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ALBERT CAMUS' LA PESTE AND THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC:
EXILE AND IMPRISONMENT, SUFFERING AND DEATH,
DEFIANCE AND HEROISM

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Abstract: Albert Camus' novel *La Peste* has once again sparked the interest and imagination of readers in lieu of the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the existential trajectory of Camus' philosophy, this paper argues that his milieu dialogues with our present context in a very timely and particular way. To present his philosophy as reflected in *La Peste* is therefore an interesting inquiry considering his distinctive analysis of the different secular and religious responses of the characters to the plague which, in many ways, reflect the current responses of world societies towards the COVID-19 pandemic. In light of humanity's desire to find ways to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic and manage its aftermath, this paper attempts to articulate the relevance of Camus' thoughts on defiance and heroism in facing the reality of exile, imprisonment, suffering and death. In doing so, I propose to analyze Camus' philosophy in *La Peste* in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic. The whole analysis will revolve around the central themes of *La Peste* namely Exile and Imprisonment, Suffering and Death, Defiance and Heroism. Likewise, this reading of Camus' notions in *La Peste* in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic brings to dialogue the traditional tension between preserving oneself from the consequences of an environmental crisis and reaching out to others despite the risks it entails.

Key words: Albert Camus, *La Peste*, plague, COVID-19 pandemic, exile, imprisonment, death, religion, defiance, heroism, humanism

1. Albert Camus' *La Peste*

„*The Plague* ... is the revelation, the bringing forth, the exteriorization of a depth of latent cruelty by means of which all the perverse possibilities of the mind, whether of an individual or a people, are localized.”

Antonin Artaud, *The Theater and Its Double*, 1938: 30.

Camus wrote *La Peste* (LP) in 1947, five years after his best-known work *L'Étranger* (Cruikshank 1978, 53). The novel immediately became a stunning success because it met the expectations of the French people who, according to Maria Ardizio (1982, 143) were dying to read novels which dealt with the tragic events of World War II in a way that raised them to the level of a myth. Apart from being more than a parable, *La Peste* is also the tale of a natural calamity that descended on the Algerian town of Oran three years before Camus wrote this novel. Developed over five chapters, like the five acts of an ancient tragedy, the narrative is admirably built following a crescendo of horror and panic, and a decrescendo, i.e. a move from the tragic greatness of misfortune to a somewhat effete wisdom of the everyday life regained. (Hussein 2016, 145) Taken at the literary level, the narrative has some perfection, and a poetic and pathetic power that are self-sufficient (Hussein 2016, 146).

Equal to the number of chapters are the main characters. These are Tarou the lonely, who is horrified by the death penalty; Rambert the journalist, who is investigating the condition of the Arabs; Joseph Grand, the writer in search of a style; Dr Bernard Rieux, the lead protagonist who rebels against this creation where children are tortured and die in excruciating pains; and Father Paneloux, the learned Jesuit who sees the plague as the divine punishment dreaded by sinners. In spite of what divides these five characters, they eventually work side by side for something that unites them ‘beyond blasphemy and prayers’ (LP, 178), for the only thing that matters: saving human lives. If in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* the concern of Camus was the problem of suicide, in *La Peste* he substitutes this problem for a strange form of martyrdom, purporting to be a religion of happiness through atheistic sanctity. (Hussein 2016, 147) In *La Peste*, Camus is mainly interested in the reactions of men faced with the collapse of everything they had believed secure: communication systems, trade and health. Hence in this novel, it is no longer a single Sisyphus but a city of Sisyphuses who found themselves crushed by disaster (Maurois 1966, 331).

In the 1980s, some authors found their inspiration in *La Peste*: André Brink (*The Wall of the Plague*), Gabriel García Márquez (*Love in the Time of Cholera*), Stewart O’Nan (*A Prayer for the Dying*), and José Saramago

