4 | CAMUS AND POLITICAL VIOLENCE

The scrupulous assassin

In the final section of *The Rebel* Camus asserts that since the beginning of its revolt against God, the "European mind" had believed that it had "all humanity as its ally". However, it subsequently became apparent to the rebel that if he were not to be defeated, he must also learn to fight against men. The dilemma of the rebel is thus posed in the following terms: "if they retreat they must accept death; if they advance they must accept murder. Rebellion, cut off from its origins and cynically travestied, oscillates, on all levels, between sacrifice and murder." Rebellion had originally pleaded the case of the innocence of man, but now "it has hardened its heart against its own culpability". Must we, as a consequence, "renounce every kind of rebellion", even if it means accepting a society weighed down with injustice or serving the interests of history even against the interests of man? Can the original, allegedly irrefutable rebellious proposition ("I revolt, therefore we exist") be reconciled with killing? The original moment of revolt assigned oppression a limit, "within which begins the dignity common to all men". It defined a "primary value", in that "it put in the first rank of its frame of reference" a point of contact between human beings, "which makes men both similar and united". It posited a profound solidarity and "compelled the mind to take a first step in defiance of an absurd world". How can this solidarity be reconciled with the problem of killing? On the level of the absurd, says Camus, the problem of murder would give rise only to "logical contradictions; on the level of rebellion it is mental laceration". For at this point, it is a question of deciding whether it is possible to kill someone "whose resemblance to ourselves we have just recognised and whose identity we have just sanctified". Having just

"conquered solitude" by declaring the rebel's solidarity with humanity, "must we then re-establish it definitively by legitimising the act that isolates everything? To force solitude on a man who has just come to understand that he is not alone, is that not the definitive crime against man?"[1]

"Logically", says Camus, "one should reply that murder and rebellion are contradictory." In one clear sense, once the rebel has killed a master, he is no longer justified in using the term "community of men" from which he derives his justification. The rebel's justification is based on the common humanity of both master and slave; however, once he kills the master, he consecrates their "difference in blood". The rebel's act of killing, "intended to affirm him, thus brings an end to his existence". If it is not possible to speak of the solidarity of every man, then, for the rebel, it is not possible to speak of solidarity at all: "If we are not, then I am not"; if such solidarity is impossible so is such rebellion. "On the level of history, as in individual life, murder is thus a desperate exception or it is nothing. The disturbance that it brings to the order of things offers no hope of a future; it is an exception and therefore it can be neither utilitarian nor systematic as the purely historic attitude would have it." The only way that the rebel has to reconcile himself with his freely chosen act of assassination appears to be to accept with the same gravity his own death and sacrifice: "he kills and dies so that it shall be clear that murder is impossible [that is to say, morally impermissible]" (*R*: 281–2; *E*: 685–6). Anything beyond this extreme point seems to constitute a denial of the solidarity inherent in rebellion.

The rebel is motivated by the desire "to serve justice so as not to add to the injustice of the human condition". Accordingly, rebellion must "refuse to legitimise murder because rebellion, in principle, is a protest against death". However, rebellion only exists because injustice and violence "are part of the rebel's condition" (*R*: 285; *E*: 688–9). As a consequence of this, according to Camus, the rebel faces what appears to be his greatest dilemma:

> He cannot, therefore, absolutely claim not to kill or lie, without renouncing his rebellion and accepting, once and for all, evil and murder. But no more can he agree to kill and lie, since the inverse reasoning which would justify murder and violence would also destroy the reasons for his insurrection. Thus the rebel can never find peace. He knows what is good and, despite himself, does evil. The value that supports him is never given to him once and for all; he must fight to uphold it, unceasingly. . . . In any case, if he is not always able not to kill, either directly or indirectly, he can put his conviction and passion to work at diminishing the chances of murder around him.[2]

What then should be the attitude of the rebel? He cannot turn away from history and seek solace in an extemporal fantasy, and neither can he immerse himself in the tide of history, in pursuit of its supposed "true" direction. Further, if the rebel refuses to make a choice, he effectively chooses "silence and the suffering of others" (*R*: 287*; *E*: 691). In *The Rebel* Camus identifies two conventional ways of interpreting political violence, the "bourgeois" and the "revolutionary", both of which he considers

fatally problematic. He defines the "bourgeois" account of political violence as simply the refusal to recognize one of the terms of the dilemma highlighted by political violence. This response judges all forms of direct violence morally impermissible, but finds it acceptable to sanction the varied forms of violence that are enacted daily on the stage of world history. The second interpretation, the "revolutionary" interpretation of political violence, is premised for Camus on the belief that violence is necessary, necessary to the point of making history nothing but "a continuous violation of everything in man which protests against injustice".[3] Camus had in mind here arguments such as that advanced by Merleau-Ponty in his *Humanism and Terror*, which sought to justify revolutionary violence on the basis that, since the world is pervaded by violence, "we ought to prefer revolutionary violence because it has a future of humanism" (Merleau-Ponty 1969: 107).

These observations from Camus deserve our close attention, not because they are especially complex or innovative, but because they indicate to us quite clearly that the ideas regarding the relative legitimacy of particular acts of political violence developed in *The Rebel*, the play *The Just Assassins* and elsewhere constitute neither a philosophy of necessary, humanizing or cathartic violence, nor, more importantly, a defence of the political status quo, on the grounds that political violence could potentially precipitate a deterioration, rather than an amelioration, in the general welfare of society. This latter charge, as we shall see, is more often than not brought against Camus when his writing on political violence is given any attention at all.

In contrast to these two conventional views of political violence, Camus proposes an alternative limited defence of political violence, which he illustrates by reference to the "military wing"[4] of the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party, one-time political rivals, and ultimately political victims, of the Bolsheviks. We shall see that the Socialist Revolutionary Ivan Kaliayev, who appears in *The Rebel* and features in *The Just Assassins*, is at the heart of Camus's ideas about legitimate political violence. For Camus, Kaliayev "proves", no less, "that though the revolution is a necessary means, it is not a sufficient end". The revolutionary tradition exemplified by Kaliayev recognizes human solidarity ("universal recognition") as a "necessary" condition of legitimate revolution, although, crucially, it also recognizes this solidarity as "insufficient" (*R*: 172–3; *E*: 578–9). The twentieth century has, according to Camus, been marked by the suppression of this paradoxical conception of political revolt and the success of what he calls "state terrorism", "rebellion, cut off from its real roots, unfaithful to man in having surrendered to history", a messianic conception of revolution that, as he argued in *The Rebel*, has given birth "to the totalitarian revolution of the twentieth century" (*R*: 174; *E*: 579–80). But Kaliayev was only one of a number of such "scrupulous assassins", whose distinctive spirit is perhaps best summed up by another Socialist Revolutionary, Maria Spiridonova, who in 1906 assassinated General Luzhenovsky for his brutal treatment of the peasants in the Tambov province of Russia, and who, during the 1917 revolution, was "the most loved and the most powerful woman in all Russia".[5] By September 1918, however, Spiridonova was imprisoned in Moscow, from where, refusing to answer the charges brought against her or to recognize the jurisdiction of the court, she

published an open letter addressed to the Central Committee of the Bolshevik Party. Protesting against the grotesquely violent regime that the Bolsheviks had initiated in order to consolidate their position, she wrote:

