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Albert Camus' political thought: from passion to compassion

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Albert Camus' political thought: from passion to compassion

by: Angel López-Santiago

A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in Political Science in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York
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Abstract

Albert Camus' political thought: from passion to compassion

by
Angel López Santiago

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The present work analyzes the political thought of Albert Camus, specifically the challenges of the justice ideal, and Camus' prioritization of the concepts of limits and compassion. Although Camus is not usually considered part of the traditional canon of political philosophy, I organized his thought into three major areas: a sub-theory of the human being, a sub-theory of institutions, and a sub-theory of political change. This method, I demonstrate, is ideal for extracting and organizing the political ideas of non-traditional political writers. In the case of Camus, he advocates for an international and democratic 'civilization of dialogue' as part of his sub-theory of institutions, a preference for limited revolt over unpredictable and violent revolution as part of his sub-theory of political change, and, given what he called the 'solidarity of man in error and aberration', a marked preference for compassion over justice in times of political crises as his sub-theory of the human being.

In memoriam

Five days before seeing this thesis through, on September 11, 2013, my thesis adviser, friend and mentor, Marshall Berman, passed away at 72 in his beloved New York City. He shepherded me into doctoral school, showed me the way through this dissertation, brought innumerable insights into my argument and even talked with the other members of my committee, the day before his passing, about how happy he was with this work. He had said as much during our last conversation, a long chat that I now find myself rerunning constantly in my head.

Yet, Marshall could not physically reach our meeting on Monday September 16, 2013 for my dissertation defense. This thesis is dedicated to Marshall, whom I will sorely miss.

Marshall Berman. I moved to New York City looking for you. I never thought in my wildest dreams that I would be having so much fun talking and arguing with you at such a personal and intimate level. You represent what I love about this city and this life. Thanks for your love and help Marshall. Keep rocking it out, wherever you are. And thanks for making this city and the South Bronx intelligible for me.

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My two parents, who are not around anymore. My sweet mother, Elizabeth. My unpredictable father, Patricio. I miss you both dearly. Thank you for giving me such a happy childhood. For buying me that encyclopedia, for having so many books around the house, for subscribing me to Time, Reader's Digest, and Guitar Magazine. I promised I was going to end my doctorate, and here it is! Sorry it took me so long. But hope you give me a pass.

My three wonderful in-laws: Nicky, Héctor and Lucas. You are my family and I am the luckiest man for that. You supported me since my B.A. years, you pushed me to finish this, you gave me the gift of my beautiful and smart wife, I cannot ask for anything more. Thanks. Lucas, I miss you since 1996. And wish you around us every single day of my life. Thanks for being so fun, so open and so humane.

My sweet sister, Elymer and my niece, Ailish (la loca!). You keep me connected to Puerto Rico. You remind me where I come from. You have supported me in untold ways, and took care of papi and mami until the end. I love you both deeply. I also love Joe and his support and love of you two. You three are that bridge to my roots.

My three wonderful committee members: Uday Mehta, Jack Jacobs and Raúl Cotto-Serrano. Uday Mehta: you warmly met with me, guided me, made yourself available. You are a wise and special human being. Thank you for your solid support. Jack Jacobs: you counseled me both academically and personally throughout the years. Never abandoning me, always trusting and solid in your friendship and support. I only wish I could pay forward your support when the time comes for me to counsel my future students. Thanks Jack! And Raúl Cotto-Serrano...wow Professor. You have known and supported me for decades. You made me the intellectual and researcher that I am now, though I have to take full responsibility for my failings. As a professor, I want to be like you: your dedication, your educational method, your openness and sternness, your meaningful brevity.

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*Notre foi est qu'il y a en marche dans le monde,
parallèlement à la force de contrainte et de mort
qui obscurcit l'histoire, une force de persuasion et
de vie, un immense mouvement d'émancipation qui
s'appelle la culture et qui se fait en même temps par
la création libre et le travail libre.*

Albert Camus
La sang des Hongrois, 1957

Introduction

Deep inside I always knew I was going to write about Albert Camus. It took me years and extreme topical roundabouts to face it, but it finally happened. In fact, years ago, while presenting a paper at Berkley's *Thinking the Present: the beginnings and end of political philosophy* conference, someone approached me at the end of my presentation and told me 'your work has Camus written all over it!' The curious thing was that paper did not even mention Albert Camus by name. Yet, I *was* talking about him.

Writing about Camus is both a fascinating and daunting endeavor. Camus had an amazingly interesting life; he loved, lived, wrote, acted and won accolades all during a time in which he could have as easily died at the hands of one of the greatest death-traps our world has ever witnessed, the Nazis. Yet, so much has been written about him, so many scholarly groups devote themselves to him and his thought, he occupies such a monumental and precious place in the understanding of our literary, moral and philosophical universe, that writing about Camus is an extremely delicate and frightful affair. There has been for me both a pull towards Camus and his

thought, *and* an instinct to be pulled away. You do not want to be the one who says something silly about such a man.

This dissertation rests on my understanding of Albert Camus as a thinker whose political philosophy privileges the idea of compassion over that of justice. For all the dynamism and passion of his prose and thought, his philosophical and moral attitude is essentially one of measuredness and compassion.

My thesis is that in spite of our understanding of Camus' thought as one that privileges justice, freedom and fairness he was quite skeptical about the blind pursuit of justice-centered political projects. I will argue **that Camus' belief in a fixed human nature**, his belief that human nature allows for very limited room for improvement – we are all united in what he calls a human brotherhood of 'error and aberration' -, **pushed him to prefer the idea of compassion over the concept of justice when thinking morally and politically.** To be more precise, Camus can be fairly considered a philosopher of justice, yet, as we will see, he was realist enough to understand that justice could be perverted into cruelty. At a theoretical level he understood compassion as residing *within* the concept of justice, yet at a political and practical level he knew that events and excesses forced political agents to sometimes choose between one and the other.

One of his most salient concerns was about ideological and political movements drowning out what he deemed most important in human civilized life: the ideas of compassion and limits.

Demands for justice, equality, liberty and national liberation, Camus thought, could not be taken seriously or uncritically if they did away with any idea of limits; or if in their righteousness they ignored the need for compassion towards suffering, the innocent and vulnerable human beings.

The main obstacle -among many others- in reading Camus as a political philosopher is my belief that he explicitly avoided writing and expressing himself as one. He obviously considered himself first and foremost a man of letters, a literary figure and thespian. His political thought, then, has to be *extracted* almost by force; and at times this feels almost as a violation of his own intentions. Even when he explicitly wrote about political matters -and he wrote a significant amount about politics- it is not easy to find explicit positive statements about the deeper philosophical roots of his political positions. Yet, he made himself unmistakably clear about where he stood and what he stood for; It is only that he preferred, master of the word that he was, to suggest rather than to bawl.

In Camus, however, we have a thinker who was much clearer about what he was *against*. And it is from here, from the negative, from his lucid criticism of the political realities and ideological fashions of his time, and from his insightful readings and fleshing out of many political thinkers and political movements throughout history, that we need to start in order to understand his political and moral thought.

The first thing is, then, setting the structure of how to read the political thought of a non-political philosopher. There are obviously many ways we could do that, but I have chosen a specific methodology and this will be briefly presented in the first chapter of the thesis. This methodological chapter –the first chapter- will not only flesh out and justify what I believe is the most elegant and optimal way to engage with Camus’ texts –Raul Cotto-Serrano’s ‘theory of sub-theories’ in political philosophy model-, but will also succinctly place this unique method I

have chosen within the larger discussions –both within and outside the field- about how texts come to be, and the best way to engage, criticize and understand these texts.

Briefly, Cotto-Serrano's theory of sub-theories posits that every political philosophy –and hence the texts of political philosophy- can be understood as a three-legged structure: an author's political philosophy usually contains a sub-theory of the human being, a sub-theory of political change and a sub-theory of political institutions. If one of the three legs is not explicitly argued by the author, if its discussion is insufficient or totally absent, the theory of sub-theories argues that this 'incomplete' aspect could be *inferred* from the two other extant sub-theories. Chapter one will deal with the 'theory of sub-theories' at length and explain why I feel it is an elegant and solid model to engage Camus' work.

Based on the 'theory of sub-theories model' I will discuss some of the most important works written by Camus as seen from the perspective of political philosophy. Chapters two, three and four will each deal with a specific aspect of Camus' political thought as viewed and analyzed from the 'theory of sub-theories' point of view.

More specifically, chapter two will deal with Camus' sub-theory of the human being within his 'absurdist' works¹ (such as *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Misunderstanding*, *The Stranger* and *Caligula*) and Camus' last published novel – *The Fall*. Chapter three will work with Camus' sub-theory of political change as found mostly within his 'revolt' cycle of works, namely, *The Plague*, *The State of Siege*, *The Just Assassins*, and *The Rebel*.

¹ We will see later on that Camus himself organized and worked on his writings in thematic series. Specifically, we will find that he worked on an 'absurd' series, a 'revolt' series and died while working on what he understood as a 'compassion' series of works.

In chapter four I will analyze Camus' sub-theory of political institutions as it can be found in his more journalistic work and his writings as an engaged public intellectual: *Letters to a German Friend*, his editorials dealing with the 'new press' in France², *Reflections on the Guillotine* and *Neither Victims nor Executioners* (among others).

The last chapter will try to bring together the three aspects of Camus' political philosophy discussed in the preceding chapters and will also try to move beyond categories and flesh out Camus' uniqueness as a political thinker: namely, the tension in his thought between the idea of justice on the one hand, and the ideas of limits and compassion on the other. His originality is not exhausted by the structure we can provide to his political thought with the 'theory of sub-theories'. As a thinker, Camus is much larger than any classification and organization we can provide to his thought (helpful and essential as these are to our understanding of his work). Camus' general thinking is firmly rooted in the ideas of limits, love and compassion; and these ideas, and his adherence to them, go above and beyond what we can call political thought as such. In other words, Camus' political thought is original -and I will argue deeply relevant- precisely because he was not a political thinker in the traditional sense of the term.

At a more intimate level, I have to thank Albert Camus for being a loyal companion in times of crisis. For during the last stages of this work (June 2013) I was diagnosed with cancer, and reading Camus and writing about him kept my mind from focusing obsessively and unhealthily on my predicament, and more importantly, it also brought back home the importance of community when either an individual or a group faces a crisis. My personal 'plague' was made

² In *Actuelles* (Camus 1977) Camus presents an essay (originally published in the newspaper *Combat*) called 'Critique de la nouvelle presse'. By 'new press' he refers to the energetic journalist body of work being produced in France immediately after the Second World War.

sufferable, and was defeated, thanks to the collective work of a wonderful, caring and responsible team of professionals, doctors, neighbors, family members and friends. Without that sense of community, lacking that feeling of being on a team, it would have been much more difficult to defeat my illness. That does not mean that Camus came back from the grave to do surgery on me and remove my tumor; it *does* mean –however- that Camus helped me be conscious about how lucky I was to be in the place I was and how lucky to be surrounded by the people I am surrounded by. I feel fortunate that Camus was such an important presence in my life during this process. And fortunate that my cancer was successfully removed and is gone.

As Jean-Paul Sartre remarked in his moving obituary for Camus, Camus was a moralist in the traditional understanding of the term (but also in a larger, more unorthodox and quite humanistic sense); and as the insightful and modern moralist that he was, we need to keep him near at all those times when political expediency and ideological excesses feel like the most tempting thing to do. Whenever we need to tame and de-escalate our darker passions, whenever we need to complement our rightful and desperate calls for justice with the cooling stream of compassion, Albert Camus is one person to keep near.

Chapter One: Heuristics and Critical Bibliography

There are obviously many ways we could go about reading Camus' texts (or any author for that matter). Here, after some brief methodological remarks, I will present the method I have assessed as optimal for reading and organizing Albert Camus' political thought.

A - The Great Conversation

In the West, the history of political thought relies to a great extent in an old trusted set of canonical works. This is what Harold Bloom calls the 'Western Canon'. (Bloom 1994). We can understand this canon as a 'Great Conversation' -a phrase coined by Robert Maynard Hutchins- in which authors are seen as conversing, arguing, expanding, commenting, and influencing each other in more or less chronological fashion:

"What binds the authors together in an intellectual community is the great conversation in which they are engaged. In the works that come later in the sequence of years, we find authors listening to what their predecessors have had to say about this idea or that, this topic or that. They not only harken to the thought of their predecessors, they also respond to it by commenting on it in a variety of ways." (Adler et al. 1990, 28)

The idea of this so-called Great Conversation rests on one fundamental assumption: there is a set of central themes and topics that remain present throughout the great conversation, and hence, throughout the intellectual history of the West. This is the idea of 'perennialism' in education for example, as posited by Robert Maynard Hutchins and Mortimer Adler (Adler and Mayer 1958; Hutchins 1952).

There is something both appealing and conflicting about this idea. The concept is reassuring because it gives us a sense of intellectual continuity with the past and a sense of potential connection with the future; it offers us a formidable pedagogic tool as a way to pass knowledge to coming generations and facilitates our understanding of things past; it plays into the sense that there are some things deep inside human beings that remain unchanged. It assumes not only an unchanging set of topical interests and concerns throughout history, but -more fundamentally- an immutable deep-core resting inside all human beings³.

Starting in the late 1960's new schools of thought (Deconstructionism, Feminism, Marxist literary criticism, New Historicism, etc.) came forth arguing -with some reason- that the traditional techniques of reading texts were deeply flawed or exhausted. This is essentially the poststructuralist critique⁴.

B – Context and Intentions within political philosophy

The political theorist Quentin Skinner has masterfully argued for (and practiced) a method of reading political authors that rejects both any crude attachment to perennial ideas (in the case of politics those would be concepts like justice, democracy, liberty, power, state of nature, etc.) while also rejecting uncritical drives towards completely embedding the text in 'context'.

In his 1969 essay, 'Meaning and Understanding in the History of Ideas' (Skinner 1969) Skinner examines -and rejects- both the idea that there is a closed set of universal/unchanging and always repeating themes/interests discussed by all political philosophers (and authors in general), while

³ The ideas of a Great Conversation, of educational perennialism, of a firm and almost-closed canon, has for decades been under attack. See following note.

⁴ The present work can not engage in a lengthy exposition about poststructuralist critical literary theory; yet, Edward Said's *Beginnings: Intentions and Method* (1975), *Orientalism* (1978) and *Culture and Imperialism* (1993) present clear and overarching narratives centered around the main arguments of the poststructuralist critique.

also rejecting simplistic arguments about the historicization and contextualization of the text (for him the idea that history and context is important is either obvious or abused in a fallacious way).

Skinner argues that we cannot possibly impose our own interests, themes, concepts, meanings, questions and concerns on the works of authors writing in different times and claim them as universal. There are no universal themes for Skinner. Our privileged themes and concepts are *ours*, not universal, and each author has his or her own very specific intentions and problems to tackle. On the other hand, the idea that history is somehow determinative of a text is either painfully and unhelpfully obvious, false or way too simplistic. Texts are embedded in their times and context, but not in the way the ‘contextual’ or ‘historicist’ school argues. The problem for Skinner with the ‘context’ argument is primarily one of the complexities of causation links.

Skinner solves this impasse primarily through his theory of ‘intentionality’.

He argues:

“the understanding of texts...presupposes the grasp both of what they [the texts] intended to mean, and how this meaning was to be taken. It follows from this that to understand a text must be to understand both the intention to be understood and the intention that this intention be understood” (Skinner 1969, 48)

Skinner’s argument is essentially a *linguistic* one.

His method, then, discards almost *in toto* the idea of a traditional set of universal themes (liberty, justice, democracy, order, power, etc.) common to most –if not all- political philosophers, yet, it does espouse the idea of a ‘conversation’ between the author and other authors, of a

‘conversation’ between the author and his or her times, and the importance of context and history when trying to sort out the intentions and meaning of the author’s utterances:

“The appropriate methodology for the history of ideas must be concerned, first of all, to delineate the whole range of communications which could have been conventionally performed on that given occasion by the utterance of the given utterance, and, next, to trace the relations between the given utterance and this wider *linguistic* context as a means of decoding the actual intention of the given writer.” (Skinner 1969, 49)

The main move here is towards a “recovery of intentions” (Skinner 1969, 49) of the author’s utterances. One of Skinner’s most important concepts is his preference to deal with ‘utterances’ rather than ‘ideas’; ideas can be expressed in many different ways, and this being so, the essential thing is to discover “*how* what was said was meant, and thus what relations there may have been between various different statements even within the same general context” (Skinner 1969, 47).

However, the ‘recovery of intentions’, a primarily linguistic enterprise, needs context as the “ultimate framework for helping decide what conventionally recognizable meanings, in a society of *that* kind, it might in principle have been possible for someone to have intended to communicate” (Skinner 1969, 49).

In the end for Skinner:

“There simply are no perennial problems in philosophy: there are only individual answers to individual questions, with as many

different answers as there are questions, and as many different questions as there are questioners.” (Skinner 1969, 50)

However, for all its insightfulness, Skinner’s method presents a few problems that render him, in my view, inadequate to use as the preferred method to read Camus’ work.

For one, the method seems optimal –and perhaps necessary- if we are studying authors far removed from us historically. It is true, for example, that when I read Cervantes in Spanish –my mother tongue- I get the sense that many of his meanings and intentions remain either totally obscure or partially so. I *do* get the sense that he is writing for and to readers far removed from me, both contextually *and* linguistically. That is not the case with Albert Camus.

Camus’ ideas, and the way he ‘utters’ them, are fairly comprehensible to us. His context and linguistic choices do not seem foreign or removed from our context and linguistic reality. In a way, this renders Skinner’s method, partially moot. The method might be of great help to understand Machiavelli, Shakespeare or Hobbes (authors far removed from us historically, and hence contextually and linguistically), it seems not so essential to understand Camus or John Rawls, among other more contemporary thinkers given their historical, contextual and linguistic ‘proximity’ to us.

A second more immediately relevant issue is that –as we will see- Camus *did* believe in certain perennial problems, not only in philosophy, but in life in general and political life specifically. Can we honestly adopt Skinner’s universalist critique (his anti-perennial method) when the

author of our interest thought himself thinking and writing about universal and perennial problems? This is very problematic.

In fact, Camus saw himself thinking and arguing both about specific *and* perennial problems with authors far removed from himself chronologically speaking (Sade, Dostoyevsky, Saint-Juste, Rousseau), and doing the same thing with his contemporaries (Sartre, Char, Malreaux, Faulkner, Koestler, Mauriac). As I will argue later on, Camus –and for that matter Sartre– had perennial and universal intentions both thematically and formally. It is no accident, for example, that Camus chose to write about the theme of ‘the absurd’ by writing two plays (*Caligula* and *The Misunderstanding*), a novel (*The Stranger*) and a philosophical essay (*The Myth of Sisyphus*) about the topic (Lottman 1979, 206). He needed the universal formats of the play, the essay and the novel to get his points across⁵. Similarly, it is no accident that he chose to set some of his plays in Imperial Rome, or fictionalize a plague situation for that matter: he was striving to speak in a universal format about what he deemed to be perennial issues of the human condition.

Understanding Camus’ intentions remains, however, essential; and the insight of ‘intention’ is Skinner’s main point. Still, we have to look for a method to organize Camus’ thought.

C - Visions of Politics

Another ‘method’ of reading political texts is offered by Professor Sheldon Wolin in his essay ‘Political Philosophy and Philosophy’ –from his 1960’s classic *Politics and Vision: Continuity and Innovation in Western Political Thought* (Wolin 1960). Wolin’s argument is more traditional

⁵ This idea will be further developed bit by bit in the following chapters.

than Skinner's, specifically given his belief that some themes are indeed perennial and recurrent in the works of most Western political philosophers.

For Wolin, political philosophy is best thought of as a unique *approach* to inquiry (Wolin 1960, 3). But this approach to inquiry is not an essentially unchanging platonic idea. Political philosophy "is not an essence with an eternal nature" (Wolin 1960, 3). The field was 'constructed' throughout history by political philosophers and their works. Yet, Wolin does believe in a certain specificity and historical contingency about the way these topics are approached by political philosophy, for he sees the field as a changing construct. He also argues that the field's main approach usually has to do with "what is 'common' to the whole community" (Wolin 1960, 4).

Wolin argues that there indeed exists a "continual reappearance of certain problem-topics" (Wolin 1960, 4), and a "common subject-matter" (Wolin 1960, 5) in political philosophy.

Authors throughout the history of the field have always referred to,

"...power relationships between ruler and ruled, the nature of authority, the problems posed by social conflict, the status of certain goals or purposes as objectives of political action and the character of political knowledge". (Wolin 1960, 5)

A key point for Wolin is that the field is 'bounded' by the "practices of existing societies" (Wolin 1960, 7); by "practices", he means "the institutionalized processes and settled procedures regularly used for handling public matters" (Wolin 1960, 7). These institutions and practices create an environment on which political philosophy is more or less dependent.

In short, political institutions are fundamental in defining and offering insight about the nature and content of the texts of political philosophy. Understanding the political institutions at the time of any given text, is logically, also essential in our reading and understanding of these texts. Institutions provide the setting during the act of writing, and provide a logical boundary from where to read and understand them.

Institutions, the argument continues, are human creations and hence open to decay and change; it is in these times of critical change that the great statements of political philosophy are put forth, according to Wolin. When institutions that otherwise integrate the political field are at its weakest, philosophical and theoretical efforts come forth to deal with these events. The reason for this is simple: when institutions decay they also bring down “the customary meaning that had been part of the old political world” (Wolin 1960, 9) opening up the space for redefinitions, re-affirmations, criticism and/or defense of the decaying institutional order. The key word here is ‘order’.

Whenever there is disorder (or the perception thereof), political philosophy is at its most vibrant. Wolin posits that this is the case because at times of institutional political change or institutional breakdown and decay:

“The range of possibilities appears infinite, for now the political philosopher is not confined to criticism and interpretation; he must reconstruct a shattered world of meaning and their accompanying institutional expressions; he must, in short, fashion a political cosmos out of political chaos.” (Wolin 1960, 9)

While constructing this argument, however, Wolin addresses a topic important for Camus; and this, I may add, is one of the reasons why he is not my preferred optimal option as a method-provider to read Camus. For Wolin at one point states that: “no political theorist has ever advocated a disordered society, and no political theorist has ever proposed permanent revolution as a way of life” (Wolin 1960, 9). Albert Camus would have certainly taken issue with the later part of that statement⁶.

Still, the main point –content-wise- is the same as before: the primacy of order as a unifying trope in the texts of political philosophy.

To summarize, Wolin believes -contra-Skinner- that there *are* some themes that are universal or perennial to the political canon. The main qualifier to this statement is that Wolin sees in the canon ever-recurring *questions*, and a myriad of different answers to those questions. The questions remain the same; the answers vary according to the realities and health of the political institutions of the times.

At a more formal level, the *language* of political philosophy and its theorists have “its own peculiarities” (Wolin 1960, 12). Yes, this language can be vague, open to obscure and unfathomable metaphors, and many of the concepts thrown around will never be subject to ‘rigorous observation’; but, this does not invalidate that it *is* a peculiar type of conceptual

⁶ A reading of Camus’ *The Rebel* (*L’Homme Révolté*) and his fierce criticism towards the end of the book against revolutionary Marxism and what he calls the ‘nihilistic’ revolution drive in some strands of anarchism, will suffice as an example of Camus’ opposition to the idea that political theorists have never “proposed permanent revolution”. That is what *The Rebel* is all about and against.

language and that it does strive to refer and explain the ‘world of political experience’ (Wolin 1960, 13).

The purpose of the political philosopher is two-folded according to Wolin. On the one hand authors are not so much interested in predictions⁷, but in offering *warnings* as to the perils a society might subject itself to if it chooses route X, rather than route Y. Wolin says: “in keeping with this function of posting warnings, the language of political theory contains many concepts designed to express warning signals: disorder, revolution, conflict and instability are some of them” (Wolin 1960, 13)⁸.

On the other hand, the texts of the field strive to determine the ‘necessary conditions’ for certain favorable outcomes. Political philosophy warns about perils ahead, but also about the opening of possibilities in the midst of change and times of crisis. The vagueness and lack of rigorous empirical standards in the field’s texts and language is due primarily to the immediate connection between the fields’ concepts and the concepts used in ordinary political experience. Specifically, Wolin argues, the field of political philosophy is burdened by a specialized language that in the very beginnings of its development was intricately tied to everyday language (Wolin 1960, 15). These specialized concepts, coming from everyday usage and ordinary political experience, have been passed down throughout history to other political philosophers to the point that Aristotle wrote about power and democracy back in 4th century BC Greece and John Rawls used the same concepts in the late 20th century. Still, the concepts’ meanings have changed throughout time.

⁷ This will invalidate any criticism pertaining to the vagueness and un-scientific conceptual and methodological framework of political philosophers.

⁸ In this sense the careful reader may notice that Wolin’s idea is not very different from that of Machiavelli, whose *Prince* is mostly a treatise of warnings for rulers of the advantages and perils of deciding to do A rather than B.

The change in the meaning and connotation of the field's concept is the product of each author's *vision*⁹. Visions can be purely descriptive, but they could also be the product of an 'imaginative' jump. Wolin's work as an exegete and commenter on political philosophy concentrates precisely on extracting this 'visionary' aspect, the imaginative uniqueness, of each author. Here Wolin nears himself to Skinner's idea of intention. Many of the quirks, metaphors, tropes, fancies and exaggerations in some of the classical writers of the field could be explained by this injection of imagination and vision into their texts, for they were possibly illuminating their arguments by diverse textual strategies. "Fancy neither proves nor disproves, it seeks, instead to illuminate, to help us become wiser about political things" (Wolin 1960, 18).

The concepts of imagination and vision should, then, be at the center of our 'reading' of political philosophy's texts. Wolin says:

"Imagination has involved far more than the construction of models. It has been the medium for expressing the fundamental values of the theorist; it has been the means by which the political theorist has sought to transcend history" (Wolin 1960, 19).

In the end, Wolin offers superb insight, along with Skinner's concept of intentionality, regarding how we might approach the texts of the political philosophy tradition, but his approach and method remains far from being optimal to read Albert Camus' political thought, because –as we will see- Camus is squarely out of the political philosophy as it is traditionally understood, and probably willingly so.

⁹ Presumably explaining why Wolin's book is titled *Politics and Vision*.

Both Skinner and Wolin somehow coincide in the uniqueness of each specific author; Skinner through his concept of ‘intention’, Wolin through the idea of ‘vision’ or imagination; but they differ in that Wolin fully embraces the idea of a tradition and of ever-recurring themes. For Wolin the force of the tradition is such that,

“...even the highly individualistic rebels, like Hobbes, Bentham and Marx, came to accept so much of the tradition that they succeeded neither in destroying it nor in putting it on an entirely new basis. Instead, they only broadened it.” (Wolin 1960, 22)

Professor Wolin also underlines the importance of institutions in the writing, reading and proper understanding of political texts.

However, as I will discuss next, Albert Camus’ uniqueness as a political writer and literary author, makes using both Skinner’s and Wolin’s suggestions non-optimal to analyze his political thought. Skinner is too constricted as to the absence of ‘perennial’ themes or issues, while Wolin gives too much importance to the political philosophy tradition/canon. Albert Camus, on the other hand, did talk about what he believed were universal and perennial issues, and he – probably consciously- never pushed himself to write in the terms and form of the political philosopher.

D - Neither Skinner nor Wolin

Albert Camus’ *L’Homme révolté* (Camus 2007) is a masterpiece of insightful thought about the works of some seminal texts of political philosophy. So is *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (Camus 1967). In these works Camus shows not only an impressive familiarity with the corpus, language and

history of Western political thought, but with the political practices, discourses, texts, and histories of statesmen throughout time; these and other works by Camus also show an enviable capacity to extract political philosophy from the texts of literary authors (such as Sade, Dostoyevsky, Rimbaud and Lautremont, among others).

In other words, Camus shows he knows how to read political philosophy, how to extract political ideas from the works of preeminently literary authors, and how the actions and words of politicians and historical characters are directly connected to the ideas of political philosophy. Yet, he never wrote a work of political theory as such. He never intended to be a political philosopher, and the canon has usually not listed him as one of the ‘must reads’ of the field (and rightly so, if we take a restricted view of what is a political philosophy text).

I believe that Albert Camus’ thought must be approached taking into account the facts that:

- a) He did believe in the recurrence and universalism of certain ideas.
- b) None of his works were intended to be political theory texts.
- c) His literary output (plays, journalism, essays, novels) was exceptionally diverse.¹⁰

Wolin’s and Skinner’s approaches do not offer a fully convincing and optimal route that addresses the three facts enumerated above.

I deem the best choice for reading Camus’ political thought to be Raúl Cotto-Serrano’s ‘Theory of sub-theories’¹¹.

¹⁰ It is worth mentioning –and this will be properly discussed in the following chapter, that Camus himself was very self-conscious about his usage of different types of techniques (essays, novels, plays) while working a single topic.

E – The theory of sub-theories in political philosophy

Although the second chapter will deal with this in much more detail (and the following might be obvious to all), let us for the moment work under the premise that Camus' political thought is found not only in his strictly 'political' essays.

Let us further assume that an important part of Camus' political thought and political preferences are 'scattered' and to be found inside his more 'artistic' works as well.

Finally, let us provisionally entertain the idea that perhaps Camus' most insightful and original political ideas are found not in his obviously political essays and journalistic work, but precisely in his literary works.

These are part of my initial premises, and –again- I will later engage on the discussion as to why this is the case, but if we provisionally accept these points, it becomes obvious that a more flexible method of engaging, finding and organizing Camus' political philosophy is needed.

Professor Cotto-Serrano is very much influenced in his method by Sheldon Wolin's work¹²; specifically, Wolin's emphasis on institutional change and crises, as fundamental to our understanding of political works; and –more generally- Wolin's premise that there are some ever-recurring themes and topics to keep an eye for when reading these texts. Cotto-Serrano keeps the 'perennial ideas' concept, but he expands *where* we can look for these ideas. These

¹¹ Professor Cotto is Associate Professor in the Political Science Department at the Universidad de Puerto Rico, in San Juan.

¹² The genesis of his method I have recovered through personal conversations with Cotto-Serrano.

perennial politico-philosophical ideas are not exclusive to the texts and canon of political philosophy.

The method I will ultimately use to read and organize Albert Camus' political thought is from the obvious necessity of at times 'extracting' a political philosophy from texts that are not primarily politico-philosophical works. If we need a politico-philosophically-attuned method to explore the work of a non-political philosopher, this method presents itself as ideal.

Cotto calls his method 'the theory of sub-theories in political philosophy'.

The first written mentioning of the method is found in Professor Cotto-Serrano's own doctoral dissertation. The dissertation, *The significance of politics in the liberation theology of Juan Luis Segundo and Gustavo Gutiérrez* (Cotto-Serrano 1990), presented an obvious problem for Cotto-Serrano: Juan Luis Segundo and Gustavo Gutiérrez were theologians first and foremost, not political theorists¹³. Yes, their *intentions* had obvious political implications and consequences, but they did not write with the language and format of what we traditionally consider political philosophy. In Cotto-Serrano's words:

“Liberation theologians are not political theorists in the sense that their main objective is not to cultivate that specific discipline. They are theologians who want to develop an interpretation of Christianity which could be relevant to persons who live under conditions of oppression. (Cotto-Serrano 1990, 77)

¹³ These artificial levels are important because in understanding Camus' political thought we need to understand his stance vis a vis the canon of political philosophy. Just as it is the case with Camus, Juan Luis Segundo and Gustavo Gutiérrez are not traditional political philosophers. Hence, while working with their work, Cotto-Serrano faced the same issue I face while working with Camus, and positioning him within the political philosophy tradition.

