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Alice Kaplan and Laura Marris. "States of Plague: Reading Albert Camus in a Pandemic"

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Peg Brand Weiser. *Camus's The Plague: Philosophical Perspectives.* Oxford University Press 2023. 252 pp. \$24.95 USD (Paperback 9780197599334).

Alice Kaplan and Laura Marris. *States of Plague: Reading Albert Camus in a Pandemic.* Chicago University Press 2022. 152 pp. \$20.00 USD (Hardcover 9780226815534). \$16.00 USD (Paperback 9780226833309).

The recent revival of interest in Albert Camus's 1947 novel *The Plague* is a fascinating story within the pandemic story. As Covid-19 appeared and spread, the novel began to be recalled, reread, reprinted, and retranslated. At first, attention was drawn to Camus's best-known themes, absurd death and random suffering - at a time when we were riveted by stories of nurses, doctors and patients, struggles for survival, and tallies of the dead and dying. As the numbers mounted, many around the world also began to think more about first responders and the many frontline workers. Then, as the numbers skyrocketed beyond anything imagined in the novel about a single small city, our twenty-first century attention was increasingly drawn towards issues of the global pandemic, including vaccination, local and national statistics, and evidence-based science. We progressively came to understand who gets the virus and why, and Covid-19 began to be seen medically as a "disease of the unvaccinated." The plague that drove Camus's essentially nonpolitical novel merged with our own questions of public health. This not only reflects the American obsession with blame and responsibility but opens a political battleground that Camus's fertile imagination only glimpsed. The slow response to the epidemic of Oran's administration and Camus's few reports of clashes at the city gates became harbingers of today's Covid-19 story—not only of incompetent politicians but of systematic denial and ideologically driven policies costing millions of lives around the world. In time, we became besieged no longer by what once seemed like Camus's absurdity, but by the continuing debate over public health and a declining sense of the common good.

By now over 1000 pandemic-related articles about *The Plague* have been published in hundreds of places and languages by journalists, Camus specialists, philosophers, scholars across various disciplines, bloggers, even cartoonists. Now, with the crisis seemingly over but with Covid-19 still among us, we have these two remarkable books. *Camus's The Plague*, edited by Peg Brand Weiser, is a collection of broadly philosophical essays on Camus's text, and *States of Plague*, is a collaborative essay by Alice Kaplan and Laura Marris, who are deeply familiar with Camus.

Both books were composed at the height of the pandemic and published after it had begun to



recede. Weiser conveys an acute sense of how the moment felt in her own essay, composed at ‘the start of a third year of Covid-19’ - the ‘current situation in which we now live. . . in the face of immediate, pending death from a fast-spreading virus that has no cure and from which there is no certain protection’ (207). Her introduction to the book refers to Camus’s ultimately ‘optimistic assessment of human behavior under duress,’ and asks whether our own ‘we’re all in this together’ has measured up to the commitment of Dr. Rieux’s intrepid team of volunteers. Then, after what appears as an obligatory introductory tour - through Camus’s life and work, the broad outline of the novel, its strengths and weaknesses, its parallels with our own pandemic story, the place of *The Plague* in Camus’s evolution and in plague literature, one or two criticisms of the novel and a range of recent discussions of it - Weiser settles into an outline of the book’s contents. Later, she returns at the end of the book to answer her question, with her own essay, ‘Modern Death, Decent Death, and Heroic Solidarity in *The Plague*.’ There she explores ways in which, unlike Rieux’s team, the United States was sharply divided during the pandemic between the ‘heroic solidarity’ of approaching the disease with an ethics of care, inspired by feminism, and a cult of death denial, a contentious ‘unheroic solidarity’ whose morality is ‘selfish and maximally uncaring’ (210). Obviously, as the United States’ four percent of the world’s population had the pandemic’s highest death toll, Weiser concludes that the fictional example of Rieux’s team indicts America’s failure to act ‘ethically under pervasive threat of death’ (200).