> You call this terror. But in the history of the Russian Revolution this word has never meant to signify revenge or intimidation. . . . The most important element in the terror was *protest* against the oppression of despotism, an attempt to arouse indignation in the souls of humiliated men and women, to fire the conscience of those who stood silent in face of this humiliation. That is how the terrorist advanced on the enemy. And almost always did the terrorist combine his deed with the voluntary sacrifice of his own life and freedom. I believe that only thus was it possible to justify the terrorist act of the revolutionary. (Quoted in Steinberg 1955: 132)

The terrorists (as they called themselves) no doubt desired the destruction of the absolutist regime of tsarist Russia, and sought it through direct and violent action. Yet we see from this declaration of Spiridonova that central to the terrorism practised by the Socialist Revolutionaries was the assassin's willingness to sacrifice his or her own life. It is here that we begin to see that which constitutes, for Camus, the particular importance of the terrorism of the Socialist Revolutionaries: they forgot nothing of what he considered the origins of revolt and the paradoxical premise on which it was based, human solidarity.

The hero of *The Just Assassins*, Kaliayev, waits on a Moscow street for the carriage of the Grand Duke Sergius Alexandrovitch Romanov, the Tsar's uncle and Governor of Moscow, into which he is to throw a bomb.[6] However, when the carriage appears, Kaliayev notices that it carries not just the Grand Duke, but also his wife and his young nephew and niece. Kaliayev abandons his task, unwilling to sacrifice the lives of children. This refusal to throw the bomb is understood by all his associates but one, Stepan, who believes that the lives of two children would be a small price for the liberation of the serfs. Kaliayev finds such reasoning repugnant: the ends, he believes, cannot justify the means. Thus far, Camus has pitched a "scrupulous assassin", Kaliayev, against the totalitarian revolutionary (in the guise of Stepan) and, of course, in this regard, there is no surprise regarding where Camus's sympathies lie. Two days after the aborted assassination attempt, Kaliayev tries again. This time the carriage carries the Grand Duke alone. The bomb is thrown, and the Grand Duke is killed. Kaliayev makes no effort to escape, refuses all deals with the police and even an offer of pardon from the Grand Duke's widow. It is in these respects, and not simply in his ultimate self-sacrifice, that Kaliayev is differentiated from Stepan. The latter clearly resembles the archetypal revolutionary as described in Nechayev's *Revolutionary Catechism*: "The revolutionary is a marked individual. He has no interests, no business, no personal feelings, no bonds, nothing that is his alone, not even his name. Everything in him is swallowed up by a single exclusive interest, a single thought, a single passion: Revolution" (quoted in *NB2*: 177–8; *C2*: 226). And although Kaliayev defended revolutionary action "for the sake

of life – to give life a chance", and his comrade Annenkov insists that "you must not say that everything is justifiable . . . thousands of us have died to prove that everything is *not* justifiable!", Stepan insists: "Not until the day comes when we stop being sentimental about children, will the revolution triumph and we be masters of the world. . . . Nothing that can serve our cause should be ruled out. . . . There are no limits."[7]

As we have seen, in *The Rebel* Camus asserts that rebellion is based upon the recognition of a common human condition, and finds its justification only in solidarity: "I rebel – therefore we exist" constitutes the rebel's *cogito* (*R*: 22; *E*: 432). Accordingly, the values of rebellion and solidarity are presented to us as the basis for an ethical understanding of legitimate political action:

> We have, then, the right to say that any rebellion which claims the right to deny or destroy this solidarity loses simultaneously its right to be called rebellion and becomes in reality an acquiescence in murder. In the same way this solidarity, except in so far as religion in concerned, comes to light only on the level of rebellion. And so the real drama of revolutionary thought is announced. In order to exist, man must rebel, but rebellion must respect the limit it discovers in itself – a limit where minds meet and, in meeting, begin to exist. Rebellious thought cannot therefore dispense with memory: it is a perpetual state of tension. In studying its actions and its results, we shall have to say, each time, whether it remains faithful to its first noble promise or if, through indolence or folly, it forgets its original purpose and plunges into a mire of tyranny or servitude. (*R*: 22; *E*: 431)

The Socialist Revolutionaries never denied or ignored the paradoxical position in which they found themselves: "necessary and inexcusable – that is how killing appeared to them".[8] Rather than seeking repose in a theory that offered them resolution at the price of hypocrisy, they conceived the idea of offering their own lives as a justification for their acts. The principle of paying for a life with a life here appears to form the basis for a radically different theory of legitimate violence.

There seem, however, to be clear inconsistencies in such a conception of legitimate violence. First, it appears that certain acts of killing may not require that a perpetrator voluntarily offer up his or her own life in exchange: in cases of self-defence, for example, or in cases of resistance against murderous oppression (Camus would hardly have suggested that French *résistants* ought to have given themselves up to Nazi justice). Secondly, it would seem that a life taken has not the same moral value as a life offered. Kaliayev may have been prepared to sacrifice his own life, but obviously his victim, Grand Duke Sergi, did not in any way "offer" his.[9] Specifically, this willingness to die on the part of the perpetrator compromises the idea that there is a moral equivalence between the two deaths. Being willing to *die* for what one believes is perhaps admirable, but it doesn't itself justify *killing* for what one believes. Clearly, then, there is something flawed in the idea that some kind of moral equilibrium is restored with the self-immolation of the assassin.

