Sartre and Camus: The Yoke of Enlightenment

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These two volumes by Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus tell us not so much about the current status of French literature, but the current standing of these two political moralists who helped shape a national consensus emerging from the ruins of military occupation and fascist extremism at mid-twentieth century. They were then at the center of a national debate on responding to the collapse of colonialism and the emergence of a Cold War in which France was a lesser, but significant player. Indeed, the position they established in those fateful years has moved far beyond the confines of the middle of twentieth-century life and letters into the realm of general theory. That two marginal works by major figures should appear now tells us a great deal with respect to what is living and dead in the timeline of two iconic figures who carried forth the French wing of the enlightenment tradition.

Albert Camus was an Algerian-born perennial outsider. He lived from 1913 to 1960. Jean-Paul Sartre was a Parisian-born insider and lived from 1905 to 1980. These two remnants by those authors are anchored in the agony of World War Two, which for France was a life-cycle epoch of defeat, occupation, and eventual liberation. They are also rooted in a post-war France that had to confront not simply the unifying force of external, foreign oppressors, but the divisive forces of internal rot—from a broken colonial empire to a badly shaken republican regime built upon military mythology. The hard bunkers of the Maginot Line were no match for the rapid mobile Blitzkrieg of the Nazi Wehrmacht. But the experience of stalemate and partial occupation in two world wars gave rise to a series of figures—not only Sartre and Camus, but also outstanding philosophes such as Raymond Aron, George Gurvitch, Henri Lefebvre,
Emmanuel Mounier, François Mauriac, and others drawn from a variety of perspectives ranging from Catholicism to Communism—who reflected on the war lost and empire frayed, and what was needed to establish a liberated Europe in a democratic universe.

Both of these volumes under consideration involve interviews, random correspondence, and editorial commentaries, or what we now call "op ed" pieces. Just how seriously one takes such ephemeral material, or better, to what extent they alter previously informed judgment on these two special figures in French literature, is a question for which there are no ready answers. What can be said at the outset is that the additional twenty years of life lived by Sartre after the demise of Camus did not stand him in good stead. As the volume of interviews indicates, those added years at one and the same time, and by Sartre's own sentiments and self-repudiation, weakened his claim to being a global philosophical titan. Rather, his Maoist musings exposed him as a political novice who could easily be derided by his opponents and hardly celebrated by his friends. Longevity is not always an advantage; even among intellectuals it may serve to attract unwelcome scrutiny. By the same token, the writings of Camus in *Combat* between 1944 and 1947 show why he remains a figure who is far closer to achieving Sartre's quest for "a form that is also a meaning" than the author of this quest himself ever managed to realize. These two French writers—or more accurately, writers in the French language—give expression to a cultural time and an epistemological tradition that have vanished, and to a normative set of issues that continue to inform the present.

Albert Camus's wartime and post-World War Two commentaries and editorials center on prospects for the rational reconstruction of Enlightenment. I take this to be the very heart and soul of the *Combat* years. It was a goal connected to a tradition, to what Diderot, Voltaire, Condorcet, and others sought: to free the person and to assert the reality of eternal progress. The goal was not to take refuge in an abstract social contract, or worse, a statist law, that displaces one form of oppression with another. To the contrary, at the very end of his association with *Combat*, and as an encore in response to critics, the essence of his struggle is made plain by Camus. He argued that not any single form of totalitarianism, but its very essence as a unified horror of the century, should be resisted in the public domain and in the private life. In defending placement of *The State of Siege* in Franco's Spain, rather than Stalin's Russia, Camus ended his *Combat* period with a running affirmation of the universal characteristic of the Enlightenment Project. "Men of somber learning reflect daily on the decadence of our society and look for its deeper causes, which no doubt exist. But for simpler souls, the evil of the present age is characterized by its effects, not its causes. It is called the state, whether police or bureaucratic. Its proliferation everywhere on a variety of ideological pretexts makes it a mortal danger for all that is best in each of us. As does the insulting social order such thinking derives from, that is, mechanical and psychological methods of repression. In this sense, contemporary political society is contemptible, regardless of its content." If Sartre took over the barricades of Martin Heidegger, it is also the case that Camus anticipated, more than reflected, the liberal democratic visions of Hannah Arendt. The ghost of German theory came out of French closets in lofty if tarnished socialist ambitions.

