

Book Review

Albert Camus

The Plague

New York, NY: Penguin/Random House, 2011 (Original work published 1947)

Reviewed by Howard A. Doughty

Whenever the spectre of political repression raises its especially ugly head in what's called the "Western World" of late capitalist economics and loosely representative governance, George Orwell's *1984* seems to find revitalized prominence. While always popular among those who assign books for use in high school literature courses, its sales spike as its cautionary vision of totalitarian authority is unleashed upon new generations in response to threats—internal or external, real or imagined.

In North America, at least, *1984* has been rivalled mainly by *The Diary of Anne Frank* and Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* as works of literary stature with a safe political message for young people (although, to be fair, Lee's novel remains somewhat less popular in the darker cultural recesses of the unreconstructed American South and Anne Frank's diary is losing support among what seems to be a rising number of anti-Semites).

History is made from the shreds of justice that intellectuals have torn from the politicians." - Julien Benda, <i>Précision</i> , 1937

Orwell's acolytes urge that no one grow up to approve of Joseph Stalin. Anne Frank's diary does the same for Adolf Hitler. And Lee adds to their stories some sentiments about prejudice in the former Confederate States of America during the "Jim Crow" era—well before the US civil rights movement of the 1950s and 1960s, never mind #BlackLivesMatter. Each book teaches stern lessons about problems seemingly of the past. Each one once reminded me of T. H. Huxley's parody of seventeenth-century poet John Dryden's line about Alexander the Great rehearsing his great victories during an inebriated rant: "And thrice he routed all his foes, and thrice he slew the slain" (Gould, 1997).

There was a time, not long ago, when it was possible to think that, somehow, such lessons had been learnt, needn't be repeated, and that it was time to move on. No longer. Parts of the past, and not always the more pleasant ones, seem to be returning.

Now, in the era of the current American president, as complicated by the current COVID-19 pandemic, we can allow ourselves little such comfort. The past, we have come to realize, is seldom securely buried. A "zombie apocalypse" may be a bit of a hard sell to serious people except as a literary genre of dubious repute; however, complacency in what passes for the real world is not entirely soothing. Or, as Karl Marx (1852) thundered in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: "the tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the

living” and, as William Faulkner echoed in *Requiem for a Nun* (1951, p. 85), “the past is never dead. It’s not even past.”

The warning that “eternal vigilance is the price of liberty” has been variously and falsely attributed to everyone from Patrick Henry to Tom Paine to Thomas Jefferson to Abraham Lincoln—American heroes all!—but I prefer to defer to the eminent British jurist, Rt. Hon. Lord Denning (1955), who held the office of Master of the Rolls in England and Wales (1962-1982) and more or less authoritatively claimed that the phrase originated with an Irishman, Rt. Hon. John Philpot Curran, who held the office of Master of the Rolls in Ireland (1806-1814); that, however, is an antiquarian argument that does no one much good to win or lose. Having thus implied that *history matters* and that literature is an important piece of history, let us proceed.

This year, Albert Camus’ *The Plague*—first published in 1947 and widely interpreted at the time as an elaborate metaphor for the Nazi occupation of France (1940-1945)—joined Orwell, Frank, and Lee as a defining volume about a dire threat to our “way of life.” The threat, of course, was not explicitly political or social, but arguably biological. While the world has witnessed such perils before and some have even generated their own literature (cf. Pepys, 1669, Defoe, 1995), Camus’ was the most important novel in recent memory to deal with a pandemic—even metaphorically.

<p>A plague is spreading. People are dying. Everyone is ordered to quarantine at home as the local doctor works around the clock to save victims. There are acts of heroism and acts of shame; there are those who think only of themselves, and those who are engaged for the greater good. The human condition is absurd and precarious.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">- Kim Willsher, 2020</p>

COVID-19 swept the world so swiftly and brutally that no one could have thought to insert *The Plague* into the curriculum for the current or, perhaps, even the coming year. If, however, the outbreak continues, repeats itself in second or third waves, or perhaps becomes an ongoing feature of human life for the foreseeable future, I will not be surprised if Camus’ contribution to our collective psyche joins the other three as staples of contemporary moral conceit.

Don’t get me wrong! Orwell, Frank, and Lee are deservedly praised. Moreover, I have admired Albert Camus (1913-1960) as much or more than any writer of the twentieth century. I have approved of his expressed attitude toward life in general and have shared much of his political perspective in particular. For a time—in late high school in 1961 and throughout my undergraduate studies—he was my most favoured “public intellectual.” To this day, I retain great affection for his novels, essays, plays, journalism, and “notebooks.” Whether writing newspaper exposés about poverty in the leftist *Alger républicain*, organizing the *Théâtre du Travail* and both writing and acting in plays that infused the theatre with thoughts about moral responsibility, musing on the contemporary relevance of ancient mythologies (*The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*, 1955), trying (not always successfully) to balance the competing claims of individual rights and social justice in the Algerian war of independence from France (1954-1962), he was a steady, humane presence. I don’t wonder that we turn to him again.

