

Book Review

Albert Camus

The Algerian Chronicles

Cambridge, UK: The Belknap Press, 2013

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

I am sitting at a keyboard just a few miles north of Toronto. It is just a few months after the fiftieth anniversary of the execution of US President John F. Kennedy. Americans have recently celebrated “Thanksgiving,” “Christmas” and the “New Year.” Despite howls of abuse from Republicans and dire warnings from Benjamin Netanyahu on the one side and cautious reassurances that President Obama has finally done something to justify his Nobel Peace Prize on the other, a tentative and temporary agreement involving Iran’s nuclear policy has been signed. It seems like an auspicious moment to reflect on the state of politics in my own and other countries.

The inventory of social insanity seems limitless. It’s enough to turn sensitive or even mildly sentient people to cynicism, spirituality or some form of intellectual, emotional or physical suicide.

In Canada, there are reasons for concern at all three levels of government. At Toronto City Hall, there is a bizarre situation as a result of its Mayor becoming the object of serious criminal investigations and self-inflicted ridicule around the world. At the provincial level, Ontario is enduring serial scandals involving the waste or worse of billions of dollars on a failing electronic health record system, the privatization of air ambulance services and the news that over a billion dollars was squandered to terminate the construction of locally unpopular electricity generation plants in order to save four government seats in the most recent election. Then, there is a federal government embroiled in multiple layers of disgrace, notably involving electoral malfeasance and voter suppression, possible criminal charges against government-appointed Senators, various cover-ups and the revelation of multiple abuses of power that may lead through the Prime Minister’s Office to Stephen Harper himself. These headline-winning events capture public attention, but there are far deeper levels of democratic deficit to be plumbed. In combination, these events would merit the adjective “surreal,” were it not for the fact that the overuse of that term has become ... well, surreal.

Moving from the merely mendacious to the potentially catastrophic, it is possible to witness everything from Wall Street bankers still collecting enormous bonuses for having almost ruined the world’s already fragile financial system to extraordinary weather patterns that betoken the consequences of climate change which some powerful political leaders still deny, though most have stopped calling it a “socialist plot” (at least in public).

And, of course, there remain chronic international conflicts, ethno-religious slaughters, huge human rights abuses and utterly unnecessary levels of poverty, ignorance and disease throughout human society—all of which could be ameliorated if not extinguished by a modest

25% reduction of global military budgets. The inventory of social insanity seems limitless. It's enough to turn sensitive or even mildly sentient people to cynicism, spirituality or some form of intellectual, emotional or physical suicide. If anything should compel our attention and urge truly innovative thought and action, the catalogue of existing and impending calamities is surely it. Indeed, a case can be made that the time for transformation and not merely innovation within existing, ossified categories of policy development and implementation is at hand.

As background for a review of a solitary writer's reflections on a single North African war of independence that came to a close over half a century ago—before, even, the premeditated death of the 36th president of the United States—this might appear to be an odd and possibly hyperbolic construction. Indeed, the relevance of that writer's contemplation of events in Algeria and the entire Algerian conflict itself might seem remote at best.

Indulge me, please.

The Belknap Press, an imprint of the Harvard University Press, has taken upon itself the job of publishing *The Algerian Chronicles* by Albert Camus. It is a book of significance. The year 2013 was the centenary of Camus' birth. Some notice ought to have been taken and it is pleasing that this publisher met the need. It may not be a sign of hope in itself, but it is at least a reminder of the possibility that a justifiable optimism could one day return—if Camus' essential message were to be revisited and finally taken to heart. I shall endeavour to explain.

