

Albert Camus and the Prohibition to Prohibit

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Theme: [History](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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And, without even noticing it, the inhabitants of the developed countries would pass, with the end of the Cold War, from the nuclear state to the promise of a state eugenics, from the atomic bomb to the genetic bomb – something which would have been impossible without the ‘information bomb.’ – Paul Virilio, Ground Zero

Not many writers stand the test of time; one that has, whose work has indeed grown more significant since his death in 1960, is the French Nobel Laureate, Albert Camus.

I was reminded of this recently when a festival of performances, films, readings, discussions, and other events was held in New York City celebrating his life and work. The occasion for “Camus: A Stranger in the City” was the 70th anniversary of his three month visit to New York City, the only time he came to the United States.

Camus’ sudden death in a car crash, shocking though it was, seems sadly fitting for a writer who spent a lifetime fighting the absurdity of death in all its guises. That an unused train ticket was found in his pocket only added to the pathos. He was 46 years old and, in his own mind, only beginning to hit his stride as a writer.

We, however, who are left to contemplate the fate of the man who made the word “absurd” so popular, would do well to consider the exemplary work he left as his legacy. For as a true artist motivated by an anguished love for the beauty and suffering of human beings, he confronted issues that continue to haunt our world. In particular, I think his ideas of measure (*mesure*, f) and limits, rooted as they were in nature and people of flesh and blood, not some abstractions or pseudo-realities, speak to us today in a profound way.

Were Camus alive today, he would no doubt be struck by the constant stream of news reports exemplifying the hubris of our technological rationality, a mode of thinking that has made a fetish out of technology, worships efficiency, and considers any critical protest as irrational. For Camus was deeply influenced by ancient Greek philosophy. “Greek thought was always based on the idea of limits,” he wrote. “Nothing was carried to extremes, neither religion nor reason, because Greek thought denied nothing, neither reason nor religion And, even though we do it in diverse ways, we extoll one thing and one alone: a future world in which reason will reign supreme.”

He would be appalled by the arrogance of a nation led by technocratic experts and politicians who have embraced the power of pure reason devoid of values. Despite all rhetoric to the contrary, the embrace of technical reason, which is innately amoral, has caused many of the problems we seem unable to remedy. These include environmental catastrophe, high-tech wars, GM foods, drone killings, drug addiction, and nuclear weapons, to name but a few. For such problems created by technology, our esteemed leaders have technological answers. The high-priests of this technological complex – organization types

all – use the technology and control the information which they then present as “facts” to justify their actions. The absurdity of this vicious circle is lost on them. Their unstated assumption: We have a prohibition to prohibit. If it can be done, it will be done. We have no limits.

Camus thought differently: “In our madness, we push back the eternal limits, and at once Furies swoop down upon us to destroy. Nemesis, the goddess of moderation, not of vengeance, is watching. She chastises, ruthlessly, all those who go beyond the limit.”

Here are just a few recent headlines that would surely have attracted his attention.

“IVF: First genetically modified human embryos ‘could be created in Britain within weeks.’ “ (The Independent, 1/13/16)

“Scientists Talk Privately About Creating a Synthetic Human Genome” (New York Times, 5/14/16)

“In Search For Cures, Scientists Create Embryos That Are Both Animal and Human” (NPR, 5/18/16)

GM babies, the manufacture of babies without biological parents, part-human part-animal creatures – these are on the drawing board. While the elite media report these developments, they try simultaneously to discount the possibility that these technological discoveries will ever become realities. Yet average people sense otherwise: that the theology of technological “progress” operates according to the law of the prohibition to prohibit. Can do, will do.

Camus, who grew up poor and in love with nature, would no doubt see in these developments our bewitchment by the Promethean god of reason and progress. God being dead since we have murdered him – as he was fond of quoting Nietzsche – our scientists and political leaders think of themselves as gods. “We have conquered in our turn, have set aside the bounds, mastered heaven and earth. Our reason has swept everything away. Alone at last, we build our empire upon a desert.”

But of course the scientists think otherwise. “I don’t consider that we’re playing God or even close to that,” claims Jason Roberts, a bioethicist at Arizona State University. “We’re just trying to use the technology that we have developed to improve people’s lives.”

Of course such rationally organized experts in a technocracy never say that what they are doing harms people’s lives since their reasoning is circular. What they “have developed” must be good and for the improvement of humanity since they developed it out of good intentions. That they might have developed something pernicious is beyond their ken.

Thus Camus might ask: what, anyway, is a bioethicist? Are ethics something you go to school for? Are they a specialty? Are they tacked onto a person?

The three headlines quoted above are about birth, how to control and manipulate it. Birth’s conjoined opposite, death, has traditionally been the other limit to human control. It, too, has come to be seen by the technocrats as simply another obstacle to be overcome. The high-tech guru Ray Kurzweil is one among many high priests of the scientific/technological faith for whom death is simply another limit to surpass. They expect to accomplish this in

the relatively near future. That they are serious would make Camus grin or grimace with irony.

