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Melissa Ptacek

Brandeis University, melmpta@gmail.com

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Abstract

Review of David Ohana. *Albert Camus and the Critique of Violence*. Trans. David Maisel. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2017. vi + 192 pp.

Keywords

Albert Camus, violence, humanism

David Ohana. *Albert Camus and the Critique of Violence*. Trans. David Maisel. Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 2017. vi + 192 pp.

David Ohana's *Albert Camus and the Critique of Violence* begins with a truism: "The short life, works and intellectual outlook of Albert Camus were almost all connected with the question of violence" (1). The violence about which Camus wrote is well known, including war, revolution, totalitarianism, terrorism, and the death penalty. The book closes with personal revelations linking the author to Camus, whom he describes as an "inspiration for me" and an "inexhaustible store of insight" (158). Ohana here tells of his Moroccan birth in a town that Camus's father reportedly participated in conquering as a member of French colonial forces.

Ohana's structure—reflected in the main sections of the book—is that of "[t]hree main metaphors of western culture" through which Camus's understanding of violence will be discussed. These are the binding of Prometheus, the sacrifice of Isaac, and the crucifixion of Jesus (7). It is in the final section that Ohana discusses the idea of a distinctive "Mediterranean humanism," which might have served well as a stronger organizing principle of a book that is really an extended essay, with sections rather than chapters.

While Ohana's *Camus*, translated from Hebrew by David Maisel, examines several of Camus's novels, plays, and other works of literature, it is not a work of literary criticism; rather, the focus is on political analysis. Ohana brings in various less common interlocutors for Camus rather than concentrating on the traditional "usual suspect," Jean-Paul Sartre. As Ohana summarizes it, a long due "respect" is owed Camus for his (Promethean) humanism, his opposition to "abstract radicalism and all-justifying violence," and his "spontaneous, simple and succinct" responses to the problems of living freely and humanly in a world without intrinsic meaning or purpose (158). What Ohana most admires in Camus is that the French author took a brave and principled stance against violence and oppression and did so consistently, almost alone on many issues and in any case earlier than others, refusing to glorify violence as either privileged and/or necessary, or as an absolute or end in itself.

Ohana's heroic portrayal of Camus is due to the latter's rejection of "metaphysical temptations" (most notably of violence) and his insistence that humans must act in pursuit of justice without demand or expectation of redemption (religious or otherwise). They should thus, in this view, accept absurdity, chaos, and isolation even within human relationships and communities, while choosing a precisely measured middle between the extremes of victim and executioner; such a choice would be "rebellion," equidistant from the violence of both state authority, most especially in its totalitarian form, and of the revolutionary, who opts collectively or individually for unlimited means in pursuit of an ideological vision and/or self-fulfillment. Neither nihilistic (in his later view) nor utopian, Camus

encouraged moral action that respects both the rational and the sacred, avoiding the “sanctification of politics” that has emerged after the death of God and that exalts abstractions and absolutes over living human beings and valorizes “man” along with violence (of the ideological or political sort) as the successor to divine or transcendental violence.

Ohana shows us a Camus who, via World War II and the Holocaust especially, came to the position of “Promethean humanism.” The bound Prometheus, who liberates himself, is a rejection of the sacrificed (associated with Isaac) and the crucified (associated with Jesus), though offering some aspects of these, and at the same time a rejection of their oppressors and ultimately killers. However, while offering a somewhat different framework for looking at Camus, Ohana’s understanding of Camus is familiar. The more original framework he suggests for understanding Camus—that of Mediterranean humanism, which is non-nationalistic and stresses pluralism—is not especially developed in this essay. Ohana, a professor at an Israeli university, though, has written elsewhere of it and has established a program for its study. Indeed, in an earlier book, *Israel and Its Mediterranean Identity* (2011), Ohana had written about how “many Israelis” consider Camus in terms almost identical to how he here presents his personal feelings.

The book as a whole has a somewhat disjointed quality, with myriad themes and issues touched upon but often in a way that does not allow them to cohere fully with the larger tripartite structure announced at the start and reflected in section titles. Ohana moves in many directions, proposing categories and structures of analysis and raising issues, which are then often dropped. For example, in the book’s title, Ohana alludes to Walter Benjamin’s famous essay, “Critique of Violence” (*Zur Kritik der Gewalt*); yet, while Benjamin is discussed in the book, this discussion—like that of Hannah Arendt, described as the contemporary most aligned with Camus in his great contribution of an “ethics of limits”—is not recalled again in depth (only in passing). At times, it seems as if the author is cobbling together a wide-ranging set of ideas about Camus, resulting in occasionally repetitious material, re-organized perhaps from previous works, that is presented out of logical order. Moreover, certain instances of imprecise or awkward expression along with errors of fact occur, at least in the translated text (e.g., we learn that Camus’s life “embraced” the violence of the early to mid-twentieth century (1) and in place of “Indochina” we read of “Indonesia” (77)), which as a result has a distinct hint of unreliability. It is unclear whether these errors are on the part of Ohana, Maisel, or the volume’s editors. Along the same lines, there are citations missing where one would expect them, for example, following quotations by (unnamed) scholars.

Given his sense of connection to Camus, it is understandable that Ohana minimizes or justifies Camus’s inconsistencies or what others might see as failures.

Nevertheless, many could still object to Ohana's implication that all or most French people living through World War II, intellectuals or not, who were not members of the Resistance must have been either collaborators or just indifferent to the fate of Europe's Jews. And, with respect to the Algerian War, Camus's solution (federation of Algeria with France rather than full independence) might be criticized as unworkable, and not solely because the main parties were uninterested in pursuing it. These are among the important issues that could have benefitted from a lengthier and tighter discussion.

Melissa Ptacek
Brandeis University