Totalitarian Threats and Colonial Geography: The Politics of Defining Terrorism in Beauvoir, Camus, and Dib

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Synopsis

This essay analyzes the divergences of existential writers Albert Camus, Simone de Beauvoir, and Mohammed Dib as they grapple with moral dilemmas in the Spanish Civil War, World War II, and the Algerian War. In considering Dib's very structurally complicated novel on state terrorism which draws inspiration from Picasso's *Guernica*, do their articulations differ when the ethics of terrorism are applied to a colonial context? Does their western or subaltern positioning account for their diverse stances on ethically thorny issues? Fighting fascism (Beauvoir) and communism's specter (Camus) determines terrorism's definition and justification: from non-state actor to that of the state.

Biography

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Essay

In this essay I compare important representations in prose and theater of moral dilemmas that plagued war-torn Europe and North Africa in Albert Camus's 1948, *The Just Assassins*, Simone de Beauvoir's 1945, *The Blood of Others*, and Mohammed Dib's 1962, *Who Remembers the Sea*. Were their positions on terrorism consistent given the entity executing an act of terrorism (state or non-state actor) and in light of the colonial geopolitical ramifications that came into play?

Camus may be described as someone whose work began exploring the futility of life, better known as its absurdity, especially when we think of his early works such as the *Myth of Sisyphus*; the gods condemn Sisyphus to carry a heavy boulder up a mountain which ultimately gravity will pull back down. Sisyphus knows that performing this repetitive act is futile but perhaps he recovers a sense of purpose—however meaningless it may be. As a metaphor for existence, it is powerfully discouraging in that anything we mortals do is pointless. How is this metaphor related to Camus's idea of terrorism? Or, does a relation in fact exist?

Terrorism, for Camus, represents a formidable, horrendous and unnatural act. Does he believe that terrorists are attempting to interrupt the inevitable futility of civil society with its inherent dystopic realities? Are terrorists high jacking Sisyphus's boulder to unchain him from an unjust destiny marred by absurdity? As a playwright, Camus explores this question and contends, "For the dramatist the passion for the impossible is just as valid a subject for study as avarice or adultery" (*Caligula* vi).

Les Justes or the *Just Assassins* in English, his 1948 provocative play, set in czarist Russia, ponders the question of how terrorists come to terms with murder. How do they even begin to justify executing horrific acts of violence all in the name of their love for a just world?

Camus's play explores this contradictory logic that laden with self-righteousness motivates terrorists. Their unwavering belief in the goodness of their cause, takes precedence over the right of others to condone or condemn the bloodshed carried out in their name.

While these extremists struggle to justify senseless murder for those outside of their terrorist cell, their convoluted self-righteous arguments find an easy echo in the minds and hearts of their fellow "brothers or sisters," terms they use to refer to each other. The play revolves around their concocted plan to assassinate the Grand Duke with an explosive. Kaliayev, the principal bomb thrower, referred to as the poet for his joyful attitude and romantic ideals, dehumanizes his victim by referring to the Grand Duke as despotism itself.

For months, from a hideout in Moscow, Kaliayev's cell has meticulously planned for an opportunity to target the Grand Duke in his carriage as he makes his way to the theater. In the love-laden rhetoric of the terrorists, in particular Kaliayev's and Dora's (the only female terrorist), a world of difference separates an assassination from a revolutionary act. They justify their bombing by claiming the latter. Yet, when Kaliayev spots two children riding alongside the Grand Duke and Duchess, he finds himself unable and unwilling to carry out his "revolutionary act." Clearly tortured by the dilemma of killing innocent bystanders, especially children, our protagonist must contend with reality.[i] Can he claim his moral high ground if he assassinates innocent human beings who are no longer simply symbols of the despotism he prided in targeting? Quite simply, he is forced to realign his moral compass with this unforeseen situation. Suddenly, his Manichean prism collapses.

The presence of these two children begs the question: Can terrorism, or what these terrorists refer to as "courageous revolutionary actions," be justified as an ethical means for social justice? Kaliayev despondently realizes that a peasant's sense of justice, like his own, in this specific dilemma, cannot and would not condone such an act. Consequently, he fails to carry out his plan. In the eyes of his fellow anarchists, Kaliayev falls from grace in his hesitation to kill non-targets or innocent bystanders.[ii]

Stephan, the character who most differs from Kaliayev, resembles the terrorists of Camus's contemporary world in his indifference and even espousal of killing innocent bystanders. The ends justify the means, so he believes. Accusing Kaliayev of being anything but a revolutionary, Stephan declares, "Just because [Kaliayev] could not bring himself to kill those two, thousands of Russian children will go on dying of starvation for

years to come. Have you ever seen children dying of starvation? I have. And to be killed by a bomb is a pleasant death compared with that" (258).[iii]

In Stephan's attitude, Dora perceives the threat of future tyrants who similarly will claim they seek justice but do so only to further enslave others in their thirst for absolute power. In a moment of lucidity, Dora warns, "Sometimes when I hear what Stephan says, I fear for the future. Others, perhaps, will come who'll quote our authority for killing: and will *not* pay with their lives" (296).

