

THE HAPPINESS OF THE MAN IN REVOLT

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Abstract. In this period when humanity is confronting the Covid-19 pandemic, the issue of the frailty of the human being and the need for solidarity in the face of death are increasingly being invoked in public discourse. The aim of this paper is to show that the ethics of the rebel is still relevant, as expounded by Camus in the fifties of the last century, because the French philosopher and writer speaks more about solidarity than about rebellion. The purpose of Albert Camus' investigation *L'homme révolté* (*The Rebel*) consists in a definition of revolt's human determination, by emphasizing the proper regenerative function of this attitude. Beyond a philosophical theory of the individual, of the living human being's rebellion against death from the biological and spiritual view, as much as a murderous ideology practice, in revolt Camus discovers human fellowship, a value which could be associated with the hope and with the delight of being one with the universe's beauty.

Keywords: *revolt, individual, absurdity, value, sense.*

Introduction

From the beginning, I saw in *The Rebel*, as a book closely linked to *The Myth of Sisyphus* (*Le Mythe de Sisyphe*), one of the main themes of Albert Camus' work, namely a kind of methodical nihilism searching for a way of constructing the meaning of life, revolt as a "function" of perpetual human exile, a given state of affairs which preserves identity conflict and a sort of initiatory quest towards possible happiness in the earthly "kingdom". Besides, I was fascinated by this complex personality whose truly tragic fate makes his power of storytelling even more striking. Obviously, my purpose will not be a paean of admiration which ignores all criticism, but an examination derived from an explanatory, analytical and interpretative attempt to faithfully reproduce the author's conception of revolt, from the final point of view of possible happiness. Certainly, the style of Albert Camus, often aphoristic, remains disturbing and contemporary at the same

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time. But the problem posed by the philosophical essay I refer to is whether the morality of the rebellious man is still necessary in our time.

Is the question posed by Albert Camus in his book written in 1951, still pertinent, which is an extension of the *The Myth of Sisyphus*; a reminder of the possibility of human dignity from a philosophical point of view?

To answer this question, I have divided my paper into two parts, namely *I. What is a rebellious man?* and *II. A special way of being: from despair to being amazed.*

What is a rebellious man?

To answer this worrying question, the author of *L'Homme Révolté* (Camus' second great philosophical essay, published in October 1951) states in the introduction to his book: "This essay proposes to continue, before murder and revolt, a reflection on suicide and the notion of absurd"¹, a statement which represents one of the consequences of the genuine civic engagement of the writer "in the time of ideologies": "The purpose of this essay is once again to accept the reality of the moment, which is a crime against logic, and to examine its justifications precisely: this is an effort to understand my time"².

This book is not about the man of classical philosophy, incorporating an ideal of rationality and legality, but quite the contrary: here it's a question of "senseless sensibility" which is conceived as a "point of departure, a lived criticism", like "the equivalent, on the plane of existence, of systematic doubt"³.

Thus, the absurd as systematic doubt, considered by Camus to be a rule of life, and not a rule of thought (Descartes), although contradictory, appears as a *catharsis*, a therapy in the form of action in search of its rules just when, thanks to revolt, the absurd is overcome.

The movement of revolt, emphasises Georges Goedert, is the first evidence of the absurd at the same time as its overcoming⁴, refusing suicide, because "To say that life is absurd, the conscience needs to be alive"⁵.

The paradoxical situation on which the philosophy of nonsense is based consists in the very fact that it can be expressed (a kind of Cartesian "cogito"), finding its frame in the revolt, in all its determinations, namely as an existential attitude, theory, art, convenient: "I shout that I don't believe in anything and that everything is absurd, but I cannot doubt my cry and I must at least believe in my protest. The first and only evidence thus given to me, within the absurd experience, is revolt. Deprived of all science, eager to kill or to consent to kill, I

¹ «Cet essai se propose de poursuivre, devant la meurtre et la révolte, une réflexion commencée autour du suicide et de la notion d'absurde», Albert Camus, *L'homme révolté*, Paris, Librairie Gallimard, 1951, p. 15.

² «Le propos de cet essai est une fois de plus d'accepter la réalité du moment, qui est la crime logique, et d'en examiner précisément les justifications: ceci est un effort pour comprendre mon temps», *Ibidem*, p. 14.

