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We should rather rebel than return to normal

An essay on re-reading *The plague* in the times of an epidemic

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ABSTRACT

When the pandemic broke out in 2020, it was reported that interest in Albert Camus' book, *The plague,* had significantly risen. Throughout the past year, many scholars and editors have attempted to formulate reasons for interest in Camus' existential novel. In the light of these readings and interpretations, we tend to see recent events, our contemporary social and political crises, through the symbols and myths represented in Camus' novel. This essay offers an attempt at a contemporary re-reading of Camus' novel, focusing on the character of Tarrou and his appeal to social and political action, as well as resistance and creation. My point is that it is actually Tarrou that represents our struggle, given the complex, social and political aspects of our crisis. My reading, based on Kierkegaard's idea of repetition, offers a nuanced vision of what rebellion against the plague could mean in the light of our contemporary situation.

KEYWORDS:

The plague; solidarity; rebellion; repetition; Albert Camus

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In memory of Li Wenliang

genuine repetition is recollected forward
Søren Kierkegaard

INTRODUCTION

In April 2020, during lockdown, I had an online session with students. We were talking about Albert Camus' novel, *The plague*. When we finished, I went out to the street, and there was no one there, the city was completely quiet, the silence occasionally broken by police loudspeakers reminding people to stay home. The fictional Oran and my hometown suddenly seemed difficult to distinguish. It appeared that on an initial, intuitive and strongly emotional level, we are re-living today what we imagine might have been the shared experience of the heroes of Oran in Camus' book. On a less emotional level, it is obvious that we are not. It took time to see and understand and appreciate the differences. The interplay between these two, contradictory elements motivated me to write on Camus' novel.

What I wish to propose here, is to start by distinguishing what it means to re-read a work, in relation to Søren Kierkegaard's theory of repetition. Afterward, we will return to Camus' city of Oran which, given our recent experiences, may require that we read the book from a completely different angle. Perhaps some of the aspects that had such strong resonance in the original reading, like Father Paneloux and the question of metaphysical evil, have lost their importance today? Any declaration nowadays that what we are experiencing is a God-given punishment of humanity, in the manner of a contemporary Paneloux, would be met, I assume, with much stronger criticism than in Camus' novel. Possibly, many of us are — like Jean Tarrou in Camus' book — acutely aware that we have brought today's crisis upon ourselves, by our own doing, and that God has nothing to do with it, this time round.[1]

Some other aspects of the novel, on the contrary, have become much bigger issues. For the sake of showing solidarity, Camus was silent about some of the tensions of his times in *The plague*: he knew perfectly well, for example, how colonial injustice functioned in the place he chose as the setting for his story.[2]

[1] One of the reviewers of my essay has made an excellent point, that these two aspects are actually not as incompatible as I present here: we have brought the crisis on ourselves and it can simultaneously be seen as a kind of "external", divine or natural, form of retributive justice. What I think should be done, though, is to suspend this "metaphysical" aspect of our situation and focus — like Tarrou — on human, which here means: limited to our possibilities — ways of overcoming the crisis.

[2] The absence of Arab and Berber citizens in Camus' Oran was one of the foundational elements of the postcolonial critique of the writer (O'Brien, 1970; Said, 1993).

Our contemporary Oran speaks out much more loudly on these matters: the "Black Lives Matter" movement in U.S., and the women's strikes in Poland, are evidence that protesters are desperate enough to voice their anger in the midst of an epidemic, adding racial and feminist dimensions to Camus' vision of a city struggling during a pandemic lockdown. Finally, some things have not changed at all. A whole essay could be written on the strange resemblance between Camus' *The plague* and our current situation regarding the media and news representations. The citizens of Oran adjusted their lives according to daily reports of infection statistics, regulated their moods according to the numbers. They grasped at any new information on vaccine development. The similarities here are striking.