(Blindness). These contemporary authors use the motif of epidemic to depict history and the human condition. Some of the most insightful, best-known readings of Camus's novel have centered on its historical dimension - from Barthes's famous critique (1955, 452), to Roger Grenier's (1991, 122) and Shoshana Felman's (1989, 260) likening of its fictional testimony to the (im)possibility of bearing witness to the Occupation and the Holocaust, respectively. Brian T. Fitch suggests that *La Peste* follows a textually self-referential formula: "the real subject of *The Plague* is none other than the text in all its various forms" (1982, 15). John Fletcher claims that Rieux is only an "alter ego" to Camus himself (1994, 37). And Robert Zaretsky admits that there is an absurd parallel involved in the text: "just as recognizing a physical illness leads to the search for a cure, recognizing the absurdity of our lives leads to revolt" (2010, 98). James S. Williams asks, if "the world of *The Plague* is ... one of perpetual doubt and ambiguity, a process set in train by the text's very title: does it concern one particular plague or plague in general?" (Williams 2000, 63). A rhetorical question, he also ventures a response: "plague, whose precise nature in *The Plague* remains unspecified, is a clear symbol neither of war nor of the hostile universe, nor even of the absurd. Just as it escapes the doctors' attempts at a cure, so it outplays the narrator's desire to control it figuratively by means of allegorical representation, resulting ... in a constantly shifting series of metaphors." (LP 70) In this regard, the plague refers to both a (literal) physical manifestation of sickness (e.g., bubonic plague) and can allegorically indicate anything ranging from the Second World War to philosophical notions of absurdity. Collin Davis argues that without providing a transparent definition, the reader is allowed to assign many possible metaphorical meanings (historical, philosophical, and even metaphysical) to the plague. (Davis 1994, 9). Jared S. White maps out several allegorical meanings with respect to *La Peste* by including the notions of epidemic and pandemic into the myriad of allegorical connotations of the plague. (White 2015, 12)

In relation to the aforementioned studies, this article has engaged *La Peste* on its literal level by tracing its parallelism in the different consequential phases that developed in the COVID-19 pandemic. The novel narrates the city of Oran absorbed by the plague and just like many cities now around the world, it pictures people dying, suffering, in exile and imprisoned not just by closed borders, quarantined ships, lockdown of cities and travel bans but also by anxiety and fear of infection or death for an undetermined period of time. The similar effects of Camus' traditional bubonic plague with COVID-19 on societies around the world is therefore significant. This present reading of the *Plague* highlights how in the Camusian imaginary narrative a plague catalyzes exile and imprisonment, suffering and death, defiance and heroism. *La Peste* thus constitutes not just the viral outbreak or pandemic but also its effects on the human psyche. Camus' construction of the plague as both literal and symbolical

informs those who are grappling with different levels of exile, imprisonment, suffering and death due to the COVID-19 that it is surmountable through defiance and heroism.

2. The COVID-19 Pandemic

„I know positively that each of us has the plague within him; no one, no one on earth, is free from it. And I know, too, that we must keep endless watch on ourselves lest in a careless movement we breathe in somebody's face and fasten the infection on him. What's natural is the microbe". (*La Peste*, 207).

In this digital age, when first mentions of viruses draw visions of malfunctioning computers, smartphones and electronic gadgets, it is startling to find millions recoiling at the thought of actual germs that might have jumped from animal species to humans, and which attack a person's respiratory systems, sometimes leading to death. Never have the words "gone viral" become so literally true. As of this writing, the COVID-19 has killed at least 13,069 people worldwide, the vast majority in Italy, China, Iran and Spain. On top of this, there have been more than 308,547 cases with infections in every continent except Antarctica, so much so that its sustained outbreaks in multiple regions of the world have led the World Health Organization (WHO) to declare the new coronavirus disease of 2019 a global pandemic last March 11, 2020.

Since COVID-19's outbreak in Wuhan, China last December 2019, the world has witnessed an explosion of effects like lockdown of cities, travel bans, states of emergencies, sealed international borders, deserted airports, train stations, tourist attractions, stadiums and theme parks, postponed big international sporting events, shutdown of schools and closed places of worship never before seen in this century. Society is reacting not just to the disease itself, but also to the separate responses of its differentiated domains (David 2020). People's lives are disrupted and altered not just directly by the virus itself but even more so, indirectly, by the unpredictable ways in which the different segments of society are responding to the threat and risk that the disease poses. More insidiously, dormant and longstanding prejudices are activated as nations and various publics scan the horizon for races and cultures to blame for this modern pestilence.

Outbreaks, turning into epidemics and eventual pandemics are class-neutral, of course, and how societies react can depend on their individual circumstances. With people increasingly concerned about how the outbreak develops, more and more cases of panic buying have been reported

in many countries bringing disaster capitalism into play - even as governments reassure their citizens that they don't need to hoard goods. Corollary to this, reasonable fear of infection mixed with the desire to pin accountability for the outbreak, rampant ignorance and misinformation about COVID-19 have led to big time blame games and pointing fingers between nations and numerous racist and xenophobic attacks against Asians but even on anyone who coughs or sneezes. World news coverage attests that the attacks range from physical to verbal to financial, all of which underline that racist assaults and ignorant attacks are able to spread even faster than the coronavirus.

