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*How the Irresolvable Camus-Sartre Conflict Helps Us Appreciate
the George Floyd Uprising, and Vice-Versa¹*

ABSTRACT: The Black Lives Matter uprising in the United States that exploded onto the scene after the police killing of George Floyd in May 2020 marks an historic breakthrough – because of its geographic spread throughout the country, its sweeping demand for an end to all racist practices, its willingness to challenge institutions, symbols, and attitudes as well as behaviors, the participation together of millions of Americans of all colors, and especially the involvement of young people. Jean-Paul Sartre and Albert Camus have left us moral and political insights that throw light on this moment: Sartre for his intransigent radicalism and opposition to oppression, Camus for his deep commitment to solidarity and restraint. In their lifetime these sets of attitudes became opposed, and led to their dramatic break. However, today's uprising has rejected the either/or that split apart the friendship as well as their Cold-War generation. But today, going beyond the Camus/Sartre break, solidarity and restraint have been at the core of the Black Lives Matter uprising, from the start together with a deep commitment to radical change.

KEYWORDS: Camus; Sartre; George Floyd Uprising; Black Lives Matter; Solidarity; Restraint; Communism; Algeria; Fanon; Cold War

June 2020 was a breakthrough moment in America. The largest movement in U.S. history began as a protest against police violence towards Black Americans, called for the “defunding” of the police, and has since been attacking racial inequality virtually everywhere, down to the most subtle “microaggressions”. Spontaneous, without central leadership, unauthorized, and unanticipated, it was immediately joined by whites and other minorities as well as Blacks, while strong voices insisted that it remain under Black leadership. More of a mass wave than a coherent movement, the protests spread virtually everywhere in the country, even in all-white neighborhoods and small towns.

¹ An earlier version of this article was published at the «IAI news» <<https://iai.tv/articles/sartre-camus-radicalism-and-solidarity-black-lives-matter-auid-1602>> (last access 03.09.2020).

It may have been outrage that moved people into the streets at first, but by mid-July as many as 26 million Americans had demonstrated in over 2,000 towns and cities and 40% of U.S. counties². Clearly something deeper was at work. What kept people coming out night after night to face tear gas and police charges, and what propelled small knots of whites to organize their very first protest in suburbs and far-flung towns, or to stand on street corners with signs week after week, and what kept surprisingly large numbers of passers-by honking and waving their approval? Why, on a quiet Sunday July evening in deserted downtown Royal Oak, Michigan two miles north of Detroit, did a tiny band of white high-school students march around carrying homemade signs chanting criticisms of the local police and “Black Lives Matter”?

One striking feature of the movement of 2020 is how deep and wide the awareness has been of racial inequality. During a pandemic whose watchword has been “We’re all in this together” is anyone not aware that the death rate among Blacks is three times the death rate among whites, or that Blacks and other people of color are suffering far more from the economic fallout of the pandemic³? The protesters know this. Moreover Americans of all ages and colors are determined not merely to call for racial equality but to *enact* this by expressing their solidarity and where possible marching *together*. That small group of young white students was declaring that they were *with* Black people, even if none were there.

It is as if the truth has fully dawned on most whites that Blacks are not just the victims of “prejudice”, or of negative treatment by individual police officers, but as the death-rate shows, they live under conditions of systemic inequality – from schools to housing to employment to health. As that dawning has been taking place throughout the society, whites are giving up their denial about how deep it is and how structured into the lives that Blacks live. It is built into the society. However vaguely, they are declaring that they want this to end, and that they want to live in a different kind of society⁴.

Of course this has not yet shaped a clear set of demands beyond the slogan “defund the police”, let alone an organized, focused movement pointing to specific structural political, social, and economic changes. But

² See L. BUCHANAN, Q. BUI, J.K. PATEL, *Black Lives Matter May Be the Largest Movement in U.S. History*, in «New York Times», July 3, 2020 <<https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/07/03/us/george-floyd-protests-crowd-size.html>> (last access 03.09.2020).

³ For a fuller treatment of the relationship of the pandemic to “Black Lives Matter” see the preface to R. ARONSON, *Noi: far rivivere la speranza sociale*, Mimesis, Milano 2020.

⁴ See I.X. KENDI, *The End of Denial*, in «The Atlantic», September 2020.

this amorphous wave is a sea change that demands to be appreciated. Its full effects will take some time to be felt. More Americans than not agree that “Black lives matter” and reject the retort that “all lives matter” as a bad-faith evasion of the essential issue⁵.