THE PLAGUE, THE ABSURD AND BREAKING THE SILENCE

One interesting thing about Camus' *The plague* is that, even if the reader is unaware of the philosophical points of reference Camus chose as the background for his characters, the book is almost intuitively depicted and seen as a work emphasizing the necessity of solidarity, resistance against some form of evil and the revolt of individuals against something, or someone, threatening their existence. Shaping such a revolt, as we see in *The plague*, must unarguably be developed through dialogue. Speech becomes important for people, since through the act of speaking, we necessarily share with others what we agree and disagree upon. Camus, whilst conceptualizing early drafts of *The plague*, was still struggling with the consequences and afterthoughts regarding his first philosophical essay, *The myth of Sisyphus*, commonly (and falsely) perceived by many readers[3] as a book on the philosophy of the absurd, a kind of appreciation of the phenomenon (which Camus vehemently rejected).[4] In Camus' terms, human acts of expression are unavoidably a form revolt a g a i n s t

[3] This misconception, on a very general level, is represented by mass culture and the image of Camus as a person completely indifferent to what life will bring, conflating the behavior of Camus' character, Meursault from *The outsider*, with the writer himself. This image, I think, is perfectly captured by a misquote, attributed to Camus and found on many Internet pages nowadays: "Should I kill myself, or have a cup of coffee?" In reality, almost everything that Camus wrote in his first philosophical essay is an attempt at affirming the possibility that life in many ways confronts us with the absurd, while rejecting the ethical consequence: that it has no meaning at all and can be, as such, taken away by an act of suicide.

[4] One of the most important statements in Camus' essay is in the foreword, where he clearly states that a philosophical reflection on absurdity is taken in his work as a point of departure, not a conclusion on the status of human existence (OC I, 220). In a much later work, *The enigma*, Camus clearly emphasizes this attitude: any conception of the absurd is, within his philosophical enterprise, an external element, something that needs to be considered, confronted and responded to with a solution.

absurdity: "I proclaim that I believe in nothing and that everything is absurd, but I cannot doubt the validity of my proclamation and I must at least believe in my protest", he writes (*Œuvres complètes* hereinafter: OC III: 68).[5] In 1943 in a very important letter he sent to clarify his position on the absurd, Camus wrote to Pierre Bonnel : "The perfect absurdity would be silence [...] the absurd is apparently an attempt at living without value judgments, but living is always, on a more or less elementary level, judging" (OC I: 321).[6] *The plague*, a book where dialogue plays an essential role for the shaping of human resistance against disease, may, to a certain extent, represent the significance of breaking the silence in reflection, focused around and concerning the absurdity of the human condition. In his introduction to *The rebel*, Camus wrote: "*Parler répare* (speaking heals)" (OC III: 68), implying that dialogue with others is a form of therapy against absurdity and the strong sensation of loss of meaning. It is also, in many situations, a form of rebellion against absurdity, understood as the acceptance of facts, without judgment, without individual reactions or attempts at changing the situation. Li Wenliang, a Chinese doctor who raised alarm when he diagnosed early cases of coronavirus in late 2019, may be seen as a good example of this. The mere statement that the pandemic was approaching was, in his case, a kind of rebellion, as were, in *The plague*, Bernard Rieux's persistent efforts to warn the administration about the forthcoming deadly epidemic. We speak to warn others of a danger, but the act of speaking is never merely a verbalized statement of facts; it is a call to action, to resistance, and a way of showing care for others. Perhaps, on a fundamental level, the reason we have so eagerly reread *The plague* in 2020 is an affirmation of this truth: expression is always a means of confronting the existential crisis, a means of protest against an absurdity that threatens to overwhelm us.

The appearance of protest brings us to Camus' idea of rebellion, residing at the very foundation of *The plague*. In Camus' view, rebellion curiously starts in the mind of the person humiliated, oppressed or deprived of his faith in meaning and significance. It is, however, composed of two inseparable elements: the first being a negation of the force taking away the dignity of the subject, of his firm belief in having the right to be recognized as equal by the other. The second element is responsible for providing the source of value enabling the protest, from which the subject is able to recognize himself as dignified, of worth for himself and others. For Camus, this recognition of value is accompanied

[5] What Camus means here, I argue, is that the protest comes not from the meaning of the statement "believe in nothing", but from the fact that this statement is expressed, cried out, and that the subject, paradoxically, believes in his declaration. It is a protest, because a person genuinely and deeply convinced that nothing really matters would not scream at all or would question the truth behind his expression.