Political theorists ‘cultivate’ their field, as opposed to simply thinking politically. Cotto-Serrano is implicitly hinting that political philosophy is not only about content, but also about form.

There is a *form* we expect and look for in the texts of political philosophy, but this form –he implies- is not all. Moreover, it is implicit in this idea that political philosophers not only intend to address some specifically political topics, but also to explicitly converse with other political thinkers within the boundaries of the field¹⁴.

In those cases of authors addressing political topics or theorizing politically, without explicitly intending to ‘cultivate’ the field, we need a method, a way of organizing their political thought, in such a manner that allows us to place their thinking within the larger stream and conversation of the political philosophy field.

Cotto-Serrano’s idea is useful, because on the one hand it wants to respect the fact that some thinkers –in our case Camus- did not intend to cultivate the political philosophy/theory field; while on the other hand, it wants to extract their political thought from the larger frame of their work and ultimately organize those political thoughts by presenting them as a coherent political philosophy.

The next obvious question becomes: what is a political theory or philosophy? What are the elements common to most –if not all- political philosophers and thinkers and their works?

Cotto-Serrano’s response is the ‘theory of sub-theories’. Cotto-Serrano argues, both in his thesis and in a later paper (‘El Estudio de la Historia de la Teoría Política’ – *trans.* ‘The Study of the

¹⁴ This idea refers us back the idea of the ‘Great Conversation’.

History of Political Theory'), that there are three specific assumptions that are found in almost every political theory or philosophy. The idea is to find these three assumptions in the works of 'political' authors, and based on their positions, we might be able to extract a political theory of what otherwise might be a scattered or unorganized political thought.

Cotto-Serrano says that political theories/philosophies¹⁵ always contain or rest on three assumptions that take the forms of sub-theories or "subsets". These are:

"a sub-theory of the human being as a political agent; a sub-theory of political institutions which will explain the nature, authority and structure of the State and its interaction with other social institutions; and a sub-theory of political change including phenomena such as resistance and revolution." (Cotto-Serrano 1998, 8)

There are two overarching premises in this method; first, the idea that wherever we find these three sub-theories we might be able to put together a 'political philosophy'; second, the deductibility idea, meaning that if we have at least two of the sub-theories mentioned-above we can infer the third sub-theory and –again- put together a 'political philosophy'.

Addressing the deductibility aspect of his theory Cotto-Serrano explains:

"There is a certain level of deductibility between the three subsets.

For example, the adoption of one type of concept of the human

¹⁵ I will use the concepts 'political theory' and 'political philosophy' interchangeably here, because although Cotto-Serrano himself has written about the difference between 'political philosophy' and 'political theory', in the specific essays I will engage with, he uses the terms much or less interchangeably.

being would impose constraints on the other parts of the theory.

Once two of the three sub-sets is known, the larger traits of the third could be logically deduced.” (Cotto-Serrano 1998, 9)

Now that the theory of sub-theories has been presented, it is worth briefly examining the context from which this idea is born, and the usage Cotto-Serrano makes of it while addressing the political aspects of every political work that he engages with, be its author a political philosopher proper or simply an author that happens to deal with political issues while addressing more immediate (as was the case with Camus) or a far larger (as was the case with Saint-Augustine) set of concerns.

The theory of sub-theories is specifically born from Cotto-Serrano’s engagement with religious thinkers. The authors Cotto-Serrano has always been most interested in, as his dissertation proves, have always been religious thinkers and/or theologians. Not only has he dealt with the issue of liberation theology, but he is an expert in the thought –for example- of canonical writers of political philosophy for whom religion is at the center of their writing and thought.

Two main authors of his interest are, for example, Saint-Augustine and Thomas Hobbes. In my conversations with Professor Cotto-Serrano¹⁶ it has been clear that he is not willing to consider these authors exclusively as political philosophers, but as religious thinkers and theologians as well; and that means that their political thought is to be found –at times- in between larger theological and religious concerns. While reading Saint-Augustine’s political thought, Cotto-Serrano is not willing to put aside the primacy that Saint-Augustine gives to his theological

¹⁶ See footnote 10.

arguments. While reading Thomas Hobbes, Professor Cotto-Serrano does not ignore that half of Hobbes' *Leviathan* is concerned with what Hobbes calls 'the Christian Common-wealth' and the 'Kingdom of Darkness'.

It is clear that Cotto-Serrano at times considers both Thomas Hobbes and Saint-Augustine as eminently *religious* writers with very explicit political concerns. They both have political agendas and very clear political preferences, but it would be a mistake to separate these from their at times pre-eminently theological arguments. In Skinner's terms: we cannot just look for the political aspects of their thought in a vacuum, and at the exclusion of their religious thought and concerns, for it was indeed their *intention* to write about larger religious and theological issues.

We can –on the one hand- in fact argue to no end as to the soundness of considering both Hobbes and Saint-Augustine as primarily political or theological authors, yet, in the end our conclusion would be mostly about semantics. Labeling them one way or the other would not mask Cotto-Serrano's main concern: many times the political thought of any given author is not just lying out there 'dressed' –as it were- in an obvious politico-philosophical narrative; but rather, the political thought of many a political thinker has to be extracted from within a larger set of concerns that are not exclusively political.

While trying to address the most optimal method of extracting a political thought from within larger extraneous –if related- concerns, Cotto-Serrano ended up putting together a more general methodology that helps us read and compare political works *in general*. This is why, in the end,

this method is effective both in reading and understanding the works of political philosophers proper, as well as the works of authors that had political ideas and concerns but were in no way interested in ‘cultivating’ the field.

However, ‘the field’ *is* in the end one of our interests. Extracting an organized political philosophy out of non-political philosophers should be one of our concerns. Doing so expands the political-ideas conversation, opens up exciting possibilities, refreshes the field, and brings a new perspective regarding the richness of many authors’ thoughts, ultimately deepening our field.

Based on Sheldon Wolin, Cotto-Serrano follows the idea that there are ‘perennial’ and ever-recurring topics in the political philosophy field. However, Cotto-Serrano deals more with a perennial ‘thematic structure’ rather than with specific recurrent concepts. Concepts’ meanings can vary over time and throughout history, but the larger thematic structure of what a political philosophy rests on, remains the same. They all include a sub-theory of the human being, a sub-theory of political institutions, and a sub-theory of political change.

This ever-present thematic structure is what allows us to properly understand the arguments political philosophers have had amongst themselves, while also permitting us to understand why non-political philosophers (in the traditional understanding of the term) are sometimes brought into what are obviously exclusively political philosophy arguments.

For example, Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* can be read in many different ways, one of them as a text of political philosophy; yet, it must always remain clear that the political reading of such a text is dependent on our concerns, emphasis and specific personal interest, for that text could *also* be read almost exclusively as a cultural criticism and aesthetic tract¹⁷.

In short, some texts and some authors have to have their political philosophies *extracted* from their texts, for these political aspects are many times neither central -nor evident- as far as the intention of the author goes.

Extracting, as it were, a political theory *from* these texts is – I believe- a way of respecting the authors' original intentions, as well as serving our own contingent curiosities and needs.

Again, this method seems valid both to engage texts of political philosophy proper, texts that are not political tracts proper, and/or in which offering a structured political philosophy is not paramount for the author.

Cotto-Serrano's sub-theories are not conceptual "straightjackets", but rather "areas that we might expect a political theorist to dwell upon in his works" (Cotto-Serrano 1998, 8); if the author in question is not a political theorist as such, him/her dwelling in these themes signals nonetheless at the possibility of extracting a political thought from his/her work.

¹⁷ Nietzsche's concerns, his theories about music, his short but uncannily penetrating comments about Hamlet, in *The Birth of Tragedy* (Nietzsche 1995), for example, are as solidly central as starting points to engage the text, as are any political ideas found in it.

These sub-theories, we might add, are sometimes implicit assumptions in the work of the author, rather than explicit aspects of their thought. It is for that reason that the ‘deductibility’ aspect of Cotto-Serrano’s theory is important.

1 - Sub-theory of the human being

“It is not possible to develop a political theory without a pre-existing understanding of human beings. It is human beings who act politically, and their inclinations, appetites, potentialities and limits impose conditions on what is possible and desirable in the political arena.” (Cotto-Serrano 1998, 8)

In practice, we can find an author’s position about his/her understanding of the human being by asking a series of specific questions. Among them:

- “Are human beings political by nature or by convention?”
- “What level of selfishness or altruism should we assume in the political behavior of people?”
- “Are human beings morally perfectible? And if so, can that perfectibility be attained by political means? How do power relations transform and constitute political agents?”
- “What is the role of language and ideology in the social and political life of humankind?”

(Cotto-Serrano 1998, 8)

These questions go to the core of what I believe is Cotto-Serrano’s main –if unstated- inquiry as far as human beings are concerned: **Is human nature fixed or subject to change for the author**

in question? And ultimately, how much impact do political life, political institutions and political actions have in influencing human nature?

It is imperative for us to stop here for a moment and dig a little more deeply into this subject.

Cotto-Serrano's sub-theory of the human being tries to investigate an *author's judgment* about human nature, that much is evidently clear. In Western thought, usually these judgments take the form of moral and ethical judgments (humans are intrinsically evil or intrinsically good¹⁸), but these moral judgments are almost always buttressed by *psychological* or quasi-psychological theories as well. This is, for example, the case of Saint-Augustine, Thomas Hobbes and Jean-Jacques Rousseau, among others. These three authors offer us not only moral judgments as to the intrinsic wickedness or goodness of human nature, but also deeply profound *psychological* assessments regarding why human beings are the way they are from a psychological perspective. In other words, many times the sub-theory of human beings that Cotto-Serrano talks about is dressed as clear moral judgments, while at other times this sub-theory is dressed up as *psychological* insights and theories, sometimes as both.

In the case of philosophical and religious thinkers (and schools of thought) from the East,

Western judgments of 'good and evil' are pretty much irrelevant generally speaking.

Nonetheless, in most Eastern thinkers (and/or schools) we *still* find a sub-theory of the human being brought forth primarily as psychological opinions and investigations. Although I will not deal with this in any extended way in the present work, and as some of his readers have

¹⁸ This good and evil judgment is certainly more prevalent in Western thought. In my readings of ancient Eastern philosophy (Patanjali's *Yoga Sutras*, the Pali Canon and the Buddha's discourses, Confucius) as well as secondary literature about the subject, we find less of an emphasis on this; sometimes we see an explicit 'beyond good and evil' attitude- ; nonetheless, we still find a sub-theory of human beings through very elaborate and elegant *psychological* theories and assumptions.

remarked, Nietzsche's ideas about morals present uncanny similarities to some Eastern schools given his rejection of the 'good and evil' paradigm, and his embrace of an almost exclusively psychological sub-theory of the human being. In this, Nietzsche's debt to Schopenhauer is evident, and as we will see Camus' debt to Nietzsche, undeniable.

Moreover, as Cotto-Serrano insightfully reminds us, an author like Saint-Augustine offers us *two* different assessments of human nature. As a believer in the Christian concept of 'original sin' Saint-Augustine generally presents human beings as sinners, crooked timber as it were; but his Christian faith opens up a second, more positive, vision of human nature after the intervention of Christ's grace. Once irreparable sinners, after human beings accept Christ, the very core of their nature is transformed. We find in Saint-Augustine, then, two different assessments of human nature: human beings as sinners, and human beings as Christians. These beings are worlds apart, the presence of Christ's grace being the defining factor separating the wicked from the good. Yet again, Cotto-Serrano's main aim is to investigate the judgment (moral, both psychological *and* moral, or exclusively psychological) that each author offers about human nature; this is their sub-theory of the human being. At the core this means, as I have previously argued, investigating *how* malleable, flexible or fixed human nature is. In the case of Saint-Augustine human nature is changeable only through the presence of Christ (and or the Church); in the case of Rousseau human nature is pure potential; we were good in the past, crooked political institutions and arrangements have forced us to act in evil and detrimental ways ('l'homme est né libre, et partout il est dans les fers'), but given that human nature is perfectible, human beings can be made good again¹⁹.

¹⁹ Rousseau doesn't want or believe possible for human beings to 'return' to a so-called Golden Age; however, he does argue that the social contract can bring back some *new* forms of human cooperation and civility beyond what

To conclude this aside, the kernel of Cotto-Serrano's sub-theory of the human being concept is not only about extracting an author's moral or psychological judgment about human nature, but primarily about investigating the author's opinion about *how alterable or perfectible human nature is*.

Cotto-Serrano starts from the assumption that no matter the answer we find in any text to these questions, a fact remains unchanged: human nature is difficult to change, and if change is what is needed, political and social institutions play a defining role in affecting these changes. This brings him to the sub-theory of political institutions.

2 - Sub-theory of political institutions

"The study of these institutions is central to all political thought, and in particular to any theory that seeks to evaluate and offer suggestions concerning political institutions" (Cotto-Serrano 1998, 8). Again, the way to put into focus the sub-theory of political institutions is through a series of specific questions:

- "What are the origins and functions of political institutions?"
- "What type of relationship exists, or should exist, between leaders, subjects and/or citizens?"
- "What is the State?"
- "What gives the State its legitimacy?"

he thought were the contemporary forms of corruption found at the time of his tract. In short, Rousseau does not want us to be noble savages again, but civil and rational political beings.

- “What is the relationship between the State and the government?”
- “What is the legitimate extent of the State’s sphere of political action in the life of its citizens?”
- “What criteria should we use to establish the distinction between what is private and what is public?”
- “What forms of governments are there and which one is the best?”
- “What are the function and the effect of political groups in the political system?”
- “What is the relationship between the political and the economic systems within any given society?”
- “How does the political culture influence the workings of the political system?”

(Cotto-Serrano 1998, 8)

Any -or all- of these questions might help in assessing what lies at the core of Cotto-Serrano’s two main concerns regarding political institutions, namely: **In general, are political institutions good in and of themselves, a necessary evil, or harmful? And, what gives political institutions their sustainability, durability and stability?**

Behind this last question, in turn, lies the issue of the nature of political stability and change as it relates to institutions. Institutions are human creations, and hence, subject to change, decay and, more importantly for Cotto-Serrano, improvement. This leads him directly into the sub-theory of political change.

3- Sub-theory of political change

“Without a doubt, any political institution can be improved.

Experience also teaches us that the processes required to change these institutions can be difficult, painful and even dangerous. But if the political theorist evaluates and makes suggestions about social institutions, his/her thought will be incomplete unless it analyzes the processes that lead to institutional change.”

(Cotto-Serrano 1998, 8)

Again, identifying an author’s sub-theory of political change relies on a series of specific questions, among them:

- “What are the legitimate aims of political change?”
- “What political project is desirable at this or that specific moment in time?”
- “What is the difference between resistance and revolution?”
- “What is the function and relevance of civil disobedience?”
- “What could justify the use of violence in any given process of political change?”
- “Every political regime limits freedom and perpetrates injustices...when is the loss of freedom such as to justify revolution?”
- “What types of injustices deprive a regime of its legitimacy?”

(Cotto-Serrano 1998, 9)

There can be no mistake here: Cotto-Serrano's premise is that political change has to do primarily with the ways institutions are changed *for the better*, or done away with, so that better institutions could be put in place.

It must be emphasized, however, that it is the coming together of the three sub-theories – sometimes by inferring one of the sub-theories from the other two - that allows us to extract and ascertain the larger contours of a political theory in an author. Wishing or proposing better institutions, merely calling for political change, or presenting random thoughts about human nature is not enough.

Indeed, while in a general sense Professor Cotto-Serrano is quite original in the way he assesses, reads and organizes an author's political thought, in a more specific sense the root idea behind his overarching concept of political philosophy is ancient: it is primarily about the perfectibility of human beings and their political institutions, and about the most effective ways to improve these institutions.

As we have seen, behind Cotto-Serrano's method there is a drive to respect the larger context of any politically relevant text. The method allows non-political philosophy canonical texts to be engaged, a political theory to be extracted from them, all while still respecting the original aims of the author by not disturbing the author's larger or more specific intentions. A theological tract, a poetic work, a manifesto, a historical work, a text of literary criticism, a short essay: they can remain what they are, while still being subjected to an organized and systematic political reading.

At the same time, the method allows for an enlargement of the political philosophy conversation. Following this method we can obviously expect to find the three sub-theories previously discussed within the canonical texts in the field. This method allows us to put their authors in a position to readily converse, not only about context-specific issues, but about what Cotto-Serrano calls the common ‘thematic structures’ to be found in a political philosophy. But, more relevant for us still, is how the theory of sub-theories allows authors outside of the canon to be brought into the political philosophy conversation. Given the common thematic structures, Milton can converse with Hobbes, and the results are enriching.

4 – Deductibility

The other important feature of the ‘theory of sub-theories’ method has to do with what Cotto-Serrano calls its ‘logical deductibility’ aspect. He posits: “We can observe a certain degree of logical deductibility between the three sub-theories. If there were no correspondence between the three sub-theories at the core of a general political theory, such theory would lack coherence.” (Cotto-Serrano 1998, 9)

And he offers a specific example about what logical deductibility looks like in his method:

“Two political theorists could legitimately disagree about human beings being either selfish or selfless. However, if one of them, in his sub-theory of human beings, assumes that humans are deeply and inevitably selfish and that they invariably want to maximize their own private standing at the expense of the commonweal, it would be difficult for the theorist to defend in his sub-theory of

political institutions a democratic political regime based on citizen participation in collective decision-making unless he proposes some type of ‘mechanism of compensation’ that could facilitate the advent of some type of commonweal coming from such selfish beings.” (Cotto-Serrano 1998, 9)

The main premise here is, of course, the demand for *coherence*. Any given part of the theory cannot (better, should not) logically contradict another portion of the theory. And, once two of the sub-theories are known, the general outlines of the missing sub-theory can be logically triangulated and inferred. We do not need a full-fledged and ‘complete’ political tract to be able to ascertain an author’s political thought. Cotto-Serrano lowers the threshold of entry to the political philosophy conversation, and hence enlarges its scope, as it were.

From a more critical perspective it might be argued that Cotto-Serrano’s assumption/demand for coherence in any given political theory might not offer sufficient room to accommodate every author/work suitable of a political reading. Strictly speaking this might be the case. However, the ‘coherence test’ is not a straightjacket; looking for coherence in the thought of an author does not exclude the fact that we can extract knowledge and insight from incoherence and contradiction, but rather the contrary. We should *expect* coherence from a political theory, and lacking it, it remains our task to investigate why the author might incur in any perceived contradiction.

Cotto-Serrano’s method is not, was not intended to be, and should not be, our only tool in approaching a politically relevant work. As the final chapter of this work will make evident, even if we somehow ‘exhaust’ the theory of sub-theories method, with some authors –such as Camus–

extracting a political philosophy is not enough to grasp the full depth of their thought. For sometimes ideas, premises and views lying squarely outside the traditional political discourse are essential in our understanding of these authors and their works as well.

E - Conclusion

This chapter has presented what I believe is the most elegant, intellectually honest and effective method to read the work of a non-political philosopher like Albert Camus. I have here engaged the general –and by now old- discussion about how texts come to be, and how we can best read and understand them. I have presented this larger discussion at the more concrete –and more relevant for us- level of the political philosophy field. Specifically, I have put forth Professor Raúl Cotto-Serrano’s ‘theory of sub-theories’ in political philosophy. This theory allows us to read -from a politico-philosophical perspective- texts whose intentions were not exclusively political, but that nonetheless carry within them relevant political insights and implications. The theory of sub-theories posits that we can extract, organize and structure a political philosophy out of any text or author that offers or puts forth a general *sub-theory of the human being*, a general *sub-theory of political institutions*, and, finally, a general *sub-theory of political change*. The method also provides what its author calls a ‘logical deductibility’ capability, by which given two of these sub-theories and lacking the third, we can infer the general traits of the third sub-theory.

The next chapter will engage in the discussion of Albert Camus’ sub-theory of the human being as we can find it in what the critical literature calls –following Camus himself- his ‘absurd’ works.

Chapter Two: Albert Camus' sub-theory of the human being : The Absurd

A - Presenting Camus' works

This chapter will present as thorough a discussion as possible of some of Camus' most important, best known and most relevant works using the theory of sub-theories methodology presented in the previous chapter.

Organizing his works much or less chronologically I believe is the best way to proceed. There are two main reasons for the chronological approach. First, I want to bring forth Camus' political thought through time. As we will see Camus was not only an intellectually towering figure in his own time, but was very much responding and conversing *with* his times; in other words, he was influential and being influenced by his times and context. His thought *as a conversation* with his times is –obviously- relevant for this inquiry; but, perhaps more important, I want to establish what aspects of his thought –if any- were continuously present throughout his life as a writer.

The second reason to work much or less chronologically is that Camus organically worked in a surprisingly organized way, all things –the Second World War and his work on the *Resistance* among them- considered. For example, most biographers –among them Herbert Lottman, Donald Lazere and Olivier Todd²⁰- underline how he almost always wrote a novel, a play and a philosophical essay about a single theme (specifically, 'the absurd', 'revolt' and a 'justice/community' series that was, sadly, never finished). Indeed by 1938,

²⁰ (Lazere 1973), (Lottman 1979), (Todd 1996).

“Camus had developed the strategy which would serve him for all his future writing. On a given theme –for the moment it was the Absurd- he would write, simultaneously, three works in three different genres: a philosophical essay, a novel, a play. *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, *L'Etranger* and *Caligula* were started at approximately the same time, the writing would be carried on simultaneously and if possible they were even to be published together” (Lottman 1979, 206).

Still, in addition to these ‘thematic’ texts, there remains a significant number of works he wrote that are primarily journalistic or immediately and obviously ‘contextual’ in nature. Here I am referring to works such as his *Actuelles* (1939-1958), *Lettres á un ami allemand* (1943-1944), *Ni victimes, ni bourreaux* (1946), and *Réflexions sur la guillotine* (1957). These will be addressed later in this work.

Yet, as the excellent *The Unique Creation of Albert Camus* (Donald Lazere, 1973) proves, Camus’ oeuvre can be presented not only chronologically but from a thematic perspective exclusively.

In his book Lazere works thematically, going back and forth from work to work, understanding – for example- the reasons behind some of Camus’ apparent contradictions, while at the same time keeping track of the ever-recurrent themes and concerns always present in Camus’ individual works. Going back and forth thematically also allows Lazere to remind us of Camus’ repeated

use of ‘Easter Eggs’²¹: his works of fiction regularly make cross-references to characters and situations from his other fiction works²².

Lazere offers a few extra-methodological reasons to justify his thematic approach, the most weighty one being that Camus wrote his works around thematic ‘cycles or series’. And indeed, from very early on the critical and secondary literature has pointed to the fact that Camus worked in this ‘serial’ way (Lottman 1979, 451). In fact, Camus’ own notebooks and interviews refer to his working method in multiple occasions (Lazere 1973) (Todd 1996) (Lottman 1979); the opening dates of his plays and the publishing years of his written works also bear witness to the cogency of this argument.

Behind the larger thematic cycles, there are in Camus more specific and implicit topics and issues that he repeatedly addresses over and over. The reappearance and weight of these themes is such that Lazere decides to approach and present Camus’ work thematically, rather than from a chronological point of view.

In addition to bringing our attention to Camus’ repeated use of certain images and motifs all throughout his life -such as “*the stranger, the plague, the fall, the judge, the condemned man, the sun and sea, the two sides of the coin, exile and kingdom, lucidity and indifference, speech and silence, solitude and solidarity*” (Lazere 1973, 6) - one of Lazere’s most profound and original steps in organizing his reading of Camus’ works is the author’s insistence in including a series of

²¹ Namely, references to characters, stories and situations from some of his other works that only an attentive reader of all his other works will catch.

²² “Mersault in *The Stranger* reads a newspaper account of the murder of a son by his mother and sister –the story of the *Misunderstanding*. Cottard in *The Plague* speaks sympathetically of the trial of a man who shot an Arab in Algiers –Mersault”, etc.

“balanced antitheses” (Lazere 1973, 12) that are ever-recurring and central all throughout his work.

These ‘antitheses’ mostly signal to positions of ambiguity and/or contradiction regarding certain ideas or realities. Among them:

- Camus’ recognition of life’s limitations while celebrating the fullness, energy and vibrancy of life within those limits (life’s sensuality- life’s limits);

- his ambiguous attitudes towards death, specifically Camus’ fascination with the concept of death, the terror he expresses at times while writing about it²³, while at the same time calling us to embrace death fully and lucidly as the absurd lot of all living beings;

These ideas are worth mentioning now because they are ‘thematic hooks’ that will be ever present in most of Camus’ output. Yet, these ‘balanced antitheses’ are also important because they bring our attention to what I believe is a fundamental aspect of Camus’ thought: *his cautious and reasoned approach concerning any topic that he deems fundamental to human existence.*

However, notwithstanding Lazere’s valuable insights and reasons for approaching Camus from an exclusively thematic perspective, I will present his work chronologically, if –obviously- always keeping track of ever-recurring themes and preoccupations.

²³ This is specially vivid in *The Myth of Sisyphus*

My method of analysis will be eminently political; and for this, I intend to use Raúl Cotto-Serrano's theory of sub-theories in political philosophy as discussed in the previous chapter. Using Cotto-Serrano's model we will be able to better see the idea that lies at the core of my argument: **the primacy that Camus gives to the idea of 'compassion' over the idea of 'justice' at a political and moral level.**

Again, some of Camus' best known literary works –such as *Caligula*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Stranger*, *The Misunderstanding*, *The Just Assassins*, *The Rebel*, *The Plague*, among others– were considered by Camus himself to be part of thematic series²⁴, and he worked on these series and works almost simultaneously.

B - Style

Finally, a word about style: Albert Camus had no general preference about what literary approach/technique he used when writing. His stylistic approach was fully dependent on the topic at hand. Still, the fact that –for example– he decided to write four different major works – *Caligula*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Misunderstanding* and *The Stranger*– to tackle the single idea of 'the absurd' bears witness to the need he felt to fully address his topics from the broadest possible technical and stylistic perspective²⁵. Each style complemented and completed the other. In short, his thematic concerns required, he felt, the broadest possible stylistic choices. This is why he wrote a novel, a philosophical essay and a play (or two), when dealing with some of

²⁴ As Herbert Lottman insightfully notes in his superb biography, in 1941 Camus approached his then editor – Edmond Charlot– to try to publish *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Stranger* and *Caligula* in a single volume (Lottman 1979, 262).

²⁵ Camus certainly did not plan his literary career in advance to the point of sketching a detailed road-map of specific themes-specific styles in the early years of his career. Still, as Lottman notes, he did consciously developed the technique of writing in different styles about a single topic early on (Lottman 1976, 206).

these topics. Indeed, as Donald Lazere points out, when asked by an interviewer “which technique –fiction, the theater, or the essay- gave him the most satisfaction” Camus replied: “The alliance of all these techniques in the service of a single work” (Lazere 1973, 5). In another occasion he wrote in 1948 about “the necessity of a style for each subject, not altogether different because the author’s special language belongs to him. But it so happens that it will bring out, not the unity of this or that book, but the unity of the entire work”²⁶.

The reader will also surely note that in Camus’ earlier works ideas are presented mostly through his characters’ monologues and soliloquies, while in his later work these ideas are presented in more dialogical ways. Camus clearly moves from an individual view-point to a more community/collaborative one.

Given my previously explained methodological choice, I will organize/arrange Camus’ works in sub-divisions correspondent to the ‘theory of sub-theories’; namely, a sub-division regarding the sub-theory of the human being, a sub-division regarding the sub-theory of political institutions and a sub-division related to the sub-theory of political change.

My contention is that Camus’ sub-theory of the human beings is at its clearest in his ‘absurd’ cycles (*Caligula*, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Misunderstanding*), although evidently we will see his sub-theory of the human being at play in other works as well, especially in *The Fall*, a novel that I read as a clear revision of the earlier sub-theory of the human being that we can read in Camus’ absurd works.

²⁶ Notebooks 1942-1951. Quoted in (Lazere 1973, 5).

Similarly, I posit that Camus' sub-theory of political change is at its clearest in the works he wrote revolving around the 'Revolt' cycle (*The Just Assassins*, *The Plague*, *State of Siege*, *The Rebel*); although again, we will find inklings of this sub-theory of political change in writings not related to the 'revolt' works.

For his sub-theory of political institutions we will rely mostly on Camus' journalistic works and his contextual essays (*Letters to a German Friend*, *Reflections on the Guillotine*, *Actuelles*).

Again, organizing Camus' works this way will allow us to see what I consider most significant and daring about his political thought: **the importance that Camus gave to the idea of compassion, and his understanding that compassion was –at times- antithetical to the more politically traditional ideal of justice.** Everything in Camus' political thought –his sub-theory of the human being, his sub-theory of political change and his sub-theory of political institutions- points towards the need for compassion in any dignified political system. And everything begins with his sub-theory of the human being.

C - Sub-theory of the human being: Life absurdly sustained

Caligula –first published in 1944- is Camus' first major work and in a way it was never 'finished'. The play forms part of what Camus himself termed the 'three absurds' series, written in Oran, Algeria: *The Myth of Sisyphus*, *The Stranger* and *Caligula* itself.

It seems he started scribbling notes for the play as early as 1936 (Lottman 1979, 115), although the play was first publicly performed –after much revision- in 1945; he was still working and revising the work in 1960, the year of his passing. The work itself can be read in two different

versions, a three-act play from 1941, and the better known four-act work from 1944. Between the two editions, Camus lived through the Second World War. The second edition is more overtly political than the original.

The overall feeling of the play is one of pure –but eerily controlled- chaos and arbitrariness. It feels contemporary in the sparseness and spaciousness of its ambience, as if all the space and air in the world was needed to accommodate Caligula's pain, his out of control ego, and his ultimate project of total freedom to murder.

Caligula *seems* out of control after his beloved sister and lover –Drusilla- dies, yet, he also seems detached and aloof at the same time. After Drusilla's death, Caligula inaugurates a systematic reign of terror, murder and torture. Everybody, from close associates to his enemies, lives in fear of what he will do next. It is obvious that something died in him when Drusilla passed away.

Caligula's coldness is partially understandable given the circumstances after losing his lover-sister, for Drusilla's death brings not only unspeakable personal pain but a full-blown existential project in Caligula: while rebelling against it, he decides to go with the flow and reality of death; His life descends into chaos and –given that he is the most powerful man around- his resentment of death leads to unlimited tyranny. Given that nothing makes sense because we all are going to die, Caligula adopts an 'everything is permitted' style. The problem for those around him is that Caligula has the means -as Roman Emperor- to force this alternate and twisted existential world on them all.

From a philosophical and political point of view *Caligula* presents us with more questions than answers; and this is also the case with *The Stranger* and his other works of fiction in the trilogy of ‘the absurd’.

