

Camus, Albert and the Anarchists

Organise!

spring 2007

Born in French Algeria into a poor family in 1913, Camus lost his father in the Battle of the Marne in 1916. He was raised by his mother, who worked as a charlady and was illiterate. Winning a scholarship, Camus eventually began a career as a journalist. As a youth, he was a keen footballer as well as being a member of a theatrical troupe.

From his time as a goalkeeper, Albert Camus always had a team spirit. He had a generous, if sensitive nature, and always sought the maximum unity, seeking to avoid or bypass rancour. Many intellectuals writing about Camus have obscured his support of anarchism. He was always there to support at the most difficult moments of the anarchist movement, even if he felt he could not totally commit himself to that movement.

Camus himself never made a secret of his attraction towards anarchism. Anarchist ideas occur in his plays and novels, as for example, *La Peste*, *L'Etat de siège* or *Les Justes*. He had known the anarchist Gaston Leval, who had written about the Spanish revolution, since 1945. Camus had first expressed admiration for revolutionary syndicalists and anarchists, conscientious objectors and all manner of rebels as early as 1938 whilst working as a journalist on the paper *L'Alger Republicaine*, according to his friend Pascal Pia.

The anarchist Andre Prudhommeaux first introduced him at a meeting in 1948 of the Cercle des Etudiants Anarchistes (Anarchist Student Circle) as a sympathiser who was familiar with anarchist thought.

Camus also supported the Groupes de Liaison Internationale which sought to give aid to opponents of fascism and Stalinism, and which refused to take the side of American capitalism. These groups had been set up in 1947–48, and intended to give material support to victims of authoritarian regimes as well as exchanging information. Supporters included the Russian anarchist Nicolas Lazarevitch, exiled in France, as well as many supporters of the revolutionary syndicalist paper *La Révolution Proletarienne*. Camus remained a friend and financial supporter of RP until his death.

Albert Camus's book *L'Homme Révolte* (translated into English as *The Rebel*), published in 1951, marked a clear break between him and the Communist Party left. It was met with hostility by those who were members of The Communist Party or were fellow travelers. Its message was understood by anarchists and revolutionary syndicalists in France and Spain, however, for it openly mentions revolutionary syndicalism and anarchism and makes a clear distinction between authoritarian and libertarian socialism. The main theme is how to have a revolution without the

use of terror and the employment of “Caesarist” methods. So Camus deals with Bakunin and Nechaev among others. “The Commune against the State, concrete society against absolutist society, liberty against rational tyranny, altruistic individualism finally against the colonisation of the masses...”

He ends with a call for the resurrection of anarchism. Authoritarian thought, thanks to three wars and the physical destruction of an elite of rebels, had submerged this libertarian tradition. But it was a poor victory, and a provisional one, and the struggle still continues.

Gaston Leval responded in a series of articles to the book. His tone was friendly, and he avoided harsh polemic, but he brought Camus to book on what he regarded as a caricature of Bakunin. Camus replied in the pages of *Le Libertaire*, the paper of the Fédération Anarchiste (circulation of this paper was running at 100,000 a week in this period). He protested that he had acted in good faith, and would make a correction in one of the passages criticised by Leval in future editions.

The general secretary of the Fédération Anarchiste, Georges Fontenis, also reviewed Camus’s book in *Le Libertaire*. To the title question “Is the revolt of Camus the same as ours?”, Fontenis replied that it was. However he faulted him for not giving due space to the revolutions in the Ukraine and Spain, and for portraying Bakunin as a hardened Nihilist and not giving credit to his specific anarchist positions. He ended by admitting that the book contained some admirable pages. A review by Jean Vita the following week in *Le Libertaire* was warmer and more positive.

These measured criticisms from the anarchists were in contrast to those from the fellow travellers of the Communist Party, like Sartre and the group around the magazine *Les Temps Moderne*. This marked the beginning of Camus’s break with that other great exponent of existentialism. The criticisms of this group were savage, in particular that of Francis Jeanson. Camus replied that Jeanson’s review was orthodox Marxist, and that he had passed over all references to anarchism and syndicalism. “The First International, the Bakuninist movement, still living among the masses of the Spanish and French CNT, are ignored”, wrote Camus. For his pains, Camus was “excommunicated” by Jeanson from the ranks of the existentialists. These methods disheartened Camus. He also received stern criticism from the Surrealists for the artistic conceptions within the book. It looked like the anarchist movement were Camus’s best supporters.