For Camus, as for so many of our greatest writers of the past, his work revolved around the issue of death and the human need to face it lucidly. That meant not explaining it away or justifying it; in short, not presuming to know the unknowable but accepting limits to human knowledge. That was – and is – a tall order in this “century of fear,” as Camus dubbed the 20th century (an appellation perfectly apt for the 21st as well), but which also could be called the time of knowledge lust, the time in which human presumptuousness has reached new heights.

The uncanny Romanian born writer, E. M. Cioran, author of *The Trouble with Being Born*, presciently wrote in 1973 that “when we have worn out the interest we once took in death, when we realize we have nothing more to gain from it, we fall back on birth, we turn to a much more inexhaustible abyss.”

This turn to birth has happened, and Camus would notice. I think he would feel compelled to link the current technological obsession to control birth with the inevitability of death, and would have linked both to our prohibition to prohibit. Nothing is off-limits today, since there are no limits to be off. People who think they are gods have none.

For in our great uncertainty, we have sought knowledge, not wisdom, as an end in itself. Afraid of the loss of God and the traditional consolation of personal immortality, we have, through our scientific and technological obsessions, transgressed ancient limits and usurped the traditional power of God over life and death. “While the Greeks used reason to restrain the will,” Camus wrote, “we have ended by placing the impulse of the will at the heart of reason, and reason has therefore become murderous.” A world verging on nuclear annihilation is the logical consequences of such scientific willfulness. Avid for the conquest of totality, we have become the children of excess.

Camus would take note of Barack Obama’s speech on his visit to Hiroshima. He would note the great irony of the President of the only country that has used nuclear weapons – the ultimate technological achievement of a society unmoored from limits – saying that “death fell from the sky and the world was changed.” Yes, death just fell. No one dropped nuclear bombs to kill as many people as possible. No one was responsible. Things happen. Death falls.

Camus would observe with Gallic irony the use of an abstraction by a technocratic leader whose hubris knows no limit; who, while saying that the souls of the victims “ask us to look inward,” is outwardly overseeing a trillion dollars investment in new nuclear weapons and continuing the Bush administration’s pursuit of a working ABM system. He would note the hypocrisy of Obama’s statement that “we must have the courage to escape the logic of fear and pursue a world without them [nuclear weapons],” as he embraces them and provokes Russia with military moves into Eastern Europe.

It is worth noting that with the invention of nuclear weapons, the power over birth, life, and death so many people believe belonged to God, was commandeered by those who invented the weapons. No doubt to “help people.” With that bit of technological magic, they became as gods. The sacred canopy that once gave people religious consolation was replaced by a mushroom cloud in a symbolic transfer of unimaginable consequences.

The temptation to simplify existence through the use of abstractions and ideologies was Camus' great enemy. In an age of relativism and rampant nihilism masked as belief, he discovered the existence of a human nature, an affirmation that demanded limits to human activity. In *The Rebel* he dethroned the various impulses toward divinization and absolutism that he saw in Western history. Evil is ineradicable; one must rebel against it, not become it by playing God. The impulse to become a God leads to nihilism and murder.

Absolute faith in the rightness of one's cause, whether it be political or religious or a fusion of the two, lay at the root of this mania that inevitably led to violence. The alternative to such absolutism was the modesty of the rebel, the rebel being one who is in perpetual revolt against injustice and human degradation but who is unwilling, in the name of truth and righteousness, to place the end before the means and destroy what one is supposedly trying to save. For such admonitions Camus was attacked by the left and the right.

War, capital punishment, murder, suicide – forms of death-dealing – were his themes. He opposed all in the name of an acknowledgement of ignorance that recognized human limits. In the name of an insane reason – the modern God – we have turned our backs on this world and strike out for the heavens “until the atom too bursts into flames, and history ends in the triumph of reason and the death agony of the species.”

It was Einstein who is alleged to have coined the term “information bomb” used by Paul Virilio in the epigraph above. Virilio claims that the computer generated information age with its constant whirligig of an overload of “facts” and “news” has created a technological fundamentalism destructive of social memory and clear thinking. Speed being essential to this mode of existence, it becomes nearly impossible for people to grasp the technological rationality behind it since they are so caught up in it. A “caste of technology monks” has invented a mode of communication that knows no limit, “eluding any precautionary principle, the systems of information transmission have become bombs which keep on exploding in people's minds, generating ever more complex and extensive accidents, creating that “uncanny identity which always makes it seem that actions are reported before they are performed, *often the mere possibility of an action.*” Such a dizzyingly disembodied experience of the world through a limitless medium that skewers time and space needs Camus to call us back to essentials. In *The Rebel* he wrote, “Heraclitus, the inventor of the notion of the constant change of things, nevertheless set a limit to this perpetual process. This limit was symbolized by Nemesis, the goddess of moderation and the implacable enemy of the immoderate. A process of thought which wanted to take into account the contemporary contradictions of rebellion should seek its inspiration from this goddess.”

In his last novel, *The Fall*, he left us Jean Baptiste Clamence, a nihilist worthy of our times, a lawyer dedicated to abstract justice, a phony actor who, in the name of absolute sincerity, lies in order to mask his destructive nihilism that knows no bounds. He reminds me of our power elites. His maxim cuts to the heart of our modern madness: “When one has no character, one has to apply a method.” No doubt a reasonable one.

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