



THE CITIZEN'S VOICE: TWENTIETH-CENTURY POLITICS AND LITERATURE

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Freedom and Responsibility

The twentieth century has witnessed the enormous power of the modern state. Developing since the late Middle Ages, the state has shown its capacity to adopt the great scientific and technological achievements of the human race and harness them to both positive and negative aims. It has been particularly skilled in mobilizing the masses to support these aims and to place itself as the main source of identification. In the mid-twentieth century, one could no longer doubt the power of states to destroy the planet as well as their willingness to utilize that power to commit crimes never before known in history. It was the power of the state that made possible two world wars, the Holocaust, and other acts of genocide, mass enslavement, and the construction of weapons of mass destruction. It was also the power of the state that had to be relied on if humanity was to constrain the destruction and provide for a decent life on the planet.

In the twentieth century, every state was to some degree a "nation-state," namely a state that does not only provide its citizens with protection

and well-being but also serves as a focus of their collective aspirations.¹ These aspirations varied from messianic visions to republican considerations, but the fact remains that in all states, individuals were committed in stronger or weaker ways to the acts of the state. Despite great disagreements regarding the degree of commitment that the citizen ought to have, few citizens could escape such a commitment or replace it by a commitment to other human associations. There have always been attempts to weaken the state's grasp over the individual, even acts of refusal to pay taxes or serve in the military forces, but individuals were strongly tied to the state and fulfilled the duties it called for.²

There has always been much public discourse about the limits of the state's power and the nature of its relations with the individuals comprising it. Problems of obedience have preoccupied thinkers from early times, but they gained special significance once it became clear, after World War II, how atrocious the actions of states were.³ Individuals and social groups, in considering their relationship to the state, could not avoid a major question that overshadowed all other questions ever asked in the history of political ideas: the question of responsibility. One need not be a young German in the post-Nazi era, or a communist intellectual after the exposure of Stalin's purges to be concerned with the question of his or her own responsibility for the atrocities committed by the state.

The question of responsibility has been discussed in many forums, the most important of which was the Nuremberg trials after World War II. In these trials of Nazi criminals the question of the individual's duty to obey or refuse an immoral order were thrown into sharp focus. Although the scope was limited to the question of legal responsibility, the trials sparked more general discourse on the responsibility of scientists for the weapons they helped produce,⁴ of citizens for wars and acts of genocide committed by their governments,⁵ or of rich and strong countries for conditions and events in less advantageous areas.⁶

The ethics of responsibility involved some hard questions: Does an individual's responsibility stem from mere affiliation with the state? Is responsibility shared equally among citizens? What is the relative status of those who command vs. those who obey? Does one's belonging to the bureaucratic, economic, or academic elite increase the responsibility? Is responsibility greater for citizens living in democratic states in which they

are presumed to have more control over decisions? What about conscientious objection and civil disobedience – does a citizen's resistance to acts of government reduce his or her responsibility? How active does such resistance have to be? Do persons who frequent anti-government demonstrations bear less responsibility even though these demonstrations turn out to be futile?

Questions related to individual responsibility in view of the atrocities of the twentieth century were forcefully raised by existentialism, originating in the works of Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard, and developed after World War II mainly by Jean Paul Sartre. Existentialism placed the responsibility on the individual's shoulders since existence precedes essence and individual action cannot be blamed on God, history, or nature. As Sartre clarified it in a lecture he gave after the war, individuals are what they make of themselves. Their behavior is not determined by their nature because there is no external force to assure that. "There is no human nature, because there is no God to have a conception of it."⁷ Thus, the biblical Abraham, ordered by the voice of an angel to sacrifice his son, is, according to Sartre, responsible for his actions:

Who ... can prove that I am the proper person to impose, by my own choice, my conception of man upon mankind? I shall never find my proof whatever; there will be no sign to convince me of it. If a voice speaks to me, it is still I myself who must decide whether the voice is or is not that of an angel. If I regard a certain course of action as good, it is only I who choose to say that it is good and not bad. There is nothing to show that I am Abraham.⁸

Sartre clarified that this does not reduce one's responsibility but increases

If ... existence precedes essence and we will to exist at the same time as we fashion our image, that image is valid for all and for the entire epoch in which we find ourselves. Our responsibility is thus much greater than we had supposed, for it concerns mankind as a whole.... Resignation is my will for everyone, and my action is, in consequence, a commitment on behalf of all mankind."⁹