Camus marked this break in other ways too. He had made a pledge to himself to keep away from intellectuals who were ready to back Stalinism. This did not stop him from wholeheartedly committing himself to causes he thought just and worthwhile. In Spain a group of anarchist workers had been sentenced to death by Franco. In Paris a meeting was called by the League for the Rights of Man on February 22nd 1952. Camus agreed to speak at this. He thought it would be useful if the leader of the Surrealists, André Breton, should appear on the podium. This was in spite of the attack that Breton had written in the magazine *Arts*, over Camus’s criticisms of the poet Lautreamont, admired by the Surrealists as one of their precursors.

Camus met with the organisers of the event, Fernando Gómez Peláez of the paper *Solidaridad Obrera*, organ of the Spanish anarcho-syndicalist union the CNT, and José Ester Borrás, secretary of the Spanish political prisoners’ federation FEDIP, asking them to approach Breton without telling him that Camus had suggested it. Breton agreed to speak at the meeting even though Camus would be present. Gómez then told Breton that Camus had suggested he speak in the first place, which moved Breton to tears. Later Camus told the Spanish anarchists that because he had not replied to Breton’s anger in kind that a near-reconciliation was possible. Camus and Breton shared the podium and were even seen chatting (for Breton and the Surrealists links to the anarchist movement see libcom.org).

Camus took a position of the committed intellectual, signing petitions and writing for *Le Libertaire*, *La révolution Proletarienne* and *Solidaridad Obrera*. He also became part of the editorial board of a little libertarian review, *Témoins 1956*, getting to know its editor, Robert Proix, a proofreader by trade. Camus, via Proix, met up with Giovanna Berneri (Caleffi) the companion of the gifted Italian anarchist Camillo Berneri, who had been murdered by the Stalinists in Spain in 1937. Camus also met Rirette Maitrejean, who had been the erstwhile companion of Victor Serge, and had been involved in the Bonnot Gang affair and trial. Rirette had been working as a proofreader for the paper *Paris-Soir* for a long time. Camus also became a friend of the anarchist veteran Maurice Joyeux, who was later to remark that of all contemporary literary works *The Rebel* was the book that most closely defined the aspirations of the students and workers in May 1968.

Again in 1954 Camus came to the aid of the anarchists. Maurice Laisant, propaganda secretary of the Forces Libres de la Paix (Free Forces of Peace) as well as an editor of *Le Monde Libertaire*, paper of the Fédération Anarchiste, had produced an antimilitarist poster using the format of official army propaganda. As a result he was indicted for subversion. Camus was a character witness at his trial, recalling how he had first met him at the Spanish public meeting.

Camus told the court, "Since then I have seen him often and have been in a position to admire his will to fight against the disaster which threatens the human race. It seems impossible to me that one can condemn a man whose action identifies so thoroughly with the interests of all men. Too few men are fighting against a danger which each day grows more ominous for humanity". It was reported that after his statement, Camus took his seat in a courtroom composed mainly of militant workers, who surrounded him with affection. Unfortunately Laisant received a heavy fine.

Camus also stood with the anarchists when they expressed support for the workers' revolt against the Soviets in East Germany in 1953. He again stood with the anarchists in 1956, first with the workers' uprising in Poznan, Poland, and then later in the year with the Hungarian Revolution. Later in 1955 Camus gave his support to Pierre Morain, a member of the Fédération Communiste Libertaire (the Fédération Anarchiste had changed its name in 1954 following rancorous struggles within the organisation). Morain was the very first Frenchman to be imprisoned for an anti-colonialist stand on Algeria. Camus expressed his support in the pages of the national daily *L'Express* of 8th November 1955.

Camus often used his fame or notoriety to intervene in the press to stop the persecution of anarchist militants or to alert public opinion. In the final year of his life Camus settled in the Provence village of Lourmarin. Here he made the acquaintance of Franck Creac'h. A Breton, born in Paris, self-taught, and a convinced anarchist, he had come to the village during the war to "demobilise" himself. Camus employed him as his gardener and had the benefit of being able to have conversations with someone on the same wavelength. One of the last campaigns Camus was involved in was that of the anarchist Louis Lecoin who fought for the status of conscientious objectors in 1958. Camus was never to see the outcome to this campaign, as he died in a car crash on 1960, at the age of forty-six.

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