Caligula wants an escape from the scandal of human mortality, while fully knowing this is not possible. He needs a ‘way out’ of the mortal existential loop²⁷. In one scene of the play he literally demands his closest advisers that the moon be brought down for him. He demands more than this universe can offer in order to mask the reality of death and human mortality. He coldly states: “this world, the way it is made, is not sufferable. I need the moon, or happiness, or immortality, I need something crazy maybe, but something not from this world²⁸” (Camus 1972, 26). The world, he feels, has no logic, other than suffering. And that absence of logic and that ever-present reality of pain and death must be brought to its logical –and absurd- consequences. Caligula wants to become the being who teaches everybody; the one who opens our eyes to the inescapable fact of death.

Caligula feels that death is the only truth, and he tells Helicon –one of the characters of the play- “everything around me are lies, but I, I want to live in the truth! And justly, I have the means of making them live in the truth. Because I know what they are missing, Helicon, they lack understanding, and they do not have a professor who knows what he is talking about” (Camus 1972, 27). He summarily imposes a death sentence on all living beings around -and under- him.

Talking about the patricians around him he says:

²⁷ Sartre’s play, *No Exit (Huis Clos)* deals with the same issue. But as the title of the play implies, Sartre *starts* from the idea that there is no exit from our predicament. Camus starts, as it were, before that realization. *Caligula* presents the desperate –and ultimately futile- search for a way out.

²⁸ My translation from the French. Unless otherwise noted all translations from the French will be from yours truly. I am fully versant in French and have read Camus in the original since 1996.

“Given our needs, we will put to death all of them in a given order, all according to a list we will put together arbitrarily. At any given moment we would modify that list, always arbitrarily (Camus, 1972, 44).”

He wants to impose some order, but that order is one of pure murder and chaos albeit managed exclusively by him. Caligula is the raging-mad Buddha, for like the Buddha he sees that “men die and they are not happy” (Camus 1972, 27), but his recipe to face this existential truth is not the ascetic-like search from the Indian sage, but rather an indulgence in even more death and more suffering.

Caligula confronts, like nobody else around him seems to do, that we –puny humans- cannot understand our fate and lot (i.e. human mortality), and his solution is as simple as it is murderous: let *him* make and be our destiny, because he is the one who understands. “We don’t understand fate and that is why I have made myself destiny itself”(Camus 1972, 96). In his delusions of grandeur and irrational murderous behavior Caligula cannot fail to remind us of Adolf Hitler, who was leading Nazi Germany at the time Camus did most of his work on the play.

An utterly uncomfortable aspect of the *Caligula* story is the fact that even after his associates have concluded that the only solution to end his reign of terror is to kill him, they are nonetheless forced to acknowledge that “at least this man exercises an undeniable influence. He forces us to think. He forces everybody to think. Insecurity, that is what makes us think. And that is why so many hatreds follow him” (Camus 1972, 123).

In *Caligula* Camus also tackles in a rather direct way one of the questions asked by the ‘sub-theory of the human being’: how do power relations constitute political agents? The political order should bring some level of predictability and stability, yet, Caligula works hard to break down any sense of order and causality; everything whimsically emanates from him. The political agents in Caligula, his victims, constitute themselves as rebels out of brute necessity.

This ‘awakening’ in the face of exceptional terror (‘insecurity’) –Caligula awakes to the specter of death while Caligula’s entourage is awakened by the emperor’s reign of terror- is also present in the novel *The Stranger*. However, while the madness and suffering in *Caligula* is presented at the social and political level, in *The Stranger* Camus’ treatment of the subject is centered around an individual’s fate.

In *The Stranger* the main idea is the concept of ‘judgment’, an ever-present motif in Camus. In *Caligula* judgment is the central problem as well, for we are all inexplicably guilty of something –nobody can know precisely what- and hence the generalized death-sentence hanging over our heads, but we are *also* guilty in a more profound way because ignorance of our fate –death- renders us irremediably guilty at a deeper and more troubling level²⁹.

However, Mersault, the main character in *The Stranger* (the second fiction work of the ‘absurd’ trilogy), lives his life precisely looking the other way. He lives *as if* already dead to his surroundings, specially his fellow human beings and friends. But, he is not quite dead; he is pretty much alive and enjoying his life while remaining indifferent to it. Mersault’s individual

²⁹ Camus never explicitly develops the topic of guilt at a deeper more existential level until *The Fall*.

predicament in *The Stranger* is unique, yet he embodies very common and universal ‘modern’ ideas such as alienation and ‘anomie’.

Mersault’s mother dies (the famous ‘aujourd’hui maman est morte’) but he does not really know –or cares- if she died that day or the day before; he befriends a neighbor who is a pimp and a woman-batterer while remaining mum about his friend’s violence; he is loved passionately by a young and beautiful woman, but he shows no emotions and cannot really say if he is in love with her or not; a cranky neighbor kicks and abuses his dog, but Mersault says nothing³⁰.

From the ‘sub-theory of the human being’ perspective Camus builds a main character of which we must assume an almost absolute level of selfishness. The first half of the story affords us a glimpse of what a political and existential order built by purely selfish beings might look like.

Yet, for all of his indifference to life Mersault enjoys walking around, making love with his girlfriend (Marie Cardona), and specially loves sun-bathing and swimming in the warm Mediterranean Sea in Algiers. The pleasures of the flesh he feels and cherishes, but beyond that we cannot see Mersault as alive in any deeper meaningful way. He seems to lack any sense of social and political conventions; he just *is* and goes with the flow without any kind of ethical backbone.

³⁰ Sartre sees the whole of *The Stranger* as Camus’ effort to remain totally silent while telling a moving and classical story.

Everything changes when Mersault is condemned to die after murdering an unnamed Arab in the beach during a scuffle for reasons that are vividly described but remain substantially unclear³¹.

The Arab has a grievance against Mersault's abusive neighbor and 'friend', the two of them come to blows at one point while Mersault is around with friends on a day out at the beach, but that confrontation ends in nothing. Later that very same day Mersault goes out alone for a walk and a swim, with the pistol of his violent friend –the pimp– in his pocket; while strolling by the beach he meets the Arab again, they end up in a confrontation, Mersault is blinded by the sun's reflection on a knife the Arab has pulled out, and for no explicable reason ends up shooting the Arab multiple times, even when the man is already mortally wounded and lying in the sand.

While in his trial, Mersault does not show any emotions about his actions, and in fact cannot say why he murdered the Arab. But, tellingly, he is not condemned by the court for the murder of a man, but rather –and inexplicably– because when asked about his mother's recent passing, he is unable to show any emotions. He is essentially condemned for not showing that he cared enough about his own mother's passing.

This is where the novel becomes both clear on the surface, while remaining profoundly murky at its deepest level. It is only when Mersault is condemned to be guillotined for murdering the unnamed Arab that a surge of consciousness and attachment to life rushes back into him. Facing death renders life and its ordinary moments precious and valuable.

³¹ The fact that Camus never actually gives the Arab a name is one of the points around which Edward Said builds his criticism of Camus in his *Culture and Imperialism* (1993).

Nothing in *The Stranger* prepares us for the disarmingly emotional and utterly heart-wrenching thoughts that we can only assume are Mersault's last:

"I think I slept because I woke up with stars shining over my face. The noises of the countryside reached me. The smells of the evening, of earth and salt refreshed my temples. The marvelous peace of that sleepy summer evening filled me like a tide. In that moment, and at the end of the night, a ship's siren wailed. It announced farewells from a world that now was forever indifferent for me. For the first time in a long time, I thought about mother. It seemed to me that I understood why at the end of her life she had taken a 'fiancé', why she had played 'start it over'."

Mersault, who at the beginning of the novel seems to be in denial about his mother's passing, ends identifying with her at a very deep and intimate level.

Then, in a masterful move, Camus never actually lets us know if Mersault is in fact executed. We must *assume* he is (by forcing us to imagine the execution, Camus makes us Mersault's executioners). The reader simply finishes with a Mersault that is vibrantly and painfully alive, in full suffering, but in total appreciation of his life and experiences.

Both *Caligula* and *The Stranger*, have been much debated as to their meaning; this is specially the case with *The Stranger*³². It is obvious for all that Caligula is, despite his existentially acute awakening, a raging madman, and although Camus forces us to identify with the tyrant at times,

³² In *From Shakespeare to Existentialism*, Walter Kaufman wrote that "*The Stranger* is a little masterpiece; but the attempt to squeeze out of this novel a philosophy of the absurd –not merely as an explication of the text but as a theory about the world and life- is once again unsound" (Kaufman 1960, 281). The 'once again' referred to the same problem supposedly existing in Sartre's *The Wall*.

there is no masking that he wanted the reader to end up wishing Caligula dead. Unbridled tyranny is too high a price to pay for an individual's existential crisis/awakening, no matter how justifiable that crisis might be. Yet, this is not the case with *The Stranger*.

Early on, the reader has no reason –for Camus gives us none- to identify with Mersault. At times he comes across as utterly despicable in his indifference towards life and death. But his unexpected death sentence –and his movingly humane reaction- propels the reader not only to identify with Mersault's plight, but to *become* Mersault. After all, we are all guilty of being indifferent to life at some time or another.

Yet, for all of our empathy towards a Mersault that becomes suddenly alive, for all we can and do identify with the condemned man, a question lingers: what about that Arab that he murdered³³? Are we to forget and forgive his unspeakable act? The answer is –obviously- no. Murder is not to be justified, legitimized or explained away under any circumstances. The reason for this lies at what in the end we can begin to identify as Camus' sub-theory of the human being.

As we will soon see, both *Caligula* and *The Stranger* are not so much sketches towards a positive or normative vision of human action, but rather a staking out of fundamental questions concerning human existence. To look for answers and clear moral guidance in these two works

³³ Again, the nameless Arab, has a surplus of significance. He certainly signifies 'the other'; and at a political level, he is that 'other' that –in the case of French Algeria- is oppressed more than all other groups. Yet, interestingly, Camus writes a story where a character that we might assume is privileged within the colonial social structure, Mersault, ends up being condemned to die by a colonial court for killing one that sits far below him socially within the very same colonial structure that condemns the murderer to die. Camus never explained this riddle to us –he leaves it to us, his readers- to figure it out.

of fiction is to miss the point not only of the works, but of Camus' development as a writer and thinker.

It is as if Camus could not offer satisfactory answers to the deepest questions about human existence he was himself asking, but was more interested in describing the impossible predicament of human mortality, and exploring language, ideology and convention in the socio-political nature of humankind.

Both of these works –*The Stranger* and *Caligula*– are riddles. Mersault lives his life oblivious to the 'structure' and meaning of it, until he is condemned to die; Caligula, on the other hand, realizes with impressive clarity, through his sister's death, the reality of inexplicable human suffering; yet, none of them offer us satisfactory answers about what *to do*, and how to live, once we understand what lies ahead, i.e. death. Madness and political tyranny are not the answer. Ignoring the fact of human mortality until we are condemned and facing death right-on is not the solution either. Both works deal with the same fundamental *question*: something must be done about our being condemned to die.

I do not think Camus had an answer; but he does lay out the epistemological contours of the fundamental tautology it vacillates between oppositional resentment and the hypocrisy of convention, thereby signaling what our responses should *not* be. Neither indifference, nor murder; or, as he later said, 'neither victims, nor executioners'.

These two works are very difficult to assess in a sustained systematic and rational way. It is as if they were written to be grasped at more intuitive and emotional levels. That was probably Camus' intention. For while they are deeply engaging and moving, these works remain distant and dry in a way that makes them feel timeless, even 'classical'. They are works that talk to us in really immediate ways, but still keep an aura of aloofness and remoteness. It is as if Camus wanted us to love these works, while making it clear that the works were not going to respond in kind³⁴. Jean-Paul Sartre, on his masterful critique of *The Stranger* –originally titled 'Camus' *The Outsider*' and later reprinted as 'An Explication of *The Stranger*'³⁵ - calls the work not only 'orderly', but 'classical' in its orderliness. However, and quite tellingly, Sartre himself –a close friend of Camus at the time- confesses to not really understanding what Camus was aiming at.

One of the possible readings about the meaning of *Caligula* and *The Stranger* leans towards Donald Lazere's idea of Camus' 'balanced anti-theses'. For in both these works we see, and this will be even more evident in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Camus' profound philosophical and existential ambivalence *vis à vis* the fact of human mortality. On the one hand, both main characters of these two works -Caligula and Mersault- present the full force, sensuality and vibrancy of what life is and the feeling of being alive; on the other hand, through these characters we also experience the terror of being inexplicably condemned to die (under Caligula's bloody tyranny) and the idea of being dead while alive (Mersault's initial indifference towards life).

³⁴ Or as the great Serge Gainsbourg would sing: "Je t'aime, moi non plus".

³⁵ 'The Outsider' was the most common early English translation of *L'Étranger*.

The deeper and most humanistic common thread in both works is the idea that there is no real reason for death, it is just our lot and fate, and hence, to legitimize death under any circumstance is not a valid proposition, neither at a personal nor at a socio-political level.

Sartre understood *The Myth of Sisyphus* (1942) as Camus' "precise commentary" explaining both *Caligula*, but specially *The Stranger*. Camus worked on these three writing almost simultaneously, and I believe that as a matter of format and style he could not fully and explicitly expose his deeper preoccupations and concerns in these works of fiction (*Caligula* and *The Stranger*) without compromising their 'functioning' as works of art. *The Myth of Sisyphus* remains our best tool in trying to understand what he was really trying to get at.

In terms of our more specific politico-philosophical concerns, and from the perspective of the theory of sub-theories in political philosophy, the *Myth of Sisyphus* presents the clearest indications of Camus' sub-theory of the human being among the three 'absurd' works as well. As previously discussed, the sub-theory of the human being tries to assess two main things: how fixed or pliable are human beings (how perfectible is human nature), and how much do political institutions affect potential changes in human nature.

From that perspective, both *Caligula* and *The Stranger* convey a basic point concerning the first of the sub-theories: human nature is changeable, but there are clear limits regarding how much we can actually alter it; for at the end all human beings have to deal with the inescapable fact of death and human suffering, and with the limits in our understanding of why human beings die

and suffer; those two facts (death and our limitations in understanding it) impose clear limits about how pliable our human nature is.

Although written almost simultaneously, and perhaps due to the differences in style, technique and intention, while *Caligula* and *The Stranger* are works primarily concentrating on putting forth existential and epistemological questions, not clear answers, *The Myth of Sisyphus* offers the first explicit answers and contours of Albert Camus' sub-theory of the human being.

The Myth is a deep exposition of Camus' philosophical concerns at the time. And it is a work that has not seen Camus still fully involved and affected by the blood-letting that was the Second World War. However, very soon he will be fully affected by the war, forcibly separated from his homeland, his wife and other loved ones³⁶, and the urgency that we see in the pages of *The Myth* will become open disgust and rebellion in the pages of his next series of works, the cycle dealing with 'The Revolt'.

The Myth of Sisyphus is Nietzschean in its scope, humanism, brilliance and poignancy. Although Camus is dealing with the concept of the 'absurd' in general, the essay presents us with extraordinarily deep ruminations in –for example- the nature of music and sound³⁷.

Just as was the case with Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*- but perhaps Camus is even more explicit - *The Myth* presents not only a 'classical' image as the main trope of the work, Sisyphus –in Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy* we have Apollo (representing reason and measuredness)

³⁶ His twins, Catherine and Jean, were born in 1945.

³⁷ As a musician myself, I cannot over-state Camus' insightfulness concerning the nature and physicality of music when viewed from the largest possible perspective.

and Dionysus (representing the emotions and excess) as the main classical tropes- but we see an equally brilliant juxtaposition and play between the force of psychological emotions on the one hand and cold, restraining and humanistic reason on the other. The work, in short, is a superbly achieved balancing act from beginning to end. But while in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the deeper ‘tragedy’ may seem to be our forced (and false) choice between Apollo and Dionysus, in *The Myth of Sisyphus* the tragedy seems to be the fact that we cannot afford to choose between reason and the emotions. For Camus we are existentially and morally forced *not* to choose³⁸.

The Myth begins with the most fundamental of questions: “to judge if life is worth or not living” (Camus 1967, 15). At this stage of his literary output suicide is, to Camus, the sole truly philosophical problem. Caligula’s murderous life in the play and Mersault’s original indifference towards life and his later predicament after being condemned, offer no clear answer to this question, but they do present us with the same dilemma. For Caligula it seems that life is not worth living after experiencing Drusilla’s death and realizing the inescapable fact of human mortality (in fact he ends up not only foreseeing but *planning* his own murder, a sort of ‘suicide by tyranny’); paradoxically, for Mersault life is worth living only after he is sentenced to die. In both works we have no final answer, only the fundamental question. In *The Myth*, however, Camus gives us his first serious provisional answer; a response that resonates and that is at the very base of all of his following work and acts as an artist and political person: life is worth living notwithstanding the absurd condition of our existence. Not only that, life should be lived happily.

³⁸ As any careful reader of *The Birth of Tragedy* knows, Nietzsche goes through great pains trying to balance Apollo (classical balance and reason) with Dionysus (that great emotional unbridled Bacchanal of sensuality). But still, ‘Socratism’, Nietzsche’s *true* enemy, fatefully propels him towards the Dionysian, as he sees Socratism as a perversion of the measured Apollinian spirit. In theory Nietzsche is nominally for a balance between these two poles, there is no mistaking his Dionysian preferences given the ideological, moral and cultural realities of his time.

It might seem obvious, but the key to *The Myth of Sisyphus* is the classical story of Sisyphus, the hero of Greek mythology. There are a few versions of Sisyphus' story, but it all comes to -and ends- the same. He tricked the Gods, he snitched on Zeus, he puts Thanatos -the God of death himself- out of commission. He is condemned to push a heavy rock uphill every day, only to see the rock roll back downhill, and is forced to tediously recommence pushing it up again, over and over.

Sisyphus' boulder is meant to signify human suffering and our absurd generalized 'death sentence'. We all are Sisyphus. But that is not the point. The issue here is *how* we deal with our sentence. Caligula's epiphany turns him into a psychopath; Mersault brews in a deep -if mild- resentment and the nostalgia for the times not fully lived and long gone. While not satisfactory answers, Camus intends to offer guidelines about how to deal with our sentence; yet in *The Myth* he still remains fundamentally ambiguous.

Camus envisions two different Sisyphuses: one that carries the boulder eternally but who damns the gods and silently revolts against them; the other Sisyphus must be imagined 'happy', carrying his rock with a smile and fully immersed in 'the present moment'. Two apparent choices, but Camus' reply leans towards one of them.

Fully aware of his lot, Sisyphus eventually comes to *own* his sentence, and relishes his struggle. The rock is 'his thing'. "We must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 1967, 166), are the last words of the essay.

Camus' choice of a happy Sisyphus is in lockstep with the earlier parts of the book, in which he sketches provisional models about how to deal with our 'death sentence'. These models are the serial lover (Don Juan), the actor and the conqueror. Sisyphus embodies the three. What these three characters (the lover, the actor and the conqueror) have in common is the idea of *living fully and only in and for the present*; the possible absence of a tomorrow is not a reason for inaction and unhappiness.

The conqueror by his/her very nature knows that all his efforts are made not for a substantive and final cause, but for the very end of the conquest itself, the conquest is itself the end; just as the actor embodies and gives life to a character that has no real depth and obviously no tomorrow³⁹; Don Juan, in turn, similarly lives for the potential affair and romantic conquest in the present. All of them however, live in an 'as if' mode, while fully conscious of it. They know that there is no guaranteed tomorrow, but they live *as if* there were.

It is the consciousness of their predicament, their being 'in the know', which makes their lives not only sufferable, but potentially and hopefully happy. There might as well be no tomorrow, for we all might be dead at any moment, but the most important thing is the accumulation of lived moments, of brute physical *vital time*. Only life itself gives us the possibility of more life. That is Camus' ultimate sub-theory of the human being, and his ever-present assessment about the worth of human life; a basic idea we will find throughout the remaining of his creative –if too short- life: human life must be sustained at all costs, because only then we will have the chance

³⁹ Characters –even if inspired by real people- are works of fiction, condemned to repeat the same acts every time the show starts.

of bettering our lot and perfecting ourselves within the limits of our scandalous ‘death sentence’ –through the sheer force of our emotions and reason; human beings are perfectible on the sole condition that they remain alive.

Remaining alive, in turn, is the continuation of ‘the absurd’, the existential condition in which the person asks for the reasons for death and suffering (why are we alive?), while the universe remains silent and indifferent to our plight. The tragedy is that most of us are intelligent enough to see our plight, but our wit reaches its limits when we try to understand the reasons about why death and suffering are our lot. The idea for Camus is to keep the absurd alive; for being alive means living in absurdity, and similarly, experiencing absurdity means –logically- being alive. The idea is not to get rid of the absurd, for that is and will remain forever impossible; the aim is to keep the absurd going because wherever the absurd is, there is human life.

At a superficial level Camus’ sub-theory of the human being –at this stage at least- is so simple that it might seem unsatisfactory. But it is not. Keeping human beings alive is not only his very powerful and almost ‘primitive’ sub-theory of the human being, of the possibility of perfecting ourselves with the limits of our ‘sentence’, but in addition, this sub-theory –found as early as his first major works (*Caligula*, *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*) - lies at the core of his sub-theory of political institutions and his sub-theory of political change. For all political and social institutions, and all political change, must ply to the demand of keeping human beings alive, at all costs, first and foremost. As we will see later on, keeping human beings alive also requires, in extreme situations, the introduction of the concept of compassion.

D - *The Fall*: a gloomy revision on Camus' sub-theory of the human being

Published in 1957, barely three years before his tragic death, *The Fall* is one of Camus' last novels, and constitutes what we can call Camus' foggy Northern European reassessment of his sub-theory of the human being. As we will see, Camus' imagery, settings and moods began to darken up as he grew older. From airy, sunny and sea-filled environments –his beloved Mediterranean- he began to fictionalize in progressively darker and more claustrophobic ways. The setting of *The Fall* is vital to our understanding of Camus' revision of his sub-theory of the human being, an important -if not radical- change in his moral thought, with obvious implications to our political concerns. This is one instance in which we can clearly see why his philosophical essays were not enough to get his point across; he needed the full arsenal of his stylistic and technical mastery of the word to really convey his message.

We begin to sense the disappearance of the Mediterranean atmosphere already in Camus' last absurd work, *The Misunderstanding*⁴⁰. In that play we see what we can call Camus' first serious attempt to introduce 'love' as an important part of the story: Jan –not recognized and ultimately murdered by his own mother and sister- and his wife, Maria, are deeply in love; yet, that love is a tragic one, for Jan's absurd assassination promptly ends Camus' first sustained experiment at writing about romantic love. But not only is love fleeting and scarily fragile in this work, but the Mediterranean Sea starts to disappear as well. Although Jan and Maria have made their lives and fortune by the sea, the story about Jan's murder happens in Northern Europe, a land of which

⁴⁰ Although Camus explicitly included only *Caligula*, *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* as constituting his 'absurd' cycle, thematically speaking *The Misunderstanding* is obviously part of his absurd series as well. Published in 1943, in occupied Paris, the date of the work also allows us to confidently include it among his works on the absurd.

Maria says: “I mistrust everybody since I arrived to this country, or look in vain for a happy face. This Europe is so sad” (Camus 1972, 168). In fact, in *The Misunderstanding* everybody is trying to flee dark Europe for sunnier shores.

But it is precisely in *that* Europe that Camus always felt as sad, grey and depressive, in Amsterdam, in a humid basement bar, surrounded by dark canals and foggy streets that Camus’ sets the story of *The Fall*, his meditation on universal guilt, confession, redemption and his survey of the human beings’ darkest inner spaces. It is without a doubt my favorite book by Camus, and a superbly crafted piece dealing with a so-called ‘minor’ theme⁴¹ about which Camus never wrote in any serious length before: living in the dark shadows, and the depression that he felt in the dark, rainy and cold latitudes of Northern Europe.

The Fall is obviously modeled both in style and setting on Fyodor Dostoyevsky’s *Notes from the Underground*. The somber ambiances, the endless soliloquy from the main character, the idea of judgment, are all common to both works. But while in *Notes* we sense a fundamental innocence in what at the end remains a psychologically challenged –if terrifyingly insightful- being, in *The Fall* we know that Clamence is unquestionably guilty. The Underground Man is paralyzed by his psyche (regardless of all his endless chatter), Clamence is paralyzed by guilt.

But not only is this work influenced by Dostoyevsky’s *Notes*: the underground motif and the concentric circles of Amsterdam’s canals –part of the setting of the novel- are explicitly likened to Dante’s *Inferno* (Galpin 1958; King 1962). *The Fall* also betrays the influence of Jean-Paul

⁴¹ ‘Minor’ theme that I have always considered fundamental in my understanding of Camus.

Sartre's terrific *No Exit* from 1944⁴². Just as with the three insufferable characters of Sartre's *No Exit*, Clamence finds himself in hell. Yet, there is a key difference, for while Garcin -one of Sartre's characters in *No Exit*- famously concludes that "hell is other people"⁴³, in *The Fall* hell is placed squarely within ourselves.

Clamence, the main character of the novel, is in a self-imposed exile in Amsterdam and looking for redemption. It is always rainy, and the fog is oppressive, but his very 'exile' renders him more humane, transparent and self-conscious about his phony past as a self-aggrandizing, self-serving and hypocritical big-shot lawyer in Paris. His real sin was his always trying to be in control, through cynical –if most of the time harmless- manipulation of others.

As Clamence confesses to the reader while conversing with his anonymous interlocutor: "I have always esteemed myself smarter than everybody else, I have told you, but also more sensible and more in the right, an elite shooter, an incomparable driver, a better lover" (Camus 1974, 53). And not only that, he also admits that "whenever I took care of others, it was pure condescension" (Camus 1974, 54). He had commanding views of his life and existence, but still, he wanted even more; Clamence wanted total control of his life and those around him.

However, three shocking occurrences happen that finally do him in and put in full display his hypocritical, empty and self-aggrandizing life.

⁴² Sartre and Camus hit it off and became friends precisely during a conversation in which Sartre asked Camus to direct *No Exit*. I must confess that *No Exit* is an infinitely important work for me, for it opened my taste -during my first year in college- for the theater, and it also allowed me to see that deep philosophical ideas and art could come together in beautiful and seamless ways.

⁴³ "L'enfer c'est les autres".

One night while out on a walk Clamence hears some sobs, and sees a woman about to jump from a Paris bridge; but he does nothing to prevent her from jumping to her death. Eventually –years after the incident- the image of the sobbing woman and his doing nothing about her situation, haunts him and begins his downward spiral.

Similarly, after one particularly ‘good’ day –meaning a day full of hypocritical good acts- Clamence suddenly hears a burst of laughter (probably coming from two friends having a good time) and he feels at his very core that this laughter is directed at him. He begins to feel that existence itself is laughing at him for his phoniness. He cannot effectively remove the feeling that life is laughing at him; in fact, he cannot silence the laughter, and a mild but insidious paranoia sets in.

Finally, on one occasion Clamence has a confrontation while driving with a man in a motorcycle, in which the man ends up slapping him in public, and Clamence does nothing to defend or avenge himself.

These three incidents finally unmask, to Clamence himself, the full charade that is his life.

His life unravels in a downward spiral, his mood darkens, a full reassessment of his self-satisfied life ensues, and he ends up in Amsterdam (a city below sea level), in that humid basement bar, a full-blown bar fly, confessing his guilt to whomever is willing to listen. When we met Clamence in Amsterdam, he has very few possessions; he has forsaken his previous life.

Clamence is in part eaten up by the sights of destruction that he sees around him. The bar that is the setting of the first part of the novel is in what formerly was the city's Jewish Quarter, depopulated/ethnically 'cleansed' by Hitler during the Second World War. And, tellingly, even in that bar there is no refuge from the images of human destructiveness, for the very name of the bar – 'Mexico City' – is meant to remind us of violent conquest and the destruction of an entire civilization, that of the Aztecs at the hands of Hernán Cortés.

The setting of destruction and disappointment is relevant because it is precisely among the ruins that Camus wishes to place human beings, both at a socio-political and at an individual level. The destruction he is referring to concerns not only the nightmare of the Second World War, a war that was inconceivable until it happened, but the devastation we can bring upon ourselves by not being ready, by being too sure of ourselves, regarding our capacity –or lack thereof- to keep our public and social lives under complete control. Obviously, at this point -1957- Camus is also referring to the World's self-annihilating drive concerning the Cold War and MAD nuclear warfare paradigm.

Clamence's three shocks (the plunging woman, the constant inner mocking laughter, being slapped in public and remaining passive) unraveled his false sense of being in control. In this, he shares the same experiences lived by Caligula with Drusilla's death and by Mersault being condemned to death. Caligula was not prepared for his awakening to the fact of human mortality, suddenly realizing that there is no logic to it all, and does everything within his power to create an order, usurping and draining everybody around him of any sense of rational liberty or security. Likewise, Mersault suddenly awakes one day, after his death sentence, completely

aware of his past aloofness –a psychological strategy that allowed him to be ‘in control’ - but his awakening comes too late.

For Clamance, however, it is not too late, or almost. The main fundamental difference being his admission and coming to terms with his guilt. We are all guilty of looking away, Camus seems to be saying; we are all guilty of doing nothing when life demands things from us; we are all guilty of trying to control everything around us, trying not to see our lot and fate, our death sentence, life’s absurd condition. But Clamence has come to see; he has come to accept his guilt and –by way of this- revises Camus original sub-theory of the human being.

Ethically speaking –and from the humanistic perspective- Sisyphus had done nothing ‘wrong’; he had merely tried to help mortals and had violated the laws of the gods in trying to do so. But Clamance *is* guilty. Sisyphus is supposed to ‘just’ accept his punishment; Clamance accepts his guilt.

What moves us in Sisyphus’ case is easy enough to understand, an innate sense of justice. What should move us to understand and identify with Clamance’s plight -his guilt- is much more complex from a political point of view: the idea of compassion.

Clamence has come to understand that the problem with our sociability, and our lack of real responsibility and care for others, does not end with feeling superior to those around us (the problem of inequality, of deeming others less smart and less important than us, etc.); he now knows –and this is a central point for our argument, and a fundamental lesson in Camus- that our

feeling of superiority leads to a surplus of clarity in our affairs; and that our feeling of being *so* in control makes us feel powerful, and “power...trumps everything”; so “...we have become lucid. We have replaced dialogue, with communiqués” for “every thing is clear now” (Camus 1974, 50).

When dialogue disappears, Clamance acknowledges, ‘misunderstandings’ are bound to happen, and tragedy ensues. “The same infirmity that made me indifferent or ungrateful also rendered me magnanimous” (Camus 1974, 55). Clamance’s sense of power as a lawyer in Paris sprouted from his profound indifference to the plight of others; but this very superiority (or perception of being *so*) is an existential and social illness; and this is what he comes to understand and is happy to confess to anyone willing to listen at the dingy Amsterdam waterhole.

The Fall makes clear that human beings are guilty of looking the other way when it comes to the generalized ‘death sentence’ and our absurd condition, but Camus’ root position remains unchanged: the only possibility of washing away part of that guilt is to keep human beings alive, even if a clear-sighted and courageous life sometimes feels like living through hell. Again, the main kernel of Camus’ sub-theory remains fundamentally the same: the only possibility of bettering human beings, and that means of having human beings come to term with their guilt and with their absurd condition, is to organize our lives in ways that keep the value of absurd human life. Hell, death and the absurd are not good reasons to give up on the creative need to discern life-sustaining forms of sociability. Human beings must be kept alive at all costs.