Imprisoned, Kaliayev euphorically savors the moments of great "happiness" leading to his execution at the scaffold. (In his second attempt, and in the absence of innocent bystanders, Kaliayev successfully detonates a bomb that ultimately kills the Grand Duke). Sacrificing his life, as Kaliayev describes in quasi religious terms, renders him a savior for the millions of exploited Russian peasants and seekers of a more equitable world. His execution represents a kind of communion with the object he claims to love, the Russian people (another abstract concept). Ultimately, Kaliayev and the other members of his group exemplify narcissistic delusions about their role in achieving the elusive freedom for their society.[iv]

What are the implications for Camus's contemporary society? Why is this historical time period significant in the context of totalitarian risks? Basing the play on anti-czarist terrorists, Camus seeks to remind his spectators that terrorists have evolved into cold criminals. Less than a century earlier, an act of terrorism was a symbolic, political act whose targets were not primarily innocent civilians. Having survived the German Occupation of France[v] and witnessed an era in which states bombard urban areas in the name of strategic war, Camus rejects the killing of innocents by both non-state and state actors.

In the late forties French society found itself at a crossroads in light of the threat of escalating violence in European and North African political theaters. His plays, like his journalism, engaged with his time. Terror and totalitarianism were two of his prominent concerns.

Spain had been under siege for at least 10 years by General Francisco Franco's military state when Camus wrote *The State of Siege*, a play, published in the same collection as *The Just Assassins*,[vi] but based in Andalusia, in a very different geopolitical area, in this case riddled with extreme-right wing tyranny.

When he wrote this play, the prominent French catholic writer, Gabriel Marcel, questioned why Camus chose Spain for the setting of his play. In turn, in his 1948 article that appeared in *Combat* entitled "Why Spain?" Camus denounced what he considered to be the hypocrisy of the French public and intellectuals in their opportunistic definition of totalitarianism. Marcel probably most took issue with Camus's depiction of the Catholic Church's complicity with the Spanish dictatorship. Camus was known for his anti-Stalinism and for such he incurred the wrath of some prominent leftists. However, he remained critical of both left and right wing totalitarian states. (Colonialism, specifically his beloved French Algeria, proved to be a more personally torturous and confused debate).

Camus accused his contemporaries for quickly forgetting the massive human right violations in Spain during the civil war and the continued repression of political dissenters. In Camus's own words to Marcel:

> You have forgotten that in 1936 a rebellious general, in the name of Christ, raised up an army of Moors, hurled them against the legally constituted government of the Spanish Republic, won victory for an unjust cause after massacres that can never be expiated, and initiated a frightful repression that has lasted ten years and is not yet over. Yes, indeed, why Spain? Because you, like so many others, do not remember. (*Resistance* 79-80)

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The protagonists in Beauvoir's novel echo Camus's fear for a fascist or totalitarian conquest of Europe via Spain and at the same time they do so by making revelatory colonial references to the "army of Moors" that General Franco employed to overthrow the republic. This fear may stem from an unfortunate and unforeseen consequence of colonialism. Franco gained valuable military leadership in the joint French-Spanish venture to pacify indigenous Moroccans fighting for self-determination during the Rif War, waged in the nineteen twenties. Both France and Spain occupied different areas in Morocco. It could be said that this colonial exploit backfired on the Spanish since their future dictator, General Franco, launched his successful attack of the vulnerable, short-lived Spanish republic from this North African colonial post and with the game-changing resources of colonial troops.

The Blood of Others, Beauvoir's historical novel, published in 1945, explores terrorism from another angle. The opening scene sets a sacrificial tone: members of a terrorist cell, headed by the existential protagonist, Jean Bromart, nervously await their next opportunity to strike as one of their martyrs, Hélène, agonizes in her deathbed. Through flashbacks Jean recounts the path that led Hélène, his love, and his comrades to reach this dramatic point and in doing so he exposes his defense for terrorism.