³ «(Un) point de départ, une critique vécue», «l'équivalent, sur le plan de l'existence, du doute systématique», *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁴ Georges Goedert, *Albert Camus et la question du bonheur*, Lettre-préface à l'auteur de Pierre Grégoire, Ministère des Affaires Étrangères et des Affaires Culturelles, EDI-CENTRE, Luxembourg, 1969, p. 92.

⁵ «Pour dire que la vie est absurde, la conscience a besoin d'être vivante», Albert Camus, *L'homme révolté*, *op. cit.*, p. 17.

only have this evidence which is further reinforced by the heartbreak in which I find myself. Revolt arises out of the spectacle of unreason, in front of an unjust and incomprehensible condition”⁶.

Here I will add that the most important desire of the rebellious man of Camus is that of understanding oneself and others within an alien society for the individual, therefore it is about the human subject crushed by political life and also by its own finitude, while the revolt of the *mass-man* of Ortega y Gasset, for example, only wants emancipation. Paradoxically, the revolt of the *mass-man* is selfish, he wants something only for himself, while the revolt of an individual Camus’ vision is altruistic, because this man revolts in the name of others, and finally because of the injustice that affects all people.

The possibility of this existential attitude is given by the ontological status of man, “the only creature that refuses to be what it is”⁷. One of the questions posed by this attitude is whether revolt as a refusal ends in or is fulfilled by the justification of universal murder, or, on the contrary, it can discover the innocence of reasonable guilt. Consequently, according to the first definition, a rebellious man is “A man who says no” and also he is “a man who says yes” at the very moment of this release form of a “slave status which has received orders all its life” and “suddenly finds a new commandment unacceptable”⁸.

“No” postulates “the existence of a border”; and “yes” claims, from a metaphysical point of view, “the order in the midst of chaos and the unity at the very heart of what flees and disappears”, and from a terrestrial point of view, it demarcates the territory of justice, by opposing, from the individual point of view, “to the order which oppresses it, a particular right of not to be oppressed beyond what one can admit”⁹. So “any movement of revolt tacitly invokes a value”, because the slave knows in the name of what he is revolting: he refuses one state of things, to impose another. For the first time in his work, according to Georges Goedert, Camus speaks here of a good: value implies the passage to law (through ethics, we must add) as a good to which the rebel aspires, which authorizes him to revolt¹⁰.

Camus doesn’t speak about any transcendence of the value, insofar as this would represent a recourse to the eternal. And yet one can recognize the transcendent character of moral value in the very solidarity that transposes the individual into a metaphysical “community”, because at the same time, is still Camus who states: “In revolt, the man surpasses himself in others and, from this point of view, human solidarity is metaphysical”¹¹.

⁶ «Je crie que je ne crois à rien et que tout est absurde, mais je ne puis douter de mon cri et il me faut au moins croire à ma protestation. La première et la seule évidence qui me soit ainsi donné, à l’intérieur de l’expérience absurde, c’est la révolte. Privé de toute science, pressé de tuer ou de consentir qu’on tue, je ne dispose que de cette évidence qui se renforce encore du déchirement où je me trouve. La révolte naît du spectacle de la déraison, devant une condition injuste et incompréhensible», *Ibidem*, p. 21.

⁷ «La seule créature qui refuse d’être ce qu’elle est», *Ibidem*, p. 22.

⁸ «(Un) statut d’esclave qui a reçu de ordres toute sa vie (...) et juge soudain inacceptable un nouveau commandement», *Ibidem*, p. 25.

⁹ «L’ordre au milieu du chaos et l’unité au cœur même de ce qui fuit et disparaît»; «à l’ordre qui l’opprime, une sorte de droit à ne pas être opprimé au-delà de ce qu’il peut admettre», *Ibidem*, p. 26.