Nevertheless, the example of Socialist Revolutionaries is undoubtedly fundamental to Camus's conception of legitimate violence, and we shall see that the ideas regarding morally permissible killing developed in *The Rebel* and elsewhere appear to take full account of both of the objections outlined above. What the rebels of 1905 illustrate, says Camus, is that rebellion cannot lead to "the consolation and comfort of dogma". In fact, the characteristic that seems to best define Kaliayev in Camus's mind is not his self-sacrifice, but his doubt. He states explicitly that it is the fact of this doubt, combined with the fact that this doubt does not prevent him from acting, that makes of Kaliayev "the purest image of rebellion".[10]

For Camus, the history of twentieth-century political violence has been the history of the travesty of these ideas. The revolutionary groups that spread throughout Russia through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries culminated in the revolution of 1917. But from the revolution of 1917 emerged not a realization of the dream shared by these early rebels, but the era of what Camus calls "caesarean socialism" and "state terrorism", in which the Bolsheviks set out to consolidate their position by systematically liquidating their ideological opponents. "Caesarean socialism", says Camus, "undoubtedly condemns individual terrorism to the extent that it revives values incompatible with the domination of historical reason. But it will restore terror on the level of the State"; state terrorism is "rebellion, cut off from its real roots, unfaithful to man in having surrendered to history".[11] The paradox of revolt, exemplified in Kaliayev, is suppressed in the name of historical expediency and historical reason.[12]

In contrast, as we have seen in the previous chapter, Camus insists that the rebel conscious of the origins of his revolt will recognize that the values that motivate his actions, and that his actions are designed to defend, are never absolute: the rebel, as we have already noted, is not concerned with either absolute justice or absolute freedom, because they are deemed to be incompatible (*R*: 287–8; *E*: 691). All individuals can aspire to is a more or less accurate approximation to these values. But more radically, he was also suggesting that rebellion is not itself a demand for these absolute values. A legitimate revolutionary act – "a revolutionary action which wishes to be coherent in terms of its origins" – must be uncompromising as to its means, but will accept an approximation as far as its ends are concerned (*R*: 290; *E*: 694). However, this constructive attitude cannot be the full solution, and Camus has already recognized that there are instances when violence is a legitimate response to oppression. Nevertheless, he suggests, even in instances of legitimate violent revolt certain limits must be observed if just revolt is not to become unjust. In fact, if we examine the acts of justified killing in the works of Camus, specifically the assassination of Grand Duke Sergi in *The Just Assassins* and that of Caligula in the eponymous play (the latter surprisingly neglected in respect of Camus's ideas on political violence), we can identify a number of characteristics that appear to distinguish an act of justified killing.[13] These characteristics may, of course, be interpreted in terms of their dramatic effect or the exigencies of theatrical production, but it seems that they also offer substantial insight into Camus's thoughts on legitimate political violence. A consideration of *Caligula* in this regard seems especially fecund, not

least because there is no suggestion that the assassination of Caligula ought to be followed by the deaths of his assassins. Indeed, the subtle yet significant ways in which Camus's Caligula differs from Suetonius's make it difficult, in my view, to exaggerate the importance of the play with respect to the present discussion. I would suggest that a consideration of the acts of assassination at the heart of *The Just Assassins* and *Caligula* indicates that for Camus the following conditions, at least, must be met for an act of killing to be deemed legitimate:

- The victim is a tyrant. The character of Caligula, of course, is synonymous with tyranny, and in *The Just Assassins*, Kaliayev repeatedly insists that the target of his bomb is the "despotism" and "tyranny" represented by, or manifested in, the Grand Duke.[14]
- The act must be discriminate. Although it is otherwise similar, in detail Camus's *Caligula* differs from his source, Suetonius, in two highly significant ways. First, in Suetonius, Caligula's assassins also kill his mistress, Caesonia, and his young daughter. In Camus's version the daughter is written out of the play and, as if to underline his monstrous nature, Caligula himself kills Caesonia. Similarly, we remember that in *The Just Assassins* Kaliayev aborts his first assassination attempt on Grand Duke Sergi because the carriage carrying the Grand Duke also carries his nephew and niece. The innocence of civilians is central to Camus's thinking on political violence, as is highlighted by one of his most important (not to say effective) interventions in the Algerian war, his "Call for a Civil Truce" in January 1956.
- The assassination is committed by a rebel in close proximity to his victim, and the assassin must accept full responsibility for his individual action. This brings us to the second way in which Camus's *Caligula* differs from Suetonius. In Suetonius the facts of the assassination of Caligula are uncertain, but in Camus's play, it is stated clearly that the play's hero, Cherea, actually stabs Caligula in the face, a peculiarly brutal detail, meaningful only in so far as it is of precise symbolic value.[15] In *The Just Assassins*, Kaliayev throws the bomb into the Grand Duke's carriage from a distance of a few feet; he makes no attempt to escape and immediately accepts responsibility for his action.[16] This point regarding the proximity of the assassin needs much refinement, but its contemporary relevance should not be underestimated at a time when wars, especially those fought by wealthy countries, are so often fought, in large part, from safe distances.
- There is no less violent alternative to assassination. This is effectively implied in the first condition above, relating to the tyrannical nature of the victim (Caligula wished his horse to be consul, the Romanovs had their Bloody Sunday), but it should be stated explicitly nevertheless.

Camus is clearly acutely aware of the ambiguities surrounding talk of permissible killing. His primary intention is to show not that in certain instances killing is morally unproblematic, but that the killing of a human being must remain the

greatest exception to ordinary human experience, that while it might be sometimes morally justifiable, it can never be habitual. He writes approvingly of the moral dilemma upon which the Socialist Revolutionaries continually reflected, a dilemma that, nevertheless, did not prevent them from acting (*R*: 169; *E*: 575). It is for this reason, perhaps, that his discussion of permissible killing in *The Rebel*, *The Just Assassins* and elsewhere is so frequently ambiguous. An act of permissible killing must achieve the status in society not just of an exception, but of the greatest of all exceptions. Although certain acts of killing may be morally justified, it is imperative for Camus that such acts are never represented as being morally transparent or unambiguous. He is adamant that an act of justifiable killing should never be considered as anything less than an act of killing. Hence the paradoxical name by which he refers to Kaliayev and his comrades, "the scrupulous assassins" (*R*: 164*; *E*: 571).

If we assume that Camus was generally sympathetic to the "scrupulous" violence of the Socialist Revolutionaries, we still cannot be sure precisely what conditions he would insist upon in order to make Kaliayev's actions justifiable.[17] I have identified several factors I believe Camus thought necessary for an act of killing to be just. However, there remains a further, and crucial, point of ambiguity: must the just assassin sacrifice his own life in order to excuse his act of killing? This point is crucial because, as we shall see, the coherence of Camus's ideas on political violence appears to rest on our interpretation of it.

