

ALBERT CAMUS AND THE POST-MODERN GENERATION

“Every authentic work of art is a gift offered to the future.”

Albert Camus

Out of all the novels, plays, and essays written by Albert Camus, *La Chute*, a controversial novel in its own time, now forty years later, reflects the American society of the 1980s and 1990s. These two decades are steeped in the same despair, where values are questionable, and a moral breakdown both personally and publicly is steadily increasing. But can and will we ever bring ourselves to do something about it? We are in a sense, stuck, like Clamence, in the canals of Amsterdam, in a state of limbo. The American *Zeitgeist* at the close of this century, is not unlike the European *Zeitgeist* following the Second World War. Yet the American post-modern generation has nothing in common with Camus' generation. Growing up as Camus did, losing his father that he never knew to the First World War, only to come of age himself to face the atrocities of the Second World War, was a tragedy that the American post-modern generation has never had to endure. The war made people do without and to think beyond their own wants, their own desires. It made people feel, to rebel, and to protest. The war ignited a passion, a passion of creativity, of thought, of action. If anything, the American post-modern generation is somewhat like a spoiled child that demands immediate self-gratification at any expense and needs their decisions made for them. We have not had to live through or endure the hardships or destruction of humanity by a world war, yet happiness seems scarce. We have had the luxury of growing up in a time of peace and have done little with it except to create a rise of materialism and individualism. But we are facing a turning point in our history in terms of scientific advancement and

prevailing social issues that demand our attention, our thought, and our action.

Is it a phenomenon of human nature that a tragedy such as a war that threatens to destroy everyone and everything is the only time we will unite? Is it simply because Camus' generation had no choice?—were they simply the victims of a time in history? Does a state of peace equate to complacency? Are we in a state of peace? Doesn't what is happening in our society inspire any reactions other than "whatever?"

Kay Haugaard, a creative writing instructor at Pasadena City College, wrote in her article, "A Result of Too Much Tolerance?" that her students could not bring themselves to say they were against human sacrifice. The students were asked to read and reflect on Shirley Jackson's "The Lottery." The story depicts the residents of a small American village in which the ritual of an annual human sacrifice (death by stoning) is done as an offering to ensure good crops. A mother of two young children is chosen through the lottery and is stoned to death; her own family the first to throw stones. Jackson, according to Haugaard, intended to show "...the danger of just 'going along' with something habitually, without examining its rationale or value. The power of public pressure was illustrated chillingly, in the ease with which the conversation about other villages' dropping the practice had been squelched."¹⁴² After an exhausting and frustrating discussion, Haugaard gave up. "No one in the whole class of more than 20 ostensibly intelligent individuals would go out on a limb and take a stand against human sacrifice."¹⁴³ She concluded the discussion by telling her

¹⁴²Haugaard, Kay. "Suspending Moral Judgement: Students Who Refuse to Condemn the Unthinkable: A Result of Too Much Tolerance?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. June 27, 1997, pp. B4-B5.

¹⁴³Haugaard, p. B5.

students, “Frankly, I feel its clear that the author was pointing out the dangers of being totally accepting followers, too cowardly to rebel against obvious cruelties and injustices.”¹⁴⁴

Haugaard’s article is followed by the article “The Paralysis of ‘Absolutophobia’,” by Robert L. Simon, a professor of philosophy at Hamilton College. In the opening paragraph Simon quotes one of his students, ““Of course I dislike the Nazis, but who is to say they are morally wrong?” Other students in my classes on moral and political philosophy have made similar remarks about apartheid, slavery, and ethnic cleansing. They make the assertion as though it were self-evident; no one, they say, has the right, even to criticize the moral views of an another group or culture...”¹⁴⁵ Simon raises an important question, “Does a decent respect for other cultures and practices really require us to refrain from condemning even the worst crimes in human history? Does it make moral judgement impossible?”¹⁴⁶ Camus, like Simon, would maintain that it does not. In Camus’ fourth *lettre* of *Lettres á un ami allemand*, he writes: “I am fighting you because your logic is as criminal as your heart. And in the horror you have lavished upon us for four years, your reason plays as large a part as your instinct....I can tell you that at the very moment when we are going to destroy you without pity, we still feel no hatred for you....we want to destroy you in your power without mutilating you in your soul.”¹⁴⁷ Camus was a master at impartiality and he pointed the finger

¹⁴⁴Haugaard, p. B5.