¹⁰ Georges Goedert, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

¹¹ «Dans la révolte, l’homme se dépasse en autrui et, de ce point de vue, la solidarité humaine est métaphysique», Camus, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

He develops this idea in the course of some fragments concerning the moral value of death and similarly the search for the identity proper to being human: “If the individual, in fact, accepts to die, and dies occasionally, in the course of his revolt, he shows thereby that he is sacrificing himself for the benefit of a good which he believes is beyond his own destiny. If he prefers the chance of death to the negation of this right which he defends, it is because he places the latter above himself. He therefore acts in the name of a value, still confused, but which he feels, at least, that it is common to him with all men”¹². From this argument it clearly follows that the value “overflows the individual insofar as it draws him from his supposed solitude and provides him with a reason to act”.

Consequently, the rewarding attitude of revolt is the way of recognizing the individual identity which is encountered by this process with the abstraction of a kind of universal otherness: “The analysis of the revolt leads at least to the suspicion that there is a human nature, as the Greeks thought, and contrary to the postulates of contemporary thought”¹³.

Contrary above all to Jean-Paul Sartre, for example, whose dogma of existence prior to essence is thus called into question, after the publication of *L’Homme Révolté*, Sartre violently attacked Camus in his review *Les Temps Modernes*, also causing a break with his interlocutor¹⁴.

It is true that there is a clear difference between revolt, as it is defined by Camus, and the *nausée* (*sickness*, a notion in the existentialist philosophy of Sartre) as an existential attitude. Nausea is a sick state caused not only by borderline awareness, but by the flesh itself, a dizziness caused by existence in time, a kind of negative emotion of the flesh that becomes resentment of the concrete, historical individual. But revolt, “on the contrary, in principle, is limited to the refusal of humility, without asking for the other. It even accepts pain for itself, provided that her integrity is respected”¹⁵.

Moreover, existentialism was, according to Albert Camus, a “great adventure of thought”, with “false conclusions”. Camus was not attracted, either by the existentialist philosophy, dominated, on the day after the Liberation, by Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, or by the extravagances of the cellars and bistros of Saint-Germain-des-Prés, of which Juliette Gréco was then the muse. He even once said that “Myth” (of Sisyphus) is a book “directed against so-called existentialist philosophers”¹⁶.

His opposition to Marxist thinking is even more categorical, although he had joined the Communist Party in his youth in 1934, probably for reasons of pity for the poverty of society. But, after a year, he resigned.

¹² «Si l’individu, en effet, accepte de mourir, et meurt à l’occasion, dans le mouvement de sa révolte, il montre par là qu’il se sacrifie au bénéfice d’un bien dont il estime qu’il déborde sa propre destinée. S’il préfère la chance de la mort à la négation de ce droit qu’il défend, c’est qu’il place ce dernier au-dessus de lui-même. Il agit donc au nom d’une valeur, encore confuse, mais dont il a le sentiment, au moins, qu’elle lui est commune avec tous les hommes», *Ibidem*, p. 27.

¹³ «L’analyse de la révolte conduit au moins au soupçon qu’il y a une nature humaine, comme le pensaient les Grecs, et contrairement aux postulats de la pensée contemporaine», Camus, *quoted work*, pp. 26-28.

¹⁴ Georges Goedert, *quoted work*.

¹⁵ «(La révolte), au contraire, dans son principe, se borne à refuser l’humiliation, sans se demander pour l’autre. Elle accepte même la douleur pour elle-même, pourvu que son intégrité soit respectée», *Ibidem*, p. 31.

¹⁶ Georges Goedert, *quoted work*, p. 96.

So his revolt is not directed against a social class, his revolt is not a subject just for himself, does not concern his own individual condition, but it is the expression of a deep solidarity with each individual. He doesn't want to go beyond his condition, like the *mass-man* of Ortega y Gasset. On the contrary, the Camusian revolt marks an intellectual triumph of individualism against the massification of men which results from modern ideologies.

He presents communism as "a logical continuation of Christianity". According to Marxists, Revelation is at the end of history, while for Christians, it is at the beginning. But the mystification of the Marxists is the most terrible: "As for the famous Marxist optimism, I will be allowed to laugh at it. Few men have pushed distrust of their fellow men further. Marxists do not believe in persuasion or dialogue. We do not make a worker of a bourgeois and the economic conditions in their world of fatalities are more terrible than the divine whims"¹⁷.