According to some critics, Camus insists that the rebel must sacrifice his own life to atone for the life he has taken. This may take the form of suicide, or as in the case of Kaliayev, it may involve surrendering oneself to the police after the act has been committed, with the certainty that one faces execution. For the sake of clarity I will refer to this reading of Camus's thought on violence as the "life for a life" theory. This is the view of Herbert Hochberg, for example, who argues that under scrutiny Camus's "life for a life" thesis collapses into incoherence, an incoherence exemplified by the fact that "on the basis of the absolute value of life Camus has rejected suicide, capital punishment and murder. He ends by acquiescing in certain cases to all three, for the suicide of the just assassin is suicide in the form of self-imposed capital punishment."[18]

Of course, even if Camus was advocating the "life for a life" thesis, this would still in no way constitute self-contradiction.[19] First, *The Myth of Sisyphus* does not present a moral argument against suicide, but argues that the absurd does not dictate suicide. Secondly, Camus's concern in *The Rebel* is not with "murder" as such, but with ideological rationalizations of "murder". And thirdly, Kaliayev's acceptance of his death cannot be reasonably interpreted as an acceptance of the legitimacy of capital punishment, for such an interpretation would require that Kaliayev be prepared to die in order to aid the destruction of an autocratic regime whose system of justice he nevertheless defers to. The justice that Kaliayev may believe he is satisfying by sacrificing his own life is not the justice of the Romanovs, but his own carefully wrought sense of justice and expiation.[20] The fact that the execution is carried out in the name of the Romanovs is of no consequence to Kaliayev: something made clear when he refuses their offer of clemency.

Nevertheless, there is considerable agreement among his critics that Camus's abhorrence of killing had indeed led him to adopt the "life for a life" theory, a theory that, they argue, is fundamentally untenable. According to this view Camus believed that in order for killing to be justified, the assassin's life must also be taken, as if in an act of primordial reparation. For example, Philip Thody writes that "to recommend that all conscientious rebels commit suicide after they have been obliged to kill in the service of the revolution is rather an impractical suggestion. No political organisation fighting against a tyranny could possibly succeed if its leaders follow Kaliayev's example" (Thody 1961: 127). Similarly, George Kateb asserts that Camus's alleged claim that the assassin, in order to be just, must sacrifice his own life actually inaugurates and defends a peculiar new doctrine: "the stain of blood can be wiped clean by more blood". The crux of these arguments is that Camus's alleged principle of "a life for a life" renders political violence untenable. For Kateb the application of Camus's doctrine would mean that the revolutionary forces "would be constantly losing their numbers" through their duty to self-sacrifice, and concludes that "the perpetuation of the established order would seem to be guaranteed: rebellion . . . is to take its moral superiority as compensation enough for its inevitable failure" (Kateb 1963: 39, 40).

This is harsh criticism indeed. However, it is in no way certain that Camus is arguing in *The Rebel* that the assassin, like Kaliayev, must actually die in order to justify his action. What is important, one can argue, is not that the assassin dies, but that he is *willing* to die in order to carry out his task, or that he accepts his own death as a likely or possible outcome of his carrying out the attack. In *The Rebel* Camus argues that violence, if it cannot be avoided, must always be accompanied not by the death of the perpetrator, but by "a personal responsibility" and "an immediate risk".[21] Further, in "In Defence of *The Rebel*", he explicitly rejects the idea that *The Rebel* had defended a "life for a life" thesis, claiming "I wanted nothing more than to refute legitimate killing and to ascribe to its demented venture a precise limit" (*SCHC*: 217*; *E*: 1713). In the same short essay, and again in his preface to Alfred Rosmer's *Moscou sous Lénine* (1953), although he continues to insist on the fundamental importance of their example to his understanding of legitimate political violence, Camus criticizes the Socialist Revolutionaries for their complete lack of political realism:

> It's fair for Lenin to give lessons in realism to the solitary terrorists. But it was, and is, indispensable that the rebels of 1905 call to order the revolutionaries who were marching towards state terrorism. Today, now that this state terrorism is in place, the example of 1905 must be incessantly held up before twentieth-century revolution not in order to negate it, but in order to make it once again revolutionary. (*SCHC*: 210; *E*: 1707; cf. *E*: 789)

However, I think Camus was far from comfortable defending political realism, whatever the circumstances. He offers a far more ingenious criticism of the terrorism of the Socialist Revolutionaries in his *Carnets*, where he identifies what seems to him a flaw in the *moral* character of their violence:

> The great purity of the terrorist of the Kaliayev type is that for him murder coincides with suicide (cf. Savinkov: *Memoirs of a terrorist*). A life is paid for by a life. The reasoning is false, but respectable. (A life taken is not worth a life given.) Today, murder by proxy. No one pays. (*NB2*: 156; *C2*: 199)

This claim is first, in fact, a stronger criticism of the "life for a life" theory than any presented by Camus's critics: the "life for a life" argument is flawed, according to Camus, because although in general terms one life can be said to be of equal value to another, a life willingly offered or sacrificed cannot be said to be equal to, or to atone for, a life taken without the individual's consent. Therefore, even if Kaliayev himself believed that his death would expiate his action, this does not seem to have been Camus's own view. Secondly, and crucially, despite its rejection of the so-called "life for a life" thesis, we can see that this *Carnet* note is not an argument against all forms of political violence, a position one might call "absolute pacifism by default". Kaliayev's reasoning may be "false" in Camus's estimation, but it is also "respectable", and the character of his violence is seen to contrast starkly with that of the contemporary era, from which Kaliayev's scrupulousness is conspicuously absent ("Today, murder by proxy. No one pays"). Camus was here referring to the expanding gulf between contemporary advocates of revolutionary violence – given the date of the *Notebooks* entry, 1947, he almost certainly had in mind Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror* – and the victims of the political violence they recommended.[22]

If Camus finds Kaliayev's reasoning to be "false", what could permit him to nevertheless insist on a fundamental distinction between his terrorism and the innumerable instances of "murder by proxy" that so distinguished the twentieth century? In this reading it is precisely his willingness to die, his personal commitment to the violence he himself commends, rather than his actual death that differentiates Kaliayev from Camus's contemporaries.[23] The point, then, is not that Kaliayev must die in order "to atone" for his action, but that he is willing to die as a consequence of it: if the just assassin is prepared to kill in the name of justice or freedom, he must also be willing to die in the name of justice or freedom. To be willing to kill, but to be unwilling to die, suggests a failure to appreciate what for Camus remains the exceptional nature of the act. Simone Weil expresses a strikingly similar view of legitimate killing:

> To keep the love of life intact within us; never to inflict death without accepting it for ourselves. Supposing the life of X . . . were linked with our own so that the two deaths had to be simultaneous, should we still wish him to die? If with our whole body and soul we desire life and if nevertheless without lying, we can reply "yes", then we have the right to kill. (Weil 2002: 86)

However, this alone is not sufficient to differentiate the just assassin from the rest. I have shown by reference to his *Carnets* that Camus is of the view that the sacrifice of one's own life does not itself accord legitimacy to acts of killing (on the grounds

that a life freely given does not equate to a life taken). By the same reasoning, neither could the willingness to die itself justify killing (for neither could the life willingly offered equate to a life taken). In this view, those factors listed earlier (the victim must be a tyrant; the assassin must accept responsibility for his act; the act must be discriminate; there can be no democratic alternative) must also be present for an act of killing to be legitimate.

