

The Man Behind 'the Great Replacement'

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Renaud Camus was once known as a man of the left. After being cut out of his parents' will for revealing his homosexuality, he marched in the May 1968 protests in support of gay rights. In the 1970s, he ran in the most avant-garde circles in France. Roland Barthes wrote the preface to Camus's quasi-autobiographical 1981 novel, *Tricks*, which recounted homosexual encounters in several countries. Camus coined new terms to describe the gay lifestyle. Even now, at age 75, he in many ways remains an exemplary liberal. He praises Nelson Mandela as a liberator of his people from a foreign oppressor. He mocks the "Putinolatry" of some on the European right. He deplors Jean-Marie Le Pen and denounces anti-Semitism.

But then there is that other issue. In the 1990s, Camus began asking, "Can you have the same Europe with a different people in it?" His answer was "No." What others described as demographic change he dubbed the "Great Replacement"—a phrase that has since been invoked by mass murderers and the French president, influencing not only marginal figures but mainstream politics.

If the gunmen in Christchurch, New Zealand, and more recently in Buffalo, NY, had read Camus, they would have been disappointed. Camus categorically rejects violence. He mocks conspiracy theories. He abhors pseudo-scientific racism that reduces cultural and civilizational complexity to genetic factors. He criticizes rapid cultural change brought about by immigration of any kind, not Muslim immigration as such. And as a committed environmentalist who opposes population

growth, he denounces efforts to boost the white birth rate. “Our culture, civilization, and people are under no menace whatsoever of demographic disappearance per se,” he said in a recent interview with me. “Indigenous Europeans or white Americans have never been so numerous in the past as they are now.” He jokes that Putin is a great president because the Russian population has declined on his watch.

Camus lives in a 14th-century castle that sits atop a hill in Gascony. From this vantage point, he has seen what he fears is the future of Europe. In 1999, while writing a guide for tourists, Camus noticed women in veils gathering at a well in a nearby village. While he was aware that many North-African immigrants had settled in France’s big cities to work, their arrival in rural France and fidelity to their customs demonstrated that they weren’t assimilating. Rather than conforming to France’s culture, they were displacing it in places where its existence had been taken for granted.

Around the same time, he heard over the radio that the Spanish government, to solve the problem of underfunded pensions, would import Moroccans into Spain. Yet there was no discussion over how, or whether, these immigrants would become assimilated into Spanish society and culture. The implication was that a change in nationality could be achieved by a mere change in location. By some act of transubstantiation, the Moroccans would simply become Spanish. A metaphysical change would allegedly have taken place, despite the fact that in their customs and culture they would outwardly appear just as they had before.

But peoples aren’t interchangeable, Camus

“Even those who argue against him have been forced to concede his significance.”

insists. They are rooted in their cultures, and they generally keep them when they move. And so, in regions where there was once one culture and one people, new cultures and new peoples can displace the indigenous. Such a shift once ruptured the social fabric in Africa and in the Americas in the wake of European colonization; now, Camus claims, it ruptures the social fabric in Europe. The French state doesn't collect demographic information on criminal data, but Camus ties rising crime to immigration. During Emmanuel Macron's presidency, 1.3 million French have been victims of violent attacks—an increase of 142 percent since 2000. Death threats against and public executions of schoolteachers, journalists, and priests who practice the old culture occur regularly. Camus believes that just as the drama of 1914-1918 was the Great War and that of the 1930s the Great Depression, the drama of Europe since the 1970s has been the Great Replacement.

This argument shocked many of Camus's friends and admirers. Labeled a far-right provocateur peddling a conspiracy theory, he was banished from media platforms. Publishing houses closed their doors to him, forcing him to self-publish. Over the past 20 years, Camus has been tried repeatedly for inciting hate and banished from nearly all his former circles. His most recent trial for hate speech over a series of tweets ended with his acquittal on March 3. But Camus's wilderness years are coming to an end. This strange figure, still snubbed in the literary world, has become a household name in France whenever the subject of immigration comes up. Public intellectuals discuss him, even if they disagree with his analysis. He appears in magazines, as well as on radio and television

shows. Presses are publishing collected editions of his works. The attempt to banish him has failed. Even those who argue against him have been forced to concede his significance.

