

5 | CAMUS AND SARTRE

Sartre or nostalgia for the universal idyll¹

The “revolted soul”

By the time Camus and Sartre were formally introduced in 1943, they were already familiar with, and had publicly expressed measured admiration for, each other's works. In 1938 and 1939 Camus had quite favourably reviewed Sartre's *Nausea* and *The Wall* (*SEN*: 167–72; *E*: 1417–22). In 1943 Sartre wrote favourably of *The Outsider* (Sartre 1962a: 108–21; Sartre 1993: 92–112). They first met in Paris in June 1943, at the opening of Sartre's play *The Flies*, and shortly thereafter Sartre became involved with *Combat* (where Camus was now editor), although he did not write for it until after the Liberation. In an interview in 1944, Camus declared himself to “have three friends in the literary world, André Malraux, even if I no longer see him because of his political positions, René Char, who is like a brother to me, and Jean-Paul Sartre”.² In the same year Sartre asked Camus to direct and act in his play *No Exit*. In 1945 Camus offered Sartre the opportunity to travel to America to write a series of reports for *Combat*. While there he wrote of his friend in *Vogue* magazine:

In Camus's sombre, pure works one can already detect the main traits of the French literature of the future. It offers us the promise of a classical literature, without illusions, but full of confidence in the grandeur of humanity; hard but without useless violence; passionate, without restraint. . . . A literature that tries to portray the metaphysical condition of man while fully participating in the movements of society.

(Quoted in Cohen-Solal 1987: 233–4; Sartre 1981: 1917–21)

However, their apparent mutual respect and admiration was certainly not without considerable qualification. Camus's reviews of *Nausea* and *The Wall* criticize Sartre for "thinking that life is tragic because it is wretched". "Life can be magnificent and overwhelming", Camus writes, "that is the whole tragedy." Camus seems to have had serious reservations about the implications of Sartre's depiction of solipsistic, absurd freedom, noting that "the realisation that life is absurd cannot be an end in itself but only a beginning. It is a truth which nearly all great minds have taken as their starting point. It is not the discovery which is interesting but the consequences and rules for actions which can be drawn from it" (*SEN*: 168–9, 191; *E*: 1418–19, 1421). Reservations are also apparent in Sartre's review of *The Outsider*, which while complimenting Camus's talents as a novelist, expresses reservations about *The Myth of Sisyphus* (which he suggests reflected a limited understanding of existentialist philosophy).³ He also places Camus in the tradition of the French *moralistes*, a tradition for which it is unlikely Sartre himself felt much sympathy. In a letter written to Jean Grenier discussing Sartre's review, Camus agreed that "most of his criticisms are fair", but complained of the "acid tone". A few months later, in July 1943, shortly after meeting Sartre for the first time, Camus wrote, again to Grenier, "In spite of appearances I don't feel much in common with the work or the man. But seeing those who are against him, we must be with him" (Camus & Grenier 2003: 66, 75; Camus & Grenier 1981: 88, 99).

In fact, despite their undoubted, if limited, friendship, their political and philosophical differences were fundamental. These differences, which initially concerned their respective ontologies (illustrated by their differing accounts of the absurd), later focused on the distinctly different character of their political commitments. We have noted already that, for example, unlike Camus, Sartre did not sign the petition requesting clemency for Robert Brasillach in January 1945. Whereas Camus had decided that he could no longer add his voice to those calling for the execution of collaborators, Sartre and de Beauvoir were of the view that although "vengeance is useless", "there were certain men who could have no place in the world we were trying to build" (de Beauvoir 1968: 28). Although there was certainly a great deal that brought the two writers together, it is clear that neither Sartre nor Camus felt entirely comfortable with the image generated in the media of them as close intellectual allies (Camus seems to have been especially sensitive to being characterized as a Sartrean acolyte). Indeed, in at least five interviews and articles between 1944 and 1946, Camus publicly and explicitly distanced himself from existentialism and Sartre.⁴ In the same period, on at least two occasions, Sartre also insisted on the profound political and philosophical difference separating himself from Camus, declaring that their association in the popular imagination "rests on a serious confusion".⁵ Besides the straightforward point that Camus was "not an existentialist", we also see in these articles the genesis of arguments that were to prove central to their ultimate disagreement in the pages of *Les Temps modernes* in 1952. In December 1945, Sartre explained that Camus's true masters were not the existentialists, but rather the seventeenth-century French moralists; in the same month Camus explained that

he found the existentialists' conclusions false, most especially those existentialists, such as Sartre, whose philosophy concludes, Camus said, with a "divinisation of history, history considered as the sole absolute value" (Sartre 1981: 1912–17; Camus *E*: 1427–9).

We have seen that Camus's series of articles "Neither Victims nor Executioners" was indirectly criticized by Sartre in 1946 and 1947. However, the clearest indication of the significance of their political and philosophical differences had already come to pass by this time, with Sartre's founding of *Les Temps modernes* in 1945. Camus's refusal of the offer of a place on the editorial board has been explained by the fact that by this time he was editor-in-chief of *Combat* (see, for example, de Beauvoir 1968: 22; Burnier 1968: 20; Aronson 2004: 57). However, it is abundantly clear that Camus did not share the values that *Les Temps modernes* sought to promote, and in January 1946 he publicly stated his fundamental disagreement with the ideas expressed in Sartre's "manifesto" in the inaugural issue of the journal, calling it "unacceptable" [*inacceptable*].⁶

Differing opinions on legitimate political violence were at the heart of Sartre's disagreement with "Neither Victims nor Executioners", but what Camus objected to in Sartre's *Les Temps modernes* manifesto is perhaps less certain, although it was most probably the idea of "committed literature", which the manifesto sought to define and defend. About a year after the manifesto was published, Camus observed in his notebooks: "I prefer committed men to literatures of commitment . . . I should like to see them less committed in their works and a little more so in their daily lives" (*NB2*: 140–41; *C2*: 180). He would probably also have disagreed with the primacy given by Sartre's manifesto to class consciousness in the amelioration of social conditions. Having already asserted in 1944 that the "class struggle is a fact to which I subscribe completely", in this editorial Sartre defines the politics of *Les Temps modernes* in contrast with what he calls "the official doctrine of bourgeois democracies", which he characterizes primarily as a blindness to the fundamental reality of the class structure, in place of which a spurious unifying "human nature" is posited: "it persists in seeing no more than men, in proclaiming the identity of human nature in every diverse situation, but it is against the proletariat that it makes that decision" (Sartre 1974b: 159; Sartre 1988: 258). Although he does not in any way limit the significance of social and economic inequality, we have seen that in *The Rebel* and elsewhere Camus attempts to justify a form of solidarity that is not class-based, that is based on human nature (or at least on a human condition), and that is therefore in fundamental conflict with the primacy given to class by Sartre.

Given that Sartre had insisted upon both the legitimacy of revolutionary violence and the centrality of class conflict, it is hardly surprising that both he and the *Les Temps modernes* group generally would disagree with the arguments of *The Rebel*, or indeed that they would consider those ideas to be politically reactionary. Although after the disagreement over Merleau-Ponty's "Le Yogi et le Prolétaire" in 1946 they effected a certain rapprochement in 1947, there remained a discernible distance between Camus and Sartre. In 1948, Jean Daniel drew attention to their diverging views on morality and politics by publishing in consecutive issues of his

magazine *Caliban* Sartre's "To Be Hungry Already Means that You Want to Be Free" and Camus's starkly contrasting "Democracy Is an Exercise in Modesty".⁷ The extent of these differences can also be seen in their responses to Merleau-Ponty's *Humanism and Terror* (1947) (of which the 1946 essay was part), a book that could be said to have had an equal and opposite effect on Camus and Sartre. Whereas, as we have seen in Chapter 2, the essay was for Camus an expression of the worst kind of intellectual "fellow travelling", Sartre compliments it with giving "me the push I needed to release me from my immobility" (Sartre 1965: 253). The extent of the political and philosophical differences now separating Camus and Sartre was further highlighted by the publication of *The Plague* in mid-1947, a novel that seemed to confirm the suspicion of Sartre and de Beauvoir that Camus had "rejected history": "to treat the Occupation as the equivalent of a natural calamity was", according to de Beauvoir, "merely another means of escaping from History [*sic*] and the real problems" (de Beauvoir 1968: 138). It is hardly surprising given the radically different political positions adopted by Sartre and Camus by this time, as well as their complete awareness of these political differences, that when the time came, *Les Temps modernes* would review *The Rebel* negatively, and indeed Camus could not have been unaware of their likely reaction.⁸

The editorial board of *Les Temps modernes*, with Sartre at the head, met every two weeks, and at each meeting since its publication in October 1951 the need to review *The Rebel* was discussed. According to de Beauvoir, although nobody on the board liked the book, neither did anyone want to review it (the reason she gives for this, that Sartre "wouldn't let any one say anything bad about it because of their friendship", is somewhat contradicted by subsequent events).⁹ Finally, Sartre decided that Francis Jeanson should write it: "He will be the harshest", he said, "but at least he will be polite."¹⁰ Ultimately, however, Jeanson was far from polite. Indeed, by the time he first met Sartre in 1947, Jeanson had already developed a sophisticated and highly critical account of Camus's thought, so it seems plausible to suggest that Sartre chose him to write the review not because of a putative politeness, but because Jeanson had already developed a complex criticism of Camus, and, crucially, because, as became apparent when he addressed Camus directly, Sartre was in complete agreement with Jeanson's analysis. In an interview in 1945, Sartre had insisted that his conception of the absurd and Camus's were "completely different", that Camus's conception of the absurd involved a sense of "scandal and disappointment", and was born from "the themes of classical pessimism" (Sartre 1981: 1916). In an article published in 1947 Jeanson sought to identify the implications of Camus's conception of the absurd, and argued that his insistence on "maintaining the absurd" did not imply consenting to the facts of experience but, instead, meant abandoning philosophical thought altogether. To him, Camus "subscribed to a form of defeatism that led to 'absurdism' by converting the fact of absurdity into a value" (Aronson 2004: 138–9; see Jeanson 1947b, c). For Jeanson, then, the absurd as construed by Camus could only result in political quietism. This perspective on Camus's intellectual trajectory was confirmed for Jeanson by his reading of *The Rebel* itself – as is indicated in the title of his 21-page review – "Albert Camus – or the Revolted

Soul".¹¹ The review began with an ironic overview of the critical praise the book had received: "a turning point in Western thought", "one of the greatest books in recent years", "no comparable oeuvre has appeared in France since the war". Jeanson said that were he in Camus's position, receiving such lavish praise from the political right wing, he would be worried, and indeed he understood that Camus was worried (*SCHC*: 79–80*; Jeanson 1952a: 2070).

