

Speaking Out

Lectures and Speeches 1937–58

Indigenous Culture. The New Mediterranean Culture

1937

A member of the Parti Communiste Algérien (PCA) since late summer 1935, Albert Camus involved himself in cultural action by founding the Théâtre du Travail, a company that he managed at the same time as being a scriptwriter, director and actor. Meanwhile, he became general secretary of the Algiers Cultural Centre, which organized cinema shows, concerts and lectures. It was at the inauguration of this body on 8 February 1937 that Camus, then twenty-two years old, delivered the following lecture. The text was published in the first issue of the Cultural Centre's bulletin, Jeune Méditerranée, in April 1937. In the autumn of that year Albert Camus left the PCA.

I

The Cultural Centre being introduced to you today claims to serve Mediterranean culture. Faithful to the general prescriptions governing centres of this type, it aims in the regional context to help promote a culture whose existence and greatness no longer need to be proved. In that respect, there is perhaps something surprising in the fact that left-wing intellectuals can place themselves at the service of a culture which seems in no way to concern their own cause, and which has even in some cases been taken over (as with Maurras¹) by right-wing ideologues.

Serving the cause of a Mediterranean regionalism may indeed restore a useless and doomed traditionalism, or even exalt the superiority of one culture over another: for instance, in a reprise of fascism in reverse, by pitting the Latin against the Nordic peoples. Therein lies a perpetual misunderstanding. The purpose of this lecture is an attempt to resolve this. The fundamental error consists in confusing the Mediterranean with Latinity, and placing in Rome what began in Athens. For us the matter is clear: what is involved cannot be some kind of sunshine nationalism. We could never subject ourselves to traditions, or bind our living future to feats already defunct. A tradition is a past that counterfeits the present. The Mediterranean that surrounds us is by contrast a living land, filled with play and smiles. Meanwhile, nationalism has condemned itself by its actions. Nationalism always appears in history as a sign of decadence. When the vast edifice of the Roman Empire crumbled, when its spiritual unity, from which so many different regions drew their reason for living, broke apart, only then at the hour of decadence did nationalities appear. Since then, the West has never recovered its unity. At the present time, internationalism seeks to reinvest it with its true meaning and its vocation. But the principle is no longer Christian, no longer the papal Rome of the Holy Empire. The principle is man. Unity is no longer in belief but in hope. A civilization can last only insofar as, all nations suppressed, it derives its unity and its greatness from a spiritual principle. India, almost as large as Europe, without nations or a sovereign, has kept its own physiognomy even after two centuries of English domination.

This is why we shall reject out of hand the principle of a Mediterranean nationalism. Besides, any superiority of Mediterranean culture is out of the question. Man expresses himself in harmony with his land. And in the domain of culture, superiority resides only in that harmony. There is no culture which is greater or less great. There are cultures which are truer or less true. We wish only to help a land express itself. Locally. Nothing more. The real question: is a new Mediterranean culture achievable?

II. Proofs

1. There is a Mediterranean sea, a basin linking a dozen countries. The men wailing in the *cafés cantantes* of Spain, those roaming the port of Genoa or the quays of Marseilles, the strange, strong race inhabiting our shores – all spring from the same family. When travelling through Europe, as you come back down towards Italy or Provence, it is with a sigh of relief that you once more encounter dishevelled men and that heady, colourful life we all know. I spent two months in Western Europe, between Austria and Germany, wondering about the source of that strange unease weighing upon my shoulders, that dull anxiety pervading me. Lately I have understood. Those people were always buttoned up to the neck. They did not know how to relax. They knew nothing about what joy is, so different from laughter. Yet it is with details like this that the word Fatherland can be imbued with a valid meaning. The Fatherland is not the abstraction driving men to massacre; it is a certain taste for life that is common to certain individuals, through which you can feel closer to a Genoese or a Mallorcan than to a Norman or an Alsatian. This is what the Mediterranean is: this smell or scent which it is pointless to express – we all feel it with our skin.