How should the demographic change brought about by mass immigration be described, and what should the response to it be? For political scientist Eric Kauffman, it should be described as “Whiteshift”: the process whereby nonwhites interact with shrinking white majorities, with the reasonable expectation that nonwhites will assimilate. For the leader of France’s hard left, Jean-Luc Mélenchon, it is *créolisation*: the mixed-race future that we must encourage and accelerate to build a kinder, gentler Europe. For liberal luminary Yascha Mounk, it is “The Great Experiment”: an ambiguous but irreversible ethnic transformation, which we must make work or risk civil war. And for Camus, it is “The Great Replacement”: a phrase which at once expresses the scale of the transformation at hand, captures fears about Europe’s future, and frames this hour of decision as another epic chapter in history.

Camus’s epithet has gone mainstream. According to an October 2021 poll, 67 percent of the French are anxious about the Great Replacement; 61 percent believe it is going to take place. Former presidential candidate Éric Zemmour made this a key theme of his campaign. Center-right candidate Valérie Pécresse tried to re-energize her failing bid by invoking it in one speech. According to his biographer, President Emmanuel Macron uses the phrase in private, with his advisers, when developing policies to defend French secularism

“The real engine of Camus’s narrative is class transformation.”

and encourage assimilation. This is a significant concession to Camus’s diagnosis of France’s ills. The phrase has shaped the imagination of people far more influential than violent shooters. Mounk is a good example of an intellectual who, despite his disagreement with Camus, is dialectically dependent on him; there are many others.

The Great Replacement is frequently referred to as a conspiracy theory. Yet Camus makes fun of those who consider mass immigration to be the secret project of a globalist cabal. “I do not believe that, one fine day, 12 or 15 arch-mandarins gathered in a hotel salon or a government office...to enact the Great Replacement,” he writes. Camus also doesn’t think mass immigration is an Islamist conspiracy to destroy European civilization via stealth invasion. There are some Muslim leaders who do think this way, of course. Speaking at the United Nations on April 10, 1974, Algerian President Houari Boumédiène exhorted millions of people to leave the Global South for the North. “They will not go there as friends,” he said. “They will go there to conquer it. And they will conquer it by populating it with their sons. It is the wombs of our women who will give us victory.” But Camus argues that the cause of the Great Replacement lies neither with globalist elites nor with Islamist militants. Because mass immigration was endorsed across the political spectrum, and by those with very different economic interests, these origin stories are for Camus unlikely, if not impossible. Rather, he believes, the cause of the Great Replacement is a mass social and cultural transformation *on the part of Europeans*.

The “indispensable condition” of the Great Replacement is what Camus calls the Great Deculturation. “A people that knows its classics,” he says, “that understands its history and knows its responsibilities, would never allow itself to be thrown into the dustbin of history without an objection.” Such a people, by this logic, would never accept the thesis that populations are fundamentally interchangeable. Yet for decades, Camus laments, European students have been taught not only to forget their past and forget their culture, but to hold their inheritance in contempt. Camus differs from most critics of this problem in that he doesn’t tie this change to the outsize influence of certain postmodern philosophers, but to a fundamental transformation in class and culture.

Culture relies on a particular social class to create, develop, and transmit it. France’s classics were written and transmitted first by the aristocracy, then by the bourgeoisie. But that era has come to an end. Whatever the other faults of the 19th-century bourgeoisie, they respected the old aristocracy and imitated it. They made a show of loving the high arts and frequenting the opera. A bourgeois regime built the Palais Garnier. But now, a new class has emerged that refuses to respect the old. It denounces the highbrow culture of the old class as too elitist, exclusive, and politically incorrect. This new class, Camus contends, is the petty bourgeoisie. The replacement of the bourgeoisie by the petty bourgeoisie is what Camus calls “the Little Replacement.” Petty-bourgeois culture is pop culture. Cartoons and detective stories replace literature. Blockbuster films replace cinema. Rock ‘n’ roll and rap replace

Bach and Beethoven. Opera has been decimated. The Great Deculturation and the Great Replacement, Camus contends, are consequences of the Little Replacement. “The Great Replacement—the change of people and civilization—would have been utterly impossible without the Little Replacement—the change of culture,” he told me.