Fundamentally, Jeanson's argument is based on the claim that Camus had rejected or denied history, and that he represented "that Manichaeism which situates evil within history and good outside of it", which requires "that we choose against history whenever possible" (*SCHC*: 97; Jeanson 1952a: 2086). Having accomplished this supremely reactionary task, Jeanson surmises, Camus has adopted the position of the Hegelian "beautiful soul" (*belle âme*), who prefers to remain pure, uncontaminated by contact with reality, and who is "satisfied with the reiteration of an abstract Idea void of all dialectical energy".¹² He further criticizes Camus for what he judged to be his superficial reading of Hegel and Marx, and his readiness to reject revolution without being able to offer any feasible alternative.¹³ In so doing, Camus achieves "the 'objectively' reactionary task" of condemning the Marxist experiment, without having anything positive to offer in exchange. He asserts that "if Camus's revolt chooses to be deliberately static, it can only concern Camus himself", and suggests that although intellectual disquisitions are fine *hors contexte*, in history they can be used for reactionary purposes (he claims, for example, that in practice Camus's rebellion is directed solely against revolutions). Thus, he surmises: "In our view incorrigibly bourgeois, it is quite possible that the face of capitalism is less 'convulsed' than that of Stalinism. But what face does it offer to the miners, to the state workers sanctioned for striking, to the Madagascan tortured by the police, to the Vietnamese 'cleansed' by napalm, to the Tunisian *rattisé* by the Legion?" In a world weighed down with such social injustice, the choice facing the intellectual is either to side with the oppressed, which can only be done effectively by supporting the Communist Party, or to "deny" history in the name of a transcendent metaphysics. It is precisely that latter choice that Jeanson accuses Camus of having made. Although he admires Camus's voice – "so human and charged with such genuine torment" – Jeanson ultimately condemns the essay, "this pseudo-philosophy of a pseudo-history of 'revolutions'". *The Rebel*, he concludes, "is above all a failed great book: hence, precisely, the myth to which it has given birth. We beg Camus not to yield to fascination, and to rediscover in himself that personal voice – by which his work remains for us, despite everything, irreplaceable."¹⁴

Camus was greatly exercised by Jeanson's implication that he was at least indirectly condoning the murderous repression by capitalist regimes of oppressed peoples who would "undertake to struggle against those responsible for their hunger", and that in doing so, was serving to ease the consciences of the bourgeoisie while giving political ammunition to the Right. Yet it is important to point out that although there was certainly a degree of wounded vanity reflected in Camus's response, his primary objection to the review was Jeanson's failure to address the main question posed by the book: the question of whether or not Marxist historical deter-

minism perpetuated tyranny and legitimized police and state terrorism. And indeed Jeanson had failed to address this question (neither, as Aronson acknowledges, was it addressed by Sartre in his letter responding to Camus). Camus did not read the review simply as an expression of the views of Jeanson (whom his response effectively ignored, referring to him only as “your colleague”), but as the view of the entire *Les Temps modernes* board and, in particular, the view of Sartre. Accordingly, it was to Sartre (addressed formally as “Monsieur le Directeur”) that he sent his letter. The August 1952 issue published Camus’s response to Jeanson’s review (seventeen pages), along with further replies from Sartre (twenty pages) and Jeanson (thirty pages). Camus began: “I shall take as a pretext the article which, under an ironical title, your magazine has devoted to me to submit to your readers some remarks concerning the intellectual method and the attitude demonstrated by this article.”¹⁵ His letter, which argued that Jeanson’s article was more a symptom of the malaise that he had tried to describe in *The Rebel* than a valuable criticism of it, centres on three related points.

First, Camus insists that Jeanson’s article not only misrepresents the arguments of *The Rebel*, it in fact attributes to Camus a view that he had explicitly criticized at length in his book. He accuses Jeanson of reducing the entire book to a defence of the view that “all evil is found in history and all good outside of it” (*SCHC*: 97; Jeanson 1952a: 2086). Camus responds:

Here, I really must protest and tell you calmly that such tactics are disgraceful. . . . In fact, *The Rebel* seeks to demonstrate – nearly a hundred quotations could prove it, if necessary – that pure anti-historicism, at least in today’s world, is as harmful as pure historicism.¹⁶ It is written there, for those who wish to read, that he who believes only in history marches towards terror and that he who does not believe in it at all authorises terror . . . above all, it demonstrates that “the denial of history is equivalent to the denial of reality” in the same way, neither more nor less, that “one separates oneself from reality by wanting to consider history as a self-sufficient totality”. But what’s the use of texts! Your colleague pays no attention to them.¹⁷

Camus argues that far from his essay being a renunciation of history in the name of transcendent values, “anyone who has seriously read” it knows that for him “nihilism coincides with disincarnated and formal values”, that *The Rebel* criticized both “the formal and bourgeois revolution of 1789” and “the cynical revolution of the twentieth century”. In both cases, “nihilism and terror are justified, although by contrary excesses – either because values are placed above history or because they are absolutely identified with it”. By “systematically suppressing one of the aspects of this double critique”, says Camus, Jeanson “sanctifies his thesis but shamelessly sacrifices the truth”, the truth that *The Rebel* “does not deny history (a denial that would make no sense) but only criticises the attitude that aims to make history into an absolute”. Rather than ridiculing a false version of his thesis, “a judicious and honest critic would have dealt with my true thesis: namely, that whoever seeks

to serve history for its own sake ends in nihilism". However, Jeanson "replaces historicism with history, which, in effect, is enough to transform the book into its opposite and its author into an unrepentant idealist".¹⁸ Jeanson had similarly claimed that *The Plague* provides evidence of Camus's exit "from history" (*SCHC*: 82–3; Jeanson 1952a: 2072–3). Camus notes in his reply that the intellectual trajectory from *The Outsider* to *The Plague* is precisely the opposite of that which Jeanson claims; that is, *The Plague* marks a move from solitary revolt towards collective action: "After all, nobody, except in your journal, would have thought to dispute the fact that if there is an evolution from *The Outsider* to *The Plague*, it is towards solidarity and participation. To claim otherwise is either to lie or to dream" (*SCHC*: 112; Camus 1952: 321).¹⁹

Secondly, Camus argues that Jeanson's wilful misreading of *The Rebel* allowed him to ignore the central arguments of the book. He ignores, for example, the question of whether or not there is a dimension of Marxist philosophy that Camus calls "a Marxist prophecy", and whether or not such a prophecy, if it exists, is not "contradicted today by numerous facts". In particular, Jeanson is accused of ignoring "everything in my book that deals with the misfortunes and specifically political implications of authoritarian socialism". According to Camus, Jeanson's avoidance of what he considered to be the main arguments of his book reveals "a more profound antinomy" – an antinomy that, as we shall see, Camus had already hinted at in *The Rebel* itself. Camus interprets Jeanson's refusal to respond directly to the discussion of Marxist historicism in *The Rebel* as not only an implicit admission of faith in that doctrine, but also an admission that such a faith was incompatible with the prevailing existentialism of *Les Temps modernes*. This is an important point, and one that has been little noted in the scholarship. As I have noted above, Camus had observed in 1945 an emerging tendency towards what he called the "divinisation of history" in Sartre's philosophical and political thinking. He returns to this point again, arguing that had Jeanson directly confronted the arguments in his book, he would have been obliged to defend the Marxian idea that history had both a necessary meaning and an end. Furthermore, Camus observes that Jeanson would also have had to demonstrate why this view was not in contradiction with the existentialist principles that, in Camus's view, remain the basis of editorial policy at *Les Temps modernes* (Camus may have been in the wrong in assuming Sartrean existentialism as editorial policy, but certainly the criticism was relevant to Sartre himself):

Only the principles of prophetic Marxism (along with those of a philosophy of eternity) can justify the complete rejection of my thesis. But can one, without contradiction, clearly affirm them in your journal? Because, after all, if man does not have an end that can be chosen as a principle of value, how could history have a meaning that could be perceived right now? And if it has one, why would man not make it his end? And if he does so, how could he find himself with this terrible and incessant freedom of which you speak? These objections, which could be developed further, are, to my mind, considerable. No

doubt, they are no less so in the eyes of your critic, since he totally avoids the only discussion that would have interested *Les temps modernes*: that concerning the end of history. (SCHC: 123; Camus 1952: 329–30)

Camus argues in *The Rebel* that the sacrifices demanded by Marxist revolution “can only be justified in the context of a happy end to history”, and now writes that Jeanson’s “professed existentialism would be threatened in its very foundations if he accepted a foreseeable end to history”. In order to reconcile his existentialism with Marxism, at the very least Jeanson would need “to demonstrate this difficult proposition: history has no end but it has a meaning that, however, does not transcend it. Perhaps this perilous reconciliation is possible, and I would love to read it.” But, Camus concludes, as long as this contradiction between the fundamental freedom of the individual and the inexorable progression of history towards its end remains, the political and philosophical perspective of *Les Temps modernes* will remain contradictory, something that is both terribly cruel (because of the reality of those regimes founded on the ideology in question) and terribly trivial (because the contradiction is fundamental to *Les Temps modernes*’ political agenda).²⁰

Thirdly, Jeanson’s article completely ignores Camus’s lengthy discussions of revolutionary violence, and the possibility of legitimate political violence. The importance of this can hardly be overestimated when we consider that it is precisely Camus’s consideration of the legitimization of violence that leads him to critique historical materialism. Jeanson ignores his analysis of non-Marxist left-wing thought; and in particular, he makes no comment on Camus’s discussion of revolutionary syndicalism and anarchism (except to pour scorn upon it, writing “Ah! Revolutionary Syndicalism is so fine, when it has no need to be revolutionary [cf. the Scandinavian countries]”²¹). Camus responds:

The First International and the Bakuninist movement, still alive in the masses of the C.N.T. in both France and Spain, are ignored. The revolutionaries of 1905, whose experiences are at the centre of my book, are completely ignored. Revolutionary syndicalism is mocked, while my arguments in its favour, resting on its achievements and on the properly reactionary nature of caesarean socialism, are ignored. Your colleague writes as if he were ignorant of the fact that Marxism no more inaugurated the revolutionary tradition than *The German Ideology* inaugurated philosophy. Although, while exalting the tradition of non-Marxist revolution, [*The Rebel*] does not deny the importance of Marxism, your article, curiously, develops as if there were no other revolutionary tradition than that inherited from Marx.