It is a liberation for whites to experience Blacks *as equals*. This means acknowledging not simply the persistence of police brutality or even the oppressive and unequal social, political, and economic structures to which police brutality belongs. There is a liberation in declaring equality openly, to other whites as well as Blacks. Calling it a liberation may help explain why it has been spreading like wildfire: by acknowledging that “Black Lives Matter” and demonstrating alongside Blacks for racial equality, whites are freeing themselves to express solidarity *and at the same time* to understand and assert that this means radical change. This is why the inflammatory slogan “defund the police” – whatever it means in practice – has become so widespread. This is why “Black Lives Matter” signs have popped up in largely white neighborhoods throughout the country. This is why John Lewis suddenly emerged from near-obscure to become a celebrated national hero on his passing. This is why not only are statues coming down that memorialized the defenders of slavery, but even corporations are calling out their support, and this is why the mainstream media has lent its voice to the uprising.

I am of course talking about an exceptional historical moment, a radical and generous mood of solidarity so widespread as to be without equal. There is no reason to assume that the wave will preserve its wonderful features as it becomes a structured and settled movement, or even that it will become such a movement. Still, even as the limitations and problems of the uprising are now being discussed, the depth and novelty of what has been happening demands to be appreciated. This is not a “Civil Rights” movement, nor is it limited, as in the past, including most recently the Ferguson, Missouri demonstrations of 2014, to African Americans and a core of sympathetic whites. And it is more than, although it is also that, an angry reaction to the presidency of Donald Trump, particularly his racism, self-interest and ineptitude during the time of Covid-19. Inasmuch as this wave was supported by two-thirds of Americans and attacked by President

⁵ On July 28 the Gallup Poll reported that *Two in Three Americans Support Racial Justice Protests*, S. Long and J. McCarthy, in *The Gallup Poll* <https://news.gallup.com/poll/316106/two-three-americans-support-racial-justice-protests.aspx?utm_source=alert&utm_medium=email&utm_content=morelink&utm_campaign=syndication> (last access 03.09.2020). By the end of August and after three months of active opposition by President Donald Trump, according to the Civiqs survey supporters had declined to 49%. See note 9 below.

Trump, it is likely that those opposing it are those same whites who oppose the progressive developments of the past fifty years – racial integration, women’s liberation, gay marriage – and form the core of Trump’s base. As the election campaign began, one of the main questions hovering over his re-election blitz was whether his obviously racist appeals to white suburbanites and for “law and order” might draw enough support to once again win a majority of the electoral college with a minority of votes.

As a scholar of the two great political moralists of the last century, Albert Camus and Jean-Paul Sartre, I am struck by the fact that the uprising has drawn together two impulses that came to be diametrically opposed in these men. Their friendship, and their historical world, broke apart over the irreconcilability of Sartre’s radicalism with Camus’s restraint. To appreciate the depth and novelty of what is happening today it may be useful to see how Camus and Sartre, and their unresolvable conflict of nearly seventy years ago, throw light on our events. And in turn, what today’s moment teaches us about the break between Sartre and Camus.

What stands out today is the presence together of what were once two opposite notes, Sartre’s intransigent opposition about systemic oppression and Camus’s no less determined emphasis on solidarity and self-restraint. Both thought it was necessary to choose between these, and their either/or became a political/moral demand seemingly imposed by history itself, specifically by the Cold War. Now when whites and Blacks march together today, and when whites carry signs saying “Black lives matter” and elicit support from passing motorists, they are being at once non-violent, acting in racial solidarity and respectful of their intended audience, and are calling into question the deep history and pervasive structures of American society. By bringing together these usual contraries, today’s wave of protest creates hope for the kind of politics that eluded both men and their generation – demanding systemic change without giving up its generous animating impulse.

Black Lives Matter contains a fierce radicalism reminiscent of Sartre specifically because of its consistent opposition to all forms of oppression. Sartre’s hallmark is his refusal to normalize any form of humans subjugating other humans. In 1952 he began his unique approach to the problem of violence by analyzing and demonstrating the structural violence imposed by bourgeois society on workers. He began to ask how violent human domination of other humans became interiorized in political, social, and economic forms. Armed with his insights, Sartre appreciated violence from below by workers, by native revolutionaries as a response, the only effective one, to bourgeois and colonial dominance.