Public Intellectuals

I have, however, become somewhat sceptical about the ways in which certain kinds of writing have been put to use in contexts and for purposes that might not have occurred to the authors themselves and of which they might not have approved. Camus has recently been described as a “public intellectual.” It is not a label that he might have fully understood or with which he might have felt comfortable. (Incidentally, he also resisted being described as a “philosopher” and bristled when he was labeled an “existentialist”; instead, he seemed happiest to be known as an “artist,” and a very good one as his 1957 Nobel Prize for Literature attests.)

Stathis Gourgouris (2020) makes the point that “public intellectual” is a uniquely North American phrase, first used extensively in the twentieth-century. He writes: “The term *public intellectual* has no meaning outside of an American context. Nowhere in the European tradition, for example, does one find references to this term because, strictly speaking, it is redundant.”

Only a society that develops a public sphere in which intellectuals are marginalized develops a need for the category of public intellectual.

- Stathis Gourgouris, 2020

In Europe, “intellectuals” are people with special talents and achievements in the arts, the sciences and related fields whose work becomes well-known and who pay attention to matters of broad social concern. While others may restrict themselves to their scholarly disciplines or research interests as private individuals, an authentic “intellectual” is, by definition, a public person.

In the United States, however, few thoughtful historians describe Benjamin Franklin, Tom Paine, Thomas Jefferson or even Ralph Waldo Emerson, Charles Sanders Pierce, Walt Whitman and Henry James as “public intellectuals.” In colonial Canada, it’s hard for any non-historian to recall anyone who would qualify.

The term chiefly applies to twentieth-century figures that are not only accomplished in some important field, but are also self-consciously engaged in public discourse. The term mainly seems apt in a mass age in which culture has become commodified to the degree that intellectual worth is mainly established by inclusion on the *New York Times*’ best-sellers list, the frequency of appearances on the opinion pages of major newspapers and, perhaps, the number of twitter followers of which an aspirant “influencer” can boast. Defined by such commercial metrics, the “best before” date of a contemporary public intellectual may be longer than the newest chunk of computer software, but it is most likely shorter than frozen pizza or a tin of canned, condensed soup.

Unlike in Europe, as well, North American “men of letters” who see fit to engage in political or social debate are often construed to be sticking their noses into public affairs with an underserved sense of entitlement. Preferring to hear from people with practical experience and a “no-nonsense” approach to the world, Americans have been preternaturally suspicious of people who think too much and who think too abstractly about real-life issues.

So, the term “public intellectual” does not comport well with certain American traditions (Hofstadter, 1963). Indeed, the United States has long had room for an “anti-intellectual” habit of mind in which overly educated and presumably condescending elites are understood not to be a national treasure, but rather somewhat subversive and a potential threat to social stability. Intellectuals in general and “public” intellectuals in particular can be bothersome, frustrating, and seditious. They are an affront to what the curmudgeonly H. L. Mencken somewhat contemptuously called the “booboisie” which, contrary to intelligent critics speaking their mind, consisted of the “great unwashed” that had no mind to speak.

Edward Said (1994: 11), a *bona fide* “public intellectual” himself, put it well: “This role has an edge to it, and cannot be played without a sense of being someone whose place it is publicly to raise embarrassing questions, to confront orthodoxy and dogma (rather than to produce them), to be someone who cannot be co-opted by governments or corporations, and whose *raison d’être* is to represent all these people and issues that are routinely forgotten or swept under the rug.”

So it is that public intellectuals are apt to be outliers. They consist of past personalities such as Norman Mailer, Susan Sontag, and Gore Vidal, current commentators including the likes of Judith Butler, Noam Chomsky, Barbara Ehrenreich, Cornel West, or even more domesticated sorts with examples from Paul Krugman to Martha Nussbaum—just a few among hundreds, if not thousands of alternatives. They can make excellent op-ed writers and sophisticated talk-show guests, but they are rarely found in positions of formal influence in government or elsewhere. Canada, I suppose, can now boast the likes of Margaret Atwood, John Ralston Saul, and Charles Taylor, but Canadians are more apt to be comfortable with ice hockey players. In fact, when the brilliant Russian poet, Yevgeny Yevtushenko (1972), was asked to name Canada’s greatest poet, he immediately replied, “Phil Esposito.” He wasn’t kidding, and the few Canadians who noticed took it as a compliment.

