

The Rebel or The Tyrant dies on the Day of Art

The essay *L'Homme révolté* (The Rebel) was published in 1951, when people were afraid of the atomic bomb and the Cold War. Albert Camus regarded the essay as his most important work. His *Défense de l'homme révolté* (Defence of the Rebel), written later, is not so much a response to the critics of the book but rather the author holding a blunt conversation with himself. The origin of every work, according to Camus, lies in a simple and deep emotion. This does not justify the work but is indispensable in order to understand it. During the 1940s Camus had observed people whose deeds and motives he was unable to understand, no matter how much effort he made. He did not understand how human beings could torture other human beings, and while they were doing so looked unceasingly at their victims. He was prepared for this because he had read about similar acts, and initially he was reassured because he was convinced that it could only be related to exceptional cases, for which the crazed fury of a wild animal in human form was responsible. These crimes became part of everyday life. Far from arising and burning in a criminal soul, only to be soon extinguished again, the crimes persisted because apparently they could be justified with rational reasons. Ultimately they became widespread throughout the world, were victorious and ruled.

The original essay states that in the modern age people look back nostalgically to those naïve times when tyrants razed entire cities for their own fame; slaves, bound to the triumphant chariot of the victor, were dragged through the town, and enemies who had been taken prisoner were thrown to the wild animals as crowds of people watched. It was a case of "candid crimes", faced with which the observer could form a clear awareness of injustice. However, it became impossible to pass sentence when the flag of freedom was waving over slave settlements, and when massacres were shamelessly justified by philanthropy or by tyranny, to which superman is entitled. Crime profited from innocence. This presented the challenge for man's moral power of judgement. Camus faced this challenge in *The Rebel*.

Rebellious man was confronted with a dilemma. It was easy to react to a criminal power with counter-power, with cunning or with contempt. Yet for a crime that justified itself by rational reasons a response had to be found with a reasonable explanation of what is good. However, what kind of good was meant here? The revolt was sure of its cause – yet rebellious man was often seized by the despair of not being able to clearly define the rational reasons of his own actions. Camus described the consequence of this view in his acceptance speech when he was awarded the Nobel Prize for Literature on 10 December 1957, "Whatever our personal weaknesses may be, the nobleness of our action will always be shown in two obligations which are difficult to fulfil: the refusal to lie when one knows better, and opposing suppression." Camus lamented that it was all the more difficult for man to do this because in the modern age there was no longer any

“lived-out moral” which could have served as a reliable orientation. Nevertheless, he had to act. It is in the “nevertheless” that the claim and nobleness of revolt lie. Man in revolt is the man who says no. Enough is enough. The game of the mighty becomes the earnestness of the suppressed. The slave, who throughout his life has obeyed orders, suddenly regards a new order from his master as unacceptable. He rebels; in the end he wants to be the master. In the direct sense of the word, revolt means a reverse of the situation, the end of everyday life. The revolt, according to Camus, reveals in man what is worth defending always and everywhere. It is triggered not only by individual suffering but also by the suppression of another: “I revolt, therefore we are.”

However, the revolt is doomed to fail if it is guided by blind rage. Indispensable for the moral success of the revolt is the renunciation of any joy in the humiliation of the other – even when it is a matter of the torturer and the tyrant. Camus reproaches the church fathers of early Christianity for having relieved the revolt of its dignity, when they gloated that in Heaven the greatest joy of the blessed would consist of watching the torment of the Roman emperors who go to their death in Hell.

“Everything is necessary,” said Hegel and Marx. “Everything is possible,” says the rebel – and what is possible is worth sacrifice. For Camus the revolt is not a romantic act. If a philosophy followed from the revolt, it would be a philosophy of limits, of calculated ignorance and of recognised risk. In the conflict between freedom and justice, absolute freedom becomes the right of the strongest to dominate; absolute justice on the other hand suppresses every contradiction and thus destroys freedom. The revolution, which escapes control by the spirit of revolt, has to end in state terror. A contradiction exists between revolution and revolt: the revolt reveals the limits of revolution. Established for a long time in compromise, it arises from the motor of all or nothing and yet remains moderate, unlike the extremeness of revolution.

The Rebel is not so much a treatise on the absurd but rather a plea for reality, a justification of what is relative. In a world that grants privileges to the absolute, the revolt is constantly in danger. “The civilisations of the North” belong to this world of the absolute. Europe is characterised by the tension between the land of the south and the land of the midnight sun; the “German ideology” is in conflict with the esprit méditerranéen. Albert Camus was born in a village in Algeria, which explains his passion for the Mediterranean and whose side he takes in this struggle. The Mediterranean is not classical and ordered but diffuse and turbulent. It is the region that opposes doctrines. At its centre is the Greek civilisation which is a culture of moderation and shows the limits of what is holy and reasonable. Nemesis keeps watch over the Mediterranean but, unlike the god of the church fathers, who promises the blessed the joy of revenge in the next world, Nemesis is the goddess of retribution not of revenge. Art also has to be measured by its sense of reality. Nietzsche was right when he asserted that no artist can endure reality, but this does not mean, according to Camus, that he is allowed to neglect reality. Every artistic creation rejects the world in which it is created,

not because it denies the world but because it has painfully realised what the world is lacking. If the man who refuses to accept the world as it is, nevertheless is not allowed to escape it, this is particularly true of the artist. "Strange citizens of this world," are the artists "who are isolated in their own homeland." Camus notices about the political revolutions of the modern age that starting in 1789 they are directed against the freedom of art and put it in its place. Camus stresses that at the same time the revolt is always aesthetic at its core, because like art it aims to create a new universe. Yet is it not true that art stands closer to the extremeness of revolution than the condition of revolt? Perhaps Sisyphus is the symbol of revolt. However, the symbol of revolution is Prometheus, as Camus makes clear in a note in his diary from the year 1938, "A revolution is always directed against the gods, starting with Prometheus. It is a matter of man rebelling against his fate, for whom tyrants and bourgeois marionettes are only a pretext." Every human creation is an alternative draft to reality, a rebellion against what exists. This is particularly true of art. In an essay praising Greek culture as the culture of moderation (*L'Exil d'Hélène*, 1948), Camus laments, "Our pitiful tragedies smell of office air, and the blood that is shed in them resembles thick ink." Nevertheless, the time of "sedentary artists" is over and done with for him; art is endangered, and in itself must be dangerous.

In his tragedy *Caligula* Camus expressed the dream of every artist that art should lead to a successful revolt. At the end of the tragedy, Caligula – referred to as "the monster" by his biographer Suetonius – decided there should be a "day of art". Poets are to recite impromptu poems for the tyrant, each lasting one minute, on the theme of death. In doing so, they literally dance to his whistle: when Caligula whistles, they have to stop their recitation immediately as a sign that they have failed with their poem: "You will march past me and as you do so lick your writing tablets to erase the traces of your infamies."

However, on the day when Caligula derides the poets, the conspirators from the circle of his own bodyguards finally pluck up courage and murder him. The tyrant dies on the day of art.

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