Camus's primary claim is that political violence must not be granted institutionalized legitimacy: hence his rejection of both "bourgeois" and "revolutionary" interpretations of violence, mentioned earlier in this chapter. Furthermore, Camus's theoretical defence of certain acts of violence (illustrated, in particular, by reference to the assassination of Grand Duke Sergi) must, I think, be understood primarily in the context of a general prohibition of killing and, indeed, he often appears less concerned with describing or defining justifiable political violence than with countering the generalized rationalizations of violence in vogue at that time. Although he explicitly rejects pacifism, calling "absolute non-violence . . . the negative basis of slavery and its acts of violence", Camus's moral sensibility is scandalized by the ease with which his contemporaries feel capable of endorsing violence for political ends in general terms (and from safe distances), while exhibiting nothing of the profoundly personal commitment to violence we see in Kaliayev (*R*: 291; *E*: 695). As we have already noted, this is clearly expressed by Camus in 1948, in a letter responding to criticism of "Neither Victims nor Executioners" levelled by D'Astier de la Vigerie:

> I believe that violence in inevitable; the years of Occupation taught me as much. To tell the truth, there were, at that time, terrible acts of violence which posed no problems for me . . . I have a horror of comfortable violence; I have a horror of those whose words exceed their actions. It is in this respect that I distance myself from certain of our great minds, for whose appeals to murder I will cease feeling contempt only when they themselves take up the executioner's gun. (*E*: 355–6)

I have argued that Camus was neither a reluctant pacifist nor an advocate of self-immolating scrupulous assassins who, in the words of Kateb, would take their moral superiority as sufficient compensation for their inevitable political failure. Too often, Camus's distrust of all totalizing narratives is reduced by critics to culpable political naiveté or over-earnest anti-communism. Norman Podhoretz, for example, argues that "the truths of *The Rebel* were on the whole the truths of the 'Right' ", before going on to criticize Camus for not having the powerful political insights of his own book (Podhoretz 1986: 47). On the contrary, I believe that Camus's ideas on violence lead us in quite a different direction.

The main discussion above, dealing with acts of terrorism perpetrated by individuals, inevitably leads one to question the contemporary relevance of Camus's thought with regard to terrorism, particularly suicide bombing. It seems clear that what makes suicide bombing morally reprehensible is the habitual deliberate targeting of civilians, and I have argued that this concern for innocent victims, for

civilians, is central to Camus's discussion of legitimate political violence, in his insistence that the act of legitimate violence be discriminate. Indeed we note that it is this concern for civilians, and not, as many have claimed, simply the risk to his own family, that constitutes the basis of Camus's controversial rejection of the FLN's tactics in the Algerian war: "I must also condemn the use of terrorism which is *exercised blindly*, in the streets of Algiers for example, and which could one day strike my mother or my family."[24] More generally, it seems that when we consider the series of factors that I have argued Camus considered necessary to acts of legitimate violence, the fundamental distinction between terrorist and soldier, necessary to so much contemporary discussion of political violence, becomes difficult to maintain. What this points to, I contend, is not the obsolescence of Camus's argument in the present era of technically advanced violence, but, on the contrary, its particular importance.

Camus distinguished himself from so many of his contemporaries in immediately condemning the bombing of Hiroshima in August 1945, seeing in it the inauguration of a new level of barbarity in human relations. Quite alone among his peers, Camus condemned the bombing, identified with palpable dread the increasing role that technology was to play in warfare – "the civilisation of the machine has just achieved its ultimate degree of savagery" – and must have recognized in this milestone in the history of total war, and in the enthusiasm with which it was greeted in much of the world's media, the refutation of his carefully wrought principles of discriminating, legitimate political violence:

> One has the right to think that there is something indecent about celebrating in this way a discovery that has been put to its first use by the most formidable destructive rage that man has exhibited for centuries. In a world that has torn itself apart with every conceivable instrument of violence and shown itself incapable of exerting any control while remaining indifferent to justice or even mere human happiness, the fact that science has dedicated itself to organised murder will surprise no one, except perhaps an unrepentant idealist.
>
> These discoveries must be reported and commented on for what they are and announced to the world so that man has a proper idea of his destiny. It is intolerable for these terrible revelations to be wrapped in picturesque or humorous essays. (*CC*: 236; *CAC8*: 569–70)

Furthermore, he suggests that whereas it is intolerable that such destruction "be wrapped in picturesque or humorous essays", there are other, political rather than moral, reasons for reflecting carefully on the bombing of Hiroshima. Considered as a forceful assertion of political power, the attack underlines the need for "a genuine international organisation in which the rights of the great powers will not outweigh the rights of small and medium-sized nations, and in which war, a scourge now made definitive by the fruits of the human mind alone, will no longer be decided by the appetites or doctrines of any one state" (*CC*: 236–7; *CAC8*: 569–71).

It seems that when applied to contemporary political events, Camus's reflections on political violence would lead us to conclude that for the same principal reason that we find suicide bombing morally impermissible (that is, because of its cost in civilian lives), the kind of warfare generally practised with self-declared moral impunity by the West must also be considered morally impermissible. But this is surely no reason to dismiss those reflections as obsolete. The twentieth century – termed by Camus the "Century of Fear" – saw a rapid rise in the number of civilian casualties of war: from 5 per cent in the First World War, to 50 per cent in the Second World War, to 90 per cent in Vietnam.[25] Juxtaposed with these statistics, military and media talk of "targeted attacks" and "precision bombing" can be seen as serving to disguise the fact that advances in military technology have invariably served to reduce the number of casualties among those who possess the technology, while causing a concomitant and disproportionate rise in the number of innocent victims.