Camus was different. He was an *intellectual engagé*—a considerably more formidable beast.

L’intellectuel engagé

Unlike his friend/rival/nemesis Jean-Paul Sartre, who swanned around the Parisian “left bank” throughout the Nazi occupation, Camus actually risked his life as editor of *Combat*, the clandestine newspaper of the French Resistance.

Sartre looked like an ogre; Camus was a movie star among philosophers. - Andy Martin, 2020

Though (briefly) a member of the Algerian communist party in the late 1930s, Camus settled on the role of “rebel” rather than revolutionary. Unlike Sartre, who first endorsed Stalin and later supported Mao from the barricades of a Parisian bistro, Camus likened historicist, revolutionary eschatologies to religious faiths and insisted that “politics is not religion; or, if it is, it is nothing but the Inquisition.” Sartre, on the other hand, contemptuously dismissed Camus’ “Red Cross morality.” A famous passage in his Stalinist apology, *Dirty Hands* (1948) might as well have been spoken directly to Camus—eight years his junior:

How you cling to your purity, young man! How afraid you are to soil your hands! All right, stay pure! What good will it do? Why did you join us? Purity is an idea for a yogi or a monk. You intellectuals and bourgeois anarchists use it as a pretext for doing nothing. To do nothing, to remain motionless, arms at your sides, wearing kid gloves. Well, I have dirty hands. Right up to the elbows. I've plunged them in filth and blood. But what do you hope? Do you think you can govern innocently?

Camus, of course, was no more an anarchist than a communist (if anything, his politics tended toward “anarcho-syndicalism,” but labels are often misleading and especially so in his case). Nonetheless, the attack stung—though not nearly as much as the denunciation that appeared a few years later in Sartre’s newspaper *Les temps modernes* (the name taken from Charlie Chaplin’s 1936 film). Therein Sartre commissioned one of his most reliable writers, Francis Jeanson, to excoriate Camus in a review of *The Rebel: An Essay on Man in Revolt* (1956). Camus wore the accusation of “innocence” for the rest of his abbreviated life. It was an accusation that crippled his political influence, especially during the Algerian hostilities when Camus rejected *both* the terrorism of the Algerian National Liberation Front *and* the torturous repression of the collapsing Fourth French Republic.

Like many, I had been forced to read this book in high school, to no ill or beneficial effect. My only faint recollection was that it made no sense to me at the time. Youth is certainly wasted on the young and so are books about mortality. - Patrick Condon, 2020

Challenged to choose sides, Camus chose humanity and paid for it dearly. Rejected by each side as an apologist for the other, his plea for simple decency left him isolated. His sentimentalism was evident in his saying that, if a bomb were placed on a bus in which his mother was riding and he was forced to choose between endorsing violence in the pursuit of justice and saving the life of his mother, he would choose his mother.

For the dialecticians of destruction, it simply would not do. Camus, they insisted, had reprised the theme of his earlier novel, *L'Étranger* (1942) in which his protagonist, an undistinguished clerk named Meursault, for no apparent reason kills an Arab on an Algerian beach and explains that he did it “because of the sun.” In the middling to late 1950s, during the cruel, bloody, armed struggle for Algerian emancipation from French colonialism, Camus was permitting the clarity of historical choice to be blurred, not by the scorching heat of the Mediterranean sun, but by the equally blinding effects of sodden *bourgeois* morality.

The Plague

Camus’ subject is several things. It is an imagination of a real event—a medical emergency, an epidemic with a beginning, an end, and an unhealthy measure of misery in between. It is also a metaphor for another truly real event, the Nazi occupation of France. And it is a description of the human condition. It is most importantly a morality lesson. At one time it might have served as stand-in for Stalinism. Today, no small number of Americans might see it as a convenient way to describe the state of their union under the current president.

The practical question of “what *can* be done?” is placed in dialogue with the moral question of “what *should* be done?” The dialectic engages two of the three main characters—a man of science (Dr. Rieux) and a man of God (Father Paneloux). The disease is the immediate problem. It is also the context for what professes to be the “larger” question.

In the novel, we follow Dr. Rieux’s often unsuccessful attempts to save the lives of people in the Algerian coastal city of Oran during an outbreak of the bubonic plague. Dr. Rieux is chiefly concerned to save lives (or at least postpone inevitable deaths); it is his job. Father Paneloux is chiefly concerned with saving souls (and thus about facing a test of eternal faith); it is his mission.

