

The New Mediterranean Culture, Albert Camus

The New Mediterranean Culture¹

I.

The aim of the Maison de la Culture, which is celebrating its opening today, is to serve the culture of the Mediterranean. Faithful to the general directions governing institutions of its type, it seeks within a regional framework to encourage the development of a culture whose existence and greatness need no proof. Perhaps there is something surprising in the fact that left-wing intellectuals can put themselves to work for a culture that seems irrelevant to their cause, and that can even, as has happened in the case of Maurras, be monopolized by theoreticians of the Right.

It may indeed seem that serving the cause of Mediterranean regionalism is tantamount to restoring empty traditionalism with no future, celebrating the superiority of one culture over another, or, again, adopting an inverted form of fascism and inciting the Latin against the Nordic peoples. This is a perpetual source of misunderstandings. The aim of this lecture is to try to dispel them.

The whole error lies in the confusion between Mediterranean and Latin, and in attributing to Rome what began in Athens. To us it is obvious that our only claim is to a kind of nationalism of the sun. We could never be slaves to traditions or bind our living future to exploits already dead. A tradition is a past that distorts the present.

But the Mediterranean land about us is a lively one, full of games and joy. Moreover, nationalism has condemned itself. Nationalisms always make their appearance in history as signs of decadence. When the vast edifice of the Roman empire collapsed, when its spiritual unity, from which so many different regions drew their justification, fell apart, then and only then, at a time of decadence, did nationalisms appear. The West has never rediscovered unity since.

At the present time, internationalism is trying to give the West a real meaning and a vocation. However, this internationalism is no longer inspired by a Christian principle, by the Papal Rome of the Holy Roman Empire. The principle inspiring it is man. Its unity no longer lies in faith but in hope.

A civilization can endure only insofar as its unity and greatness, once all nations are abolished, stem from a spiritual principle. India, almost as large as Europe, with no nations, no sovereignty, has kept its own particular character even after two centuries of English rule. This is why, before any other consideration, we reject the principle of a Mediterranean nationalism. In any case, it would never be possible to speak of the superiority of Mediterranean culture.

Men express themselves in harmony with their land. And superiority, as far as culture is concerned, lies in this harmony and in nothing else. There are no higher or lower cultures. There are cultures that are more or less true. All we want to do is help a country to express itself. Locally. Nothing more. The real question is this: is a new Mediterranean civilization within our grasp?

II.

Obvious facts,

(a) There is a Mediterranean sea, a basin linking about ten different countries. Those men whose voices boom in the singing cafés of Spain, who wander in the port of Genoa, along the docks in Marseilles, the strange, strong race that lives along our coasts, all belong to the same family. When you travel in Europe, and go down toward Italy or Provence, you breathe a sigh of relief as you rediscover these casually dressed men, this violent, colorful life we all

know. I spent two months in central Europe, from Austria to Germany, wondering where that strange discomfort weighing me down, the muffled anxiety I felt in my bones, came from. A little while ago, I understood. These people were always buttoned right up to the neck.

They did not know how to relax. They did not know what joy was like, joy which is so different from laughter. Yet it is details like this that give a valid meaning to the word "Country." Our Country is not the abstraction that sends men off to be massacred, but a certain way of appreciating life which is shared by certain people, through which we can feel ourselves closer to someone from Genoa or Majorca than to someone from Normandy or Alsace. That is what the Mediterranean is a certain smell or scent that we do not need to express: we all feel it through our skin.

(b) There are other, historical, facts. Each time a doctrine has reached the Mediterranean basin, in the resulting clash of ideas the Mediterranean has always remained intact, the land has overcome the doctrine. In the beginning Christianity was an inspiring doctrine, but a closed one, essentially Judaic, incapable of concessions, harsh, exclusive, and admirable. From its encounter with the Mediterranean, a new doctrine emerged: Catholicism. A philosophical doctrine was added to the initial store of emotional aspirations. The monument then reached its highest and most beautiful form—adapting itself to man.

Thanks to the Mediterranean, Christianity was able to enter the world and embark on the miraculous career it has since enjoyed. Once again it was someone from the Mediterranean, Francis of Assisi, who transformed Christianity from an inward-looking, tormented religion into a hymn to nature and simple joy. The only effort to separate Christianity from the world was made by a northerner, Luther. Protestantism is, actually, Catholicism wrenched from the Mediterranean, and from the simultaneously pernicious and inspiring influence of this sea.