[6] All translations from the French, if not stated otherwise, are my own.

by the affirmation of its intersubjectivity: it is shared with all other human beings; not only those oppressed, but — making the rebel's situation much more complex — also those responsible for humiliation and the deprivation of hope in others. Solidarity with others, arising from rebellion, is, in my understanding of Camus's *Rebel*, a challenge, composed of intellectual and experiential[7] elements. Promoting both the necessity of protecting others from harm and suffering, as well as the desire to limit and restrict the force directed against the oppressors, the rebel's situation becomes increasingly difficult. Rebellion, understood from the inside as an attempt at restoring justice and solidarity, may become, on the outside and for the other, yet another manifestation of the absurdity of the human condition. And so, *The plague* may have a "natural" source in the outside world, in a form of silence to our fundamental, existential questions. It may also have a source in others, who become destructive by failing to maintain the equilibrium of their own protest, ending in their will to power, domination and silencing others. Camus' *Caligula* and *Letters to a German friend* both relate to this element: rebellion becomes yet another representation of the absurd for those suffering from the political after-effects of others' protests. From a certain standpoint, this makes Camus' choice of heroes in *The plague* understandable: the rebellion of the Oranians must be interdisciplinary, because what they are fighting against is not just the silence of the world, but also those who want others to be silenced.

REPETITION

Kierkegaard has inspired a great deal of contemporary scholarship, especially focusing on notions such as rethinking, reevaluating and reinventing. I abstain here from a normative evaluation of this phenomenon: my aim is simply to state that there is a perceived need to progress in our understanding of the repetition of themes and motives, in search of new meanings, new readings or new inspirations.[8]

It was hardly surprising to hear, in March 2020 when the pandemic began spreading, that some publishing houses reported higher sales of *The plague*. Many reasons were given to re-read Camus, many of which were really thought-provoking (Zaretsky, 2020) and inspiring. However, the act of repetition demands that an act be repeated, meaning that as culture, we should have a primary experience of the text (*The plague*) and its accepted meaning. And

[7] Most significantly, this experiential and personal element of this complexity is visible in Camus' editorials for Combat between 1944 and 1945 where the author recognizes the difficulty of judging collaborators of the Nazi regime (Kałuża, 2017a: 45–80).

[8] A good example of how fruitful and excellent such rethinking can be is Jonathan Webber's book on rethinking existentialism (Weber, 2018).

for a re-reading to be instructive and original, we must be aware of the changes that have occurred between the original reading and our contemporary reevaluation. Let me illustrate, through a thought experiment, what I mean:

Imagine that in 2021 a famous U.S. director decides to make a movie, based on Camus' book and the recent pandemic. When it comes to casting suggestions, though, he is noticeably appalled by a Camus scholar who mentions that actually all the characters in the book are white males. A movie, in 2021, with an all-white male cast, seems suicidal, so some changes are made to the script. Thus, Rieux becomes a Chinese immigrant, Rambert a native Algerian and Muslim, Tarrou is black, Paneloux becomes a woman. To avoid any further conflict or reference to the colonial past, since the scene takes place in the Algerian city of Oran, nobody speaks French in the movie. Both Tarrou and Rieux are openly gay. Finally, almost everybody is satisfied with these modifications, while the Camus scholar may have noticed that given the metaphysical meaning of the novel, the changes are really not that important at all. The audience is satisfied and the movie becomes a blockbuster. Certain reviewers are actually grateful that the movie managed to amend some of the many colonial slips in the original. *The plague*, in its rewritten form, finally eliminates all of the issues that postcolonial critics of Camus have perceptively enumerated.

This example reveals many important issues about rewriting and rereading. We can take any given book, written years ago, and make it acceptable, politically correct or "safe" to show in modern, multicultural countries so as to avoid risking cancellation, demonstrations and whitewashing charges. We can also, like Kamel Daoud (Daoud, 2015),[9] be inspired by Camus' original ideas and create something of our own, worth reading and discussing. But, like Daoud did, in order to adapt Camus' original ideas and present a new and different vision, we have to understand what Camus intended to show us in the first place. We need to enter into dialogue with Camus. This involves understanding his times, his context and the difficulties of his own situation. So even though it makes sense that a contemporary adaptation of Camus could add inexistent elements to make the modern audience receptive to the message, we cannot simply assume that these changes should overshadow the message about solidarity, rebellion and human nature that Camus clearly had in mind when writing his second novel.