From the Christian perspective, values are ordained by divine will. The Marxist admits that there are no values outside history. These two solutions are unacceptable according to Camus, who asks precisely how man, without appealing to divine help and without getting bogged down in historical materialism, can create an order of values himself.

What matters now is that people in revolt may be called upon to sacrifice themselves for the benefit of a good that goes beyond their individual existence: "Therefore, the individual is not, by itself, the value he wants to defend"¹⁸.

During his literary career, Camus often had a critical attitude toward social or political events or issues. Each time he denounced injustice because they make people unhappy. Thus, the rebellious man is neither the abstract man of the philosophers, the subject of human rights, nor the *mass man* of Ortega y Gasset. At the same time, it is the singular subject of the revolt which opened up this always universal problem of the individual order: "At the root of every work we find often a deep and simple, long ruminating emotion. For my part, I would not have written *L'homme révolté* if, in the 1940s, I had not found myself in front of men whose system I could not explain and whose actions I did not understand. To put it briefly, I did not understand that men could torture others without ceasing to look at them. I learned that the crime could be reasoned, make a power made into a system, spread its cohorts on the world, finally conquer, and reign. What else to do if not fight to prevent this reign?"¹⁹.

¹⁷ «Quant au fameux optimisme marxiste, on me permettra d'en rire. Peu d'hommes ont poussé plus loin la méfiance à l'égard de leurs semblables. Les marxistes ne croient pas à la persuasion ni au dialogue. On ne fait pas un ouvrier d'un bourgeois et les conditions économiques sont dans leur monde des fatalités plus terribles que les caprices divins», Camus, *quoted work*, p. 30.

¹⁸ «L'individu n'est donc pas, à lui seul, cette valeur qu'il veut défendre», *Ibidem*, p. 31.

¹⁹ «À la racine de toute œuvre, on trouve le plus souvent une émotion profonde et simple, longtemps ruminée. Pour ma part, je n'aurais pas écrit *L'homme révolté* si, dans les années 40, je ne m'étais trouvé en face d'hommes dont je ne pouvais m'expliquer le système et dont je ne comprenais pas les actes. Pour dire les choses brièvement, je ne comprenais pas que des hommes puissent en torturer d'autres sans cesser de les regarder. J'apprenais que le crime pouvait se raisonner, faire une puissance de son système, répandre ses cohortes sur le monde, vaincre enfin, et régner. Que faire d'autre sinon lutter pour empêcher ce règne?», Camus, *Ibidem*, p. 32.

Although this is about a crime that generates the absurdity of the Nazis, this phrase embraces human existence in all the complexity of its founding paradox.

According to Albert Camus, the absurdity of human existence limited by death provokes a revolt which can become fruitful from a political, ethical and even aesthetic point of view. Because, reflecting as an artist engaged in history, Camus discovers that Nazism is only a particular case of the negative pole of humanity, whose political power turns out to be regenerative of legal, moral and spiritual crimes: contempt, injustice, despair.

From Caligula to Stalin, but also, in a certain sense, from Pericles to any contemporary democratic leader, human societies refer in a more or less visible manner to murderous ideologies. The concrete individual, the living man, member of civil society revolts against the death, from the biological point of view and also from the point of view of the abstract quality of politics. Life itself consists of this revolt associated with the absurd.

The aim of the absurd search is, from Camus' perspective, to know if another human order can be based on a moral requirement rooted in the individual, which is as originating as the fear of the death as death and violent death, arising from rational calculation.

Thus, the dynamic of self-reflection and orientation towards the other which the rebellious man commits to, would manifest the tendency towards the positive pole, from contempt towards consideration, from injustice towards respect, from misfortune towards happiness.

The rebellious man is the one who says *yes* to the absurdity of existence which says *no*.

A special way to be: from despair to amazement

The path of the rebellious man from injustice to justice, his commitment and his orientation towards the other, we can consider, are traits of a democratic character or temperament, the emanation of the power of the individual, the great discovery of modern philosophers of the right of subjectivity. The Camusian revolt is not Max Scheller's resentment, nor the stupid reaction of the *mass-man* of Ortega y Gasset, which proclaims the right to mediocrity, but a chance to make from a thankless condition, a supreme pretext for being happy. Even an artist, a philosopher or an aristocrat may be in a state of revolt against his own death. Recognizing this essential limit is the first act of liberation.