Finally, let me say that from my perspective it is certain that Camus would have found the current so-called "war on terrorism" morally and politically dubious.[26] The attitude of the current American administration to international law and global political consensus, exhibited, for instance, by its invasion and occupation of Iraq (the illegal nature of which was affirmed by the then UN Secretary General, Kofi Annan[27]), should immediately remind us of Camus's anxious defence of international democracy in "Neither Victims nor Executioners" in 1946. Here he identifies international democracy as the only viable means of ensuring global stability, and saving the world from mass destruction on a hitherto unknown scale. He insists that international democracy, like national democracy, exists when the law is above those who govern, and identifies as the gravest flaw in the burgeoning international democracy represented by the UN the fact that "[international] law is made and unmade by governments, that is, by the executive. We are therefore in a regime of international dictatorship." Here Camus is taking clear aim at the so-called "Big Five", the permanent members of the UN Security Council (the USSR, the USA, the UK, France and China), and most especially at the veto these countries enjoyed, and continue to enjoy. He goes on to insist:

> The only way out is to place international law above governments, which means that the law must be made, that there must be a parliament for making it, and that parliament must be constituted by means of worldwide elections in which all nations will take part. And since we do not have such a parliament, the only option open to us it to resist this international dictatorship on an international level using means not in contradiction with the ends we seek.[28]

There may seem to us something awkwardly naive in this, but one can surely find sufficient evidence here to argue that to take Camus's thought seriously in the present time is not to feel a warm consolatory nostalgia for youthful political idealism;

instead it compels one to actively oppose the moral and political recklessness of those who are certain that they are right and who are in possession of the political and military means to articulate this conviction: as Camus wrote in "Neither Victims nor Executioners", "we suffocate among people who think they are absolutely right" (*CC*: 259*; *CAC8*: 611).

"Reflections on the Guillotine"

> After the liberation of Paris, I went to see one of the purge trials. The accused was, to my mind, guilty. However, I left the trial before the end because I ended up on the side of the prisoner; I've never been back to a trial of that kind. In every guilty person, there is some innocence. It is that which makes all absolute condemnation repulsive.[29]

One of Camus's most interesting contributions to the question of political violence is his essay on capital punishment, "Reflections on the Guillotine", first published in 1957 (a time when France was actively executing Algerian militants). Whereas, as we have seen, several of Camus's works recognize the legitimacy of political violence in certain circumstances, in this essay he rejects the use of capital punishment, which he considered to be state-sanctioned murder, under any and all circumstances. He begins the essay with a memory of a story relating to an execution that his father had witnessed. The prisoner who was to be executed had committed an especially heinous crime, murdering an entire family before robbing them. The crime disgusted his father to such an extent that he decided he wanted to witness the execution himself. However, his anger at the injustice of the killings committed by this man quickly turned to revulsion when he witnessed what was committed by the state in the name of justice:

> What he saw that morning he never told anyone. My mother relates merely that he came rushing home, his face distorted, refused to talk, lay down for a moment on the bed, and suddenly began to vomit. He had just discovered the reality hidden under the noble phrases with which it was masked. Instead of thinking of the slaughtered children, he could think of nothing but that quivering body that had just been dropped onto a board to have its head cut off.[30]

Although Camus begins his essay with a personal memory, its purpose is not to elicit from the reader an emotional state conducive to his argument. It is instead designed to confront the reader with what he suggests the institution of capital punishment seeks to hide from him: the actuality of execution. "Reflections on the Guillotine" constitutes not an emotional appeal for abolition, but a reasoned argument against capital punishment based on the view that capital punishment is itself irrational. Camus states his position baldly from the beginning: speaking of the execution witnessed by his father, he asserts that the execution "is no less repulsive than

the crime, and this new murder, far from making amends for the harm done to the social body, adds a new blot to the first one". He argues that the true awfulness of executions is kept from the general public through the complicity of officials and reporters: "hence we read at breakfast time in a corner of the newspaper that the condemned 'has paid his debt to society' or that he has 'atoned' or that 'at 5 a.m. justice was done'. The officials call the condemned man 'the interested party' or 'the patient' or refer to him by a number." Camus declares that his intention, in contrast, will be "to talk about it crudely". When obscene acts are committed in silence, "then there is no other solution but to speak out and to show the obscenity hidden under the verbal cloak" (*RRD*: 176–7; *E*: 1021–2). Such an exposé of the facts of execution is especially warranted because responsibility for the continued practice of this "primitive rite" belongs to the public in general (it is, after all, in the name of the people that these acts are committed). He asserts that the public responds to news of executions only with "the ceremonial phrases that have been drilled into it. When the imagination sleeps, words are emptied of their meaning: a deaf population absent-mindedly registers the condemnation of a man." Nevertheless, he asserts that if this cloak is pulled away, and the brutal mechanism of state-sponsored murder is revealed, "then public imagination, suddenly awakened, will repudiate both the vocabulary and the penalty" (*RRD*: 177; *E*: 1022–3).

Camus's argument against capital punishment is based on an analysis of the two arguments habitually deployed by its proponents: the deterrence argument and retributivism. The deterrence argument, which Camus refers to throughout as the argument from "the exemplary value of the punishment", is based upon the assumption that people "refrain from crime because they fear punishment", and "since people fear death more than anything else, the death penalty is the most effective deterrent" (*RRD*: 179; *E*: 1024; Schuessler 1971: 182). Camus suggests that the most obvious problem with this argument is that, as he has already suggested, when executions are discussed in the media, they are discussed euphemistically. If the purpose of the death penalty is to deter people, he asks, wouldn't it be made more effective if the media at least reported it accurately? He surmises that society itself proves that it does not believe the deterrence argument, and suggests that were the purpose of the death penalty really to deter, society "would exhibit the heads", that if society really did believe in the deterring power of executions, it would "give executions the benefit of the publicity it generally uses for national bond issues or new brands of drinks". Instead, the execution is described in euphemism: "whom do they hope to intimidate . . . by that example forever hidden, by the threat of a punishment described as easy and swift?"[31]

The second objection Camus has against the deterrence argument is that it cannot be verified empirically, as it is not possible to show with any certainty that a particular act of murder would have been committed were it not for the existence of capital punishment. Indeed, he suggests that what circumstantial evidence does exist tends to prove the very opposite: as is reflected, he says, in the fascination "thousands of criminals" exhibit for the death penalty (*RRD*: 181; *E*: 1024). In order, he says, to defend the deterrence argument against statistical evidence, which

appears to prove that there is no correlation between levels of serious crimes and the presence or absence of the death penalty, one is forced to present an argument like the following: "Nothing proves . . . that the death penalty is exemplary; as a matter of fact, it is certain that thousands of murderers have not been intimidated by it. But there is no way of knowing those it has intimidated; consequently, nothing proves that it is not exemplary." In this way, says Camus, "the greatest of punishments . . . rests on nothing but an unverifiable possibility", and he asks, "should there not be a certainty to authorise the most certain of deaths?"[32] As Camus reads this argument, the execution is defended "not so much for the crime he committed but by virtue of all the crimes that might have been and were not committed, that can be and will not be committed". Accordingly, "the most sweeping uncertainty . . . authorises the most implacable certainty".[33] Whereas there is no statistical evidence to support the deterrence argument, there is, Camus suggests, a good deal of anecdotal evidence suggesting that the death penalty serves as no deterrent whatever. This is the case for two related reasons. First, he suggests that although the deterrence argument assumes a certain degree of premeditation on the part of the serious criminal or murderer, there is a great deal of anecdotal evidence suggesting that the vast majority of serious crimes (especially murders) are committed without premeditation.[34] Secondly, the deterrence argument fails to deal adequately with those criminals such as "the man who doesn't know that he is going to kill, who makes up his mind to it in a flash and commits his crime in a state of frenzy or obsession". Neither does it deal with the so-called hardened criminal, for whom the threat of execution instils no fear (*RRD*: 188; *E*: 1031).

In this light, Camus suggests that, far from deterring potential criminals, the death penalty may serve to brutalize society: "[it] is already possible to follow the exemplary effects of such ceremonies on public opinion, the manifestations of sadism they arouse, the hideous vainglory they excite in certain criminals. No nobility in the vicinity of the gallows, but disgust, contempt, or the vilest indulgence of the senses." He cites in evidence the testimony of executioners, wardens and chaplains, who speak of the "keen sense of personal shame", the "horror, shame and humiliation", of "[the] slang of the administrators of justice[,] quite as cynical and vulgar as that of the criminals".[35] Camus concludes that although it hardly seems to exist for those not connected to it, the death penalty has at least one incontrovertible effect: "to depreciate or destroy all humanity and reason in those who take part in it directly" (*RRD*: 196; *E*: 1037). He finds evidence for such brutalization in the macabre satisfaction some executioners evidently derive from the administration of their duties, but also in the following "hallucinatory" account of an execution provided by Père Devoyod, the chaplain of the Santé prison in Paris, quoted at length:

> The morning of the execution, the condemned man was in a very bad mood and refused the consolations of religion. Knowing his heart of hearts and the affection he had for his wife, who was very devout, we said to him: "Come now, out of love for your wife, commune with yourself a moment before dying", and the condemned man accepted. He communed at length before the crucifix,

> then he seemed to pay no further attention to our presence. When he was executed, we were a short distance from him. His head fell into the trough in front of the guillotine and the body was immediately put into the basket; but by some mistake the basket was closed before the head was put in. The assistant who was carrying the head had to wait for a moment until the basket was opened again; now, during the brief space of time we could see the condemned man's eyes fixed on me with a look of supplication, as if to ask for forgiveness. Instinctively, we made the sign of the cross to bless the head, and then the lids blinked, the expression of the eyes softened, and finally the look, that had remained full of expression, became vague.
>
> (Devoyod 1955, quoted *RRD*: 184–5; *E*: 1028)

Using such eye-witness accounts as evidence, Camus argues that the real reason people support the death penalty has nothing whatever to do with deterrence and is, in fact, much simpler: "[let] us call it by the name which, for lack of any other nobility, will at least give the nobility of truth, and let us recognise it for what it is essentially: a revenge". This defence of the death penalty, the retributivist defence, is, says Camus, "as old as man", and he characterizes it as "the law of retaliation [*le talion*]. Whoever has done me harm must suffer harm; whoever has put out my eye must lose an eye; and whoever has killed must die." He rejects this retributivist defence of capital punishment because, he argues, it is based not on reasoned principles but on a "particularly violent" emotion: retaliation, he says, "is related to nature and instinct, not to law", and law is "not intended to reproduce that nature", but, specifically, to "correct it". Camus also claims that whereas the retributivist argument is based upon the crude arithmetic of an eye for an eye, there is in fact no equivalence between the two acts, the murder and the execution, because execution "adds to death a rule, a public premeditation known to the future victim, an organisation, in short, which is in itself a source of moral suffering more terrible than death. Hence there is no equivalence" (*RRD*: 197–9; *E*: 1037–9). Premeditated acts of murder are usually thought of as morally more reprehensible than murders committed without premeditation, and capital punishment, he says, is clearly "the most premeditated of all crimes". In fact capital punishment is such that it inflicts two deaths on the victim, thereby exceeding the *lex talonis* itself:

> what man experiences at such times is beyond all morality. Not virtue, nor courage, nor intelligence, nor even innocence has anything to do with it. . . . All equity and all dignity have disappeared. . . . Two deaths are inflicted on him, the first being worse than the second, whereas he killed but once.
>
> (*RRD*: 204–5; *E*: 1042–3)

I have already noted that Camus's opposition to the death penalty was confirmed in the context of the post-war purge, and first publicly articulated when he added his signature to a petition requesting clemency for Robert Brasillach in 1945. I also noted that both Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir supported the decision to execute

collaborators and refused to sign the petition for Brasillach. In fact this trial and execution prompted de Beauvoir to formulate her own version of the retributivist argument, in an essay entitled "An Eye for an Eye".[36] De Beauvoir identifies the thirst for vengeance, such as that exhibited during the purge, as "a response to one of the metaphysical demands of man". She suggests that what makes certain crimes exemplary is that they involve the refusal to identify the very personhood of the victim: a crime becomes "a scandal from the moment that one human being treats other human beings as objects, when by means of torture, humiliation, servitude or murder, he denies their status as human beings". The respect we demand for ourselves, by virtue of our humanity we extend to all others: this, says de Beauvoir, "is the metaphysical basis of the idea of justice". De Beauvoir contends that while no punishment, however severe, can undo the harm already inflicted by the perpetrator, an opposite and equal action also satisfies "a deep human need". Vengeance thus is an attempt to secure a balance destroyed by violence, and if it were to renounce vengeance, society would "give up on concretely linking the crime to the punishment". Although she insists that "social justice" cannot be achieved through violence alone, and suggests that "the verdict counts more than the execution; it is the will to kill the criminal that matters, more even than his death", she is nonetheless persuaded that "if a wrong weighs heavily enough, only one penalty is heavy enough to counterbalance it: death . . . death is the only penalty that can express the violence with which society refuses certain crimes" (de Beauvoir 2004: 247–9*, 254, 252; de Beauvoir 1948a: 113–16, 129, 124). Indeed, the main purpose of the essay is to defend her decision to *refuse* to sign the petition requesting clemency for Brasillach:

> when a man deliberately tries to degrade man by reducing him to a thing, nothing can compensate for the abomination he causes to erupt on earth. There resides the sole sin against man. When it is accomplished no indulgences are permitted and it belongs to man to punish it . . . for the life of a man to have a meaning, he must be held responsible for evil as well as for good, and, by definition, evil is that which one refuses in the name of the good, with no compromise possible. It is for these reasons that I did not sign the pardon petition for Robert Brasillach when I was asked to.
>
> (De Beauvoir 2004: 257; de Beauvoir 1948a: 135–6)