During the war of Algerian independence Sartre was one of the first to talk about colonialism as a system, and his searing denunciation of government torture of Algerian rebels was banned by the government. His famous 1961 preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* captures the systemic dehumanization of natives by colonialists and justifies their recourse to violence to reclaim their humanity. In these writings Sartre identifies with the oppressed, describes their oppression both at an individual and a structural level, and justifies their violent response. As the years passed he again and again supported the weak against the powerful: the Hungarian workers' rebellion against the Communist Party and government, the Cuban revolution, the Vietnamese being subjected to genocide by the Americans, the 1968 uprising of French students and workers, immigrants living in the Paris suburbs.

But in the climate of either/or nurtured by the Cold War, he went overboard. In the Fanon essay he used the language of *Critique de la raison dialectique*, extolling revolutionary violence as «the beginning of humanity»⁶, refused to criticize terrorism, gave a blank check to anti-colonial rebels for any and all atrocities, and even accepted the Munich massacre of Israeli athletes as the «only means of struggle»⁷ by an oppressed people. These were more than momentary excesses: the oppressed experience violence through every pore, and they can only overthrow the structural violence imposed on them through turning this back on their oppressors. Sartre believed that to demand from the outside that such violence be measured and controlled is to undermine the capacity to struggle. His logic was sweeping: nonviolence only perpetuates oppression; violence, the essential tool of oppression, is the only possible path of liberation.

Camus's strength, and his blind spot, lay in the other direction. He was the voice of militant nonviolence. He was keenly aware that revolutionary violence always entailed more, much more, than the rejection and overcoming of oppression. In *The Just Assassins* and *The Rebel*, he explored it as a deep psychological and even metaphysical urge stemming from our desire to overcome the fundamental absurdity of existence that became displaced from its original and impossible-to-achieve goals. In 1956 he made a courageous effort to resolve the Algerian conflict with a minimum of violence. He was, after all, behind the last significant effort of Europeans and Arabs in the history of Algeria to unite behind a common

⁶ J.-P. SARTRE, *Critique de la raison dialectique*, Paris, Gallimard 1960, p. 453.

⁷ ID., *About Munich*, translated by E. A. Bowman, in «Sartre Studies International», IX, n. 2, 2003, pp. 5-8, p. 7.

project. In 1956 he was one of the heroic voices against the violence being unleashed in Algeria, sponsoring and speaking at the last mass meeting in Algiers to explore a peaceful solution to the conflict.

But he did not know as he spoke to the crowd that the meeting, threatened with violence and disruption by *pieds-noirs* who rejected any accommodation, was in fact being protected by a disciplined cadre surrounding the hall belonging to the Algerian rebels, the FLN, who had decided to let the meeting proceed. There could often be, in other words, a lack of realism in Camus's generosity. Further, although he was deeply committed to restraining violence and was no less committed to an ethic of solidarity and mutual respect, Camus never accepted the principle of Algerian independence. For all his belief in equality, he toyed with solutions that would keep Algerian under French control, and "as French Algeria's most famous son" he refused to tell the truth about their colonial privileges to his *piéd-noir* community. Camus repressed the reality of the FLN. He refused to connect their violence with the facts of Arab life in French-ruled Algeria, ignoring the violence-imposed privileges of his own community. In his principled, opposition to overt violence and his commitment to mutual respect, he never talked about the oppressions of native life or their reason for demanding independence.

Such were the blind spots about violence of these two brilliant critics of violence. Camus managed to combine his insight and bad faith in a single provocative statement during his Nobel Prize visit to Sweden in December 1957: «I have always condemned terror. I must also condemn a terrorism that is carried out blindlyCin the streets of Algiers for example—Cand may one day strike my mother or my family. I believe in justice, but I will defend my mother before justice»⁸. We have seen Sartre's celebration of anti-colonial violence in the preface to *The Wretched of the Earth*.

The themes of Camus and Sartre call out eloquently, but they became cut off from each other in their work and lives. Their compelling insights were constantly abraded by the Either/Or to which both subscribed and in terms of which each criticized the other. Yet this guaranteed that each writer-activist would possess no more than a half-truth. Sartre kept silent about, or excused, the atrocities committed by movements of national liberation while fiercely denouncing every misstep of the French government, and Camus came close to being obsessed by anti-Communism, and then never questioned the violently imposed and maintained Frenchness of Algeria while dismissing as irrational the Algerian demand for inde-

⁸ A. CAMUS, *Essais*, Gallimard, Paris 1965, p. 1882.

pendence. Like the sides that embraced them during the Cold War, each man obscured his contradictions by employing a double standard of judgment, accepting behaviors on the one side that he declared reprehensible on the other. The fact that they did so with almost perfect symmetry in relation to each other suggests that each one was in bad faith, intentionally hiding from an uncomfortable part of the truth.

