

Rebellion and Revolution, Albert Camus

The revolution based on principles kills God in the person of His representative on earth. The revolution of the twentieth century kills what remains of God in the principles themselves and consecrates historical nihilism. Whatever paths nihilism may proceed to take, from the moment that it decides to be the creative force of its period and ignores every moral precept, it begins to build the temple of Caesar.

To choose history, and history alone, is to choose nihilism, in defiance of the teachings of rebellion itself. Those who rush blindly to history in the name of the irrational, proclaiming that it is meaningless, encounter servitude and terror and finally emerge into the universe of concentration camps. Those who launch themselves into it preaching its absolute rationality encounter servitude and terror and emerge into the universe of the concentration camps.

Fascism wants to establish the advent of the Nietzschean superman. It immediately discovers that God, if He exists, may well be this or that, but He is primarily the master of death. If man wants to become God, he arrogates to himself the power of life or death over others. Manufacturer of corpses and of sub-men, he is a sub-man himself and not God, but the ignoble servant of death.

The rational revolution, on its part, wants to realize the total man described by Marx. The logic of history, from the moment that it is totally accepted, gradually leads it, against its most passionate convictions, to mutilate man more and more and to transform itself into objective crime. It is not legitimate to identify the ends of Fascism with the ends of Russian Communism. The first represents the exaltation of the executioner by the executioner; the second, more dramatic in concept, the exaltation of the executioner by the victims. The former never dreamed of liberating all men, but only of liberating a few by subjugating the rest.

The latter, in its most profound principle, aims at liberating all men by provisionally enslaving them all. It must be granted the grandeur of its intentions. But, on the other hand, it is legitimate to identify the means employed by both with the political cynicism that they have drawn from the same source, moral nihilism. Everything has taken place as though the descendants of Stirner and of Nechaiev were making use of the descendants of Kaliayev and Proudhon. The nihilists today are seated on thrones. Methods of thought which claim to give the lead to our world in the name of revolution have become, in reality, ideologies of consent and not of rebellion. That is why our period is the period of private and public techniques of annihilation.

The revolution, obedient to the dictates of nihilism, has in fact turned against its rebel origins. Man, who hated death and the god of death, who despaired of personal survival, wanted to free himself in the immortality of the species. But as long as the group does not dominate the world, as long as the species does not reign, it is still necessary to die. Time is pressing, therefore; persuasion demands leisure, and friendship a structure that will never be completed; thus terror remains the shortest route to immortality. But these extremes simultaneously proclaim a longing for the primitive values of rebellion.

The contemporary revolution that claims to deny every value is already, in itself, a standard for judging values. Man wants to reign supreme through the revolution. But why reign supreme if nothing has any meaning? Why wish for immortality if the aspect of life is so hideous? There is no method of thought which is absolutely nihilist except, perhaps, the method that leads to suicide, any more than there is absolute materialism. The destruction of man once more affirms man. Terror and concentration camps are the drastic means used by man to escape solitude. The thirst for unity must be assuaged, even in the common grave.

If men kill one another, it is because they reject mortality and desire immortality for all men. Therefore, in one sense, they commit suicide. But they

prove, at the same time, that they cannot dispense with mankind; they satisfy a terrible hunger for fraternity. "The human being needs happiness, and when he is unhappy, he needs another human being." Those who reject the agony of living and dying wish to dominate. "Solitude is power," says Sade. Power, today, because for thousands of solitary people it signifies the suffering of others, bears witness to the need for others. Terror is the homage that the malignant recluse finally pays to the brotherhood of man.

But nihilism, if it does not exist, tries to do so; and that is enough to make the world a desert. This particular form of madness is what has given our times their forbidding aspect. The land of humanism has become the Europe of today, the land of inhumanity. But the times are ours and how can we disown them? If our history is our hell, still we cannot avert our faces.

This horror cannot be escaped, but is assumed in order to be ignored, by the very people who accepted it with lucidity and not by those who, having provoked it, think that they have a right to pronounce judgment. Such a plant could, in fact, thrive only in the fertile soil of accumulated iniquities. In the last throes of a death struggle in which men are indiscriminately involved by the insanity of the times, the enemy remains the fraternal enemy. Even when he has been denounced for his errors, he can be neither despised nor hated; misfortune is today the common fatherland, and the only earthly kingdom that has fulfilled the promise.

The longing for rest and peace must itself be thrust aside; it coincides with the acceptance of iniquity. Those who weep for the happy periods they encounter in history acknowledge what they want: not the alleviation but the silencing of misery. But let us, on the contrary, sing the praises of the times when misery cries aloud and disturbs the sleep of the surfeited rich! Maistre has already spoken of the "terrible sermon that the revolution preached to kings."

It preaches the same sermon today, and in a still more urgent fashion, to the dishonoured elite of the times. This sermon must be heard. In every word and in every act, even though it be criminal, lies the promise of a value that we must seek out and bring to light. The future cannot be foreseen and it may be that the renaissance is impossible. Even though the historical dialectic is false and criminal, the world, after all, can very well realize itself in crime and in pursuit of a false concept. This kind of resignation is, quite simply, rejected here: we must stake everything on the renaissance.

Nothing remains for us, moreover, but to be reborn or to die. If we are at the moment in history when rebellion has reached the point of its most extreme contradiction by denying itself, then it must either perish with the world it has created or find a new object of faith and a new impetus. Before going any farther, this contradiction must at least be stated in plain language.