2. There are other proofs, historical ones. Whenever a doctrine has encountered the Mediterranean basin, in the resulting clash of ideas it is always the Mediterranean that has remained intact, the land that has conquered the doctrine. Christianity was originally a moving but closed doctrine, primarily Judaic, eschewing concessions, harsh, exclusive and admirable. From its encounter with the Mediterranean a new doctrine emerged: Catholicism. The initial complex of emotional aspirations was supplemented by a philosophical doctrine. The monument was completed, embellished – adapted to man. Thanks to the Mediterranean, Christianity was able to enter the world and begin there the miraculous career known to all.

It was another man of the Mediterranean, Francis of Assisi, who made from Christianity, all inward and tormented, a hymn to

nature and naive joy. And the sole attempt made to separate Christianity from the world we owe to a man of the North, to Luther. Protestantism, properly speaking, is Catholicism torn away from the Mediterranean and its fatal, thrilling influence.

Let us look more closely. For those who have lived in both Germany and Italy, it is an obvious fact that fascism does not wear the same countenance in both countries. You feel it everywhere in Germany, on faces and in the city streets. Dresden, a military city, suffocates beneath an invisible enemy. What you feel first in Italy is the land. What you see at first sight in a German is the Nazi, greeting you with the words: 'Heil Hitler!' With an Italian, it is the friendly, cheerful man. Here again, the doctrine seems to have retreated before the land; and it is a miracle of the Mediterranean to allow men who think humanely to live without oppression in a country with inhuman laws.

III

Yet this living reality which is the Mediterranean is nothing new for us. And it seems that this culture is the image of that Latin antiquity which the Renaissance sought to rediscover from across the Middle Ages. It is that Latinity which Maurras and his people are seeking to annex. It is in the name of that Latin order that, in the Ethiopian affair, twenty-four Western intellectuals signed a shameful manifesto exalting Italy's civilizing work in barbaric Ethiopia.

But no. That is not the Mediterranean to which our Cultural Centre lays claim. Because it is not the true one. It is the abstract, conventional Mediterranean symbolized by Rome and the Romans. Yet that people of imitators without imagination did imagine replacing the artistic genius and feeling for life that they lacked by martial genius. And that order so warmly extolled to us was the one imposed by force, not the one which draws breath in intelligence. Even when they copied something, they made it dull. And it is not even the essential genius of Greece that they imitated, but the fruits of its decadence and its mistakes. Not the strong, harsh Greece of

the great tragic or comic writers, but the charm and affectation of the final centuries. It is not life that Rome took from Greece, but childish, quibbling abstraction. The Mediterranean is elsewhere. It is the very negation of Rome and the Latin genius. Alive, it could not care less about abstraction. And we may readily concede to Monsieur Mussolini that he is the worthy continuator of the ancient Caesar and Augustus, if we mean by this that, like them, he sacrifices truth and greatness to soulless violence.

It is not the taste for argument and abstraction to which we lay claim in the Mediterranean, but its life – the courtyards, the cypresses, the strings of peppers; Aeschylus and not Euripides – the Doric Apollos, not the Vatican copies. It is Spain, its strength and its pessimism, not the swagger of Rome; the landscapes crushed by sunlight, not the stage sets where a dictator gets drunk on his own voice and subdues crowds. What we want is not the lie that triumphed in Ethiopia, but the truth being murdered in Spain.²

IV

An international basin criss-crossed by every current, the Mediterranean is of all lands perhaps the only one to converge with the great Oriental ways of thinking. For it is not classical and ordered, but diffuse and turbulent, like those Arab neighbourhoods or those ports of Genoa and Tunisia. That triumphant taste for life, that sense of crushing boredom, the deserted squares at noon in Spain, the siesta: those are the true Mediterranean – and what it resembles is the Orient. Not the Latin West. North Africa is one of the rare lands where East and West cohabit. And at this confluence there is no difference between the way a Spaniard or Italian on the quays of Algiers lives and the Arabs who live all around them. What is most essential in the Mediterranean genius springs perhaps from that historically and geographically unique encounter born between East and West. (In this regard, reference to Audisio³ is obligatory.)

That Mediterranean culture and truth exists and is displayed

in every aspect: (1) linguistic unity – ease of learning one Latin language once you know another; (2) unity of origin – prodigious collectivism of the Middle Ages – order of knights, order of monks, feudal powers, etc. The Mediterranean, in all these aspects, gives us here the image of a living, colourful, concrete civilization transforming doctrines into its image – and absorbing ideas without changing its own nature.