According to Pierre Grégoire, the author of *The Rebel* "is one of the most honest writers" he knows and "this honesty, fundamentally artistic, marked his works with a certain imprint", in which he sees "the distinguishing sign of genius – of a genius transformed, no doubt and hurt by the clutches of a harsh, but singular, painful and relentless existence, logical in the spiritual exploration of human life"²⁰.

²⁰ «Le cachet du génie, d'un génie tourmenté, à n'en pas douter et blessé par les griffes d'une existence mal apprivoisée, mais singulièrement, douloureusement et implacablement logique dans l'exploration spirituelle de la vie humaine», Georges Goedert, *quoted work, Lettre-préface à l'auteur* de Pierre Grégoire, *Ministre des Affaires Étrangères et des Affaires Culturelles*, p. 5.

The book *L'Homme Revolté* is about a special way of finding enjoyment, according to Pierre Grégoire, beyond a character trait or a surprising attitude, beyond a somewhat baroque enhancement. The term enjoy (*jouir*) means that there is, in this process, "a kind of bursting, an explosion of the hungry nature of the writer in the beauty of the universe, cries of joy, repeated cries of an amazed man, in the midst of sunny landscapes, an ecstasy sustained by happiness, by the miracle of visible splendours, by the strange, by the very absurd that the present, always animated, never ceases to generate and sudden equal of a shock in return, a lucidity, a dazzling lucidity, bringing out from its own luminescence the shadow of death"²¹. Thus, it is death itself which is discovered, in spite of the despair of existing, the love of living.

A demonstrative title in this sense is *The Happy Death (La Mort heureuse)*, the novel not published during the life of Albert Camus, which exploits his memories of the poor neighbourhood, Belcourt, where Camus spent his childhood, who talks about his job, brokerage maritime, his trip to central Europe in the summer of 1936, his trips to Italy in 1936 and 1937, his stays in a sanatorium, his life at home Fichu in 1936. We also can read here a couple of episodes of his love stories: his two years of conjugal relation and her break up with Simone Hié, consummated in Salzburg after a stormy explanation, are transposed in this book. But "The fast reading of the novel highlights the main theme: how to die happily? That is to say, how to live happily until the point that death itself is happy? Of this living well and dying well, the first part is the reverse, for lack of money, time and sentimental education; the second, thanks to an organization of time and peace of heart. These are, in summary, the content and meaning of *The Happy Death* in its final version"²².

This example has been used to highlight the consistency of Camus' conception regarding the ethical and philosophical valuation of revolt. But the Camusian revolt can also be valued from the point of view of the highest politics, as pointed out by an American commentator on the work of Camus, discussed here: "Revolt that draws its inspiration from the Mediterranean tradition can be effective as a political ideal precisely because the values which it discovers are not mere abstraction. The dignity and fraternity which it reveals and the moderation it enjoins are values that owe their whole existence to the action of men and their personal experience of revolt"²³.

Therefore, it is a matter of dignity in living life and also of brotherhood against the death, which represents the happiness, the discovery of the rebel.

²¹ «Une sorte d'éclatement, une explosion de la nature affamée de l'écrivain dans la beauté de l'univers, des cris de joie, des cris répétés d'homme émerveillé, au milieu de paysages ensoleillés une extase soutenue par le bonheur, par le miracle des splendeurs visibles, par l'étrange, par l'absurde même que le présent, toujours mouvementé, ne cesse d'engendrer et, subitement, à l'égal d'un choc en retour, une lucidité, une lucidité fulgurante, faisant surgir de sa propre luminescence l'ombre de la mort», *Ibidem*, p. 11.

²² «Le rapide parcours du roman met en évidence le thème principal: comment mourir heureuse? C'est-à-dire comment vivre heureux au point que la mort elle-même soit heureuse? De ce bien vivre et bien mourir la première partie est l'envers, faute d'argent, de temps et de maîtrise sentimentale; la seconde, grâce à une organisation du temps et à la paix du cœur, l'endroit. Tels sont, sommairement, le contenu et le sens de *La Mort heureuse* dans sa version ultime». *Cahiers Albert Camus I, La mort heureuse*, roman, Éditions Gallimard, 1971, pp. 7, 9, 19.

