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Can Existentialism Be Multicultural?

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Abstract

This article introduces the work of Gisele Halimi, advocate and co-author with Simone de Beauvoir. Halimi's work is examined for its philosophical content and its relation to the cultures of North Africa. This active woman exemplifies certain conceptual trends then at work in France and other areas, and her writings show the influence of the overall European and colonial milieus on a number of ethnicities.

If one were to ask if French existentialist thought could be viewed as multicultural, one could hardly do better than advert to the work of Gisele Halimi. Halimi, the noted Tunisian attorney and co-author, with Simone de Beauvoir, on important material with respect to the Algerian war, is a little-known figure in Anglo-American circles, but she left a respectable body of written work. In addition to her war efforts, she is probably best known for her autobiography, *Milk for the Orange Tree*. Halimi's style of doing the law, her general overview, and even the literary tropes of her *Orange Tree* work all suggest to us a philosophical temperament that is well suited towards pondering matters human, and especially the intersection between human rights and the law. In this she was a gifted observer. As is the case with Camus, whom she knew and admired, she is especially acute in her questioning of what it means for an entity – France, for example – to have some say over the life of someone simply because of citizenship. Halimi shows herself well poised to write and to describe.

We might well ask what it is, on the whole, in which existentialism consists. This philosophical school of thought, associated with post-war Europe, asks us to push to the side our preconceived notions about the afterlife, God and the meaning of existence, and to face life in a straightforward fashion. On this view, we can create our own meaning. It is a conceptual pattern often associated with Beauvoir (*The Ethics of Ambiguity, The Mandarins*) and also, of course, with Jean-Paul Sartre (*Being and Nothingness, The Flies*). We might be tempted to say that Halimi's philosophical orientations show up in three major areas of her work, and that each of these areas has something to teach us about the very important topic for today of the possibility of applying a specific thought pattern to one's life, irrespective of national origin or ethnicity. Halimi's concerns for the oppressed are immediately evident in her recountings of how she became embroiled in representing Algerians during the French war. But perhaps more important, her reflections on a life lived to the full – with an existential sense of the present – and her very powerful feminism, at an anti-feminist time, give hints of her overall purpose. Remarkably, Halimi was tied to the Berber culture. Just as Simone de Beauvoir had an interest in fighting against oppression, Halimi

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had such a cause – and she came to it via a different route.

Although some have labeled *Djamila Boupacha* Halimi's most important work, much of what she believes is in *Orange Tree*. It will be our purpose to set out some of the philosophical trends in this author's work.

I

Halimi's work on behalf of the Algerians fighting the French for their liberation in the 1950s and 1960s provides us with a window into a way of thinking that, in a sense, might be deemed to be existentialist and at the same time profoundly committed to human rights. Halimi is acutely aware of the fragility of life, and of the nature of the general level of oppressive conduct that human beings inflict on one another. Although Halimi worked with others, this appears to be something that she comes by naturally. As she says at the beginning of the 'Algerian Chronicles' section of *Orange Tree*: 'If guilty, the accused had to fight to explain their motives: the fight for their country's independence. What was at stake went far beyond this trial and the Algerian war' (*Orange Tree*, 119).

It might be thought that Halimi becomes involved in the fight for the Algerian side simply because, as a Tunisian, she has much in common with those who are committed to the cause, but it could be maintained that Halimi's view is broader than that. She is the sort of person who is sensitive to the notion of the inhumane, and she seems dedicated to working against oppression wherever she finds it. This puts her in the league of thinkers – at least among Europeans – who are aware of bad conduct as part of the human condition and who, like Simone de Beauvoir, believe that 'popular wisdom' can tell us much about the sources of human ills.

Part of what Halimi does in her descriptions of her activities as an attorney for the Algerians is to emphasize the individual at almost every turn – and this is a profoundly existentialist tack. Her attempts to try to place the person at the core of the various activities indicate not only

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an interest in the existential dilemma, but an emphasis on the spirit of militancy, with or without a cause, that is a bit reminiscent of Camus's *The Rebel*. Her work with Djamila Boupacha, as well as the efforts detailed in *Orange Tree*, underscore the ways in which she sees Djamila as an individual fighting against the scheme of things. As she writes in *Boupacha*: 'I wanted to discuss the matter further. In the first place, I asked, how had Djamila as an individual, come to opt for a militant role in the political struggle?' (*Boupacha*, 53).