As we will see, Camus was not always faithful to this premise –as for example during his initial support of executing war criminals right after the end of the War- but he rapidly and readily admitted he was wrong; he always came back to his fundamental truth of the primacy of human life.

But *The Fall* is more political than what this reading of mine might suggest so far. For Camus burdens Clamance not only with doing nothing to save the suicidal woman in that Paris bridge, but also tells us that during the recent war –the Second World War- Clamance had the chance of joining the French *Resistance* but did not. *The Fall* is a late work, and by this time in his life Camus had made the full circle and was considered –through his work at the newspaper *Combat* and his public fight with Sartre and friends for example- an earnest and influential political writer; *The Fall* bears witness to his full political commitments. It was not enough to ‘condemn’ Clamance for his personal mistake of doing nothing to save the woman about to jump; Camus paints him as condemned at a larger socio-political level: Clamance did nothing to fight the Nazis, and is now condemned to live (and drink) in the very Jewish Quarter that Hitler devastated in his murderous madness.

But Clamance is alive, and is a partially redeemed man, even if trapped in hell. By the end of the novel, Clamence, is sick; although –and this is quite important- he takes it rather lightly. He is guilty, almost paralyzed by his guilt, but there is a lightness about him, precisely because he has come clean about his past to his fellow human beings; he has found a ‘solution’. Clamence makes explicit at the end of the book that his ‘solution’ is to confess his faults and mistakes, with

the hope that his confession will make his fellow beings appreciate their own faults and mistakes and confess in turn. His solution is *self-assessment, self-criticism and transparency*.

Being alive and sustaining life is –again- the core of Camus’ sub-theory of the human being.

Human beings are guilty in this absurd universe, but they must be kept alive in order to have any chance at ‘coming clean’ with their past, of achieving happiness, freedom, justice and redemption. In the most extremes cases keeping human beings alive demand our defiance of the loudest and most strident calls for justice: keeping human beings alive at times requires compassion. Although at this stage Camus has still not explicitly developed any ideas about the importance of the concept of compassion in a humane political system, his sub-theory of the human being clearly points in this direction.

This sub-theory of the human being, the recognition of human limits, the possibility of human redemption and perfectibility, and the earnest acknowledgement of our darker instincts and flaws, is fundamental in the political and moral thought of Albert Camus. This view is the root of what I consider most central and compelling in his thought as a political and moral thinker: his ideas of limits, love and compassion when dealing with others both at a personal and a political level.

The Fall also presents us with an essential idea in Camus’ political thought proper: the importance he puts on the idea of ‘confession’, of ‘coming clean’ with one’s past mistakes, the centrality of transparency. As we will see, true transparency is a fundamental idea in Camus’

appreciation of political institutions, specifically, the importance of a free press in any healthy political arrangement⁴⁴.

As we will see in more detail later on, *The Fall* is *also* a very personal mea-culpa from Camus. As one of his last works, *The Fall* was written years after his fallout with Sartre and his circle, a dramatic event that reached its very public crescendo right after the publishing of *The Rebel* and that remained –through the rest of Camus’ life- a very painful experience. Camus missed Sartre to his last day⁴⁵; he was pained by the loss of their friendship and although not in personal contact with him, had an ongoing conversation with Sartre throughout all his works. Thanks to his notebooks and through personal interviews conducted with close associates after his death, we know that Camus felt partially guilty regarding the breakup with Sartre because of what he later understood as his being too sure of himself and his righteous *attitude*; an attitude based on the belief that ‘every thing is clear’⁴⁶.

The Fall, then, has to be understood not only as a moral and political lesson from Camus to his readers, but as a very personal reassessment of his attitude concerning his political and moral convictions *and how he dealt with others*. Sisyphus must always have another shot at rolling his boulder up that steep hill.

⁴⁴ The relationship between confession and transparency is paramount, for Camus was painfully aware of Stalin’s show trials and the phony trials of the Eastern Bloc during the 1940’s and 1950’s.

⁴⁵ Sartre’s eulogy of his dead ex-friend bears witness to the love he also felt towards Camus.

⁴⁶ It would be tempting to enter the history of the Camus-Sartre personal and ideological friendship and their later spectacular and very public fall out. Yet, I have chosen not to do so. The best work I have read on this topic is Ronald Aronson’s *Camus and Sartre: The story of a friendship and the quarrel that ended it* (2005). As the reader will see later on this work, my opinion is that the Cold War diminished the thought of both men, creating huge intellectual and moral liabilities for both.

Chapter Three: the revolt: Albert Camus' sub-theory of political change

Camus' sub-theory of human beings is at the center of all his political and moral thought. As we have seen, his view of human nature is one that allows for change, perfectibility and redemption, *within certain limits*. Human beings can and do change, and we possess reasoning capabilities that allow us to understand that our existential plight (the generalized death sentence hanging over each) is common to all. But rationality and intelligence enter the equation only *after* we have grasped and understood our absurd condition at a more intuitive level; reason comes at play at the moment we need to decide *how to live our lives*, once we know and understand the absurdity common to all human existence.

Caligula, Mersault and Clamence each go through an existential awakening that, in the specific case of Clamence, extends into a moral reassessment of how we should actually live our lives both at a personal and at a political level. But their stories are mostly about coming to terms with the absurd, not so much about what *to do* once we become conscious of our condition. It is clear that in *The Fall*, for example, Clamence never goes much farther than his admission of guilt; being actually paralyzed by it; his admission never overcomes his guilt.

What to do? That becomes the question in the 'revolt' cycle of Camus' works. His short answer seems to be: think rationally and change; but beware of that 'change', for not everything is permitted in our struggle to better our lot; act within certain limits and with compassion.

Indeed, it is in the ‘revolt’ series –*The Just Assassins*, *The State of Siege*, *The Plague* and *The Rebel*– that we see Camus’ first systematic normative ideas about how to conduct ourselves once we are in the know about the absurd. It is also in the ‘revolt’ series that we see Camus’ works develop into calls for aggressively exercising our rational capabilities. Asking ourselves ‘what to do’ and how to conduct our lives demands that we think; it is at this point that we need to move – without abandoning it- beyond the emotional intuitive grasping that he so effectively describes in ‘the absurd’ works.

All of the fiction works in the ‘revolt’ series portray energized characters on the move, not so much shocked at their impossible and scandalous plights, but grappling with how to act *in moral ways* while deeply embedded in difficult personal and political environments. More specifically, all of these works present characters fully dependent on -and in positions of responsibility towards- others.

In general, at a technical level the revolt works of fiction see an ‘explosion’ of characters, if we compare these works with the works of the absurd cycle. In *Caligula*, the most ‘populated’ work in the absurd cycle, everything revolves around the main character. In the ‘revolt plays’, and in *The Plague*, the different plots depend on the actions and decisions of all. In this cycle the foreground is not of a solitary struggling individual, but of whole communities in need and in the process of churning out their own solutions. In these works everybody is responsible for everybody else, because life and its struggles concern us all.

The revolt series, then, coincides with Camus' sub-theory of political change⁴⁷. Tellingly, the sub-theory of political change in Camus takes the form of dire and stern warnings.

Theoretically, if we follow a 'strict' reading of Raúl Cotto-Serrano's theory of sub-theories, a sub-theory of political institutions should precede our analysis of any sub-theory of political change. After all, and in general, ideas about political change refer to changes to political institutions. Still, as we will see later on, although Camus did write about and gave some thought to the political institutions of his time, institutional analysis was never a central part of his concerns. Most of his 'institutional analysis', as it were, happens while dealing primarily with issues of political change. Political change, specifically his concerns about revolt and revolution, are the focus of Camus' most sustained, in-depth and systematic political thinking. But in order to fully grasp his sub-theory of political change we must fully understand his sub-theory of the human being, as described in the previous chapter. In fact, an important part of Camus' sub-theory of political institutions will have to be inferred/deduced from his sub-theories of the human being and of political change, for his thoughts about political institutions are –let's say– rather scattered about.

The main recurring motif in Camus' works of fiction dealing with the concept of revolt is the image of a clammed-up and besieged city. In the three fiction works of this cycle, *The Just Assassins*, *The State of Siege* and *The Plague*, a city is either living through a calamity and closed to the outside world, expecting a calamity, trying to do something to avert the worst and/or struggling to liberate itself.

⁴⁷ The idea of revolt obviously refers to potential actions to *change* something, in our case political institutions or political systems.

In his development of the besieged city motif, *The State of Siege* –published in 1948- is the ‘lightest’ work of all, an assessment based on the rather caricaturesque treatment of its characters. This lighter archetypical treatment perhaps could be explained by the Spanish picaresque setting - the city of Cadiz, in Spain- of the plot. Reading the play cannot fail to remind us of classical plays of the Spanish Golden Age, such as Lope de Vega’s *Fuenteovejuna* (Vega 1987). In fact, both plays -*The State of Siege* and *Fuenteovejuna*- deal with the arrival of an opportunistic and depredating outsider who turns life in their respective cities upside down, and how the residents of the city –utterly unprepared for the arrival of catastrophe and in general denial as to the deeper occurrences of life beyond their narrow individual concerns - struggle to get rid of the recently arrived ‘plague’.

It all starts with the appearance of a sign from the heavens, a comet. Yet, while no one can be sure of what the comet really means, most agree that it must certainly be an ominous sign. Just as in *The Stranger* and *The Fall*, it seems that complacency with one’s own individual life is at the root of what is to follow. Nada, a trouble-maker and drunk, remarks: “I expected it. From the moment you all have taken your three meals, worked your eight hours and entertained your two ladies, you think that everything is in order. No, your life is not in order, you are in line. Falling in line, a placid face, you are ripe for calamity.” (Camus 1961, 22)

Still, the whole political and social environment of Cadiz, the city about to be struck by the plague in *The State of Siege*, is organized to avoid and deny the existence of change and unusual occurrences.

Logically, then, the first reaction to the appearance of the ominous and unusual comet in the sky is to officially deny that anything has happened, a government herald proclaims:

“Good governments are those where nothing happens. Therefore, it is the will of the governor that nothing happens in his government, so that it can remain as good as always. It is therefore said to the habitants of Cadiz that nothing has happened on this day that is worth any alarm or fear. This is why everybody, starting 4pm, should consider false that any comet has been seen over the horizon of the city. Consequently, any resident who talks about comets in any way, except as sidereal phenomena having occurred in the past or possibly occurring in the future, will be punished with all the force of the law.” (Camus 1961, 26)

This order is obviously hilarious in its ridiculousness, but it is in fact the way that the political system of Cadiz (and Spain) operated at the moment the plot of the play starts to unfold.

Everybody has seen the comet, everybody was more or less alarmed by it, but everybody is supposed to simply deny what they have seen with their own eyes, because the political and social order requires them to do so.

Shortly after the comet appeared in the sky, people start falling ill by a strange and lethal malady: the plague⁴⁸. The first move by those in power is to profit from the situation by trying to get the

⁴⁸ Two of Camus ‘revolt’ works revolve around the plague motif, *The State of Siege* and *The Plague* itself. But the treatment of this motif is radically different in these two books, as we will see. Camus himself tells us in the introduction to the *State of Siege* that “notwithstanding what has been said around, [the play] is in no way an adaptation of my novel”.

whole town to go to church, while at the same time trying to hide the truth from them. One of the mayors of the town says to other leaders: “we must dissimulate the situation and not tell the truth to the people under any circumstance.” (Camus 1961, 55)

But the truth does not want to hide. And so it happens that soon after, while the leaders of Cadiz are still busy planning and trying to keep the people from learning the truth, that two strangers –a man and a woman- make their presence known to all. The man is ‘the plague’ himself and the woman is his secretary, death herself. The plague immediately demands a transition of power, he being –naturally- the recipient of all political power from then on. He freshly tells the governor of Cadiz, “I need your place” (Camus 1961, 69). They negotiate (the plague promises to spare those previously in power and to only concern himself with the regular folk if he is handed power immediately) and all civil and political powers are duly transferred to the newly arrived and ‘colorful’ characters.

The legal and political powers of Cadiz abandon the people to save their own necks, and the townsfolk come to understand that given that the governor is gone, “the plague is the state”. They are on their own.

The plague and death –his not-so-faithful secretary- proceed then to institute a ‘state of siege’ in Cadiz; through an extremely well-organized and efficient -if totally absurd- bureaucratic system, they start killing the townsfolk at will. There is no logical coherence to their system, but it is efficiently run. “Starting today, you are going to learn to die in order” (Camus 1961, 92-93), the plague tells them. He proceeds to forbid the un-forbid-able: “such as the ridiculous anguish of

happiness, the stupid faces of those in love, the selfish contemplation of landscapes...”(Camus 1961, 92), in place of all of that “I will bring organization” (Camus 1961, 92), he tells them. The plague and death want to bring all “into the statistical” (Camus 1961, 93). Every single person is “on the list and I forget no one. Everybody being suspect, we start well” (Camus 1961, 93).

The aim is to terrorize the people and bring them to their knees. The plague’s next words are quite troubling and relevant for our sub-theory of political change discussion: “I bring silence, order and *absolute justice*⁴⁹.” (Camus 1961, 95)

There are two relevant particularities to their murderous administration: their bizarre use of language and their fondness to use local collaborators in their murderous enterprise.

When interacting with the townsfolk the plague and death use highly confusing, absurd, officious and legalistic language just to “habituate them to a bit of obscurity”, as the secretary (death) openly states. “The less they understand, the better they will follow” (Camus 1961, 79).

Miscommunication is key to maintaining the state of siege. This point is made the clearest later in the play by Nada⁵⁰, the colorful town’s drunkard and a newly minted functionary/minion of the plague, when he tells a distressed woman who complains of not understanding anything of the new ‘statistical’ language:

“this is about no one understanding anything, even when speaking
the same language. And I can surely say that we are approaching
the perfect moment where everybody will speak without finding an

⁴⁹ My italics.

⁵⁰ Nada means ‘nothing’ in Spanish. Nada = nothing = *nihil* (Lat.) Nada is the play’s nihilist.

echo, and when the two languages spoken in this town will destroy each other with such obstinacy that we will see ourselves walking towards the final aim, that is, silence and death” (Camus 1961, 128).

Although this topic of communication will be better understood as part of Camus’ sub-theory of political institutions, it is worth mentioning that the lack of transparency and communicational bridges was a constant preoccupation for Camus, helping explain his commitment to a free press as part of any healthy political system. People should be able to speak freely, frankly and clearly, and power should be linguistically approachable by all. As the *State of Siege* lies bare, *terror by miscommunication and ‘misunderstandings’* was a paramount concern for Camus.

The new system of governance (i.e. the plague and death) also take a few people from the town as collaborators and spies, chief among them Nada.

The two ‘heroes’ of the play, Diego and Victoria, are a couple deeply and ridiculously in love; and it is with them that the state of siege starts to break down. The plague has ordered every person to spy on their family and friends, and suspicion sets in among the most intimate relationships, even between lovers. However, after a few extremely painful exchanges Diego realizes what’s going on and says “I am ashamed of seeing what we have become” (Camus 1961, 147). In a fit of mad courage Diego confronts the secretary with some powerful words: “there is in man –look at me- a force that you will not diminish, a clear madness, mixed with fear and courage, ignorant and triumphant without end. It is that force that will rise and you will learn that your glory was only smoke” (Camus 1961, 176).

Confronted by a fearless Diego, death confesses that there is a ‘bug’ in their system (death, by the way, is secretly in love with Diego): “it has always been the case that [the system] needed just one man to lose his fear for the machine to start grinding and sputtering. I don’t say it stops, it takes a lot for that. But, it squeaks and, sometimes, it ends by really jamming” (Camus 1961, 178).

The dark spell is broken; Diego, who by this point has been marked to die sees his marks disappear for he has lost his fear. And it is at this point that *The State of Siege* evolves into a rather troubling discussion about political change.

Diego starts to make the rounds around town letting everybody know about his discovery, about the ‘bug’ in the system; the message that the state of siege has no power against fearless folk brings at first a natural reaction in the people: a thirst for revolution and vengeance. But this reaction is met with a curious and unexpected response by those in power; death tells the people:

“it is no more up to the people to make revolutions, let’s see, it is rather *démodé*. Revolutions do not need insurgents anymore.

Today the police is enough, even to topple governments. Isn’t that better anyways? This way the people can repose while a few good souls think and decide on their behalf about the amount of happiness most favorable to all” (Camus 1961, 156).

But the people in Cadiz will have none of that, and the thirst for revenge engulfs the city. The townsfolk feel they need to ‘clean up’ and settle scores with those who collaborated and profited from the state of siege.

Again, the plague seems unfazed, in fact, is quite happy with this reaction by the people. “Look at them! They are doing the work themselves!”. “When in fear, it was for themselves. But their hatred is against others” (Camus 1961, 199).

Towards the end of the play, after some settling of scores has already taken place, Diego is able to stop the self-inflicted carnage and proclaims: “Neither fear nor hatred, that is our victory!” (Camus 1961, 200).

But Diego has to offer his own life to the plague in exchange for the illness to spare the city and for the revolution against the plague to stop. This idea of putting one’s life –and one’s life *only*– on the line if needed to achieve political change is a fundamental and ever-recurring idea in Camus’ political thought. An idea that we will see again in the play *The Just Assassins* and that Camus discusses at greater length in *The Rebel*.

The final dialogue between the plague and Diego is also of the upmost relevance for our discussion about Camus’ sub-theory of political change. I quote at length⁵¹:

⁵¹ As the reader will surely notice, I quote much more extensively from the dialogues taking place in the ‘revolt’ works if compared with the quoting done in the absurd cycle. There is a simple reason for this. Stylistically and linguistically, the revolt series presents a much more ‘collaborative’ way of presenting fundamental ideas. These works of fiction are not only less ‘poetic’ and less suggestive in their language, but also present us ideas that are put together, as it were, by the different characters through their dialogues. While the absurd works are much more

“Diego: I cannot consent to your type of [absolute] justice.

The plague: Who asks you to consent! The order of this world will not change to accommodate your wishes. If you want it to change, leave aside your dreams and come to terms with what is.

Diego: No. I know your recipe. We must kill to suppress murder, do violence to cure injustice.

For centuries it has been like that. For centuries the masters of your race have pestered the wounds of this world under the guise of healing them, but continue to boast their recipe, and all because no one laughs them off-stage!

The plague: No one laughs because I do things. I am efficient.

Diego: Efficient, of course! And practical. Like an ax!

The plague: It is enough to look at men. We learn then that any justice is good enough for them.

...

Diego: I know that they are not pure. But me neither. And so I was born among them. I live for my city and my times.

The plague: A time of slaves!

Diego: A time of free men!

The plague: You amaze me. I would love to see them. Where are they?

Diego: In your prisons and charnel houses. The slaves are at the thrones.

The plague: Put your ‘free men’ in a police uniform and you will see what they become.

Diego: It is true that it happens that men become heartless and cruel. That is why they don’t have any more right than you do to power. No man has enough virtue to consent him absolute power.

But that is also why men have the right to the compassion that we will deny you.” (Camus 1961, 211-214)

centered around a main character’s soliloquys, the revolt works are primarily dialogical in their structure. Hence, making lengthier quotes necessary.

At the end Diego is put to death by the plague and his secretary. And before drowning himself, Nada, the unrepentant collaborator, engages in an interesting dialogue with those around him.

“Nada:... You see, governments pass, but the police remains. There is, then, justice.

The chorus: No, there is no justice, but there are limits. And those who pretend not to fix anything, like those who pretend to give rules for everything, go equally beyond limits...”

(Camus 1961, 232)

The State of Siege has not received the amount of rigorous analysis devoted to many of Camus’ other works. but I posit that this work contains a few fundamental ideas at the center of Camus’ political thought. Ideas that might seem controversial, but that define Camus as an amazingly original and courageous thinker. Namely, his deep skepticism about revolutions as a desirable mechanism for political change *and* his refusal to consider the concept of ‘justice’ as the end of any political system.

As a play, *The State of Siege* is not a passive philosophical meditation, but an exercise on how political actors might *act* and *react* to very specific –if fictional- political situations. While a careful reading of Camus’ philosophical essays makes clear that the idea of ‘justice’ was never as central to his political thought as most of us would originally assume, in *The State of Siege*, a play where unwillingly politicized actors must act to liberate themselves and change a terrifying political system (the system created by ‘the plague’ in this case), we explicitly see Camus’ quasi-rejection of the ideas of ‘revolution’ and ‘justice’ as central to any movement for political change. It might be a bit unsettling, but there is no other way around this: Camus seems to be

encouraging us to fight not for the more just political system, but rather for the most compassionate one. Justice has no limits, for it is usually defined by those in power, by those wielding the most efficient ax, and as Clamance pointed out in *The Fall*, power brings too much clarity and self-assuredness, and under those circumstances ‘misunderstandings’, communiqués and legal murder are bound to take the day.

There are more than a few things to be said about Camus’ sub-theory of political change concerning *The State of Siege*. The play makes more than a few mentions of ‘the police’; in this case ‘the police’ must not be understood as –for example- the NYPD or not even the more obviously corrupt New Orleans Police Department, but rather as a metaphor for a mechanism in charge of defining and dispensing justice *by force*. Nada’s last words are key here (“governments pass, but the police remains. There is, then, justice”). Nada implies that justice exists whenever the police is in charge, in other words, justice *is* the police. That is why before drowning himself he seems not too worried about having being on the losing side during Cadiz’s struggle. Yes, Nada the nihilist lost, and he will kill himself⁵², but justice still rules –according to him- because a new police is already in control. It is obvious, just as it is the case in the closing lines of *The Plague*, that Nada’s words are Camus’ call to remain ever-vigilant of the resurgence of the state of siege. Both works, ultimately, betray an optimist that human beings can overcome catastrophes, either man-made political ones or natural.

⁵² The idea of suicide is very important in Camus’ earlier works, especially on *The Myth of Sisyphus*, where he declares that “there is but only one truly serious philosophical problem: suicide” (Camus 1967, 15). Still, I believe that Nada’s suicide is not deeply related to Camus’ earlier ideas about the topic, but rather a plotting devise by which Camus forces us to think of a situation in which after a population has been brutalized, the people have no one or nothing (Nada) to take their vengeance to.

At a more practical level, Camus' ideas about 'the police' tie up neatly with his skepticism about revolutions as a desirable mechanism to achieve political change. The problem with revolutions, at least as he expresses it in *The State of Siege* and elsewhere, is that revolutionary actors have to become the police, they have to take power by force, to wield and become the new efficient ax. Under these circumstances the fight for justice becomes purely a matter of efficiency, and efficiency, in turn, knows no limits, at least theoretically (things –good or bad- can always be done more efficiently with the help of technology, for example). There are always more efficient ways to sharpen the ax to trump and rule⁵³.

In *The State of Siege*, then, Camus all but rejects justice as the main and sole guiding principle to bring about political change. He, instead, prefers the limiting bounds of *compassion*. The idea of compassion, in turn, is a very concrete one for Camus at the political level; it is *an attitude that impels a moving/energized force (a person or institution) to pause or slow down before performing an irreversible action, and that gives time and space to an individual and/or society to consider human beings' commonality in 'error and aberration'* (as he calls it in *Reflections on the Guillotine*).

At a more intimate level compassion forces human beings –and society at large- to entertain the improbable idea that even those most monstrous and bloody of tyrants could eventually redeem themselves and make amends. Camus' thought seems to tell us that even if that was not the case, even if criminals and tyrants were beyond redemption, we should act *as if* that slight probability were indeed a fact.

⁵³ Of course, the question of efficacy can potentially leave out a lot of other ideas as well (like questions of solidarity, equality, human dignity, etc.), in this case at least, Camus is interested mostly in how justice suffers from untrammelled efficiency thinking.

Compassion means that we should act towards others (both personally and institutionally) in a way that never permanently denies the chance to anyone of becoming or acting compassionately and humanely. However, compassion is not a right of defendants; but it should be *our* norm. In the coming chapter we will see how compassion might look like at an institutional level.

This will surely sound odd. After all, Camus collaborated within the *Resistance* against the Nazis, and probably considered the Nazi leadership beyond redemption. Yet, for Camus, forceful resistance against an evil regime and the idea of compassion were not mutually exclusive ideas. In fact, he was fighting the Nazis to defend ideas such as compassion and justice. The Nazis, obviously, present us with an exceptional historical case, but Camus makes the effort nonetheless to show –in his *Letters to a German Friend* (Camus 1961)- the reasoning behind his support for the resistance, an effort that involved armed struggle. In his first letter, Camus ties the idea of country with the idea of ‘justice’, ‘doubt’ and ‘reason’. He says “I should like to be able to love my country and still love justice” (Camus 1961, 5). In other words, country and justice must not and should not be mutually exclusive.

Those fighting the Nazis, Camus says, “profess heroism and we distrust it at the same time” (Camus 1961, 7). This distrust of heroism and aggressiveness, Camus counts as a triumph of reason and morality, but he also understands that it is the reason as to why France fell behind the Germans militarily. “This is why we were defeated in the beginning: because we were so concerned, while you were falling upon us, to determine in our hearts whether right was on our side” (Camus 1961, 8). As far as Camus is concerned France and Europe fell prey to the Nazis because of a difference in values that influenced their behavior, and obviously, their military and

technical achievements. But for the French –or at least for Camus- those values (“right”, “justice”, “reason”, “doubt”) come first. Camus is not resisting in the name of France proper; he is resisting in the name of the *values* France is supposed to embody.

His German ‘friend’, however, is attacking others and fighting for his country without any regards for justice or intelligence; and with no doubts or questions about the rightfulness of his acts. The problem with the Nazis is that they merely love their *nation*, and they do so blindly; and “a nation is not justified by such love” (Camus 1961, 11).

And so Camus is resisting, but he distrusts the fighting. He is not doing so happily; he is fighting because there is no other option but to do so. Still, he understands that, in the end, the real reasons behind the war are a matter but “fine distinctions”. “It so happens that we are fighting for fine distinctions, the kind of distinctions that are as important as man himself. We are fighting for the distinction between sacrifice and mysticism, between energy and violence, between the true and the false, between the man of the future and the cowardly gods you revere” (Camus 1961, 9-10).

As we will see later, Camus supported the death penalty against the Nazis and their French collaborators right after the end of the war. But he eventually changed his position. In his later position, I do not think Camus would have given Hitler a second chance because Hitler ‘deserved’ it, or because there was a chance of Hitler acting humanely, or of him making amends. I think he would have opposed executing Hitler⁵⁴, the Nazi leadership and collaborators,

⁵⁴ Hitler was not executed, he committed suicide when he realized he was going to be captured. Ditto with Goebbels and his wife (who also murdered their seven children).

just because it would have been unnecessary and cruel to do so once the war had been won; and cruelty –as he tells us in *Reflections on the Guillotine*- is a morally corrosive poison for the perpetrator. All violence was to be avoided once human beings were safe. The fight had to continue only until absolutely necessary and not a second more. Once human beings were safe and sound, executions and cruelty were unnecessary because “Man is that force which ultimately cancels all tyrants and gods” (Camus 1961, 14). Obviously, Camus was never a pacifist.

Finally, and before moving on to the discussion of *The Just Assassins*, we must keep in mind that *The State of Siege* is not only theatrical but a burlesque gone awry and -at times- humorous work of fiction. Among all his other works, it is the only one where we see the constant employment of the *reductio ad absurdum* device. As such, we must not assume that Camus *totally* rejects ‘justice’ as a valuable guiding political concept, for it is very clear that his main concern revolves around the idea of what the Plague called ‘absolute justice’. In fact, justice is an important idea for Camus once a political system is in place; a good, humane and compassionate political system *is* also a system where justice rules. Yet, our concern here is with Camus’ sub-theory of political *change*; and it is from there that we must understand his warning about making (absolute) justice the exclusive guiding light when political change is imperative. Any movement for political change whose exclusive and trumping purpose is justice usually deforms into a revanchist (tautological) drive; and this –in turn- implies a breakdown in the larger project of creating commonly accepted and stable order, and not a sustainable base for any future political arrangement.

The answer to one of the specific questions of the theory of sub-theories regarding political change is, then, answered by Camus. To the question “What are the legitimate aims of political change?” Camus answers: justice should not be the ultimate legitimate end of political change, because the idea of justice has no built-in limits and hence it can easily become a concept with a life of its own, independent of the plight and suffering of human beings. The quest for justice can easily become a quest for *absolute* justice, and this in turn can lead to avoidable and unnecessary abuses and suffering.

The idea of a more limited and compassionate (as opposed to absolute) drive when fighting for political change is also at the center of *The Just Assassins*. Published in 1949, this play is set around the time of the 1905 Russian Revolution. It is based on real events and populated with real characters from the period.

The two main characters in the play are Ivan Kaliayev (Kaliayev) and Stepan Fedorov (Stepan). While Kaliayev is a real historical character⁵⁵, Stepan is the only fictional character in the work; the encounter between the ideologies of these two characters is the locust of the political message of the play.

Kaliayev, his lover Dora, a student named Voinov and Stepan are all part of a terrorist cell, led by comrade Annenkov, that have been charged by ‘the party’ to assassinate Grand Duke Sergei

⁵⁵ The real life Ivan Kaliayev (1877-1905) was a Russian poet and revolutionary, responsible for killing Grand Duke Sergei Alexandrovich, a crime for which he was hanged. Some of the plot scenes in Camus’ play did actually occur (like a meeting between Kaliayev and the Grand Duke’s widow), although not exactly as Camus presents them in the play.

Alexandrovich, brother of the ruling Russian Emperor Alexander III and uncle of the future –and last- Russian Emperor Nicholas II.

Kaliayev, also known as ‘the poet’, is a happy and smiling man. Full of life, and fond of drinking and dancing, Kaliayev has a clear sense of the ravages, injustices and hunger lived by the Russian people, but all of this knowledge is not enough to make him bitter, unhappy or resentful. Stepan, on the other hand, has just re-entered Russia after a three year stint in a Swiss jail (like Lenin) and is hardened, bitter, somber, extremely disciplined and only worried about the cell succeeding in its’ task; he says at one point: “we are here to succeed.” (Camus 2006, 33)

Stepan mistrusts Kaliayev because he is unable, after suffering jail, of making sense of Kaliayev’s constant laughter and ever-present smile. Stepan initially believes that Kaliayev is not up to the task, but –contrary to Stepan- Kaliayev is in fact willing to give his life for the cause. They openly discuss their deep differences:

“Stepan: I don’t know. You change the signals, you love playing the character of the peddler, you proclaim verses, you want to throw yourself in front of horses, and now, talk about suicide...I don’t trust you.

Kaliayev: You don’t know me, brother. I love life. I don’t ever get bored. I entered the revolution because I love life.

Stepan: I don’t love life, but justice which is above life.

Kaliayev: Each one serves justice the way he can. We must accept that we are different. We must love each other, if we can.

Stepan: We can't.

Kaliayev: What are you doing among us?

Stepan: I came to kill a man, not to love him nor to salute his difference.” (Camus 2006, 33-34)

Still, they must work together. The group is supposed to bomb the Grand Duke's carriage during a ride he will make to the theater. Everything is ready, and they have rehearsed their plan. But, the agreed moment presents a 'slight' problem: the Grand Duke's nephew and niece are with him in the carriage at the time Kaliayev is supposed to make the bomb go off, and Kaliayev refuses to push the button and kill the kids along with the Grand Duke.

