

The Plague

La Peste

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Over 75 years after its publication, Albert Camus's novel *The Plague* has returned to the media spotlight during the Covid pandemic. Its depiction of the city of Oran struggling with an unrelenting epidemic has been interpreted as a harbinger of the global catastrophe, prompting astonishment and recognition among readers who have been surprised by the novel's accurate portrayal of their experiences. However, such a literal interpretation challenges the traditional allegorical reading of the novel, which views the plague as a metaphor for the spread of fascism through a defenceless community.

In *The Plague*, Camus recounts the spread of a mysterious epidemic that turns out to be the plague in the Algerian city of Oran, which is quickly placed under lockdown. Using simple and monotonous language, Camus creates a dystopian novel that is both medically realistic and metaphorically open. The confined setting of the quarantined city restricts time and space, enabling him to observe how individuals in positions of authority — such as a doctor, a priest, a reporter, an employee and a judge — and individuals with different beliefs respond to the rapid spread of the plague and its violent absurdity. The allegorical nature of the novel is explicit and invites political interpretation. The truncated date “194.” with which the novel opens refers explicitly to the decade of the Nazi occupation of France, and Camus's choice of disease immediately evokes the *peste brune* ('Brown Plague'), a nickname given to Nazism by analogy with the brown colour of the SA's shirts. This provides readers with further clues to help them identify the plague as a political and ideological evil. However, Camus insists that his novel can be read “sur plusieurs portées” (“on several levels”). He conceived the novel as something that could and should be updated according to context: the plague is a polysemic symbol that transcends Nazism.

By choosing the epidemic metaphor to reflect on the context of the spread of fascism and the resistance to Nazi occupation in Europe, Camus builds on a long tradition. As total social facts, epidemics raise fundamental questions about the community, its government, and the relationship between individuals and the authorities. During an epidemic, other people are both a threat and potential victims. How can we maintain social ties in the face of this dilemma? On what principles? As the etymology suggests, an epidemic, from the Greek *epi* (above) and *demos* (people), involves the definition of the people, that is the group but also the basis of a political community. For this reason, epidemiological narratives are often inherently political, offering an opportunity to consider what constitutes and endangers a collective. By embracing this tradition and its questions, Camus explores the potential for resistance against an evil that is both mysterious and seemingly without cause.

He pays close attention to perception and language. Perception must be refined in order to see what is happening beneath the surface, while language can manipulate and frighten, but it can also

provide the clearest possible description of evil. This is the first step towards combatting evil effectively. The novel is a lesson in hermeneutics and designation, but it also establishes a kind of moral code of conduct. While the official authorities are unable to cope, the resistance is led by volunteers who organise medical teams and provide aid to the sick. There is no need for a majority: the resistance relies above all on the commitment of a few men — there are no women in *The Plague* — united only by their conviction that they must act. Camus's characters are not part of a party, nor do they belong to the same social class. Their actions are not based on prior convictions. Their fight against the plague is not about rebuilding the world, but about countering an immediate destructive force. It is a matter of survival. And it does not result in definitive victory. There is no hope of a definitive cure or a new era. The novel ends with the emphatic reminder that “the plague bacillus never dies nor disappears” (279).

By resorting to allegory, Camus gives his novel an extremely broad scope, opening up countless possibilities for interpretation. However, this choice also has significant political implications, given its universal potential and broad scope. Simone de Beauvoir wrote in retrospect: “To reduce the occupation to a natural scourge was still to flee from history and from real problems” (1992, 182). We could take this further and argue that assimilating Nazism — or indeed any form of “tyranny”, to use Camus's term — to an epidemic is precisely to depoliticise its origins and consequences. It literally places the evil that must be fought outside the community affected by it. The plague appears as a scourge rather than the result of particular socio-economic conditions that can be acted upon, and the vocabulary of fatality overshadows that of history. While the metaphor of contagious disease illustrates the rapid progression of evil, it overlooks the drivers behind its spread and the stages of its institutionalisation. There are no executioners, only random victims: no group is persecuted as a group, whether for ‘ethnic’ or ideological reasons. The fight against the plague is therefore not waged in the political arena, where different worldviews clash in a power struggle that must change in order to revolutionise the order of things. Instead, it is fought on the basis of almost blind necessity; it is a matter of “saving the bodies” (“sauver les corps”), nothing less but nothing more. The struggle is not waged for the sake of an ideology; it stems from a deep-seated commitment to preserving the humanity of every individual — a notion so elusive that it transcends politics and borders on metaphysics. Can *The Plague* really be read as a political novel? Ultimately, it is up to the reader to decide.

Reference

Beauvoir, Simone (de). *La Force des choses*. Gallimard, 1992

LANGUAGE: French / Français

CENSORSHIP STATUS: