

“Algeria is What Pains Me”

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“Algeria is what pains me.” The title of my talk is taken from the “Letter to an Algerian Militant,” Aziz Kessous, that Camus wrote in 1955. It appeared in the first issue of Kessous’s newspaper, published on October 1 of that year, and has been reprinted in *The Algerian Chronicles*. But that isn’t the way I translated the phrase in the published version. The French is: “*Vous me croirez sans peine si je vous dis que j’ai mal à l’Algérie en ce moment, comme d’autres ont mal aux poumons.*” In the published version I wrote: “Algeria is where I hurt at this moment, as others feel pain in their lungs. And since August 20 I have been on the edge of despair.” (On August 20, 1955, 37 European settlers were brutally massacred by Algerian rebels in Philippeville, today known as Skikda. It was one of the worst atrocities of the Algerian war.)

Camus suffered from tuberculosis, so when he compared the pain that Algeria caused him to the pain of sick lungs, he was owning his “Algeria pain,” his “neurAlgeria,” as something born within him, an intimate, organic pain stemming from a diseased part of himself, which, though it might kill him, could never be removed, because it was as integral to sustaining his life as his own lungs. That is one of Camus’s representations of himself as an Algerian, a full-fledged native-

born Algerian (he was in fact a third-generation immigrant, as entitled to call himself Algerian as I, a third-generation immigrant to the United States, am entitled to call myself American). He expressed this Algerian identity in a manifesto published in 1937, entitled “*La culture indigène*,” native culture. His use of the word *indigène*, which French settlers normally used to differentiate the territory’s non-French inhabitants from themselves, was a provocation, about which I will say more in a moment.

And yet, in the very next sentence of his 1955 letter to Kessous, Camus wrote:

Only a person who knows nothing of the human heart can think that the French of Algeria can now forget the massacres in Philippeville. Conversely, only a madman can believe that repression, once unleashed, can induce the Arab masses to trust and respect France. So we now find ourselves pitted against one another, with each side determined to inflict as much pain as possible on the other, inexpiable.

Here, evoking the two communities at grips with each other in a nascent civil war, Camus refers to *les Français d’Algérie*, a phrasing that separated the French from the soil they occupied and thereby drove a wedge through the nation whose oneness he once imagined, as we will see in a moment, as a quasi-natural phenomenon, a “unity of sunshine and joy.” Indeed, a few years later, Pierre Nora

published a book that used this same phrase, *Les Français d'Algérie*, as its title—a title deliberately chosen, Nora later revealed, for its “surgical” deftness in severing Algeria from “the French” and “the French” from Algeria.¹ But here, in 1955, addressing an old comrade with whom he once stood in solidarity, Camus, speaking from knowledge of “the human heart,” reluctantly recognizes that, try as he might to rise above the human condition, he is nevertheless, by birth, not a full-fledged Algerian but *un Français d'Algérie*, condemned to suffer for the sins of his countrymen.

And so we have a Camus who can describe himself on one and the same page as a man who feels Algeria within him as viscerally as he feels his own lungs yet who also stands apart as “a Frenchman of Algeria,” as alien to Africa as he is estranged from France. This is not the same Albert Camus who in 1938 wrote in *Les Noces* of his relation to Algeria as a moment of almost sexual ecstasy, of *jouissance*, that overwhelmed all alienation with ineffable bliss. Here he is at the age of 25, describing the mystical communion he experiences on the beach at Tipasa:

No, it was not I who counted, or the world, but only the harmony and silence out of which love grew from it to me. Love that I was not so foolish as to claim

¹ I take this information from Ed Baring’s penetrating study of the young Jacques Derrida, who, like Camus, was born in Algeria and who took Nora’s formulation as a provocation, a refusal to comprehend that a person could feel both integrally French and wholly Algerian [Baring, 249].

for myself alone, for I was proudly conscious of sharing it with an entire race, born of the sun and the sea, a vigorous and savory race whose grandeur comes from its simplicity and which, standing erect on its beaches, returns the sky's luminous smile with a complicit smile of its own.

How does this passage help us to understand Camus's *cri de coeur* of 1955: "Algeria is what pains me, Algeria is where I hurt right now?" On one level, the meaning of this sentence is quite clear. For twenty years, half his lifetime, Camus had tried to imagine a community in which the "French of Algeria" and the "Algerians of Algeria" might live in the "harmony and silence" that made possible the "world-love" that he experienced on the beach at Tipasa. The failure of that imagined community, its descent into terror and torture and civil war, pained him viscerally. But that plain surface meaning conceals a deeper, more hidden meaning and a Camus whose estrangement from the world and from human community is more permanent—dare I say more metaphysical?—than a purely political reading of his 1955 letter would suggest.