Kierkegaard wrote, concerning repetition, that "[r]epetition and recollection are the same movement, except in opposite directions, for what is recollected has been, is repeated backward, whereas genuine repetition is recollected

[9] In Daoud's book, *Meursault, contre-enquête*, the story from *The outsider* is retold by Moussa, the brother of the Arab, murdered by Meursault on the beach in Camus' novel. Contrary to many claims from reviews, I have argued elsewhere that this book is actually a homage to, rather than a critique of Camus (Kałuża, 2018).

forward" (Kierkegaard, 1983: 131). Our urge to (re)read *The plague* is related to the movement of repetition, not necessarily to the movement of recollection. It is a repetition that is recollected forward, because once we try to envisage our situation nowadays in relation to the symbols, myths and allegories of Camus' novel, the most significant aspect of the enterprise concerns our present and future, our forward-looking approach, our interest in projecting and changing our situation. We seek to use the knowledge from the novel in order to find a way out of the crisis of our contemporary Oran, or our contemporary *State of siege*. Camus used myths and symbols of the past: Sisyphus, Prometheus and Nemesis, and introduced them into a modern framework, in the manner of Kierkegaardian repetition. Likewise, in rereading *The plague*, Camus' characters become for us the past myths and symbols we introduce into our modern context.

In Danish, repetition, *Gjentagelse*, literally means to take up again.[10] In the act of re-reading, we are literally taking up Camus' novel again, in response to the crisis we have been living through. We are also taking up anew the themes and myths Camus raised in his book, adapting them to our situation. Our task today, when reading *The plague*, should raise the question of how these symbols and myths might help us act at present and in the future. Repeating, in contrast to recollecting, thus demands an active presence on the part of the reader, engagement in translating what is taken up again to the new dimensions of reflection in the light of altered circumstances. To a certain extent, repetition involves changing both the reader and the source. Coming back to *The plague* in such a mood may require finding an equilibrium between what *The plague* meant, when it was written, and what it means when it is repeated, re-read, re-thought and taken up again. In his essay on *Repetition*, T. Wilson Dickinson wrote that the book, especially in the ethical context, should be treated as an exercise rather than a rulebook, relating to stoic ways of understanding practice (Dickinson, 2011: 659). My firm belief is *The plague* should be read and re-read in a similar way.

WHAT PLAGUE?

There are however difficulties with this notion of repetition, since taking up again entails us supposedly having had an original, foundational experience. It may well be, however, that there is no single point of reference or experience upon which to base our repetition, largely because of the complexity of Camus' novel, which resists any common, shared or universal understanding. Much like the infection itself, depicted throughout the novel, Camus' work resists

[10] I am grateful to Mélissa Fox-Muraton for pointing out this important fact.

simple forms and easy classifications, and quite often leads readers and critics astray.[11] And so, I feel that we ought to take particular caution when people claim that we should reread Camus today, simply because we are also experiencing an epidemic, like the heroes of Camus' novel. It may be best to limit our parallels to observing similarities between the human reaction to threat and crisis we can find in the novel and in our contemporary lives, rather than reflect on the origin of peril (the most obvious thematic similarity) that started the resistance movement in Camus' Oran.

On a very general level, there are at least three ways of understanding the symbol of the plague in the existential novel: 1.) the plague as the metaphysical problem of Evil and human rebellion to divine injustice (Paneloux's perspective); 2.) the plague as the political problem of countering political violence and social injustice (Tarrou's perspective); 3.) the plague as the individual struggle with death, which affects and limits human existence and existential injustice (Rieux). My question, and my concern in this article is the following: has anything changed, because of the events of 2020, in the realm of our understanding of evil? Has anything changed regarding our understanding of the social aspect of the book, so that its appeal to solidarity and resistance to political violence and social injustice should reappear under new forms? Has anything happened to reform or change our appreciation of Rieux's individual resistance to the threats embedded in the human condition? While at least some aspects of today's world appear markedly different (Camus was writing at a time when ghettos and death camps were a concrete reality throughout Eastern Europe), I would contest that we cannot really say, without hesitation, that these perils are past, given the resurgence of radical right wing extremists (BBC, 2019). Of the perspectives listed above, in my view, the most pertinent to reexamine today is that of Tarrou. And to echo the many voices that have spoken before me on the significance of Camus' book, let me paraphrase Paddy Farr, who noted that we are all Rieuxs today (Farr, 2020), and claim that in contemporary re-readings, it is especially helpful to understand the link between our 2020 position and the role of Tarrou in *The plague*.[12]

[11] One of the best examples is Barthes' interpretation of the book, condensing the meaning to a chronicle of the French resistance in the 1940s. Barthes' interpretation had the advantage of being read, and replied to, by Camus (Kałuża, 2017b). This reply, I assume, strengthens my claim that the book is complex, multilayered and ambiguous, and was developed as such by Camus.

