

THE DECLARED ENEMY

Texts and Interviews

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§ 7 May Day Speech

I must begin with a few words about my presence in the United States.

My situation with regard to the administration of this country contains an element of unreality that I have to take into account. Indeed, for two months I have traveled around without being disturbed; my entry into the country took place in unusual circumstances;¹ here and elsewhere, I live like a vagabond, not like a revolutionary; my habits and behavior are themselves unusual, so that I must be very careful when I speak in the name of the Black Panther Party, which, for its part, is attached to this country and whose habits are not nomadic, who have to defend themselves with what are called legal means, and with real weapons. What I mean to say is that no unreality should slip into my interventions, for that would be detrimental to the Black Panther Party, and to Bobby Seale, who is in a very real prison, made of stone and cement and steel.

My freedom to speak and to move around must not become a game dictated by whim: and this is one of the reasons why I submit to the necessities of the Panthers.

The second point I want to make is related to the first: racism here is widespread and growing fast. I noticed this as soon as I arrived in the United States. It leaped out at me, but gradually, while staying here, I believe I have also seen some very healthy behavior, I mean in which racism had no part. And then there were the events in the New Haven court.² From the moment I entered the courtroom, American racism, which is to say antiblack racism, became apparent to me in all its violence. When I arrived in the courtroom with my black comrades of the Black Panther Party, a cop, without asking me, led me up to the first row

of the audience, in the section where there were only whites. It's only thanks to the insistence of my black comrades that I was allowed to go sit with them. To you this may seem like an insignificant sign, but to me, having been there as its pseudobeneficiary, I translated this sign immediately. And when Hilliard and Emory were arrested for disrupting the court by reading out a statement, I myself who had also read a statement before the court—I was simply expelled from the courtroom, but left free.

A few days later another event occurred that confirmed this observation: a black friend of mine whom I cannot name, a few whites, and I were boarding a TWA airplane.³ In the walkway leading to the plane, a policeman ordered the black man to open his suitcase. Since there was nothing in it but three shirts and three pairs of pants, he was allowed to board the plane; but the policeman changed his mind and, with an escort of five other cops, came onto the plane, showed his badge, and asked our friend to get back off the plane. None of the three whites, including myself, was treated so rudely. (Fortunately, there are other airlines besides TWA.)

My interpretation is this: they didn't bother me because I'm white and as such I present no danger to American society. The blacks, of course, are black, and therefore guilty of being black, and the Black Panther Party is a threat to the bourgeois order of the United States. Now I'm coming to the point that seems very important to me: the kind of relations that exist between leftist organizations and the Black Panther Party. Here I believe that whites need to bring a new dimension into politics: a delicacy of heart. But be careful: it's not a question of sentimentalism, but of a delicacy in relations with people who do not have the same rights as we do. Even if their rights are recognized in the laws of the country, black people are far from fully possessing these rights (as I showed in speaking of New Haven), and the Black Panther Party even less so. De facto discrimination exists, as you know; you see it every day. It is visible everywhere, even and especially in unions, even among workers, even in universities. So it is very clear that white radicals owe it to themselves to behave in ways that would tend to erase their privileges. As for other whites, it should be obvious that if they are so attached to their whiteness, it's really in death that they will find it. The whitest of whites is, for a moment, a dead white.

If the pride of the blacks and the Black Panther Party, and sometimes their arrogance (but what can be said of the arrogance of the whites, and of their brutality against not only blacks but the entire world!), if this

pride is the result of a new political awareness, this awareness is still too new for them not to get very upset when they and their positions are challenged. They have a tendency—and they're right to be mistrustful—to see in such challenges a desire on the part of whites, a more or less conscious desire, to dominate them yet again. Everything happens as if whites added to the correctness of their ideas (when they are correct) an authoritarianism in the expression of these ideas, to the point that blacks can already see a budding imperialism in it. This habit of domination is communicated in the ideas of whites, and this is perhaps what they mean when they speak of American dynamism.

It is very important, then, for white radicals to act with candor, certainly, but also with delicacy, when it comes to their relations with blacks, for, once again, blacks run the risk of going to prison for an insignificant gesture, whereas for a white man who makes the same gesture, something like complicity already exists between him and the authorities. This complicity of the white man—it too unconscious—is something that the black man cannot help feeling. To refuse to admit this as a given fact is merely a sign of arrogance, brutality, a lazy mind, or sheer stupidity.