Camus displayed courage and resilience in the face of the daily threat of capture and death while other more ostensibly radical intellectuals swanned around occupied Paris with no apparent fear and in no apparent danger

First, however, a brief introduction is in order for those readers who may not be familiar with Albert Camus. In the years immediately preceding the Kennedy assassination, I found myself reading Camus voraciously. I began when a substitute high-school French teacher loaned me a copy of the great Algerian's signature novel, *L'Étranger*. I was smitten and soon went on to devour his major essays, *The Rebel* and *The Myth of Sisyphus*, his novels *The Plague* and *The Fall*, his plays including *The State of Siege*, *The Possessed* and *The Just Assassins*, his extensive journalism, his lyrical and critical essays, and especially his *Cahiers (Notebooks)*. Camus was sometimes associated with "absurdist" art and philosophy. He was often lumped in with "existentialism," despite his constant denials and protests. He won the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957 and he was killed in an automobile crash in 1960. He was my first intellectual infatuation and he was sometimes called the moral conscience of at least one generation.

The Algerian Chronicles is a collection of occasional writings about the anti-colonial conflict in Camus' homeland, mainly from 1954 to 1962 when independence was painfully, grudgingly granted. Camus was in the thick of it. He had been blacklisted by the Vichy government and forced out of Algeria in 1940 because of his journalistic work on the *Alger républicaine*. He relocated in France and served as editor of the French Resistance newspaper, *Combat*, during the Nazi occupation. He displayed courage and resilience in the face of the daily threat of capture and death while other more ostensibly radical intellectuals swanned around occupied Paris with no apparent fear and in no apparent danger.

In the 1950s, Camus' refusal to endorse the doctrinaire version of communism advocated by his one-time friend Jean-Paul Sartre brought him into disrepute among the bistro revolutionaries, many of whom had maintained their well-nourished lives under the Nazi occupation. Instead, Camus advocated a compassionate rebellion and carried on a constant critique of extremists—whether left or right. It was a delicate position, and one that would cause him to be castigated by dogmatists and fanatics at both ends of the bipolar ideological conflict. He opposed capital punishment for Nazi collaborators as he would later oppose capital punishment for Algerian terrorists. His humanity annoyed both the radical left and the radical right.

Aujourd'hui, maman est morte.

Albert Camus was born and raised in poverty. Branches of his family had migrated to Algiers and environs from Spain and from France. His father, a poor agricultural labourer, was drafted into the French army and perished at the Battle of the Marne when Camus was an infant. His mother, a half-deaf and illiterate charwoman, remained an emotional focus and the stuff of inescapable speculations about his unconventional relationships with women in and out of his fiction and his private life (including his own and other people's marriages). Not by chance was the first line in *L'Étranger*, "*Aujourd'hui, maman est morte.*"

Such matters, however psychologically intriguing, are properly to be at least provisionally separated from Camus' politics and the controversies that his views provoke. So should his upbringing as a lower working-class *pied noir*, an Algerian of European ancestry from which demographic also came the formidable French philosophers Louis Althusser (1918-1990) and Jacques Derrida (1930-2004).

Camus' novels reveal next to nothing of the Arab Algerian experience and have—like his explicitly political tracts—been contemptuously dismissed as exercises in the hypocrisy of those who feign allegiance to the oppressed, but whose sympathies are ultimately with the oppressors. That these accusations came most emphatically from the *bourgeois* French intelligentsia does not automatically discredit them, but it does make them suspicious. In my own modest view, such criticism errs. Camus' fiction had strong moral messages and posed foundational moral problems. *The Plague* was written largely as an allegory. *The Fall* was composed as an intensely personal account of Dante-like

descent, of sin and the absence of redemption. Neither novel was composed as sociological exploration; neither was required to display a politically correct narrative. For the critics, however, this was beside the point. Camus, it was argued, tried to remain aloof, offering up pious homilies while refusing to engage the material realities on the contested ground. The time had long past, cried the revolutionaries from their cafés and wine-bars on *la rive gauche*, for pretentious moralizing.