The leader, and the rest of the group approve of Kaliayev's independent and improvised decision not to kill the Grand Duke (and his nephew and niece) as originally agreed. But Stepan is incensed. He tells Dora: “I don't have enough heart for this silliness. When we finally decide to not mind the kids, that very day, we will be the masters of this world and the revolution will win” (Camus 2006, 59). For Stepan a kid's *present* life is nothing when compared to the bounty of the *future* revolution; for him everything is permitted.

But, they are all against this kind of 'efficiency' reasoning. Annankov tells Stepan: “I cannot allow you to say that everything is permitted. Hundreds of our brothers have died so we could learn that not everything is permitted” (Camus 2006, 61). And Dora utters what are perhaps the deepest lines in the play: “the death of the nephews of the Grand Duke will not stop any kid from dying of hunger. Even in destruction, there is an order, there are limits” (Camus 2006, 62).

Kaliayev agrees: “men do not live of justice alone” (Camus 2006, 64).

Here Camus adds another dimension to his sub-theory of political change, something we might call a ‘chronological’ awareness. In short, we might either fight for political change primarily for the *future*, or fight for political change with a view primarily for the *present*. The members of the terrorist cell, except Stepan, are worried and concerned about ‘the now’. Their concern is about present justice (or lack thereof) and already existing lives; Stepan, on the other hand, is possessed by a rather long-term utopia. He is prepared to sacrifice other people and even the innocent because “others will come, and I will salute them as my brothers” (Camus 2006, 65).

Kaliayev’s response is swift and profound: “I love those who live today in this earth with me, and those are the ones I salute. It is for them that I fight and that I consent to die. And for a faraway city, about which I am not sure, I wouldn’t even go slap my brothers in the face. I will not add to a living injustice in the name of a dead one” (Camus 2006, 65).

Camus here answers two of the very concrete questions concerning the sub-theory of political change (namely, “What could justify the use of violence in any given process of political change?” and “What political project is desirable at this or that specific moment in time?”) For Camus the most desirable political project is the one who addresses the problems faced by actually living human beings, human beings living presently. While he is not oblivious to the plight of future generations, the main concern of any political project should be the plight of humans living today. We cannot properly attend to the problems of future generations if first we do not attend to our own circumstances. Changing politics for the welfare of currently living human beings might justify violence. Violence is justified only if –again- it is not committed in

the name of a far away utopia, but rather in the service of ameliorating living conditions in the present time.

Like Sisyphus, the cell is forced to start all over again. Voinov, one of the lookouts for the Grand Duke's carriage, bails out of the plan, and Annankov has to take his place.

A few days before their second attempt, in a moment of intimacy, Dora and Kaliayev (who are in love) talk about their relationship. Dora has hardened in her aversion to Stepan's idea of justice, but she fears that regardless of her words and ideas their fight for justice has taken the best out of them, making love impossible. "Those who truly love justice, do not have a right to love. They are broken-in like I am, head upright, eyes-fixed. Who will come make love in these proud hearts? Love sweetly bends heads, Yanek⁵⁶. And yet, the backs of our heads are rigid"(Camus 2006, 84).

And Dora then asks a heart-wrenching question: "would you love me if I were unjust?"(Camus 2006, 86). Kaliayev hesitates, Dora cries and implores: "say yes, dear, if you think it and it's true. Yes, face to face with justice, in front of all the misery and people in slavery. Yes, yes, I beg you, in spite of the agonies children suffer, in spite of the people that they hang and those that they whip to death..." (Camus 2006, 86)

Camus' skepticism about 'justice' becomes even more explicit and profound in *The Just Assassins*. There are not only the issues of 'limits' and 'compassion', but he now adds the problem of the impossibility of concrete human love in a world consumed by the justice-injustice

⁵⁶ Yanek is Kaliayev's nickname.

binomial. In *The State of Siege* we saw Diego suffering -and the Plague celebrating- the fact that justice has seamlessly taken the shape of revenge and score-settling. We also saw Nada equating justice and 'the police' (i.e. crude force). In *The Just Assassins* we have the initial situation about how killing innocent lives (the Grand Duke's nephew and niece) will breach any sense of present justice in the name of uncertain and faraway utopia. But now Dora and Kaliayev enter into even more unfathomable terrain: the impossibility of romantic love in a world obsessed by the fight for justice.

The reader here has to be both inquisitive *and* skeptical. After all, the idea that a fight for justice excludes any idea of romantic love is an interesting one. Yet, it fails to meet the test of reason. There is no logical, emotional, political or psychological reason as to why revolutionaries (or even those fighting for extreme justice) cannot fall in love or be romantically attached. It just does not make sense. But, the question then becomes why does Camus presents us with such a situation. The fact is that it look as if as early as 1948 –year of *The State of Siege*'s publication- Camus was already expressing radical doubts about not only the morality and desirability of revolutions, but also about how corruptive they could be to the human soul. This way of thinking would reach a fever pitch during the early 1950's, around the years *The Rebel* came out, and his break with Sartre.

The plot thickens after the second attempt to the Grand Duke's life succeeds⁵⁷ and Kaliayev is arrested. Kaliayev believes in God and harbors no illusions as to the weight that killing a man - even a tyrant-enabler like the Grand Duke Sergei- carries. And the Grand Duchess Elizabeth – now a widow and also a believer- seems to be willing to personally pardon Kaliayev and

⁵⁷ This time the children were not in the carriage.

officially and sincerely plead for his life to be spared, if he repents. But the state has other plans. Using Elizabeth's desire to meet with Kaliayev in his jail cell, the state plans to use their meeting to move against the whole terrorist cell.

Right before the meeting between Kaliayev and the Grand Duchess, an agent of the secret police, Skouratov, comes to meet Kaliayev. He wants him to betray his comrades in exchange for their lives, if not, he will publish that in the meeting between Kaliayev and the Grand Duchess the prisoner betrayed his comrades and friends. Kaliayev refuses the bargain. Their dialogue is reminiscent of Nada's discussion with the townsfolk in Cadiz after the plague has been routed. Skouratov tells the prisoner that "we start by wanting justice and we end by organizing a police force"(Camus 2006, 107). He presents the 'grand bargain' to Kaliayev –namely, betray your friends and no one will pay with his/her life for the Grand Duke's murder-; Kaliayev rejects it and justifies their act as political action, an act of war. Skouratov leap to a higher level: "let's leave aside the Grand Duke and politics. In the end, we have the death of a man. And what kind of death!"(Camus 2006, 109). Kaliayev's response sounds hollow: "I threw the bomb against your tyranny, not against a man". Skouratov: "Without a doubt. But it is a man who got it" (Camus 2006, 109).

Kaliayev explodes, he does not want to be bothered any more by Skouratov's entreaties and tells him that "the only thing that should concern you is our hatred, mine's and my brother's. It is at your service" (Camus 2006, 111). Skouratov responds: "Hatred? Another idea. What isn't an idea is murder...you shouldn't try to forget the Grand Duke's [severed] head. If you didn't forget that, then ideas would serve you no more" (Camus 2006, 111). And Skouratov: "You would feel

shame, for example, instead of being proud of what you've done. And from the moment you feel shame, you would want to live and make amends. The most important thing is that you decide to live" (Camus 2006, 111).

Skouratov also shrewdly understands that Kaliayev's initial refusal to set off the bomb when the children were in the carriage speaks to the limits of Kaliayev's ideology, if not of his convictions. Skouratov mocks Kaliayev by letting him know that it is precisely because of his qualms about killing the children, Kaliayev's very decency and humanity, that the Russian Empire will survive. Camus knows, and he uses Skouratov to make the point crystal clear, that waging a struggle for political change within certain moral limits is an almost impossible task, but there is no other way around this for Camus (and for Kaliayev).

Here, Camus' introduction to the play is central. In it he writes about his admiration for the 'exceptional souls' of the fighters of the 1905 Russian Revolution, because the hatred that they felt towards their oppressors was a weighty and 'intolerable' one. A hatred, Camus laments, that had become 'a comfortable system' in his day (presumably the Stalin years). Tellingly, our author calls these fighters' struggle a 'revolt', not a revolution, an important political and moral distinction in Camus' political language⁵⁸.

⁵⁸ We will examine the distinction carefully later on, but for now suffice it to say that in my appreciation, for Camus a revolution was a quasi-institutional effort –bordering in the impersonal- that many times ended up justifying wholesale systematic murder and terror. Revolts, on the other hand, were a much more personal (dare I say intimate) affair. Rebels (as opposed to revolutionaries) struggle to keep violence at a minimum, and were weighted down with their 'necessary' and unfortunate acts of violence. Revolutions, however, seem to celebrate and rejoice in murder and terror. This is obviously very problematical at a historical level. Not all revolts have been good, not all revolutions bad. We will examine this at a later time.

Kaliyev's final refusal to Skouratov's entreaties is met with the fulfillment of Skouratov's threat: he publishes all around that Kaliyev has betrayed his friends, if only to smear his name on his comrades' minds and give these a powerful psychological blow. Kaliyev, however, is ultimately worried not about his name and honor, but about not risking his friends' lives, even Stepan's. Yet, on the other side of town, Dora, Stepan and Annankov are not worried about their own lives, but about confirming that Kaliyev really loved and cared about them; they do not want him to die, but they want to confirm his love. Unfortunately for all, given the news of his 'betrayal', there is only one way of confirming the earnestness of his commitment to the cause and his personal love for them. Only if Kaliyev is hanged would they confirm his loyalty and love (i.e. by not betraying them at the cost of his own life); and only by giving his life will the accused make the ultimate sacrifice for his friends.

Apart from the topic of romantic love in the face of a struggle for justice, all of the topics of *The Just Assassins* have been previously tackled by Camus. In addition to the issue of love, the force of the play comes from two main sides: the fact that the story is based on historical events, and Camus' introduction of Stepan, the only fictitious character in the play, to use as a sounding board and counter-point to the importance that the rest of the cell placed on the ideas of limits, love and compassion while in the midst of a struggle for political change. In short, by bringing Stepan into the play Camus introduces the main topic of what will later be *The Rebel*: the fundamental difference between revolts and revolutions.

We will address this at much greater length later on this chapter, but *The Just Assassins* lays bare the basic contours of Camus' political preferences as far as political change is concerned. Camus

deeply dislikes and distrusts revolutions both at a practical and at a moral level. Revolutionaries, he posits, feel eerily comfortable in the righteousness and justice of their struggle; they are willing to do almost anything, or just anything, to succeed. This is not only morally unacceptable for Camus, but it is also simply not smart politically. Revolutions, he thinks, seldom bring the justice, change and improvement that are their original motivations. They easily devolve into uncontrollable machines of murder and control through force. They are prone to distort into legalistic and legitimizing systems of score-settling and revenge.

Revolt-ees, on the other hand, are never comfortable in what they are doing. Guilt and confession are always troubling them; they are fundamentally skeptical. And most central to the message of *The Just Assassins*: those engaged in revolt worry about other things in addition to their struggle for justice, things that make them human, humane and tender: romantic love, friendship, compassion, concern for present lives and present justice.

For all the insightfulness, intelligence, rationality and eloquence of its characters, *The Just Assassins* presents a more intuitive approach to all these problems if compared with Camus' treatment of these issues in *The Rebel*. We will have to wait for that discussion to see the philosophical roots of his sub-theory of political change.

In the third and final work of fiction we will discuss of the 'revolt' series, *The Plague*, Camus goes even deeper into his examination of human interactions and loyalties, people's day to day lives, almost completely expunging explicitly political vectors from his treatment of these topics. From the perspective of the sub-theory of political change, *The Plague* presents itself as a very

challenging work, precisely because Camus sought to expel politics from the plot and tried to more purely concentrate in moral action and human interactions in midst of a crisis. While *The State of Siege* still has open discussions about the police, the state and revolution, its analysis was made a bit easier by the fact that it is –among other things- an extreme (*reductio ad absurdum*) and humorous work. *The Plague*, however, sees no substantive discussion about the police, the state or revolution, and is as earnest and nuanced a work of fiction as you could ever encounter.

There is a rather simplistic, although I would like to believe heuristically insightful, way of separating Camus' most difficult and complex works of fiction from the least complex ones: in his least complex works, characters are –at the very beginning of the plot- expecting something to happen or someone to arrive from the outside. This is the case with *Caligula*, *The Misunderstanding*, *The State of Siege* and *The Just Assassins*. In *The State of Siege*, people are wondering about the comet and they suspect something is about to happen; in *Caligula*, the mad Emperor is out in the woods, God knows up to what, after Drusilla's death, and the stage is empty in the very first moments; in *The Misunderstanding*, Jan is by himself in the hotel's lobby waiting for someone to receive him; in *The Just Assassins*, the terrorist cell is also awaiting for news from the outside hunkered in their headquarters/apartment. His least complex works have some kind of rhythm and structure to them, they all begin with some kind of expectation and wait, and effectively something –usually very bad- comes to happen. In Camus' most intricate works -*The Fall*, *The Stranger* and *The Plague*- however, nothing is about to happen, but when things do happen they do almost a-rhythmically. In short, these works have no formula. These works are much more difficult to engage and analyze because they are much more nuanced.

Not coincidentally, these more ‘complex’ works also revolve around the idea of compassion and/or around characters acting compassionately, that most nuanced, and indeed difficult, of concepts in Camus’ thought.

Published in 1947, and set in Oran, Algeria, *The Plague* is at times painful to read, not just because it develops rather slowly, but because in it Camus has decided to be as linguistically ‘dry’ as possible. A few pages after the outbreak hits the city, it becomes evident for the reader that there will be no grand flourishes, no unexpected developments, no masterful linguistic gymnastics, just the plague and life under it. Although this is not the case during a first reading of the novel, a second reading proves to be hard and boring at times. But, I believe that was, let us say, a ‘meta’ point for Camus: the reader should slog-it-through and remain absolutely vigilant to the few gems buried here and there (those little morsels of beauty and joy, misery and courage, his amazing scientific descriptions of the illness and its treatment), just as the characters in the novel get terribly bored in their quarantined city, but cannot ‘drop it’ and move on; they must learn to see and appreciate the beauty in the quotidian, the interesting -but often overlooked- details of everyday life, and these, they learn, are enough to sustain the will to live. Camus addresses the language ‘problem’ that the reader is sure to notice throughout the novel. The dryness of the language in the book is no accident, he is not just losing his chops as an author; one of the characters in the book –Grand- struggles at great length with the language of a novel he is trying to write; he does not make it much farther than the opening sentence, reworking it tirelessly, seeking the opinion of his friends, torturing himself over minor details in the flourished language of the sentence. It is plainly a pathetic sight. Moreover, during what is known as ‘Tarrou’s confession’ –Tarrou is a foreigner trapped in the city that keeps a diary of

the situation- he concludes that “all the troubles of mankind come from our refusal to speak clearly” (Camus 1947, 203).

Donald Lazere is succinct in his analysis of the book, concluding:

“In sum, *The Plague* is an immensely absorbing and moving novel on first reading and one that readers may well return to for emotional support in times of plaguelike disaster but not one that they are likely pick up again periodically for the satisfactions of masterly novelistic technique or ideological cogency” (Camus 1947, 182).

At a rather superficial level one of the most immediate –and misleading- rewards of the novel is that it organically pushes the reader to play the ‘metaphor game’, as if the work were a *roman á clef*. But this proves to be an amusing waste of time, for *The Plague* is not supposed to be about hidden metaphors and messages buried in the plot or its characters. Plainly, the plague afflicting Oran is a *very* general metaphor to the Nazi occupation of France and the anonymous, courageous and –most of the time- silent struggle many people put up against the Nazis, but that is where the metaphor ends. While Lazere and other critics have remarked the obvious -that the Nazis and their collaborators killed knowingly and willingly, while the plague is a natural phenomenon- and bemoan this ‘discrepancy’ as a lack of ‘ideological cogency’, the point of the novel is not the plague as such, but the book’s characters reactions to it. Camus is mostly interested in examining *moral* ways of resisting evil. And this is where we can look for further keys and affirmations of Camus’ sub-theory of political change.

Briefly, Oran is going about its business when suddenly dead rats start to sprout from everywhere. From dead rats it soon becomes dead humans, and many of them. The mysterious illness is identified as the bubonic plague, and it advances exponentially; while the local government is rather slow in taking decisive measures to face the crisis, in time the city is quarantined and closed to the outside world, and most of the burden of dealing with the outbreak is shouldered by the regular citizens. The novel has an abundance of characters -some of them quite colorful- which form an emergency brigade and take turns dealing with the crisis according to their professions and experience, availability and health. The plague ravages the city and alters everyday life in unimaginable ways; in fact, many of the most fascinating portions of the work are precisely Camus' description of how regular life is turned upside-down. Toward the end of the book a serum is developed that proves effective --if not totally- against the disease, and after more or less a year of quarantine, the plague is 'defeated'.

There are two important points to be made about this synopsis, particularly concerning the 'defeat' of the plague. The first is that the narrator of the story, Dr. Rieux, tells us in the last paragraph of the novel -while witnessing the celebrations of a town finally rid of the outbreak- that,

“he knew that this happiness was always under threat. For he knew what that joyous crowd ignored, and that one can read in the books: that the bacillus of the plague does not die and that it never disappears, that it can remain dormant during decades in furniture and cloth, that it waits patiently inside rooms, caves, trunks,

handkerchiefs, papers, and that, maybe, the day would come when
for the woe and education of men, the plague would wake up its
rats and send them to die in a happy city” (Camus 1947, 247).

In short, Camus –again- warns us to be vigilant about crises and to never be too complaisant about the way things are, because they can change unexpectedly.

Second, no one in the novel, and certainly not the reader, knows for sure if the plague was ‘defeated’ because of any human effort or if it just withered away naturally, biologically and/or exhausted.

The message is clear: the plague is not the issue, our actions are.

Regardless of the courageous fight that Oran’s residents put up, the plague takes too long to leave the city; it takes its time and a huge human toll. The city’s isolation is both nerve-wrecking and unbelievably boring to most of the characters in the book; but while a few of these characters had the chance to leave the city’s walls, none of them did. They all stay in, fighting the impossible and seemingly unwinnable fight. Like Sisyphus, the novel’s characters carry their boulder every day anew. The plague has brought in them an unbreakable alliance and a consciousness that desertion from their plight might mean death to the others in the brigade, not to speak of all the victims. They are all needed; the plague concerns them all.

Camus certainly had the imaginative and technical mastery to devise an arresting plot of a man-made disaster within the same besieged city motif. But, and this is where his sub-theory of political change becomes relevant, he *chose* to plot around a natural disaster. And this was a *politically* motivated decision. It is clear that Camus' intention was to break the rhythm of the man-made calamity/man-made reaction plot. A man-made crisis has three basic responses in Camus' political universe; either the characters do nothing and choose passivity, or the characters take arms in a revolution, or –finally- the characters could revolt. By plotting around a natural disaster like the plague Camus takes the revolutionary option off the table, for you cannot take up arms against a biological outbreak. A natural disaster reduces our choices to two basic ones: either you die passively with your arms crossed or you patiently 'revolt', intelligently planning your way out of the situation, no delusions or guarantee of success.

Camus is asking us: 'what will you do if in a critical situation you didn't have the option of revolution?' –Revolt. Revolt is, as we will see in our discussion of *The Rebel*, both the impossible *and* only sustainable option for political change and resistance for Camus. I might dare posit that revolt was for Camus, the only *morally* acceptable route.

There is no 'lack of ideological cogency' in *The Plague*, there is 'just' a deep, lengthy and sad examination of revolt as Camus' preferred option for affecting political change. In *The Plague* there are no cartoonish figures to defeat, as was the case in *The State of Siege*; and there are no terrifyingly real historical monsters like the Nazis; there is no battle of the wills. The plague is immune to reason and to our plight, just like the absurd universe painted in Camus' absurd cycle.

And it is within ‘the absurd’ that Camus encourages us to remain. The moral way out seems to coincide with the difficult way out.

The oeuvres within the revolt cycle are a logical expansion and continuation of Camus’ previous philosophical and political works. The revolt is ‘the absurd’ stance taken to a social and political level. But while the absurd cycle dealt mostly –from the point of view of our political interests- with Camus’ sub-theory of the human being, the revolt cycle is more concerned with a sub-theory of political change, specifically resistance to evil. *The Plague* does not offer any substantive choice between passivity, revolution or revolt. It forces us to imagine ourselves revolting, and it invites us to see any political and social crisis as a natural disaster, not because Camus wants to wash away human responsibility in man-made catastrophes, but because he wants to remove hatred, revenge and the ‘all is permitted’ attitude from our possible political choices. Not everything is permitted, and in fact, not everything is even *possible* when we imagine ourselves in a situation like the one faced by the characters in *The Plague*. In short, you cannot shoot or hang a plague.

The Plague is about the moral choices exercised by the characters in the novel, not about the type of evil that is upon them. The main conflict in the novel is not between the characters and the plague, but between the different ways the characters could have reacted –and in fact reacted- during the crisis.

At the level of a sub-theory of political change Camus’ choice of a natural-disaster (the plague) also forces us to imagine a political situation where the quest for absolute justice is meaningless.

Justice has nothing to do with fighting the plague, for the illness kills all. The struggle for change in *The Plague* renders the concept of justice-as-the-end of social and political action almost totally irrelevant.

In his excellent *Camus, Portrait of a Moralist* (Bronner 1999) Stephen Eric Bronner points out another extremely relevant willful ‘omission’ in *The Plague*: the fact that there are no communists among the main characters of the novel. Again, there is no explanation for this omission except as a political statement from Camus. If *The Plague* is a parable/metaphor on the Nazi’s occupation of France during the War, and of the Resistance struggle against them, then omitting the communists would surely count as an enormous distortion of the historical facts. But Camus’ is not aiming for historical accuracy; he is concerned about morally cogent resistance to a totalitarian system. The decision to omit the communists, Bronner says, “was surely purposeful. There is no reason why, from the standpoint of the parable itself, he had to ignore the communists or historically distort the Resistance. His decision was based only on what had become a definitive political and ethical position: “There is no objection to the totalitarian attitude other than the religious or moral objection” (Bronner 1999, 71). But Bronner fails to mention that no central character of the work has his or her politics clearly defined. Camus might have been disingenuous, but to include a communist among the ‘resisters’ of the plague would have been to privilege communists among all other groups.

In the novel, the ‘moral objection’ to the disaster takes the form of many small acts of courage and lots of careful planning. Scientific research and the free flow of information –keeping residents well informed- are also key for the survival of the besieged town. There is no single

and grandiose revolutionary moment in the work, there is just the slow and painful resistance to the destruction brought about by the illness.

In addition, as Bronner also points out, “*The Plague* portrays characters driven to political engagement, almost as a last resort, who long for a return to private life” (Bronner 1999, 65).

The characters are not professional activists or highly politicized beings; they do not cherish their involvement in the struggle, and they certainly do not want their work to last forever; they are decent civilians, with private lives of their own, who had felt morally obliged to lend a hand and risk their lives to save their community. The fact that they all long for the nightmare to finish, to go back to their normal lives, return to their lovers, wives and day-jobs, is a subtle jab at the idea of the ‘professional revolutionary’. The characters of the play are kept alive and resist in the name of their personal dreams, their friendship, the longing and desire to return to a normal life. Ideology, justice and revolution are not their motivations.

In *The Plague* Camus concludes that a healthy political community does not need a standing army of revolutionaries to survive and improve their lot, but rather a moral, fearless and decent citizenry that is capable both of attending to their private concerns while remaining vigilant about the well-being of the community at large.

Lazere points out that *The Plague* “conveys little consciousness of social class in Oran. We do not see enough of the difference in the effects a plague –or a military occupation- would have on the rich and the poor” (Lazere 1973, 181). While this is true, we cannot naively assume Camus was not aware of the differences between how the rich and the poor lived through a natural

disaster or a military occupation. In fact, in *The State of Siege* –a work of fiction also dealing with a plague-like situation- the very first encounter between the political authorities and the Plague (the character) is precisely a negotiation to spare the powerful and the rich. Moreover, Camus' journalistic work in Algeria (from the 1930s to the 1950's)⁵⁹ bears witness not only to his awareness of the differences between the life of the rich and the lives of the poor -he grew up very poor himself- but also a deep awareness of the differences between the lives of European settlers and the native Arab population⁶⁰. He not only knew: his articles show that he *cared*.

Lazere seems to overlook Camus' *intention*. *The Plague* places its characters in almost a 'state of nature', where all are from the very beginning equalized in death and suffering. Camus' intention was to examine a struggle for change and survival where the concepts of justice and revolution are inconsequent, and show us that –at least in a very realistic work of fiction- survival and change were still possible notwithstanding the carnage of the plague.

The base of Camus' position –his sub-theory of the human being- remains unchanged, namely, human beings should be kept alive at all *morally permissible* costs. *The Plague* is Camus most serious fictional examination of how we should act when the current social and political situation is far from ideal.

⁵⁹ See his *Algerian Chronicles* (Camus 2013).

⁶⁰ Camus grew up in Belcourt (Algiers) a tough and poor neighborhood of working class immigrants from all around the Mediterranean basin (Spain, Italy, Greece, France, North African, with a significant Jewish population). His mother was a cleaning lady. But still, the French Republic offered him a fantastic education as a *pupille de la nation* (Camus was officially adopted by the French Republic after losing his father during the First World War). In strictly legal terms Camus was entitled to supplementary help (monetary and educational) from the French Republic and the French Empire, just like many other French children whose parents have died during military conflict since 1917. That the French Republic was able to bring out someone like Camus from poverty and oppress the Algerian population through their colonial practices is a great irony, and one that has been used to accuse Camus of being an imperial figure, as Edward Said called him in *Culture and Imperialism*. (Lottman 1979), (Said, 1993).

Communication, love and friendship are paramount in *The Plague*, as well as empathy towards the suffering and plight of others. In short, Camus celebrates a sense of community. Camus, writing about this work in a letter to Roland Barthes, says that *The Plague* “represents the transition from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared. If there is an evolution from *The Stranger* to *The Plague*, it is in the direction of solidarity and participation” (Camus and Thody 1968, 338) And those facts –friendship, love and compassion- in turn suppose a very clear and explicit acknowledgement of where the limits of what is permissible are. For as Dora told Kaliayev in *The Just Assassins*, love –for example- might not be possible during a revolution obsessed with an idea of justice that devolves into a murder machine and revenge, just as friendship and compassion become harder as well.

In a situation like the one portrayed in *The Plague* there is no logical human recipient of our frustrations and hatred, there is no possible blind obsessive pursuit of justice, nor professional revolutionaries at the vanguard of a utopian struggle; there is only the search for a realistic solution, the quest for change; and revolution is not the only way that political and social change can happen, nor –for Camus at least- a morally desirable one. *The Rebel*, the next book we will analyze, explains why.

Let us start with the title. The English translation of *L’homme révolté*’s title –*The Rebel*- overlooks an ingenious and important word-play/pun by Camus; for in French *L’homme révolté* can either mean ‘Man in Revolt’ or ‘Revolted Man’. The book, published in 1951, is certainly not only a celebration of ‘good’ rebels everywhere, but also –and more importantly- a deep

examination and case-study of how and why political ideals degenerate⁶¹. Specifically, the book tries to investigate how revolt became revolution; how a morally-sound struggle for political freedom and equality turned into murderous totalitarianism.

This was the book that broke Camus' friendship with Sartre, and it is easy to see why. There are two things that shocked me about the book: first, Camus' undeniable courage and boldness. Condemning the idea of political revolution is not a popular sport even today, especially in progressive circles: it was even more difficult and potentially unsettling and alienating in Camus' times. Yet, the book is a sound condemnation not only of historical revolutions, but of the very *concept* of revolution itself. Revolutions, Camus tells us, have not gone wrong because of historical and political 'accidents'; revolutions have gone wrong, and end in totalitarianism and terror (Stalinism, Fascism, Nazism), because the very concept of revolution very easily leads towards totalitarian political systems⁶².

The second shocking aspect of *The Rebel* is the amount of scholarship –both historical and philosophical- behind the essay. Camus' works until that time prove him to be a creative master and an insightful political observer; yet, it is still startling -not to say inspiring- to see his command of the history of political thought, his capacity to 'extract' political ideas from ostensibly apolitical works, and his superb analysis of how political ideas have been applied in the real world throughout history. Stephen Eric Bronner calls the book Camus' "first, and last, work of political theory" (Bronner 1999, 80).

⁶¹ A study in degeneration, as it were, is a pathological study, a fitting description of *The Rebel*.

⁶² He would surely had agreed that this was not the case of the American Revolution, for example. But, he could also had argued that the American Revolution was not a true revolution imbued with a desire to remake the whole world and the whole institutional and economic structure of the land. In this sense the American Revolution –in spite of its name- could be considered a sort of rebellion, rather than a full blown revolution.

Indeed, *The Rebel* is not a modest work. In the words of one of Camus' biographers, Herbert Lottman, the purpose of the book is:

“Nothing less than to examine in depth and in history the theories and forms of revolt, in an attempt to discover why ideals are perverted –revolt becoming murder (Prometheus becoming Caesar) –and then to attempt to lay true paths to a necessary revolt against our common fate from which crime –even legitimated, state-sponsored crime- would be rigorously excluded.” (Lottman 1979, 508)

Camus starts building his definition of ‘revolt’ from the concept of the absurd. In very simple and general terms: ‘absurd’ beings (persons that have come to understand the absurd condition) recognize that their plight (mortality) is not exclusive to them, but a plight shared by all, and this, in turn, engenders an intuitive drive towards solidarity and compassion towards others. It also happens that under politically oppressive conditions the rights that tyranny and oppression trample on, are –at times- core and fundamental rights shared by other human beings as well. Both the absurd *and* oppression push the person towards an understanding that they are not alone, propelling the person towards community. The revolt is a firm affirmation of rights by a plurality.

The Rebel presents an original survey of political thought from both familiar and unexpected political ‘thinkers’; it is also an examination of how the political and philosophical ‘thought’ of these thinkers –again, not all of them canonical figures- have shaped the political debate in the

West. But before this survey, Camus constructs his own political landscape, reminiscent of the ‘primeval’ scenarios familiar to those with the field of political philosophy. The very first pages of the book are key to what is to follow in the rest of the essay.

Imagine a slave, Camus proposes, up to this point relatively at ‘peace’ with his/her condition, but suddenly the master issues an order, or tramples on the slave in a way that the slave’s gut reaction is a strident ‘no’. That instinctive refusal, “the man who says ‘no’” (Camus 2007, 27), those are the necessary –but not sufficient- beginnings of the revolt. That ‘no’, Camus continues, might mean that “things have gone on for too long” or “you are going too far” or “up to this point ‘yes’, beyond that ‘no’” (Camus 2007, 27). When the slave discovers the idea of ‘limits’ the movement of revolt begins in earnest.

But there is another more complex process going on: that ‘no’ is based on something, a *value* deep inside the person that is worth *affirming*. The discovery of something inside us worth upholding and defending, an affirmation that stems from someone or something over-stepping our limits, is not only a quasi-political statement, but primarily an identity-building anchor.

In this case the over-stepping of limits brings not only an affirmation of the slave’s being, but a discovery of his/her identity. The revolt, then, is not an exclusively negative occurrence (the primeval ‘no’), but the positive discovery of one’s self.