The great virtue of Weiser’s book is that it enables us, by way of its various readings of the novel in relation to our pandemic, to see our own situation more sharply and to reflect on it with greater depth. It does so by sometimes taking us in surprising and unexpected directions. In her essay, Margaret E. Gray takes off from George Floyd’s ‘I can’t breathe’ during the pandemic (but with no apparent connection to it), talking about suffocation in *The Plague* and asphyxiation during our pandemic, along with the theme of denial during each. Cynthia A Freeland explores with great power the inevitable horror and sense of evil of natural processes that threaten us and our need to combat them, when possible, without drama or self-aggrandizement. Beneath Camus’s allegory of the war and Resistance is the fact that ‘natural phenomena . . . might simply not be subject to our human forms of moral reckoning’ (169). Steve Kellman, in ‘The Plague and the Present Moment’ reminds us of the stark differences between the fictional quarantine in Oran in 1947 and, during our 2020’s shutdown, the nearly worldwide instantaneous internet connections to both the greater world of politics, society, culture, and economics and our own personal worlds. Unlike fictional

Oran, we experienced a near-universal shutdown of in-person business, education and entertainment locations, and the public health realm became sharply contentious, especially in the United States and Brazil. In *The Plague*, people left their homes, continued to work and socialize, but the quarantine forced them to see endlessly repeated performances of the same films and operas.

In 'Present in Effacement: The Place of Women in Camus's Plague and Ours,' Jane E. Schultz focuses on Camus' utterly patriarchal take on those doing battle with his fictional Oran plague of the 1940s: Rieux's all-male team, with silent in-home support by his mother. This was not simply a cultural-historical condition. Indeed, insofar as *The Plague* was intended as an allegory of the anti-German Resistance, Camus himself knew better than to utterly ignore the substantial presence of women activists in his world. Moreover, his all-male team was unlikely and ahistorical given the important role women were already playing in nursing and other caring occupations in his world. Today, of course, women were virtually everywhere among those fighting Covid-19, yet conversely, despite our 'all in this together,' like Camus we largely ignored the legions of pandemic workers, whose 'presence health care systems registers too negligibly in the cacophony of public opinions' (73).

Another interesting comparison of the two plagues is offered by the novel's treatment of Rieux's experience. Leaving aside the question of whether Camus's portrayal of Rieux as physician is 'clinically correct,' including whether the novel made 'clinical errors' and whether Rieux is 'an authentic physician,' Edward B. Weiser focuses on the stresses health care workers withstood during the pandemic and the costs to their functioning in near-impossible situations. 'Camus's Rieux seemed to understand the progressively declining emotional engagement, despite performing those tasks he could still do' (138). Weiser, himself a physician, finds 'significant and instructive' parallels between care provider perspectives in *The Plague* and our own pandemic: above all, optimistic and hopeful 'lessons of resilience and persistence and solidarity' (141-2).

At the end of his essay, 'The Plague and the Present Moment,' Steven G. Kellman touches on Camusean absurdity by pointing to two authors' evocation of *The Myth of Sisyphus* and its endless frustration of beginning over again each day and accomplishing nothing. Camus's absurdity was a common theme at the beginning of the pandemic, many writers finding it irresistible to see in our pandemic and *The Plague* the absurdity of *The Myth of Sisyphus* but Weiser's authors have moved on. As Kathleen Higgins points out in her penetrating essay on 'Grief and Human Connection in

The Plague, Camus's earlier starting point was no longer his understanding in the novel. Describing what she calls Camus's 'existentialist' perspective, Higgins describes how the individuals who become Rieux's team, including Father Paneloux, overcome the grief imposed by the plague, finding 'personal meaning through solidarity' (115), Higgins recapitulates the key steps of Camus's development:

'The world is 'absurd,' meaning that it is devoid of intrinsic meaning and does not operate in accordance with our demands for rational order and justice. We should recognize this fact, yet we should also resist the temptation to capitulate to absurdity. We can create meaning in our lives by being as conscious as possible and by struggling against what is inhumane, senseless, and unjust within our world. To embrace this struggle is an act of individual will, but once we have made it, we will be led to the recognition that one shares one's situation with all other human beings' (116).

Higgins takes us through the transition from *The Stranger* and *The Myth of Sisyphus* to *The Rebel*, from individual alienation to committed social involvement. As Camus himself said, 'Compared to *The Stranger*, *The Plague* does, beyond any possible discussion represent the transition from an attitude of solitary revolt to the recognition of a community whose struggles must be shared.' (Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays* (New York, 1970) 339.)