[12] Another, significant and thought-provoking element that quite probably has changed, was observed recently by David Pathé-Camus (Pathé-Camus, 2020). Our contemporary Oran is much, much larger than the Oran from Camus's book. The world today is Oran. There are no gates to a safe, covid-free world. In truth, there are no gates at all.

AT THIS MOMENT, WE ARE ALL TARROU

"I had the plague [...] long before I encountered it here" (OC II: 204) remarks Tarrou, rather surprisingly, to Doctor Rieux. I would like to start my proposal for a contemporary re-reading of *The plague* by reflecting on this element of Tarrou's confession. Everything that has happened in 2020 — the sudden and abrupt riots ("Black Lives Matter"), tensions concerning personal freedom versus the collective safety of citizens, the rising awareness of climate-related dangers, the women's strikes in Poland, citizens' movements for democracy... — may perhaps be best understood through Tarrou's statement. What we are dealing with nowadays is not anything new. The only thing that may, by some, be seen as novelty, is the speed and scale of the events we have been experiencing. And, I dare say, if the problems we encounter are not new, this is why one ought to re-read the solutions Tarrou provides in his last chronicle of the epidemic:

> I only know that one must do what one can to cease being plague-stricken, and that's the only way in which we can hope for some peace or, failing that, a decent death [...] only this can bring relief to men and if not save them, at least do them the least harm possible and even, sometimes, a little good (OC II: 208).

Tarrou not only promises very little, he also claims that any noticeable success of the enterprise must rely on strict attention, an exercise of the will. This affirmation seems particularly timely in relation to our contemporary situation:

> Health, integrity, purity (if you like) — is a product of the human will, of a vigilance that must never falter. The good man, the man who infects hardly anyone, is the man who has the fewest lapses of attention. And it requires tremendous will-power, a ceaseless tension of the mind, to avoid such lapses (OC II: 209).

Such words sounded like good advice to follow in March 2020, when we were only just beginning to realize how long the change occurring in our lives would last. But re-reading these words now, at the dawn of 2021, I can also feel the genuine, existential burden implied by Tarrou's advice. We are all tired of wearing masks, keeping distance, washing our hands, avoiding, isolating, resigning and many, many other elements that demand v i g i l a n c e and attention.[13] The longer we need to maintain this attention, the stronger our idealization of the past times becomes, making us slowly forget, that — as Tarrou warns — we had the plague long before 2020 arrived.

In a very broad view, existential thought is the exercise of the mind, requiring constant tension, vigilance and attention to proceed. Perhaps the reason we

[13] See the World Health Organization's report on the phenomenon of pandemic fatigue (WHO, 2020).

should, in the times of crisis, reach back to existential thought and literature, is that in very many ways, existential though is "reactionary" to the philosophical tradition's willingness to dominate the contemporary way of understanding, perceiving and explaining the human condition. The generally understood situation of the existential attitude, allied with the phenomenological tools of capturing and understanding events, makes engaged intellectuals perceptive to the problems inherent in unifying, totalizing solutions. This obviously comes at the price of not being, like the aforementioned Tarrou, able to offer much in the realm of ethics, social and political philosophy. For Camus, and especially in the case of his Tarrou, this opens up the possibility of ending the re-reading with a clearly negative conclusion. The solution is too idealistic, too trusting, too demanding. Tarrou's "good man" who restrains himself from infecting others is clearly detached from our reality, where the speed of the 2020 pandemic is fueled by our inability to accept limitations, restraints and concessions. In the long run, even though we understand we should be like Tarrou, we all fall prey to periods when our attention is distracted.

To a certain extent, Viktor Frankl, psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor, would agree with Tarrou that "Health, integrity, purity (if you like) — is a product of the human will" (OC II: 229). Frankl remarked (Frankl, 2020: 110), when summarizing the experiences of prisoners of Auschwitz in his most famous work on the meaning of human existence, that even in the most dehumanizing circumstances, we still possess the ability to retain dignity. Camus notoriously linked dignity with the recognition of human existence and nature (OC III: 73). A different question would be, however, how many of us could be capable of retaining dignity, and of not becoming indifferent to others in extreme circumstances. When the first shipments of COVID vaccine arrived, in late 2020, some consciously agreed to wait their turn, while others tried (and some succeeded, see Tilles, 2021) to skip the queue. In Camus' *The plague*, some, like Cottard, "collaborate" with the epidemic, while others try to resist at all costs. The experience shows that while some can and do act like Tarrou, others do not. This raises an important question: whether rereading *The plague* has any real impact on our situation, and whether any ethical appeal, along the lines of: "We should be like Tarrou, not like Cottard", makes any sense. In short, the question is whether any reading of an existential novel adds anything to our contemporary, ethical decision-making. Can we learn anything from the novel? Will our reading make our decisions more "dignified", will it help us resist temptations with more ease? Any positive answer to these claims, transgressing the individual level of my own personal life, would seem dangerously unsupported. But there seems to be, as we could assume from the reported interest in Camus' novel, a broader interest in searching for moral guidelines in times of crisis. And even though any claim that reading Camus' novel can be of help to us today could be mere wishful thinking on the part of existential thinkers, it seems reasonable to