Camus examines two major themes in the *Combat* years: 1944-1945 are devoted to the final destruction of the Nazi Third Reich, and 1946-1947, to the challenges to colonialism, especially as it affected France and the Algerian War. Anglo-American audiences are perhaps less sensitive
to the symbolic importance of Algeria in French reconstruction. For Camus, whose life was deeply immersed with that nation, the issue was simply whether Algeria was to be treated as a colony or as a viable part of France as a whole. In retrospect, it is doubtless true that Camus underestimated not just Arab and Moslem resentment for France, but the deep desire for national liberation that swept the emerging Third World as a consequence of World War Two. Camus was convinced that if France extended the hand of equality, Algeria would have remained a part of its greater culture. Indeed, one could argue that Charles de Gaulle attempted just such a policy in the final years—with little success. As Ted Morgan [Sanche de Gramont] makes plain in his own new book on My Battle of Algiers, the die was cast early in 1956 when the bombing of a milk bar in the chic Rue d’Isly was followed by a wave of terrorist attacks, followed by a counter-terrorist attack by the French Army, which did not stop at formal rules of warfare to elicit information. The Enlightenment tradition, with its powerful secularizing as well as egalitarian tendencies, simply did not take hold in Algeria. By the end of the decade, Camus’s pessimism reflected in part the failure of a policy of “Algérie française” in which that country would be a vital pivot in a post-colonial Franco-phone universe.

Camus had no such expectations for the inclusion of Southeast Asian territories in a greater France. As a result, his sparse comments on those territories are far less ambiguous. He was an advocate of letting the remote territories become independent, with the hope and the expectation that the act of political separation would make possible economic cooperation and, even more, continuation of the French language, which indeed was and remains very much a part of Vietnam and Cambodia. In a series of brilliant essays entitled “Neither Victims nor Executioners,” Camus attempts to recognize the universality of the struggle between freedom and authority. It was a view that opposed communism, as well as colonialism. This meant avoidance of the sort of confrontation with Soviet power advocated by Arthur Koestler and Manus Sperber, but Camus also opposed the sort of accommodation to Marxist dogma advocated by the early André Malraux and the later Sartre. This ruled out the resurrection of the popular-front ideology that so captivated French intellectual life prior to the outbreak of the Second World War.

The liberal conundrum has never been better expressed than by Camus in nine mini-essays entitled “Neither Victims nor Executioners.” These essays express the deepest democratic instinct that emerged from wartime French culture, although Camus may have doubted that such a midpoint between revolution and reaction could actually prevail. He saw the problem as a gap between political thought and historical reality. Thought cannot retreat to an industrial capitalist solution of the eighteenth century or a welfare socialist solution of the nineteenth century. The sad truth is that Camus was part of the problem; he drew a blank on political innovation. He accepted somewhat reluctantly the idea of “collectivization” as long as it was a resource that is indispensable to everyone and should in fact belong exclusively to no one—the very reverse of what the Soviet experience taught him. While everything else was declared to be “just political speechifying,” the fact is that Camus’s vision for the future amounted to political pabulum.

The secular, enlightenment vision made it impossible to be sympathetic to any religious possibilities (especially in France) and incapable of allowing for a conservative policy approach. That the opposite of “collectivism” might be “individualism” was never on the charts for Camus. The range of thought he envi-
sioned was somewhere on the compass between Stalinist totalitarianism (unac-
ceptable) and Gaullist statism (tolerable). Appeals to world peace, interna-
tional organization, and nationalization of re-
sources were the order of the day; per-
haps they still are. But the enormously
powerful force of socialism in post-war
France made other options hard to fathom,
particularly for those intellectuals who
imagined themselves as liberators. In-
deed, other than the Gaullist movement
and its centrist allies, the most powerful
force between 1945-1947 was Left Social-
ism, the Communist Party, and the memo-
ries of Léon Blum and the Popular Front of
Pre-Vichy France. It was the willingness
of all of the above to maintain the Republic
that led Sartre (in the 1960s) to view with
contempt the communist party as the
most conservative force in France. In this
case, the celebration of Catholic Ac-
tion or of Conservative Nationalism was
an unacceptable option for Sartre even
more so than for Camus.

The foreword by David Carroll to
Camus’s journalistic writings properly
draws attention to the sources of his pes-
simism: the purge trials by the Vichy Re-
gime of French Resistance fighters; the
critique of Pierre Laval and Henri Pétain;
and the bitter residue against the col-
laborationist elements in a divided
France. After the war ended, problems of
yore resurfaced. There was the failure of
French colonial policy in North Africa,
and the failure of the free press to take
root in post-war France. Camus objected
in particular to a retrenchment from the
view of democracy as the right of opposi-
tion, to democracy as a system of rule—
what he smartly called the movement
from a modest to an immodest vision of
democratic society. One could add a
fourth element when the cause of free-
dom and justice was heralded. In a skill-
fully crafted statement, delivered the day
after Christmas in 1944, Camus congratu-
lated Pope Pius XII for his “carefully
worded message that calls for equally
careful commentary.” Camus entered the
Christian Dialogue by reminding the Pope
that “the Christians of the First Century
were not moderates.” The Church ought,
then, not to become “mixed up with the
forces of conservation.”