²³ John Cruickshank, *Albert Camus and the Literature of Revolt*, New York, Oxford University Press, 1960, p. 115.

Epilogue

In this period when humanity is confronting the Covid-19 pandemic, the issue of the fragility of the human being and the need for solidarity in the face of death are increasingly being invoked in public discourse. I thought it would be useful to bring this vital issue to the readers' attention, starting from the exemplary text presented above, illustrating the thought of Camus, also the author of a famous book about another pandemic: *The Plague (La Peste)*.

Is the ethics of the rebel still relevant, as Camus expounded in the fifties of the last century? I think yes! And this is because the French philosopher and writer speaks more about solidarity than about rebellion. In short, it is essential in a life lived with dignity to revolt against the injustice done to others, and not for the injustice done to you as an individual. If what is happening now can be considered an injustice of nature, we must also acknowledge man's lack of respect towards nature. Thus, from the injustice done to nature, to the economic, social-political and cultural injustice is but one step. The latter (step) has already been taken.

Through an unfortunate combination of circumstances, the novel *La Peste* written by Albert Camus, seems current. Thus, summarizing and interpreting this novel, Matei Vişniec reared: "The need to understand what is happening to humanity is so great that the general public uses not only information and analysis from the media, but also literature. In Italy, for example, in the context of the galloping epidemic, there is a spectacular increase in sales for the novel *La Peste* by Camus"²⁴.

Because here, shows Vişniec, Albert Camus, the holder of the Nobel prize for literature in 1957, describes "how a community organizes itself to resist and overcome an unpredictable evil that seems to fall out of the blue". He starts from the metaphor of rats invading the city, because "they are always there, hidden, invisible, and, probably, the epidemic erupts precisely because at one point they became too many, because the underground misery in Oran (the city where the action takes place) became too great. Thus, Vişniec makes an analogy with the "less glorious face of globalization". For, like the city Oran, "a nasty one, oriented exclusively to trade", globalization can mean "a diversion of all energies from what we could call human protection and well-being to a huge competition for enrichment, consumption, excess, speculation"²⁵.

L'homme révolté that I have presented, however, is about the good "globalization" of solidarity. If most of us have to solve the problem of solidarity by staying away from the others, in order to avoid contaminating each other, the problem of medical and economic assistance is raised. But we can all provide

²⁴ Matei Vişniec, "Coronavirusul, «Cioma» lui Camus și timpul retrocedat", *RFI România/Vocile Lumii*, 24 martie 2020, https://m.rfi.ro/special-paris-119502-coronavirus-cioma-camus-timp-retrocedat?fbclid=IwAR1EyMJ87VH9REAmY6rzKRUEdO_E91ekUYczpDPobFH2CzLQhXotSa5-dFw, accessed April 5, 2020, 15:34.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

active moral support, not only by physically helping those who cannot actually leave their homes, but also by telling them about a better world. That is why the morality of the rebellious man is still necessary in our time, because Camus' man in revolt is a capable one²⁶. One may see that inward revolt helps him/her overcome loneliness, in solidarity with others, outward, from the text, toward action²⁷.

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²⁶ According to Ricoeur, the reflection of the talking man, thinking man or acting man belongs to the same problem of the capable man. The capable man can say, do, tell stories and recognize oneself or recognize a person (the others) in a state, in an image. This is about the possibility of building a personal identity. – Lorena-Valeria Stuparu, *Romanian Review of Political Sciences and International Relations* nr. 2/2017, Vol. XIV, pp. 132-134.

²⁷ «Une phénoménologie de l'homme capable retiendra de ce détour par la narratologie qu'il revient au lecteur d'intrigues et de récits de s'exercer à refigurer ses propres attentes en fonction des modèles de configuration que lui offrent des intrigues engendrées par l'imagination au plan de la fiction. Apprendre à se raconter, c'est aussi apprendre à se raconter autrement» – Paul Ricoeur, *Parcours de la reconnaissance. Trois études*, Paris, Édition Stock, 2004, p. 152.