Let us look even closer. For anyone who has lived both in Germany and in Italy, it is obvious that fascism does not take the same form in both countries. You can feel it everywhere you go in Germany, on people's faces, in the city streets. Dresden, a garrison town, is almost smothered by an invisible enemy. What you feel first of all in Italy is the land itself. What you see first of all in a German is the Hitlerite who greets you with "Heil Hitler"; in an Italian, the cheerful and gay human being. Here again, the doctrine seems to have yielded to the country—and it is a miracle wrought by the Mediterranean that enables men who think humanly to live unoppressed in a country of inhuman laws.

III.

But this living reality, the Mediterranean, is not something new to us. And its culture seems the very image of the Latin antiquity the Renaissance tried to rediscover across the Middle Ages. This is the Latinity Maurras and his friends try to annex. It was in the name of this Latin order on the occasion of the war against Ethiopia that twenty-four Western intellectuals signed a degrading manifesto celebrating the "civilizing mission of Italy in barbarous Ethiopia." But no. This is not the Mediterranean our Maison de la Culture lays claim to. For this is not the true Mediterranean. It is the abstract and conventional Mediterranean represented by Rome and the Romans.

These imitative and unimaginative people had nevertheless the imagination to substitute for the artistic genius and feeling for life they lacked a genius for war. And this order whose praises we so often hear sung was one imposed by force and not one created by the mind. Even when they copied, the Romans lost the savor of the original. And it was not even the essential genius of Greece they imitated, but rather the fruits of its decadence and its mistakes.

Not the strong, vigorous Greece of the great tragic and comic writers, but the prettiness and affected grace of the last centuries. It was not life that Rome took from Greece, but puerile, over-intellectualized abstractions. The

Mediterranean lies elsewhere. It is the very denial of Rome and Latin genius. It is alive, and wants no truck with abstractions. And it is easy to acknowledge Mussolini as the worthy descendant of the Caesars and Augustus of Imperial Rome, if we mean by this that he, like them, sacrifices truth and greatness to a violence that has no soul.

What we claim as Mediterranean is not a liking for reasoning and abstractions, but its physical life—the courtyards, the cypresses, the strings of pimientos. We claim Aeschylus and not Euripides, the Doric Apollos and not the copies in the Vatican; Spain, with its strength and its pessimism, and not the bluster and swagger of Rome, landscapes crushed with sunlight and not the theatrical settings in which a dictator drunk with his own verbosity enslaves the crowds. What we seek is not the lie that triumphed in Ethiopia but the truth that is being murdered in Spain.

IV.

The Mediterranean, an international basin traversed by every current, is perhaps the only land linked to the great ideas from the East. For it is not classical and well ordered, but diffuse and turbulent, like the Arab districts in our towns or the Genoan and Tunisian harbors. The triumphant taste for life, the sense of boredom and the weight of the sun, the empty squares at noon in Spain, the siesta, this is the true Mediterranean, and it is to the East that it is closest. Not to the Latin West.

North Africa is one of the few countries where East and West live close together. And there is, at this junction, little difference between the way a Spaniard or an Italian lives on the quays of Algiers, and the way Arabs live around them. The most basic aspect of Mediterranean genius springs perhaps from this historically and geographically unique encounter between East and West. (On this question I can only refer you to Audisio.)²

This culture, this Mediterranean truth, exists and shows itself all along the line:

(1) In linguistic unity—the ease with which a Latin language can be learned when another is already known;

(2) Unity of origin—the prodigious collectivism of the Middle Ages—chivalric order, religious order, feudal orders, etc., etc. On all these points the Mediterranean gives us the picture of a living, highly colored, concrete civilization, which changes doctrines into its own likeness—and receives ideas without changing its own nature.

But then, you may say, why go any further?

V.

Because the very land that transformed so many doctrines must transform the doctrines of the present day. A Mediterranean collectivism will be different from a Russian collectivism, properly so-called. The issue of collectivism is not being fought in Russia: it is being fought in the Mediterranean basin and in Spain, at this very moment. Of course, man's fate has been at stake for a long time now, but it is perhaps here that the struggle reaches its tragic height, with so many trump cards placed in our hands. There are, before our eyes, realities stronger than we ourselves are. Our ideas will bend and become adapted to them. This is why our opponents are mistaken in all their objections. No one has the right to prejudge the fate of a doctrine, and to judge our future in the name of a past, even if the past is Russia's.