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The individual's place in the universe is a staple of European philosophical thought, but it becomes even more important in the era after the Second World War. The notion that an individual can change things simply by failing to go along with the established regime is a crucial one, and much of Continental thought, in particular, harkens to this notion. What does it mean for a person to strike a blow for freedom? How can one person's actions affect others? Should an individual choose to go along with government programmes, even while in disagreement with them? Do the French actually have any rights in Algeria? And what would this mean for someone not of French or European ancestry? All of these questions have strong ethical and jurisprudential overtones, not to mention the equally strong existentialist markers that we find.

As indicated, Beauvoir, among other thinkers, is one whose work – especially on the level of her journalistic writings – has often addressed these issues. In her essay 'Existentialism and Popular Wisdom', she is making it clear that each of us, even without an awareness of it, is facing a set of existential decisions every day. We often couch these debates in, as she has it, cliches and popular thought. But it is part and parcel of a more conceptual overview that the take on things becomes a self-conscious one; interestingly, Halimi herself begins to show some of this in her pieces on the Boupacha case, and there is more than a smattering of this self-awareness in her commentary on the Algerian political and legal scene.

The choice of an individual to refuse to remain silent in the face of oppression or dangerous circumstances is one that we often are tempted to believe would be easily made, but when we examine our own consciences we can see that, indeed, such a decision would be difficult to make in most situations. Thus it is remarkable that not only did many Algerians choose to speak out against the repression forced on them by the French government (Djamila Boupacha among them), but many felt constrained at least to write to newspapers or express their opinions editorially once facts about the cases of torture came to light. Halimi

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herself notes, in *Boupacha*, that letters of outrage began to pour in once Beauvoir's editorial in *Le Monde* had been published, and she is struck by the fact that the authors of the letters were examining their own minds and coming to certain individual – and highly thoughtful- – conclusions about the events.

She writes:

> The attempt to gag Simone de Beauvoir was not only despotic but extremely stupid, and provoked widespread reactions. Letters came flooding in, not only from France but from all over the world … All seemed to express a mood of shocked awakening, and testified to the wrath and indignation felt by their writers. (*Boupacha*, 67)

If we can categorize French thinking after the war as conceptually oriented in general, and reflective to the point of a sort of overblownness, then we can acknowledge that, in a sense, Halimi is a person of her era – and one who wants to extend areas of thought. She is not simply representing Algerians – she is making a statement about how it is that Algerians (and others) come to be believers in their own country and in establishing a point of view. Because of the strength of their beliefs, they are willing to take stands that are not only unpopular, but dangerous. This willingness to step to the edge of the cliff, so to speak, is one that Camus himself will later discuss in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. In writing about our daily lives, he notes that we often sense a sort of void, but we have a difficulty in thinking our way around it. We take the mundane activities of our lives as efforts in which we must engage, even if part of us wants to believe that we could make more important statements by being more active. These are, of course, profoundly human matters.

We can then say that not only are those whom Halimi represents instances of this bringing-to-meaning, but it is also the case that Halimi herself participates in this sort of sense-making. We strike out on our own and begin to become *engagé* when we go against the grain and take a stand, especially on matters of political and social importance. This, obviously, can be done by any human being. It is for these reasons that we can think of these moves as philosophical.

II

In *The Rebel*, Camus wants to present a view of things political that allows us to see that much of what might historically have been designated as a political rebellion does not properly fall under that rubric, viewed in a certain way. In a section titled 'State Terrorism and Irrational Terror', he indicates that movements such as Fascism do not deserve the title of political act, and he has this to say:

> In actual fact, the Fascist revolutions of the twentieth century do not merit the title of revolution. They lacked the ambition of universality …[T]he difference between them and the classic revolutionary movement is that, of the nihilist inheritance, they chose to deify the irrational, and the irrational alone, instead of deifying reason. (Camus, *The Rebel*, 148–9)

But much of what Halimi chooses to represent legally, or to write about, is done in a spirit that Camus would probably recognize as that of the authentic rebel. That is, the rebel is one who chooses to make an existential commitment not simply for himself, but for others. In that mode, most of those who took part in the Algerian political scene were, indeed, rebels. This is an aspect of her work that Halimi quite rightly chooses to highlight, and she does so in very specific ways.

