Debates: Camus Versus Sartre

The sentiment of Europe post-WWII can most accurately be encompassed by the debates of Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus, French writers and intellectuals who defined the ideology of an era fraught with political instability, nuclear fear, and socioeconomic division. The horrors of WWII caused, for many, a distressing shaken belief in God. The rise of atheism prompted the popularity of existentialism and absurdism, of which Sartre and Camus were the main proponents. While the USSR dominated Eastern Europe and the United States combatted the Soviets with the paranoid “Red Scare,” those not engaged in proxy wars of the nuclear era were forced to choose between Capitalist and Communist. In the case of Sartre and Camus, this escalated to an intellectual debate that captivated the attention of Western Europe. Opposing views on the inevitability of violence and what it should be used for tore apart the friendship between the two, prompting all observers to ask themselves, what is the price for freedom?

To explain the disparity between the two philosophers one must first explain their backgrounds. Albert Camus (November 7th, 1913 – January 4th, 1960) was born in French-Algeria to a working class, illiterate mother. In early 1935, Camus joined the French Communist Party despite never having read Das Kapital nor identifying as a Marxist, for the purpose of fighting inequalities between native Algerians and European colonialists. He left the party a year thereafter, but still held heavy leftist and anti-fascist views.

Concerned with the concept of the absurd (the human search for meaning despite the lack of any inherent meaning), Camus published L’Etranger and Le Mythe de Sisyphe (“The Stranger,” and “The Myth of Sisyphus,” respectively) in 1942. These works articulated the downtrodden mindset of WWII and the years following it. Taking an active role in the French resistance during Nazi occupation, Camus became a journalist for the banned newspaper Combat and joined a circle of intellectuals including Simone de Beauvoir and Jean-Paul Satre, the latter of which became a very close friend.

Jean-Paul Sartre (June 21st, 1905 – April 15th, 1980) was born in Paris to upper-class parents. His interest in philosophy began in his teenage years, and he frequented intellectual circles until being drafted into the French Army from 1939-1941. After being captured by German troops in 1940, he spent nine months as a prisoner of war. Upon his return to Paris, Sartre began to write for underground sources about the occupation of France.

Sartre had a complex and sometimes tumultuous relationship with the French Communist Party and the USSR. Near the eve of the Second World War, Jean-Paul Satre, a liberal intellectual, was politically inactive, writing little about the state of Europe and believing the era after WWI to be one of peace. During Nazi occupation of France, Sartre met and became close with fellow writer and intellectual Albert Camus. Nazi victories prior to the war’s end shook his liberal beliefs to the core, and his post-war sentiment began to shift towards that of socialism. Inspired by the USSR’s triumphs over Germany, he began working closely with members of the French Communist Party, though he never joined himself. In October 1945, Sartre and his lifelong partner Simone de Beauvoir founded Les Temps modernes, a journal to replace the void left by the pre-war magazine La Nouvelle Revue Français, which was shut down after French liberation

due to its close collaboration with the occupation. Sartre was passionate about postwar efforts, glorifying and glamorizing the Resistance as the peak of uncompromising morality in action, and condemned those who stayed silent or inactive during occupation.

As the world began to split into deeply divided Communist and Capitalist blocs, Sartre proposed that the cultures within European civilization could only be preserved by dissolving and reforming the states into the United States of Europe. In the 1949 journal Politique étrangère, Sartre wrote:

If we want French civilization to survive, it must be fitted into the framework of a great European civilization. Why? I have said that civilization is the reflection on a shared situation. In Italy, in France, in Benelux, in Sweden, in Norway, in Germany, in Greece, in Austria, everywhere we find the same problems and the same dangers ... But this cultural polity has prospects only as elements of a policy which defends Europe's cultural autonomy vis-à-vis America and the Soviet Union, but also its political and economic autonomy, with the aim of making Europe a single force between the blocs, not a third bloc, but an autonomous force which will refuse to allow itself to be torn into shreds between American optimism and Russian scientificism.

With Europe split decisively over the issue of Communism, Sartre commended the USSR on its revolutionary ideals and tactics, stating that critics must keep in mind the necessity of the USSR to defend itself against a hostile, Capitalist-dominant world. Taking inspiration from the Soviet bloc, Sartre defines the ideal Europe as a reunified, homogenized state consisting of multiple autonomous blocs. This was a precursor to the formation of the European Union in 1993. This collaboration between political and economic ideologies led to multiple criticisms of Sartre’s idealism- specifically due to its contradiction with Sartre’s endorsement of revolutionary violence (from which his debate with Camus held its origins).