It is quite true that blacks and whites have a gulf to bridge, a gulf opened by four hundred years of contempt and falsified history. There was an alleged superiority on the side of the whites, but the whites didn't suspect that they were being observed—in silence, true, but observed all the better for that. Today, blacks have drawn from this silent observation a profound knowledge of whites, whereas the contrary is not true. Radicals often say that everyone knows this, but since no one really takes it into account, it amounts to saying that everyone acts by lying.

It is therefore up to whites to initiate an understanding of black people, and, I repeat, this can only be done in a delicacy of relations, when whites and blacks decide to undertake a political action in common—as revolutionaries.

Up to now, blacks have found among whites only two modes of expression: brutal domination and a distant and rather contemptuous paternalism. Another way must be found. I have indicated one possible way.

Blacks are asking for nothing other than equality in relations. That's clear. Faced with the disproportion of privileges, whites, if they are resolved to have equal relations, are obliged to act as I have said. Not submissively, but with a discerning attention to what still continues to hurt blacks after these four hundred terrible years.

It may be necessary to have done with symbols and symbolic gestures. I'm not talking about the emblems whose real content is without great significance, but the symbols themselves, as a substitute for revolutionary action. (A provisional definition of this term: every act capable of abruptly breaking down the bourgeois order with the aim of creating a socialist order.)

The American Left, and particularly that part of the American Left that calls itself radical, has the possibility of carrying out effective actions rather than empty gestures. In a sense it has a field of action: its struggle for the liberation of Bobby Seale and its support for the Black Panther Party.

Symbols refer to an action that has taken place, not to one that will take place, since every action that is accomplished (I'm speaking of revolutionary actions) cannot make any serious use of already known examples. That is why all revolutionary acts have about them a freshness that is like the beginning of the world.

But a symbolic gesture or set of gestures is idealistic in the sense that it satisfies those who make it or who adopt the symbol and prevents them from carrying out real acts that have an irreversible power.

I think we can say that a symbolic attitude is both the good conscience of the liberal and a situation that makes it possible to believe that every effort has been made for the revolution. It is much better to carry out real acts on a seemingly small scale than to indulge in vain and theatrical manifestations. We should never forget this when we know that the Black Panther Party seeks to be armed, and armed with real weapons.

To speak to its members of pacifism and nonviolence would be criminal. It would be preaching to them an evangelical virtue that no white person is capable of applying or living for himself.

I said that the American Left, if it considers itself revolutionary, has the possibility of accomplishing real acts, in relation to Bobby Seale and in collaboration with the Black Panther Party. To refuse this would be to accept, here in the United States, that a sort of Dreyfus affair has been declared. Perhaps even more harmful than the Dreyfus affair in France and Europe. It is time to decide whether intellectuals are silent because Bobby Seale is guilty, or because he is black and the chairman of the Black Panther Party, and whether intellectuals are afraid of Agnew's threats against those who aid and encourage the party.⁴ And here everything seems to indicate that there is no interest in Bobby Seale because he is black. In the same way, Dreyfus was guilty because he was Jewish.

It used to be that, in France, the guilty man was the Jew. Here, the guilty man was, and still is, the Negro.

Of course this parallel with the Dreyfus affair cannot be maintained at every point. And I have to admit that in America up to now there has been no Clemenceau, no Jaurès, and especially, among the intellectuals, no Zola to write "J'accuse." A "J'accuse" that would condemn both the courts of your country and the majority of whites who are still racists.⁵

When we speak of the Black Panther Party, we must also realize that within a year and a half police repression against them has increased from one to seven. What I mean is that the number of police actions must be multiplied by seven.

Another thing worries me: fascism. We often hear the Black Panther Party speak of fascism, and whites have difficulty accepting the word. That's because whites have to make a great effort of imagination to understand that blacks live under an oppressive fascist regime. This fascism, for them, is not the doing of the American government alone, but also of the entire white community, which in reality is very privileged.

Here, whites are not directly oppressed, but blacks are, in their minds and sometimes in their bodies.

Black people are right to accuse whites as a whole of this oppression, and they are right to speak of fascism.

As for us, perhaps we live in a liberal democracy, but blacks live, really and truly, under an authoritarian, imperialist regime of domination. It is important that a taste for freedom be spread among you. But whites are afraid of freedom. It's a drink that is too strong for them. They have another fear as well, which never ceases to grow, and that is the fear of discovering the intelligence of blacks.

Yet I have hope for blacks as a people and for the revolution undertaken by the Black Panther Party. First, all the peoples of the Third World are more and more conscious of the revolutionary necessity; and then whites, and even Americans, and even Johnson and all the rest, can be transformed.

