

Politics after the plague

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In his novel *The Plague (La peste)*, Albert Camus captures the meaning of the Covid-19 pandemic in our times: “There were no longer any individual destinies, but a collective history that was the plague, and feelings shared by all. The greatest of these were feelings of separation and exile, with all that that involved of fear and rebellion”.¹ This metaphor for the Covid-19 pandemic offers a well-rounded cultural interpretation of the ongoing developments in the global society. The coronavirus pestilence demands a particular sacrifice: solidarity through separation. We are not just reminded of our vulnerability and mutual dependence, but also required to abandon our workplace, suspend our social life and stay at home in order to save lives. Paradoxically, ‘we are all in this together’ by staying apart. The new-found community rests on ‘social distancing’ for fear of contagion.

Covid-19 has affected all of us, everywhere and at the same time, attacking our pre-existing weaknesses and disrupting ways of life. That is not the same as the bubonic plagues in the Middle Ages that decimated Europe’s population or the European viruses during the Age of Discovery that ravaged Latin America. Both those killed people in their millions and left civilizations fundamentally transformed. Black Death ended serfdom and revalued human labour, whereas Iberian-imported diseases wiped out indigenous people and ushered in centuries of Western colonialism. The coronavirus does not mark the end of the West and the rise of ‘the rest’, though it might accelerate Western self-erosion and China’s ascendancy. The communitarian consensus that was manifest during the first lockdown could also renew the West’s best traditions.

HUMAN DECENCY

What the present plague certainly does is to reveal the fragility of our human and social condition. It works on the body politic in the same way as on our physical bodies, probing our immune system and preying upon underlying co-morbidities, as the political thinker (and member of the UK House of Lords) Maurice Glasman has argued.² The pandemic has laid bare

¹ Albert Camus, *The Plague*, tr. Robin Buss (London: Penguin, 2001), p. 129.

² Maurice Glasman, ‘As globalisation fractures, the West must champion internationalism in the face of China’, *New Statesman*, 3 July 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/world/asia/2020/07/globalisation-fractures-west-must-champion-internationalism-face-china>

the erosion of our everyday economy, stripped down to ‘just-in-time’ delivery and dependent on foreign powers we cannot trust. Covid-19 has also shone a light on the hollowing out of society, built on an atrophied polity and anaemic civic institutions. For decades, state and market concentrated wealth, power and status. Now the coronavirus crisis amplifies the unravelling of our structures. Entire countries need debt-based life support and people are forced into protective isolation. Vulnerability has been shown to be the fundamental reality of our lives. Yet frailty is also what makes us human.

Unlike his erstwhile friend Jean-Paul Sartre, Camus was no follower of atheist Marxism. One of the thinkers who influenced him most on the question of human weakness was St Augustine. Camus’ literary *œuvre* is a long reflection on this and other existential questions: our mortality, our humanity, the hopes and fears of our earthly existence. Without being a confessing Christian, he was sympathetic to a broad Christian humanist vision, which he viewed as standing apart from both reactionary clericalism and scientific atheism. Camus rejected Marxist and liberal ideologies alike, opposing at once the apologists of the Soviet Union for equating oppression with liberation and liberals for abandoning a common ethical outlook in favour of individual greed and selfishness.

Contemporary liberals seem unable to defend freedom as a form of ethical restraint that respects the limits of life. Liberty is instead reduced either to a utilitarian pursuit of pleasure and prosperity or else to absolute legal injunction. For this reason, advocates of ultraliberalism are the first ones to fall victim to a plague: “They considered themselves free”, Camus writes, “and no one will ever be free as long as there is plague, pestilence and famine”.³ Human existence is about frailty as much as freedom. During the Covid-19 pandemic, the deep desire for community has been palpable. Whereas liberals oscillate between free choice and total lockdown, communities want greater state protection combined with more social solidarity.