The colonial situation with respect to those under French domination may have been slightly better – or worse – than those under the aegis of other nations, but Algerians were only too aware of the oppression under which they functioned. This is why the Arab nature of the population is frequently highlighted. They were liable to be questioned at every turn, and the type of physical abuse suffered by Djamila Boupacha, and reported upon extensively, was more common than one would like to believe. In

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a sense, a situation such as the Algerian one virtually cried out for the type of action that Camus describes.

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In general, much of Camus's work relies on a set of constructs that, at bottom, has a great deal to do with the sense of alienation that frequently sweeps over us as thoughtful human beings. The bewilderment that we often feel when we look around us and reflect on how we came to be is a hallmark of this author's work. In *The Stranger*, Camus uses what seems to be a near-permanent state of dissociation felt by the protagonist, Meursault, to depict the odd sense of the unreal that drives much of what he says and does. He is comparatively unmoved by the death of a parent; when Marie, his girlfriend, asks him if he loves her, he indicates that he hadn't thought about it, but he doesn't think so. One might want to argue that similar sentiments on the whole dominate the post-war French culture, but all of this makes a case for a lively set of beliefs when these conceptual areas are added to the colonial situation in Algeria. Interestingly, *The Stranger* itself is set in Algeria, and although it is not a large feature of *The Plague*, so is that novel. Indeed, more recent commentators have focused on the Arab cultural aspects of these works that might be relevant.

The notion that a sense of unreality might be heightened by settings and surroundings seems to be a part of Camus's work, and it is reinforced by even a cursory description of what is, actually, the landscape of North Africa. From time to time, Halimi herself provides views that might be deemed to be similar to those provided by Camus – it is as if the mere fact of having grown up in the continental African desert is enough to inculcate a set of beliefs that highlight our fragility as human beings and our sense of unrelatedness. All of the local cultures – Tuareg, Berber and Arab – might be deemed to be relevant here. A brief description from *Boupacha* is startlingly similar to some of the detailed work in Camus: 'Presently we set off back to the hotel, trudging along the main boulevard that zigzags down through Algiers from the mountains to the sea. It was blindingly hot. We said little to one another: this warm and generous reception had merely served to increase our sense of shame' (*Boupacha*, 78).

The importance of Camus as a theorist in the overall context of Halimi's writing can scarcely be overstated. If we take all of the contributing factors together – the topography of North Africa, the weather, the general feelings of alienation experienced by the colonized population (and which might be experienced by anyone at any time) – we come to the conclusion that there is something special about the Algerian (or Tunisian) experience that seems to cry out for existential analysis. All of this helps make sense of the fact that Halimi herself, in writing about her work as an attorney in this set of circumstances, seems to experience a bit of existential angst. It is as if representing those who are dispossessed – someone like Djamila,

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or some of those who were accused of terrorism and whose stories she recounts in *Orange Tree* – reminds her of conceptual issues, and at the same time forwards notions having to do with 'rebellion', if 'rebellion' is taken in that special way which is the way that Camus describes. Although, as Halimi notes, much of French culture tends to push in this direction (particularly during this time period), there is a great deal more to the experiences she recounts than merely something that might take place in Paris or Lyons. The objectification that goes along with colonialism has the consequence, as Fanon also wrote, that those who think about their situation become still more reflective. Thus here existentialism takes on a multicultural cast when we think of it as pertaining to the plights of individuals from Arab or Berber backgrounds.