Personally, I place a certain trust in the nature of man, even the most limited man. The Black Panther Party's endeavor continues to spread, there are more and more people in the general public who understand them, and white intellectuals will perhaps support them: this is why I am here with you today.

For Bobby Seale, I repeat, there must not be another Dreyfus affair.

Therefore I am counting on you, on all of you, to take the protest everywhere, to talk about Bobby Seale in your families, in your universities, in your courses, and you must challenge and sometimes contradict your professors and the police themselves.

And—I will say this again, since it is very important—it is not a question of symbolic gestures but of real acts. And if it becomes necessary, I mean if the Black Panther Party asks it of you, you ought to desert your universities, desert your classrooms, in order to speak out across America in favor of Bobby Seale and against racism.

Bobby Seale's life, the existence of the Black Panther Party, these come before your diplomas. Now you must—and you have the physical, material, and intellectual means for this—now you must confront life directly and no longer in comfortable aquariums, I mean in American universities, where people raise goldfish capable of nothing more than blowing bubbles.

Bobby Seale's life depends on you. Your real life depends on the Black Panther Party.



Appendix⁶

What people call American civilization will disappear. It is already dead because it is founded on contempt. For example, the contempt of the rich for the poor, the contempt of whites for blacks, and so on. Every civilization founded on contempt must necessarily disappear. And I am not speaking of contempt in terms of morality, but in terms of function: I mean that contempt, as an institution, contains its own dissolving agent, and the dissolving agent of what it engenders.

I am meddling, you will say, in the affairs of America: this is because it set an example for me by meddling in my own affairs and in the affairs, pretty much everywhere, of the entire world. After meddling with Korea, it took care of Vietnam, then of Laos, today it's Cambodia—and me, I'm taking care of America.

I denounce, in no particular order, the following institutions: first of all, the *Press*. The news provided to Americans is criminal because it is presented in a rosy hue, or not presented at all. The *New York Times* lies. *Look* magazine lies by omission, out of prudence or cowardice. It too is

afraid of the naked truth. The *New Yorker* lies, out of mental debility, television lies too when it refrains from giving the true motives that led three blacks to ambush four white policemen. The Press, which possesses all the means for providing information but which refuses to do so, is responsible for the thunderous stupidity of the Americans.

The *Church*, born from an Eastern fable perverted from its original meaning by Westerners, has become a tool of repression, especially here against blacks, to whom it preaches evangelical gentleness out of respect for the master—the white man—and to whom, with the Old Testament, it promises the fires of hell to those who revolt.

The “*Charitable*” *Institutions*, controlled by all-powerful firms—the Ford Foundation, the Rockefeller Institute, and so on—which in turn control those they claim to help.

The *Unions*, of which I hardly need to speak to you, since they are your enemies, and what is more pathetic, the workers are enemies of themselves. To console themselves for being, ultimately, the victims of their bosses, they take refuge in an idiotic comfort and an aggressive racism against blacks.

I will not forget the *University*. The Universities. They teach you a false culture, in which the only recognized values are quantitative. The University is not content to turn you into a digit within a larger number—for example when they train five hundred thousand engineers—it cultivates in you the need for security, for tranquility, and, quite naturally, it educates you to serve your bosses and, beyond them, your politicians, although you are well aware of their intellectual mediocrity. So that you, who want to be scientists and scholars, will end up in an armchair, at a table—but at the far end of the table—of a mediocre politician. And you’ll be proud of it.

To continue, another institution: *Advertising*. The newspapers are full of idiotic advertisements. As are the television stations. And the advertisers, by threatening to boycott the newspapers and television stations, make their directors tremble. So that here, in the United States, what moves you is an immense trembling. Everyone trembles before everyone else. And the strongest before the weakest, and the least idiotic before the most idiotic. What is still called American dynamism is an endless trembling that shakes the whole country.

I will finish this list with one major institution: the *Police*. They too provoke fear. They threaten, but they tremble. They are not very sure of

themselves. Three days ago, old Johnson was saying that the Warren Commission was wrong in naming Oswald as the sole culprit in the murder of Kennedy.⁷ And—the height of irony—it’s the supreme manager of the Police, Johnson himself, who had backed the Warren Commission. This contradiction—or this reversal—might provoke an immense outburst of laughter. In any case, they must be having a good laugh in Peking. But here, in the end, it’s pathetic.

Chapter 7: May Day Speech

Speech given May 1, 1970, in New Haven, Connecticut, during a large demonstration in support of the Black Panthers. The text is based on a typescript that was corrected and annotated by Genet. It includes the appendix that was added when the speech was published by City Lights Books.

