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Kristian Williams

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No longer merely metaphor: Re-reading The Plague by Albert
Camus

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Plague by Albert Camus

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Albert Camus' novel *The Plague* offers a portrait of a town under quarantine, ravaged by an epidemic. It tells us of life arbitrarily constrained and unjustly shortened, of human beings isolated by law and by disease, of panics and shortages, of despair and heroic sacrifice. It presents a grim picture of human life, but an affirming picture of human beings. It ends with a clear moral, that "what we learn in time of pestilence" is that "there is more to admire in humanity than to despise."¹

The book follows the lives of several men—most notably Rieux, a doctor; Rambert, a Spanish Civil War veteran now working as a journalist; and Tarrou, a Communist turned pacifist—as they do what little they can, risking their lives and suffering separation from their loved ones, in order to try to fight the contagion and attend to the public health. That it falls to such people to take the initiative says much about the

¹ The edition quoted is *The Plague*, by Albert Camus. Translation by Stuart Gilbert. New York: Vintage, 1991.

failures of the authorities, and reflects Camus' attitude about authority overall.

The official response to the outbreak is belated, dithering, confused, and inadequate. The inaction of the authorities forces ordinary people to take extraordinary measures. The turning point comes when Tarrou, the former Communist, approaches the doctor, Rieux. "The sanitary department is inefficient—understaffed, for one thing," Tarrou remarks. "I've heard the authorities are thinking of a sort of conscription..." Rieux admits that this is true, though the Prefect remains paralyzed by indecision.

Tarrou then asks, If he daren't risk compulsion, why not call for voluntary help?

It's been done, [Rieux replies]. The response was poor.

It was done through official channels, and half-heartedly, [Tarrou points out]. What they're short on is imagination. Officialdom can never cope with something really catastrophic. And the remedial measures they think up are hardly adequate for a common cold. If we let them carry on like this they'll soon be dead, and so shall we.

He then proposes:

I've drawn up a plan for voluntary groups of helpers. Get me empowered to try out my plan, and then let's sidetrack officialdom. In any case the authorities have their hands more than full already. I have friends in many walks of life; they'll form a nucleus to start from. And of course, I'll take part myself.

The network Tarrou set up took on a range of responsibilities: They "accompanied doctors on their house-to-house visits,

saw to the evacuation of infected persons, and subsequently, owing to the shortage of drivers, even drove the vehicles conveying sick persons and dead bodies.” They did their work diligently. But to what degree these measures contributed to the ultimate waning of the epidemic, or whether the plague just ran its course, we naturally cannot know. Nevertheless, the sanitary squads may have served a more important purpose:

These groups enabled our townsfolk to come to grips with the disease and convinced them that, now that the plague was among us, it was up to them to do whatever could be done to fight it. Since plague became in this way some men’s duty, it revealed itself as what it really was; that is, the concern of all.

The plague, of course, is not simply the plague. It also serves as a metaphor for the French experience under Nazi occupation, when the official response—surrender and collaboration—forced ordinary people, Camus among them, to take action themselves and form a Resistance movement.

This analogy is striking, and has deep implications. Camus saw fascism—and indeed any belief system that justifies murder—as a threat to all humanity which, nevertheless, human beings spread and to which anyone may succumb. His thinking on this point was almost mystical in its severity: To affirm life meant that one must resist death. To accept even the fact of death was equivalent to suicide, and akin to murder; it was in fact to become complicit with death in all of its forms. The challenge, always, was to affirm the value of humanity against the tyranny of death, knowing that such a struggle would ultimately end in defeat. This required a spirit of rebellion, and thus Camus placed his hopes not in authorities or institutions, but in the hearts of ordinary people.

Rereading *The Plague* now, in the midst of a pandemic, one finds that it suddenly has a new relevance. It is no longer

merely metaphor. Our hopes for surviving the scourge of Covid-19 cannot rely on the actions of those at the top of the social hierarchies, whose decisions so often manage to be at once draconian and inadequate. Politicians, bureaucrats, and police are not to be trusted and, in any case, will pursue solutions dependent on laws, bureaucracies, and police. They are, to Camus' way of thinking, simply another set of symptoms of the plague itself, which is a spiritual and political, as well as a medical, condition.

The cure, if one is to be found, relies not merely on medical science, but on social solidarity. Our survival may depend on the actions of our coworkers and our neighbors—people with no official position and no authority, but with enough courage and common sense to act in the public interest even against the orders of the authorities and the instructions of their own purported leaders. In a growing wave of wildcat strikes, auto workers, librarians, electricians, sewer maintenance workers, garbage collectors, fast food workers, bus drivers, warehouse workers, and workers at slaughterhouses have shut down facilities to prevent the spread of contagion when their bosses refused to. People around the country are forming mutual aid networks to share resources, check in on neighbors, and provide for those who are under quarantine. Such actions need not, and should not, wait for official decisions. And these moments carry in them also the promise of a different kind of society, where the bureaucrats are sidelined, where everyday people suddenly discover their own power, and where we look to each other, instead of the authorities, to meet our basic needs.

Perhaps, then, Camus' analogy may be borne out by reality: Perhaps the means of fighting pestilence will prove to be the same as those for fighting fascism.