What does this history have to do with recent events? The uprising was characterized by analytical depth, moral coherence, solidarity, radicalism, mutual respect, and restraint *at the same time*. There was no need to choose between mutual respect and radical change. The system's economic violence, health-care violence, and police violence did not provoke a massively violent response. For once the minority had the majority with it, and in any case still has the deep certainty that history and right are on its side. Solidarity and equality are still the dominant notes of the Black Lives Matter uprising, and the protestors are still engaged in a productive dialogue with the larger society, including its media representatives. Arguing and thinking through the meanings of "defund the police" has been part of that dialogue, as is the renewed conversation about reparations. In Sartre and Camus's world, lines were drawn more tightly between two sides, and it was necessary to choose. With Donald Trump fanning the flames, was this happening again? The fact is that two months after George Floyd's death, support for Black Lives Matter had dropped to less than a majority, and those opposing it increased⁹.

The anti-racist movement of 2020 emerged by refusing to choose between what has long been given as opposing and irreconcilable impulses, a radical understanding of Black oppression and an impulse of racial solidarity. Not yet in theory, but in practice and at the level of grass-roots action, it insisted on uniting a kind of Sartrean intransigence towards systemic oppression with a mutually respectful Camusean sense of solidarity. Generosity and radicalism: will it be possible to hold these together, or will it once again be necessary to choose?

In the conclusion to *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It* I speculated whether the time was ripe for going beyond the Either/Or of generosity/radicalism imposed by the Cold War

⁹ Civiqs Survey Results on August 23, 2020 showed 49% supporting Black Lives Matter and 38% opposing <https://civiqs.com/results/black_lives_matter?annotations=true&uncertainty=true&zoomIn=true> (last access 03.09.2020).

that broke apart their friendship and so much else¹⁰. After all, by the twenty-first century the specific issues dividing the two men had faded: along with the need to pick one side or the other, hadn't the demand vanished by supporters of either side to tell half-truths and partially blind themselves specifically about the systemic violence so deeply understood by Sartre (for example of capitalism or colonialism) or the perils of violent resistance (for example encouraged by Communists or anti-colonial revolutionaries) warned against by Camus? Instead, I hopefully imagined a Camus/Sartre: a political-intellectual stance that might, as I said, «illuminate today's systemic violence while accepting the challenge of mounting an effective struggle against it without creating new evils»¹¹.

Perhaps today's uprising points the way. On the one hand, as I have argued in trying to look beyond their unresolved conflict, the particular *need to choose* that destroyed their friendship, rooted in the Cold War, made a coherent moral-political position impossible. There was no way Sartre or Camus could combine analytical depth, moral coherence, solidarity, radicalism, mutual respect, and restraint *at the same time*, which is precisely how tens of millions of Americans responded to the police killing of George Floyd. Camus and Sartre, and their world-historical conflict, help us to understand the achievement of this moment.

ABSTRACT: La rivolta di *Black Lives Matter* negli Stati Uniti, che è esplosa sulla scena dopo l'omicidio da parte della polizia di George Floyd a Maggio 2020, segna una svolta storica – per la sua diffusione geografica per tutto il paese, per la sua ampia pretesa di porre fine a tutte le pratiche razziste, per la sua intenzione di sfidare le istituzioni, i simboli, gli atteggiamenti e i comportamenti, per la partecipazione condivisa di milioni di americani di tutti i colori, e soprattutto per il coinvolgimento dei giovani. Jean-Paul Sartre e Albert Camus ci hanno tramandato idee morali e politiche che aiutano a chiarire questo momento: Sartre per il suo radicalismo intransigente e per l'opposizione all'oppressione, Camus per il suo profondo impegno nei confronti della solidarietà e per il suo equilibrio. Nella loro vita questi approcci divennero opposti, e condussero alla loro drammatica rottura. Tuttavia la rivolta attuale ha respinto l'*aut aut* che ha diviso sia la loro amicizia sia la generazione della Guerra Fredda. Oggi, andando oltre la rottura di Camus e Sartre, la solidarietà e l'equilibrio sono stati al centro della rivolta di *Black Lives Matter* fin dall'inizio, insieme a un profondo impegno per un cambiamento radicale.

¹⁰ See R. ARONSON, *Camus and Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago 2004, p. 234.

¹¹ *Ibidem*.