

Liberal Read

No 13 | June 2022

Camus' Ethic of Political Moderation

BOOK REVIEW

Albert Camus

The Rebel

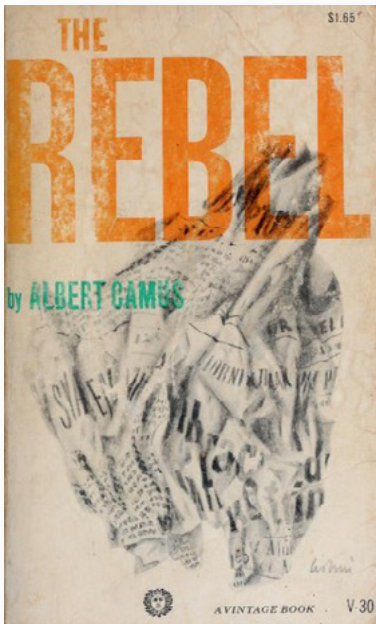
Penguin Classics, 2000

By Luke Hallam

A series of crises has put many liberal ideas under question. Inspired by a popular commercial concept, Liberal Reads are packaged in an easily accessible format that provides key insights in 30 minutes or less. The aim of Liberal Reads is to revisit and rethink classical works that have defined liberalism in the past, but also to introduce more recent books that drive the debate around Europe's oldest political ideology. Liberal Reads may also engage critically with other important political, philosophical and economic books through a liberal lens. Ideological discussions have their objective limits, but they can still improve our understanding of current social and economic conditions and give a much needed sense of direction when looking for policy solutions in real life problems.

Liberal Read

Camus' Ethic of Political Moderation



Introduction

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, thousands of readers turned to the French philosopher Albert Camus' most famous novel, *The Plague*. They were attracted by its portrayal of ordinary people heroically battling pestilence in a daily slog of sacrifice, perseverance, and hope – and with good reason. But as visionary as *The Plague* remains, it is *The Rebel* (1951), the final book-length essay Camus published during his lifetime, that of all his works speaks the most to our politics, especially to anyone concerned with the problem of freedom.

Camus' broad aim was to understand the great events of the twentieth century – a period of wars and genocides, torture and execution, fascism and communism. He wanted to define an alternative political morality, one that would place certain limitations on what one human being can justly do to another and would strive to prevent such atrocities from ever happening again.

Yet, although Camus harboured a fierce commitment to freedom, his politics are difficult to define. He was a member of the French Resistance against wartime Nazi occupation, a committed journalist, and a renowned novelist. Though briefly a member of the Communist Party in the 1930s, by the time *The Rebel* appeared, he had long since become a fervent critic of political idealism, especially Marxism.

Nor was he an 'existentialist', a label that was frequently applied to him in his lifetime, much to his displeasure. Jean-Paul Sartre and other existentialists were sceptical about the idea of human nature, arguing that 'existence precedes essence'.¹ Camus, by contrast, ardently believed that there is such a thing as human nature, and that this means that human life, freedom, and dignity are worth protecting.² He therefore rejected existentialism, and believed that existentialists like Sartre who combined this philosophy with Marxism were too apologetic for the crimes being committed by the Soviet Union.

The argument of *The Rebel* is difficult to follow. It is somewhat meandering, and the book is densely loaded with references to works in continental philosophy and episodes from European history. Yet, in its 248 pages, Camus vividly plumbs the deepest problems of modernity, concluding with an electrifying call for freedom in opposition to the ideologues and fanatics who were responsible for so many of the horrors he witnessed in his lifetime.

1 Jean-Paul Sartre (2007), *Existentialism & Humanism* (trans. Philip Mairet), Methuen, p.30.

2 Albert Camus (2000), *The Rebel*, Penguin Classics, p.4.

The death of God

Camus' philosophy can best be approached through one of his greatest influences, the nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche.

In the 1880s, Nietzsche famously declared that 'God is dead', by which he meant that the course of modernisation in Europe since the eighteenth century has been accompanied by a slow but firm process of secularisation.³ Rather than believing that all meaning ultimately derives from God, and that the Church represents God's will on Earth, Europeans increasingly question received religious and moral dogma, and Nietzsche believed that politics changes to reflect this.