(SCHC: 118–19*; Camus 1952: 326)

“Hostile to history”

Unsurprisingly, Sartre was infuriated by the assumption implicit in Camus’s letter that the views of Jeanson were also his own (as justifiably annoyed as Sartre was,

nothing in his letter suggests that he was not in complete accord with Jeanson's arguments).²² It is unsurprising, then, that the issue of *Les Temps modernes* that contained Camus's letter also contained replies from Sartre and Jeanson. Jeanson's was taken up mainly with defending his original criticisms, but Sartre, whose association with Camus in the popular mind was becoming a political liability, had a vastly more significant task. His letter, which began "Our friendship was never easy, but I shall miss it", accused Camus of having become "the victim of a bleak immoderation which masks your internal difficulties and which you call, I believe, Mediterranean *mesure*", adding, "Sooner or later someone would have told you; let it be me" (Sartre 1952: 334; *SCHC*: 131–2*; trans. Lottman 1979: 504). Like Jeanson, Sartre appears initially to reproach Camus for having turned his back on his former heroes:

Where is Meursault, Camus? Where is Sisyphus? Where are those Trotskyists of the heart today, who preached permanent revolution? Without doubt, murdered or in exile. A violent and ceremonial dictatorship has taken possession of you, supported by an abstract bureaucracy, and pretends to rule according to moral law.²³

He seems to assert here that what had interested him and others about Camus was the paradox of his absurdist philosophy combined with his political commitment, and that in *The Rebel* Camus has replaced this dynamic with a profoundly reactionary conservatism. Crucially, Sartre is arguing *at this point* in his letter that the position Camus outlines in *The Rebel* marks a distinct break from his thought in the past, the thought of the Camus they had so much admired.²⁴

You had been for us – and you could be again tomorrow – the admirable conjunction of a person, an action, and a work. This was in 1945. We discovered Camus, the Resistant, as we discovered Camus, the author of [*The Outsider*]. And when the editor of the clandestine *Combat* was joined with Meursault, who carried honesty to the point of refusing to say that he loved his mother and his mistress, and who our society condemned to death, when we knew, above all, that you had ceased neither to be the one nor the other, when this apparent contradiction made us progress in the knowledge of ourselves and of the world, then you were not far from being exemplary. . . . You were a real *person*, the most complex and the richest, the last and the most gifted heir of Chateaubriand and the scrupulous defender of the social cause.²⁵

However, examined in the light of the article as a whole, it becomes abundantly apparent that this is *not* Sartre's view. In fact, in his letter Sartre deploys a series of arguments designed precisely to demolish the perception of Camus as a political writer and to show not only that *The Rebel* is ahistorical and politically reactionary, but that precisely in its political irrelevance it is the culmination of Camus's entire *oeuvre*. We have noted already the centrality of history and historicism to both the

intellectual relationship between Camus and Sartre and the argument of *The Rebel*. We have seen too that in his letter responding to Jeanson's criticism, Camus asked Sartre to explain how *Les Temps modernes'* implicit faith in Marxist historical determinism did not contradict its founding existentialist principle of radical freedom. This particular point, made more elaborately some years later by Raymond Aron, is ignored by Sartre.²⁶ Instead, Sartre returns to Jeanson's earlier argument regarding Camus's own relation to history, and he attempts to show conclusively that Camus proves himself "completely hostile to history".²⁷ In other words, whereas Camus's letter questioned Sartre's relationship with Marxist historical materialism and the implications that might have for his existentialism, Sartre responded by questioning Camus's relationship to his own historicity.

He alleges that Camus, once a powerful voice on the Left, was fast becoming a tool of the bourgeoisie, no longer simply a member of that class, like Sartre or Jeanson, but a representative of their interests. His writing, exemplified in his letter to *Les Temps modernes*, had become, says Sartre, terroristic.²⁸ It was not possible to disagree with Camus: to do so was to be on the side of totalitarianism, was to deny the existence of concentration camps in the USSR. Like the bourgeois who, in spite of their horror, rejoiced in the discovery of the camps because it proved the communist experiment to be a failure, Camus too "exploits the Turkestani and the Kurd to more effectively demolish a critic who did not happen to praise [him]".²⁹ Sartre further insists that one must earn the right to critique the communists: "To merit the right to influence men who are struggling, one must first participate in their struggle, and this first means accepting many things if you hope to change a few of them. . . . But when a man can only see in present struggles the idiotic duel of two equally abject monsters, I hold that this man has already abandoned us. He has gone into a corner all by himself to sulk" (*SCHC*: 147*; Sartre 1952: 345). That is to say, with the critique of Soviet communism in *The Rebel*, and most especially with his determination to replace class conflict with human nature as the unifying principle behind political action, and his insistence that the obscurely defined concept of "rebellion" was as the heart of legitimate revolution, Camus had proclaimed a "false solidarity" between the classes and made himself completely irrelevant politically: "You decided against history; and rather than interpret its course, you preferred to see it only as one more absurdity . . . Your personality, which was real and vital as long as it was nourished by events, became a mirage. In 1944, it was the future. In 1952, it is the past."³⁰ We have already observed, in discussing his response to Jeanson, Camus's insistence that in *The Rebel* "the denial of history is equivalent to the denial of reality", and that Jeanson's article "replaces historicism with history, which, in effect, is enough to transform the book into its opposite and its author into an unrepentant idealist" (*SCHC*: 114–16*; Sartre 1952: 322–4). Irrespective of the legitimacy of this distinction, Sartre ignores it completely, something that may be explained by his evident desire not to be drawn into the subject that remained at the heart of the debate, that of political violence and its theoretical legitimacy. As Ronald Santoni points out, "the criticism that Camus levelled against Jeanson could just as aptly be applied to Sartre: specifically, that he had been reluctant to discuss

some of the crucial issues of *The Rebel* – for example, ‘a limit [regarding violence] revealed by the . . . movement of rebellion itself’” (Santoni 2003: 129).

However, Sartre’s letter is not only concerned with exposing the “hostility to history” he finds embodied in *The Rebel* and, in fact, he uses the immediate task of critiquing the essay, and Camus’s defence of it, to launch a scathing attack on Camus’s entire *oeuvre*. Although Sartre begins his review by asking the question “How could an author so central to French life after the war become so irrelevant so quickly?”, the conclusion he comes to questions the worth of Camus’s entire *oeuvre*. The remarkable conclusion at which Sartre arrives is not simply that *The Rebel* marks an abdication from the great act of affirmation of human value present in the early “absurd” works, but that the irrelevance of Camus was inevitable because of his persistence in seeing the causes of human misery in strictly metaphysical terms. Accordingly, what began as a critique of a book and its author’s precious defence against its detractors becomes a profound and scathing critique of a writer’s entire *oeuvre*. What Sartre sets out to prove is that, given Camus’s absurd premise, his work inevitably evolved towards a kind of critical entropy that culminated in the profoundly ahistorical and reactionary work that was *The Rebel*. In this context, it will become apparent that, despite his appeal to Camus’s reason – “You had been for us – you could again be tomorrow – the admirable conjunction of a person, an action, and a work” – Sartre was, at least by 1952, entirely convinced of Camus’s political irrelevance.³¹ For Sartre *The Rebel* was, precisely in its insignificance, the culmination of its author’s life work, and like Jeanson, he perceived the source of Camus’s political insignificance precisely in his conception of the absurd. Hence, although Sartre claims to have been immediately attracted by Camus’s remarkable courage in seeking only temporal truths (“you only wanted to be concerned with truths ‘which must rot’”), it transpired that this actually masked a far more significant fact, that Camus identified injustice as eternal, as transcendent of history. Sartre, therefore, characterizes Camus’s conception of the absurd in the following terms:

You rejected the fraud of the Soul and of the Idea. But since, in your own terms, injustice is *eternal* – that is since the absence of God is a constant throughout the changes of history – the immediate and continually re-affirmed relation of man who insists on *having* a meaning (that is to say, who demands that one be given him) to this God who maintains an eternal silence, is itself transcendent to History [*sic*]. The tension by which man realises himself . . . is thus a veritable conversion that wrenches him from his daily “agitation” and from “historicity” in order to make him finally coincide with his condition. One can go no further: there is no place for progress in this instantaneous tragedy. (SCHC: 148–9*; Sartre 1952: 346)

There are at least two problems with Sartre’s argument here. First, we should note that man’s insistence on meaning in no way implies, as Sartre has it, that “[man] demands that he be given one”. Instead it suggests that man has the capacity

to create meaning. This is suggested by the very lines from *Letters to a German Friend* quoted by Sartre in the same paragraph: “man must exalt justice in order to fight against eternal injustice, create happiness in order to fight against eternal injustice” (*RRD*: 28; *E*: 240; quoted in *SCHC*: 148; Sartre 1952: 346). The verbs here denote action or creation on the part of the individual. Further, we should note that this act of creating meaning is necessarily done *in history*. Secondly, Sartre claims to identify in Camus’s idea of metaphysical injustice the assertion that all forms of injustice have metaphysical origins. There is no doubt that Camus continues to see, in the context of the absurd, the human condition characterized by an absence of justice (as opposed to the presence of injustice), and there is no doubt that he also sees rebellion as emerging out of this context. We have seen in Chapter 1 that this may appear vulnerable to the “pointless lament” argument advanced by A. J. Ayer. However, Camus also clearly understands rebellion in a political context, as *The Rebel* makes clear. Whatever eternal “metaphysical injustice” Camus may have identified, it does not itself diminish the political critique he was also engaged upon. Crucially, at no point does Camus assume that the immediate cause of political injustice is anything other than political. Although he identifies a correlation between metaphysical revolt, which is exemplified by both Sisyphus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* and Prometheus in *The Rebel*, and political revolt, which is exemplified by the Socialist Revolutionaries, and although both acts of rebellion are based on a sense of limit, it is in no way clear, as Sartre assumes, that these equivalences themselves make one form of rebellion (i.e. political) dependent upon the other (i.e. metaphysical). In any event, Sartre now claims that, despite appearances, Camus’s philosophy is profoundly conservative, and firmly situated

within our great classical tradition which, since Descartes, and with the exception of Pascal, has been completely hostile to history . . . you didn’t reject History through having suffered from it and because you discovered its face with horror. You rejected it, previous to all experience, because our culture rejects it, and because you located human values in the struggle of man “against heaven”.
(*SCHC*: 149–50*; Sartre 1952: 347)

Sartre’s interpretation of Camus’s intellectual trajectory makes Camus’s involvement with *Combat* difficult to understand, or at least leads one to suspect that his motivation for being involved was different from that of most other *résistants*. Absorbed by the perpetual bitter fight of man against the injustice of his fate, what could interest Camus in the struggle against the Nazis? Sartre does acknowledge the extent of Camus’s involvement in the Resistance but argues that Camus fought against the Nazis only because he was able to imagine them as having taken sides with that universal injustice, as, “accomplices of the blind forces of the universe, they sought to destroy man” (*SCHC*: 151; Sartre 1952: 348). Hence, for Sartre, Camus identified the struggle against the Nazis in strictly ahistorical terms, and only then did the fight become worthwhile. Not only is this premised on a faulty conception of the absurd; it ignores Camus’s explicit commitment to history in both the early and

late works: in *The Myth of Sisyphus*, for example, he declared, “Conscious that I cannot stand aloof from my time, I have decided to be an integral part of it. . . . Between history and the eternal I have chosen history because I like certainties”, and in *The Rebel* he insists that the rebel “cannot turn away from the world and from history without denying the very principle of his rebellion” (*MS*: 80–81; *E*: 165; *R*: 287; *E*: 690). Similarly, he noted at the outbreak of war in 1939 that “the dilettante’s dream of being free to hover above his time is the most ridiculous form of liberty” (*NBI*: 143; *CI*: 172). Nevertheless, Sartre purports to find evidence in *Letters to a German Friend* to support his view of Camus’s “hostility” to history, so we should look carefully at the details of his argument: “You accused the Germans of taking you away from your struggle against heaven, of forcing you to take part in the temporal combats of men. ‘For so many years now, you have tried to *make me enter into History*’, and further on, ‘you did what you had to do, *we entered History*’” (*SCHC*: 150*; Sartre 1952: 348).