It is not a clear definition to say like the existentialists, for example (who are also subjected for the moment to the cult of history and its contradictions) ,¹ that there is progress in the transition from rebellion to revolution and that the rebel is nothing if he is not revolutionary. The contradiction is, in reality, considerably more restricted. The revolutionary is simultaneously a rebel or he is not a revolutionary, but a policeman and a bureaucrat who turns against rebellion.

¹ Atheist existentialism at least wishes to create a morality. This morality is still to be defined. But the real difficulty lies in creating it without reintroducing into historical existence a value foreign to history.

But if he is a rebel, he ends by taking sides against the revolution. So much so that there is absolutely no progress from one attitude to the other, but coexistence and endlessly increasing contradiction. Every revolutionary ends by becoming either an oppressor or a heretic. In the purely historical universe that they have chosen, rebellion and revolution end in the same dilemma: either police rule or insanity.

On this level, therefore, history alone offers no hope. It is not a source of values, but is still a source of nihilism. Can one, at least, create values in defiance of history, on the single level of a philosophy based on eternity? That comes to the same as ratifying historical injustice and the sufferings of man. To slander the world leads to the nihilism defined by Nietzsche. Thought that is derived from history alone, like thought that rejects history completely, deprives man of the means and the reason for living.

The former drives him to the extreme decadence of "why live?" the latter to "how live?" History, necessary but not sufficient, is therefore only an occasional cause. It is not absence of values, nor values themselves, nor even the source of values. It is one occasion, among others, for man to prove the still confused existence of a value that allows him to judge history. Rebellion itself makes us the promise of such a value.

Absolute revolution, in fact, supposes the absolute malleability of human nature and its possible reduction to the condition of a historical force. But rebellion, in man, is the refusal to be treated as an object and to be reduced to simple historical terms. It is the affirmation of a nature common to all men, which eludes the world of power. History, undoubtedly, is one of the limits of man's experience; in this sense the revolutionaries are right. But man, by rebelling, imposes in his turn a limit to history, and at this limit the promise of a value is born. It is the birth of this value that the Caesarian revolution implacably combats today because it presages its final defeat and the obligation to renounce its principles.

The fate of the world is not being played out at present, as it seemed it would be, in the struggle between bourgeois production and revolutionary production; their end results will be the same. It is being played out between the forces of rebellion and those of the Caesarian revolution. The triumphant revolution must prove by means of its police, its trials, and its excommunications that there is no such thing as human nature. Humiliated rebellion, by its contradictions, its sufferings, its continuous defeats, and its inexhaustible pride, must give its content of hope and suffering to this nature.

"I rebel, therefore we exist," said the slave. Metaphysical rebellion then added: "we are alone," by which we still live today. But if we are alone beneath the empty heavens, if we must die forever, how can we really exist? Metaphysical rebellion, then, tried to construct existence with appearances. After which purely historical thought came to say that to be was to act. We did not exist, but we should exist by every possible means. Our revolution is an attempt to conquer a new existence, by action that recognizes no moral strictures. That is why it is condemned to live only for history and in a reign of terror. Man is nothing, according to the revolution, if he does not obtain from history, willingly or by force, unanimous approval.

At this exact point the limit is exceeded, rebellion is first betrayed and then logically assassinated, for it has never affirmed, in its purest form, anything but the existence of a limit and the divided existence that we represent: it is not, originally, the total negation of all existence. Quite the contrary, it says yes and no simultaneously. It is the rejection of one part of existence in the name of another part, which it exalts. The more profound the exaltation, the more implacable is the rejection. Then, when rebellion, in rage or intoxication, adopts the attitude of "all or nothing" and the negation of all existence and all human nature, it is at this point that it denies itself. Only total negation justifies the concept of a totality that must be conquered.

But the affirmation of a limit, a dignity, and a beauty common to all men only entails the necessity of extending this value to embrace everything and everyone and of advancing toward unity without denying the origins of rebellion. In this sense rebellion, in its original authenticity, does not justify any purely historical concept. Rebellion's demand is unity; historical revolution's demand is totality.

The former starts from a negative supported by an affirmative, the latter from absolute negation and is condemned to every aspect of slavery in order to fabricate an affirmative that is dismissed until the end of time. One is creative, the other nihilist. The first is dedicated to creation so as to exist more and more completely; the second is forced to produce results in order to negate more and more completely. The historical revolution is always obliged to act in the hope, which is invariably disappointed, of one day really existing. Even unanimous consent will not suffice to create its existence.

"Obey," said Frederick the Great to his subjects; but when he died, his words were: "I am tired of ruling slaves." To escape this absurd destiny, the revolution is and will be condemned to renounce, not only its own principles, but nihilism as well as purely historical values in order to rediscover the creative source of rebellion. Revolution, in order to be creative, cannot do without either a moral or metaphysical rule to balance the insanity of history. Undoubtedly, it has nothing but scorn for the formal and mystifying morality to be found in bourgeois society. But its folly has been to extend this scorn to every moral demand. At the very

sources of its inspiration and in its most profound transports is to be found a rule that is not formal but that nevertheless can serve as a guide. Rebellion, in fact, says "and will say more and more explicitly" that revolution must try to act, not in order to come into existence at some future date in the eyes of a world reduced to acquiescence, but in terms of the obscure existence that is already made manifest in the act of insurrection.

This rule is neither formal nor subject to history, it is what can be best described by examining it in its pure state "in artistic creation. Before doing so, let us only note that to the "I rebel, therefore we exist" and the "We are alone" of metaphysical rebellion, rebellion at grips with history adds that instead of killing and dying in order to produce the being that we are not, we have to live and let live in order to create what we are.

The end