What became acceptable for Camus
was a movement of moral redemption:
away from categories of hate and love,
war and salvation, and into some rati-
onalist world government in which peace
would triumph over conflict and democ-
racry would become the norm, and fanatic-
cism and authoritarianism things of the
past. Camus opted for “defining a dia-
logue as a communication world wide”
where the enemy became an abstraction:
“servitude, injustice and falsehood.”
These were the “scourges.” In “the modest
aims of a murderous world, we must de-
cide to reflect on murder and choose.”
The horror of the twenty-first century is
that these choices are not always made in
favor of democracy. Instead, a unity of
religious fanaticism, immolation, and
murder came about—in part due to the
very forces of national independence in
the Arab world that Camus hesitatingly
supported.

This political outcome is not some-
thing that Camus would have been
pleased to witness, or even to acknowl-
dge as a step toward embracing a new
democratic world. But the Enlighten-
ment Project makes the outcome in ambiguity
possible if not essential. The sentiments
of compassion Camus expresses are poles
apart from those of conflict expressed by
Sartre. But if these are the only polarities
open to actual politics, neither figure can
be said to have answered the call of prac-
tical policy. The hidden presumption
behind Camus’s theorizing is that the
Enlightenment Project, which includes
the Western style of freedom, justice and
peace, were universal ambitions. The idea
that any exclusive, theocratic based ide-
ology could replace the totalitarian ide-
ology that had just been beaten in Germany and Italy never occurred to him. He was scarcely alone in this. But having a crowded field of democratic believers simply did not help.

Camus’s commentaries provide a case study of classical liberal verities derived from the Enlightenment, that seem so at home in an American context. They were truth rooted in the universality of the democratic persuasion, starting with a commitment to the sanctity of the person. No such saving grace can be said for the embarrassing publication of a hoary set of interviews between three British Marxists who achieved fame in the 1960s, and Simone de Beauvoir, friend, confidante, and mistress to Sartre. They do help to explain why the decade of the 1960s was far more than a revolution in style, but also a substantial rebellion against Enlightenment (enveloped as it was by Sartre in a presumed revolt against capitalism, imperialism, Americanism, the bourgeoisie and other assorted evils). Sartre’s rhetoric is so commonplace now that it is difficult to recollect that he spoke his piece in the mid-1960s. He tells his acolytes that “we must visualize our struggle today, in the context of a durable American hegemony. The world is not dominated by two great powers, but by one.” Writing in the context of the Vietnam quagmire, he correctly sensed a “weariness of the mass of Americans and from the disquiet of Washington’s leaders at the growing disapproval of the entire world, and in particular of all their allies.” This chord has been struck a thousand times since, being uttered far closer to the sources of European power than Sartre would have dared imagine in the days of the student uprisings in Paris of May 1968.

In his latter-day political thought, Jean-Paul Sartre would have his readers and adherents believe that he was sitting high on the shoulders of the Chinese Maoists. While he hardly disguised his admiration for that revolution and its combined military cadre and peasant base, the plain fact is that Sartre’s political thought remained closer to the Paris of Robespierre in 1793 than to the Beijing of Mao Tse Tung in 1963. In response to the Cultural Revolution and the Great Leap Forward, Sartre expressed a certain irritation with the Chinese Communists, its “central discordance between the unleashing of mass initiatives and the cult of the leader.” His own position is that “the idea of a perpetual apocalypse” in such circumstances is “naturally very attractive.” One senses in these remarks an unwavering dedication to the idea of the permanent revolution. It alone makes possible the struggle between good “poor peasants,” and an evil American empire, boasting an armed force supported by a “highly industrialized country of 200 million inhabitants.”