Jean redeems himself in the eyes of other positive characters who throughout the Spanish Civil War criticized his distaste for interventionism. For his friends, war alone could deter authoritarian forces menacing Europe and thus argued, "Could we stand with our arms folded, besides blood-splattered Spain, besides the pogroms that defiled Germany, and that Brown tide which was rolling towards Austria?"(120). In turn, Jean confessed, "And I, too, ardently hoped for the defeat of Franco's Moors, but from that lonely wish, that intimate quivering of my flesh, I did not deduce the right to create a will which I would impose on my comrades" (113).

A free spirit, Jean refuses to encourage his trade union to organize mass strikes as a means to pressure Léon Blum, the Prime Minister of France, into supporting the Spanish republicans. Such endorsement, Jean considers, would be meddling in politics; but most of all, he abhors the responsibility of choosing for other people. Ironically, his future terror campaign will decide the fate of others since brave French prisoners will face retaliatory executions and other bystanders will by definition die arbitrarily.

It is not until the end of the novel that the reader can piece together that Jean, the trade-unionist who shunned the Communist Party for being in his words "too political" and involved in problematic alliances (a not so veiled allusion to the 1939

Soviet-Nazi Pact of non-Aggression that demoralized leftists around the world), in fact heads a terrorist cell. He goes from two extremes—from defending neutrality in the hope of sparing Europe and France from engaging in an international war—to believing that underground resistance during the Occupation did not go far enough. Writing pamphlets against Nazism and the Vichy government, working clandestinely to liberate prisoners, securing resources for the resistance, and similar actions proved too tepid for Jean's new found "revolutionary" or saboteur taste.

Immediately upon the arrival of the first German occupiers, Jean turns to terrorism. He counts on Germany's retaliatory warnings that any acts of violence and sabotage will guarantee the immediate execution of French prisoners. For every German soldier killed, ten French prisoners pay with their lives. And that is exactly what Jean seeks to exploit— a cycle of terror and retaliation that will impede any reconciliation between the French and Germans. Jean fears that a sense of reluctant complacency may root itself in the hearts of war-weary French peoples; he indeed projects his own sense of guilt for having supported pacifism.

In the minds of both Jean and Hélène the German invasion justified any means necessary to attain their liberation. Hélène's insight that life in occupied Paris was like being a colonized person radicalized her. Witnessing the abundance that prevailed for German officers as Parisians scrambled for food, she realizes, "In our midst, they were like a nation of colonizers amongst a crowd of natives; two worlds that ran parallel with each other without even intermingling" (187). For former a-political Hélène and non-interventionist Jean, it took a foreign occupation to radicalize even the staunchest of pacifists.

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Mohammed Dib, an Algerian writer of Berber descent, who inspired his generation—the one that dared to imagine an independent Algeria in the early nineteen fifties, abandoned the realism of his early novels in which he innovatively represented from an indigenous perspective what it meant to exist under colonial dominance. But in the pivotal year of 1962, when Algeria gained its independence, Dib published a novel, *Who Remembers the Sea,* which was like no other.

Is it a science fiction novel populated by Minotaur who arbitrarily sequester husbands, roam the *medina* and terrorize the second-class population? Dib creates unrecognizable creatures resembling mechanical birds called spyrovirs and iriaces that attack, bombard, and police the terrified population whose fear turns their throats into stone. This is a nameless city in an unknown country where walls strangle its inhabitants and close in on the city dwellers—even those living humbly and voicelessly in the periphery. The feverish construction of encroaching buildings pollutes the already toxic environment of the city.

A nameless narrator symbolizes the anonymity of urban targets. He struggles to both relate and comprehend what the population suffers:

> During this time, the walls were constantly tying themselves into inextricable knots, mindless of what became their captives. Anger prowled, paced, retraced its steps through these viscera-like passages,

> and at last fell back, helpless. And yet, this is the most surprising thing, we didn't want to believe such cruelty existed. I shared this reaction, I admit it. (9)

He bears witness to the trauma of a population that is radicalizing for its survival. Hence, unlike Camus's play and Beauvoir's novel, it is the general population and not fringe elements that convert to violence. The margins of the city, that for years meagerly sheltered the second class citizens who speak a different language from the alien occupiers, lose territory to the invading forces transforming the already hostile, segregated landscape.

Terrorism is justified when an occupying state makes the barricaded city unbreathable, human relations unrecognizable. And out of desperation for survival there is nowhere to live but underground. Nafissa, the narrator's model wife, like the soothing force of the sea, is the *mère* (homophone for sea/*mer*), the mother of the narrator's community who fears extinction. As the enigmatic revolutionary who the narrator lauds for her monumental courage and leadership, Nafissa sacrifices her children, home, and husband to go underground in the hope of constructing a new society above. But before that can happen, others like Nafissa silently plant bombs to demolish the predatory constructions above.