These quotations, thinks Sartre, constitute clear evidence of Camus’s “hostility to history”, and they constitute the only direct evidence Sartre provides as evidence of Camus’s “refusal” of history.³² In fact in his letter (a letter in which he berates Camus for a “mania for not going to the source”) Sartre quotes from *Nuptials* (1939), *Letters to a German Friend* (1945) and the “Neither Victims nor Executioners” articles (1946), but not once from either Camus’s letter to *Les Temps modernes* or, crucially, from *The Rebel* itself.³³ Moreover, closer inspection leads us to question the accuracy of Sartre’s interpretation of his second quotation from Camus (“you did what you had to do, *we entered History*”), because of the use of the first person plural. Whatever Camus was describing, by attributing it to people other than himself (as indicated by the “we”), he is clearly not referring to the solipsistic exile that Sartre claims Camus enjoyed. Further, it is clear that Camus was talking about a specific act precipitated by a specific cause, rather than presence or absence of a general “commitment” to history. What becomes evident from a careful reading of this specific passage is that Camus is talking about his own involvement with the Resistance, with the violent struggle against Nazi domination, rather than a generalized affirmation of the importance of political action. Camus believed in justice, but refused the affirmation of justice at the expense of happiness. Yet his experience of Nazi occupation caused him to conclude that there were instances when immediate happiness could be sacrificed in the cause of justice:

We thought that happiness was the greatest of conquests, a victory over the fate imposed upon us. Even in defeat this longing did not leave us. But you did what you had to do, and we entered History. And for five years it was no longer possible to enjoy the call of the birds in the cool of the evening. . . . For five years the earth has not seen a single morning without death agonies, a single evening without prisons, a single noon without slaughters. Yes, we had to follow you. *But our difficult achievement consisted in following you into war without forgetting happiness.*³⁴

Moreover, and crucially, the first quotation provided (twice) by Sartre (“For so many years now, you have tried *to make me enter History*”) is in fact a fabrication. Camus actually wrote the following (I include the previous two sentences, as the context shows Camus to have meant something almost exactly the opposite of what Sartre alleges): “For a long time we both thought that this world had no ultimate meaning and that consequently we were cheated. I still think so in a way. But I came to different conclusions to the ones you used to talk about, which for so many years now, you have been trying to introduce into history.”³⁵ Although it is peculiar, to say the least, that Sartre’s letter makes no direct reference to the text that was supposed to have been at the heart of the dispute, *The Rebel*, it seems difficult to exaggerate the significance of this misquotation.

Sartre continues with the claim that after Camus had “served [his] five years with History, [he] thought [he] could return (and all men with [him]) to the despair from which man must derive his happiness”. Camus was prepared to struggle against the Nazis because he identified in them an accord with the metaphysical forces that thwart the human pursuit of happiness. Unless he was capable of making this association between metaphysical cause and political effect, Sartre seems to allege, social injustices were ignored: “You revolted against death, but in the iron belts that surrounded cities, other men revolted against social conditions which raised the toll of mortality. When a child died, you blamed the absurdity of the world and this deaf and blind God which you had created in order to spit in his face. But the child’s father, if he were an unemployed worker or an unskilled labourer, blamed men.”³⁶

Having ignored Camus’s question regarding the implications of Marxist historicism, and having established to his own satisfaction Camus’s abdication from historical responsibility, Sartre can accuse Camus of never having dreamt, in Marx’s phrase, of “making history”: “The proof”, he says, alluding perhaps to the modest proposal of “Neither Victims nor Executioners”, is that “after the war, you envisaged only the return of the *status quo*”.³⁷ As I hope the previous chapters have indicated, this is, to say the least, a peculiar assessment of Camus’s political trajectory. Indeed, there is contrary evidence in the very texts cited by Sartre. In *Letters to a German Friend* Camus declares: “I belong to a nation which for the past four years has begun to relive the course of her entire history and which is calmly and surely preparing out of the ruins to remake another history”, and in “Neither Victims nor Executioners” he explicitly rejects the idea of maintaining the status quo, calling it “a completely utopian position insofar as it assumes that history is immobile” and “the impossible dream of bringing history to an abrupt halt” (*RRD*: 10; *CC*: 266; *E*: 225, 341–2). Therefore the allegation that Camus welcomed the return to the status quo after the war seems utterly disingenuous. Even a cursory look at Camus’s *Combat* writings shows this to be the case (indeed even a look at the newspaper’s masthead, bearing the slogan “From Resistance to Revolution”, would be adequate).

It is groundless, then, for Sartre to claim that “even when, for us, you still incarnated the man of the immediate past, perhaps even the man of the near future, you had already become, for ten million Frenchmen, one of the privileged. They didn’t

recognise their only too real anger in your ideal revolt. This death, this life, this earth, this rebellion, this God, this no and yes, this love, were, they said to you, the games of a prince. Others went as far as to call them circus acts.” Despite the fact that “for a few years, you were what could be called the symbol and the proof of class solidarity”, Sartre now accuses Camus of locating the cause of human misery outside history, or human control (*SCHC*: 153, 152; Sartre 1952: 350, 349). To Sartre’s mind Camus had effectively ignored the class struggle. He accuses the author of “indulging and displaying his moral sensibilities while leaving the world to its own resources” (Judt 1998: 95). Far from being working class, Camus was, like Jeanson and Sartre himself, bourgeois. But Camus, unlike either Sartre or Jeanson, now represented the interests of the bourgeoisie. Sartre continues:

Today, it is different. It is no longer a matter of *defending* the *status quo*, but of changing it. This is what you will not accept, unless accompanied by the most formal guarantees. And I suppose that if I believed that history is a pool of filth and blood, I would act just like you and look twice before diving in. But suppose that I am in it already, suppose that, from my point of view, even your sulking is proof of your historicity. (*SCHC*: 156*; Sartre 1952: 352)

“Freedom without brakes”

So far, the main purpose of Sartre’s letter has been to highlight what he considers to be Camus’s hostility to history, hostility more or less latent in his earlier writings and given full expression in *The Rebel*. However, there is a separate point: Camus’s letter is clearly addressed to Sartre directly, and this leads him to comment on what he considers to be Camus’s misinterpretation of his writings, saying “I have at least this in common with Hegel: you have not read either of us.” Specifically, according to Sartre, Camus has radically misunderstood his conception of absolute freedom, as articulated in *Being and Nothingness* (1943), misinterpreting it as an assertion of absolute political freedom, rather than absolute ontological freedom. He supports this view by purporting to quote Camus attributing to him (Sartre) the idea of “freedom without brakes”, an accusation that originates, says Sartre, not in his own writings, but in those of the Jesuit critic Roger Troisfontaines. Sartre goes on to say that when it is understood as an ontological concept, “you cannot put a brake on freedom”, and that with his talk of “freedom without brakes” Camus has confused “politics and philosophy” (*SCHC*: 145–6; Sartre 1952: 343–4). The implication of this alleged confusion is significant, for it permits Camus to attribute to Sartre a view of freedom that licenses the nightmare of contemporary totalitarianism. Ronald Santoni endorses this reading of Camus, pointing to his claim in *The Rebel* that absolute freedom “is the freedom to kill”. According to Santoni, Camus misunderstood Sartre’s concept of freedom, and confused “ontological freedom and practical/political freedom” (Santoni 2003: 129–30). However, this argument does not stand up to a great deal of scrutiny. First, we note that, as Sprintzen points out,

the phrase “freedom without brakes” [*liberté sans frein*] appears neither in Camus’s letter nor in *The Rebel* itself. Furthermore, the view Camus actually attributes to Sartre in his letter, “this terrible and incessant freedom of which you speak”, is to be found in *Being and Nothingness*: “this terrible necessity of being free”.³⁸ Secondly, it is clear from a careful study of the material in question that Camus did not confuse ontological freedom with political freedom; instead (as I have argued above) he questioned whether a philosophy of teleological socialism could be reconciled with absolute ontological freedom. He claims that such a “perilous reconciliation” is necessary to the coherence of the philosophical and political agenda of *Les Temps modernes*, and he considers Jeanson’s failure to address this question directly as an endorsement of his suspicion that such a reconciliation is impossible.³⁹ Curiously, although Ronald Santoni fails to recognize the argument as it appears in Camus’s letter, he later makes the same argument himself, suggesting that interpreted through the optic of *Being and Nothingness* certain of Sartre’s later writings would seem to be in bad faith because they impose “an unsurpassable limit on the unlimited freedom of every individual in the group . . . freedom has now placed chains on itself”. Later, referring to the discussion of “necessary” violence in Sartre’s “Rome Lecture” (which I discuss below), Santoni asks, “what is the sense of the word ‘necessary’ in this context? It is surely not a ‘necessary’ that precludes freedom to do otherwise in this situation. That would violate Sartre’s ontology”, and concludes with an observation that echoes Camus’s complaint: “it is the inexactness of his words as well as the duplicity in his position that moves the reader to seek more moral definition or closure with regard to his revolutionary ‘contradiction’ (his word)” (Santoni 2003: 48, 160).

The strength of Camus’s argument seems to be further endorsed by Sartre’s more conspicuous failure to address it directly in his open letter, and it could be said that it is precisely this question, that of the compatibility of his existentialism with his Marxism, that Sartre eventually addresses in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960). Strikingly, when Sartre goes on to discuss political freedom directly in his response to Camus, he asserts that “The limit of a right (i.e. a freedom) is another right (that is to say, still another freedom) and not some human nature” (*SCHC*: 146; Sartre 1952: 344). Santoni is probably correct to interpret this reference to “human nature” as a “swipe” at Camus, although on the surface there seems to be nothing in Sartre’s assertion with which Camus would disagree, except to note that the recognition of another’s freedom might itself presuppose a common human nature (Santoni 2003: 130). It is perhaps worth noting that in his 1946 essay “Materialism and Revolution”, Sartre expressed a view strikingly similar to Camus in this regard (“The declaration that ‘We too are men’ is at the bottom of any revolution” (Sartre 1955a: 217)), but it is clear that by 1952 for Sartre the dilemma created by the fact of incompatible freedoms is not resolved by resort to talk of human nature, but only through conflict: freedom today, he says in his letter to Camus, “is nothing but *the free choice to fight in order to become free*” (*SCHC*: 146; Sartre 1952: 345, original italics). The implicit denial of this reality, the reality of oppression, in *The Rebel*, says Sartre, is proof of Camus’s irrelevance. Here we find ourselves back on familiar

territory: Camus is seen as “hostile to history”, has “gone into a corner all by himself to sulk”, belongs in “the Galapagos islands” and so on (*SCHC*: 149, 147, 144; Sartre 1952: 347, 345, 343). But Camus’s question, regarding the putative incompatibility of Sartre’s existentialism with his Marxism, remained unanswered.