Our task here is to rehabilitate the Mediterranean, to take it back from those who claim it unjustly for themselves, and to make it ready for the economic organization awaiting it. Our task is to discover what is concrete and alive in it, and, on every occasion, to encourage the different forms which this culture takes. We are all the more prepared for the task in that we are in immediate

contact with the Orient, which can teach us so much in this respect. We are, here, on the side of the Mediterranean against Rome. And the essential role that towns like Algiers and Barcelona can play is to serve, in their own small way, that aspect of Mediterranean culture which favors man instead of crushing him.

VI.

The intellectual's role is a difficult one in our time. It is not his task to modify history. Whatever people may say, revolutions come first and ideas afterward. Consequently, it takes great courage today to proclaim oneself faithful to the things of the mind. But at least this courage is not useless. The term "intellectual" is pronounced with so much scorn and disapproval because it is associated in people's minds with the idea of someone who talks in abstractions, who is unable to come into contact with life, and who prefers his own personality to the rest of the world.

But for those who do not want to avoid their responsibilities, the essential task is to rehabilitate intelligence by regenerating the subject matter that it treats, to give back all its true meaning to the mind by restoring to culture its true visage of health and sunlight. I was saying that this courage was not useless. For if it is not indeed the task of intelligence to modify history, its real task will nevertheless be to act upon man, for it is man who makes history. We have a contribution to make to this task. We want to link culture with life. The Mediterranean, which surrounds us with smiles, sea, and sunlight, teaches us how it is to be done.

Xenophon tells us in *The Persian Expedition* that when the Greek soldiers who had ventured into Asia were coming back to their own country, dying of hunger and thirst, cast into despair by so many failures and humiliations, they reached the top of a mountain from which they could see the sea. Then they began to dance, forgetting their weariness and their disgust at the spectacle of their lives. In the same way we do not wish to cut ourselves off from the world. There is only one culture. Not the one that feeds off abstractions and capital letters. Not the one that condemns. Not the one that justifies the excesses and the deaths in Ethiopia and defends the thirst for brutal conquests. We know that one very well, and want nothing to do with it. What we seek is the culture that finds life in the trees, the hills, and in mankind.

This is why men of the Left are here with you today, to serve a cause that at first sight had nothing to do with their own opinions. I would be happy if, like us, you were now convinced that this cause is indeed ours. Everything that is alive is ours. Politics are made for men, and not men for politics. We do not want to live on fables. In the world of violence and death around us, there is no place for hope. But perhaps there is room for civilization, for real civilization, which puts truth before fables and life before dreams. And this civilization has nothing to do with hope. In it man lives on his truths.³

It is to this whole effort that men of the West must bind themselves. Within the framework of internationalism, the thing can be achieved. If each one of us within his own sphere, his country, his province agrees to work modestly, success is not far away. As far as we are concerned, we know our aim, our limitations, and our possibilities. We only need open our eyes to make men realize that culture cannot be understood unless it is put to the service of life, that the mind need not be man's enemy. Just as the Mediterranean sun is the same for all men, the effort of men's intelligence should be a common inheritance and not a source of conflict and murder.

Can we achieve a new Mediterranean culture that can be reconciled with our social idea? Yes. But both we and you must help to bring it about. Published in the first number of the review *Jeune Méditerranée*, monthly bulletin of the Algiers Maison de la Culture, April 1937

¹ This outline of a lecture given at the Maison de la Culture on February 8, 1937, is a very early text.

With its insistence on the fundamental difference between political doctrines elaborated in the north of Europe and the more tolerant attitude toward life fed by the Mediterranean, it already contains the essence of Camus's argument in *The Rebel*. -P.T.

2 Gabriel Audisio, born in 1900, studied in Marseilles and Algiers, where he was a member of the literary group associated with the publisher Chariot. In 1932 he published a collection of popular folk tales entitled *Les Meilleures Histoires de Cagayous*. These stories, attributed to a popular character named Musette, were originally written by Gabriel Robinet. -P.T.

3 I have spoken of a new civilization and not of a progress in civilization. To handle that evil toy called Progress would be too dangerous.

The end