This is the starting point of *The Rebel*. Camus starts by describing someone who asks deep questions about our fundamental values as being in a state of 'rebellion'. Such a person refuses to bow down before dogma; or, more accurately, they are unable to take comfort in the old religions and old certainties. As such, they find themselves in a peculiarly modern predicament: they have come face to face with what Camus elsewhere calls 'the absurd'.⁴ This is the realisation that the universe is a place of infinite complexity and mystery, and the answers to the deepest questions have not yet been satisfactorily answered. Among the rebel's realisations is the fact that human beings are alone, clinging to values and certainties that they themselves have created, while being ultimately responsible for their own actions and fate. Camus writes that 'the first step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men'.⁵

For his part, Nietzsche feared that the death of God would have other far-reaching consequences. It seemed to him that once we question God and morality, *nothing* is immune from the piercing eye of doubt and revision. Why, for instance, should anything be considered 'good' or 'bad'? Surely nothing is forbidden, even murder, theft, rape, and genocide. As the Russian writer Fyodor Dostoevsky, one of Camus' greatest influences, put it in his novel *The Brothers Karamazov*: in a world without objective moral laws, must we not conclude that 'all is permitted'?⁶

While we're at it, Nietzsche asked, why not also do away with the idea of truth? Knowledge is relative, after all. There is no supreme metaphysical glue holding everything together – we only have our human minds to work with. And human minds are diseased by prejudice and distortions, many of which we inherited from religion. Perhaps we invented the idea of 'truth'?

These questions pose particular problems for liberals. After all, a world without morality or truth will probably not be a liberal world. The events Camus witnessed during his lifetime confirmed this fact: horrors such as the Holocaust, Stalin's purges, ethnic cleansing, torture, and the atom bomb announced themselves as inherent features of a modernity in which morality had been replaced by the ruthless logic of power and violence. As a member of the French Resistance under Nazi occupation, Camus in the pages of the newspaper *Combat* aptly described his age as 'the century of fear'.⁷

3 Friedrich Nietzsche (1974), *The Gay Science* [2nd ed.] [trans. Walter Kaufmann], Vintage Books, p.167.

4 Albert Camus (2005), *The Myth of Sisyphus* (trans. Justin O'Brien), Penguin Books. e.g. p.26.

5 Camus (2000), *The Rebel*, p.10.

6 Quoted in *Ibid.*, p.33.

7 Albert Camus (2006), *Camus at 'Combat'* (ed. Jacqueline Lévi-Valensi) (trans. Arthur Goldhammer), Princeton University Press, p.257.

From here, Camus advances towards his main point: circumscribing the role of violence and coercion in political life. He refuses to believe that the USSR or Nazi Germany represented the logical endpoint of a world without God. Even if there is no ultimate metaphysical structure in the universe and human beings are condemned to a life of endless questioning, it should not follow that 'all is permitted'. Camus was determined to make space for values such as mercy, love, and freedom.

Ideology and totalitarianism

The Rebel deals at length with the ideologues and fanatics who used the death of God as a springboard from which to draw appalling political conclusions.

Even if there is no ultimate metaphysical structure in the universe and human beings are condemned to a life of endless questioning, it should not follow that 'all is permitted'.

First, Camus describes the phenomenon of nineteenth-century Russian nihilism – the emergence of young radicals in the cities of the Russian empire around the 1860s convinced that God was an illusion and that it was the duty of human beings to create a paradise for themselves on Earth. The new revolutionary organisations engineered a spate of political assassinations targeting dignitaries, soldiers, and royalty. In a case from 1869 that shook the empire, a terrorist cell murdered one of their own, a student, for a perceived betrayal, and dumped his body in a lake. Some of the radicals ultimately went mad, declaring that nothing mattered and that everyone must follow their animal instincts.⁸ Others believed that the application of human reason alone was enough to create on Earth the eternal utopia that religion had promised in heaven.

Varied as these incidents were across many decades, Camus believes that the nihilists were united by the same basic assumption: the world was unjust and false, and humankind has the right to destroy it. Camus says they waged a 'war on philosophy, on art ... on erroneous ethics, on religion, and even on customs and good manners'.⁹ This nihilism takes many forms – at its most extreme, it represents the rejection of any sort of ethics whatsoever, of any course of action that doesn't involve following your instincts. The assassins and revolutionaries truly acted according to the principle that 'all is permitted'.

Yet such an attitude is difficult to sustain for long. *The Rebel* portrays those who seek to cast off morality as caught in a vicious cycle of contradiction. For they are still human beings, and therefore unable to stomach the total renunciation of all value and all morality. Camus lists various terrorists who were wracked by scruples: Ivan Kaliayev, whose plan to assassinate a Grand Duke was delayed because he wouldn't risk harming the children riding in the Duke's carriage, is one example; Boris Savinkov, who baulked at murdering a Russian admiral on a train because of the civilians who would likely be harmed, is another. These are individuals who, 'while recognizing the inevitability of violence, nevertheless

⁸ Camus (2000), *The Rebel*, p.105.

⁹ Ibid.

admitted to themselves that it is unjustifiable'.¹⁰ In their desire to prove that everything is permitted, they ran up against a very human kernel of conscience and empathy that they nevertheless tried to negate.