It is worth noting the difference in the role that the sea plays in the works of our two Algerian writers (Camus and Dib) dating from the same time period, the last years of French Algeria's tempestuous existence. Their separate and unequal colonial status influences this markedly varied depiction of the sea. Dib's anonymous narrator pays homage to the sea's protection of the population: "Without the sea, without the women, we would have remained orphans permanently; they covered us with the salt of their tongue and that, fortunately, preserved many a man among us! It'll have to be recognized publicly someday" (10). The healing salt is an allusion to the fellagas wounded in the insurrection who sought clandestine medical attention.

While the sea brings solace in Dib's novel, in Camus's anti-totalitarian play, *State of* Siege, based to the north west of Algeria, the sea wind blowing from Africa breathes freedom to oppressed Andalusia. The chorus (which highlights the anonymity of voiceless oppressed peoples under a dictatorship) laments: "O vast sea-spaces, shining solitude, baptism of brine! Ah, to be alone besides the sea, facing the blue expanse, fanned by the wind [from North Africa] and free at last of this city sealed like a tomb, and these all-too-human faces clamped by fear!" (167). Similarly, as far as Camus is concerned, his French North Africa is free but Camus fears that Europe is under siege by the Stalinism's expansionist influence in the working classes and the leftist intelligentsia. On a first level, the play appears anti-Franco but for Camus communism's specter is the metaphorical plague spreading in the western world.

Dib felt that realism failed to capture the psychosis of the Algerian war, the product of a desperate occupation in the throes of survival. In his postface he confesses that Picasso's *Guernica* allowed him to imagine the fantastic style and language that best translates the way in which our unconsciousness is brutalized by the threat of state aggression on our urban centers. Dib captures the universality of *Guernica*:

> Not one realistic element in the whole painting—neither blood nor dead bodies—and yet there is nothing else that expresses so strongly the horror…Picasso has but fixed and given orders to nightmares on his canvas; surely that was not for him a simple method of composition like any other. Above all, there was that which he knew and sensed; these were nightmares that haunted him as they did other men, but he alone was able to give them a face that all thereafter could recognize. (122)

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This paper can only begin to compare important twentieth-century existentialist representations in prose and theater of terrorism's ethicality in thwarting domestic and foreign aggressions on either side of the Mediterranean Sea. What is at stake in each writer's representation of terrorism? How do colonial and non-colonial geographical considerations intersect? Do their subject positions influence how they treat the subject of terrorism? I begin to ask these questions in this paper but such intricate questions demand a longer study.

Camus occupies a more complicated positioning as a French citizen in French Algeria. He rejects Jean-Paul Sartre's famous assertion that there is no such thing as a good or bad colonizer.[vii] Camus's humble background paints a more nuanced picture of the social inequalities faced by all the distinct communities—those considered indigenous (such as the Berber, Muslim, and Jewish) and those of European descent: French, Italian, Maltese, and Spanish. His poor, illiterate mother of Spanish origin was widowed when his father died in a World War I battlefield. His destitute upbringing better poised him to understand the hardships of the subaltern communities. Yet, he could not fathom a country where people like his mother would lose their home as they knew it—albeit its inequalities and indefensible imperfections. He does not condone the *Front Libération Nationale* (Liberation National Front) or FLN's revolutionary struggle against French colonialism.

Camus's play on Russian anarchist-terrorists, based far from the Algerian theater, asks: How is political crime different from senseless murder? Can terrorism be justified as a means for social justice? The answer is absolutely not.

Beauvoir's novel depicts a more romantic idea of the bourgeois' zealous sympathies for the proletariat and how this same impassioned solidarity could lead him or her to radicalize in an extreme situation like war. Her heroic characters employ the metaphor of being colonized[viii] to describe the German Occupation and consequently deem it ethical to shed French and German blood in order to prevent their fellow citizens from entertaining any passive or active ties of complicity with the occupier.

On a biographical note, Beauvoir actively supported the FLN and her cause célèbre during the Algerian War was exposing the French army's sustained tortured and rape of Djamila Boupacha, a young Muslim woman involved in the liberation struggle who intended to set off a bomb but decided against it. (Picasso's drawing of Boupacha adorns the front cover of Beauvoir's book on her cause; Algerian women resisting for a

new nation also inspired his other works, like his portrayal, *Femmes d'Alger*. Thus, just as *Guernica* resonated with pro-nationalists such as Dib, Algerians's defense of their liberty from the yoke of colonialism nourished Picasso's art. Two decades earlier his art defended the rights of anonymous Spanish urban victims and in doing so he inspired radicalized citizens to rise up against empires).