Although Albert Camus is still much admired by a small slice of the attentive public, I suspect that he is read little, if at all, by college students or even by their teachers today. When I was young, Camus' peculiar anxieties connected almost viscerally to a substantial segment of the more serious undergraduate population. In Europe debate raged. In North America, an

acquaintance with his thought and art seemed *de rigueur* among at least young people with intellectual aspirations—especially those who found Sartre’s Germanic language and Heideggerian pretensions too daunting. By calling attention to him now, however, Harvard University may be on to something. Albert Camus is buried in a quiet grave near Nice in the *Côte d’Azur*; it may be time to resurrect him.

The Algerian Chronicles is a compilation that includes new and excellent translations of familiar pieces as well as a number of smaller works that have been rendered in English for the first time. The book was originally published in French in 1958 and contains Camus’ final words on Algeria. Some essays, such as his account of the hideous poverty among the Berbers in 1939, have been widely available for a time; other contributions are taken from his work with the *Alger républicaine*. Some letters and other documents not present in the original French edition have been added.

Camus’ vision was of an Algeria in which social justice, equity and liberty would be amply afforded within the context of a metropolitan France. He spoke of an inclusive identity which contained both Arab and French Algerians. He supported proposals for a federation with France, perhaps based on the Swiss canton system. He was naïve to the point of absurdity. His moderate solutions were offered at the moment of the most intense cruelty—both from the “terrorists” of the *Armée de Libération Nationale* and in the brutal repression by the French authorities. He urged a forging of a Mediterranean culture in which all Algerians could partake. His lucid statement of morality and his contradictory recognition of reality came together in 1948, before the hostilities were fully underway. He said this: “we must refuse all legitimacy to violence ... violence is both unavoidable and unjustifiable.” A decade later, he begged the French to abandon the tactics of torture and reprisal; “once one begins to justify them, even indirectly, no rules or values remain.” No one listened or, if they did, they ignored his pleas. “Politics,” he once wrote, “is not religion or, if it is, it is nothing but the inquisition.” I’d phrase it differently; I’d say that the Inquisition is the betrayal and subversions of politics. Insofar as his intension is concerned, however, he was right.

Whether anyone will listen today is not a matter of particular significance for Algeria and Algerians, except as an example of a quaint, whimsical antiquarianism or remembrance of instances of bad faith. They may provide a pithy quote for postcolonial scholars, but they will serve no immediate practical purpose. After independence, about 800,000 of the roughly one million French *pieds noirs* fled. Within a decade, the remaining 200,000 had shrunk to only 50,000. The French colonial presence, whether living in grandeur, poverty or (as was mainly the case) in small shops as artisans and merchants, has vanished. Few returned and fewer were welcomed back.

Albert Camus is buried in a quiet grave near Nice in the <i>Côte d’Azur</i> ; it may be time to resurrect him.
--

Camus’ sensibilities, however, are of tremendous potential importance for anyone who takes seriously the host of contemporary parallels to war-ravaged Algeria that are extant today. Camus was writing, after all, about terrorism and responses to terrorism. He was writing about ethno-religious conflict, about wars of oppression and wars of resistance, about core values

regarding random acts of violence and random acts of mercy, and about merciless acts of intimidation and death. Little could be timelier.

Even people who have grown tired of bad news, simplistic jeremiads, apocalyptic visions and hallucinatory dystopias may not have inured themselves to collective insanity so much that they cannot be reached on the individual, human level. For them, Camus' writing can be restorative—not because his answers are pertinent in current contexts such as the blood-letting in Afghanistan and Syria, to say nothing of the slums of Mumbai, the internal wars of the Congo or the continuing assaults on the aboriginal peoples of Honduras.

In an era of technological dehumanization and drone strikes, big data analytics and constant, invasive surveillance of our every action and transaction, Camus brings us back to a place where we can actually discuss public issues, private issues and the distinction between them. *The Algerian Chronicles* can remind us how to talk about authentic issues without technological mediation and the intervention of computerized and thereby sanitized virtual suffering.