The ultraliberal longing for limitless liberty is what Camus would call absurd because it is meaningless. Untrammelled freedom dehumanizes us, replacing our contingent condition with a determinism that robs us of our own agency. Nor are we humans immortal or invincible – forms of hubris that come with conceit, the pursuit of possessions and striving for status, a lack of joy and an absence of gratitude. Camus’ sceptical humanism is a call against ancient pagan heroism as much as modern self-assertion. Missing from these two conceptions of ethics are basic moral sentiments that define our humanity. This is reflected in the words of Dr Rieux, the central character in Camus’ novel, who believes the plague brings into sharp relief the

³ Camus, *The Plague*, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

nature of our human condition: “[T]his whole thing is not about heroism, it is about decency [*honnêteté*]. It may seem a ridiculous idea, but the only way to fight the plague is with decency”.⁴

THE DIGNITY OF LIFE AND LABOUR

When asked what decency is, he replies: “In general, I can’t say, but in my case I know that it consists in doing my job [*métier*]”.⁵ Camus links this to uncertainty: “Rieux shook himself. This was certainty: everyday work. The rest hang by threads and imperceptible movements; one could not dwell on it. The main thing was to do one’s job well”.⁶ Trying to do one’s job well is to be a hero of the everyday. During the Covid-19 pandemic, doctors on the intensive care units of countless hospitals across the world have worked heroically to save the lives of thousands. Yet, as Edward Docx’s extraordinary essay in the *New Statesman* on the experience of an intensive care consultant shows, “[T]he truth is that the people who watch the patients are the nurses. Hour after hour into the night – an unceasing vigil”.⁷ For a brief period, the weekly clapping for carers in the UK united people in moments of spontaneous solidarity around a shared gratitude for the sacrifice and service of key workers.

After decades of being told that the new knowledge economy is driven by the professional-managerial class largely composed of bankers and lawyers, we now realize who the essential workers are. Lorry drivers and warehouse workers. Delivery staff and shelf-stackers. Shop assistants and cashiers. Police officers and firefighters. Doctors and nurses. Hospital cleaners and home carers. “Labour”, writes Glasman, “is something you can’t do from home. It requires real physical presence, leaving home and doing something, usually involving your hands, for other people. Far from being replaced by machines, key workers require skill, empathy and compassion to fulfil their vocation”.⁸ The Covid-19 pandemic has created the conditions for restoring the meaning and dignity of labour. The labour value has been revealed as central to the economy and society. It is through work that we find fulfilment and become more human.⁹

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 33.

⁷ Edward Docx, ‘The peak: inside the mind of Dr Jim Down, a leading intensive care consultant, on the night of the peak number of deaths from Covid-19 in hospitals’, *New Statesman*, 27 May 2020, full essay online at <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/health/2020/05/peak>

⁸ Maurice Glasman, ‘The coronavirus crisis has sounded the death knell for liberal globalisation’, *New Statesman*, 12 April 2020, <https://www.newstatesman.com/politics/economy/2020/04/coronavirus-crisis-has-sounded-death-knell-liberal-globalisation>

⁹ Jon Cruddas, *The Dignity of Labour* (Cambridge: Polity, 2021).

Frailty, decency, sacrifice, service and the dignity of labour are some of the building blocks for a post-pandemic politics that is guided by an ethical compass. It is a re-moralized politics that transcends the pursuit of power or wealth by helping people to live rewarding lives for themselves and others. The vocation of politics is not to endorse a single conception of the good life or to impose moralistic values. Rather, it is to enable people to live both in security, free from fear or want, and in dignity. Like the idea of the good life, dignity is not reducible to one thing. Sometimes, it is painfully expressed in grief when we experience dispossession or the loss of loved ones. At other times, it is celebrated joyously when we can exercise agency and shape the world around us. In each case, dignity concerns both one's own intrinsic worth and the worth of others. It is about earning esteem and recognizing contribution.¹⁰

Security and dignity frame questions of justice, which exceed individual rights or collective utility. Justice is about relations within society and how they should be organized so that people can live fulfilling lives. Covid-19 has brought this to the fore. The initial response to the pandemic was to privilege health and well-being over economic growth. As we recognize the need to move from 'just-in-time' supply chains to 'just-in-case' safety nets, so too we must replace 'business as usual' with ethical firms and new ways of value creation. For now, austerity has been consigned to the dustbin of history (though libertarians and Thatcherites are itching to bring it back). The size and role of the state in the economy will continue to grow over the next few years. A space is opening up for novel economic and political arrangements anchored in the public good. That means reconciling estranged interests between capital, labour and the state. It also involves infusing greater social and ecological purpose into both business and the public sector.

