The Rebel (book)

This article is about the book by Albert Camus. For other works with this title, see The Rebel (disambiguation).

The Rebel (French title: L’Homme révolté) is a 1951 book-length essay by Albert Camus, which treats both the metaphysical and the historical development of rebellion and revolution in societies, especially Western Europe. Camus relates writers and artists as diverse as Epicurus and Lucretius, Marquis de Sade, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Fyodor Dostoyevsky, Friedrich Nietzsche, Max Stirner, André Breton, and others in an integrated, historical portrait of man in revolt. Examining both rebellion and revolt, which may be seen as the same phenomenon in personal and social frames, Camus examines several ‘countercultural’ figures and movements from the history of Western thought and art, noting the importance of each in the overall development of revolutionary thought and philosophy.

The work has received ongoing interest decades on after its writing, influencing modern philosophers and authors such as Paul Berman and others.

1 Themes

One of Camus' primary arguments in The Rebel concerns the motivation for rebellion and revolution. While the two acts - which can be interpreted from Camus' writing as states of being - are radically different in most respects, they both stem from a basic human rejection of normative justice. If human beings become disenchanted with contemporary applications of justice, Camus suggests that they rebel. This rebellion, then, is the product of a basic contradiction between the human mind's unceasing quest for clarification and the apparently meaningless nature of the world. Described by Camus as "absurd," this latter perception must be examined with what Camus terms “lucidity.” Camus concludes that the absurd sensibility contradicts itself because when it claims to believe in nothing, it believes in its own protest and the value of the protestor's life. Therefore, this sensibility is logically a “point of departure” that irresistibly “exceeds itself.” In the inborn impulse to rebel, on the other hand, we can deduce values that enable us to determine that murder and oppression are illegitimate and conclude with “hope for a new creation.”

Another prominent theme in The Rebel, which is tied to the notion of incipient rebellion, is the inevitable failure of attempts at human perfection. Through an examination of various titular revolutions, and in particular the French Revolution, Camus argues that most revolutions involved a fundamental denial of both history and transcendental values. Such revolutionaries aimed to kill God. In the French Revolution, for instance, this was achieved through the execution of Louis XVI and subsequent eradication of the divine right of kings. The subsequent rise of utopian and materialist idealism sought "the end of history.” Because this end is unattainable, according to Camus, terror ensued as the revolutionaries attempted to coerce results. This culminated in the “temporary” enslaving of people in the name of their future liberation. Notably, Camus' reliance on non-secular sentiment does not involve a defense of religion; indeed, the replacement of divinely-justified morality with pragmatism simply represents Camus' apotheosis of transcendental, moral values.

Faced with the manifest injustices of human existence on one hand, and the poor substitute of revolution on the other, Camus’ rebel seeks to fight for justice without abandoning transcendental values, including the principle of the intrinsic value of human life. Consequently, some rebels attempt to justify their actions through a crude form of payment. As Camus argues, the Russian terrorists active in the early twentieth century were prepared to offer their own lives as payment for the lives they took.

A third is that of crime, as Camus discusses how rebels who get carried away lose touch with the original basis of their rebellion and offer various defenses of crime through various historical epochs.

At the end of the book, Camus espouses the possible moral superiority of the ethics and political plan of syndicalism.

2 See also

- 1951 in literature
- Anarchism
- Terror and Liberalism
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