INTRODUCTORY NOTE

The "May Day Speech" is probably the most important statement Genet made while in the United States. Given outdoors before an enormous crowd of more than twenty-five thousand people, it was addressed to the relatively diverse group of protesters who, in response to a call put out by the Panthers, had come together for the large demonstration that took place from May 1-3, 1970; it included students, intellectuals and revolutionary activists, as well as members of various movements (messianic, hippie, yippie), who assembled on the grounds of Yale University, in New Haven, to protest the charges against Bobby Seale, incarcerated at the time in the very same city. The speakers included leaders from every current of the revolutionary Left: Jerry Rubin, Abbie Hoffman, Dave Dellinger, Ralph Abernathy, David Hilliard, and others.

Genet gave his speech on the first day of the demonstration. Because his presence in the United States was relatively illegal (see note 1), his intervention had not been previously announced to the press. (The same day, however, the *New York Times* published an article on him entitled "Genet Emerges as an Idol of the Panthers"). The author, using a microphone, read the first lines of his manuscript in French, then Elbert "Big Man" Howard, minister of information of the Black Panther Party, took over, reading an English version of the text.

This is the last of Genet's interventions in the United States. The day before, he had received a summons from the Immigration Services in Connecticut demanding that he show his identification papers and his visa. The day after the speech, May 2, Genet left the country by crossing the Canadian border.

The "May Day Speech" was published in English under this title in the summer of 1970 by City Lights Books in San Francisco, in the form of a small booklet of twenty-eight pages. The speech was published with an introduction by Allen Ginsberg and with an appendix Genet himself had written for the booklet.

In his introduction, Ginsberg describes Genet as the "most eminent prosateur of Europe and saintly thinker of France, most shy poet of XX Century." Commenting on the speech, Ginsberg adds: "The exquisite common sense of Genet's document on racism was immediately apparent—to those of us whose consciousness attended his classic language. . . . And the Panthers and their righteous cause and the grievous, mean, bitter, murderous injustice dealt them by our Government was explained again clearly once for all and established irrevocably in conscience and consciousness, in *white terms*, unmistakable, and

in language that commanded a new 'delicacy of heart' as the next political dimension of White Reality."

The text, given here in its entirety, includes the additions Genet wrote by hand on the typescript. Excerpts from the speech and the appendix were published in French in the journal *Jeune Afrique*, November 10, 1970, under the title "J'accuse."

Sources: Interviews with Marie-Anne Thomson de Pury, Monique Besse, and Jeannette Bredin. Archives of Gallimard, Edmund White, Jean Genet / IMEC.

ENDNOTES

1. The "unusual circumstances" in which Genet entered the United States are these: after the American consulate in Paris had denied him a visa, Genet arrived on March 1 in Canada, where he made the same request, once again without success. He then decided to try to enter the country through one of the least-used border stations. He went there in the company of Jacques Maglia. Taking advantage of a moment of distraction on the part of the passport agent, who, upon seeing two Frenchmen arrive, began to hum "La Marseillaise," Genet switched his own passport with that of his companion, who had just passed the checkpoint; the agent then put a second stamp on Maglia's passport and let Genet through. Genet met up with the Panthers in New York the evening of March 5.

2. The events referred to here took place on April 14, 1970, in a New Haven court, where Jean Genet, David Hilliard, and Emory Douglas (minister of culture of the Black Panther Party) attended a hearing in the trial of Bobby Seale.

At a certain moment during this hearing, Bobby Seale's lawyer, Charles Garry, handed a statement written by his client to David Hilliard, who began to read it out loud. A policeman tried to stop him. When David Hilliard and Emory Douglas resisted, they were arrested and sentenced immediately to six months in prison. Genet, despite his vigorous protest, was expelled from the courtroom; an hour later he wrote an account of the arrests for the *International News Service*, a newsletter published April 17, 1970, by the Committee to Defend the Black Panthers at Yale University. A few days later, the Panther leaders were released after making an apology to the court.

3. This other incident took place April 28, 1970, when Genet, two white lawyers for the Panthers, and Thomas Jolly, a lieutenant in the Panthers, boarded a flight from Los Angeles to New York. (When Thomas Jolly was apprehended by the federal police, his three companions decided to get off the plane and took a later flight.)

4. Spiro Agnew, vice president of the United States, led a virulent campaign against the Black Panthers. He was forced to resign in 1973 and was prosecuted for corruption.