Here then lies a partial answer to the problem of responsibility. Atrocities cannot be attributed to states, leaders, and ideologies but to individuals who

are predestined to be free and are therefore responsible before the entire human race for the consequences of their actions. However reluctant we are to recognize our responsibility, especially in light of the complexity of the systems in which we operate, and the scant control we feel we have over them, it is only our own will and conscience that will be judged in the last resort. The state may have failed the moral test, but this does not reduce the responsibility of the individuals comprising it.

Camus's *The Stranger* makes this point in full vigor through its main protagonist. Camus was born in 1913 in the village of Mondovi to a father of Alsatian origin and a Spanish mother. His father died a year later in the battle of the Marne, and the child grew up in extremely poor conditions in the working-class district of Belcourt. Since he was an excellent student, with the help of an enlightened uncle, he made it to the university of Algiers and later to France, where he became one of the important philosophers, writers, and playwrights of the age. During the war he lived mostly in Oran and completed his major works: the novels *The Stranger* and *The Plague*, the play *Caligula*, and the philosophical treatise *The Myth of Sisyphus*. He joined the resistance and wrote for the underground paper *Combat*. Camus met Sartre in 1943 and became very close to him until their break in the early 1950s over Sartre's boundless support of Russian communism at the time. In 1957 Camus won the Nobel Prize and in 1960 was killed in a car accident. His autobiographical novel *The First Man* was published posthumously.

The Stranger begins with the famous words: "Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday, I don't know."¹⁰ It is easy to consider this phrase one of defiance and revolt, especially in light of the emphasis placed by the court judging Meursault, and by Camus in his later interpretations of the book, on Meursault's failure to cry at his mother's funeral. But it can also be read as a statement about one's helplessness in the face of a mother's death. One could react differently to a dry telegram announcing the death of a mother than Meursault does, by remarking, "That doesn't mean anything. It may have been yesterday."¹¹ But the fact of the matter is that it really does not mean anything as far as one's capacity to do anything about it is concerned, and it could indeed have been yesterday. It is understandable why Meursault's insistence that his mother's death was not his fault was taken to represent the rejection of common conventions, but as it was not his fault, he may be seen to be commenting on the constraints in which he lives.

Occasionally Meursault behaves in an unconventional way in defiance of the chains that shackle him. Thus, instead of mourning his mother in the conventional way, he goes to a Fernandel movie and makes love to Marie Cordona. But such independent responses to his mother's death do not diminish the fatalism implied by that death nor do they diminish the helplessness involved. The sense of fatalism, developed later in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, appears faintly in *The Stranger*, as if the young Camus still refused at this stage to submit to it. But however defiant Meursault's behavior is, there is no way out of the determining factors. This is usually hinted at in relation to trivial matters as when Meursault is reminded during the funeral by a nurse that "if you go slowly, you risk getting sun-stroke. But if you go too fast, you perspire and then in the church you catch a chill."¹² "She was right. There was no way out,"¹³ he responds.

Determinism is apparent in the mythological relationship between old Salamano and his dog. Although the man and the dog hate each other, they are connected to each other by a strong bond. After living together for so long, the retired railway worker and the spaniel with skin disease walk alike and look alike, as if they belonged to the same species. The scene in which they drag each other along may be read as a statement about common fate:

You can see them in the rue de Lyon, the dog dragging the man along until old Salamano stumbles. Then he beats the dog and swears at it. The dog cringes in fear and trails behind. At that point it's the old man's turn to drag it along.¹⁴

When asked what the dog has done, the old man's answer reveals the deterministic nature of the relationship: "He's always there."¹⁵ When the dog gets lost, his owner may not be willing to pay money to get him back, but he is lost himself, as there is no way for him to escape the symbiosis. It may be easier for Camus to admit the lack of control we have over our affairs when it comes to the old man than to his main character. Salamano, we learn, wanted to go into the theatre but ended up as a railway worker and did not regret it because this provided him with a small pension. We may thus assume that Meursault too, despite his independence of will, has been dragged along by circumstances. Even his shooting of an Arab – one of the most notorious acts of free will in modern literature – can be attributed to circumstances ranging

from Marie waking him up that Sunday morning to the political situation in Algeria.