¹⁴⁵Simon, Robert L. “Suspending Moral Judgement: Students Who Refuse to Condemn the Unthinkable: The Paralysis of ‘Absolutophobia’.” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*. June 27, 1997, p. B5.

¹⁴⁶Ibid.

¹⁴⁷Camus, “Letters to a German Friend.” *Resistance, Rebellion and Death*, pp. 30-32.

at thugs whatever their political persuasion, culture or race—which does not mean he was intolerant or a racist. The importance of Simon’s question however, is an underlying interpretation. What needs to be recognized and understood is that not all Germans are Nazis and not all Nazis agreed with Hitler’s plan of ethnic extermination. By condemning the practice of ethnic extermination one does not condemn or is it in any way disrespectful of Germans, nor does it imply that all Germans are contemptible, Nazis or anti-Semitic; it is the injustice, cruelty, and atrocity of ethnic extermination that is immoral and that is the difference, as Camus has shown us through his writings. “For Camus, the murderous systems of Stalinism and Nazism are both rooted in a kind of cowardice typical of the ideological mentality.”¹⁴⁸ In the introduction of *L’Homme révolté* Camus states, “As soon as man, through lack of character, takes refuge in a doctrine, as soon as crime reasons about itself, it multiplies like reason itself and assumes all the aspects of the syllogism...Ideology today is concerned only with the denial of other human beings...It is then that we kill.”¹⁴⁹

Far from being driven by petty greed or even profound animosity, totalitarian murder is fueled by a grand vision of a future world in which even the most barbarous cruelties will be redeemed. In this vision cruelty is not really cruelty at all, nor is murder really murder. Rather, they are necessary and virtuous deeds hastening the arrival of a world where there will no longer be any need for them. This is the cowardice of the ideology—that it offers comfort and consolation, rationalizing criminality and effacing any reliable boundary between innocence and guilt.¹⁵⁰

“Anyone who seeks to serve the one to the exclusion of the other serves no one not even

¹⁴⁸Issac, Jeffrey C. *Arendt, Camus and Modern Rebellion*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992, p. 56.

¹⁴⁹Camus, *The Rebel*, pp. 3-5.

¹⁵⁰Issac, p. 56.

himself and is doubly the servant of injustice.”¹⁵¹ Ignorant prejudice is being replaced perhaps, as Haugaard suggests with too much tolerance. But why are our college students afraid to take a stand with the issues of our time, our history and make intellectual and moral decisions? What are they afraid of?

Mark Edmundson, a professor at the University of Virginia, described the general attitude and mentality of today’s college students (1997) in, “On the Uses of Liberal Education: I. As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students.” In it he describes his students as, “very self-contained, with little fire, little passion to be found...How did my students reach this particular state in which all passions seems to be spent? I think that many of them have imbibed their sense of self from consumer culture in a general and from the tube in particular.”¹⁵² He continues to note that:

Most of my students seem desperate to blend in, to look right, to not make a spectacle of themselves...The Socratic method seems too jagged for current sensibilities. Students are intimidated in class; the thought of being embarrassed in front of the group fills them with dread...Students will not indict the exigencies of Capitalism. For the pervading view is the cool consumer perspective, where passion and strong admiration are forbidden.”¹⁵³

Likewise, Maxine Greene, a noted educational theorist, in terms of a broader community sense writes: “There is a general withdrawal from what ought to be public concerns...But there is because of withdrawal, a wide spread speechlessness, a silence where

¹⁵¹Camus, “Return to Tipasa.” *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 165.

¹⁵²Edmundson, Mark. “On the Uses of a Liberal Education: I. As Lite Entertainment for Bored College Students.” *Harper’s Magazine*. September 1997, v275, n1078, p. 41.