The most densely philosophical essay in the book, 'The Meaning of a Pandemic,' by Andrew Edgar, also focuses directly on the question of absurdity. Like Higgins, he argues that *The Plague* demonstrates Camus 'moving significantly from his earlier position' (88) in *The Myth of Sisyphus*. Although Oran's epidemic disrupts life's usual coherence and sense of meaning, it is not absurd but demands reinterpreting life 'as an awareness of injustice and criminality' that must be combated collectively. If Covid-19 imposed on us the same initial sense of disruption and absurdity, it immediately imposed the need to go 'beyond a meaningless nature to the social conditions that mediate the pandemic and its appropriation' (99). This opens the possibility of 'a new sense of identity and a new temporality for the individual, and a new history for society' (100).

States of Plague is a rather different book. It consists of twelve chapters of wide-ranging reflections by two authors intimately acquainted with Camus's works. They share their own thoughts on life during the pandemic as they lived it in Paris and Buffalo, New York. These thoughts are interwoven with visits to Algiers and Oran just before the pandemic. The book includes brief personal reflections, thoughts on *The Plague* and how Camus came to write it,

moments from his life, and observations on the spread and control of disease. Accomplished Camus scholar, Alice Kaplan, and current translator of *The Plague*, Laura Marris, discuss a wealth of topics about the novel and the pandemic, including their own personal situations and interests during its frightening first several months. Yet this is more than a potpourri. Modestly subtitled *Reading Albert Camus in a Pandemic, States of Plague* is a beautifully achieved work. In alternating chapters by two artistic sensibilities in a shared voice, they invite us to take a break from the pandemic's aggravated sense of purpose, dwell with their book, reflect on it, and indeed, enjoy it as a meaningful work of literature.

It begins with Alice Kaplan's protracted Covid-19 illness in Paris, then moves on to Camus's account of the plague in Oran, centered on physician Rieux, but whose narrator will only be revealed to us later 'to give the book momentum' (4), but not treating the narrator as a hero. Although those of us who have read the book to the end are deprived of that mystery, 'the refusal of heroism is key to Camus's values' (5). Moreover, we cannot miss the fact that the book is a collective story, of 'a community under oppression' (6). Thoughts about the novel as allegory of the Occupation and Resistance follow, and then mention of Camus's postwar fame as editor of *Combat* and then a discussion of his activities in the Resistance, followed by reflections on the dawning collective awareness of the pandemic in the United States.

Kaplan's beginning reveals neither a straightforward narrative nor an argument: it drifts, intentionally, from theme to theme. So does co-author Laura Marris's first chapter, which starts strikingly with the rats of Oran, then mentions Camus's source for his discussion, Marcel Proust's physician father's 1897 study of rats and epidemics. Then, she takes us to the daily repetition in Oran of Gluck's opera, *Orpheus and Eurydice*, and the horrifying scene in which the male lead dies onstage at the opera's climax which, in the story but not in this performance, will lead to Eurydice coming back to life and a second chance for the lovers. Against his own hopes, Rieux and his wife will be denied their own second chance later in the story when she dies while away for treatment. Then, Marris shifts to Tarrou and Rieux's exhilarating swim in the sea, including her translator's dawning awareness of how the sea resembles a rat as Camus seems to represent the plague as lurking in the ocean - anticipating a more recent scientific speculation that the earth's waters hold some sort of microbial memory. Indeed, a 2005 study of epidemic victims in Oran discovered infecting agents from rodent fleas that were still active from an earlier epidemic in 1945.

Marris's fascinating chain of reflections, like Kaplan's, follows no clear argument or narrative

line, but, as we respond to the book's personal and reflective mood, it is a pleasure to follow. As these first two chapters show, the authors ask readers to set aside their usual preoccupations and dispositions to "get to the point" and flow with the authors' multi-layered interests and accept their pace. Of course there are some mainly thematic chapters. In "Les Separés," Kaplan talks about the separations imposed by the epidemic, experientially rooted in Camus's own wartime experience of being marooned in France, after November 8, 1942 - when the Allies invaded North Africa and the Germans took over "Unoccupied" France where he was recuperating from an attack of tuberculosis. Camus was cut off from his wife, Francine, and his home in Algeria, for the rest of the war. This 'driving force of Camus's own experience' (23) became central to the plot of *The Plague*. On the other hand, it is striking to think of the contrast between so many of the separated ones in Oran, including Rieux and Rambert, and our own constant pandemic interactions via phone, internet, Zoom, or Facetime.