But then, you will say, why go further?

V

Because the very land that transformed so many doctrines must transform the doctrines of today. A Mediterranean collectivism will be different from a Russian collectivism, strictly speaking. The game of collectivism is not being played out in Russia; it is being played out in the Mediterranean basin and in Spain at the present moment. To be sure, the game of man has been played out for a long while, but it is perhaps here that it has reached the peak of tragedy and that so many trump cards are concentrated in our hands. Before our eyes, there are realities that are stronger than us. Our ideas will bend before them and adapt. That is why our adversaries are mistaken in all their objections. No one has the right to pre-judge the fate of a doctrine and judge our future in the name of the past, even if it is that of Russia.

Our task precisely here is to rehabilitate the Mediterranean, take it back from those who unjustly lay claim to it and make it ready to receive the economic forms that await it. It is to discover what is concrete and alive in it, and promote at every opportunity the diverse aspects of that culture. We are all the more prepared for this task in that we are in direct contact with the Orient, which can teach us so much in that respect. We are here with the Mediterranean against Rome. And the essential role that cities like Algiers and Barcelona can play in their own poor way is to serve that aspect of Mediterranean culture which promotes man rather than crushing him.

VI

The role of the intellectual is hard in our epoch. It is not up to him to modify history. Whatever people say, revolutions are made first and the ideas come later. So great courage is needed today to declare oneself faithful to things of the mind. But at least that courage is not useless. If so much scorn and so much disapproval is attached to the label intellectual, that is insofar as it implies the notion of the argumentative, abstract gentleman, incapable of devoting himself to life and preferring his own personality to the rest of the world. But for those who do not wish to avoid their responsibilities, the essential task is to rehabilitate intelligence by regenerating the matter upon which it works, and to give the mind back all its true meaning by restoring to culture its true face of health and sunlight. And, as I was saying, that courage is not useless. For if it is not in fact up to intelligence to modify history, then its proper task will be to act upon man who himself makes history. We have a contribution to make to that task. We want to reconnect culture with life. The Mediterranean, which surrounds us with smiles, sunlight and sea, provides us with the lesson for this. Xenophon, in his *Retreat of the Ten Thousand*, recounts how the Greek soldiers who had ventured into Asia, returning to their own land, dying of hunger and thirst, in despair at so many setbacks and humiliations, reached the top of a mountain from which they saw the sea. At once they began to dance, forgetting all their exhaustion and disgust at the spectacle of their past lives. Neither do we wish to separate ourselves from the world. There is only one culture. Not that which feeds off abstractions and capital letters. Not that which condemns. Not that which justifies the abuses and deaths of Ethiopia and legitimizes the taste for brutal conquest. We know that one well and want no part of it. But the one which lives in trees and hills and men.

This is why men of the left are presenting themselves before you today in the service of a cause that at first sight had nothing to do with their opinions. I would hope that, like us, you might now be

convinced of the opposite. All that is alive is ours. Politics is made for men, not men for politics. For Mediterranean men, a Mediterranean politics is needed. We do not want to live off fables. In the world of violence and death surrounding us, there is no room for hope. But there is perhaps room for civilization, the true kind, the kind that puts truth before fable, life before dreams. And this civilization has no need for hope. Man lives there off his truths.*

It is to this common effort that men of the West must devote themselves. In the framework of internationalism, the thing is achievable. If each person in their own sphere, land or province agrees to a modest labour, success is not far away. As for us, we know our target, our limitations and our possibilities. We have only to open our eyes to be aware of our task: to make people realize that culture can be understood only when placed at the service of life; that the mind is capable of not being man's enemy. Just as the Mediterranean sun is the same for all men, the effort of human intelligence must be a common patrimony rather than a source of conflict and murder.

Can a new Mediterranean culture compatible with our social ideal be achieved? Yes, but it is up to us and to you to help achieve it.

* I have spoken about a new civilization rather than about progress within civilization. It would be too dangerous to wield that wicked toy called Progress.

