DAILY COMMENT

CAMUS AND THE POLITICAL TESTS OF A PANDEMIC

By Steve Coll
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During the Nazi occupation of Paris, Camus wrote with clarity and force for a clandestine paper. Photograph by Henri Cartier-Bresson / Magnum

In 1943, Albert Camus lived in German-occupied Paris at the Hôtel Mercure, on the Rue de la Chaise, on the Left Bank. He had published "The Stranger" during the previous year to a strong reception, and he was becoming a notable figure in Parisian literary circles. Not far from the Mercure was the Hôtel Lutetia, the headquarters of the Abwehr, the German military's notorious counterintelligence service. Traffic signs in German dotted the area. Camus could walk from his residence to the office of his publisher, Gallimard, where he worked as a manuscript reader, earning four thousand francs a month, according to Olivier Todd, one of his biographers. In addition to his day job, Camus struggled to write what would become "The Plague," a novel, published in 1947, that has enjoyed a deserved revival in this time of the coronavirus, with writers reflecting on it as an allegory about the

"virus of Fascism" and as a work that is, as my colleague Adam Gopnik put it, "becoming to this disruption what W. H. Auden's 'September 1, 1939' was to the aftermath of 9/11."

The novel recounts the outlooks and actions of men in the coastal city of Oran, Algeria, as they respond to a fictional outbreak of bubonic plague and a subsequent quarantine. Like all enduring literature, it can be read in multiple ways, and Camus made clear that this was his intention. One such reading involves the politics of a modern epidemic. In this political season of our own, as the right to vote safely amid the pandemic is under threat, even while President Trump routinely insults journalists of color and issues scores of false statements about his performance since the coronavirus swept the country, it can be uncanny to encounter Camus's seven-decade-old account of Oran's dissembling Prefect, whose advisers cannot bear initially to acknowledge the catastrophe, or even to speak aloud the name of the disease that is its cause.

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The novel's hero and narrator, Bernard Rieux, a physician, takes quiet moral action amid his city's devastation, even as he understands that his potential to bring about change is highly constrained. His outlook is surely drawn from Camus's experiences during the occupation of Paris. For much of 1943, he pursued his literary projects openly; among other things, he explored working with Jean-Paul Sartre on the latter's play "No Exit." But, that winter, Claude Bourdet, the director of the National Resistance Committee (mainly aligned with Charles de Gaulle in the French struggle against Germany), asked Camus to join up as an editor and writer, and he agreed. He was provided false papers under the name Albert Mathe, and became the editor of *Combat*, a clandestine newspaper. The paper was supposed to come out every other week, although it struggled to meet that rate of publication; by the time Camus got involved, the resistance was printing about a quarter of a million copies of each edition.

Camus never ran guns or conducted sabotage against the Nazis, but his editorial role was risky enough; if caught, he could expect to be tortured by his Abwehr neighbors, and, at best, interned in miserable conditions. He wrote in *Combat* with clarity and force. None of the paper's authors signed their articles, but among the essays commonly attributed by scholars to Camus is one published in March, 1944, titled "Against Total War, Total Resistance." It takes note of recent incidents of collective punishment carried out by the German occupiers. In the Isère, a department in eastern France, "a whole village was burned by the Germans on the mere suspicion that compulsory labor service holdouts might have taken refuge there."

Another time, in the Ain, after German troops failed to find holdouts they were looking for, they "shot the mayor and two leading citizens." These were Frenchmen who might have said of the occupation, Camus wrote, "This doesn't concern me." He went on, possibly reflecting the evolution of his own thinking during 1943: "Don't say, 'I sympathize, that's quite enough, and the rest is no concern of mine.' Because you will be killed, deported, or tortured as a sympathizer just as easily as if you were a militant. Act: your risk will be no greater, and you will at least share in the peace at heart that the best of us take with them into the prisons."

Camus also retained hope about the power of facts to defeat Joseph Goebbels's propaganda: although a lie, he wrote, "reprinted a million times, retains a certain power, stating the truth is enough to repel the falsehood." In another *Combat* piece attributed to him, he celebrated "clandestine journalism," which, in the circumstances, "is honorable because it is a proof of independence, because it involves a risk. It is good, it is healthy, that everything to do with current political events has become dangerous." In the future, he added, politics and journalism "will be obliged . . . to judge those who dishonored them."

Early on in "The Plague," Rieux meets a visiting journalist, Raymond Rambert, and asks if he would "be allowed to publish an unqualified condemnation of the present state of things? . . . I've no use for statements in which something is kept back." Rieux presses Oran's Prefect to stop denying the obvious—that the plague is rampaging in the city—and to protect the population. One difficulty proves to be that none of the men leading Oran has the knowledge or the experience required to cope with invisible contagion. Camus's characterization suggests a colonial Algerian version of a Jared Kushner-led task force:

For the most part they were men with well-defined and sound ideas on everything concerning exports, banking, the fruit or wine trade; men of proved ability in handling problems relating to insurance, the interpretation of ill-drawn contracts, and the like. . . . But as regards plague their competence was practically nil.

Prefects and Presidents command bureaucracies and hierarchies; viruses elude them effortlessly. That Camus, writing in the mid-nineteen-forties, could conjure with such clarity, during an epidemic, a political morality that advocates for factual reporting, medical science, and public-health regimens seems astonishing. But Camus was less interested in the evolving science of epidemic response than in our capacity as individuals to face the truth, endure, and contribute to success under extreme conditions. Rieux's breakthrough in this respect, as Camus narrates, is to let go of speculations, to concentrate on the "certitude" of his daily medical rounds. "It was only a matter of lucidly recognizing what had to be recognized; of dispelling extraneous shadows and doing what needed to be done. . . . The thing was to do your job as it should be done." Those sentences might sound banal in another setting, but not in the context of the imagined plague in Oran, or in the light of Camus's lived experience at *Combat* under Fascist occupation.

"The Plague" has been criticized periodically since its publication for being heavy and overly moralistic, but the "criticism has not aged nearly as well as the novel," as the historian and Camus biographer Robert Zaretsky wrote recently. The reason is that successive natural and political crises, such as the one we are enduring this year, have taught us, as Zaretsky put it, that "there is nothing ordinary about humanity and good sense. As we see now on both sides of the Atlantic, both traits are quite extraordinary, especially when they confront the entwined threats of biological and ideological plague."

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- Seattle leaders let scientists take the lead in responding to the coronavirus. New York leaders did not.
- Can survivors help cure the disease and rescue the economy?
- What the coronavirus has revealed about American medicine.
- Can we trace the spread of COVID-19 and protect privacy at the same time?
- The coronavirus is likely to spread for more than a year before a vaccine is widely available.
- How to practice social distancing, from responding to a sick housemate to the pros and cons of ordering food.
- The long crusade of Anthony Fauci, the infectious-disease expert pinned between Donald Trump and the American people.