Beauvoir's novel asks: Who has the right to decide for the life or death of others? The characters realize that inaction, such as France's neutrality during the Spanish Civil War, is also deciding whether others live or die.

Dib's more experimental novel offers a more nuanced representation of the asymmetrical kinds of terrorism that haunt society as a whole—those executed by states or non-state actors alike. Dib's novel raises two crucial questions that plague us today: Can and should genocide be defined differently from a civil war or pacification operation? Can a so-called democratic state engaged in indiscriminate bombardments of civilian populations be held accountable for terrorist acts? The monstrous, soulless, bizarre creatures terrorizing from the skies urban dwellers in Dib's novel eerily foreshadow our own drone attacks. However, current occupations—mostly located in yesterday's decolonized countries—prey on urban and remote village communities *alike* in the "war on terror's" declared global battlefield.

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[i] Richardson states, “Albert Camus, in his play *Les Justes*, beautifully captures the sense of morality in the nineteenth-century anarchists, the precursors of many contemporary terrorists. He describes how Kaliayev, seeing two children seated in the carriage next to his intended target, the grand duke, could not bring himself to hurl the bomb. He subsequently does kill the grand duke and is executed, but he could not justify to himself killing children. Many contemporary terrorists, of course, have no trouble justifying the killing of children” (16).

[ii] Richardson aptly describes the initial idealism of Russian anarchists: “Credited with creating the notion of propaganda by deed, the Russian anarchists in fact created more propaganda than deeds. This was true even of more extreme groups such as the Russian Socialist Revolutionary Party, which carefully sought to avoid the death of innocents and constrained itself within clearly defined limits. Its members believed, for example, that terrorism was justified only when the perpetrator was prepared to sacrifice his own life to atone for his actions. ..Their fatal weakness—one shared with their twentieth-century successors—was their tendency to arrogate to themselves the right to decide what was good for people. Their failure was in part due to the fact that the elitist’s self-confidence that came from this viewpoint blinded them to both the degree of their isolation from the people and the strength of their opponents. Nevertheless, their methods revealed a strong sense of moral responsibility that was not always reciprocated by the governments they opposed” (35).

[iii] Play included in *Caligula and Three Other Plays.*

[iv] These anarchist terrorists fit Cronin’s profile of delusional justice makers: “At its heart, terrorism is intended to be an altruistic act, aimed toward a political end that represents a better fate for those on whose behalf attacks are carried out. Terrorism without the pursuit of justice (at least as someone who sees it) is nothing but mass murder and lacks the legitimacy necessary to attract a political following. When terrorism succeeds, as it rarely does, it yields benefits for those on whose behalf it is undertaken. Leaving them out of the equation is to be duped by the claims and ambitions of leaders whose main task is after all, to manipulate perceptions” (74).

[v] In Camus’s published letters to a German friend who supported Nazism (see *Resistance)*, he passionately declares that amidst the butchery of Hitler’s war and its crimes against humanity, the free world is more humane because human dignity is respected. He states, “But at this very moment when I am judging your horrible behavior, I shall remember that you and we started out from the same solitude, that you and we, with all Europe, are caught in the same tragedy of the intelligence. And, despite yourselves, I shall still apply to you the name of man. In order to keep faith with ourselves, we are obliged to respect in you what you do not respect in others” (30).

[vi] See *Caligula*.

[vii] In Sartre's 1956 article, "Colonialism is a System," that can be found in *Colonialism and Neocolonialism*, Sartre asserts, "The fact is that colonization is neither a series of chance occurrences nor the statistical result of thousands of individual undertakings. It is a system which was put in place around the middle of the nineteenth century, began to bear fruit in about 1880, started to decline after the First World War, and is today turning against the colonizing nation" (31).

[viii] It is peculiar that while the French characters in the novel make the clear parallel between occupation and colonization, the French government and the general population did not in the aftermath of their 1945 liberation. On May 8, 1945, as the French celebrated freedom, French military aircraft bombarded Algerian communities clamoring for a more just system in Sétif and its rural outposts. Similarly, the French forces went from liberating France to engulfing in a losing, costly war to maintain Indochina. (This may be considered the first Vietnam War). The triumphant, liberated Vietnamese inspired Algerian nationalists and thus France was forced into another bruising war. In turn, Algerians inspired revolutionaries fighting colonialism, segregation, and imperialism around the globe.