Until now Sartre has interpreted Camus’s critique of historicism as a rejection of his own historicity, his own historical “situatedness”, the implication of which was his locating the source of all social or political injustice outside history, beyond human agency. However, in the letter’s penultimate paragraph he appears to acknowledge that what Camus was really questioning was the assertion that history had a necessary end or objective. Sartre responds to this argument by claiming that “Marx never said that History would have an end. How could he? One might as well say that one day man would be without goals. He spoke only of an end to prehistory, that is, of a goal that would be reached within History itself and then surpassed like all goals” (*SCHC*: 157; Sartre 1952: 353). Of course, from the point of view of a critique of historicism, whether it was the end of prehistory or history that Marx had predicted was irrelevant, for the principle of historical determinism would still apply, and it was against precisely this principle that *The Rebel* was substantially addressed. Indeed, Camus explicitly addresses this Marxist distinction between history and prehistory in the essay – “Capitalism is the last of these stages of production [the Marxist ‘objective stages of historical development’] because it produces the conditions in which every antagonism will be resolved and where there will be no more economy. On that day our history will become prehistory” – and finds it spurious, noting that “we come no nearer to solving the problem by declaring that it is not a question of the end of history, but of a leap into the midst of a different history. We can only imagine this other history in terms of our own history; for man they are both one and the same thing. Moreover, this other history poses the same dilemma. Either it is not the solution of all contradictions and we suffer, die, and kill for almost nothing, or it is the solution of contradictions and therefore, to all intents and purposes, terminates our history” (*R*: 197, 223; *E*: 602, 627).

Concluding his letter, Sartre rephrases the essence of his response thus: “Does History have a meaning, you ask? Has it an end? For me this question has no meaning. Because History, apart from the men who make it, is only an abstract and static concept, of which it can neither be said that it has an end, nor that it doesn’t have one. And the problem is not to *know* its end, but to give one to it” (*SCHC*: 157; Sartre 1952: 352). This is interesting for two reasons. First, one could suggest on the basis of it that whereas Camus sought to give history a meaning (“I continue to believe that this world has no ultimate meaning. But I know something in it has meaning, and that is man, because he is the only creature to insist on having one” (*RRD*: 28; *E*: 241)), Sartre seems to have sought to give history an objective or end (“the problem is not to *know* its end, but to *give* it one” (*SCHC*: 157; Sartre 1952: 352)). It is precisely this that Camus finds objectionable in Marx – whether one seeks to create history’s end by giving history an end one desires, or one claims to have determined the nature of that end in advance of its coming into being. Camus asserts that when we live towards ends, the bodies pile up (of course, giving human existence “meaning”

is not at all the same as “giving history an end”). In the course of another, not entirely unrelated, polemical exchange in 1955, Camus asserted:

When I criticize twentieth century Communism for judging everything in terms of the future, it is because that future is represented as definitive, and that that happy end of history then authorizes all excesses. The future in history, when one calculates it, is simply the gathering of different possibilities, and in order to decide upon an attitude toward history it is necessary to consider each of these options. The future of history, then, can justify no dogmatism, but demands that a risk be taken. It is utterly unreal to consider history as so determined in advance as to not bother trying to give it, through risk and commitment, a meaning by which we can live. (E: 1755)

Raymond Aron similarly notes that Sartre’s point here “lacks something of the rules of honest discussion. There is no doubt that we give an objective to History by our actions. But how are we to choose that objective, without recourse to universal values or a unified understanding?”⁴⁰

The second reason why the conclusion to Sartre’s letter is interesting is because it is based upon an entirely spurious premise. Camus nowhere asks whether “history [or, for that matter, ‘History’] has a meaning”. What he does ask, in his reply to Jeanson, is whether history has “a *necessary* meaning and an end”. Camus clearly believes that although no such necessary meaning can be known to exist, a limited meaning can be *created* by man.⁴¹ There is perhaps not a great deal that is philosophically complex about Camus’s argument here, but there is something distinctly unsubtle about Sartre’s wilful misreading of it. Although Sartre criticizes Camus for being “no longer anything but an abstraction of a rebel”, it is precisely such abstraction (including Sartre’s) that Camus is writing against in *The Rebel* (SCHC: 158; Sartre 1952: 353). In fact, Camus’s is precisely a revolt *not* based upon abstraction.

Since there are few moments in Sartre’s letter when he is not, in one way or another, underlining for his readers the extent of his political and philosophical differences with Camus, it is ironic that when he turns to explain his ideas in contrast to Camus’s alleged “rejection of history”, he actually articulates a view that in certain respects is remarkably similar to that of Camus:

Whether or not there are values transcendent to history will not be discussed. It will simply be noted that, if there are any, they are manifested through human actions which are, by definition, historical. And this contradiction is essential to man. He makes himself historical in order to pursue the eternal, and discovers universal values in the concrete action that he undertakes in view of a specific result. If you say that this world is unjust, you have already lost the game. You are already outside, busily comparing a world without justice to a Justice without content. But you will discover Justice in each effort that you make to organise your efforts; in each effort to reapportion the burdens among your comrades; in each effort to subject yourself to discipline

or to apply it. . . . It is not a question of knowing whether History has a meaning and whether we should deign to participate in it, but to try, from the moment we are up to our noses in it, to *give* to it the meaning that seems best to us, by not refusing our support, however weak it may be, to any concrete action that may require it. (SCHC: 157–8; Sartre 1952: 352–3)

Although there does seem to be a great deal here with which Camus would concur, there are at least two crucial points with which I think he would disagree: first, Camus's modesty would prevent him from claiming to "pursue the eternal" in any context; secondly, as we have seen, Camus was not of the view that the world was unjust, but instead claimed in *The Rebel* that life must be lived with an effort to create justice where it is found to be absent. On the other hand, in general terms, it seems that Sartre's claim that we ought to try to give history a meaning seems close to Camus's own thinking.

Camus and Sartre on violence

Notwithstanding this disconcerting affinity, it remains clear, as I have tried to show throughout this chapter, that there were marked differences in the political evolution of Camus and Sartre. Chief among these differences, as the exchange of letters in *Les Temps modernes* shows, was their conflicting attitudes to political violence and its theoretical legitimization. I have discussed Camus's ideas on violence in detail elsewhere, and although it is beyond the scope of this book to give a detailed account of the trajectory of Sartre's thought on violence, it is perhaps worth attempting a summary here, if only in order to illustrate the depth of the philosophical differences that existed between him and Camus. Ronald Santoni (2003) has provided an exhaustive study of Sartre's ideas on violence, analysing them from their initial ontological context in *Being and Nothingness* (1943) to their latest, and most surprising, formulation in the controversial *Hope Now* interviews, which took place shortly before Sartre's death in 1980. Although he suggests a number of curious similarities between Camus's writings on violence and Sartre's (notably in Sartre's posthumously published *Notebooks for an Ethics*, written in 1947–8), for present purposes it is reasonable to focus on those works where his ideas on violence achieve their fullest expression: in the two volumes of the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* (1960, 1985; trans. 1991; hereafter *CDRI* and *CDRII*) and the unpublished "Rome Lecture" (1964), which Sartre scholars have interpreted as an "ethical sequel" to *CDR*.⁴²

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre identified conflict as "the essence of the relations between consciousnesses". It defines the nature of the relation between the self and the other: "it is necessary above all that I be the one who is not the Other, and it is in this very negation . . . that I make myself be and that the Other arises as the Other" (Sartre 1956: 429, 283). However, the *Critique of Dialectical Reason* marks the philosophical culmination of Sartre's post-war focus on the socio-historical context

of human existence, so rather than a phenomenological account of the origins of conflict, Sartre here emphasizes “how the economic, political, and social structures that humans create ‘make’ human beings” (Anderson 1993: 88). In this context, Sartre now interprets violence “in terms of purposive human activity aroused by conditions of material scarcity”, noting, furthermore, that “scarcity makes the passive totality of individuals within a collectivity into an impossibility of co-existence”.⁴³ This impossibility serves as the background to *CDR*’s description of the dialectical movement of social organization from individual praxis (the individual working on nature to satisfy his or her needs) to the common or group praxis (the group working on nature to satisfy their common needs), what Sartre calls the “group-in-fusion”. Through this dialectic what Sartre calls “seriality” is “dissolved and human freedom is resurrected” (Santoni 2003: 42). Raymond Aron has observed that although the constitution of the “group-in-fusion” may represent what he calls a “perfect moment”, “perfect moments do not last” (Aron 1975: 59, quoted in Santoni 2003: 43). Sartre himself acknowledges that “alienation exists as a constant danger within the practical group. . . . The most lively and united group is always in danger of relapsing into the series from which it came”. To combat this danger, Sartre proposes as a “practical device” what he calls the oath or pledge, which he believes will “bind the group in unity and permanence”. It is through this pledge that “the potential for violence and its justification – presumably within the framework of a new humanity – emerges in full force”.⁴⁴ Indeed Sartre declares the oath to be “a statute of violence”, a statute that “finds its origin in fear and its strength and élan through violence and the threat of *Terror*. The pledge purports to guarantee the freedom of everyone against necessity . . . even at the cost of one’s life. ‘To swear is to say, as a common individual, I demand that you kill me if I secede [or betray the group]. And this demand has no other goal but to establish *Terror* in me against the fear of the enemy’.”⁴⁵ *Terror* becomes what Sartre calls the “fundamental statute” of the “pledged group”, “the reciprocal ‘right’ of everyone in the group over the life and death of every other member” (*CDRI*: 430, 433; Santoni 2003: 44). Furthermore, in Sartre’s analysis, far from destroying, *terror* unites, indeed it constitutes the “primary unity” of the pledged group. Through the combination of the “creative act of the pledge” and the statute of *terror*, what Sartre calls “fraternity-*terror*” is born (*CDRI*: 437).

Based on the synopsis so far, one might be inclined to agree with Raymond Aron’s assessment of *CDR*, and view it simply as articulating “a philosophy of violence” (Aron 1975: 160, 214, quoted in Santoni 2003: 45). And the ethical anxieties that might be aroused in the reader by Sartre’s talk of “fraternity-*terror*” are nowhere addressed in *CDR* itself, indeed are not addressed directly and substantively until the 1964 “Rome Lecture”. In *CDR* violence is interpreted more or less unambiguously as the recuperation (or creation) of a right, and as counterviolence (violence against the violation of freedom), and therefore presents itself as justified, even as “cleansing” and regenerative (*CDRI*: 720; Santoni 2003: 46). Perhaps the clearest expression of this legitimate revolutionary violence, for Sartre, was to be found in anti-colonial violence. The violence of the Algerian insurrection, for example, in the

midst of which *CDR* was published, was according to Sartre “simply an adoption of the despair in which the colonialist maintained the natives; its violence was simply a negation of the impossible [i.e. the impossible condition of the colonized subject] . . . The violence of the rebel *was* the violence of the colonialist; there was never any other.”⁴⁶

The second volume of *CDR*, drafted in 1958, left unfinished and published posthumously in 1985, should be read as an effort to apply the discoveries of the first volume to the question of “History”. Specifically, Sartre says in the first volume, “it will attempt to establish that there is one human history, with *one* truth and *one* intelligibility” (*CDRI*: 69). Sartre’s method of positing a single history is to interpret history as a “totalization”. According to this interpretation, although actions and events follow one another sequentially, “the relations between them are not like those of links in a chain”.