In 1951, Camus published The Rebel, which gave voice to his own political and philosophical viewpoints post-WWII. He argued that there is a price for freedom- one that includes the acceptance of limits and discipline. He condemned revolutionary violence, considering it to be an absolutist way of nudging history in a direction of choice. He articulated the conflict between justice and freedom.

“Absolute justice is achieved by the suppression of all contradiction: therefore it destroys freedom.” (The Rebel, part 5, “Historic Murder,” 1951)

Freedom, he argued, is the right for the strongest to dominate. The battle between justice and freedom must always be re-balanced and reconsidered. The must coexist, but cannot mutually exist in their absolute form.

“Freedom, that terrible word inscribed on the chariot of the storm, is the motivating principle of all revolutions. Without it, justice seems inconceivable to the rebel's mind. There comes a time, however, when justice demands the suspension of freedom. Then terror, on a grand or small scale, makes its appearance to consummate the revolution. Every act of rebellion expresses a nostalgia for innocence and an appeal to the essence of being. But one day nostalgia takes up arms and assumes the responsibility of total guilt; in other words, adopts murder and violence.” (The Rebel, part 3, “Historic Rebellion,” 1951)

Camus embraced the idea of moderation as a celebration of humanity- to live and let live, per

se.

Sartre, however, disagreed wholeheartedly. He believed in the possibility of perfect, absolute justice as well as freedom working together in harmony. A perfect utopia could be achieved with the onset of communism. Workers could not experience true freedom under capitalism, but according to Sartre, granting autonomy back to the workers would allow for the freedom to pursue self-fulfillment.

However, communism inherently requires revolutionary violence to be put into action. While leftists united against fascism in WWII, afterwards many found themselves deeply torn over the endorsement of such revolutionary violence. The USSR, a crucial player in the war, divided moderate and extreme leftists (often socialists and communists, respectively). Camus, the moderate, was appalled by stories of gulags and dictatorial paranoia emerging from the Soviet Union. Sartre argued that the ends justify the means.

Les Temps modernes, the journal edited by Sartre, published a scathing review of The Rebel, and the feud began. Sartre and Camus, once close friends, became media sensations due to their falling out. Popular journals of the time (such as Le Monde and L'Observateur) covered the debate, and many readers clearly could clearly see the political crises of the era reflected in the ideas of both men.

While Camus defended his position until his death in 1960, Sartre supported the USSR until the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 (June 23rd – November 11th), in which Hungarian citizens staged a nationwide revolt against the Hungarian People's Republic and its Soviet policies. Although the Hungarian government had collapsed into chaos, peace had begun to re-settle over the country by late October. On November 4th, Soviet troops seeking to regain control invaded Budapest, killing over 2,500 civilians and displacing 200,000. This violent dismantling of a nearly-successful revolution swayed Sartre to reconsider his position on the USSR, though he never abandoned his support of revolutionary violence.

In a world post-Cold War, it's easy to sympathize with Camus. Time and time again, absolutist regimes create a polar shift in government that leads to collapse. The swift, violent, and radical shift from Tsarist Russia to the Soviet Union collapsed within a century. The Reign of Terror lasted barely ten months, killing 40,000 and serving only as a bridge from one monarchy to the next. Extremism in any form is deadly at worst, and unrealistic at best. While Sartre, the revolutionary, believed in an idealistic future and the possibility of utopia, this is unattainable. The most conducive asset to society and the ability to govern is dialogue. Absolutism can only breed further absolutism; discourse takes time and compromise, but keeps peace and stability. In its perfect form it seeks to hear the thoughts of even the least-represented individuals. Extremists, in rare cases of monumental power, become akin to what they fought against primarily. Fascist and communist dictatorships have little to distinguish them from afar, and often those regimes come into power quickly and violently, with no room for moderation or peaceful exchange of ideas. However, it's vital to remember that Sartre and Camus began as friends. Despite their many differences, their open dialogue connected them through one common goal: to build from the ashes of Europe a just and peaceful world.