At the same time, their innate need for some sort of value and meaning has simply been transplanted, most often into the promise of a glorious future. They cling to the image of utopia, despite everything, and in their monomania they cast the future (without realising it) in terms of the divine. 'The terrorists' real mission', Camus says, 'is to create a Church from whence will one day spring the new God'.¹¹ They wanted to coronate humankind with God's crown by granting humanity's most enlightened leaders the authority to remake the world from scratch. By this logic, any amount of human sacrifice (murder, torture, theft, manipulation) is justified by ends to be achieved.

In the twentieth century, nihilism was translated upwards into the awesome destructive power of the state. No longer were the European upper classes haunted by isolated terrorist cells plotting political assassinations. With Soviet Russia and Mao's China, the belief arose that the future could be only vouchsafed by a revolutionary vanguard class of purists. Under such regimes, individuals' wills must be subjugated to the will of a central committee or a revolutionary party.

Fascism too elevated the principle of terror above any scruples of morality. Camus believed that Mussolini and Hitler constructed their states 'on the concept that everything was meaningless and that history was only written in terms of the hazards of force'.¹² That is, the only important principles in a fascist regime are action and victory. When a state is organised for the purpose of waging war, the thing that matters most is military victory. Camus warns that 'he who rejects the entire past ... condemns himself to finding justification only in the future and, in the meantime, to entrusting the police with the task of justifying the provisional state of affairs'.¹³

Twentieth-century authoritarianism was built on one supreme ambition: to impose a new ethical system on a Europe left disoriented by the decline of the old faith. It was justified by a nihilistic belief in the right of a leader to reconstitute the ethnic or moral fabric of society while appealing cynically to fantasies of an authentic nationhood, whose goals were more important than any limits imposed by morality or law. Modern defectors from North Korea, whose rulers presents themselves as gods on earth, would no doubt find this description familiar.¹⁴

Ultimately, Camus feared that in the wake of the death of God, political fanatics had commenced 'an attempt to found a Church on nothingness'.¹⁵ It is clear why Camus felt his was an era without morality, humanity, or sense: all around him, states perpetuated terror and bloodshed under the marching orders of fanatic strongmen.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.119.

¹¹ Ibid., p.116.

¹² Ibid., p.128.

¹³ Ibid., p.110.

¹⁴ 'North Korean children told Kim Jong-un "is a god who can read their thoughts"', *Mirror [online]*, 5 September 2020, <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/world-news/north-korean-children-told-kim-22634989>

¹⁵ Camus (2000), *The Rebel*, p.134.

Camus' humanism

Why did this happen? Why did so many people become willing accomplices to the terror of the modern totalitarian state? And if those who committed the atrocities were, as Camus thought, mistaken – if it is *not* the case that we can simply cast aside morality, rights, empathy and justice, and decide these things for ourselves – then how *should* we act?

First, Camus reminds us that rebellion properly understood starts as a striving for freedom and truth.¹⁶ It means freedom to pursue the truth beyond the confines of the old religion, a liberation from the suffocation of traditional moralities and hierarchies. The problem is that far too many people in the twentieth century rejected this fact. They were blindly led back towards servitude: 'hardly was [man] free ... when he created new and utterly intolerable chains'.¹⁷ In other words, through domination, through totalitarianism, ideologues made the solution (totalitarianism) worse than the problem (the death of God) had ever been.

It's only a small step from denying the existence of human nature, Camus warned, to denying the moral importance of human dignity; from there, you give fodder to tyrants who claim for themselves the right to sacrifice human beings to aid the state or a political ideology.

Not only was it worse; it is also inconsistent. Rebellious thought begins by announcing that humankind is alone in an indifferent universe – but this necessarily suggests that there is something common to human experience. To recognise your own isolation ought to mean recognising something of yourself in others. As we've already seen, at the beginning of *The Rebel*, Camus says that 'the first step for a mind overwhelmed by the strangeness of things is to realize that this feeling of strangeness is shared with all men'. There is something common about human experience.

And, crucially, there is such a thing as human nature. This is a point Camus stressed throughout his writing. The French existentialists believed there was no such thing as human nature, that human beings are endlessly malleable creatures, whose every act is an act of self-creation. Camus rejected this. He preferred the philosophy of those ancient

Greeks who knew that there is a human nature common to all people, even if we can't describe its contours scientifically. It is only a small step from denying the existence of human nature, Camus warned, to denying the moral importance of human dignity; from there, you give fodder to tyrants who claim for themselves the right to sacrifice human beings to aid the state or a political ideology.

But this doesn't yet give us a blueprint for how to act. We can find one buried halfway through *The Rebel*, where Camus gives us two metaphors. Like certain Russian nihilists, we can react to our existential predicament through 'blind combat, dimly groping on

¹⁶ Ibid., p.99.