The dialectical claim [i.e. Sartre’s claim in *CDR*] is that while action A is followed by action B and then B by C, the relations between them are such that action B *contains* action A, and action C contains both A and B. In Sartre’s terminology, action B *totalises* action A, and action C totalises action B. Again, using Sartre’s terminology, the relations between actions A, B and C from a dialectical point of view are relations of interiority, and this, according to Sartre, is the point of view required to understand the historical process.

(Dobson 1993: 64–5)

Further, since “the totalising nature of individual actions makes for dialectical intelligibility”, “the bonds of interiority which make dialectical reason the right reason to ‘read’ history ensure that nothing is left ‘outside’ the ‘totalisation without a totaliser’, which is History”.⁴⁷ Consequently, *CDRII* can be read as “an attempt to substitute unity for plurality at the level of history, not – as in volume one – through the formal demonstration of the dialectical intelligibility of ‘practical structures’ (groups, organisations and institutions), but by revealing the dialectical intelligibility of *struggles*”. In order to do this Sartre seeks to show “the totalising movement” present “at the heart of even the most apparently disunited society – one riven by class struggle, for example: ‘if the class struggle is to be intelligible to the historian’s dialectical reason, one must be able to totalise classes in struggle – and this comes down to discovering the synthetic unity of a society riven through and through’” (Dobson 1993: 98, quoting *CDRII*: 15–16). Although he continues to see the “deep source” of conflict as “scarcity”, Sartre now suggests that each particular case of disunity or conflict actually constitutes “an incarnation and singularisation of class struggle as it unfolds in contemporary forms of capitalism. *All* violence is ‘gathered in, clarified and made explicit’ in the single conflict or act of violence. . . . In this way, Sartre believes, violence and conflict – and, of course, History, the main focus of *Critique II* – can be rendered dialectically intelligible” (*CDRII*: 23; Santoni 2003: 64, quoting *CDRII*: 50).

This lengthy digression should serve as a sketch of the philosophical context in which the ideas regarding violence and its justification expressed in the “Rome Lecture” can be understood. According to Santoni, on whose summary of the unpublished lecture I largely rely, the “justificatory question” at the heart of the lecture can be put thus: “If there is but one way to humanity and it involves *means* incompatible with a human world, isn’t action with humanity as its *end* impossible?” Sartre’s response to this question, says Santoni, “is in the negative: humanity as end can continually look back at, scrutinise, alter, and moderate the means. Even terror – in which ‘subhumans become the means of humanity’ – introduces sanctions to accompany its orders.” In order to better understand Sartre here it is important to take into account what he has to say about the relationship between means and ends. Contrary to the accepted view, but perhaps unsurprisingly given the philosophy of history he has developed in *CDR II*, Sartre does not think that the means can be considered separately from the ends in a given scenario. Accordingly, the so-called “scale metaphor”, whereby means and ends are weighed against one another in determining the moral justness of a given action, is rejected by Sartre in favour of a conception of ends and means in which both are considered as constitutive parts of human action, where “the end synthesises or totalises the means [and where] the end does not come after the means”, but “pervades their use, keeps them together as means and even guides them”. Accordingly, “justificatory questions”, of the type “If there is but one way to humanity and it involves *means* incompatible with a human world, isn’t action with humanity as its *end* impossible?”, which separate ends from means when determining moral legitimacy, “appear to be misdirected and/or to betray a radical misunderstanding of the structure of human action and the means–end ‘unity’ on which Sartre here insists” (Santoni 2003: 145–7).

All this forces a radical reinterpretation of the possibility of legitimate political violence because revolutionary means, forming a “synthetic unity” with revolutionary ends, can no longer be weighed independently of those ends. Looked at in this way, it becomes obvious that for Sartre “revolutionary praxis requires no external justification”. Given the baldness of this assertion, Santoni wonders “whether the end of revolutionary praxis would preclude any means as part of its synthetic unity”, or whether “all means [are] dialectically synthesisable with the ‘end’ of revolutionary praxis”. Sartre provides a “quick answer” to this question, by asserting that “all means are good except those that denature the end” (Santoni 2003: 147).

Santoni finds an illustration of the meaning of this denaturing of ends in Sartre’s early essay *What Is Literature?*, in which, he says, “Sartre had expressed serious reservations about systematically lying to a party’s militants for the sake of abolishing oppression. . . . The lie itself, [Sartre] contended, is a form of oppression, and lying would, unfortunately, contribute to the creation of a *‘lied-to and lying mankind’*” (Santoni 2003: 148). However, in the passage in question, Sartre does not in fact assert that lying is impermissible *because* it creates “a *lied-to and lying mankind*”, but only *if* it creates “a *lied-to and lying mankind*”. Although he claims that “the politics of the Communist Party, which consist of lying to its own troops,

of calumniating, of hiding its defeats and its faults, compromises the goal which it pursues”, he also notes that “on the other hand, it is easy to reply that in war – and every revolutionary party is at war – one cannot tell soldiers the whole truth”.⁴⁸ In other words, Sartre here does not object to lying because it might denature the revolutionary end, but he will object to lying if it denatures the revolutionary end. This point is highlighted when Sartre goes on to discuss the “permissibility of terror”. Whereas the legitimate use of terror is assumed in both *CDR* and his “Preface” to Fanon’s *The Wretched of the Earth*, in the “Rome Lecture” Sartre attempts to *explain* its moral legitimacy. He does so by characterizing it not as a revolutionary means with the potential to denature the revolutionary end, but instead, within the context of the means–end synthetic unity, as “one of the ‘night time moments’ [*moments de nuit*] of ‘making the human’”; terror “is a necessary action of counterviolence” against oppressive and dehumanizing systems (Santoni 2003: 148, quoting the “Rome Lecture”). As I have suggested earlier, probably the clearest instance of such terror, for Sartre, is to be found in anti-colonial violence, such as was practised by the Front de Libération Nationale in Algeria.

Notwithstanding the paradoxical relation between the assertion that “all means are good except those that denature the end” and the assertion of the legitimacy of terror as “necessary counterviolence”, Santoni suggests that at this point in the lecture “Sartre proceeds to answer the kind of challenge regarding terror that Camus put to him [in the *Temps modernes* exchange]”, by placing the following four “enabling’ or ‘limiting’ conditions” on its permissibility (Santoni 2003: 149):

- Terror is permissible only as a “provisional expedient” and only when it can be prevented from becoming “an alienating system like that of the oppressing adversary”. In short, “if Terror is to be used only as a means to produce yet another exploitative system or to keep human beings in a state of subhumanity, it must *not* be permitted”.
- Terror is permissible only “if those who employ Terror can preclude and therefore avoid all ideologies of Terror . . . Stalin’s ‘socialism in one country’ is an example of what would not be permissible”.
- Terror is permissible “only if no justification of Terror is offered other than its *necessity*”, meaning that if a less violent and equally effective option is available then no grounds (such as, that it is “easier”) can justify resorting to it.
- Terror is permissible “only if Terror has its ‘origins in the masses’”. Further, it must be considered “a deviation of humanity due to urgency”, and, more, “a technique totally unjustifiable outside its effectiveness”.⁴⁹

Sartre believed that on meeting these conditions, “terror becomes revolutionary justice”, and consequently, “the humanization of terror” becomes “possible *in principle*”. It is clear that the above conditions would sanction the violence of, for example, the Algerian insurrection against French rule, but they would not sanction, says Santoni, “the institutionalised terror of the USSR, which made terror the keystone of an ‘ideologically justified’ system of government”. Although Santoni

suggests that Sartre's argument constitutes "a belated elaboration and refined rationale for what he and Jeanson were militantly contending against Camus in their 1952 confrontation", he acknowledges that it is not "completely without ambiguity" (Santoni 2003: 151–2). However, I suspect that if we are to treat Sartre's argument as a *moral* argument its "shortcomings" are evidently far more serious than Santoni admits.

First, just as Sartre's "denaturing of the end" criterion, mentioned earlier, "does not easily or unambiguously distinguish what is not permissible", his resort here to terms such as "necessity" and "effectiveness" (not to mention such heavily weighted terms as "ideologies", his use of which implies the Marxist commonplace that it itself was not an ideology) seems to undermine whatever moral sense his arguments appear at first to possess. After all, legitimizing violence on the grounds of "effectiveness" is surely the opposite of an ethical or moral argument. Secondly, we note that Sartre's insistence on the synthetic unity of the means and ends ("the end does not come after the means", he says at one point, but "pervades their use, keeps them together as means and even guides them") implies not only a certainty that terror will contribute to the achievement of that end, but that the end itself is inexorable (Santoni 2003: 152, 146). Thirdly, and finally, as Thomas Anderson has observed, "none of the conditions Sartre presents involves distinguishing between violence against innocent people and violence against aggressors seeking to destroy human beings. Yet such a distinction seems crucial to any moral consideration." Santoni, too, conceded that this failure on Sartre's part constitutes a "significant omission".⁵⁰

This might suggest that Sartre's arguments in defence of political violence, although self-evidently justificatory, are not meant to be *moral* arguments. In this view, although Sartre evidently seeks to justify political violence, and indeed suggests a number of limiting conditions that can be applied to the use of such violence, the arguments he deploys to this end are not themselves moral arguments. When we consider his assertion, for instance, that in the context of revolutionary violence "all means are good except those that denature the end", we might conclude that Sartre's arguments are based simply on the expediency of revolutionary means in achieving revolutionary ends. Similarly, we could explain Sartre's failure to incorporate a consideration of innocent victims into his analysis of violence on the basis that, in the context of revolutionary praxis (a context in which Sartre believed that humanity "does not yet exist, . . . is incomplete, lacking and alienated"), there are no grounds on which such a morality could be established (Santoni 2003: 142 n.11). This view seems to be endorsed by Elizabeth Bowman and Robert Stone, who note that "Sartre's dialectical ethics" contains no "general rules or principles of right action" because "for Sartre, no such positive norm is required to justify revolutionary praxis". In fact, Bowman and Stone (who are probably the foremost experts on Sartre's "Rome Lecture") note elsewhere that according to Sartre, "due to class, sex, race, ethnic and other oppressions that deny freedom, a universal morality is not now possible", and that "revolt is 'justified' not by a morality (such an end is only in process of construction) but by the oppression of systemic exploitation to which it

responds” (Bowman & Stone 1986: 209; Bowman & Stone 2004: 8). They illustrate this point with a pertinent contemporary statement from Sartre:

Sartre held that the mark of the “false intellectual” is to affirm *there is* such a universal morality “here and now”, though it can only be that of the small bourgeois class. By denying society is “an arena of struggle between particular groups . . . for the statute of universality” such intellectuals act as watchdogs for that class. By contrast “true intellectuals” insist “man does not exist” but is rather “the distant goal of a practical and daily enterprise” consisting of [the] “liquidation of particularisms” in a movement of “universalization” on the part of “the immense majority, particularized by the oppression and exploitation which make of them the products of their products”.