"Outbreaks can bring out the best and worst in people" said Dr. Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus, the WHO chief said last January. Immediately after the coronavirus outbreak, Chinese authorities built two massive hospitals in Wuhan in just two weeks. Japan's ruling Liberal Democratic Party members donated 2 million yen from their own pockets and the Japanese government likewise built on those efforts by sending thousands of pieces of protective garments to Wuhan, while the residents of Oita prefecture - Japanese sister city of Wuhan - also gifted 30,000 masks to the epicenter of the coronavirus. When the coronavirus hit South Korea, a letter of condolence was sent by North Korean leader Kim Jong Un to South Korean President Moon Jae-in expressing his solidarity with the families of the South Koreans who died due to the coronavirus outbreak. Last March, China reciprocated Italy's help by sending Chinese medical experts to bring medical supplies to northern Italy; while in the rest of the Italian state, gestures of gratitude and music ring out above the vacated streets at the exact hour that health officials normally update the daily numbers of the country's increasing infected and dead. When COVID-19 hit the region of Metro-Manila in the Philippines, one of the most populated places in the world, LGUs, a civic group, a small craft beer maker, big business conglomerates, and even Jack Ma, founder of the giant Chinese e-commerce and technology company Alibaba, poured in various and different kinds of support which include not just personal protective equipment (PPE) but also food for the impoverished residents, informal settlers, medical and military frontliners. Add to these the many instances of kindness by celebrities, athletes, musicians, soldiers, flight attendants, farmers, grocery employees, food delivery personnel, doctors, nurses and other health care workers all the world over.

Even as new outbreaks are reported around the world, the situation is stabilizing in some areas where infections were first detected. In countries like China and South Korea, there have been a major drop in the number of new cases reported in the past weeks. This has led some areas to lower travel restrictions and begin the slow process of getting back to work. As more and more people start to return to normality, experts point out that the situation of the world remains precarious since there is still

no vaccine which can totally prevent the COVID-19 from wreaking havoc once again.

Of all of Camus' novels, none described humanity's confrontation – and cohabitation – with exile, imprisonment, suffering and death so vividly and on such an epic scale as *La Peste* (Vulliamy 2015). What makes this novel worth reading, especially at this point in time, is not only that it represents all humankind's responses to a plague, but how – with the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic – it works on the moral as well as the metaphorical level. Readers the world over will feel a grim sense of recognition at the Oran authorities' unwillingness to call the plague a plague, due to "the usual taboo, of course; the public mustn't be alarmed, that wouldn't do at all." (LP, 35)

3. Exile and Imprisonment

„No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the emotions shared by all. Strongest of these emotions was the sense of exile and of deprivation, with all the crosscurrents of revolt and fear..." (LP, 151)

The outbreak of the plague in an ordinary city like Oran, without warning and without reason, makes it a microcosm of Camus' absurd universe. Camus narrates: "The word "plague" had just been uttered for the first time ... Everybody knows that pestilences have a way of recurring in the world; yet somehow we find it hard to believe in ones that crash down on our heads from a blue sky. There have been as many plagues as wars in history; yet always plagues and wars take people equally by surprise." (LP, 31) Soon after dead rats are found on the streets, humans are dropping too and eventually Oran finds itself quarantined from the rest of the world. Citizens are cut off from friends, family and lovers beyond the town's borders and households that suffer fatalities are themselves quarantined from the rest of the city. Then Camus adds: "At first, the fact of being cut off from the outside world was accepted with a more or less good grace, much as people would have put up with any other temporary inconvenience that interfered with only a few of their habits. But, now they had abruptly become aware that they were undergoing a sort of incarceration under that blue dome of sky, already beginning to sizzle in the fires of summer..." (LP, 100) When the town gates are shut, its citizens are all trapped inside, separated from the outside world. It actually shows how the townspeople have now become like rats in an experiment.