Defence of Intelligence

1945

After a gap of four years during the war, Temps présent began to appear again in late August 1944. On 15 March 1945, under the aegis of the Amitié Française association, the Catholic weekly invited 'young intellectuals' to meet at the Mutualité hall in Paris. Albert Camus addressed this assembly, which among other speakers included Stanislas Fumet, editor of Temps présent, André Mandouze, Emmanuel Mounier and Maurice Schumann. Published at the end of 1945 in the first issue of the magazine Variété, the speech 'Defence of Intelligence' was to be reprinted by Camus in the first volume of his Actuelles (1950), in a section called 'Pessimism and Tyranny'.

If the kind of French friendship which concerns us here were to be merely an effusion of feeling among agreeable people, I would not give much for it. That would be the easiest thing, but the least useful. And I assume the people who took this initiative wanted something else – a more difficult friendship, requiring effort. So that we shall not be tempted to give way to facility and content ourselves with mutual congratulation, in the ten minutes allotted me I should simply like to indicate the difficulties of this undertaking. From that point of view, I can do no better than speak about what always stands in the way of friendship – I mean falsehood and hatred.

For we shall do nothing for French friendship if we do not deliver ourselves from falsehood and hatred. In a certain sense, it is only too true that we have failed to deliver ourselves from them. We

have been schooled by them for too long. And perhaps Hitlerism's last and most durable victory has been those shameful scars left in the hearts even of those who fought it with all their strength. How could it be otherwise? For years this world has been given over to an unparalleled flood of hatred. For four years, here at home, we have witnessed the methodical exercise of that hatred. Men like you and me, who of a morning would pat children in the Métro, in the evening would become transformed into meticulous executioners. They would become the functionaries of hatred and torture. For four years, those functionaries made their administration work: villages of orphans were built; men were shot in the face to make them unrecognizable; children's corpses were stamped with heels into coffins too small for them; brothers were tortured in front of sisters; cowards were moulded and the proudest of souls destroyed. It seems that such stories were not credited abroad. But for four years they had to be credited here, in our fleshly agony. For four years, each morning, every Frenchman would receive his ration of hatred and his slap in the face as soon as he opened his daily paper. Inevitably, something of all that has been left behind.

It has left us with hatred. It has left us with the impulse which, the other day in Dijon, drove a fourteen-year-old child to hurl himself upon a collaborator being lynched and try to gouge his face. It has left us with that rage that scorches our souls at the memory of certain images and certain faces. The hatred of the executioners is matched by the hatred of the victims. And now that the executioners are gone, the French have been left with their own hatred partially unsated. They still look at each other with a residue of anger.

Well, that is what we first need to conquer. We must heal those poisoned hearts. And tomorrow, the hardest victory we have to achieve over the enemy must be won within ourselves, through the exceptional effort that will transform our appetite for hatred into desire for justice. Not yielding to hatred, conceding nothing to violence, not permitting our passions to become blind – this is what we can still do for friendship and against Hitlerism. Even today, some newspapers give free rein to violence and insult. But that is

to surrender once more to the enemy. On the contrary, it is up to us never to allow criticism to descend into insult; to admit that our opponent may be right, and his arguments in any case, however faulty, may be disinterested. In short, it is up to us to remake our political mentality.

What does that mean, if we stop to think about it? It means that we must preserve intelligence. For I am convinced that this is where the problem lies. A few years ago, when the Nazis had just taken power, Göring would give a true idea of their philosophy by declaring: 'When people talk to me about intelligence, I take out my revolver.'¹ And that philosophy spread beyond Germany. At the same time, throughout civilized Europe, the excesses of intellect and the sins of the intellectual were being denounced. Intellectuals themselves, through a telling reaction, were not slow to join the assault. Everywhere philosophies of instinct triumphed and, along with them, that cheap romanticism which prefers feeling to understanding, as if the two could be separated. Since then, intelligence has constantly been called into question. War came, then defeat. Vichy taught us that the main culprit was intelligence. The peasants had read too much Proust. And everyone knows that *Paris-Soir*,² Fernandel³ and corporate banquets were signs of intelligence. The mediocrity of the elites which was killing France apparently had its source in books.