This close association between class and culture has a leftist pedigree. After World War II, the rise of the middle classes, including the petty bourgeoisie, seemed to submerge old class struggles and refute Karl Marx. In response, the left changed the way it understood class. Returning to Marx’s more humanistic tracts, the left shifted its attention from economic themes to social and cultural ones. The new aim was to show that the rise of the petty bourgeoisie inaugurated by capitalism created new forms of oppression and alienation that, in turn, produced a new and powerful social and cultural hegemony. Camus is influenced by this tradition. Economic differences persist, but he holds that they are less important than the general vulgarization of culture. “A petty-bourgeois society,” he says, “is a society where class differences tend to be only economic and where the rich are only the poor, with money.”

Yet Camus departs from the postwar Marxian left in major ways. First, for him the triumph of the petty bourgeoisie isn’t a sign of social alienation. Rather, it represents the rejection of human excellence. The prospect of some—but not all—achieving something is too abhorrent for the petty bourgeois. One must include everything and everyone. Fearful that individual distinction will leave some people behind,

modern society pursues what Camus, drawing from Alexis de Tocqueville, denounces as “hyperdemocracy.” Equality is well and good in law and politics, but once it leaves those realms, it reduces everything and everyone to the same level of mediocrity.

Further, Camus argues that we now live under the dictatorship of the petty bourgeoisie. This refers not to a political, military, or economic dictatorship, but to a cultural regime. From the late Princess Diana to former French President Nicolas Sarkozy to affluent third-generation Yale students, modern elites make a show of being the same as everyone else. They are proudly anti-aristocratic and anti-bourgeois and have routed the ethic of these older classes.

While “dictatorship of the petty bourgeoisie” is a phrase inspired by Lenin’s “dictatorship of the proletariat,” the substance of Camus’s concern is an old, liberal one. It is Tocqueville’s and Mill’s tyranny of the majority, which they feared would develop in a democratic society dominated by the equality of conditions. Class hegemony leads to ideological hegemony. Because the petty bourgeoisie hates distinction, it has reduced the range of acceptable speech. On fundamental questions, everyone must think and speak the same. Camus thus blames the triumph of this class for the erosion of educational standards. “People who would insist on having their children educated the traditional way, with the traditional syntax and the traditional words, as well as the social habits which go with them, would turn them into complete social pariahs,” he writes. “To *raise* a child is to make an outcast of him.”

Above all, Camus has a much more radical

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critique of technological progress than Marx permits. The embrace of technology’s revolutionary capabilities, he argues, unites a variety of seemingly disparate regimes. His latest work, an 800-page tome entitled *La Dépossession*, describes how Marx and Lenin endorsed technological transformation as an instrument of revolution. Mechanization was the way to sever men’s connection to their past, changing the way men think of themselves, so that they would regard their fundamental task as producing as many consumer goods as possible. For Trotsky, those who raised concerns about depersonalized and despiritualized work were taking a “reactionary path.” On this point, the architects of the Soviet Union weren’t far from those who theorized and rearranged the US economy and regime in the 20th century, Henry Ford and Frederick Taylor. Ford, as Camus painstakingly details, was admired in National Socialist circles. Standardization wasn’t just about developing uniform machinery. It was also about ensuring that all workers see themselves in the same way, so that they are more compliant, easier to administer, and easier to replace. That is the prerequisite for achieving mass production in the modern state.

Camus ties the rise of mass production to the Great Replacement. Replacing one, two, 10,000 men—even whole populations—with others seems trivial, he argues, so long as states maintain economic productivity. This is possible, he concludes, because a people is defined not by a shared culture, but as a productive material unit, as economic output. And in turn, individual men are measured by their productive capacities. They are, essentially, machines. In Camus’s lexicon, every man

becomes “Undifferentiated Human Matter.” To keep the economy rolling and to pay for pensions in an aging Europe, it doesn’t matter if you hire a worker from Toulouse or Timbuktu —one can easily replace the other. Consequently, mass immigration must continue; and cultural rootedness and distinctiveness must be abolished.

Camus thus lays out a multi-layered argument, in which the real engine of change is a class transformation intimately bound up with cultural change. The Little Replacement produced the Great Deculturation, which enabled the Great Replacement. Class, cultural, and demographic change feed into each other, compounding the crises associated with each. Camus has a plan to counter the problems he sees. His political party, “*In-nocence*,” proposes a platform built around an expansive interpretation of Mill’s harm principle. To counter *nocence*, harm, the party calls for a renewal of the social contract. It makes the case for teaching the French “civility” again and building towns that don’t harm the environment. It encourages the restoration of education for the sake of excellence, what Camus calls “the equal access to inequality.” Camus’s model here is the Third Republic, which he thinks was very good at providing talented peasants with the opportunity to learn and participate in high culture, while making them materially better off. The republic once improved culture; it could do so again. And Camus proposes not just ending mass migration, but reversing it. There are precedents. In Algeria in 1962, the ratio of settlers to natives was roughly the same as it is in France today. But Camus rejects the violent

means the Algerians used to expel the French, advocating instead for a peaceful reversal. He exhorts the French to set a better example.