But first I want to call your attention to something very odd in the passage I just quoted from *Les Noces*. In it, Camus speaks of "love," but it is a very peculiar kind of love: not love between two individuals, although Camus does speak in this same text of that more usual carnal variety of love, which he also experiences on the beach at Tipasa. But the love he claims to crave in this passage is a different

love, the love of the world, or, rather, *by* the world, which he says grew “from it”—that is, from the world—“to me” out of “harmony and silence.” In other words, Camus is not professing love of the world or nature—which would be all in all a rather banal sentiment. He is rather expressing his craving for the *world*—the mute, indifferent world that he would later evoke in the final paragraph of *L'Étranger*—to love *him*. On the beach at Tipasa, he becomes momentarily convinced that it does—convinced, in other words, that the world recognizes his worth and enfolds him in its embrace. Although he is proud of being the object of this world-love, he also says that he is “not so foolish” as to claim it for himself alone. Rather, he is “proudly conscious” of “sharing” the world’s love with “an entire *race*, born of the sun and the sea, a vigorous and savory race whose grandeur comes from its simplicity.”

As peculiar as the use of the word “love” is in this passage, the use of the word “race” is no less singular. For “race” is usually intended to imply some kinship of blood, a genealogical filiation. This sense is even stronger in French, where the word also means “breed,” as in *chien de race*, a pedigreed dog. Indeed, French, when it wants to be ecumenical, does not speak of “the human race,” as we do, but rather of “*le genre humain*,” the human genus. The “race” Camus seems to have in mind is not a blood race, however, but a race that coincides with a milieu: everyone who shares the confluence of sun and sea that Tipasa symbolizes for him

belongs to it. This is a convenient fiction for a temperament like Camus's, instinctively drawn to "harmony and silence." In this privileged enclave, this Mediterranean beach that stands metonymically for Algeria, there is no colonizer and no colonized, no *Français d'Algérie* or *indigène*, but only a "vigorous and savory race" distinguished by its "simplicity"—that is, a sort of Rousseauian pre-social, pre-political, and therefore prelapsarian humanity, uncorrupted by civilization.

The young Camus had great hopes for this race of noble savages, of human beings coexisting without conflicting interests or political division. The year before writing *Les Noces*, in 1937, while still a Communist but just barely, he was the principal author of the manifesto I mentioned earlier, in which he presented the views of a group of young artists and activists that included Algerians of both European and African extraction. The title of this manifesto was "Indigenous Culture: The New Mediterranean Culture." Camus's use of the word *indigène* in his title was not his only provocation. His even more contentious claim was that the marriage of sea and sun he would celebrate a year later at Tipasa had inflected the ideas that dominated the age. Listen to what he says in his manifesto:

The point is that a region that has transformed so many doctrines in the past must also transform today's doctrines. A Mediterranean collectivism will be different from a Russian collectivism. The fate of collectivism will not be

determined in Russia but in the Mediterranean, and at this very moment in Spain.

It's curious that, to my knowledge, no commentator has ever linked Camus to the nineteenth-century historian of ideas Hippolyte Taine, who argued that literature was determined by "race, milieu, and moment." For that is what Camus is doing here: linking not just literature, but what he calls "doctrines," meaning political ideas wrapped in social movements, to the "race," milieu, and time in which they manifest themselves, where by "race," as we have seen, he means not the white or brown race but "the peoples of the Mediterranean," who inhabit "the realm of joy and smiles."

This Mediterranean—this race, milieu, and time—has transformed not only Marxism, he tells us, but also Christianity: "It was also a Mediterranean, Francis of Assisi, who turned Christianity from a religion of inner torment into a hymn to nature and naïve joy. And it was a northerner, Luther, who was responsible for the one attempt to separate Christianity from the world." More surprisingly, he even attempts to distinguish Mediterranean fascism from Teutonic fascism: "To anyone who has lived in both Germany and Italy, it is obvious that fascism in these two places is not the same. . . . By dint of some Mediterranean miracle, people who think humanely are able to live without oppression in a country under inhumane rule."

These are extravagant claims, even for a 24-year-old. They should not, I think, be taken as propositions with any sort of rigorous philosophical or historical basis. Rather, they are expressions of Camus's need to resolve insuperable contradictions by casting himself as a member of an imagined community in which those contradictions simply do not arise. Does the Soviet form of what he calls "collectivism" require a suppression of liberty he cannot abide? Then simply transplant Marxist "doctrine" to the Mediterranean and it will be transformed into a "hymn to nature and naïve joy" among people who "think humanely" and can therefore live "without oppression."

Let that imagined community vanish from the mind, however, and "naïve joy" gives way to bitterness and despair. If the world does not love him, Camus becomes Meursault, a man who, when exposed "to the world's tender indifference," loses sight of life's horizon. Instead of the world-love experienced on the beach at Tipasa, only meaninglessness and estrangement remain. Life becomes "absurd."

Camus's spontaneously harmonious "Mediterranean culture" born of sun and sea should thus be read as an antithesis to the deeply divided colony into which he was actually born. It defined the horizon toward which the young Camus briefly directed himself. But if Camus quickly gave up on the possibility of Mediterranean

culture, he did not give up on the search for imagined communities in which the contradictions that pained him in Algeria could be resolved.