assume that the demanding, challenging and difficult stance presented in Tarrou's confession is actually the one that could bring moral, political and social benefits to our situation. We are not all Tarrou, but the moderate ethics he represents is actually the kind of ethics we need today.

NORMALITY — WHY WE SHOULD NOT DREAM OF "GETTING BACK TO NORMAL"

What binds us, I assume, with the citizens of Oran from Camus' novel is also our way of thinking about the future. We share their understanding that great epidemics come and go, and that in between we have times of normality. Moreover, we believe and hope that we will get back to normal once the pandemic ends. My deep desire here is to show that whatever it was we understood as "normal", we never had in the first place. We tend to think that because of the traumatic events of 2020, we were experiencing normality before the pandemic struck. But at the risk of stating the obvious, people were dying already before 2020. We were simply much more blind to the abnormal aspects of our "normality" than those living in flooded villages. We were just much luckier than the victims of hate crimes, affected by the radicalization of extremists and right-wing activists in many regions of the world. No, we cannot really say, in all honesty, that "everything was fine" and that COVID ruined our firm and stable quest for global happiness.

To some readers, Rieux's reaction at the end of the plague in Oran seems out of place. Worrying that bad things will still happen shortly after such a grand victory may seem neurotic. But if we want to make any use of *The plague* today, we ought to pay attention to Rieux's warning. We should worry, because things, after the decline of COVID, are not likely to "go back to normal", and an acceptance of this possibility, following Camus' conclusion, is worth consideration. Things simply do not go back to normal, by themselves, and the only way to make the world, safe, "normal" and livable is through the concentrated and solidary action of humans.

THE COTTARDS OF THE 1940S AND THE COTTARDS OF 2020

One of themes of *The plague* we should study nowadays with scrutiny is the role of Cottard. Camus' Cottard — on the most basic level — is an opportunist, who treats the plague as a solution to his problem. Because of the epidemic, Cottard avoids being arrested since the administration has more urgent things to do than carry out his prosecution. And paradoxically, while all others treat the epidemic as isolating and restraining, he learns to profit and gain — to a certain

extent — freedom through the situation. Cottard is a complex and intriguing character: he fears detention, yet he seems completely ignorant of the danger of dying from the plague, as if being "naturally" resistant to it. On the political level, Cottard is resistant, because if we perceive the plague as a metaphor for political tyranny, it safeguards Cottard from death as long as he collaborates.

In 2020, while we were rediscovering *The plague*, focus was laid on virtues, not vices (Zaretsky, 2020). But it seems necessary to observe that as in the 1940s, we are and have been surrounded by Cottards recently, making our crisis much more difficult to handle. On the political level, there is something disturbing, possibly even naive in thinking that once the epidemic disappears, the contemporary Cottards will lose their power. And I would claim that the biggest difference between the Oran of 1940 and the "Oran" of 2020 is that with the disappearance of the epidemic in Camus' Oran, the promoters of the malaise lost their power and protection. Having nowhere to go, Camus' Cottard started shooting people on the street, culminating in his arrest. His story, and his influence, end with the epidemic.

Our political Cottards of 2020 are, I argue, hardly likely to disappear in 2021. Like the virus, which develops and learns, so as not to lose effectiveness, whatever threatens and causes the crisis today will definitely not disappear tomorrow. Our Cottards will not get arrested, lose support, lose the election, their presidency, their power. They will not be arrested, even after having incited people to storm the government buildings of our Oran. Even without a pandemic, even with people getting vaccinated against the physical threat, the political dimension of our crisis will demand further engagement and concentrated effort from us. This is why even though one day we will perhaps let Rieux rest, we are hardly at the point of saying that we should let Tarrou follow his friend. Camus hesitated about the ending, corrected *The plague*, but finally published the book, developing the consequences of the political dimension elsewhere in a cycle of articles know as *Neither victims nor executioners*. We should read these, together with Camus' novel, to learn that what we need to do with our Cottards is remarkably simple. We need to revolt. We need to say "no" to all the Cottards of our politics, of our contemporary crisis. But our "no" must, as it had in 1940s, have a foundation, some kind of rootedness (*enracinement*), a "yes" from which our contemporary protest could gather its strength.