“Who is a really *wicked* thinker you enjoy reading?” a friend once asked one of France’s most famous writers. “Renaud Camus,” he immediately replied. “But he is both right and wrong. Right about immigration; wrong about rock ‘n’ roll.” With the same critical spirit, we should ask what Camus gets right and what he gets wrong.

In addition to coining new terms, Camus uses familiar pens in unusual ways. For example, he employs the term “race” interchangeably with “people.” He makes clear that in doing so he is referring to a shared cultural and historic experience, not to genetic identity. He complains that because of the ascent of “antiracist” doctrine, any discussion of the distinctiveness of a people is alleged to be secretly reliant upon ideas of biological distinctiveness akin to the pseudo-scientific worldview that the Nazis used. Strange as his use of “race” can seem, it tracks with classical French practice. Most French literary figures used “race” interchangeably with “people,” as did moderate politicians in living memory. President Georges Pompidou, for example, spoke of “the very character of our race” alongside the characteristics of the French people. Like Camus, he acknowledged that most French people have an ethnic marker but didn’t reduce them to it. A skeptic of the notion that “French” is an ethnic category, Camus prefers to define the French people as the Catholic writer Georges Bernanos did: “that vague and

enchanted memory, that dream, that deep murmur.”

For Camus, the highest and most urgent task is transmitting the memory of that cultural inheritance, understanding its distinctive and inherent excellence, and not being embarrassed about it. Few educational institutions take up that task today. Camus is right that we have come to hold our inheritance in contempt. But he is only half-right about the reasons why. The problem is not just an exaggerated emphasis on human homogeneity and a defective understanding of equality. It is a defective understanding of liberty. The fear is that if we were to accept what is handed down, it would indicate that we are unfree. In recent years, more writers have begun to criticize this false conception of liberty. Camus, however, is a classical, quasi-aristocratic liberal. He doesn't wish to interrogate liberty too harshly.

At times, this sympathy to the old liberalism makes Camus too sympathetic to pernicious strands in the new. One prominent example is Camus's opposition to natalism. When J.D. Vance argued Americans need to have more children and the state should enact policies that make it easier to have more children, *The Washington Post* attacked him for hawking white supremacy. On this point, Camus sides with the *Post*. Camus believes that overpopulation is a looming environmental calamity, and in his view, no one, including whites, should be having more children than they already do.

Camus is right in that we can't isolate an “interest” driving multiculturalism. Too many groups support that ideology, often against what a reasonable person would characterize as

their own best interests. Camus's warning here is helpful to those, especially on the right, who have recently discovered "class interest" and, in their zeal, deduce with mathematical certainty a fixed set of interests that must be motivating those in power. Reality is more complicated. It is an intellectual dead-end for the New Right to replicate the jejune Marxism of the Old Left.

Camus's caution in attributing fixed interests to shadowy elites is laudable in that he avoids silly conspiracy theories. But the deficiencies of his class analysis blind him to certain realities. He argues that a largely uniform shift in European opinion enabled the transformation of its culture and civilization. The political realities suggest otherwise. Since the 1970s, popular majorities have been granted little say in how their governing elites changed Europe's economic and political institutions and encouraged mass immigration. When the people have a chance to address these questions at the ballot box, they tend to repudiate what the elites regard as inevitable. There is more conflict between Europe's rulers and those they rule than Camus's narrative suggests. Since Macron's election, Camus told me, he has become more aware of the growth of a new administrative regime, which he calls "Direct Davocracy". Having hollowed out the democratic institutions and crippled the nation-state, this regime now prefers to govern without intermediaries.

Camus imagines a completely pacified planet. "We are not dealing with *politics* anymore," he laments. "Twitter has more power over the liberty of expression in France than the courts do." In such a situation, Camus's cultural

critiques are of no more use. He has little to say about where the ruling Davocrats can be challenged—or how they might be replaced.

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