In his analysis of *The Stranger*, Connor Cruise O'Brien suggests that in order to comprehend the book one must understand the relationship between Camus, who grew up among the poorest of the European working class, and the Moslem and Arabic-speaking people who made up the bulk of the population in Algeria. In light of the little information Camus provides us with about that relationship, O'Brien characterizes him as a writer who attempts to escape his origins and to belong instead to the intellectual culture of the French middle class. According to O'Brien, Camus reveals himself as incapable of thinking in any other categories than those of a Frenchman; his Mediterranean culture is a European one and in Algeria a French one. This, says O'Brien, explains his and his protagonist's estrangement. Like a Crusader, Camus is a stranger both on the African shore and in France. By positioning Camus in this way O'Brien is able to advance the argument that the book presents a myth of French Algeria in which no French court would actually have condemned a European to death for shooting an Arab. What appears to the casual reader a contemptuous attack on the court, writes O'Brien, is not in fact an attack at all but a denial of colonial reality.¹⁶

However, colonial reality is by no means denied, and Camus actually reveals to us a great deal about the Algerian situation. I would like to argue that *The Stranger* exposes some of the deepest truths about the life of two peoples doomed to live with each other on the same piece of land. Like Salamano and his dog, they hate each other but find themselves in a bond that cannot be untied in spite of the suffering it involves.

The Algerian scene must be recognized. Commentators have pointed at various elements of "pied-noir" culture in the novel, e.g., the excursion on the beach in which such elements as the values of the body, the lack of reflection, the camaraderie, and the superficial sense of belonging to nature have been identified.¹⁷ But it is not only the French perspective we are exposed to. Although Algeria does not appear in this novel in the colorful way in which it is depicted in *The First Man*, it is there, with the people, the clothing, the crowded trams, the cafés, the Sunday football fans, and, of course, the eternal cinemas.

Camus provides a beautiful picture of a North African town on "A typical Sunday."¹⁸ He describes families out for a walk with the boys in sailor

suits, with trousers below their knees, looking a bit cramped in their stiff clothing, and a little girl with a big pink bow and black patent leather shoes, an enormous woman in a brown silk dress and a small, frail father wearing a straw hat, a bow tie and carrying a walking stick. The local lads are described with their hair greased back, red ties, tight-fitting jackets with embroidered handkerchiefs in their top pockets and square-toed shoes. The trams are described as they return from the local football ground with bunches of spectators perched on the steps and hanging from the guardrails. We are also exposed to the moment, so familiar in that setting, when the local cinemas pour their audiences out in a great flood onto the street.

Against this background, Camus describes the Algerian situation as only an insider, not an estranged outsider, could do. Algeria was annexed to France in 1836. By the time Camus wrote the novel, the French minority and the Arab majority had been living side by side for many generations in a state of mutual dependency that involved a great deal of fear. That condition was forcefully described in *The First Man*:

[T]his was the very country into which he felt he had been tossed, as if he were the first inhabitant, or the first conqueror, landing where the law of the jungle still prevailed, where justice was intended to punish without mercy what custom had failed to prevent – around him these people, alluring yet disturbing, near and separate, you were around them all day long, and sometimes friendship was born, or camaraderie, and at evening they still withdrew to their closed houses, where you never entered, barricaded also with their women you never saw, or if you saw them on the street you did not know who they were, with faces half veiled and their beautiful eyes sensual and soft above the white cloth, and they were so numerous in the neighborhoods where they were concentrated, so many of them that by their sheer numbers, even though exhausted and submissive, they caused an invisible menace that you could feel in the air...¹⁹

Now, consider the central scene of the novel. Meursault's killing of an Arab on the beach has been seen as a deliberate act of murder committed in isolation from any moral essence, although not from the need to pay a price

for it. What could be less moral than the shooting of a man by a person declaring: "I realized at that point that you could either shoot or not shoot."²⁰ This is the same person who, a few pages before, told us the following: "That evening, Marie came round for me and asked me if I wanted to marry her. I said I didn't mind and we could do so if she wanted to."²¹