The Algerian War may have provided motive for Sartre’s “totalism,” as it did for Camus’s “universalism.” But Sartre’s grounds for rejecting colonialism spawned different outcomes. Sartre’s personal odyssey came close to The Reign of Terror and Committee of Public Safety as a rationale for policy. In examining the nature of terrorism, he came near to arguing the need for unbridled, lawless slaughter via the guillotine as a legitimate device of handling those whom he defined as enemies. The totalitarian background in the post-revolutionary era provided an instinctual cesspool for his vision. Sartre could write with absolute conviction that “I always refused to place on an equal footing the terrorism by means of bombs which was the only weapon available to the Algerians, and the actions and executions of a rich army of half a million men occupying the entire country.” The odd aspect of this absolute certainty of right and wrong, or better, good and evil, is that Sartre’s earlier life gave no indication of any interest in political systems, much less their moral claims of a public. We have it on the good authority of Raymond Aron that, until 1940, Sartre cared not a
For democratic or anti-democratic regimes. In part, his immersion in the works of Martin Heidegger was made simpler by this apolitical posture. Less odd is that what began as a disinterest in politics became after the war and beyond a total immersion. The attractiveness of totalitarian modes of thought united Heidegger to Sartre. His transformation from disinterest to partisan commitment becomes much easier to understand in light of this aspect of the existentialist persuasion.

The same exclusivity of virtue first claimed by Robespierre and later reenacted by Lenin in the assassination of the Czar Nicholas and his entire family, permitted Sartre to justify that regicide was a necessary part of the contemporary moral agenda. Without both virtue and terror, Sartre argued, any real justice was emptied of content. Indeed “terror is nothing other than justice, prompt, severe, inflexible”; it is therefore an emanation of virtue. Just as Robespierre could rail against those who pleaded for “indulgence for the royalists,” or who claimed “mercy for the villains,” Sartre exclaimed “No! Mercy is for the innocent, mercy for the weak, mercy for the unfortunate, mercy for humanity.” In the same way, Sartre rejected the idea that killing of Vietnamese by Americans must be juxtaposed or balanced by the killing of Americans by Vietnamese. “A revolutionary party must necessarily reproduce—up to a certain limit—the centralization and coercion of the bourgeois state which is its mission to overthrow.” The line that runs from Robespierre to Lenin to Sartre runs far more deeply than any other. It has been blurred by the French Resistance Movement and philosophical argument about choices. But these interviews indicate quite plainly that the destruction of the Nazis only made Sartre’s juices flow for increased violence and greater vigilance. The destruction of the West as such, as a bourgeois culture, became both the game of the moment in the 1960s and his goal for future generations.

Sartre’s belated passion for politics was genuine, written in the element of Enlightenment endemic to the Rousseauian program for the state educating the young, and given specificity by Martin Heidegger’s Being and Time (1927) as an “enquiry into the being that we ourselves are.” Dasein or Existence was to restore personal meaning to historical purpose. But the early search for rationality in Being and Nothingness, in which Sartre claims reality is grounded in the free and responsible self who is ultimately in control of choosing life’s meanings through struggle with the generalized other, was summarily displaced by something he called “lived experience.” Curiously, it was in the tortured evolution from Hegel to Heidegger that Sartre ended with a position not too dissimilar to the praxis of anarchical fascism, to activity as an exhilarating condition unto itself because it is a “totalistic” experience. Sartre had far less interest in accurately describing events so much as in exciting the passions that could stimulate revolutionary virtues. Sartre took the notion of praxis far more seriously than the search for consciousness as such. Politics provided that arena; literary criticism, such as his multi-volume work on Flaubert, offered the intellectual feat which in his mind entitled him to leadership. The earlier era in which Sartre wrote plays, novels, and grand theories are introduced as a source of self-criticism rather than analysis. In true Maoist parody of humility they were curiosities of an earlier age—antiquarian residuals of a philosophical life.

Political mysticism replaced even a hint of intellectual balance. As with Georges Sorel in the fin de siècle, radicalism in revolt against reason became for Sartre the true source of the socialist agenda. It was an agenda of personal revelation that could be captured as a psychological property and did not require a
historical genesis or location. Sartre reports that “when I discovered the class struggle, this was a true discovery in which I now believe totally.” But the word “totally” is not so much a thesaurus-like equivalent to thoroughly as a metaphysical cadence out of time. “One can be conscious of an external totalization, but one cannot be conscious of a totalization which also totalizes consciousness.” The swamp of tendentious platitudes, in which even the search for meaning surrenders to the poetics of mysticism, is made possible by a movement without questioning—a totalitarian temptation hidden behind mild, tepid rebukes for Nazism and Stalinism.

