

[It is as a writer]

by MAURICE BLANCHOT

It is as a writer that I signed this text, not even as a political writer, nor as a citizen engaged in political struggles, for do I not participate in them, but as a nonpolitical writer led to comment seriously and firmly on essential problems that matter to him and concern him as such.

How do these problems present themselves? We know that young Frenchmen are prosecuted, imprisoned and condemned for having refused to carry arms against the Algerian people, other for having helped Algerian fighters. These facts exist. They exist in front of us, they are known by all, everyone discusses them, and everyone judges them, the newspapers, the parties, and the judges. It seems to us, to us writers and intellectuals, that, faced with such serious facts, before this debate laid open before French and international opinion, we have the duty not to remain silent but to comment openly and calmly. This decision to speak is contained in the final declarations of this text.

Why these declarations? What do they intend to explain? That in all intellectual rigor and honesty, you judges, ministers, and you bodies of political opinion can no longer apply to these acts that you incriminate or to these men that you indict the habitual use of words and values: that, when you speak about treason and insubordination, you make an illicit and guilty use of terms and legalities that no longer apply here.

Why? For two essential reasons. Indeed, for five years on the one hand and for the past two years on the other, we have entered into a situation where the usual civic criteria are no longer valid, a situation defined by the war in Algeria, an oppressor's war, which is moreover unspeakable, and by the transformation of the military power into the predominant political power.

The first reason is that the Algerian war is an illegitimate, indefinable, unspeakable war, scandalous to the point that no one has the right to name it (but simply the duty to do so). Truly unnamable, yet a war directed against ourselves, a violent and often awful action radically dividing the French, waged for the benefit of a small cast against a community of men who are legitimately demanding their independence; this right to independence whose full legitimacy was acknowledged by the head of state himself.

The Algerian War, which has no national justification, which is directed against the French no less than against the Algerians, is such that civil power has no right to draw the entirety of its conscripted soldiers into it. On the contrary, by mobilizing French youth for something that was touted as mere police operation, the civil power has committed a fundamental violation that it is the duty of each one of us to denounce. If the government has the right to mobilize conscripts in this war, if this is a war where the fate of the nation is at stake, then it should also have the right, even the duty, to declare a general mobilization. A mass levy would have to be declared, yet the absurdity, the fundamental illicit, the criminal, and mad character of this mobilization, would immediately be apparent. But if the mobilization of all French citizens in the Algerian War would be a crime, then it is also a crime, almost a more serious crime, to mobilize all French youth in such a war. And to the government, to the military power, we are saying: you no longer have the right to enlist French youth in this war, the most unjust and the basest of wars, exposing them to mortal risk and to a true inner destruction. And to the judges, we say: you no longer have the right to condemn those who refuse to undergo the violence that is inflicted upon them by mobilizing them illegally for this war.

But there is yet another reason, a reason that gives the first one its seriousness. For two years now, since May 1958, we have known in all certainty, that the army has become a

political power that, as a political power, intends to decide national destiny as a whole. We know that the army, in the enormous material power that it represents and in the importance that the Algerian War gives to it, has the power to overthrow governments, to change regimes, to impose decisions of its own choosing. This transformation of military power into political power is a fundamental fact of unprecedented gravity. You judges and you military men, I imagine that you are aware of this gravity, whether to approve of it or to regret it. But this is a fact, an essential fact for our country.

Apparently, the army is the nation itself, because it is made up of conscripted soldiers: but this is where the trap lies. The army as an institution, the meaning of the army as an institution, is what its executives, its leaders, its active elements have made of it. It is a kind of political party, with enormous material power at its disposal, laying claim to conscripts bound to strict obedience, in order to make believe that this political party is the nation itself.

Now, what we will be saying from here on, following this radical transformation of the army as an institution, is that the refusal to submit no military duty takes on an entirely different meaning. In claiming for itself the right to have a political attitude and to play the political role that it does, the army gives each person the duty to judge whether or not he accepts being enrolled in the political party that the army has become. Some accept it; there is nothing more to be said. Others refuse: this refusal is a fundamental right. To the extent that the army is an instrument of ideological and racist domination, the young people who are enlisted in it not only take part in an unjust war but, due to this very fact, already carry arms against the remaining democratic institutions and prepare, despite themselves, for an explicit dictatorship tomorrow.

I would also add this: Why does the Algerian War continue? Why does this criminal, unjust, absurd war continue, while the civil power affirms that it is ready to render the right of independence to the Algerians, a right that is justifiably theirs and that was violently taken from them one hundred and fifty years ago? Why? It seems to me that a great number of French people agree with this fact: the war does not end because the army does not want it to end. And the army does not want it to end because it is linked to this war professionally, morally, and politically, this kind of conflict being the only one capable of satisfying its ambitions. Through this war, it assumes a

determining role in national destiny as a whole and has at its disposal a power that it will never renounce.

But if this is the case, we can see the terrible spiral in which we are caught: the army will never give up the Algerian War, because it is from the Algerian War that it draws its power and its political determination. Without the Algerian War, it would not be able to achieve its schemes of political domination. But as long as the war continues, and the more intensely it is waged, the more violently the army will have power over all the citizens of this country, this army that is a political power. Today we see clearly—and only in the emotional level—what is happening. French people, profoundly and confusedly, are almost all convinced that this war is unjust. We could thus believe that they will revolt against the fact that their sons participate in it. But the reasoning must be reversed: because their sons are participating in it—automatically, by the mad automatism of military service—they can no longer recognize that this war is unjust, and they make themselves accomplices. The army thus has a hold on everyone: the sons, physically, and because it perverts them little by little; the parents, because they can only be supportive of their sons. This is the trap. The army at war in Algeria is a trap. This must be said. This is what we are saying.

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