A slave’s refusal of a master’s order is not a trivial occurrence, for it certainly entails great risk. But the affirmation in the person of something worth defending is not about defending just ‘a part’ of us, but rather the *total* integrity of our being. It will be no exaggeration to consider that

initial ‘no’ as our second birth; it is at least the birth of independent consciousness. The slave at that moment wants to be a slave no more, she or he wants to become –as in ‘embody’- the value itself; it is a process of total identification. For the revolt to be born the initial ‘no’ is not enough; it has to be followed by a total affirmation. This is what Camus calls ‘the all or nothing’ moment (Camus 2007, 30).

Suppose now, Camus continues, that in fact that ‘all or nothing’ attitude/moment means that the slave is willing to die, rather than deny him or herself. That is the moment when the revolt ceases to be an individual experience and becomes a social and political plight. Raw logic dictates that if the person prefers death to denying that recently discovered value, it is because that value is somehow deemed to be larger than our own individual self. That value is a value common to all, even to the oppressive master.

This line of reasoning has very profound implications for Camus’ sub-theory of the human being and, consequently, for his sub-theory of political change. Camus himself clearly appreciates the political and practical consequences of his argument. It is a commonplace idea, Camus says, to believe that human values are conquered *after* some kind of political struggle. At least that is the presumption among historically-centered political thinking. But this is plainly not the case with the values for which the slave is willing to die; the values the slave and the oppressed fight for are pre-historical –and hence pre-political- values. This, Camus posits, gives us ground “to suspect that there is a human nature, like the Greeks thought, and contrary to the postulates of contemporary thought” (Camus 2007, 30)

At the level of Camus' sub-theory of the human being we can dig a little bit deeper, since the existence of a 'human nature' automatically pushes us to ponder how changeable and perfectible that 'human nature' is. The answer is clear: not too much. Whatever valuable exists in men (and women) exists from the very beginning; our concern should be not so much to change or perfect that nature, but to defend and uphold it. Consequently, at the level of Camus' sub-theory of political change, all political action should square with the existence of that 'human nature'; that nature imposes concrete limits about how far political action can or should go.

At this stage we see that the values that are at the root of Camus' idea of revolt are values that Camus considers common to all mankind. And there is no turning back from this communal discovery. In time Camus moves away from the slave scenario and expands the net: "Revolt is not born only, and forcibly, in the oppressed, but can also be brought forth by witnessing the oppression victimizing another" (Camus 2007, 31). The revolted person, or the person in revolt, goes beyond his/her own individual self⁶³.

By this point the concepts of 'oppressor' and 'victim' become irrelevant. The human values at the root of the revolt are common to all. In a very precise sense, the revolt is pure positive affirmation, and completely antithetical with resentment⁶⁴. The revolted, the primeval rebel, does not want to rule over –or humiliate- his/her master, it does not want to take the oppressor's fundamental rights and values away, it does not want to 'get even'; quite the opposite, by affirming his/her values through the movement of revolt, the rebel affirms and defends even the oppressor's own fundamental rights.

⁶³ Notwithstanding his criticism of *la Terreur*, and his qualms about the methods of the French Revolution, Camus is speaking the language of the Enlightenment.

⁶⁴ In this Camus is doubtlessly Nietzsche's heir.

The revolt, then, involves and revolves around the concept of *like*-ness. We all possess those rights and values, and those rights and values -although experienced and held at an individual level- go beyond individuality.

But, Camus is not naïve; he does not espouse or present an empty universalist ‘revolt utopia’; he is quite explicit about this: the movement of revolt is found only in societies where the ideas of individuality and theoretical equality are either superficially or deeply rooted, and/or in societies that are either pre- or post-traditional and pre- or post-sacred.

In other words, the revolt movement is only found in societies where there are no ready-made answers (like in religiously bound or tradition-bound societies); the revolt is a *rational* movement. The rebel *knows* that we are all supposed to be equal at a fundamental level and wants *rational human* answers (as opposed to traditional or religious ones) to explain why inequality and oppression exists; the rebel also seeks for human-created solutions⁶⁵ for the problem of oppression.

Forced out of his/her solitude, the rebel proclaims: “I revolt, therefore we are” (Camus 2007, 38)⁶⁶. What started as an individual refusal to one’s limits being over-stepped, turns into a communal, political and social movement. But how and why did this cry of pure affirmation of the value of the lives of all get perverted into systematic political terror, holocaust, totalitarian

⁶⁵ As opposed to solutions based on the religious and the sacred.

states, legalized murder and show trials? The answer to this question is what the rest of *The Rebel* tries to investigate.

Stephen Eric Bronner claims that argumentatively speaking *The Rebel* is a failure as a text of political philosophy, although he sees some originality in the work, especially at the level of Camus' 'forwardness' given his admiration of Northern European democratic socialism. The book, Bronner feels, is argued in a non-rigorous fashion, and –in any case- other people had expressed these very same political ideas and warnings about revolution, 'real existing socialism', Marxism and modernism before⁶⁷.

Bronner is right, but his point –I will argue- is almost irrelevant. If *The Rebel* had been written to be understood as a text of pure political theory, then, the essay's failure would be monumental. Camus does fail to explain why the concept of rebellion should be deemed as existentially and philosophically central as he thinks it should, for example. Camus also fails to “develop the dramatic difference between undertaking rebellion in a democratic as against an authoritarian concept” (Camus 2007, 92). But, political a work as it is, *The Rebel* is not a tract of political philosophy. Nor is *The Rebel* Camus' shot at a ““critique of ideology” (*Ideologiekritik*)” seeking to “illuminate the seemingly hidden social or political interests within artistic and philosophical work” (Camus 2007, 92).

The Rebel is a moral commentary in the tradition of Ortega y Gasset's *La rebelión de la masas* (*The revolt of the masses*) or Julien Benda's *La trahison des clercs* (*The betrayal of the intellectuals*). Just like these works, Camus' essay seeks to bring forth in us an eminently

⁶⁷ Bronner mentions Ernst Bloch, Harold Rosenberg, Clement Greenberg and Edmund Wilson as some of these authors.

emotional response. In *The Rebel* Camus' prose is at its most potent and poetic, and this should be enough to persuade the reader that Camus' intention was not to engage in any rigidly logical political or philosophical argument, but rather to touch us emotionally and move us into action.

Bronner points out that the plethora of "connections and allusions are especially arbitrary" in *The Rebel*, and that Camus seems to be "comparing apples and oranges" by placing "Baudelaire and Rimbaud on the same stage with Marx and Lenin" (Camus 2007, 91). Again, Bronner is right. But there is a plain reason for this 'apples and oranges' appraisal: *The Rebel* is *also* an indignant Camus with a flame-thrower, wrecking havoc at the Left's -at least the Parisian left- Pantheon, for its silence and/or outright support of totalitarianism in Eastern Europe. This is the aspect of the book that is seldom brought forth: *The Rebel* as an act of intellectual terrorism; a heavy projectile smashed against a complaisant establishment; an act not dissimilar to the work done by the group of Russian revolutionaries in *The Just Assassins* whom Camus so much admired.

At least this is the reading and understanding some of Camus' contemporaries had of the essay immediately after its publishing, and one of the reasons –among many others- the book was so tartly received. The book was not only an attack on a specific ideological camp, but an attack on everything that camp held in high esteem. It was not enough for Camus to go after the Surrealists; he went for the roots, the Comte de Lautreamont. André Breton, for example, cries foul because of Camus' dressing down of Lautreamont and his *Chants de Maldoror*: "One cannot protest enough, when writers enjoying public favor occupy themselves by attacking what is a thousand times greater than they are" (Lottman 1979, 521). In fact, Lautreamont's

appearance in *The Rebel* is totally unexpected. Camus *is* indeed mixing apples and oranges. But why?⁶⁸

The ‘data’ that Camus presented in *The Rebel* was not news, and –as Bronner rightly points out- it had been addressed before by other authors; public intellectuals –such as Sartre and de Beauvoir- were in no way ignorant of Stalin’s crimes and murderous totalitarianism; they all knew. That was precisely *the* point. And even more significant still, Camus knew that they knew, and he felt morally obliged to address the situation.

The problem was not one of want or lack of information, but one of people’s –intellectuals specifically- utter indifference in the face of murder, and their making up excuses for inexcusable crimes in the name of ideology. The problem, Camus says in *The Rebel*, is not murder as such -we will always have murder- but the *legitimization* of murder; the turning of slaughter into a necessity.

Peter Sloterdijk⁶⁹ has tried to understand these modalities of thinking in his *Critique of Cynical Reason*, even devising a formula for it: “they know very well what they are doing, but still, they are doing it⁷⁰”. And more recently, and although it might seem as –precisely- the mixing of

⁶⁸ It can be argued that radical ideas are a central component of the moral and political tradition of the West since the Enlightenment; and that these same radical ideas are sometimes used to criticize and berate the Enlightenment. *The Rebel* is an interesting book at a socio-literary level because it tries to sort out (by underlining, using and criticizing) a whole hosts of ideas that play with each other in different ways and in different context, and that all are issue of the Enlightenment.

⁶⁹ Sloterdijk is a German philosopher and public intellectual. In the English-speaking world his best well-known work is *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Sloterdijk 1987).

⁷⁰ I am pretty familiar with the work and thought of Slavoj Žižek, a Slovenian and Paris-educated philosopher and cultural critic, because my beloved wife did her master’s thesis on him. He is a brilliant thinker and keen and insightful observer of Western culture and ideology, but –an inveterate media and celebrity hog- he also has an uncanny ability to say the stupidest and most outrageous things. Among them: claiming in his 2012 *Less than Nothing* (Žižek 2012, 21) that “the problem with Hitler was that he was “not violent enough”, his violence was not

apples and oranges, the author who I find has best illuminated the outrage that Camus might have felt is Slavoj Žižek, specifically in his *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and *For they know not what they do*. Žižek says: "Cynicism is the answer of the ruling culture to this kynical [*ibid*] subversion: it recognizes, it takes into account... the distance between the ideological mask and the reality, but it still finds reason to retain the mask." I briefly bring both Žižek and Sloterdijk to the discussion because they help us understand that Camus' aim in *The Rebel* was not –as Bronner argues- to “illuminate the seemingly hidden social or political interests within artistic and philosophical work” (Bronner 1999, 92). Camus was not trying to bring to light what everybody knew was happening, he was trying to shame and shock them into stopping it.

In view of this, Camus does not go for a narrow ideological argument, but rather chooses a full frontal attack at the *totality* of ideas that he deems help justify political oppression and murder. This is both a thrilling thing to read and a very perilous and not totally successful strategy for Camus. The book makes for a compelling read, but it is also teeming with misreadings and mischaracterizations due to Camus' haste to get his point across.

But there is something even more profound about the book. I hold that *The Rebel* shows something supremely important about Camus' politics and his understanding of them: the centrality of aesthetic practices at the time of political actors taking their ideological positions. Being a ‘committed artist’ himself, Camus probably understood –both rationally and instinctively- the place that *aesthetics* played in attracting or discouraging support for any given

“essential enough”, saying during a 2010 interview with the Times of India that “Gandhi was more violent than Hitler” (“*First they called me a joker, now I am a dangerous thinker,*” *The Times of India*, January 10, 2010), and repeatedly calling himself a Stalinist. Žižek's early work, especially *The Sublime Object of Ideology* and *For they know not what they do* revolve around Sloterdijk's *Critique of Cynical Reason* (Sloterdijk 1987).

political or ideological choice. *The Rebel* is witness to Camus' understanding that in its revolutionary and aggressive drive some members of the left of his times had sometimes summoned a whole host of creative *enfants terribles* to give a patina of aesthetic beauty, acceptability and daring to what otherwise *could* be seen as misguided justifications of systematic murder. As we will see, Camus did not seem to have any deep-seated aversion to any of the authors he violently criticizes (like Rousseau, Sade, Rimbaud or Lautremont) –or tries to– in *The Rebel*, but he *did* have a strong opinion about the *usages* the left of his time was making of these authors and their works. This explains both the ferocity of his reading of the works of Sade, Lautremont and Nietzsche (among many other authors), *and* the always palpable respect and admiration he professes for them at the same time.

That move from Camus' side to demolish all those whose positions he believed led intellectuals and artists to justify oppression and legalized political murder is what might answer Bronner's criticism of *The Rebel* being at times 'arbitrary' by –for example– placing “Baudelaire and Rimbaud on the same stage with Marx and Lenin” (Bronner 1999, 91). In this case Camus believed twisted misreadings of Bauldelaire and Rimbaud made possible the misuse and abuse of Marx and Lenin. Rather than artificially separating the aesthetic from the political Camus decides to meet them directly.

It was Camus' intention to spread his net wide –both at the aesthetic and philosophico-political levels– as to better meet post-World War Two ideological and political narratives.

Rather than going through the intricacies of Camus' convoluted and unorthodox argumentative narrative, it might be better to offer my own original reading of this argument and to extract its relationship to Camus' sub-theory of political change.

The Rebel is divided in what can be called mini-essays on a whole range of artists and thinkers that Camus sees as facilitators or enablers of the Soviet dictatorship. He deals with the work/thought of Sade, Baudelaire, Lautremont, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Lenin, Marx, Hegel, Rousseau and Saint-Juste (among others). And he goes about it by tying these authors' thought as in a downward spiral of ideological corruption that culminates in the gas chambers of the Holocaust and the Russian gulag.

It must also be said that Camus does not proceed in a strictly chronological fashion in his discussion, but rather works along what he understood had been the misappropriation of the revolt ideal from a 'history of ideas' and genealogical perspective. The apologists of mass murder had concocted a powerful and destructive mix out of the thought and aesthetic ideals of many honorable thinkers and Camus is concerned primarily with how this devastating formula came to be⁷¹.

⁷¹ Camus understood there was an important ideological difference –and history- behind the mass murder variants of the Nazis and the Soviets, and he analyzes them both separately. The sub-chapter 'State Terrorism and Irrational Terror' –in *The Rebel*- is devoted to the Nazis (Camus 2007, 229-238), while the sub-chapter 'State Terrorism and Rational Terror' is devoted to the Soviets (Camus 2007, 239-306). Yet, the very difference in the length of these two chapters proves that Camus is much more concerned with Soviet terror than with the Nazis. There are two main reasons for this: first, when he wrote *The Rebel* the Nazis were already defeated, and second, he claims that there was almost universal agreement about the fact that the Nazis were murderers, while there were still people trying to justify Soviet terror.

It all starts from 'the absurd'. The dictatorships Camus saw around him started –he argues- from a humane and heart-wrenching demand for meaning and justice in this world around the time of the French Revolution; a cry that Camus understands begins as a radically *individual* predicament. Sade best expresses this initial individual demand in their embrace and celebration of the dark and forbidden forces at the core of the human heart. Given that traditional values and moral codes have led to a cul-de sac, Sade's perversions and Baudelaire's romantic dandyism define a first move to liberate the human soul by embracing and elevating –in the case of Sade- the dark forces. They represent alternatives. After the execution of the French monarch, Camus argues, God being dead, all bets are off, and new forms of divinity –even if in the shape of dark extreme modalities- are needed and dutifully provided by the likes of Sade and Baudelaire. Two things stand out, however; first, this phase of the human revolt is still a primarily *individual* affair; and second, there is still a push to tie the human soul with something larger than itself. Baudelaire and Sade present radical new forms of morality and values, but they are still values and moral norms.

A first important –and potentially 'corrupting'- existential and political break occurs within the work of Dostoyevsky, primarily due to the emphasis his characters place on a radical and uncompromising idea of justice and –perhaps more important at this stage for Camus- given that with Ivan Karamazov the revolt takes an almost exclusive social turn. While Sade's twisted master lives behind the impregnable walls of a fortress tower in a parallel cosmos, and while Baudelaire's dandy wanders the street in solitude and playing the game of individual authenticity, Aliosha and Ivan Karamazov agree about the injustice and irrationality of babies dying in dire poverty. The break is at its most extreme with Ivan Karamazov's idea that

‘everything is permitted’⁷² in the pursuit of justice and his proclamation that he will a thousand times reject God if the choice is between God and justice. The game board itself has changed.

It is safe to assume that Camus agrees with the reasons for Ivan’s condemnation and rejection of God (although he never explicitly says so), yet, he also sees how Ivan’s position *could* lead to destructive nihilism. Again, Camus does not reject most of the authors he discusses in *The Rebel*, and he is certainly not accusing any of them of being proto-Stalinists or proto-Nazis; what he *is* doing, however, is offering us a history of their ideas, to later explain how these ideas were twisted, and how that distortion ended up plunging the world into genocide and mass murder. Camus sees a potential way out of the path towards nihilism, gone awry in his opinion, in the works of Friedrich Nietzsche. While for Camus Ivan’s stark choice evidently -if indirectly- leads to nihilism, Nietzsche is the first to *own* this nihilism consciously and the first to try to make it a positive drive. Camus posits that Nietzsche understood the potential destructiveness of Ivan Karamazov’s position. In Camus’ words, “Nietzsche always thought in function of an apocalypse in the making, not to celebrate it, for he saw the sordid and calculating face that this apocalypse would take, but to prevent it and transform it into a renaissance” (Camus 2007, 91). In other words, Nietzsche prefers to reject inherited and exhausted values –in this he is a nihilist- while trying to *discover* more organic forms –as opposed to traditional or inherited- of morality. He tells us that Nietzsche has “understood the immensity of the event [the death of God] and decided that the human revolt would not lead to a renaissance if it was not [properly] directed”

⁷² Curiously, Ivan Karamazov never said ‘everything is permitted’. Yet, in the very specific context of *The Rebel*, at one point the reader gets the unmistakable *impression* that Camus *is* quoting Ivan as saying this (Camus 2007, 82). The phrase itself appears in quotes in *The Rebel*, but Camus never directly writes that it is Ivan who utters the phrase, muddling the whole attribution aspect of the issue. Two things are obvious: the reader does get the impression that Camus is quoting Ivan Karamazov (Camus is quoting someone), and the phrase is central in Camus’ argument. The question –obviously unanswerable- then becomes: if Camus is not quoting Ivan Karamazov, who is he quoting?

(Camus 2007, 94). In this sense Camus tells us, “Nietzsche did not formulate a philosophy of revolt, but rather built a philosophy *based* on revolt⁷³” (Camus 2007, 94).

What Nietzsche discovered is ‘nature’ and that untamable biological force, the rule of necessity, those forces that go well beyond the human will. Nietzsche invites us to accept what is, nature that untamable biological force, and warns us not to deny necessity. “The total adhesion to total necessity, that is the paradoxical definition of freedom” (Camus 2007, 99).

Camus felt, however, that Nietzsche had been done a great injustice by the many that merely saw his thought as a discursive tool for their own selfish ends and narrow political agendas. First, because Nietzsche himself was prone to beautiful, thought-provoking and at times twisted excesses, and second because “from the moment we neglect the methodical aspect of Nietzschean thought (and it is not clear at all that he himself always did), his revolted logic knows no limits at all” (Camus 2007, 104).

Nietzsche’s contribution to the history of the revolt was to make it “jump from the negation of the ideal to the secularization of the ideal. Given that human salvation is not made by God, it must be made on this earth” (Camus 2007, 105) .

Throughout all of this very complex –and at times ‘jumpy’- analysis there is a common thread to all of these authors, a commonality that Camus himself did not make explicit: Nietzsche, Dostoyevsky, Baudelaire, Lautremont, Rimbaud and Sade all operate within the realm of *the present moment*. Justice for Ivan Karamazov, the discovery and compliance with the Dionysian force for Nietzsche (accepting and working with reality as it is), Baudelaire’s dandy, Rimbaud’s

⁷³ My italics.

proto-surrealism and Sade's master are all struggles and struggling within and for the present. And Camus was insightful enough to understand that all of these thinkers' 'revolted' projects were doomed to fail by their very inherent immediacy.

As creators of fiction, all of these authors naturally understood the force, stubbornness and undeniability of concrete reality (things as they were). And hence, Camus says their 'projects' were, as it were, condemned by the present. They all operated, if ever so faintly, within the realm of the absurd, and hence the tragic mood in all of them. They knew there was no possible negotiation with reality, no 'defeating' of it; for Camus, all of them understood that the first order of business in our engagement with the world was to see and understand it for what it was, accept it as it was (Nietzsche's necessary-ism), suffer it, and work within or around it. Any truly original *revolt* was fragile –and almost certainly destined to failure- precisely because true revolt works within the impossibly absurd present. Camus admires the fact that these authors respected our moral predicament so much that they preferred to work within the language of fiction (at least most of them), rather than to push moral judgments about real actions and choices in the real world far into the future (history).

Failure in making all of these variations on the same common idea of revolt extend to the political and social realm was –and is- what led to the next unfortunate development in the history of the revolt according to Camus. He sees in this new coming stage/phase of the revolt the passage from the metaphysical revolt to the historical revolt.

Again, rather than engaging in a detailed –and tediously repetitive- analysis of what Camus says about each author, it will be more dynamic to offer my own take on his overall argument.

A simple way of putting it is that the ‘historical’ phase of the revolt is not interested in constructing or discovering values for the present, but is mostly geared towards an uncertain and always distant future. In other words, with the historical phase of the revolt the stated goal is always flowing and moving further away in time. It is in this precise way that the concept of history is introduced by Camus to his depiction of the revolt ideal. It is when thinkers and philosophies start to work for the future and coming generations that real murders and bloodshed enter the picture. Only the introduction of history as a value *in itself* can grant free reign to Ivan Karamazov’s idea (or Camus’ idea of what Ivan Karamazov actually said) that ‘everything is permitted’⁷⁴ because when seen from the historical perspective truth and values are always processes in the making, and judgments can never be fully made in the present.

The argument, however, is more complex and –indeed- ominous. Camus deems that the shades of the revolt ideal become more radical in the works of certain authors; Camus understands that while searching for more politically effective methods, most ‘thoughtful’ and ‘methodical’ ideals of revolt were left behind as ‘concretely ineffectual’ and that more ‘effective’ modalities of the ideal came to the fore. Camus sees this more ‘effective’ reading of the idea of revolt in the execution of Louis XVI during the French Revolution’s *terreur*, the horrors of Nazi Germany and the Stalinist show trials and Russian gulag⁷⁵, and it finds its most complex and elaborated version –for Camus- in the historical ‘prophecies’ of Marx.

⁷⁴ See note 66.

⁷⁵ I don’t think Camus would have ever equated the beheading of Louis XVI with murder of millions during the Holocaust. I do think that he would have considered twisted modalities of political effectiveness at the root of them both.

The kernel of Camus' argument about this novel form of revolt (historical revolt) is straightforward enough: truth, freedom and justice are not to be found in God or other personal forms of morality or value systems; they are not to be found or verified in the present either. In short, these truths are out there, outside of us, they are impersonal and they do not exist now, but will exist in the future. The revolt ceases to become a claim for justice for the current moment and for currently existing humans, but rather becomes a new futuristic gospel. The problem is that none of us will be there to pass judgment in the future, and that the goalpost, the future, will always lie further ahead, making judgment about our methods to achieve justice, truth and freedom impossible. Because no judgment is possible within this historical non-stop drive forward, 'everything is permitted'.

In specifically political terms this translates, according to Camus, into a new and radical idea of power; talking about Rousseau's *Social Contract* Camus argues that power "is not anymore what is, but that which should be" (Camus 2007, 151). While the authors of the 'metaphysical revolt' (Sade, Dostoyevsky, Nietzsche, Baudelaire, etc.) struggled to demystify the moral and values-centered universe, Camus argues that with the likes of Rousseau (and Saint-Just)⁷⁶ we assist to a new mystification of power and morality (mystification as in: outside of judgment and criticism). Camus says: "It is clear that with *The Social Contract* we witness the birth of something mystical, given that the General Will is postulated as God himself" (Camus 2007, 151). This mystification or deification of power, in turn, gives way –at least in Rousseau- to a 'civil religion':

“*The Social Contract* ends, by the way, with the description of a
civil religion, making Rousseau a precursor of contemporary

⁷⁶ It is puzzling and saddening to see how Camus throws them together in *The Rebel*.

societies that exclude not only any opposition, but even those who want to remain neutral. The first one, in fact, in modern times, Rousseau institutes a ‘civil faith’” (Camus 2007, 152).

But for Camus this is not about theory and political treatises only. Camus sees these ideas operating in real life and having real effects in history. For example, he believed that “it is the *philosophes* that end up murdering the king: the king must die because of the social contract” (Camus 2007, 149)⁷⁷.

Readers of *The Rebel* will surely be surprised by the overwhelming sense of nostalgia seeping out of the work when Camus discusses the execution of the French monarch; the sense that something went irremediably wrong, morally and politically, at that precise moment is such that at times it feels *as if* Camus were nostalgic for the *ancien régime*⁷⁸. But while the nostalgic tropes are certainly there, Camus is not mourning the *ancien régime*; he bemoans the loss of innocence brought about by the revolution, the fact that murder becomes legal in the name of a future utopia. Fighting for ideas that would become verifiable only in the future -or as the ad would have it: ‘the best is yet to come’- is what does away with the sense of guilt and limits, and what allows terror to take place, according to Camus. Obviously, Camus did not think that terror

⁷⁷ At this very precise point Camus himself introduces a footnote to speak ‘on behalf’ of Rousseau. This is significant, because it shows the delicate balance that Camus tried to walk in writing *The Rebel*: assessing the importance and debt he felt for some of these works and authors, while also being very critical given the role he saw some of these work play during the historical development of bloody political revolutions. He says (after writing that ‘the king must die because of the social contract’): “Rousseau, it is well understood, would not have appreciated this. We must start our analysis, to give it some sorts of frame or limits, with that which Rousseau firmly declared: “nothing of what I write here deserves to be bought at the price of human blood” (Camus 2007, footnote 149).

⁷⁸ Camus says, for example: “It is true that in France at least, the monarchy, when it knew about it, almost always tried to defend popular communities from the oppression of power-holders and the bourgeois.” (Camus 2007, 148). Or, “Somewhere, in that France of new principles [principes], the vanquished prince [principe] perpetuated himself within prison walls, by the force of existence and faith alone” (Camus 2007, 149).

and brutality were inaugurated with the French Revolution; however, he does argue, that it is with the French Revolution that political terror and oppression become not only legal and – hence- necessary, but prone to be systematically and ideologically excused. It might seem as an asinine distinction, but Camus is not only interested in avoiding legalized murder and ideological terror, he wants to end our rationalizing/excusing them in the name of higher values.

Camus is willing to attack the French Revolution because he is not looking at the institutional ‘details’ or the specific circumstances of that specific revolution; he is not worried about the ‘French’ part, but about the ‘Revolution’ part. Revolt has given way to revolution, and this is an unfortunate development of the highest magnitude for Camus. In order to condemn the Russian revolution -and the Stalinism of his times- he is willing to condemn *all* revolutions starting with the French. Interestingly, but perhaps understandably, he does not ever mention either the American or Latin American ‘revolutions’⁷⁹.

The *Social Contract* also brings with full force the idea that the individual person has by now almost disappeared from the philosophical and theoretical equation. He says: “[even] when we all forgive, the General Will cannot do so. Even the people themselves cannot erase the crime of tyranny. Can’t the victim, in its right, remove its complaint? We are not in ‘right’, we are in ‘theology’ (Camus 2007, 155).

With the passage from revolt to revolution Camus’ argument turns completely and exclusively political. The king being dead, and order being necessary to safely move towards the aims of the revolution, the police becomes the necessary tool to defend the new all-powerful, all-seeing and

⁷⁹ Camus does not talk about this, but exception made of Haiti, the so-called revolutions in the ‘New World’ were wars of national independence and not revolutions proper. In the case of Haiti we have both a classic revolution *and* a war of independence.

all-encompassing God: the state's laws expressing the General Will (Camus 2007, 160). Under this new paradigm "any moral corruption is at the same time political corruption, and vice versa. Issuing from the doctrine itself, a principle of infinite repression is installed" (Camus 2007, 160).

Still, throughout all of this there is still a vague –if ever changing and ever diminishing- idea of pre-defined values that lie outside of human history, universal values. In the terrible Saint-Juste these are the 'virtues'. Camus would say, although he never does, that this drive towards formal and ideal values and virtues outside of history is what made possible the Universal Declaration of the Rights of Man during the French Revolution. God has changed (it was now the state and or its laws, the General Will) and the state's true and purest manifestation will take place in the future, but there are still values worth fighting and murdering for. Values and virtues that are only achieved through the state. Values and virtues that lie outside of the human being but that we nonetheless should strive to acquire or conquer.

The last and most formidable corruption of the revolution-that-still-looked-like-a-revolt was the idea that the future itself, the flow of history, *is* the ultimate moral and political value and virtue. This new piece of the puzzle is brought forth by Hegel's philosophy of history. "Hegel destroys for good all vertical transcendence, and foremost that of the idea of principles, there lies his unquestionable originality" (Camus 2007, 184). With Hegel values are not something lying above human beings, but rather a set of facts posited "at the end of history" (Camus 2007, 184). "Up to that moment [the end of history] there is no criteria to base a value judgment. We must act and live in function of the future. All morality becomes provisional" (Camus 2007, 184).

Camus' true target here, it must be obvious by now, is Marx; but engaging and demolishing Hegel is fundamental for his violent attack of Marxism⁸⁰. He could not be more explicit: "The political, or ideological, movements inspired by Hegel, made common cause in the explicit abandonment of virtue" (Camus 2007, 184).

I would dare to say that at this point *The Rebel* becomes troubling. On the one hand Camus' virulence is understandable, but at times he seems too fixed in his aim (attacking revolutions, and specifically the Russian Revolution) that he embraces on calculated, cynical and intellectually dubious assessments. The liberal West being 'triumphant' in our day makes it perhaps too easy to chastise Camus for his un-tempered words about Marx (although in all fairness he gives us some beautifully humanistic and moving celebrations of Marx's critique of capitalism⁸¹), yet it remains true that Camus' treatment of Marx's thought is unfair to say the least. In other words, there is no excuse, not even the urgency he felt at the time, to justify his attack on Marx, even if Camus is at pains to tell us that his problem is not Marx himself, but with Marxism.

Marx's general sociological critique of the capitalist system is insightful and valuable enough, Camus argues; but it is rendered basically useless for Camus by Marx's penchant for – inaccurate- predictions and prophesies. The keen political and sociological observer is an invaluable contributor to our understanding of the society of his time; Marx the political and economic activist is useless for Camus. The problem is that Marx seems too worried about

⁸⁰ Obviously, turning Hegel into a straw-man to beat at will is also intellectually dishonest and unfair.

⁸¹ As part of his beautiful –if too short- homage of Marx Camus says: "he put work, its unfair degradation and its profound dignity, at the center of his reflections. He revolted against the reduction of work to a simple merchandise and the turning of workers into objects. He revolted against the reduction of work to a simple merchandise and the turning of workers into objects. He reminded those with privileges that their privileges were not divinely sanctioned, nor issuing from an eternal right....he denounced, with an unsurpassed depth, a social class whose crime was not so much its power, but using that power to bring about a mediocre society lacking any sense of true nobility" (Camus 2007, 264). And again: "one quote of his [Marx's], for once clear and trenchant, refuses for ever to his triumphant disciples the grandiosity and humanity that were his: 'an end that necessitate unfair means is not a fair aim'" (Camus 2007, 264).

political action and political power and never strays too far away from the most mystical aspects of Hegel's philosophy of history.

While Camus recognizes Marx's 'discovery' that Hegel's history is primarily *economic* history ("what Hegel said about reality moving towards the spirit, Marx affirms about the economy moving towards a classless society" (Camus 2007, 251), and while he understands that Marx's economicism ends once and for all the fallacy of solitary man (for an economic understanding of history means a social understanding of man), Camus' main grievance against Marx is the fact that he renders Lenin almost inevitable.