¹⁵³Ibid, pp. 42-43.

there might be—where there ought to be—an impassioned and significant dialogue.”¹⁵⁴ Because of our general withdrawal, the lack of thoughtfulness or thought and a society based on individualism, there is a deafening silence, that everyday grows louder and louder and is becoming an American tragedy. “There is almost no serious talk of reconstituting a civic order, a community. There are no clearly proposed proposals for creating what John Dewey called an ‘articulate public.’”¹⁵⁵ “Conscious thinking always involves a risk, ‘a venture into the unknown’; and it occurs against a background of funded or sedimented meanings that must themselves be tapped and articulated, so that the mind can continue dealing consciously and solicitously with lived situations, those situations (as Dewey put it) ‘in which we find ourselves.’”¹⁵⁶ Martin Heidegger would perhaps agree. “The most thought provoking thing in our thought provoking age is that we are still not thinking.”¹⁵⁷

There are numerous social and political issues that collectively, as a society, a community, we need to address. Remarkably Hannah Arendt’s *The Human Condition*, written in 1958, is as relevant today, if not more as it was then. In the introduction she writes:

The earth is the very quintessence of the human condition, and earthly nature, for all we know, may be unique in the universe in providing human beings with a habitat in which they can move and breathe without effort and without artifice. The human artifice of the world separates human existence from all mere animal environment, but life itself is outside this artificial world, and through life man remains related to all other living organisms. For some time now, a great many

¹⁵⁴Greene, Maxine. *The Dialectic of Freedom*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1988, p. 2.

¹⁵⁵Ibid.

¹⁵⁶Ibid, p. 125.

¹⁵⁷Solomon, *From Rationalism to Existentialism*, p. 191.

scientific endeavors have been directed toward making life also “artificial,” toward cutting the last tie through which even man belongs among the children of nature. It is the same desire to escape from imprisonment to the earth that is manifest in the attempt to create life in the test tube, in the desire to mix “frozen germ plasm from people of demonstrated ability under the microscope to produce superior human beings” and to alter [their] size, shape and function”; and the wish to escape the human condition, I suspect, also underlies the hope to extend man’s life-span far beyond the hundred-year limit.

This future man, whom the scientists tell us they will produce in no more than a hundred years, seems to be possessed by a rebellion against human existence as it has been given, a free gift from nowhere (secularly speaking), which he wishes to exchange, as it were, for something he has made himself. There is no reason to doubt our abilities to accomplish such an exchange, just as there is no reason to doubt our present ability to destroy all organic life on earth. The question is only whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction, and this question cannot be decided by scientific means; it is a political question of the first order and therefore can hardly be left to the decision of professional scientists or professional politicians.¹⁵⁸

We are much closer today to reaching the dark decisions that Hannah Arendt described forty years ago. In June, 1997, The National Bioethics Advisory Committee recommended to President Clinton to continue the ban on federally funded cloning research. Yet a federal law banning federally funded research certainly does not prevent research from taking place, and it should not stop the ethical and legal questions that every individual should be asking. As Arendt wrote, the question is whether we wish to use our new scientific and technical knowledge in this direction, and as she states, this question *we* must answer, not the scientists, not the politicians. “Whatever” will not suffice here as a thoughtful, critical, and moral examination of the issue. Just how far are we willing to go in the name of science and technology? Why do we fear drawing a line and saying that’s enough—that research in human cloning is going well beyond the limits and is simply wrong? What does this mean in terms of our society, our culture? Are we becoming so desensitized and tolerant to what

¹⁵⁸Arendt, pp. 2-3.

is going on in our society that we are willing to dehumanize ourselves completely to science?

Another social issue that also warrants our attention is the possible legalization of physician-assisted suicide. Any type of suicide according to Camus, could never be legitimate since death is never the desired end; we “revolt” against death, and this concept of physician-assisted suicide gives physicians in a sense the right to kill, which certainly goes well beyond the limits and ethics of the medical profession.

Both human cloning and physician-assisted suicide will ultimately give the scientific, medical, and political communities the “supreme” right to decide whose life and what kind of life has more value and relevance over others. This is a terrifying prospect of our very near future, because for all the good that may possibly result from these issues, there will also be abuse, atrocities, and the devastating forms of objectification and depersonalization that go well beyond the limits and are the ultimate betrayals of the human condition.