Behind Sartre’s critique of culture is the need for leadership of a new type—one predicated on the language of egotism writ large. With the vibrant exception of Simone de Beauvoir, who in fact displayed herself to be exceptionally resistant to his mystical blandishments, the British New Left interviewers are in the embarrassing position of serving as straight men to a cultural figure that has gone off the rails. Not even in the wildest moments of the Socratic Dialogues, does Plato offer up such weak and insipid opposition to the master philosopher-king of the Parisian salons. The reason Sartre offers for abandonment of the existentialist canons is the belief that “subjectivity and objectivity seem to me entirely useless notions today.” This lapse into solipsism goes unchallenged by his interlocutors. Instead, explanations of a shabby sort are offered as to why Flaubert is the object of his work rather than the more popular Stendhal. We are simply notified that “there is a totalization in language.... The whole of language. As a system of differentiated meanings is present in its very absence.” Dialectics becomes a feasting ground for obscurantism of a sort that must have made even die-hard Marxists squirm. We are left not with a discourse on events, so much as how events are internalized in the life and work of the master. With the Communist Party of France declared “the largest conservative party in France” and all other parties to the right of that Party, all that is left is the husk of the culture, of the new leader of a new movement, of Sartre himself. That the absurdity of such egomania remained clouded in the vision of acolytes only further fueled the dream world of permanent revolution Sartre came to occupy.

Simone de Beauvoir’s desperate attempt to engage her intermittent life partner in something resembling rational dialogue was foredoomed to failure. As she realized matters in her early autobiography of 1960 on The Prime of Life, the failure of both of them to take account of “the weight of reality” and preference to take flight in the myth of “radical freedom” made any reconciliation, even of a temporary sort, emotional rather than intellectual. Even her clever aperçus, such as her drawing attention to the problem in the women’s movement between the search for economic advancement and political equality did little to raise Sartre from his clumsy fumbling torpor. De Beauvoir notes that “we are in favor of an egalitarian society and the abolition not only of the exploitation of man by man, but of hierarchies, privileges and so on. On the other hand, we want to have access to the same qualifications as men, to start off with the same qualifications as men, the same career opportunities, and the same chance of reaching the top of the hierarchy.” Sartre’s response, based on the half-hearted conviction that the gender struggle and the class struggle must move in lockstep to the inevitable overthrow of the bourgeois
civilization and the coming of the new age, took on eerie signs of empty sloganeering—made transparent by its focus on de Beauvoir’s feminism, which, however limited, was a real movement with real people taking place in real time. The results of this interesting wordplay between the two provides a horrible public display of what must have been played out in futility in the private life. It is little wonder that Sartre is now viewed more as a representative of an exhausted cause than as a creative figure in the history of European thought.

The British publisher that issued this strange collection has done little to enhance the reputation or the rehabilitation of Sartre as the volume of interviews range from 35 to 40 years old. They are reissued without a new or even an old introduction or preface to this collection. As a consequence, the reader is given no information on the contexts of each interview. One might have expected at least an editorial explanation for the vituperative rhetoric of some ideologues conducted at the height of the French student movement of 1968 and before that, the war in Vietnam. For that matter, the interview-format itself presents an odd situation in which only the mistress and lover of Sartre seem capable of mustering even a mildly critical and independent posture. The tension between feminism and radicalism itself might have been helpful to readers.

Beyond this lapse in editorial judgment are poor translations that make matters worse. The German word for alienation (Entfremdung) is translated as “distanciation,” while the work of Bertolt Brecht is seen as urging a “contestation” when, in fact, Mother Courage aims to establish relationships. “Dialectical intelligibility” is reduced to rubbish by sentences that make Heidegger appear pellucid. For example, Sartre tells us that “one can be conscious of a totalization, but one cannot be conscious of a totalization which also totalizes consciousness.” The need for a present-day analysis could hardly be more necessary or less in evidence in these political judgments of the moment. As matters stand, Sartre leaves the Enlightenment with but a single limb: one that carries the dead leaves of slogans and sayings aimed at the mindless destruction of the world as it is in favor of a revolutionary world that presumably will liberate people, even if it is a revolution that devours its own children in the process of transformation. Sartre knew this full well in his reservations about the Chinese model of Bolshevism, but in the absence of comment, the interviews as such do not make his reservations apparent.

The belated appearance of these two volumes is a reminder of what we have long known. The struggle between the rational and the irrational, the public and the egoistic, the democratic and the dictatorial is not confined to any single nation or region. More than sixty years after the end of World War Two, the French nation and its people are undergoing the same sort of definition and redefinition of the Western tradition as their Anglo-American world counterpart. The issues are now quite different—immigration, race, bi-cultural secularization—but the values remain the same. French Enlightenment is the source of democratic and anti-democratic tendencies, of popular movements and political management. It offers a project for practical reform and unwieldy utopian projections of progress. To read Camus and Sartre back-to-back is to appreciate what a special role French political ideology has played since the middle of the eighteenth century in fashioning the common culture. It is also to appreciate the strong likelihood that the Enlightenment itself may have once been a solution, but its contradictory post-liberation outcome is far more a conundrum in the present.