CHANGE OF ERA

As Pope Francis remarked, we are witnessing not an era of change but a change of era. The virus speeds up long-standing developments that have been decades in the making: the fragmentation of free-market globalization and the resurgence of the protective state; a greater emphasis on borders and national sovereignty; the need for greater investment in our public services and the importance of civic community; the urgency for science and technology to serve human needs in a manner that favours ecological balance; a yearning for stability and mass participation in big ways and small to take care of others.

¹⁰ Michael J. Sandel, *The Tyranny of Merit: What's Become of the Common Good?* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2020); David Goodhart, *Head, Hand, Heart: The Struggle for Dignity and Status in the 21st Century* (London: Penguin, 2020).

Each of these developments is consistent with principles of liberality like pluralism, tolerance and generosity, and yet none of them are reflected in contemporary liberalism. All of these developments involve some respect for authority within bounded polities – respect for law and order as well as for the inheritance of customs and traditions. Yet none of them are honoured by authoritarianism with its antiliberal attack on certain rights and institutions, including the free press or the independent judiciary. Potentially, these developments represent a new reality that is postliberal – fusing greater economic justice with social stability and ecological purpose. But each development and the wider world that might take shape after the viral emergency can go one of three ways: either reverting to the well-trodden path of liberalism, or sliding towards the cliff-edge of antiliberalism, or taking the road of postliberalism.

The first development is the fragmenting of the global economy. Before the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis, the pace of economic globalization was slowing down. Since 2015, the rate has flattened as cross-border financial flows first stagnated and then fell. The US–China trade spat has the potential to disrupt global commerce. Outsourcing labour and offshoring production will continue to cost corporations as the post-pandemic emphasis shifts towards national resilience and more local supply chains. Ruchir Sharma, a writer and economist at Morgan Stanley, argues that these developments are a corrective of free-market globalism. Far from being temporary setbacks, they have the potential to transform the world economy in the direction of what he calls de-globalization.¹¹ But at a time when the post-1989 era of neoliberal triumph has ended, global capitalism is not about to collapse.

Paradoxically, antiliberal protectionism may save the current economic order from some of its own worst excesses that have stymied national development. De-globalizing tendencies are not by themselves a harbinger of postliberal times. That would involve a balancing of greater national economic autonomy with more international cooperation to secure the status of workers and enable them to resist the dehumanizing exploitation of contemporary capitalism by building new forms of democratic association – starting with trade unions in the big tech and gig economies (especially Amazon) and allowing worker self-organization in state capitalist countries like China.

The second development is the resurgence of the protective state, which is similar to what happened seventy-five years ago. Then the shared experience of mass participation in the

¹¹ Ruchir Sharma, *The Rise and Fall of Nations: Forces of Change in the Post-Crisis World* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2016).

Second World War was key to the birth of the post-war social settlement based on state intervention in the economy and welfare support from ‘cradle to grave’. Prior to the pandemic, the nation-state was already re-emerging as a bulwark against the global market. Now the post-viral era has the potential to bring about a new settlement in which the protective state not only saves the economy but also strives more, at least in appearance, to serve the common good of society – beginning with greater national resilience concerning food, water, energy, medical supplies, manufacture and transportation.

But increased government intervention alone provides little more than a sticking plaster that leaves us vulnerable to the pandemics, ecological threats and social crises of the future. The reverse face of an expanded government role in the economy may be continued state support for the forces of unfettered capitalism and instrumental technology that already dominate and distort our daily lives. So far, tech platforms like Amazon, Google or China’s Alibaba are the main winners of the impending economic depression, besides other corporate oligarchs that include newcomer Zoom. A system of bio-surveillance is taking shape with the power to monitor and manipulate the behaviour of whole populations. A postliberal protective state has to combine pluralist democracy with a corporatist conciliation of estranged interests and strong institutions to devolve power to people.