LESSONS FROM *THE PLAGUE* TO CONTEMPORARY ORANIANS

Re-reading an existentialist novel is above all about understanding how existential thought could engage us, socially, politically and morally in our quest for the restoration of its most fundamental truths regarding freedom and responsibility. And while I cannot say that I know why we are reading *The plague*

today, I think I know why we should relate to Camus's book in our attempts at rethinking what is happening to us in the light of these assumptions.

Like the heroes of *The plague*, we are not confronted today with a singular malaise. Tarrou observes that he had been "plagued" long before he came to Oran and witnessed the events of the epidemic. We have been "plagued", long before COVID appeared, battling our own failures in the social, political and ethical realms. Tarrou's metaphor of being diseased before the actual appearance of the infection has strong resonance today. We are the only species on Earth responsible for a possibly irreversible change of climate, resulting in the mass extinction of species. So when Tarrou says he is the plague bearer, this confession takes on a new meaning today: there is, alongside the natural malaise of viral infection, another and possibly more dangerous kind of disease. And according to the majority of climatologists (IPCC, 2018), mankind is the only source of this malaise. We, of course, did not create COVID, and we may feel victimized by its appearance. But, as in Tarrou's confession, we are nevertheless the creators of our own pandemic, responsible for our political and social inability to avert the changes we have ourselves brought into this world. And quite curiously, even though some of us are aware that remedies exist, we somehow fail to act for reasons many contemporary philosophers are trying to understand (Dupuy, 2015).

At the very heart of *The plague* lies a strong ethical statement: that human nature exists, making Camus a unique existential thinker among his contemporaries. And for Camus it seems clear, in his study of revolt, that this human nature is grounded in the value of solidarity, the strong, fraternal bond between humans, confronted with absurdity and the "silence of the world".[14] Camus assumed that by revolting against the nihilist[15] revolution of Nazism, people would restore this solidarity, restore the natural value, but at the same time they may be forced to destroy the very bond that brought their revolt to action, forcing the rebels to confront and kill humans, seduced by political ideologies.[16] What seems unique in his appeal to human nature, however, is that

[14] To reply to an anonymous reviewer's observation, that human nature may obviously also be the source of our wrongdoings, I must say, that such a way of understanding human nature — as essentially a source of both corruption and value — was either absent or marginalized by Camus. There was in him — and I strongly share this belief, as a person and as a thinker — a strong conviction that humans are, by nature, revulsed by the suffering of others. So, while he was experiencing and witnessing the atrocities and genocides of the mid-twentieth century, he considered them a form of departure from and deviation of nature rather than its essence.

[15] Camus' conviction, that Nazism is founded on nihilism was influenced by his study of Rauschning's *Revolution of nihilism* (Rauschning, 2011).

[16] Camus' evaluation of the Stalinist threat from *The rebel* is much more complex, as he assumes, similarly to Raymond Aron (Aron, 2017) that Stalinist ideology is a secular form of a religious, quasi-rational conviction that contemporary violence will produce a rational kingdom of ends.

he accepted as real the double possibility that this nature could either result in solidarity, or be bent, or even destroyed, allowing human existence to continue in forms of slavery, in political terror and in states of sanctioned murder. Returning to these remarks seems timely, not only given the pandemic, but also given the dangerous levels of success on the side of post-truths and "alternative facts" (McIntyre, 2018).