(Bowman & Stone 2004: 24 n.22, quoting “A Plea for Intellectuals”, in Sartre 1974c: 249–58)

However, Bowman and Stone also make it clear that, paradoxically, Sartre *did* consider his justification of violence in the “Rome Lecture” to be a moral justification, calling it a “socialist morality”, which asserts both “the present impossibility of being moral” and “the moral primacy of revolution”. Evidently the morality proposed here is a revolutionary morality, which he pits against the various oppressive moralities (sexist, racist, classist etc.) of the status quo. Sartre’s “socialist morality”, they explain, “is a set of guidelines for securing conditions of concrete freedom that will make moral conduct on such a universal standard possible” at some point in the future (Bowman & Stone 2004: 6–8, 16). It may well be that, as Linda Bell argues, Sartre believed that violence could never be legitimated according to what he himself calls “a universal morality”, but that question seems of little significance, given that Sartre succeeded in granting political violence legitimacy according to a revolutionary morality of his own devising (termed an “*interim* morality of universalization” by Bowman and Stone), and given that he appears to have accorded such violence unique authority in making such a future “universal morality” possible.⁵¹

It is probably this absence of a moral sense not subsumed under the revolutionary agenda of the *CDR* that leads Benny Lévy to suggest in *Hope Now* that there is in Sartre’s work “a profound tendency toward an ethic of violence” (Sartre 1996: 93). It is also probably the basis of that “combination of moral neutrality and necessitarianism” that Ronald Aronson identified in *CDRII* (Aronson 1987: 179, quoted in Dobson 1993: 104). Furthermore, although critics may disagree about the legitimacy of interjecting “extraneous moral judgements into [the] properly historical and theoretical account” of *CDRII*, no such objection can be made regarding the “Rome Lecture” because it presents itself precisely as a moral defence of political violence (Aronson 1987: 179; Dobson 1993: 104). Although Sartre continued to reflect on the possibility of legitimate violence, most notably in *Hope Now* (where, *contra CDR*, he declares violence to be “the very opposite of fraternity” (Sartre 1996: 93)), it seems that the “ethical” argument contained in the “Rome Lecture” leaves a great deal to be desired.

Although the lecture was written more than a decade after the dispute with Camus, we must remember that its approach to morality is distinctive only in its articulation of the so-called limiting conditions on terror, and its general thesis on morality and violence, which is so obviously at odds with the philosophy of *la mesure* in *The Rebel*, had been worked out much earlier. In fact, we see an early expression of Sartre's posited philosophy of "unfolding totalization" (Bowman & Stone 1991: 68) in his *Saint Genet: Actor and Martyr*, which was published shortly before his response to Camus's letter in 1952:

Either morality is stuff and nonsense or it is a concrete totality which achieves a synthesis of Good and Evil. . . . The abstract separation of these two concepts expresses simply the alienation of man. The fact remains that, in the historical situation, this synthesis cannot be achieved. Thus, any Ethic which does not explicitly profess that it is *impossible today* contributes to the bamboozling and alienation of men. The ethical "problem" arises from the fact that Ethics is *for us* inevitable and at the same time impossible. Action must give itself ethical norms in this climate of nontranscendable impossibility. It is from this outlook that, for example, we must view the problem of violence or that of the relationship between ends and means. To a mind that experienced this agony and was at the same time forced to will and to decide, *all high-minded rebellion, all outcries of refusal, all virtuous indignation, would seem a kind of outworn rhetoric.* (Sartre 1964a: 186n., emphasis added)

I have already noted that Camus's quarrel with Sartre over *The Rebel* was preceded by a conceptually related dispute over Merleau-Ponty's "Le Yogi et le Prolétaire" in 1946. I have also noted that in his editorials in *Les Temps modernes* and in works such as *Baudelaire* and *What is Literature?* (both 1947) Sartre had begun to articulate a political position plainly at odds with that of Camus, particularly with regard to political violence.⁵² It could be said, however, that the extent and nature of the differences between Sartre's and Camus's ideas on political violence only really became explicit with the appearance of their respective plays, *Dirty Hands* (1948) and *The Just Assassins* (1949).⁵³ Although the submerged dialogue we can discern between the two plays can be seen to presage the very public disagreement that followed a few years later, it is important that it be seen in this broader context as well.

Immediately on comparing the two plays one is struck by the clear thematic similarities, the most important of which is their common preoccupation with the question of the legitimacy of political violence. Both plays are concerned with individual acts of political assassination (one based on the assassination of Grand Duke Sergi, the other, much more loosely, on the assassination of Trotsky) and both generate a good deal of their dramatic momentum by pitting the arguments of a revolutionary "realist" (Stepan in the case of *The Just Assassins*, Hoederer in the case of *Dirty Hands*) against those of a revolutionary "idealist" (Kaliayev in the case of *The Just Assassins*, Hugo in the case of *Dirty Hands*). Although in the context of his play

Sartre declared that “a good play ought to present problems, not solve them”, there is abundant evidence that, as Simone de Beauvoir states, Sartre’s “sympathy went to Hoederer”, the revolutionary realist, rather than Hugo the idealist (Sartre 1974a: 188; de Beauvoir 1968: 160). It is Hoederer who insists that revolution “is not a question of virtue but of effectiveness”, who articulates and defends the concept of “dirty hands”:

How you cling to your purity, young man! How afraid you are to soil your hands! All right, stay pure! What good will it do? Why did you join us? Purity is an idea for a yogi or a monk. You intellectuals and bourgeois anarchists use it as a pretext for doing nothing. To do nothing, to remain motionless, arms at your sides, wearing kid gloves. Well, I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows. I’ve plunged them in filth and blood. But what do you hope? Do you think you can govern innocently? (Sartre 1989: 229, 218)

Sartre himself repeatedly asserts in contemporary interviews that “politics requires us to ‘get our hands dirty’” and insists that in rejecting Hoederer’s “politics of compromise”, Hugo “is still acting from the bourgeois idealism which was precisely what had made him rebel against his class and which he did not succeed in overcoming”.⁵⁴ An illustrative example of Hoederer’s willingness to dirty his hands can be seen in his attitude to lying. In contrast to Hugo, who says that on joining the (Communist) Proletarian Party “for the first time I saw men who didn’t lie to other men”, Hoederer insists, “we have always told lies, just like any other party . . . I’ll lie when I must . . . I wasn’t the one who invented lying. It grew out of a society divided into classes, and each one of us has inherited it from birth. We shall not abolish lying by refusing to tell lies, but by using every means at hand to abolish classes.”⁵⁵ Ironically, given Sartre’s insistence that Hoederer’s was also *his* view, it seems that the public (and the communists) continued to interpret the play as being anti-communist, something to which Sartre objected and that ultimately led him, in December 1952, to prohibit production of the play anywhere without the imprimatur of the local Communist Party.⁵⁶

This interpretation of *Dirty Hands*, and its contrast with Camus’s evolving ideas on the legitimacy of political violence (to which I will turn shortly), is given further endorsement by Sartre in an interview with his Italian translator, Paolo Caruso, in 1964. Although he admits to having “great understanding for Hugo’s attitude”, Sartre says that Hoederer “is the man I’d like to be if I were a revolutionary”. He further relates that, after attending one of the play’s final rehearsals, Camus told him there was a detail in the play he did not “approve of”, and asked “Why does Hugo say, ‘I don’t love men for what they are but for what they ought to be’ . . . and why does Hoederer answer, ‘And I love them for what they are’? The way I see it [says Camus], it should have been just the opposite.” Sartre insists that Camus’s interpretation was based on a fundamental confusion: “He really thought that Hugo loved men for what they are since he didn’t want to lie to them, whereas Hoederer, on the contrary, became in his eyes a dogmatic Communist who weighed men in terms of

what they ought to be and who deceived them in the name of an ideal. This is just the opposite of what I meant to say.”⁵⁷ Ronald Aronson’s gloss on this statement is instructive: “For Camus, sticking to principle and refusing to lie for the sake of politics was inseparable from respecting people and loving them. For Sartre, acting on principle dictated being true to long-term ends” (Aronson 2004: 106). Sartre himself goes on in the same interview to explain in some detail what he *did* mean to say in *Dirty Hands*:

I think there should be as little lying as possible *within the limits imposed by the imperatives of praxis*. Lying should not be condemned nor, of course, approved *a priori* (by making a Machiavellian technique of it, for instance) but there is nothing abnormal about its happening, when circumstances require it. When Hoederer says, “It is not I who invented the lie and I shall use it if it is necessary”, I think he is quite right. There has never been a political situation in which lying, by omission at any rate, does not become absolutely essential . . . Hoederer tries to speak the truth as far as possible; lying is not in his nature, except that he does not recoil either from lying or from political murder when they are the necessities of praxis.⁵⁸

Where Sartre articulates and defends a view of history in which, as de Beauvoir puts it, “the vanity of morality” confronts “the efficacy of *praxis*”,⁵⁹ it is hardly surprising to find that Camus favoured the idealist’s approach to the use of revolutionary violence. Although Camus was far from considering the Socialist Revolutionaries to be perfect models of legitimate political violence (we remember that in “Defence of *The Rebel*” he criticized them for what he perceived to be their *complete* lack of realism), he unambiguously favoured the revolutionary idealism of Kaliyev over the realism of Stepan, and sought to construct his ethic of legitimate violence precisely *against* such realism as was by then being advocated by Sartre. For example, Kaliyev’s decision not to throw the bomb into the Grand Duke’s carriage because it contained his nephew and niece provokes Stepan’s “realist” declaration that “nothing that can serve our cause should be ruled out”. Stepan also makes explicit what for Camus is the implication of such “realism” in his assertion: “Not until the day comes when we stop being sentimental about children, will the revolution triumph and we be masters of the world” (*COP*: 186, 185; *TRN*: 337, 336). Camus’s favouring of idealism over realism was, naturally, interpreted by Sartre and others as representing an ideology of “clean hands”, or the *de facto* pacifism of a “beautiful soul”; indeed, it was seen to involve the same “rejection of history” that he and Jeanson identified in *The Rebel*.⁶⁰ None of this, though, should lead us to suspect that Camus was, perhaps despite himself, a pacifist. If not entirely won over to the view of Camus as pacifist, Ronald Santoni, for example, repeatedly exhibits a tendency to articulate it: for example, he asserts near the end of his discussion of *The Just Assassins* that “it is evident that [Camus] is mobilizing all the arguments he can against revolutionary violence and murder and putting before the reader the human consequences of so-called justified murder” (Santoni 2003: 115). As I have shown

elsewhere, violence remained for Camus inevitable and, under certain circumstances, legitimate. His main concern was to address the enthusiasm with which some of his contemporaries embraced violence, and the arguments they offered in its defence. Ronald Aronson, too, is ambiguous on Camus's attitude to political violence. Although he recognizes that Camus was not a "pacifist", he nonetheless highlights what he calls Camus's preoccupation "with keeping his hands clean".⁶¹ What "clean hands" means for Aronson is not always very clear, for at one point he characterizes it (justly, I believe) as Camus's insistence "on the use of violence only when absolutely necessary, within limits, [and] in response to a vital threat", yet elsewhere he characterizes Camus as "the man who so decried violence and sought clean hands", and suggests that having "only reluctantly accepted violence" in *Letters to a German Friend*, after the Second World War Camus became "more and more visible as an opponent of political violence", an opposition that, according to Aronson, culminates in *The Rebel* (Aronson 2004: 90, 219, 34). Whereas Camus deliberately maintained a paradoxical attitude to political violence, declaring it, for example, "at the same time unavoidable and unjustifiable", both Santoni and Aronson display a tendency to read Camus as insisting that violence was simply "unjustifiable", while understating (though not necessarily discounting) the properly paradoxical nature of his interpretation of political violence. Aronson also seems to see in *The Just Assassins* an articulation of what I have called elsewhere the "life for a life" thesis, whereby the revolutionary's violent action is granted legitimacy only at the cost of the revolutionary's own life (*E*: 355–6; Aronson 2004: 117, 123, 124; Santoni 2003: 164).