To provide an overview, we might note that a great deal of what represents the most important work of the French intellectual scene at this time is captured by Tony Judt in his impressive work, *Past Imperfect* (Judt, *passim*). Judt is very clear about the fact that there was a certain sort of intellectualizing that was expected in French circles during this time, and that it was promulgated by all and sundry, even if it was difficult for many to abide by its set of tenets. A type of amalgamation of Marxism and French historical efforts was pushed forward, and the upshot, as Judt claims, was that French intellectuals often bought the contention that 'since we cannot know whether a revolution is "authentic" or not, it is better to let it pass through its present phase and methods' (Judt, 122).

It might be argued that Algerian attempts at a revolution – or a freedom fight, or a coup (the terminology is comparatively unimportant) – were precisely the sorts of events that Judt had in mind when he indicated that, ultimately, authenticity was not the major focus of effort or thought. Halimi is one who is willing to identify with the fighters and their causes, almost irrespective of what other sorts of actions are accomplished. Because she sees the French state as guilty of a host of sins, she is unwilling to try to make out the case that someone should not be engaged in some sort of activity, or that the activity in which the person is engaged is an act of terrorism or an act that is not moral. This gives the work that Halimi does the flavour of the philosophical, even when she is presenting a dry account of a sequence of acts. Her defence of Boupacha, for example, has the hallmarks of a strong work of feminist resistance, but what we go on when we make that claim has to do with Halimi's overall focus, her writing with Beauvoir, and so forth.

III

I have been arguing that there are strong philosophical overtones to the work of Gisele Halimi, both in her autobiography and in other writings, and that Halimi's work exemplifies the various strands of existential thought. Halimi is one who is driven by a great sense of the recurrence of injustice, but also by an awareness of life's existential dilemmas. The fact that philosophical themes occur so often in her work is no accident – she is one who counted herself a friend of Camus, and she did, of course, have a great deal of contact with Beauvoir. But the sort of problem that Halimi senses in the population that she represents legally is also a philosophical problem in the sense – as argued here – that it represents another take on Camus's rebel. Those who are trying to fight for Algerian (or other) independence are driven by genuine concerns for the whole, and they tend not to use the rhetoric or views of other twentieth-century political movements. Halimi is an able exponent of their thoughts.

Perhaps one way of summing up the conceptual moves that drive much of Halimi's writing, and her work, can be derived from a portion of *Orange Tree* describing one of her encounters with Camus. Although his position on the Algerian rebellion varied over time, the passages that detail this meeting are helpful in setting out what we might term a general overview. Of an early encounter with Camus, Halimi writes:

> As we got on to political matters that I knew a bit about, I regained confidence. I burned to tell him the spell that his novel *The Outsider* had cast over me, with its creeks

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> white-hot in the sun and the tragic shades of Meursault, condemned for not having wept at his mother's funeral, rather than for having killed. My words tumbled out to express my emotion, my appreciation … 'Yes,' he admitted with a certain warmth, touched – finally. 'People like you and me are affected by Meursault's complexity … because we come from there, don't we?' (*Boupacha*, 78)

In trying to answer the remarks of Halimi, Camus is making the point that a certain orientation is shared by many individuals, across spans of time and geography. This orientation, acutely aware of life's difficulties and complexities, is one that perhaps those who are engaged in the rebellion share to some extent, and it is clearly one in which Djamila Boupacha herself participates.

As Halimi notes, the 'white-hot' creeks of the Algerian and Tunisian region may put one in a given frame of mind. For Camus and for Halimi, working with others is a way of alleviating the sense of helplessness that is caused by a strong awareness of the fragility of life. So it is no surprise that this Tunisian – and Berber – attorney, turned advocate for the people, writes of her work in a vein that reminds us of other philosophical work of the time. We can read *Milk for the Orange Tree* or *Djamila Boupacha* with the knowledge that the author is a committed and engaged person who is devoting herself to others. Perhaps that is, in and of itself, a philosophical orientation.

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Jane Duran was Lecturer in Black Studies at the University of California at Santa Barbara, where she has also been a Visiting Fellow in the Department of Philosophy. Her books include *Knowledge in Context* (1994), *Worlds of Knowing* (2001) and *Queenly Philosophers* (2018).

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