None of Camus' works is about a singular philosophical topic. *The outsider* is about the absurd, but also the necessity of revolt against absurdity. *The plague* is about revolt, but it is also about limits. And the recognition of limits is an important element to consider today. Re-reading *The plague* in our contemporary context is difficult, as is Camus' theory of limit and measure. Following Maurice Weyembergh's proposition (Weyembergh, 2009), we may conclude that this limit is related to facts, to the discovery of the existence of a frontier between dignified beings which cannot be transgressed. Moral acceptance is the measure (Gay-Crosier, 2015) of this limit, the activity of human beings not transgressing and not letting others transgress the recognized limits. This concept, obviously, has significance only insofar as we assume there is a shared nature, which can and should be recognized, and which within the natural, epistemological realm demands ethical reflection and moral engagement for the sake of protecting this nature from destruction and abuse. When Camus wrote *The plague*, he was concerned about the dangers threatening our shared human nature in politics: especially the creation of totalitarian states, where it is possible to legitimize murder, and technologies of destruction (his reaction to the use of atomic bomb in 1945 was one of great concern and dread). Within *The plague*, the natural world was hardly threatened by human activity: the sea next to Oran was not only indifferent to the pandemic struggles, it was also — because of the lockdown of Oranians — perceived as a kind of reward,[17] offering alleviation to the traumatized citizens. When the gates of our contemporary Oran reopen today, there may be a very different experience of our reconnection to nature. The sea outside the city is not isolated in our contemporary crisis: it is warmer and the sea level is higher than in the 1940s. The experience of sea bathing, a kind of catharsis for Tarrou and Rieux in *The plague*, is lost in our forward-looking repetition: there is too much plastic pollution and too much concern for the climate for our Rieux and Tarrou to enjoy their swim. The impossibility of recollection in this regard brings us back to the idea of the measure: we have, quite possibly long ago, evidently much earlier than 2020, transgressed a limit, behind which the goddess Nemesis became ruthlessly intolerant to our mistakes. In *The plague*, a moment that

[17] Frankl (Frankl, 2020) wrote on the strangeness of natural beauty to the holocaust survivor: a meadow, next to a concentration camp seemed to him completely alien and abstract after the experience of suffering, death and torment.

completely changes the attitude of Father Paneloux is his witnessing the suffering and death of an innocent child. We may have been spared an epidemic that ruthlessly attacks children, as statistics show that COVID is much more dangerous for the elderly. But if scientific predictions turn out to be accurate and in 2070 19% (instead of the current 0.8%) of our planet will be uninhabitable (Conners, 2020), our children may very well nevertheless be exposed to suffering, hunger and migration.

WHERE IS THE REFERENCE POINT TO "OUR ORAN"?

We have already noted that when the pandemic ended in the fictional Oran of the 1940s, Rieux did not share the enthusiasm of his compatriots. He was aware that the plague would never be completely defeated. When Camus was handing over the final version of his book, news of Soviet concentration camps was reaching public opinion in France, undermining the hopes of those who thought that justice would be eventually restored by the political enterprise of the USSR. We, the contemporary Oranians, are perhaps wondering what resources we have to create a better, less plagued, less threatening future for our children and our civilization. When I presented the first draft of this essay during a conference in August 2020, I was convinced that our Oran today simply does not have any external reference point. That, as David Pathé-Camus noted in his essay (Pathé-Camus, 2020), our Oran has become a global phenomenon, and there is no gate to any other, unplagued world. I thought this lack of "transcendence" was actually constructive: we must live in history and, without any externalized reference, make this Oran a better place to live. On further reflection, however, the period of global lockdown, with citizens around the world shut up in their flats and cut off from all contact, was the opportunity for many to watch news reports about other countries, observe other people's struggles, read novels, and explore many aspects of our world that, caught up in our daily existence, tend to be invisible. And that is precisely the force of literature, works of art, *etc.*: they give us an external reference point with regard to our lives, show us possibilities other than the ones that we live, take us out of the "normal" of the everyday and open us up to new existence possibilities. So perhaps external reference points are exactly what we need in order to not go back to the old normal, but to be able to imagine and create a better world.

This is indeed, I think a very "Camusian" argument, and one that is implicitly expressed in *The plague*; Doctor Rieux, the fictional hero of Camus' novel, made creative use of his experience and the experiences of others. He became an artist, so that others like us could have the "external reference point" of a shared experience of resistance against the plague. Judging from the demand for the novel in 2020, during lockdown, the force of such a reference is not

weakening. The conclusion of this essay, then, must entail this element: we need vigilance, we need rebellion, but we also need dialogue through creativity. It was by creatively transposing reality that Camus managed to produce a novel that still speaks to us today. Its characters, I firmly believe, should inspire our present-day Tarrous to develop further the connections between solidarity and rebellion. These, I am convinced, will be all the more necessary when the immediate risks of contagion begin to decline, and the social and political consequences of our contemporary crises become much more imminent.[18]

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