Call it a simpler time and a more innocent discourse if you must, but the fact is that Camus' words are direct and his anxiety is tangible. The fundamental issues that he raises are unsullied by euphemism, opacity, delusion and linguistic subversion. He does not bury language in acronyms and ethical ellipses. There is no nonsense about collateral damage, ordnance delivery and population decontamination otherwise known as genocide. Purposely obscurantist rhetoric has been insinuated into all spheres of public service, but most especially in counter-terrorism, intelligence gathering and the new travesties of data mining. They place an opaque veneer over various “black ops” and renditions where cattle prods, dressed up as Tasers, join with enhanced interrogation, waterboarding and old fashioned beatings and lashings to remove political speech one step further away from political reality.

Man is a political animal. – Aristotle War is politics by other means. – Clausewitz Politics cannot make use of war without ... being denatured. - Balibar
--

Almost 2,500 years ago, Aristotle (1947: 556) observed “that the state is a creation of nature, and that man is by nature a political animal.” He regarded politics, the active involvement of citizens in the affairs of their communities, as our species' highest secular calling. Almost two centuries ago, in 1832, Carl von Clausewitz (1968: 119) posthumously expressed the view that war was simply “politics by other means.” The principles of citizenship made famous by Pericles and held in high regard by at least some of the ancient Greeks were abandoned in the raw quest for power and domination over others. Then, just seven years ago, the contemporary French philosopher Étienne Balibar (2006) sided with Aristotle and sought the restoration of principled politics as he told a meeting at Northwestern University in Chicago that “politics cannot make use of the violent means of war without being transformed itself by the use of these means, and perhaps radically transformed, denatured.”

The beliefs and behaviour of revolutionaries, terrorists, torturers and established authorities isolated from the people they govern have combined to *denature* us. So, I am sad to say, have the attitudes and actions of bureaucrats in massive corporations—both public and private. The

“managed democracy,” which Sheldon Wolin (2008) also calls “inverted totalitarianism,” has twisted political life and polluted political speech, leaving us all awash in hierarchical organizations which eviscerate debate and turn democratic participation into exercises in symbolic ritual far removed not only from the power to provide answers, but even from the ability to define questions.

Albert Camus tried to restore dignity to humanity and to politics, and to claim civil discourse for humanity at large, not just the elites or the aspirant elitists who rule or who lead revolutions. To press for a restoration of politics which is not merely war by other means, Camus’ constructive and substantive pleadings on behalf of moderation in Algeria are now of urgent relevance.

This is a moment when ideological intransigence all but defines political discourse. It is also a moment when ruthless, transparently calculated *realpolitik* unites formal democracies, cruel dictatorships and unearthly theocracies in clashes involving toxic mixtures of ideologies and oil, all of them are insinuated into dubious financial dealings, global corporate malfeasance, the transformative effects of technology out of control and, not uncommonly, intimations of genocide. It is, in short, a moment in which wisdom in whatever guise from wherever source is earnestly needed and might even be welcomed by whichever diplomats, soldiers and titular heads of pertinent states might be willing to listen attentively and to act upon sage advice.

Just as Chinese leaders are no doubt aware that they might benefit from a re-reading of *The Book of Tao*, so also Western leaders might benefit from a (re)acquainting themselves with Camus and, if sufficiently humbled, could even be persuaded to re-examine the likes of Montaigne and Spinoza. They could do worse. They must do no less.

About the Author:

Howard A. Doughty teaches political economy at Seneca College in Toronto, Canada. He can be reached at howard_doughty@post.com.

References

Aristotle. 1947. “Politics.” Pp. 546-617, in Richard McKeon (Ed.). *Introduction to Aristotle*. New York, NY: Modern Library.

Balibar, É. 2008. *Politics as War, War as Politics. Post-Clausewitzian Variations*. Centre International D’Étude de la Philosophie Francaise Contemporaine. Accessed April 29, 2014 at <http://www.ciepcf.fr/spip.php?article37>

Clausewitz, C. 1968. *On War*. London UK: Penguin.

Wolin, S. 2008. *Democracy Incorporated: Managed Democracy and the Specter of Inverted Totalitarianism*. Princeton NJ: Princeton University Press.