

# Solidarity in the Time of a Virus

Albert Camus' *The Plague*

Fran Shor

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As a consequence of the coronavirus pandemic, there is renewed interest in Albert Camus' 1947 novel, *The Plague*. While providing a fictional confrontation with a life-threatening infectious disease, the novel also reflects Camus' perspectives on solidarity. Those expressions of solidarity convey meanings that have resonance for our present situation in relation to Covid-19.

Camus explores forms of solidarity that for him exist along a continuum. The most basic form is rooted in our fundamental sense of interdependence and moral responsibility to the communities in which we reside. Beyond that form of social solidarity exists a civic solidarity demanding action in order to protect the most vulnerable from social ravages. Finally, political solidarity necessitates confronting the injustice and oppression that inhere in any system, insisting on collective action to overcome such systemic inequities.

Camus fleshes out these forms of solidarity by exploring the points of view of three representative characters. Each of these fictional individuals, in turn, allows Camus to generate his reflections on the historical and political limitations of solidarity in his time and from his philosophical and political perspective.

*The Plague* takes place in the port city of Oran in French colonial Algeria during an inexact year in the 1940s. Camus was born in Algeria and while still there in the late 1930s he began cooperating with anarchists. He left for France in 1940 just before the Nazi invasion.

During the war and the Vichy collaborationist government, he joined the Resistance, cooperating with many anarchists, including Spanish and French anarcho-syndicalists. It is against this backdrop of actual pestilence, war, and resistance that Camus crafts the novel.

In *The Plague*, the residents of Oran must contend with the literal and figurative repercussions of the disease. As it spreads throughout the city, it claims an increasing number of lives and leads to ever more stringent quarantine measures. The "disease, which apparently had forced on us the solidarity of a beleaguered town," observes the narrator, "disrupted at the same time long-established communities and sent men out to live, as individuals, in relative isolation." Describing this isolation as an "exile" and "prison-house," the majority of residents settled into "a sort of passive and provisional acquiescence."

Yet, unlike the instructions to shelter-in-place ordered in 2020 in most cities and states in this country and around the world, there is little effort in *The Plague* to effectuate a more inclusive regimen of physical distancing. Indeed, cafes remain open in Oran even as the city is in lockdown and although those with the disease are quarantined. From Camus's perspective, it is the spiritual isolation, "under the vast indifference of the sky" that militates against all forms of more active solidarity, whether social, civic, or political.

Refusing social and spiritual isolation, three of the key characters in *The Plague* actively engage with the moral responsibility embedded in all forms of solidarity. In some ways, the journalist Rambert, trapped in Oran through a quirk of circumstance, represents the fundamental challenge of enacting social solidarity. At first, Rambert seeks out a means of escape, convincing himself that his own happiness is paramount.

However, he comes to the realization that, in his words, “it may be shameful to be happy by oneself.” Recognizing that “this business is everybody’s business,” Rambert moves from social solidarity to civic solidarity, joining with two other characters, Dr. Bernard Rieux and Jean Tarrou, as a member of the sanitary squads.

The sanitary squads, created and sustained by Dr. Rieux and Tarrou, represent the essence of civic solidarity. As portrayed in the novel, the sanitary squads are engaged in a struggle “to save the greatest possible number of persons from dying and being doomed to unending separation.” Acting on this logic, Dr. Rieux ministers untiringly to those suffering from the plague. Working against constant death with little relief in sight, Dr. Rieux comes closest of all the characters to Camus’ use of the tragic figure of Sisyphus, punished by the Greek gods with forever rolling a boulder up a hill to only have it repeatedly roll down again.

Dr. Rieux answers Tarrou’s question about “never lasting victories,” with the Sisyphian fact that there’s “no reason for giving up the struggle.”

The character of Tarrou initiates these groups out of a sense of civic solidarity and a long-standing commitment to challenging death sentences, whether imposed by infectious diseases or the institutional machinery of the state. In the past Tarrou explains, he became a political “agitator,” fighting against what he saw as a “social order...based on the death sentence.” At this point, the political subtext intrudes when Tarrou admits that the organization he joined also “passed sentences of death. But I was told that these few deaths were inevitable for the building up of a new world in which murder would cease to be.”

Here, Camus is referring to his own brief involvement with the Communist Party in Algeria during the mid-1930s and the brutal Stalinist policies that resulted in massive state-sponsored murder in the Soviet Union. Rejecting Communist politics, Camus turned to exploring anarchist and anarcho-syndicalist ideas. In the process, he developed respect and sympathy for anarchists who refused to compromise with contending authoritarian powers.

In keeping with Camus’ political trajectory, Tarrou offers his own self-criticism of this Stalinist legacy: “I learned that I had an indirect hand in the deaths of thousands of people; that I’d even brought about their deaths by approving acts and principles which could only end that way.”

This disillusionment articulated by Tarrou in *The Plague* not only targets the Communist Party, but any political organization or ideal that refuses to realize its own complicity with the machinery of death. Hence, Tarrou suspects any party that promises political solidarity and salvation while committing murder in its self-appointed role as the redeemer of History. In addition, by representing Camus’ own guiding moral precept of “neither victim nor executioner,” Tarrou acknowledges “that each of us has the plague within him; no one on earth is free from it.”

With his sober assessment that he will “leave it to others to make history,” Tarrou also commits “not to join forces with pestilences.” While Tarrou will “fight for the victims,” enacting a central tenet of civic solidarity, he also embraces collective action against the injustice of historically grounded pestilences.

Although Tarrou succumbs to the plague, Dr. Rieux lives on. He survives, but as the narrator of the novel, he warns his readers “that the plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good.” Therefore, there could be no final victory “in the never ending fight against terror and its relentless onslaughts.”

Nonetheless, in striving “to be healers,” individuals can enact civic solidarity that provides a temporary relief for all those victimized by the plague. By joining together with others, Rambert, Tarrou, and Dr. Rieux did their utmost to become “healers.” Thus, Camus can acknowledge with Dr. Rieux “what we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise.”

Against the backdrop of the defeat of fascism, Camus reminds his readers that moral responsibility needs to be ever vigilant against the pestilence of social systems that would sacrifice humans at the altar of false gods, whether religious or political. In turn, his experiences during the Resistance led him to explore anarchistic perspectives for overcoming individual despair, and for encouraging resistance and solidarity. The questions he raised are particularly relevant to anarchists today because of the urgency of learning how to avoid ending up strengthening hierarchical dominance and exploitation.

On the other hand, in our intense globalized world biological pestilences have an even more compelling reality, far beyond Camus’ imagination in *The Plague*. The proliferation of pandemics has now become the “new normal.” With increasing destruction of animal habitats, the rise and expansion of factory farming, globalized supply chains, and climate change we face potential propagation of more lethal trans-species viruses. Already demagogues in

various countries are using these pandemics to scapegoat whole populations and societies as a cover for their own unjust politics and aggrandizement.

Given the biopolitics of the moment, what can we, as individuals and as participants in cooperative and cooperating groups, do to promote any of the forms of solidarity delineated by Camus? The persistence of poverty, ethnic/racial injustice, and class exploitation, especially in the United States, militate against mitigating the impact of diseases like Covid-19, let alone generating forms of civic solidarity to address these vulnerabilities. Indeed, we have a moral responsibility to engage with others to protect the victims and to challenge injustice and oppression wherever it appears. As Camus would say, we have no other option but to seek and practice solidarity in whatever form possible.

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