In any event, what *Camus* meant by "clean hands" can be readily discerned by a cursory examination of his use of this phrase. He suggests, for example, that because the French were not responsible for starting the Second World War, they entered it with "clean hands": "Time will tell", he wrote as Paris was being liberated in August 1944, "that the men of France did not want to kill and that they went with clean hands into a war that was not of their own choosing."⁶² "The choice to kill was not ours", he says in an editorial from the previous day. "We were placed in a position where we had either to kill or to bend our knees" (*CC*: 15; *CAC8*: 148). What this suggests is that "clean hands" for Camus did not necessitate the rejection of all violence, but only that violence be accepted under specific circumstances (in this case, under the circumstances of an unwanted, unprovoked war). This is what Camus means when he says in *Letters to a German Friend* that not only did the Resistance go into war with clean hands, but that they will also emerge from the war with clean hands.⁶³ Therefore, Camus's supposed preference for clean hands, such as it is (expressed in print on three occasions between 1943 and 1944), does not in any way preclude the possibility of legitimate violence.⁶⁴

A final observation that should be made here regarding Camus's "clean hands" versus Sartre's *Dirty Hands* is that the examples of legitimate political violence in Camus's works – the assassinations of Caligula and Sergi – quite literally involve the protagonists dirtying their hands. As I have argued elsewhere, the direct involvement of the perpetrator in his or her violence seems to have been central to Camus's

conception of its legitimacy.⁶⁵ A commitment to “dirty hands”, a willingness, according to Sartre, to “compromise between the ideal and the real”, was for Camus no assurance of revolutionary commitment. For him, genuine fidelity to the revolution necessitated a willingness not only to take an active part in it, but also, perhaps, to be willing to sacrifice one’s own life in its defence. Perhaps with Sartre’s play in mind, Camus’s Kaliayev, angered by Stepan’s denigration of his revolutionary commitment, shouts “Look! Do you think that hand will tremble? No, it won’t tremble. Do you think that I shall hesitate when the Grand Duke is there in front of me? Surely you cannot think that!”, and crucially, Kaliayev concludes: “And even if my arm did begin to tremble . . . I know a sure way of killing him . . . I’d throw myself under the horses’ feet” (*COP*: 171; *TRN*: 318). The question of dirty hands, then, is a pseudo-question, one which implies that there are only two possible approaches to the issue of political violence: the view that it is necessary and legitimate (“dirty hands”) and the view that it is never necessary and never legitimate (what Aronson seems to mean by “clean hands”). Such talk of dirty and clean hands seems to permit little more than a fine display of bombast regarding the depths of one’s revolutionary commitment, while side-stepping all of those issues that it might be said *should* be at the heart of a discussion of political violence, such as the possible criteria for ascribing to it a degree of moral legitimacy. Camus would certainly have found something rather grotesque in the implication that the refusal to have innocent blood on one’s hands was to refuse to get one’s hands dirty, and indeed he objected most strenuously to the conspicuous cleanness of the hands of precisely those defending a philosophy of dirty hands.

In the more general context of Sartre’s political evolution, it is important to point out that at the time of Jeanson’s review of *The Rebel* and the subsequent exchange of letters, Sartre was in fact attempting to align himself publicly with the communists. This stage of his political development culminated in the writing of *The Communists and Peace*, which coincided exactly with his split with Camus in 1952: indeed, Camus’s letter and Sartre’s response literally interrupt the serial publication of the essay in *Les Temps modernes*.⁶⁶ According to Ronald Aronson, this lengthy essay presented “the theoretical argument for his identification of the PCF with the proletariat”, as well as the “social and historical basis for this identification”. What this identification meant in practice, however, according to another critic, was that “the Party’s politics must, therefore, be accepted”, since “the future of democracy is in the hands of the working man and the Communist Party is the party of the working class” (Aronson 1980: 219; Burnier 1968: 83). Examining this essay now, we can see clearly that the arguments in his letter to Camus are entirely consistent with those in *The Communists and Peace*, and in a certain respect the letter and the serialized essay form a coherent whole. Further, given the extent of what Sartre called his “conversion”, it seems plausible to suggest that although he may not have sought such a dramatic public split with Camus, it was unlikely to have caused him much upset when it occurred. He had, after all, decided at this time that “an anti-Communist was a rat”, and Camus was for Sartre precisely such an anti-communist.⁶⁷ As Ronald Aronson illustrates, the “political evolution” evinced in

Sartre's attack on Camus did not go unnoticed in the communist press, and "the break earned [him] points with the Party" (Aronson 2004: 166). Speaking of *The Communists and Peace* and Sartre's letter to Camus, de Beauvoir asserts that the two pieces of writing

had the same meaning: the postwar period was over. No more postponements, no more conciliations were possible. We had been forced into making clear-cut choices. Despite the difficulty of his position, Sartre still knew he had been right to adopt it. [Quoting from Sartre's unpublished notes, she continues] "I had to take some step that would make me 'other'. I had to accept the point of view of the USSR in its totality." (De Beauvoir 1968: 274)

Although Sartre's attitude to the communists was to change (notably after the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956), his view of Camus did not, and the position taken by the latter on Algerian independence, which is discussed in the next chapter, was seen as conclusive proof of his fundamental "hostility to history". After Camus's death in 1960 Sartre wrote little about their relationship, and what he did write was often contradictory. For example, his frequently cited and anthologized obituary associates Camus with the French *moralistes*, and admires his "stubborn humanism, strict and pure, austere and sensual, [which] delivered uncertain combat against the massive and deformed events of the day". He also observes that "by the unexpectedness of his refusals, he reaffirmed, at the heart of our era, against the Machiavellians, against the golden calf of realism, the existence of the moral act".⁶⁸ As profound and generous as these words seem, they are somewhat complicated by Sartre's own disdain for the *moralistes*, and by subsequent comments made to his friend John Gerassi:

There is a little falsehood in the obituary I wrote about Camus, when I say that even when he disagreed with us, we wanted to know what he thought. . . . He wasn't a boy who was made for all that he tried to do, he should have been a little crook from Algiers, a very funny one, who might have managed to write a few books, but mostly remain a crook. Instead of which you had the impression that civilisation had been stuck on top of him and he did what he could with it, which is to say, he did nothing.⁶⁹

However, as personally antagonistic as they may have remained, Sartre's reference in his obituary to the "golden calf of realism" does seem to suggest a certain self-criticism and a softening of his views of the historical imperatives of revolutionary violence. In this light it is perhaps useful to follow Ronald Aronson in considering the Sartre and Camus dispute in the context of the competing values of politics and morality. For Aronson, Camus locates morality "outside history", and suggests that his morality, untethered from the weighty demands of the political, too easily turned to moralizing.⁷⁰ This, of course, was also the view of Sartre: "You became violent and terrorist when History – which you rejected – rejected you in

turn. . . . Your morality first changed into moralism. Today it is only literature. Tomorrow perhaps it will be immorality.”⁷¹ Although there is no evidence that Camus located the morality “outside history”, it is certainly the case that for him the prerogatives of morality always outweighed those of politics (in so far as they could be separated from the political). Sartre, as we have seen, developed a markedly different approach to the relationship between politics and morality. For him “ethics became indistinguishable from history and politics”, and “being moral involved acknowledging that we and our world are inescapably violent”. Sartre “finally articulated the framework for an ethics that would satisfy him, namely, that radical political change is the only path for creating a world in which moral human relations are possible” (Aronson 2004: 112). Clearly then, if Camus subordinated politics to morality, Sartre subordinated morality to politics. Although Camus’s attempt at a resolution of politics and morality may be seen to have failed, it was surely a far less egregious failure than that committed by Sartre. Indeed Sartre seemed to recognize that his attempt to forge a politically efficacious morality had been a failure when, in the mid-1970s, he spoke frankly of his reasons for rejecting “moralism” in favour of political realism: “you do it because it works, and . . . you evaluate it according to its efficacy rather than some vague notions having to do with morality, which would only slow things up”. However, he also insists that “that whole idea didn’t sit too well with me, it upset me no end, despite the fact that – ignoring my own better judgement – I carried it through and finally arrived at a pure realism: what’s real is true, and what’s true is real. And when I had reached that point, what it meant was that I had blocked out all ideas of morality.”⁷²

This does appear to suggest a greater sympathy with Camus’s “stubborn humanism”, his principled stand “against the Machiavellians, against the golden calf of realism” (Aronson (2004: 229) goes as far as to suggest that the unfinished second volume of Sartre’s *CDR* “poses precisely the same questions” as *The Rebel*: “how did a revolution aiming at human emancipation create hell on earth?”). However, while I have suggested when discussing *The Rebel* that there are good reasons to consider Camus as an advocate of “anti-political politics”, and while it is helpful to consider his reconciliation of politics and morality by resort to this idea, there appears to be a very different kind of ambivalence in Sartre’s attempt at the same reconciliation. In the same interview in which he admits to a period of commitment to political realism, he identifies as the moment when he reintroduced morality into politics his encounter in the late 1960s with the Maoists, saying that although Marxism had always presupposed a morality, “it’s Mao who clarified it and gave it flesh” (Sartre 1978a: 80). Accordingly, we can say that Sartre’s reconciliation of politics and morality is neatly described in his defence of what he identifies as the distinct “morality” of Maoist violence:

For the Maoists . . . everywhere that revolutionary violence is born among the masses, it is immediately and profoundly moral. This is because the workers, who have up to that point been the objects of capitalist authoritarianism, become the subjects of their own history, even if only for a moment. . . . Yet

even though the economic and political motives of the explosions of popular violence are obvious, the explosions cannot be explained except by the fact that these motives were *morally* appreciated by the masses. That is, the economic and political motives helped the masses to understand what is the highest immorality – the exploitation of man by man. So when the bourgeois claims that his conduct is guided by a “humanistic” morality – work, family, nation – he is only disguising his deep-seated immorality and trying to alienate the workers: he will never be moral. Whereas the workers and the country people, when they revolt, are completely moral because they are not exploiting anyone.⁷³

Although the general idea of a reconciliation of morality and politics might indeed be discernible in the works of both Camus and Sartre, we can only conclude that the respective reconciliations they sought (let alone whatever reconciliation they might be said to have achieved) were of markedly different varieties.