With this observation I come to the main point of my talk. The thought I want to leave you with is this: the flight we witness here from a divided, contentious reality into a mythic, unified, transcendent horizon of the imagination was the fundamental movement of Camus's mind. We see it again in his wartime writing. For Camus, the Resistance was like the early Christian church: a communion in otherworldly purity. "It was more difficult for the Resistance to have martyrs than for the Church," he wrote in *Combat*, because those who died for the Church believed in an afterlife, while those who died for the Resistance had no such "hope or consolation." They acted simply because they could not refrain from acting, gratuitously, without hope, and crucially without the "realism" that weighs costs and benefits—remember that for Camus, "realist" was an insulting epithet reserved for those who lacked the purity of ideals.

Indeed, he used the language of purity and religious communion so frequently in his wartime writing that the Catholic writer François Mauriac, with whom he often clashed, was prompted to remark that "my young colleague is more spiritualist than I imagined—more than I am in any case. . . . The young masters of *Combat* have yet to flush certain scraps of Christianity entirely out of their system." As my co-panelist Rob Zaretsky reminds us in his latest book, moreover,

Camus identified deeply with St. Augustine—the first exemplar of “Mediterranean culture,” if you will, whose escape from the dividedness of Manichean culture into an imagined community in which Platonism and Christianity were reconciled preceded Camus’s escape from twentieth-century Europe’s Manichean divisions into a Mediterranean culture that would somehow transcend them.

But if the characteristic movement of Camus’s mind was to flee contradiction, disharmony, and solitude by inventing imaginary communions—Mediterranean culture, say, or the Resistance culture—where, miraculously, everyone shared the same hopes, goals, and dreams, these invented communities invariably failed him, as the contentiousness of reality insistently reinstated itself. If Mediterranean culture arose spontaneously out of sea, sand, and sun, it could collapse just as suddenly, with the abruptness of a detonation. As Meursault remarks when he kills the Arab in *L’Etranger*, “I shook off the sweat and the sunshine. I understood that I had destroyed the equilibrium of the day, the exceptional silence of a beach where I had been happy.” We are once again among the elements out of which the miracle at Tipasa was made—sun and sea, sand and silence—and instead of a unitary “Mediterranean culture” free of nettlesome contradiction we now behold only a dead Arab and a French murderer.

Similarly, in his wartime writing, Camus had held out the hope that the Resistance, which he set before the readers of *Combat* as he imagined it rather than

as it was, could regenerate a corrupt political system around a set of ideals that he believed to be more widely shared than they actually were. In the end, however, as the actual elements that made up the Resistance fell to bickering and mutual recrimination, Camus could only whimper: “We were defenseless because we were honest. The new press, which we wanted to be worthy and proud, is today the shame of this wretched country.” His characteristic movement from division to harmony thus culminates in an equally characteristic fall into anger, bitterness, and despair. As he put it in *La Chute*: “I lived for a long time under the illusion of a general harmony, heedless and smiling as judgments, barbs, and ridicule were aimed at me from all sides. Suddenly alerted, lucidity came to me all at once. I suffered many wounds simultaneously and lost all my strength in an instant. All around me the universe began to laugh.”

When this sudden “lucidity” swoops down on him, he sheds the illusion that the world loves him and becomes, like Meursault, “open for the first time to the world’s tender indifference,” as we read in the last paragraph of *L’Étranger*. In that moment he discovers that he is not surrounded by sympathetic comrades but utterly alone, and his only salvation from loneliness is to imagine a crowd of spectators come to witness his death and greet it with “cries of hatred.”

And this, I submit, is why Camus’s voice has become audible again. Because we all crave, as he did, the world’s love. We want to be recognized and

embraced and in our most exalted moments we may even believe, as Camus did on the beach at Tipasa or while writing editorials for *Combat* from an isolated village in the Cévennes, that we belong to a community of *nos semblables et frères*, whose cravings are identical with ours and who acknowledge our existence and intrinsic worth as we acknowledge theirs. But these exalted moments do not last. We live most of our days utterly alone, acutely aware of “the world’s tender indifference” and of the insuperable differences between us and others that make us all “French of Algeria” or *indigènes* rather than comrades united in the consoling belief that “the Internationale is the human race.” The illusory optimism of the era of decolonization has vanished. Postcolonial critics of Camus such as Conor Cruise O’Brien and Edward Said, so confident that they had placed their armchairs in the direction of history, have been left facing an empty stage as history moves off in a different direction. Their allegories of abstraction seem thin compared with the chronicle of a lacerated self that Camus has given us. “Algeria,” then, stands for the all-too-humanness of the predicament we share with the writer who left us more than half a century ago, so we can truly say, with Camus, that “at this moment, Algeria is what pains us.”

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