Camus' attack on fascism and Nazism in the book is devastating, insightful and moving. Still, by the time he wrote *The Rebel* Nazism had been soundly defeated militarily and solidly discredited intellectually. His real concern was not a widely discredited and shameful nihilistic and irrational ideology, but with what he understood to be a systematic, extremely rational and legitimizing 'gospel' that justified political repression and murder in the name of an aesthetically attractive utopia: revolutionary Marxism.

He goes on: if history is *economic* history, and if given the extremely complex, global reach and huge political and social interests vested on the capitalist economic apparatus, it stands to reason that a very elaborate, systematic and specialized system of repression and policing is necessary to support and preserve this economic status quo. Enter, then, Lenin's professional revolutionary; a character far removed from humanistic values and ideals (the revolt ideal specifically), too entrenched in the struggle against the modern repressive state and its highly specialized economic and political elite, to care about anything other than a militarized struggle to grab

power. Lacking any solid affirmation of moral values and virtues, Marx's economic discovery renders Lenin's professional revolutionaries inevitable; a force solely concerned about how to effectively wrestle power out of the hands of the bourgeoisie. The tragedy here, one might argue, is that Camus understands that there are other ways (other than professional revolutionaries) to bring about the political, social and economic change that he deemed necessary for a more humanistic society; social democracy, as Stephen Eric Bronner points out, being Camus' preferred choice.

When Camus reaches Lenin in *The Rebel*, notwithstanding his cringe-inducing under-reading and mis-reading of Marx, his sub-theory of political change –our main concern here- is obviously clear: Camus is engaged not only in the full demolition of the revolutionary left Pantheon of thinkers and artistic muses, but is fully and rabidly committed to attack revolutions in the name of revolt. Guiltless revolutions have betrayed innocent revolt, hence they must be attacked not only in their specific crimes but as very general ideas.

Camus' deepest concern, however, remains unchanged, is relevant even in our day, and is intimately related to his sub-theory of the human being: his belief that in its drive for total and effective political domination, revolutions have no built-in limits, going as far as to attack human nature if necessary in order to grab power.

I think that while it is imperative –and intellectual honesty would not have it otherwise- to recognize the argumentative 'excesses' and flaws of *The Rebel*, a fruitful reading of the book demands us understanding these excesses as a function of Camus' circumstances, intentions and

his sub-theory of political change. Ironically, and to paraphrase Marx, we can say that Camus is using ‘unfair means’ to arrive to a fair end. This is not pretty, but it is in effect what he does.

One main problem for Camus is the revolutionary’s impetus towards *total* solutions, a danger that he explicitly says Marx warned us about; he posits that Marx had –if “obscurely”- argued that “communism was but *one* necessary form of human being’s future, but that it was not *all* its future” (Camus 2007, 280)⁸². We see here that while at times bordering in intemperate argument, Camus still badly wants to exculpate Marx from what he considered the irresponsibility and excesses of Marxism.

For Camus, revolutions had no limits, are driven towards totality, and are prone to attack what he believed is at its core an inviolable human nature⁸³; and all of this is possible because during the course of the intellectual history of the West the concept of revolt –and its ancillary ideas of a much or less fixed and universal human nature, of limits, of the sanctity of human life- are betrayed by our natural inclination –both political and existential- to get out of the ‘absurd’ predicament of our lot. A predicament that, as he made clear throughout his works in the absurd ‘cycle’, we cannot -nor should- dream to escape. Looking for a total and overriding solution to the scandalous predicament of an unjust fate –both politically and existentially- can only lead to an even more scandalous state of affairs: the move towards a justifiable and legal political terror.

⁸² My emphasis.

⁸³ Again, the problem for Camus is not only that revolutions have no limits in what they try to achieve and the means used to achieve these ends, but that ‘historical revolts’ (or ‘revolutions’ in *The Rebel*’s parlance) turn the absence of those limits into legal, justifiable and necessary affairs. In short, while almost no ideas or concepts have ‘built-in’ limits, for Camus only modern revolutions turn the absence of those limits into something necessary, hence, legally and morally justifiable.

Camus' politico-institutional alternative to any 'final solution', or absolute uncompromising utopia, is what he calls in *Neither Victims nor Executioners* a "relative utopia" (Camus 1977, 131). This 'relative utopia' is as procedural as it is substantive, and it is as political as it is an individual code of conduct. It "demands only that we reflect and then decide, clearly, whether humanity's lot must be made still more miserable in order to achieve far-off shadowy ends...or whether, on the contrary, we should avoid bloodshed and misery as much as possible so that we give a chance for survival to later generations better equipped than we are" (Camus 1977, 131). He supports a relative *global* utopia based on the procedural values of a *democratic* system, in which primacy is given to *legislative* –as opposed to executive- power, and in which the existence of a healthy, uncompromising and independent *free press* is guaranteed. A truly free press is also fundamental in fostering compromise and negotiation, and in avoiding extremism and positions of ideological purity. That is the topic of our next chapter, namely, Camus' sub-theory of political institutions.

Chapter Four: sub-theory of political institutions: Extra! A modest global democracy is needed!

To find Camus' sub-theory of political institutions I posit it is best to engage with the works he wrote as a journalist during his years at the *Combat* newspaper (1944-1947) and some of his other post-war essays, when he was explicitly preoccupied with the reconstruction efforts in post Second World War Europe. The works we have analyzed so far are primarily concerned with larger ideological, moral and philosophical questions, and do not offer the clearest view of Camus' preferences as far as political institutions are concerned. Although this 'institutional' absence is not absolute in the works he have engaged up to this point, his work as an essayist-journalist is the best place to find his most developed ideas in terms of his politico-institutional preferences. The reason for this is as simple as it is self-evident: in Camus' journalistic/editorial work at *Combat* and his post-war essays, he was at his most 'reactive', dealing full-frontal with the day to day political and institutional developments of post-war France. Camus' work at *Combat* bears the imprint of his deepest moral and political convictions, but these convictions very frequently take the form of a more reality-based institutional discussion.

Camus' clearest thinking about what we will call his sub-theory of political institutions is developed during what might easily be understood as Europe's weakest peace-time institutional period given the recent cataclysm of the Second World War. Europe was in ruins, and Europeans of all political stripes (Nazis excepted, obviously) were engaged in a heated, lively and –at times– violent argument about how to reconstruct their nations and institutions so as to avoid repeating

the bloodletting of the previous two global wars. This discussion, however, did not happen in a vacuum, for there were unavoidable realities limiting the political stage, and limiting how much room the continent (and indeed the world) could have about the direction and possibilities of this ‘reconstruction’ at the institutional level. Chief among these limiting factors were the most powerful victors in the war: the United States and the Soviet Union.

Indeed, when Camus wrote his journalistic work after the war, it was already clear that the terms and limits of institutional development were dependent on the budding antagonism between a Stalinist communist camp, led by the Soviet Union, and what appeared to be a liberal camp, led by the United States. Significantly, Camus did not understand this antagonism in exclusively ideological terms. Not only did he see the *geopolitical* significance of this titanic struggle, but also was keenly aware of the technological and economic aspect of it. Specifically, all of Camus’ sub-theory of political institutions is in fact developed against the background of the infinite destructive capabilities of contemporary warfare.

The first key aspect of Camus’ sub-theory of political institutions, then, is *realism*. Not everything was politically desirable, and not everything was politically *possible* for Camus. The two world wars, and Stalin’s bloodbaths, had obviously pointed to certain political avenues that would have to be forever closed, for example. Moreover, political, economic *and* military realities on the ground also limit and dictate what Camus has to say about what kind of political institutions were desirable for him

.

On the other hand, for many, including Bronner (1999) –and the author included- Camus’ call for political realism is deeply compromised by his ineffectual and irrelevant positions during the Algerian War (1954-1962). For all intents and purposes Camus supported the maintenance of a crumbling and oppressive French Empire (although he was also deeply aware of the grievances of the local population at the hands of the colonial power) and seemed unaware of the calls for national independence coagulating all around him. Ironically, while in *Neither Victims nor Executioners* (Camus 1977, 136) Camus predicts future calls for national independence (‘in 10 years, in 50 years’) from European colonies all over the world, he seemed to ignore the really-existing calls for independence around him at the time of his writing. In the specific case of the Algerian War Camus took a principled position that also betrayed an outstanding lack of political realism.

Modern technology, and specifically modern warfare, meant that the struggle between the communist and liberal camps could easily result in a global confrontation that could make the Second World War look like a pleasant day out in the woods. Camus’ thinking about the geopolitical struggle between the liberal and communist camps almost totally ignores the deeper ideological logic behind each faction, being almost totally concerned with the avoidance of war and bloodshed, both immediately and in the longer term. The question for him was: what political institutions will work best to promote freedom, justice, happiness and the rule of law which at the same time will not mean another global war?

In general, as we will see, Camus’ institutional thinking revolves around a deep suspicion about the modern state. His concerns are by no means original, and revolve mostly around the technical

and scientific capabilities that the state could marshal at a moment's notice with the potential for untold chaos and brutality. As we will also see, his concern starts and ends with the historical power of the state to kill 'legally', to justify murder as necessary (hence, legal). It is within this general concern about the modern nation-state's formidable capabilities that we must understand Camus' more specific ideas about political institutions, and his moral and political thinking about and against capital punishment, for example.

Camus' general attitude concerning his views on the state can be summoned by his idea that "for thirty years now, State crimes have been far more numerous than individual crimes (Camus 1961, 227). And his political answer to this state of affairs can also be succinctly summed up by his statement that "our society must now defend herself not so much against the individual as against the State. It may be that the proportions will be reversed in another thirty years. But for the moment, our self-defense must be aimed at the State first and foremost" (Camus 1961, 227). In short, Camus was deeply distrustful of states *in general*, regardless of them being 'communist', 'socialist' or 'liberal', for *all* states are capable of crushing human beings and justifying their immoral actions by legal or ideological means.

Yet, it is an interesting fact that Camus understood at a rather deep level the progressive weakening of the national state. He clearly saw that no nation was an island. In fact, he was well aware that even the economies, interests and reach of the Soviet Union and the United States – the two main nuclei of the budding conflict- were not only global, but ultimately intimately interconnected. He knew that political, social, economic or institutional change in one nation meant change and readjustment at a global level. Major political or institutional

restructuring/change in France, for example, meant change and readjustment for the Soviet Union *and* the United States. Any change, then, had to take into account this; hence, if war was to be avoided, any change had to be acceptable to both camps. His thinking takes good measure of these facts, and as such, can legitimately be called 'global'.

As we will see, then, Camus' 'globalist' ideas were not ideals; his global ideas were not the result of his cosmopolitan tastes or blind wishful thinking, but deeply rooted in a radically realist understanding of the political facts of his time.

Yet, Camus' realism does not compromise the moral dimension of his proposals. In fact, Camus' realist assessment of contemporary geopolitical facts buttressed all the moral and political thought that we have already analyzed in previous chapters. It was a fact that no nation could change its institutions in any meaningful way without risking escalating conflict, but it was *also* a fact that the status quo was not only morally unacceptable but was a recipe for conflict and bloodshed down the line.

Camus also saw that behind the global political realities of his time there were deep ideological undercurrents buttressing the conflict. He could not be clearer in his understanding of the ideological fight around him: both liberal capitalisms and revolutionary communism were based on theories and realities of times past, and hence, wholly inadequate for the challenges of his time. In *Neither Victims nor Executioners* he says: "it is evident for all that political thought finds itself overtaken by current events" (Camus 1977, 135). He is even more specific: "today [1948] big politics pretend to deal with the future of the world by way of principles formed

during the 18th century as it relates liberal capitalism, and the 19th century when referring to so-called scientific socialism.” (Camus 1977, 135)

Still, neither the urgency of the geopolitical situation between the two super powers, nor the noise from their ideological confrontation impeded Camus to see beyond their conflict. History was moving too fast for us to fully comprehend the events around us – “history runs, while the spirit meditates” (Camus 1977, 136)- but he still tried to see beyond the trap –both ideological and historical- that the super powers had set up. He argued that “If we conceive of any international solutions in function of the Russo-American problem, we will risk again being overtaken [by the problems]” (Camus 1977, 136)

Camus obviously understood the budding Cold War as potentially fatal for the planet, but also saw it as temporary (provided we survive it); he thought that the next immense international challenge lying ahead was the struggle for decolonization. Here Camus is both at his most eerily and pathetically prophetic⁸⁴, for he understood that the coming wars of independence, the colonized nations’ call for self-determination, was eventually going to lead –“in 10 years, in 50 years”- to “questioning” the “primacy of Western civilization itself” (Camus 1977, 136). We were heading at an alarming pace to a conflict between whole civilizations, a struggle that had an economic side that in itself was a formidable geopolitical challenge –and here Camus is even more prescient of contemporary international politics-: the global management of natural resources, what he called “the international means of production: petrol, coal and uranium” (Camus 1977, 137).

⁸⁴ See note 75.

Exhausted -but highly reactive and dangerous- ideologies, a global geopolitical stage at the mercy of contemporary technology and warfare, future struggles for decolonization that could conceivably morph into a clash of civilizations, and natural resources management conflict at a global scale; these were the ‘facts’ as Camus understood them to be, and it is with this clear-eyed appreciation of these facts that Camus offers us his sub-theory of political institutions. Failure to consider the facts was conducive either to political failure, bitter disappointment, or even worse, perpetual war. Yet, failure to push back against the status quo, of imagining alternatives to these facts, was a sure road towards world-scale conflict as well.

We can appreciate, then, that Camus’ sub-theory of political institutions –into which we will plunge now- is not only concerned about the substance and content of specific institutional arrangements, but about the sustainability and possibility of actually reaching the desired goal. As morally-rooted as Camus was, he never ceased to be a ‘possibilist’ as well.

His assessment of political realities on the ground led Camus to the conclusion that avoiding and managing conflicts that could become global, required global solutions and global institutions. This he called his ‘relative utopia’. He knew this to be a counter-intuitive concept (after all, how can a global solution could be called ‘relative’?), but still considered his reasoning sound and realist. The fact was that all proposed solutions to political conflict were *already* global, he said, and that global drive was the inescapable reason behind the expansionist, bellicose and colonizing direction of both the liberal-capitalist and revolutionary-socialist camps. The only institutional solution to both the immediate problems and the future ones was going to be necessarily global. The most urgent issue was getting to develop global institutions without

threatening any of the big camps, and actually led both factions to agree to a mutually acceptable solution. The larger issue was how to get there.

Again, Camus does not think it possible –in terms of sustainability- to build the necessary political institutions to keep human beings alive (his aim at the level of his sub-theory of the human being) at the national level exclusively. National institutions are obviously necessary for day to day administrative purposes; still, Camus thought that the sustainability and stability of these national institutions could never be secured unless a more just, peaceful and democratic international order was in place. He thought we needed “to diminish the importance of internal politics” (Camus 1977, 140). Politico-institutional solutions, then, must be devised at an international level in order to sustain stable institutional arrangements at the national level.

Without this new international order “not only the type of property cannot change in a durable way in any part of the globe, but the most simple problems, like our daily bread, the big famine that twists the stomachs of Europe, coal, will not see any solution unless peace can be made” (Camus 1977, 139).

In short, we need solid international institutions, given our globalized world and our global and national challenges. *How* to form these institutions was the issue. We need, according to Camus, a “new social contract” (Camus 1977, 138). For Camus global institutions could be developed from the top down, what he calls an “international dictatorship” setting (Camus 1977, 141); in this scenario, executive leaders from all nations impose their executive privileges and devise institutions far removed and minimally representative of the will of their constituents. This is what he explicitly says is the model of the United Nations. The United Nations (founded in

1945) was, at the time Camus wrote *Neither Victims nor Executioners* (1948) still a very young institution and he says, referring to it, “they are, in effect, preparing us an international law. But that law is made or unmade by governments, meaning, by the executive. We are then within an international dictatorship regime” (Camus 1977, 135). This was clearly unacceptable and unsustainable for Camus; one chief reason being that any global executive-centered governing body, any international institutional arrangement based on a top-down logic, could only lead to the most powerful nations still intending to impose their hegemony –this time through a legitimate international political body- at a global level. In Camus’ time he saw the Soviet Union and the United States, again, vying to occupy the center of this type of international political arrangement.

The new international order, that international law, could be put together in another much more acceptable way for Camus. “What is national or international democracy? It is a form of society where the law is above those in government, that law being the expression of the will of all, represented by a legislative body” (Camus 1977, 134). The only way of building this kind of democratic international regime was by “placing international law above governments, hence of making that law, hence of availing us of a parliament, hence of constituting that parliament by way of global elections in which all people participate” (Camus 1977, 135).

We see here that Camus’ explicit institutional preference is for a global parliamentary body, as opposed to an executive-centered system. This is the ‘new social contract’⁸⁵. National political systems should also preferably be legislature-centered, but ultimately each nation could decide its optimal internal political institutions provided that national local governments were *under* the

⁸⁵ This is the title of the seventh section of the essay *Neither Victims nor Executioners* from 1948.

authority of that larger global parliament. Still, procedurally both international and national institutions had to be *democratic* institutions. In his preference for democracy Camus is Churchillian: it was an imperfect system, but much better than everything else we have seen throughout history.

In absolute agreement with both his sub-theory of the human being and his sub-theory of political change, the first law enacted by this global democratic parliament (an institution residing above the prerogative of local national institutions) had to be “*the general abolition of capital punishment*”⁸⁶ (Camus 1977, 142). Immediately after this the international parliament was to enact “the necessary principles for a civilization of dialogue” (Camus 1977, 142). We appreciate here the mix of very concrete steps (the immediate abolition of capital punishment) and of general guidelines (the establishment of the principles for a ‘civilization of dialogue’). Still, as we will shortly see, Camus’ idea of a ‘civilization of dialogue’ is not as general as that grandiose term could lead us to believe.

Camus does not want this idea of international institutional arrangements to become an ideological totem: “it would not be about building a new ideology, but only about looking for a life style” (Camus 1977, 142). Limiting his proposal to the pursuit of a given life style (he never specified what this ‘life style’ might mean), rather than an all-encompassing and all-explaining ideological Behemoth, means –for example- exploring how that dialogue of civilization might look and what political institutions might be needed for bringing it to fruition.

⁸⁶ My emphasis.

There is wide agreement that engaging Camus' journalistic work is essential to fully grasp his moral and political thought. Yet, I posit that him *being* a journalist –his concrete experience covering trials, his investigative journalism, his solidarity with fellow newspaper workers, his work as a newspaper editor, administrator and editorialist and –more specifically- his thoughts about a free press- are also essential for our understanding of his sub-theory of political institutions. More to the point: Camus' 'civilization of dialogue' is a direct result of his deep understanding of the value of a civilized and independent free press. In very crude terms, a 'civilization of dialogue' can only be the result of civilized dialogue.

Perhaps we could proceed backwards. Camus' assessment about the causes of political decadence, both at an institutional and ideological level, revolves around the ideas of silence and fear. This idea is the opening salvo of his essay *Neither Victims nor Executioners*⁸⁷ (Camus 1977). People all over the world live in fear of war and bloodshed, for all nations understood the Damocles' sword hanging above their heads given the geopolitical conflict of the Cold War. People were in fear of losing their very physical existence because the terror of military conflict was ever present in their lives given the technological development of the techniques and machines of warfare. And that fear bred silence. "Today no one speaks anymore (except those who repeat themselves), because the world seems at the mercy of deaf and blind forces that would not hear the warning cries, the advice, the supplications" (Camus 1977, 118). Ideologies had rendered mankind un-persuadable. He continues, "the long dialogue of man has just stopped. Clearly, a man that one cannot persuade is a scary man" (Camus 1977, 118).

⁸⁷ This work was originally published in the newspaper *Combat* in 1948, and was reprinted in *Actuelles: écrits politiques* (Camus 1977)

The point, then, would be to move man from the paralyzing silence caused by terror, to the lively dialogue that would make life sustainable and worth living. Living in terror meant “that the majority of men are deprived of a future” (Camus 1977, 117). Living in dialogue meant just the opposite. For Camus, however, the abstract concept of dialogue meant one thing only: *political institutions* that not only supported, but encouraged dialogue. As we will see, the free press is institutionally essential to this aim for Camus.

Dialogue also meant something much more profound than dialogic-friendly political institutions; it meant the willingness to establish a dialogue with oneself in order to correct one’s positions and render oneself persuadable to the ideas of others. In the preface of *Actuelles*, a collection of editorial essays during his early period at *Combat*, Camus shows us what he meant. The collection, he says, includes essays expressing ideas “that have become foreign to me” (Camus, 1977, 13) but *still* he included the essays in the collection because the aim of dialogue –and of the journalist- was not to be right but to be truthful to historical events and the facts. He confesses:

“a number of editorials in *Combat*⁸⁸, for example, are included here not because of their worthiness -they barely are- or because of their content, for they have opinions that, at times, I do not share anymore, but because they seem significant to me. One or two of them I read today not without malaise, or sadness, and I had to

⁸⁸ From 1946.

make an effort to have them reprinted here. But this testimony could not tolerate any omissions” (Camus 1977, 14)⁸⁹.

By reprinting those painful editorials he wished to pay the price of his mistakes. This is Camus as Clamance (the tortured main character of *The Fall*). He had to bring to light his own mistaken opinions, because “in politics mistakes follow conviction like a shadow” (Camus 1977, 14). At one page and a half *Actuelles*’ preface is very short, but it speaks volumes about Camus’ intellectual honesty, his deepest political and philosophical convictions, and his inner struggles as an all too human being.

Breaking the silence bred by fear through a dialogical attitude, and dialogical political institutions, meant being willing to speak –and pay the price of speaking- the truth. This truth could only emerge through dialogue, and could also solely emerge through the constant reassessment of one’s positions and public admission of mistakes and wrongs.

That the political institution of a free press is of fundamental importance in the establishment of dialogue for Camus must be self-evident by now; still, we have to dig a little bit deeper to see what he meant by a ‘free press’⁹⁰.

⁸⁹ He does not explicitly say it, but we can safely assume that Camus’ ‘malaise, or sadness’ regarding some of his previous journalistic work refers to his original support for the execution of some members of the Nazi leadership and collaborators in France.

⁹⁰ We should underline the irony that nothing resembling a ‘free press’ (as we understand it today) existed in France before the French Revolution in 1789. So, while Camus is very critical of the excesses, terror and bloodletting that followed the French Revolution, and although at times he glosses over the dark aspects of pre-1789 France (to the point of seeming nostalgic of the *ancien régime* while discussing the execution of the King) it was the French *Revolution* that first brought a ‘free press’ to France.

Although the discussion of the idea of a free press might seem as an affair having mostly to do with institutions, it is quite surprising to see how Camus' sub-theory of political institutions is so overtly and explicitly related to his sub-theory of the human being.

Camus understood dialogue, and the institution of a free press, as a *limiting* and corrective enterprise. A civilization of dialogue, then, means that all institutions needed (political institutions among them) to bring about this dialogic arrangement were also necessarily *limiting* and corrective institutions.

Human beings are not only prone to self-delusion, self-aggrandizing and mistakes, but a surprisingly large percentage of us –or so Camus thought- is also shockingly ready to torture and commit murder. He thought the Second World War was solid enough a proof about this.

Interestingly enough, Camus does not talk about the Holocaust as institutionalized murder with any specificity either in *The Rebel* or in his *Reflections on the Guillotine*⁹¹. He devotes a few poignant pages in *The Rebel* about the murderous and nihilistic nature of the Nazi regime, and talks at length about his concern for the Stalinist show trials and executions in the Soviet Union, both in the *The Rebel* and in *Reflections on the Guillotine*; yet, there is barely a mention of the Holocaust as such.

⁹¹ It is quite safe to assume that the Holocaust was very much present in Camus' mind when he worked in the many references in *The Fall* to Amsterdam's Jewish Quarter, and the overall and pervasive gloom of the work.

Camus gets to work on this narrower and more specific issue of our darker drives, that he felt were reflected at a social level in the brutal practice of capital punishment, much later in *Reflections on the Guillotine* from 1957.

Human nature is beautiful and worth sustaining at any cost, but unfortunately human beings are also at times controlled by unruly psychological and temperamental forces. He cannot be more explicit about this than he is in his *Reflections on the Guillotine*. While attacking the arguments of those in favor of capital punishment, he argues that even the fear of a violent death is not strong enough to persuade people not to kill; and that even the most respectable people are prone to psychological states that led them to murder and torture: “those peaceful creatures are the ones who pride the largest percentage of homicides” (Camus and Koestler 1957, 186). He says, “according to a magistrate, the vast majority of murderers he had known did not know when shaving in the morning that they were going to kill later in the day” (Camus and Koestler 1957, 186). It was evident for Camus that *limiting*⁹² political institutions, and capital punishment was not among them, were needed to keep human beings in check. An attitude of dialogue and of speaking the truth was necessary for this. But the solution could not be only left to each; it has to be built-in institutionally at a political level.

A free press was one of these necessary political institutions. Camus thought that a press too tied up to moneyed interests, and too oblivious to important historical events before the war, was a press not optimally positioned to forewarn France and rest of the world about the coming cataclysm. Evidently, a weak press did not cause the war, but it facilitated it. “The press from before the war was lost as to their principles and morality” (Camus 1977, 28), he says in his

⁹² As in ‘that encourage limits’, not as in ‘that are limited’.

editorial ‘Critique of the New Press’⁹³. The aim should be to “liberate the newspapers from money and give them a tone and truthfulness that elevate the public to the standards of that which is best in it” (Camus 1977, 28).

Camus’ idea of a global democratic parliament “in which all people participate” is not possible without truthful and self-correcting dialogue; a global parliament without a free and independent press –an institution responsible for this truthful and self-correcting dialogue- is merely a utopia among others. Each nation needs a free press in order to reach that “civilization of dialogue”; this was a *sine qua non* at the national level. “We think –he writes in the same editorial- that a country is usually worth the value of its press” (Camus 1977, 28). The press had to “raise each country by elevating its language” (Camus 1977, 28). Newspapers had to “fear the excesses of rhetoric” (Camus 1977, 29). He preferred ‘objectivity’ to rhetoric (Camus 1977, 30).

Journals and newspapers –and Camus’ complaint shows us how very little our world has changed- had to be about to “inform well” rather than to “inform fast” (Camus 1977, 31). Journalists also had the responsibility of helping to flesh out current events, and aid in the comprehension of stories. They had to provide context, for without context any event could mean anything and everything to each different person. History was disorderly, and without proper context many important events were devoid of any moral significance. Journalists could also help by offering moral and political commentary⁹⁴. Newspaper writers should also acquaint their readers with “the information technique” (Camus 1977, 32) in order to raise awareness of how journalism and reporting happens. Only by being knowledgeable –if only slightly- about how

⁹³ By ‘new press’ Camus refers to the journalists and newspapers working in France right after liberation in 1945.

⁹⁴ As Bronner reminds us, “His was the only French editorial on August 8, 1945, that expressed horror and outrage at the dropping of the atom bomb”. (103)

journalism worked, could readers be made ready to critically assess what they had in front of their eyes. In this call for meta-information about the techniques of information gathering Camus sounds almost contemporary to us. Most importantly, journalists and newspapers had to be open to publicly own their mistakes and self-correct, that most difficult of tasks.

Without these moral and political commitments newspapers were not only useless, but indeed dangerous; for they could easily become the weapon of choice of tyrants and dictatorships: tools of propaganda. The absence of a free and independent press also meant the reign of silence, and as the mother tells the daughter of *The Misunderstanding*: “silence is fatal” (Bronner 1999, 71) (Camus 1972, 123-124).

Shunning euphemisms whenever possible was also part of that truthful dialogue necessary to “save the bodies” (Camus 1977, 121), and this was specially the case with the press. “Tricks of language” only helped the perpetuation of unacceptable and unsustainable political institutions, as was the case –and still is in the United States- with regards the institution of capital punishment.

In *Neither Victims nor Executioners*, Camus repeated the often told story of his father’s reaction upon returning from witnessing the beheading of a particularly monstrous criminal: Camus’ father became sick and started throwing up. What his father had seen, the revolting spectacle of a man being guillotined, was still practiced in France in the late 1940’s, but the executions took place behind prison walls all over the country. Camus argued that the French government knew

the practice to be revolting and morally unacceptable to many people, and in order to forestall any violence or unscripted incidents it had decided to hide executions from public view⁹⁵.

Yet, the press was also in the business of hiding the many executions of the time through its use of euphemisms. Instead of writing the truth, that of a “blade that will slice off your head like a razor” (Camus and Koestler 1957, 182), “we read at breakfast time in a corner of the newspaper that the condemned ‘has paid his debt to society, or that he has ‘atoned’, or that ‘at five a.m. justice was done’ (Camus and Koestler 1957, 176).

It was the press’ job to speak clearly and truthfully; without this non-euphemistic truth-telling, neither a national democracy nor a global democratic parliament were achievable institutional goals.

Lastly, the press had another extremely important task: the preservation of memory. Memory is important for Camus both at a philosophical level and at the level of his sub-theory of political change. *The Rebel* contains Camus’ longest and deepest discussion about revolutionary socialism’s (and Marxism’s) usages of history for their own ideological and political purposes. Without getting into too much detail about his thinking concerning this, we can say with confidence that Camus felt the concepts of time and history were trapped under the most revolutionary strands of leftist thought. The concept of history was used as an omnipotent excuse that allowed revolutionaries to commit the worst atrocities in the name of it. The worst crimes could be committed as politically and ideologically necessary and no *present* judgment could be

⁹⁵ The last public execution in France was the 1939 execution of Eugene Weidmann for murder. A secretly recorded video of the execution is extant.

pronounced against these crimes because, in the words of Fidel Castro, ‘history will absolve me’. Not only all possible judgment lay exclusively in the future (making moral judgment today impossible), but facts from the *past* were also a matter of contention because the socialist revolutionaries’ had a penchant to re-write history to force past events to conform to their current and future ideological and political needs. In short, truthful memory was the best guarantee to guard against the ‘uses and abuses of history’. A free press is needed to safeguard the past against the depredations of the present.

Another important component of Camus’ sub-theory of political institutions is ‘negative’: the abolition of capital punishment. This opposition he treats at length in ‘Reflections on the Guillotine’, an essay published within *Reflections on Capital Punishment*, a book authored by Camus and Arthur Koestler (Camus and Koestler 1957).

His arguments against the death penalty are cogent, but they are completely familiar by now: capital punishment is not exemplary, it does not prevent crime, it might breed violence given its inhumanity, the judiciary system is imperfect, executions are just revenge and retaliation, etc. Still, the essay is a must read because Camus’ style is impeccable and impressive; because in it we find gems like this: “the guillotine exists, and so does crime; between the two there is no apparent connection than that of the law” (Camus and Koestler 1957, 192); and because it contains a very clear exposition of Camus’ political thought regarding institutions and its relationship to human frailties.

Camus's discussion about capital punishment begins to concern his sub-theory of political institutions at the moment he finally declares –midway into the essay- that executing criminals is pure revenge, an impulse that “comes down to us from the primitive forests” (Camus and Koestler 1957, 198).

