Communist, and so they took the side of the FLN. De Beauvoir told Koestler: “If we have to choose between de Gaulle and the Communists, we’ll take the Communists.” But there were other critics of Camus’s position on Algeria whom Walzer has ignored. For example,

there was Raymond Aron, who was certainly not pro-Communist, even if not exactly a conservative. In his brochure, *Algeria and the Republic*, Aron wrote this against Camus: “Despite his will to justice and generosity M. Albert Camus does not rise above the attitude of a colonialist of good will.” Against Camus’s statement: “. . . as far as Algeria is concerned, national independence is surely an emotional formula. There has never been an Algerian nation”—Aron replied, “These Muslims have not been a nation in the past, but the youngest among them want to create a nation. An emotional demand? But of course, like all revolutionary demands.”

In Stockholm in 1957, Camus said this about Algeria: “I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice.” While not exactly endorsing this remark, Walzer indicates that its meaning for him is “. . . the simple antinomy of justice and love. . . .” Now for Aron, Camus’s remark was just meaningless. Aron writes:

The Algerian revolt raised for all Frenchmen, but especially for the French of Algeria, a question of conscience. Why did Albert Camus reply to this question by noting his love for his mother? We would understand his having been torn between his attachment to Algeria and his desire for justice, if he had refused to take sides between the two camps. But the confrontation of “mother” and “justice” seems to me just a literary phrase and not the recognition of a conflict fraught with tragedy.

So Camus was simply wrong about Algeria. But now what about the *democratic left*, where, according to Walzer, he is remembered with honor? What is this democratic left? And what would Camus be asked to do for it if by some miracle he could be restored to life?

In France, would he be asked to vote to support President Mitterrand’s new tax policies, borrowed from President Reagan? Or, in America, would it be to support Fritz Mondale against President Reagan in last November’s election? But support for Fritz Mondale would mean support for Jesse Jackson, and his power in the Democratic party; and Jesse Jackson, in his turn, supports Sovietized Cuba, and the extension of Soviet power in Central America. How can we think of Camus supporting that? And in any case, what radical deed is there to be performed requiring a radical temperament like Camus’s?

It is rather difficult these days even to *appear* to be a radical. I was on a program at Chautauqua along with I. F. Stone last August, and for two days at breakfast, lunch, and dinner we argued. But not over any policy that could really be called radical.

And I noted that when he gave his prepared speech, I. F. Stone at one point defended President Reagan's personality, remarking that he was gracious to his subordinates and not mean-spirited as President Carter had been to his. Now I. F. Stone is

an old-fashioned but authentic American radical, and if there were anything radical to be done, despite his failing health, I think he would be doing it. But in fact Mr. Stone has turned aside from politics. He is a wise man: he is studying Greek. □

I. F. Stone

Since Lionel Abel, in his comment, brought in the name of I.F. Stone, we thought it only fair to ask Mr. Stone if he had anything to say about that. Below is his reply. — EDS.

To the Editors of *Dissent*:

September 18, 1984

Thank you for letting me see Lionel Abel's attack on Michael Walzer. I enjoyed meeting Lionel Abel. He's gifted but he'd have a lot more fun if he weren't so crabby. He gives a wholly erroneous impression of my talk at Chataqua, of my activities, and my life.

I did say that various people I trusted, including my good friend, the late Carey McWilliams, found Reagan and his wife Nancy engaging and gracious. I have never met them, and would rather not because I consider him a planetary pied piper leading the world to a nuclear confrontation. I have been saying so in political talks here and abroad (on London's Channel Four in August, among other places), and will do so again in preelection talks I have scheduled in San Francisco, Los Angeles, Washington, and Minneapolis.

My health is not failing. I am 76 and enjoying one of the happiest periods of my life. My wife of 55 years is my guardian angel. For me the study of ancient Greek is not an escape but an enrichment. I detest Plato politically, and agree with Aristotle that virtue is *political*, the exercise of those qualities that make it possible for man to live in peace with his fellows in communities and cities. And I believe the planet must become one *polis*, and humanity conscious of itself as one race if we are to survive. I am for the Mondale-Ferraro ticket and I don't believe any fight is over until the last blow or ballot.

With kind regards to my traducer, Lionel Abel,

I. F. STONE □

Michael Walzer Replies

I am grateful for Joseph Frank's comment and glad to hear that Camus is being read and honored again in France.

With Lionel Abel I seem to have a quarrel; he is obviously annoyed by my essay, but he is not annoyed in any coherent way, and I am not sure that I can develop a coherent argument against him. But there are a few points worth making.

(1) I did not know Camus personally. Nor did I know John Calvin, or Oliver Cromwell, or John Locke, or Jean-Jacques Rousseau, or Robespierre, or Clausewitz, or Marx, or General MacArthur, all of whom I have written about at one time or another. I am willing to learn from people with more intimate knowledge, but they have to be better teachers than Lionel Abel, with his sour mix

of low gossip and *obiter dicta*. Yes, Camus in the Resistance was noble (did Abel know Camus in the Resistance?), but he was also, in his public life after the war, in the things he said, the commitments he made, the acts he performed, a good man.

(2) The phrase “connected critic” describes a writer who acknowledges and honors his ties to the people he criticizes. No reasonable reader could have missed the point; I was not saying anything about the critic’s ideology.

(3) Raymond Aron indeed did well during the years of the Algerian war; his book *L’Algérie et la République* was both brave and (largely) true. But he had an easier time than Camus, for he had no ties to the *pied noir* community and no close feel for Algerian politics. When he opted for negotiations with the FLN and for Algerian independence, he did so convinced that arrangements could be worked out enabling the *pieds noirs* to remain in the country. Had Camus been similarly convinced, he might have opted for the same solution. But Camus saw more deeply into the “tragic” nature of the conflict.

(4) What annoys Abel most is my identification of Camus with the democratic left, which he professes to know nothing about. (He has only to remember. . .) But surely that was Camus’s own identification throughout his life—and never more strongly than when he was attacking French leftists for their Stalinist apologetics. I will quote just one example, from an essay published in 1957, in the aftermath of the Hungarian revolution:

The untiring insistence upon freedom and truth [Camus wrote], the community of the worker and the intellectual. . . political democracy as a necessary and indispensable (though not sufficient) condition of economic democracy—this is what Budapest was defending. And in doing so, the great city in insurrection reminded Western Europe of its forgotten truth and greatness. It made short work of that odd feeling of inferiority that debilitates most of our intellectuals but that I, for one, refuse to feel.

And clearly, as we might remind Lionel Abel, there are right-wing as well as left-wing forms of debility. □

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