Camus gives both sides of the issue their due. In the process, while he accepts none of the Christian doctrine about sin, punishment, the salvific fate of Jesus, and eternal bliss (or damnation), he does not satirize, scorn, mock, or mourn. The absurdity of evil visited upon innocents in a world made by a god of love is, for Camus, a serious conundrum and the advocates of faith are not to be treated with disrespect.

[Camus’] odd conception of history results in its being suppressed as such, because it eliminates all concrete situations in order to obtain a pure dialogue of ideas; on the other hand, the metaphysical protest against suffering and death; and, on the other hand, the equally metaphysical temptation toward impotence. The first constitutes true rebellion, the second its revolutionary perversion.

- Francis Jeanson, 1956

“Theodicy” or the vindication of an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent God in light of the manifest existence of evil and the suffering of innocents is not contemptuously dismissed (Camus is not an “empty-headed” atheist). Instead, by pressing the conversation by the two men, he lets the reader work through the esoteric and abstruse domain of thought and come down to the plane of terrestrial action perhaps oddly buoyed up by the encounter with death to emerge whole at a place where we can experience what Camus (1956: 290) called “thought at the meridian,” the “erratic arc” between the extremes that invites destruction of hubris by nemesis, and is redeemed only by a sense of measure.

Facing suffering and death with neither moral indifference nor political rationalization, to say nothing of economic expediency, Camus, through Dr. Rieux and throughout the plague, acknowledges limits, recognizes complexity, deters submission, and abjures the passion for control. Contrary to his critics of both left and right, this is *not* an excuse for subservience, a pusillanimous resignation to live in the dead centre of political life. It is rather the willingness to remain active between contradictions and to tolerate the acceptance of reality that constantly regenerates the act of rebellion against evil. Camus holds that giving in to the impulse to pose a particular doctrine against its opposite assures only the mutual destruction of both. Camus in life and Rioux in imagination prefer to remain poised, to keep their balance, to resist both a surrender to faith and the abyss.

Penetrating the Partisan Pestilence

The reason that Camus' response to the political plague of fascism was to reject *both* the disease itself *and* the proposed cure in the form of the Soviet Marxism is also the reason that *The Plague* is germane today. And it is especially relevant to those who, if the fates smile upon us, will be tasked with the responsibility to clean up the mess that COVID-19 will leave in its wake. Restoring social arrangements to what they were even in the recent past is neither possible nor necessarily desirable. Nothing that has been accomplished or proposed to deal effectively with the disease and its multiple consequences is likely to succeed completely either in restoration or redemption. Indeed, there is little hope of constructing novel and improved conditions in any aspect of our lives. The dead weight of the past is too burdensome.

However, there's one thing I must tell you: there's no question of heroism in all this. It's a matter of common decency. That's an idea that may make some people smile, but the only means of righting a plague is common decency.
- Albert Camus, 1947

We will, at least for the time being, pursue contradictory policies, improvise, act impulsively or not act at all, misunderstand our problems and misguide our solutions and – if we are extraordinarily lucky—manage to muddle through and hope that someone is taking notes so that we can do better next time.

Our chief difficulty will be clearing away the rhetorical debris that's left after months of ineptitude on the one hand and buffoonery on the other. Although the most exaggerated form of political pestilence—name-calling, conspiratorial thinking and wild conspiracy theorizing (they are not necessarily incompatible), indifference to constitutional protocols, scape-goating, hate-mongering, toying with mass violence while ramping up instruments of repression, demanding law and order while discounting the rule of law, and indulging in other related calumnies are on full display in some jurisdictions while a sort of paralysis, inconsistent messaging, unaccountable delay and endless procrastination describe circumstances in others.

That is as may be; but the *real* test of capacity will not take the form of miracle vaccines, efficient testing and tracking, adequate supplies, useful training, ongoing public compliance with incoherent public regulations will only *begin* to make a difference when we try to explain what happened, why it happened, and how—if at all—both preventative and ameliorative measures can and will be taken when our public health system is next tested, perhaps inevitably more severely.

And this is where Camus' writing becomes *directly* relevant to those in whose hands choice for future public sector innovation is held.

Economic disturbance, social disruption, intermittent shortages in goods and services, public confidence in government, unavoidable delays in regenerating investment and reducing unemployment, ongoing tragedies (the hideous record of too many nursing homes being the most obvious), and irredeemable losses in time, opportunity, and simple “normalcy” will all take their tolls; however, genuinely helpful innovation must begin with an honest and pervasive explanation

and exploration of the current pandemic on a scale far broader than registering complaints about “wet markets” in China or the curious shortage of N-95 masks in modern, urban hospitals.