Intelligence is mistreated even now. This merely proves that the enemy is not yet defeated. And it is enough to strive to understand without any preconceived idea, enough to talk about objectivity, for people to denounce your sophistry and accuse all your pretensions. Well, no! That is just what has to be reformed. For, like everyone, I well know the excesses of intellect; like everyone, I know that intellectuals are dangerous creatures who easily betray. But that is the wrong kind of intelligence. The kind we are speaking about is that which relies on courage; that which, for four years, has paid the necessary price for the right to be respected. Whenever this kind of intelligence is extinguished, the night of dictatorships falls. Which is why we have to uphold it with all its duties and all its rights. It is at this price, at this price alone, that French friendship will

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have any meaning. For friendship is the knowledge of free men. And there is no freedom without intelligence and without mutual understanding.

In conclusion, it is you students whom I shall address here. I am not one of those who will preach virtue to you. Too many French people confuse that with weakness of blood. If I had the right to do so, I should instead advocate passions. But on one or two points I should like those who will shape the French intelligence of tomorrow at least to be determined never to yield. I should like them not to yield when people tell them that intelligence is always excessive; when people try to prove to them that lying is all right in order to ensure success. I should like them not to yield to trickery, or violence, or cowardice. Then perhaps a French friendship will be possible that will be something more than empty babble. Then, perhaps, in a free nation passionate about truth, man will begin once more to acquire that taste for man without which the world will never be anything but a vast solitude.

Informal Talk by Monsieur Albert Camus [to the Romanians]

1945

When Albert Camus addressed this message to the Romanians, their country was passing through a serious political crisis. Under communist pressure, the government of national unity – established in August 1944 after the crushing of German and Romanian troops by the Red Army – resigned in October, in favour of a pro-Soviet government led by Petru Groza. After the 1946 elections and the abdication of King Michael I in 1947, Romania became a people's democracy under Moscow tutelage. The conditions under which this message was broadcast are unknown. Possibly Pierre Kauffmann and Serge Karski, dispatched successively to Romania by the newspaper Combat of which Camus was then chief editor,¹ may have acted as local contacts for its radio transmission.

The Frenchman who is speaking to you today has no other claim to be addressing you than having for four years been the citizen of a country enslaved and humiliated as Romania was. So it is not any official way of speaking that I can adopt with you today, nor the authoritative manner that more important personages might allow themselves. But it does seem to me that I can speak to you as one of those seemingly anonymous millions of men who made up the French people under oppression.

Like everyone in my country, I know the ties that have always bound Romania and France. But those ties, translated into the language of chancelleries or of academic lectures, have always struck

me as a bit abstract. If it was necessary to speak only about them, I should have nothing to say to you. But for four years there has been a European community in which the French people and the Romanian people have formed other ties, and which is a community of suffering. It is here that I am able to speak.

I have no taste for oratorical warnings. And that is why I shall say, as I think, that Romania and France entered shame at the same time and left it at the same time. This is what makes our resemblance and our common destiny. And it is this that should help us understand each other better. For if it is not shared shame and revolt which bring people closer, then nothing in the world can bring them closer and they are condemned to eternal solitude.

Barely emerged from nights of oppression, Europe is obliged to acknowledge her solidarity. We now know that everything which threatens Romanian freedom threatens French freedom, and that conversely everything which hurts a Frenchman affects at the same time the free men of Romania. We know that we shall save ourselves together, with all the other peoples of Europe, or we shall perish together. And that is fine. What we were unable to do in the days when intelligence was free and happy, we shall perhaps do after all these years in which it was insulted and desperate.

I know that some among you are concerned for France and retain the memory of her greatness. I know that they are asking: 'What is she doing? What is she going to do?' It is a question I cannot answer. Frenchmen of my age, when they think about their country, experience an anguish they cannot share with anybody. But I can tell you at least what we do know for sure. We are sure that France, and with her Europe, will not be remade from one day to the next. We know that political greatness is lost more quickly than it is achieved. But we know too that there are forms of greatness which are for all time, even though they are not obtained painlessly.

It is these forms of greatness which motivate us, because they are not based on hatred or oppression. I am referring to justice and freedom. We who have so detested injustice and been fired by the