Although de Beauvoir's argument may appear more rational than the general retributivist argument characterized by Camus, it seems that it does not answer his chief objection, that the *lex talionis* (which is explicitly evoked by de Beauvoir) disguises the fact that in cases of capital punishment there is no equivalence between the original crime and the execution.[37]

There is for Camus a further problem with the retributivist argument, one not entirely unrelated to the conduct of the purge.[38] If vengeance is ever justifiable, he suggests, it could only be in cases where the avenger is innocent. The suggestion that capital punishment might succeed in restoring a putative harmony or balance

presupposes the innocence of the executioner. And, declares Camus, society is far from being completely innocent of the crimes committed by some of its members; every society, he goes so far as to say, "has the criminals it deserves".[39] Recognizing that certain acts of especial barbarity, such as infanticide, can hardly be explained solely on the basis of social deprivation, noting that "there is no question of reducing the culpability of certain monsters", he continues:

> But those monsters, in decent dwellings, would perhaps have had no occasion to go so far. The least that can be said is that they are not alone guilty, and it seems strange that the right to punish them should be granted to the very people who subsidise, not housing, but the growing of beet for the production of alcohol.[40]

A combination of state apathy, in relation to social housing, and state subsidy, in relation to alcohol production, is seen by Camus to be at least in part responsible for some serious crime.[41] "The State that sows alcohol", he says, "cannot be surprised to reap crime. Yet instead of showing surprise, it simply goes on cutting off heads into which it has poured so much alcohol. It metes out justice imperturbably and poses as a creditor: its good conscience does not suffer at all."[42] At the same time, however, it must be recognized that Camus is not making "a reductive correlation between social conditions and crime". His claim, as Donald Lazere (1996: 374) points out, "is that *any* society that fosters, and allows profiteering from, poverty and vice bears a minimal share of responsibility for the criminal consequences". Recognizing that there are certain criminals who are likely to remain dangerous in any social environment, he still insists that the death penalty does not "solve" the problem posed by these individuals, but merely serves to "suppress" it (*RRD*: 211*; *E*: 1047).

Camus is more immediately concerned with the use of the death penalty in those cases where the convicted individual is, or may be, "remediable", and more particularly still, where the convicted individual may be innocent. The possibility of what has become known as a "miscarriage of justice" seems to Camus to be the most compelling justification for the abolition of the death penalty, and he notes approvingly that the recognition of the possibility of error has caused both Belgium and England to consider the abolition of the death penalty, but notes that in France "consciences are apparently untroubled". He continues:

> If justice admits that it is fallible, would it not be better for justice to be modest and to allow its judgements sufficient latitude so that a mistake can be corrected? Could not justice concede to the criminal the same weakness in which society finds a sort of permanent extenuating circumstance for itself? Can the jury decently say: "If I kill you by mistake, you will forgive me when you consider the weakness of our common nature. But I am condemning you to death without considering those weaknesses or that nature"? There is a solidarity of all men in error and aberration. Must that solidarity operate for the tribunal and be denied the accused? (*RRD*: 213, 216–17*; *E*: 1049, 1051–2)

For Camus justice has no other meaning than the recognition of this solidarity. Furthermore, this solidarity cannot divorce itself from compassion, a compassion that, he notes, "does not exclude punishment, but . . . suspends the final condemnation".[43] According to Camus, society has no right to condemn individuals to death unless it can fulfil each of the following criteria. First, it must show that it has the metaphysical or religious authority to do so.[44] Secondly, it must show the accused, and the accused alone, to be guilty of the crimes committed. Thirdly, it must show that there is no possible doubt over the guilt of the accused. The satisfaction of these criteria is impossible, given the essentially limited nature of human knowledge, and accordingly, in no instance can the death penalty be justified.

Furthermore, capital punishment denies the criminal the opportunity to make amends, and Camus insists that no man should be denied the opportunity to add to the sum of his actions "a little of the good that will make up in part for the evil we have added to the world. Such a right to live, which allows a chance to make amends, is the natural right of every man, even the worst man." However, Camus further insists that he is far from advocating "that there is no responsibility in this world and that we must give way to that modern tendency to absolve everything, victim and murderer, in the same confusion". Instead he asserts that the criminal should be given every opportunity to reform himself. "We know enough to say that this or that hardened criminal deserves hard labour for life. But we don't know enough to decree that he be shorn of his future – in other words, of the chance we all have of making amends" (*RRD*: 221, 230–31; *E*: 1055, 1061–2).

Camus's view, he stresses, is not consequent on a particularly optimistic view of human nature, nor on an especially optimistic vision of the future: "On the contrary, its abolition seems to me necessary on the grounds of reasoned pessimism, of logic, and of realism." That reasoned pessimism, logic and realism are founded on the absurd, on Camus's recognition of the strict limitations of human understanding and of human fallibility. Echoing themes present in *The Plague* and the absurd works, Camus asserts: "Capital punishment upsets the only indisputable human solidarity – our solidarity against death – and it can be legitimised only by a truth or principle that is superior to man."[45] It is here, in relation to Camus's insistence on the limits imposed by experience, that "Reflections on the Guillotine" most closely reflects the ideas of the absurd and rebellion that inform his most important works. Camusian rebellion, as we have seen, is consequent on the recognition of the principle of the absurd and the experience of solidarity, as well as the awareness of "limits" that emerge from that identification. Essential to the concept of revolt, here and especially in relation to *The Rebel*, and central to the modest yet determined humanism that he relates to it, is the acceptance of "limits" and the recognition of fallibility. If we renounce any claim to absolute certainty, capital punishment becomes unjustifiable. This fallibility does not render all serious action impermissible (for instance, in the case of a convicted murderer, Camus suggests life imprisonment as an alternative to capital punishment), but the idea of limits is supposed to inculcate in us a suspicion of the tendency of individuals or states to proclaim for themselves absolute objectivity.

Camus's reassertion of his belief that the individual is the only possible source of value, combined with his general criticism of the death penalty, leads him to conclude that "our society must now defend herself not so much against the individual as against the State". Society, he claims, ought to revoke the state's authority to execute on its behalf. He asserts that "forbidding a man's execution would amount to proclaiming publicly that society and the State are not absolute values, and that nothing authorises them to legislate definitively or to bring about the irreparable".[46] The state has taken the right of a "natural and human society" to defend itself, and replaced it with "a dominant ideology that requires human sacrifices". Hence it falls to the people to "call a spectacular halt and proclaim, in our principals and institutions, that the individual is above the State". Concluding this essay in 1957, Camus declares, as he had in "Neither Victims nor Executioners" in 1946, his hope that the abolition of the death penalty might manifest itself in a future unified Europe, asserting that the "solemn abolition of the death penalty ought to the first article of the European Code we all hope for".[47]