

Fighting The Plague

by Michael Curtis



On March 10, 2020 the Director-General of the World Health Organization, Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, declared that Coronavirus, Covid-19 was now a “pandemic,” a term used only a few times to apply to diseases, as in 1918 and 2009, and defined as a disease that has become global and widespread. The virus, detected in China three months ago, and declared a global health emergency on January 30, 2020 has spread exponentially, across the world. The WHO was deeply concerned “both by the alarming levels of spread and severity, and by the alarming levels of inaction,” by nations.

Others were equally alarmed. Pope Francis had already cancelled his public appearance and spoken by video to protect himself and the congregation in St. Peter’s Square from infection. President Donald Trump on March 11, 2020 announced a 30-day suspension of travel from Europe, except the UK, to

the U.S. and accused the European Union of not taking necessary precautions. He spoke as well of the need for economic help, aid to workers and small businesses affected by the virus.

Using the term "pandemic" to apply to the virus crisis will obviously spur policies, in the U.S. and elsewhere, for more urgent action and more resources to deal with it. One result will be increasing sensible behavior by citizens to practice good hygiene. People have reduced social contacts, are not shaking hands, or travelling by planes, or attending large gatherings, social or religious. Presidential candidates cancelled campaign events. Officials have banned public gatherings, sports competitions. Businesses, schools, theaters, have been suspended.

The virus is now a global issue affecting both the physical and economic health of nations. The dramatic fall in the stock market resulting from the spread of the virus is reducing wealth and harming the economy, and demands global policies to deal with it by economic and fiscal measures, including safeguarding companies and jobs, to lead to economic growth. It has led to reductions in air travel and to the number of flights. It is costly because of the inevitable large increase in public spending to counter the virus, especially in health services and spending for hospitals.

It took time for the U.S. and other governments and health services to recognize the severity of the problem and thus the urgency of appropriate action to be recognized. The WHO declaration and similar statements by political leaders suggest there is now universal recognition for the need for urgent, heightened action, and for global thinking about measures to be taken to deal with the consequences of the virus. They would obviously include money and manpower for medical help, testing of all citizens, quarantine measures, halting or stopping public transport, schools, public functions, and economic provisions for sick pay. Security

issues must be reexamined. Since the virus came from China, supplies from that country are considered untrustworthy, which among other things means a shortage of pharmaceutical drugs for citizens, and therefore the need for American firms to diversify or seek alternative suppliers than China.

Art is not life and cannot be a midwife to society. Nevertheless, in the present uncertain state of medical and economic affairs, it is useful to read again and benefit from fictional accounts of accounts of medical disasters that may help responses to present conditions. Literature is full of stories of outbreaks of infectious disease and their consequences, such as Giovanni Boccaccio's *Decameron*, the tale of the ten Florentines fleeing their city in mid 14th century. As one writer wrote, a close conversing with death, or with diseases that threaten death, would scum off the gall from our tempers, remove the animosities among us and bring us to see with differing eyes than those which we looked on things before.

Two major writers may be examined, Daniel Defoe and Albert Camus. Daniel Defoe wrote a historical novel, *The Journal of the Plague Year*, published in 1722, about the bubonic plague in London around 1665. A narrator named HF tells the story of the plague that had seemed to abate in cold weather but increased in warm weather in the middle of the year, and fatalities increased. He observes the behavior of citizens of London, the rich are leaving the city and the poor are suffering and are preyed on by rogues and fortune tellers. When ordinary conventions are ignored people suffer grief and crime. Officials publish rules and regulations for guarding houses, and close events in which large numbers of people gather. Quarantine is imposed but ineffective, because rules are ignored. Economically, the country suffers as foreign trade avoids London.

Defoe indicates a bleak picture of how people behave badly

once the ordinary conventions are suspended. As Laura Curtis argues, in her analysis of Defoe, there is a division in his writing between an ideal world order and rational control, and a real world of disorder and impulse.

Defoe's narrator says people are persecuted who are strangers because they might be carriers of disease. When the disease disappears, many are grateful and want to live differently, but most return to their old, bad ways, and have learned nothing.

With some parallel to the present crisis, the newspapers of the time did not publish news about the plague, and information was spread by gossip. The plague spread slowly and was covered up, but then it increased and Londoners were afraid, and fled if they could.

As the plague decreased, Londoners got careless, and this prolonged it.

The narrator in the book does not reach a conclusion who should be blamed for the spread of the disease, and he refrained from commenting on the "ungratefulness, and return to all manner of wickedness among us." But he does suggest that it was most likely the disease spread through the movement of people and goods.

A second book helpful for understanding the present crisis is *The Plague* by Albert Camus, published in 1947 dealing with the residents involved in an epidemic in Oran in Algeria, a city closed off from the world. The book is not easy to decipher because the essential issue and reflections on attitudes to the plague is linked to Camus's philosophy about the absurd nature of the world. The book is based on an epidemic reminiscent of one a century earlier in Oran, but it is also to some extent an allegory about resistance to Nazism and its spread, and even to the problem of conformity and bureaucracy. Terror has many faces.

The plague in Oran is infectious. At first, as rats emerge people are indifferent to problems of suffering of other people, then comes the realization that the plague is a problem involving everyone. Action is necessary and essential, and people are defined by this. Moreover, the central figure recognizes that the battle against the disease is never over.

Camus uses a number of characters to express different points of view as they begin adapting to development of the disease, from Dr. Rieux changing his belief in personal action to that of collective struggle, to the pastor Father Paneloux who urges his flock to accept their fate which they deserve. All the characters make difficult, even life threatening, choices.

The plague is both a political and social problem, one of resistance to physical occupation, and metaphysical, a struggle of human beings against an enemy. The book is, as Camus said in a 1955 letter to a literary critic Roland Barthes, more than a chronicle of resistance but it is no less. The story represents a move in the city from solidarity to recognition of community,

Can the Trump Administration and Congress learn from Camus's characters? Dr. Rieux, cool, rational, sensible : "the habit of despair is worse than despair itself." He urges authorities to take action, but at first slowly, and then appreciates the gravity of the situation, and warns the authorities. Rieux, a doctor in a hospital, works long hours, and gives advice on action as a doctor, not for any grand or ideological purpose. For him, not joining health teams would have been incredible for any citizen.

Jean Terrou, a good natured man who is not in the city on business, calls for teams of volunteers to fight the plague because it is everyone's responsibility. Raymond Rambert, a journalist, has no connection to Oran, tries to leave, asks smugglers to help for a fee, then decides to stay and fight the plague. Joseph Grand, city clerk, joins the volunteers as

general secretary, is a man with quiet courage. Father Paneloux, Jesuit priest, declares people are sinners, and that the plague is a scourge sent by God to those without faith. But after the death of a child, he is confused, then joins a team of voluntary workers. The prefect holds that action is necessary but also don't emphasize it and attract attention. To talk of a plague is a false alarm, but nevertheless he authorizes limited measures to combat it. Since they do not work, he asks the government for orders. Then he imposes regulations and closes the town. The Janitor says there are no rats in the building, even as rats are dying around him. The local newspapers say things are under control.

The plague in Oran ends, but danger remains that rats might be roused again. The lesson for Washington, D.C. as for Dr. Rieux, is that heroism and sanctity are not really appealing so much as being a person who understands that division and fragmentation exist, and that collaboration is essential on a world-wide basis to fight the plague, the evil that is present in societies, and never ends. Can Washington assume the moral leadership of the world?