The third development is a stronger emphasis on bounded polities and national sovereignty. Free movement of capital has weakened the power of labour while the free movement of people without national economic development has put pressures on wages and hit workers. Bordered polities are an important condition for politicians to have the capacity to protect community and country. Nations represented democratically within sovereign states provide a vital source of legitimacy for government. But left unchecked, state sovereignty tends to slide into authoritarianism at home and anarchy abroad – as is prefigured in the works of Jean Bodin and Thomas Hobbes.¹² That is why a postliberal politics seeks to hold in balance not just the central state and intermediary institutions but also patriotism and internationalism.

The fourth development is greater investment in public services and the role of civic community. Austerity with its decimation of local government has eroded the social fabric of Western countries, leaving them exposed to economic shocks and pandemics. The private sector is vital for prosperity based on investment and innovation, but it cannot replace the public provision of public goods that are irreducible to profit. That includes the need for strong civic

¹² John Milbank and Adrian Pabst, *The Politics of Virtue: Postliberalism and the Human Future* (London: Rowman & Littlefield International, 2016), pp. 13-67.

institutions to uphold the ties of trust and cooperation. As the post-pandemic recovery unfolds, state and market risk reverting to the status quo ante – concentrating wealth and power in old elites or new classes who benefit from their preferred policy mix: technocratic ‘global governance’ that overrides democratic polities; cultural libertarianism that corrodes community and tradition; mass immigration and unfettered free trade that erode national industry, economic development and the social fabric. The postliberal alternative is to embed power and wealth in democratically governed institutions and strong social relations based on reciprocal obligations – the duties we owe one another.

WHAT WE ARE UP AGAINST

What are the forces that a postliberal politics will have to contend with after the pandemic? Besides hostile foreign powers and tech totalitarianism, there are the forces of hyper-capitalism and extreme identity politics that disrupt the lives we assumed were solid. The plague exposes the frailty of human existence. This brings us back to Camus, who published *La peste* in 1947. One hundred years earlier, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels wrote similarly about unprecedented disruption to settled ways of life: “All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind”.¹³

The authors of the *Communist Manifesto* anticipated the coming age of modern globalization, with its first wave in the late nineteenth century, driven by a rapacious form of capitalism that recreated the world in its own image of relentless expansion: “The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the entire surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere”.¹⁴ Marx and Engels opposed the emerging capitalist world, but they welcomed the destruction of the old order. Not unlike latter-day liberals, they assumed that reason, science and cosmopolitan values would fulfil the Enlightenment promise of progress.

Yet today hyper-capitalism has fused with extreme identity politics – whether the so-called ‘Great Awakening’ on the left or the alt-right that champions market nativism.¹⁵ Together they erode trust, undermine institutions and trash our precious natural environment,

¹³ Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848), full text online at <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1848/communist-manifesto/>

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Matthew Yglesias, ‘The Great Awakening’, *Vox*, 1 April 2019, <https://www.vox.com/2019/3/22/18259865/great-awakening-white-liberals-race-polling-trump-2020>

destroying the basis of a common life shared across ages and classes. The Covid-19 pandemic could intensify these tendencies further, or it could inaugurate something more hopeful.

For Marxists, like liberals, historical progress is the ultimate morality that determines politics. Both are utopian visions with dystopian consequences – with all hope resting on human will, the forces of techno-science and the economy. Camus, by contrast, was keenly aware of the limits of determinism and utilitarian schemes of striving for the ‘greatest happiness of the greatest number’. In Covid-19 times of utilitarian calculations about herd immunity, his words continue to serve as a cautionary note: “[E]veryone has it inside himself, this plague, because no one in the world, no one, is immune”.¹⁶ It is a reminder about our fundamental vulnerability. Much of modern ideology turned abstract ideas into idols and sacrificed millions in the attempt to serve them. Going forward, politics has to start with our human and social condition of frailty – with people as they are in their families, localities and workplaces.

¹⁶ Camus, *The Plague*, op. cit., p. 195.