The public sector itself must be fundamentally rethought as central to the well-being of any salvageable structure of late capitalism. Not only has the “free market” demonstrated its incapacity to provide the necessities of social life, but its larger cultural, social, and psychological pathologies have also been revealed.

In 1946, when Papa wrote the book, wealth was measured by different standards to today, when people are simply chasing after gold and human beings are regarded as free market goods to be bought and sold. We jump from one thing to another. Everyone thinks they are right and forgets what life is about, that there are doubts.

- Catherine Camus, quoted in Willsher, 2020

In particular, the consequences of the triumph of neoliberalism over the past forty-plus years are now on display. What Gary Teeple (1995) among others diagnosed as the decline of social reform twenty-five years ago, and what Sirvan Karimi (2015) diagnosed as “the tragedy of social democracy” just five years ago, have been proceeding apace. Along with the hand-maidens of international conflict and domestic inequities, we have recently witnessed the election of the current American president, the chaos of the British “Brexit,” the rise of illiberal democracies from central Europe to southern Asia and South America, spikes in domestic racism, as well as ongoing migrations of desperation and ecological degradation.

It is time to connect these dots and to try to reimagine what the world might have been like if the purported blessings of technological advances, the putative benefits of at least a nominal shift from imperialism to independence, and a gradual transformation from tyranny to democracy had been properly managed.

One of the most obvious therapies for our current mental and material pathologies including but not limited to the current pandemic *must* be premised on the recognition that the logic of privatization and the myth of market-driven efficiencies in the general public interest have both failed. The corollary is that, in some fashion, the public sector must be restored, redesigned, and repurposed.

A new public sector structure need not take the form of a massive, intrusive, overweening bureaucracy and the concomitant deprivation of civil liberties. Its relationship to the private sector and the predisposition toward individualism is not preordained. Innovation in conceptualization is essential and pre-existing designs are not hidden in marble waiting to be revealed. On the contrary, intensive democratization of public spaces and public services are the most likely preconditions for success in what’s left to be decided in the twenty-first century.

Opening Alternatives

Of course, there is no obvious reason to imagine that we will diagnose our deeper ills more effectively than we are coming to understand the specific virus that has caught our attention and

precipitated unprecedented global reactions over the course of the current year. No small number of institutions financial, commercial, industrial, political, military, technological, educational and ideological—are taking the opportunity to work out strategies to achieve even greater instruments of cultural hegemony than they have enjoyed to date.

There may be, however, momentary opportunities and brief interludes when prospects not just to *avoid* the worst that might befall if Mussolini’s dream of “corporatism”—the merging of the wealth of private sector business and the authority of a repressive state apparatus—is to be modified or avoided, but also a chance to achieve a more environmentally sustainable, equitable, participatory, and (yes) innovative society is to arrive.

That perhaps slim but not impossible alternative cannot come, however, by replacing one monstrous ideology and social structure on top of another. And that is precisely where Camus shows his worth. In the sorriest of times, he explains, our value as human beings is achieved not through grand feats and gestures, nor through the implementation of grand theories and multi-year plans.

Camus’ choice is to live lives purposefully in accordance with the foundational ethic of decency. That choice, however, *must* be embraced fully and unreservedly. It is not an invitation to avoid conflict, to accommodate injustice, to compromise with tyranny, to submit to power, or to look elsewhere when suffering is plainly on display. Quite the contrary, “common decency” must take on an almost Kantian imperative if it is not to be jettisoned at the first sign of trouble like an innocuous “New Year’s Resolution” the first time someone offers a second helping of a rich dessert or a clever way to cheat on your income tax.

Far from being a bland affirmation of impotent politeness, it is a high standard to be applied to both private and public actions, and especially to innovations by the state. Tonic change can no longer be approved if it serves efficiency in the pursuit of ill-considered goals. Rather, we must keep in mind the personal and public consequences in the immediate and distant future, and be prepared to be bold in some cases and cautious in others according to the best evidence and not merely the power of entrenched interests or someone’s notion of inevitability.

Progress can be stopped, especially when it is not “progressive,” and all policy must be held to rigorous ethical as well as economic account especially when it places others in the service of some. The means must be made to justify ends, not the other way around; and this can happen only when the ends are embodied in the means. And, like “herd immunity,” common decency can be expected only when it becomes sufficiently common.

As far as “leadership” is concerned, it must be exercised lightly as possible and with quiet competence by people like Dr. Rieux who encourages us, as Patrick Condon (2020) nicely put it, “to ponder what is the right thing to do, the right way to feel, the best way to behave in the midst of an unfathomable tragedy.” Or, more importantly, in the effort to normalize common decency in the activities of ordinary life.

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