It is evident that the main point and relevance of *Reflections on the Guillotine* is Camus' brilliant argument against capital punishment, but for our specific interest of establishing the contours of Camus' sub-theory of political institutions the book becomes interesting after the main argument against the practice has been all laid out. “Retaliation is related to nature and instinct, not to law. Law, by definition, cannot obey the same rules as nature. If murder is in the nature of man, the law is not intended to imitate or reproduce that nature. It is intended to correct it” (Camus and Koestler 1957, 198).

Human beings can agree among themselves to enact laws, practices and processes that lie above and beyond each individual potential murderer (all of us!), in order to correct that part of nature-in-the-person that needs to be corrected. Laws are social *precisely* because there is something in us that is not. As Camus says earlier on “I do not think that man is by nature a social animal. To tell the truth, I think just the reverse” (Camus and Koestler 1957, 178).

But although necessary for human survival, society is obviously not perfect and cannot be elevated to the status of a divinity. Yet, this is –according to Camus- precisely what has happened: “society began in the nineteenth century to find a substitute for religion by proposing herself as an object of adoration” (Camus and Koestler 1957, 226) and it became “accustomed to

legitimizing what might serve her future and, consequently, to making use of the supreme punishment in an absolute way” (Camus and Koestler 1957, 226).

It was all an almost Satanic turn of events, not dissimilar to what Jean-Jacques Rousseau painted in his *Social Contract*. Individuals had built society to survive, and yet, everywhere they were in concentration camps. There was one key difference: Camus thought that human beings were neither naturally good nor born free; we were rather bound by very dark and powerful psychological and passional forces buried deep within us. This is a subtle but fundamental distinction, and perhaps an ironic one, given our pre-conceptions of who Albert Camus was and what he thought: nothing that came from humans –not even coming from all of us acting together and democratically- could guarantee perfect political institutions and solutions.

This is not what he saw around him. “State crimes have been far more numerous than individual crimes” (Camus and Koestler 1957, 227) in the twentieth century he said in *Reflections on the Guillotine*. The State and society were simply out of control, and the human individual was in dire need of protection from the institutions supposedly created to assure human survival. In one of the most chilling ideas that I have ever encountered in Camus, he tells us “each of us, however honorable he may be, can foresee the possibility of being someday condemned to death” (Camus and Koestler 1957, 227). “Justice and expediency command the law to protect the individual against a State given over to the follies of sectarianism or of pride” (Camus and Koestler 1957, 227).

As Stephen Eric Bronner reminds us, it was ideas like that that have been used by neoconservative thinkers to appropriate Camus' ideas and distort them as simplistic liberal-democratic political thought (Bronner 1999, 152-154). The truth is that the liberal conservative misreading is a brutal and willful misreading and over simplification of Camus' thought. For Camus knew that there were centuries in which individuals had to be protected not from the state, but from each other, or from feudal lords, or from the forces of nature. Human beings also need protection from market forces and financial dictatorship, for example. Human beings' solutions were always in need of readjustment and reassessment, for the simple reason that human beings were deeply flawed moral beings.

Camus could not understand how society was so confident in putting a criminal to death when society itself bears part of the guilt for every single murder; "every society has the criminals it deserves" (Camus and Koestler 1957, 206).

The problem was a lack of institutional humility (and while the following quote is specifically about capital punishment, it is relevant for a whole other host of situations): "if justice admits that it is frail, would it not be better for justice to be modest and to allow its judgments sufficient latitude so that a mistake can be corrected?" (Camus and Koestler 1957, 216-217).

Societal institutions were the result of "**a solidarity of men in error and aberration**" (Camus and Koestler 1957, 217). That solidarity 'in error and aberration' had to be recognized at all times. It was society's own Sisyphean boulder. *That constant recognition* of our proclivity to make mistakes and our common darkest passions is what he calls 'compassion', a concept that

sits almost silently at the center of Camus' moral and political universe. In *Reflections on the Guillotine* Camus once again engages in weighting the claims of justice as against the claims of compassion. Just like Kaliyev in *The Just Assassins*, he chooses compassion⁹⁶.

Political institutions have to offer room and opportunities for reassessment of judgments and decisions; they had to take into account that society and the state were fallible, just as individual human beings are. Democratic processes, and accountable institutions, can minimize errors, but they offer no absolute guarantee. The only guarantee was an attitude of institutional humility, and that meant institutions refusing to take irrevocable decisions, such as capital punishment. For Camus, final judgments are not the types of judgments appropriate to the human condition.

In ending, none of his ideas about compassion and limits meant –for example- that Camus was a Ghandian advocate of non-violence⁹⁷. He was not. He participated in the *Resistance* against the Nazis in France; and the *Resistance* was –as Aldo Raine, the main character in Quentin's Tarantino's *Inglorious Basterds* would put it- in “the business of killing Nazis”. Yes, Camus was a pacifist, he never advocated the use of violence, but he knew and understood violence as an *unfortunate* occurrence in human affairs, as he tells his ‘German friend’ in his famous three *Letters to a German Friend*. The problem is the legitimization, legalization and systematizaion of violence and murder; flaunting it as necessary.

⁹⁶ We will revisit this central aspect of my argument in the conclusion, the next section of the present work.

⁹⁷ He was ‘accused’ of being a non-violent partisan –if you can be *accused* of that- by Emmanuel D’Astier de la Vigerie –(1900-1969) founding member of the newspaper *Libération*, Minister of the Interior for the Provisional Government of the French Republic (GPRF) in 1945, and member of the French resistance against the Nazis- on *Arrachez la victime aux bureaux*, D’Astier de la Vigerie’s reply to *Neither Victims nor Executioners*.

Just as with the other aspects –or sub-theories- of his political thought, Albert Camus’ sub-theory of political institutions is one that revolves around the ideas of limits and *compassion*. His institutional recipes are always contextual and specific, the only repeated imperative being his call not to ever take final unappealable decisions. This might seem as overtly abstract and general, but it is not. His sub-theory of political institutions calls us to leave the door open, to offer society and human individuals the opportunity to make amends; in this it mimics, coheres and reflects Camus’ ideas about human beings and political change.

Only if human beings –both individually and communally- have a second chance to admit their guilt and correct their errors, only then will political life be a humble step beyond our shared ‘errors and aberrations’.

As a conclusion of this chapter I would add a thought many times discussed with my thesis adviser, Marshall Berman; an idea that was difficult to accept early on, but that time and research made clear: Camus’ moral and political thought seems to be clouded and compromised in direct proportion to his willingness to fight the Cold War. The same can be said about Jean-Paul Sartre. Camus was an original and brilliant left of center humanist thinker, but it is clear –as we have seen in this very chapter and the previous one (where we discussed *The Rebel* at some length)- that the farther Camus got from Cold War polemics the more fruitful and compelling his moral and political thought became. The zenith of his moral thought I believe can be found in his campaign (along with Koestler) against capital punishment. He presented strong institutional and political arguments for his position, but at the end, it was mostly a moral argument: capital punishment morally belittles and victimizes both the victim and the executioner, while achieving nothing positive that justifies or explains its moral, psychological and social price.

Chapter Five: Conclusion: The limits of justice

At its root the concept of justice refers us to the idea of balance⁹⁸, and at a deeper level to the idea of compassion. Indeed, in its purest form justice can be understood in the classic platonic way, as a principle that propels us to keep things balanced from the onset, an attitude that helps us act in measured ways as to respect certain boundaries that should not be crossed, or confuse things that should not be confused, the harmonic plucking of a string. But, in perhaps a more overtly political understanding of the term, justice can also be understood as a reaction, a correction, a reassessment, a second chance to balance things out when they have become off-kilter, the re-tuning of an out of tune instrument that we bring back to harmony.

In both these senses Albert Camus is a philosopher of justice. For all his emotionally moving and trenchant prose, Camus always remained an admirer of the ‘balanced’ classical spirit. But as the realist that he was, Camus also understood that this second meaning of justice (justice as corrective action) had an inherently human problem: us going too far in our corrective efforts, hence creating more injustice and defeating our original corrective intentions; in short, justice had the problem of human excess.

The gravest injustices, his works seem to tell us, demand the most patience and cool-headedness from us⁹⁹. For the violence created by such gravely unjust acts (acts of genocide, for example) usually require time to allow corrective actions to take full effect. Justice was not simply about holding the Nuremberg Trials, but also about allowing time to pass and let the German nation ‘correct’ –to the extent a Holocaust and World War can be corrected, that is- its wrongs; a

⁹⁸ This idea of ‘justice as balance’ is at least as old as Plato’s *Republic*.

⁹⁹ ‘Patience’ is an interesting –if marginal- idea in Camus; on *The Rebel* he warns: “the law of power never has patience” (Camus 1977, 64)

decades-long process. Just as the murder of an innocent, for example, cannot simply be corrected by the swift application of the law (although that is a necessary first step), it also requires time to intervene and see if the assassin can somehow ‘correct’ the wrong s/he has done through good actions. This is seen at its clearest in Camus’ opposition to the death penalty. Camus is not naïve; he struggles while thinking of those people that seem beyond redemption (some unrepentant murderers), beings whose aberrations are so deep that it takes the proverbial ‘leap of faith’ to imagine them ever doing any good. Still, true justice requires us to never close the door to anybody’s potential redemption. In other words: justice-as-corrective-action can only be a very painful and never-ending proposition; a Sisyphean affair requiring us to keep pushing up the boulder uphill perpetually.

The idea of justice was, then, insufficient as the sole guiding principle in political situations, for it could easily degenerate into cases of ‘extreme justice’, ‘absolute justice’ and/or outright cruelty (i.e. no justice at all); hence Camus’ constant reminders of ‘limits’ and ‘measuredness’. In the end, Camus’ idea of ‘limits’ is not divorced, but rather intimately related, to his larger and deepest concerns about justice. Yet, in political and social settings, the profound ideas of justice, measuredness and limits might still not be enough to check our shared and terribly human darkest impulses (that ‘solidarity of man in error and aberration’).

Limits (measuredness, *la mesure*), cannot be understood in Camus’ thought as an end in itself; we have to have limits *because* we need to be compassionate with each other, and we need to be compassionate with each other out of solidarity for our shared human propensity to ‘error and aberrations’ and because justice itself demands it. In a very specific sense compassion is the

surest way to allow deep justice to work its corrective balancing act. Compassion, that *attitude that impels a moving/energized force (a person or institution) to pause or slow down before performing an irreversible action, and that gives time and space to an individual and/or society to consider human beings' commonality in 'error and aberration'* is absolutely necessary if we are to have the best chance of building a just society.

And while all of this abstract discussion can make perfect sense theoretically, morally and philosophically, Camus understood that the solid logical relationship between limits, justice and compassion was not commonly found in politically messy human affairs. Rather, it was much more common to find examples (like what he felt was the deeply compromised Russian Revolution) in which our moral and political principles became disjointed to the point of undermining each other. We only need to remember the chorus in *The State of Siege*: “no, there is not justice, but there are limits” (Camus 1961, 232).

This is, in my assessment, the greatest contribution of Albert Camus' political thought for our times, his grappling with the absurd in politics. Yet, while much has been written about his emphasis on limits and measuredness¹⁰⁰, almost nothing has been said about his idea on the need for compassion (and mercy¹⁰¹) in the political sphere. In fact, as Herbert Lottman notes in his biography, by the 1950's Camus was beginning to feel 'exasperated' by the reaction that his ideas of 'limits' and 'measuredness' elicited from the public, and he felt that he needed to move on from what he felt were concepts that underlined a certain kind of 'austerity' and negativity

¹⁰⁰ See for example the very old article 'La notion de limite chez Simone Weil et chez Albert Camus', (Rastan 1953).

¹⁰¹ In an interview in 1954 Camus speaks frankly about his growing doubts with the idea of justice, and quotes Sancho Panza, who having being made governor of an island by Don Quijote, himself realizes the limits of justice: “since we cannot render a simple justice, let us at least appeal to mercy” (from Lottman 1979, 564).

(the idea of limits and measure revolve around a hypothetical ‘you shall not...’) , towards more positive and actionable ideas (the ideas of compassion and pity revolve around a hypothetical ‘you shall be or do....’); Camus said “that he was seeking to go beyond the concepts of *limite*, *mesure*” (Lottman 1979, 563). Limits and measuredness, Camus eventually understood, were not nearly enough to face some of the situations human beings had to deal with under extreme duress and crises. This trying to move beyond limits and measuredness, his growing uneasiness with the idea of justice, perhaps explains his position on his native Algeria’s Civil War.

In *Camus, Portrait of a Moralist* (Bronner 1999) Stephen Bronner presents a powerful critique of Camus’ as a rather faulty philosopher. Writing about *The Rebel*, Camus’ weak arguments in it and the ideological and philosophical opening these offered to Sartre and his allies, Bronner bluntly states: ‘Camus certainly does not argue his case very well’ (Bronner 1999, 91). More recently Ronald Srigley has added to the criticism by stating that Camus’ argumentative strategy in *The Rebel* undermines the whole structure of the work, calling it “a series of weak, frequently sophistic arguments” (Srigley 2011, 51)¹⁰².

But Bronner argues that Camus’ problem went beyond faulty arguments; for behind what he feels are Camus’ weak arguments lurked the problem of Camus’ own personal insecurities and vacillations¹⁰³ when impotently faced with unspeakable bloodshed and human tragedy on a large scale. This is at its clearest in Camus’ role during the Algerian War. As the bloodshed grew in

¹⁰² Srigley’s argument is a bit convoluted, although interesting; he considers that *The Rebel* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* are completely at odds (Srigley argues that Camus’ faulty logic stems from his own personal confusion towards the issues of Christianity), hence undermining the coherence of Camus larger philosophical system. While Camus rejects any possible salvation in *The Myth*, in *The Rebel* Srigley sees Camus the proto-Christian, positing the character of the rebel as an intermediary capable of saving human beings from themselves.

¹⁰³ As the previous note makes clear, Bronner is not the last author to blame Camus’ ‘faulty’ logic on his personal confusions and dilemmas, be they theological or political.

his native land, and as his proposals floundered one after the other under the extremism of both sides (the right-wing colons and the nationalist FLN), Camus fell silent. As his preferred option (a more autonomous and republican Algeria within the French polity, that recognized the rights of the French colons) painfully became but a utopia, Camus refused to take sides on the conflict and soil his hands with the blood of the innocent.

At one level Bronner understands Camus' choice; at another level he believes Camus' refusal to take sides bordered on the criminal. "His choice was a refusal to choose between the only serious alternatives available, and, in the context of the time, his vacillations were less than irrelevant: *they actually hindered bringing the conflict to a close*¹⁰⁴" (Bronner 1999, 116). Although morally questionable, there is some sense in Bronner's assessment of what Camus should have done: 'his primary ethical aim should have led him to embrace the side with the best chance of ending the bloodshed' (Bronner 1999, 114), namely the FLN. Bronner does not see any development in Camus' thought to adjust to the Algerian situation, and argues that he simply acted in the ways 'prescribed' in *The Rebel*, with its faulty logic. But what were –according to Bronner- already vague general ideas of ('limits', 'rebellion vs. revolution', 'refusal') were "nearly" turned by the Algerian War "into platitudes" (Bronner 1999, 114).

Bronner's final assessment on this issue is quite straightforward, Camus –just as Jean-Paul Sartre on his side¹⁰⁵- found it extremely difficult to connect theory and practice.

¹⁰⁴ His emphasis.

¹⁰⁵ In their back and forth on Sartre's *Les Temps Modernes* about *The Rebel* (the debate that officially ended their friendship) Sartre chastised Camus for his inability to properly 'engage' (engagement) in politically sensitive situations, accusing him of moral posturing. Yet, as Bronner argues, he might as well have been talking about himself. For Sartre himself found it extremely difficult to engage politically, connecting theory and practice. Bronner reminds us how in Sartre "discontent with one communist experiment only led to the next. Ever more

That Camus –and Sartre for that matter- had difficulties connecting theory and practice is painfully obvious to all, yet not at the least surprising. For one, in the specific case of the Algerian War, it is almost impossible to imagine one’s own native land being drenched in blood and being forced to take sides in the bloodbath, especially when both sides –from Camus’ perspective- had rights and legitimate grievances worth fighting for. In addition, it seems to me that to pass such a stern judgment as Bronner’s almost half a century removed from the events in question is a bit unfair.

Personally, I have always found baffling the contemporary obsession to try to redeem or condemn Camus on the bloodbath of Algeria¹⁰⁶. An important watershed on the Camus-on-Algeria debate was Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*, where a whole chapter, ‘Camus and the French Imperial Experience’ (Said 1994, 176), is devoted to Camus. Said goes as far as calling Camus a “very late imperial figure¹⁰⁷” (Said 1994, 208) for his refusal to outright embrace Algerian nationalism¹⁰⁸. The flow of works about Camus and Algeria has continued ever since, both for and against Camus’ role and actions during the conflict. For example, most of Tony Judt’s introduction to the 1994 printing of *Le Premier Homme* centers around Algeria (Camus 1994)¹⁰⁹; Alice Kaplan’s introduction to the English translation of his *Chroniques*

surely, the “realist” found himself making one unrealistic excuse after another for one Third World “dictatorship of the proletariat” after another” (Bronner 1999, 100).

¹⁰⁶ The scholarly literature on Camus’ relationship is vast, and interesting. Yet, the present work won’t dwell on this topic at any serious length for I consider any possible conclusion to that debate (either, Camus was complicit of colonialism, or conversely, Camus’ work on Algeria is irreproachable) largely irrelevant to the present work.

¹⁰⁷ Obviously implying both that Camus was morally and politically wrong, *and* clueless about the changes happening around him, in other words: a reactionary.

¹⁰⁸ Said’s take on Camus –a subject that I treated at length in my M.A. thesis, is interesting, yet, it bears reminding the reader that Said had a very explicit political agenda concerning the Middle East and Islam.

¹⁰⁹ Although this is not the case with Judt’s introduction to the Penguin edition of *The Plague* of 2001.

Algériennes (trans. *Algerian Chronicles*) similarly deals with Camus' profound personal and political dilemma regarding the country's civil war at great length (Camus 2013, 1). The literature in the French-speaking world is, obviously, teeming with works about the topic; but curiously enough, some of the works by some notable North African scholars, like Ali Yédes' *Camus l'Algérien* (Yédes 2003), José Lenzini's *Camus et l'Algérie* (Lenzini 2010) and Abdelmaker Djemaï's *Camus à Oran* (Djemaï 1995) take an almost mythical, organic and transcendental approach in *embracing* Camus' Algerian-ness¹¹⁰.

It is clear, given all the controversy surrounding his position (or lack thereof, according to critics) on the Algerian Civil War, that Camus could have done a much better job of explaining his stance given his political and personal loyalties both to France and Algeria; he did not. In a very sad and ironic turn of events, the situation in Algeria was so maddeningly personal and painful that Camus either chose not to be clear, could not, or was unable to sort out his position in any satisfactory way. The result is the backlash and the smudge we see attached to his name and the Algerian Civil War. Camus was right about the complacency with murder, or the easiness with which other intellectuals in the West explained away the bloodletting in his native land in the name of ideologies (like nationalism, socialism, revolutionism, communism, capitalism, etc.), still, he was in a privileged position –as a highly French Algerian public intellectual- and had the responsibility to flesh out and expound his political and moral reasoning in a more systematic, reasoned and lengthy manner as it related to the Algerian Civil War. In this last point he failed.

¹¹⁰ For English speakers David Carroll's *Albert Camus, the Algerian* (2007) presents a spirited, well-researched and insightful defense of Camus's role during the Algerian Civil War.

Ultimately, however, Camus' painful failure to bring about any civilized resolution *on the ground* during the Algerian Civil War speaks about his failure as a political figure, and not about the failure or weakness of his ideas or proposals. Camus found no buyers for his ideas during a conflict that had been brewing for well over a century; and that should tell us more about his skills (or lack thereof) as a political practitioner, than about the soundness and humanism of his moral and political thought.

But there is a deeper level at which I believe Bronner's conclusion about Camus' problematic 'refusal' is off the mark: Camus' whole oeuvre was predicated on the idea of 'limits' and on the refusal to shed innocent blood in the name of ideology (colonialism or nationalism in the case of Algeria). Camus' so-called 'silence', his using all energies and efforts to privately plead for the life of militants condemned to death, his repeated -and ineffective- calls for a truce and unsuccessful condemnations of the nationalists' terrorist tactics was all he could do in good conscience according to his own writings. Camus' 'silence' and 'refusal' was analogous to Kaliyev's retreat and refusal to use the bomb when faced with the presence of the two kids in his target's carriage.

Accusing Camus of 'hindering' the closure of the conflict is, then, only *possibly* true, while certainly unfair¹¹¹. It helps us to understand that Camus' idea of limits is not only a moral concept, but, in a very specific sense, an almost 'biological' one. In Camus' work the idea of 'limits' refers not only to limiting our actions in the political realm (not everything is permitted, he tells us in *The Rebel*), but *also* to the limits imposed by our human biology and the

¹¹¹ In fact, I personally doubt Professor Bronner would have taken sides with the FLN and its indiscriminate bombing campaign just because they had the best chance of winning the conflict faster and consequently putting an end to it more promptly. You simply cannot side with the most effective murderer in a conflict between murderers.

constitution of our brains concerning what we can actually know about the world; Camus understood the obvious: that for all our awe-inspiring rational powers, there were certain things, certain situations, in which not only our knowledge, but our options, were limited. That is precisely the power and insight of the idea of the absurd. In short, in Camus the idea of limits is not only a normative concept, but a descriptive one.

Through no fault of his own, Bronner also fails to consider that perhaps Algeria is not the best (or only) ‘case study’ to attest the power and effectiveness of Camus’ moral and political thought. After all, it seems logical to conclude that given that Camus was born in Algeria, and deeply concerned and involved in the debates about the Algerian War, the Algerian conflict might constitute the battlefield where Camus’ ideas went to thrive or die. Bronner makes it explicitly clear that Camus’ Algerian engagement was a failure, and by all accounts, Camus’ being the first, it was. Yet, I would argue that Algeria is not the only place where we see the power of Camus’ ideas get dirty with a real-life political conflict. Barely a decade later, Camus’ thought reception by the activists of the Civil Rights movement, the New Left and the Anti-Vietnam War movement, makes it clear that Camus’ thought had a second –and this time successful- opportunity to be tested in times of political conflict and social upheaval (Rossinow 1998)¹¹².

It can be argued that it was the Civil Rights movement’s activists that got the message about Camus’ concerns about justice, and his positive ideas about compassion. Among the many things that they were, the movement against the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights movement and the New

¹¹² Rossinow’s *The Politics of Authenticity* (1998), provides an excellent analysis of Camus reception by the New Left, the Civil Rights movement and the Anti-Vietnam War movement.

Left, can be understood as calls for compassion and maturity in the American polity; and as we will see at the end of this conclusion, the ideas of old-age and maturity are intrinsically connected with Camus' understanding of compassion.

Camus understood that ideally, compassion and justice should go hand in hand; politically however, we might be forced to choose between one and the other; the aim always being the avoidance of innocent blood. The key idea here is how the humanly imperfect quest for justice, and the limits of our knowledge, might lead us to perform an irreversible action (especially against innocent human beings); and that is what Camus most wishes to avoid. Measuredness in the service of compassion is what allows us to avoid an irreversible action: acting on our understanding of our common propensity to 'aberration and error' and the limits of our rational powers.

The idea of measuredness (Camus somehow preferred the term *la mesure* to *limites*) has to be understood as a purely 'procedural' mechanism, an attitude; and indeed, in her 1953 essay about the idea of limits in the thought of Simone Weill and Camus, Marie-Joséphine Rastan reminds us that Camus never separated his idea of 'limits' from the mechanical idea of 'brakes' (*frein*).

Rastan argues that, contrary to Weill, "Camus keeps the idea of brakes"¹¹³; she continues:

"measuredness is the desperate tension that says no to evil and yes to what is right. This tension is what generates life and action. It [measuredness] leans against the nihilisms that lead humanity to regimes of terror. Only measuredness can stop them" (Rastan 1953, 33).

¹¹³ Rastan understands Weill's idea of limits as intimately tied with her mystical and theological beliefs. The idea of limits for her is a mystical evocation of the biblical process of Creation, where God 'rested' and retreated after six days of creation giving human beings, according to Weill, a chance to exercise their will and unleash their own creative forces. In Camus there is no such belief in biblical creation. While for Weill limits meant a humble attitude of 'retreat' (*retraite*) analogous to the divine retreat of the Book of Genesis, for Camus it meant a forceful 'no'.

In one sense Camus' understanding of justice goes beyond the idea of justice-as-correction, and becomes both conceptually more profound *and* more problematic when he ties it up (justice) with the idea of compassion (and hence, of limits). Justice is not the same as compassion, but it cannot be separated from it. He says on *Reflections on the Guillotine*, "if justice has any meaning in this world, it means nothing else but the recognition of that solidarity; she cannot –in its very essence- be separated from compassion" (Camus 1961, 217).

He continues –and in doing so gives us the most explicit treatment/definition he offers about the idea of compassion-: "compassion, obviously, is nothing more than the understanding of a shared suffering, and not a frivolous indulgence that ignores the suffering and rights of a victim.

Compassion does not exclude punishment, but it suspends ultimate and final condemnation. It [compassion] is repulsed by any definitive and irreparable action, something that does injustice to men by ignoring the miseries common to all" (Camus 1961, 217).

Camus' emphasis is obviously on suspending 'ultimate and final condemnation' and on preventing the taking of any 'definitive and irreparable action'. The reasons are solidarity and compassion: his seeking to avoid 'ignoring the miseries common to all' and our common propensity to 'error and aberration'. At the same time he continues to express doubts and concerns about the idea of justice: "if justice admits that it is frail, would it not be better for justice to be modest and allow its judgment sufficient latitude so that a mistake can be corrected?" (Camus 1961, 216-217).

But in Camus the idea of compassion goes deeper than our suspending any ‘definitive and irreparable action’ against others. Compassion is the way for the salvation (*salut*) of all. In other words, we must be compassionate not only for the sake of others, but for our own sake.

This idea, then, refers us back to the original plight and motivation of ‘the rebel’, the one who clearly sees and feels the injustices done to other as his/her own. The rebel refuses to be free or happy by him/herself; as previously discussed, the rebel has been forced out of his/her solitude and is propelled to fight for the fundamental rights of all (“I revolt, therefore we are” (Camus 2007, 38)). The idea of compassion is, then, the moving force behind the human revolt. And that idea, compassion, is what should not be thrown wayside in the midst of even the most urgent of struggles; for losing that ‘north’ means betraying the very essence of human revolt, and ultimately, the possibility for more just political regimes.

Significantly, Camus understands that the idea of compassion might be difficult to grasp within the language of our philosophical and political traditions, but he is steadfast in his position. He says in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: “It is only compassion that seems acceptable to us: a feeling that perhaps you can barely understand and that you might consider a bit unmanly. Still, only the most audacious among us know this feeling. And we call manly only the lucid ones, for we do not want any force/power that separates itself from clear-sightedness” (Camus 1967, 122)¹¹⁴.

Compassion takes audacity, Camus tells us. He understands that it is far easier to try to just save oneself and to better one’s lot, while leaving others behind; he also understands the difficulty of

¹¹⁴ In a very specific way Camus seems to understand that within the moral, political, philosophical and legal tradition, the idea of justice is associated with the concepts of manliness and virile-ness. He is not formulating a feminist critique à la MacKinnon (*Feminism Unmodified: discourses of life and law*, 1987), but he is softening the ground to the feminist critique to the idea of ‘justice-as-dominance’.

suspending ‘definitive and irreparable action’ in our march towards justice; still, we cannot separate this compassionate audacity from his absurdist refusal to give up in face of life’s absurd condition. In short, compassion does not only make sense to save ourselves and to better the chances of a just political regime, it is the only logical choice once we accept Camus’ description of our absurd condition.

The idea of compassion, obviously, will and should remind us of the Christian tradition. And this becomes obvious during Camus’ re-assessment of a previous and very public argument with Catholic philosopher and writer Francois Charles Mauriac concerning executions of Nazi collaborators immediately after the war. By all accounts Mauriac (1952 Nobel Prize in literature) disliked Camus personally and it seems that the original issue was Camus’ atheism, yet, their substantive differences became obvious and public during their debate about executions. Camus had initially supported the execution of collaborators, while Mauriac had opposed them. Yet, Camus eventually became disillusioned with the excesses of justice in post-Second World War France and came to change his position, publicly admitting that Mauriac had been right all along, while he had been wrong. In a talk he gave in 1950 at a monastery in Paris, ‘The Unbeliever and the Christian’¹¹⁵ (Camus 1977, 169), Camus made clear that although he did not share his audience’s Christian “convictions”, “he confessed that when he had meditated on his polemic with Mauriac concerning the trials of Nazi collaborators, he decided finally that Mauriac had been right, which demonstrated the utility of the dialogue between believers and non-believers” (Lottman 1979, 431).

¹¹⁵ The original title of this talk was ‘L’Incroyant et les Chrétiens (Camus 1979).

But Camus went beyond publicly admitting his mistake, and –betraying once again his doubts about the idea of justice- in 1950 wrote to the Minister of Justice,

“to ask for a pardon for editors of the collaborationist newspaper *Je Suis Partout*. He did not wish to make light of their crimes; he felt they were guilty; but these men were waiting to be executed each morning, and that seemed to him sufficient punishment. *He had long believed that justice was paramount, but now he realized its limitation and that the country also needed pity*¹¹⁶” (Lottman 1979, 432)

Camus, however, is after something that at times looks similar to Christianity but without the ‘magical’ elements and the element of faith –he had readily confessed he lacked the Christian ‘conviction’¹¹⁷. Yet, he still ties the idea of compassion with the idea of salvation, while giving it a decisively political turn. In discussing what seems to be one of his favorite characters (Ivan Karamazov) he says: “Ivan incarnates the refusal to be saved alone. He throws his lot with those condemned, and because of them refuses eternity. If he had faith he could save himself, but others would still be condemned. Suffering would continue. There is no possible salvation for the one who suffers from true compassion. Ivan would continue to put God in the wrong by doubly refusing faith like one refuses injustice and privilege. And extra step, and from the *all or nothing*, we move on unto the *all or no one* (Camus 2007, 81).

¹¹⁶ My italics.

¹¹⁷ The present work cannot dwell on the similarities of some aspects of Camus’ thought with the Christian doctrine; still it bears reminding the reader that Camus –a man born in Algeria, like Saint Augustine- wrote his diplome thesis on *Neo-Platonisme et pensée chrétienne*.

In the end, Camus' lesson goes both below and beyond politics, for it is a deeply existential and intimately personal lesson. Albert Camus, the passionate Mediterranean soul, competitive lover of sports and affairs, the inveterate bohemian, so passionate in friendship and in his suffering, whose destiny deprived us all of seeing him get old in his untimely death, had one unstated existential and political aim: seeing human beings and our civilization enjoy life, grow old and mature healthily. His reasoning is clear and had been stated early on in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: the more human life is extended, the more experiences we accumulate -both individually and socially- and this offers opportunities to enrich and energize life, opening up choices and ideas, deepening the catalog of individual and social options to enjoy existence and confront its challenges. A long life, for Camus at least, was a rich life, one full of experiences; and a fun life. As he reminded himself on his *carnets*: "To grow old is to pass from passion to compassion" (Camus 1962, 323).

"Power without love is reckless and abusive, and love without power is sentimental and anemic. Power at its best is love implementing the demands of justice, and justice at its best is power correcting everything that stands against love."

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

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