¹⁷ Ibid., p.221.

the sands, like crabs which finally come to grips in a fight to the death'.¹⁸ But those who claim that violence is the *only* solution – that nothing matters apart from power, force, and personal gain – are mistaken. Camus gives us his second metaphor, of:

beams of light painfully searching for each other in the night and finally focusing together in a blaze of illumination. Those who love, friends or lovers, know that love is not only a blinding flash, but also a long and painful struggle in the darkness.¹⁹

This is the path he thinks we should choose. In fact, this is the only path that is faithful to the central truth that humans all share the same basic condition. There is a 'mutual complicity among men, a common texture, the solidarity of chains, a communication between human being and human being which makes men similar and united'.²⁰

Some might raise the objection that this talk of solidarity in chains sounds too radical, perhaps an echo of Marx and Engels' prophecies in *The Communist Manifesto*.²¹ But unlike Camus, Marx and Engels believed they had discovered a fundamental truth about the nature of historical progress. They claimed that history, driven by capitalism's inherent contradictions, is on an inevitable track towards a future utopia in which class distinctions would be abolished and property would fall under common ownership.

Camus knew better. In order to understand the human condition, he believed, you have to understand our intellectual limits. We do not know what ultimate path history is on – indeed, we have no reason to believe that any such path exists, especially not the path envisaged by communist theorists. He rejected political messianism and the tyranny it often devolves into.

Several consequences follow. First, nobody is justified in committing murder in the name of some future good. This is what Camus means when he says that true rebellion recognises certain 'limits' which we must not cross.²² An ideologue cannot start a rebellion in the name of humanity by negating the human condition. Once we recognise our limitations, we cannot believe we know enough to commit systematic murder in the name of justice.

This does not mean that Camus was a pacifist. To refuse violence at all costs, he thought, is simply another form of nihilism. In extraordinary times, refusing to intervene for fear of getting your hands dirty means you have simply resigned yourself to the horrors around you. Camus' philosophy was more pragmatic than this. He believed that violence has to be used with both a sense of 'personal responsibility' and 'immediate risk'.²³ Violence must always be provisional, and never an end in itself. And whoever uses it must, above all, be realistic. Violence is a terrible thing because it negates human life. It might sometimes be a necessary tool in dire situations, as Camus believed it was when he joined the French Resistance; but violence cannot be a *method*, and it must never be an *end*.

Camus also believed in the importance of freedom of speech. This theme is underdeveloped in *The Rebel*, but his description of it as an 'absolute' right suggests how

¹⁸ Ibid., pp.111-12.

¹⁹ Ibid., p.112.

²⁰ Ibid., p.223.

²¹ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels (2002), *The Communist Manifesto*, Penguin Books.

²² Camus (2000), *The Rebel*, p.1.

²³ Ibid., p.233.

important it was to his worldview.²⁴ Camus believed our inherent intellectual limitations mean we can only approach truth haphazardly, through dialogue and experimentation. If you are so certain that your understanding of justice is the correct one, you might think it worthwhile to censor your opponents and stop them from speaking. For Camus, this is a travesty, and ignores the inherent limitations of human knowledge. No person or faction possesses the illusory key to human harmony and flourishing. With his warning against 'the comforts of dogma', Camus urges us to recognise our limitations, and to remember that questions in politics and morality cannot be settled with any degree of finality.²⁵

Camus today

Much has changed since Camus' time. The world wars have receded further into the past; the Iron Curtain no longer divides east from west; the threat of nuclear apocalypse is not so immediate.

And yet certain fundamental problems remain. Our world is even more secular than Camus', and more nails have been hammered into God's coffin. At the same time, Western nations feel even more divided within themselves than ever before. It's clear that we too must be on guard against the fallacies of thought and action that led to the twentieth

century's greatest atrocities, and that many of the same nihilistic impulses against which Camus warned – terrorism, insurrection, and dogma – still loom. It's vitally important to build a politics that accepts the complexity and mystery of the world without being led down a path that gives self-elected vanguards of utopia the right to undermine the dignity of others.

Albert Camus is not to be found on most lists of twentieth-century liberal philosophers. But by confronting our deepest spiritual and philosophical problems, he carved out a set of ideas that place limits on what human beings should expect from the modern state and each other. Lives must not be sacrificed for ideological goals; a world without God is not a world without morality; violence and cruelty corrupt and weaken political life and should be avoided where possible; and we cannot, no matter how fraught our politics become, delude ourselves that 'all is permitted'.

It's vitally important to build a politics that accepts the complexity and mystery of the world without being led down a path that gives self-elected vanguards of utopia the right to undermine the dignity of others.

²⁴ Ibid., p.232.

²⁵ Ibid., p.121.



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