Yet, it is hard not to recognize the determinism involved in the scene. It takes place under the burning sun. "[T]he bright morning sunshine hit me like a slap in the face."²² "The sun was shining almost vertically onto the sand and the glare from the sea was unbearable."²³ The bright sun stands in contrast to the shady streets of the Algerian town in the evenings described in *The First Man*. In those evenings there was tension and fear but also a state of ambivalence that allowed French settlers and Arab inhabitants to coexist for generations. But in the bright sun there is no escape. In the murder scene Meursault seeks escape to no avail:

And every time I felt the blast of its hot breath on my face, I set my teeth, closed my fists in my trouser pockets and tensed my whole body in defiance of the sun and of the drunken haze it was pouring into me.²⁴

He hopes to relax in the shade, but there is no shade, just the bare reality, lit up by a burning sun, of two peoples on the same land. Thus, you could either shoot or not shoot, but it is clear the shots will come. What I am arguing is that the shooting on the beach is the deterministic outgrowth of an impossible political situation. We may not predict when the shots will come, or who will do the shooting, but the murder is unavoidable.

In trying to make sense of the murder, or to comprehend its senseless nature, it is easy to ignore the deterministic elements in chapter 6 in which the scene is described. Camus himself had hidden those elements, possibly even from himself, by placing Meursault on trial where the act is related to human choice rather than to political reality. But I would like to present a different perspective admittedly stemming from my own background as an Israeli. This perspective developed in my thought mainly after the assassinations of President Anwar Sadat of Egypt in 1981 and Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin of Israel in 1995. These murders, like the one in *The Stranger*, represent neither sheer individual choices nor mythological sacrifices,

although they were often interpreted as such, but rather acts stemming from given political circumstances. It is unknown who will pull the trigger – in the specific situation on the beach Meursault was not the one who would come first to mind – but the murder would ultimately occur, for in the above circumstances, there is no choice.

Only a writer living in a country claimed by two peoples can describe the scene in the way Camus did. The murder has no real reason besides fear. The fear is not just of the Arabs as “the others” but of their being so deeply rooted in the locale. This is apparent in every word relating to the Arabs in the scene:

We were just about to set off when Raymond suddenly pointed across the street. I looked and saw a group of Arabs leaning against the front of the tobacconist's shop. They were looking at us in silence, but in their own special way, as if we were nothing more than blocks of stone or dead trees.²⁵

This is the look of the native who has been there before, will be there later, and assumes that the presence of the French settler is temporary. Throughout the scene the Arab patience is stressed, mainly in a description of two Arabs lying down behind a large rock “quite calm and almost contented. Our arrival had no effect on them,”²⁶ one of them watching the intruders in silence, the other blowing a small reed, the symbol of pastoral native life since ancient times.

The deterministic element is strengthened by the fact that the French in the scene, like many Europeans in colonial history, are constantly on the move while the Arabs are mostly situated in motionless silence. There is a jumpiness about the Europeans who are on the beach for fun. But this cannot hide the fact that, beyond the picturesque rows of little villas with green or white fences along which they walk and the motionless surface of the sea, there is commotion that can be expected to burst forth at any moment. Particularly strong is the scene in which the small group of Pied Noirs is walking towards a bus stop:

We went towards the bus stop which was a bit further along and Raymond informed me that the Arabs weren't following us. I

looked round. They were still in the same place and looking with the same indifference at the spot where we'd just been.²⁷

Such images of fear and insecurity make it clear that the specifics of the coming struggle are not very important. Indeed, the shooting has no real reason, but it is also unavoidable as Meursault realizes: "Whether I stayed there or moved, it would come to the same thing."²⁸

Returning now to the issue of responsibility, does such lack of control over the circumstances imply that nobody is really responsible for the shooting on the beach? Here lies Camus' contribution to political thought; he separates the question of responsibility we have over the circumstances surrounding us from the degree of control we have to change them. In other words, he breaks the tie between freedom and responsibility. We have no control over the circumstances and at the same time we have full responsibility. This is why Meursault accepts his trial and verdict with such apparent indifference. It is not defiance of the legal or political system. It is the acceptance, and internalization, of his condition. None of us has control over the political circumstances, but this does not remove the responsibility we have, as citizens, over the acts committed in our name by the modern state.