In one of the most interesting chapters, "On Restraint," Marris contributes a little essay on Camus's concise and restrained, indeed "unheroic," writing style in the novel and the demands it places on the translator wanting to render it faithfully and with its full impact. 'More than any other literary experience, translating Camus has taught me that restraint isn't for the writer; it's for the reader. By holding back the dazzle for a moment, a writer can let someone look directly through the page, at the part of the world that hurts' (40).

The book is filled, in no apparent order, with such informative, moving, and simply enjoyable sketches, sometimes entire chapters, that take us every which way into Camus's life, the novel's high points, our pandemic, fictional and real life in Oran and Algeria. The powerfully silent Mme. Rieux is drawn from Camus's own mother - Kaplan managed to visit her grave in Algiers while travel was still possible, and negotiated to have it repaired and maintained. Marris describes her own visit, just before the pandemic, including the cemeteries of Oran and Algiers, giving us both authors' reflections on the city's past.

Kaplan contributes a beautiful little essay on the comic relief of Rieux's team member the underpaid temporary municipal assistant Joseph Grand's endlessly rewritten opening sentence of a never-to-be-continued novel: 'One fine day a svelte equestrienne rode a superb sorrel mare down the flowering lane of the Bois de Boulogne' (88).

Further on, Marris contributes a moving and challenging essay turning on thoughts by Berthold Brecht and Adrienne Rich, on the importance of insignificance, 'one of the most radical ideas in

this novel' (98). Camus himself wrote 'anthologies of insignificance' and gave this habit to Tarrou. This character, Rieux's best friend (who Laura says 'breaks my heart'), devoted his life to opposing the death penalty, compiled writings exploring various kinds of insignificance. Prizing insignificance as a major approach to reality was a way of defying the murderous abstraction of the plague. In a challenge to normal understanding, the plea of this chapter, and its power, lies in its embrace of the smallest and least important details, a 'personal life,' the 'sum of small things that meant much to them without meaning anything to other people' (96) such as the seemingly meaningless the very personal 'habit of turning a door latch to the left or right' (Ibid).

The final chapters deal with the end of the plague and the novel, and its allegorical meanings about the Liberation of France. Kaplan talks about Camus, the journalist, writing about the alleged riot of Algerian war veterans and the massive repression that followed. She also looks at Camus's action as lead editorialist for *Combat* and the issues facing post-liberation France, including Camus's changing stance towards the much-contested purge of collaborators. She stresses the ambivalence of the ending of *The Plague*, hopefully underscoring people's resiliency and yet darkly anticipating future outbreaks.

Marris's last chapter takes us not only into post-pandemic thoughts about the human condition and future plagues, but approvingly accompanies Camus well beyond the novel's modesty and concreteness that she emphasized so strongly to what later became his self-assigned and often self-righteous role as a moral tribune. There is no mention that Camus's political writings often relied on vast oversimplifications and inflated language far from his appreciation of modesty. He didn't hesitate to rely on abstractions such as 'grandeur,' 'justice,' 'honor,' 'the truth,' and 'virile morality.' After teaching us better than most critics about Camus the novelist's appreciation of restraint and insignificance, in the book's last pages Marris follows Camus the essayist uncritically as he strains for significance.

However, this is a minor flaw in what is otherwise a gem of a book. Both books leave us, above all, with appreciation of Camus's main point about struggling collectively, unheroically, with each person keeping at their task, whether against an epidemic in fictional Oran in 1947, or in the Resistance against the German Occupation. In this 'restrained and austere book,' Camus describes Rieux's team doing their 'job simply and without illusions.' This was already understood to be the novel's essential lesson of commitment, as his friend Jean-Paul Sartre described it in speaking on the unpublished manuscript to an audience in New York in mid-1945 (see R. Aronson, *Camus and*

Sartre: The Story of a Friendship and the Quarrel that Ended It (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2004).

And today? By its very nature Weiser's more specialist collection discussing *The Plague* and the pandemic is designed to be used by scholars into the future. Kaplan and Marris's work cannot help but be much more a book of the moment. *States of Plague* talks about the pandemic as present, in real time, as its authors and readers were living it. That is its charm. But does this mean that its moment has passed? It has brought *The Plague* deeply into our experience of Covid-19 and our experience into Camus's novel. And beyond that? From here on, reading it will have to be its own reward. To this reader, it is.

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