We live in a highly competitive, fast-paced, technological, consumer driven culture and society that lacks authentic thought and creativity. We are becoming a society not divided by race or religion, but simply in an economic sense, *The Haves* and *The Have Nots*. The young adults today do not have some sort of base in which to draw from in order to make moral decisions about our history, the prevailing social, political, and scientific issues, not to mention their own personal lives; there is little desire for an authentic life. We have replaced “laborers” with “high-tech workers” who are not critical thinkers. We claim to be tolerant, yet there is an increasing amount of anger, impatience, and hostility that is directed against each other. We are as a nation in a state of peace, so why is there so much hostility? We may have become use to secluding ourselves, but we are still connected to one another,

we are still responsible for each other. We still need each other. We don't live in a artificial environment yet. We cannot, as Camus has told us, resign ourselves to nothing.

What all the noted professors, philosophers and writers have in common is a shared awareness that the post-modern generation, and perhaps even the post-modern American society, is in dire need of a moral guide, a moral consciousness. But what was not discussed is a way for the post-modern generation to change their unwillingness to make moral decisions, a way for them to pursue an authentic life and to use their voices to make a difference in our society, our communities and in doing so replace the "silence" and "withdrawal" with thought, creativity, involvement, and action.

Undoubtedly, Albert Camus would not mind being used as a means in respect to educating and enlightening a new generation. In fact, it is probably the ultimate goal of any artist to have his work continuously rediscovered and renewed. As Camus himself said, "Every authentic work of art is a gift offered to the future." In a recent book review of Olivier Todd's biography on Camus, *Une vie*, John Wrightman notes that "...for some years after his death [Camus] it remained fashionable to treat him and his works rather dismissively. The tide has now turned..."¹⁵⁹ Camus' life itself is a testimony of what one can accomplish in life. Camus is a man who had no advantages whatsoever, other than his own determination. Against his social and economic status as well the chaos and destruction of the Second World War, Camus made a remarkable life for himself—a life and a philosophy about life that was never compromised by greed and success. And what he did have he gave

¹⁵⁹Wrightman, John. "The Outsider." *The New York Review of Books*. January 15, 1998, p. 26.

back not only to his generation, but to all generations.

Albert Camus' art and insight into the human condition is perhaps needed more today than ever before. As an individual his deep integrity, impartiality, and moral honesty are a moral guide and consciousness for us all. Camus spoke to everyone and for everyone. His analysis of the human condition, though not providing concrete, absolute solutions, does provide understanding, comfort, and the courage to revolt; to stand together in solidarity against our common fate and fight against any form of oppression. Camus recognized the value of all human life and believed that not one human life ought to be sacrificed or compromised by any means. The ethic of moderation and limits that emerge from his writings is a guide for our post-modern generation that can be used personally, as well as within the social, political, and economic framework of our post-modern society. Camus has shown us that we have the power and the ability to rise above nothingness and nihilism and create a society that respects the limits of the human condition.

Without a reliable ideological guide whom they can trust, the public appears to have been stranded to find their way through a new world in which consciousness itself has become fragmented, ambiguous, and indeterminate...Perhaps below the surface of today's political upheavals, realignments and often superficial emotions, may lie a potential political-literary force, a new liberal intelligentsia that is just starting to be tapped.¹⁶⁰

Camus' writings should continue to provoke our thoughts. His voice remains to be the voice of this century and well into the next. "In the coming century, Camus' clear and passionate voice, a mixture of an intellectual and social vision to change a stagnant community in an

¹⁶⁰Brody, Ervin C. "Camus Thirty Years Later." *Literary Review*. Fall 1991, v35, n1, p. 131.

unjust world will surely be heard again.”¹⁶¹ Thus, Camus’ spirit and art will continue to speak to us—our “perpetual contemporary.” André Malraux wrote, “The author dead, the work continues; it lives. It cannot progress, but it can be enriched. It could not be modified, but through its relation to new minds it can be renewed...”¹⁶²

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¹⁶¹Brody, p. 132.

¹⁶²Doubrovksy, Serge. “The Ethics of Albert Camus.” *Camus: A Collection of Critical Essays*. Germaine Brée, ed. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1962, p. 71.