The townspeople all suffer the same epidemic and experience similar kinds of exile and imprisonment. The plague simultaneously exiles and imprisons the town of Oran, and its closed gates leave many citizens separated from their loved ones. Rambert and Dr. Rieux are both separated by the quarantine from the women they love, and Rambert, a foreigner, is exiled from his own home as well. Camus also describes the townspeople's feelings of exile as the plague progresses: first everyone wants to speed up time and end the plague, or they work ceaselessly (like Rambert) to escape and rejoin their lost loved one, while later many citizens give up hope or live in fantasies of regret and longing. For others like Tarrou, their exile is a separation from an idea, a sense of happiness, or a peace that Tarrou only finds in his last struggle against death.

Over time, the plague transforms the souls of its residents, with "Husbands who had had [once] complete faith in their wives found, to their surprise, that they were jealous; and lovers had the same experience." (LP, 70) Suddenly, children, "who had lived beside their mothers hardly giving them a glance [now] fell to picturing with poignant regret each wrinkle in the absent face that memory cast upon the screen." (LP, 71) The once self-satisfied commercial town and its residents gradually rediscover a sense of solidarity, realizing they're "in the same boat, and each would have to adapt himself to the new conditions of life... The ache of separation from those one loves suddenly became a feeling in which all shared alike and, together with fear, the greatest affliction of the long period of exile that lay ahead." (LP, 67)

Through the absurdity of exile and imprisonment brought by the plague, the people of Oran are forced to realize that they are no longer in control of their lives. To offer a solution to the problem of the absurd and an explanation of the universe is by definition, for Camus, beyond the reach of human reason. He considers it unjust to dismiss the absurd by altering the nature of the problem just as he argues in *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*: "Yet all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine... At the final stage you teach me that this wondrous and multicolored universe can be reduced to the atom... But you tell me of an invisible planetary system in which electrons gravitate around a nucleus... I realize then that you have been reduced to poetry. I shall never know" (Camus 1955, 8).

4. Suffering and Death

It is not long before hundreds are dying each day: funerals are replaced by swift unceremonial burials behind closed cemetery gates. Soon there is violence and looting. As the bodies pile up, a climate of helplessness and resignation ensues. In the novel, the bubonic plague is a symbol of many things – the harsh, meaningless universe, the human

condition, or war – but all of them mean suffering and death. The people of Oran deal with this meaningless suffering in various ways. At first they try to ignore or downplay it, and then they see it as a personal antagonist separating them from their loved ones.

Some see it as divine punishment like Father Paneloux, who, in the first month of the plague, opens his sermon in the town cathedral with: “My brethren, a calamity has befallen you; my brethren, you have deserved it!” (LP, 80). He insists that the people of Oran deserve this heavenly punishment, as did the people of Sodom and Gomorrah, and the Pharaoh. As the novel progresses, Camus brings up the sufferings of innocent children due to the plague. Jacques Othon, the son of Monsieur Othon, contracts the disease. Despite Dr. Castel's attempts to save his life with the new anti-plague serum, Jacques dies after a lengthy, painful suffering. Dr. Rieux and Father Paneloux meet again outside the hospital where the young Jacques has just died. Paneloux suggests that although the suffering and the death of an innocent child is outrageous and beyond the understanding of humankind, one should love what one does not understand. To which Dr. Rieux replies, “No, Father. I have a different notion of love; and to the day I die I shall refuse to love this creation in which children are tortured.” (LP, 218) Father Paneloux stays with young Jacques during his last hour and says prayers to God to spare him. Despite all the efforts of Dr. Rieux, Dr. Castel, and the medical staff, as well as Father Paneloux's prayers, the boy dies. This, Father Paneloux finds, is completely unjustifiable, yet has to be accepted since God willed it so. From this point onward, Camus portrays Paneloux as a priest who starts having doubts since the suffering of innocent children could not be explained by any religious arguments.

In Father Paneloux's second sermon, there is a calmer priest as opposed to a stern one. He uses the pronoun “we” as opposed to “you.” Deeply affected by the suffering and the consequent death of a child, Father Paneloux speaks to the less crowded church with a less enthusiastic audience. He says: “My brethren, the love of God is a difficult one. It assumes a total abandonment of oneself and contempt for one's person. But it alone can wipe away the suffering and death of children, it alone makes them necessary because it is impossible to understand such things...” (LP, 183). Towards the end of *The Plague*, Camus depicts the contractions of the disease by Father Paneloux and Jean Tarrou. Paneloux accepts the will of God and refuses to fight the disease and dies whilst holding on to the remnants of his faith. Dr. Rieux records Paneloux's case as a “doubtful case” since it did not clearly resemble that of the plague. Meanwhile Tarrou puts up a great heroic fight against the plague only to fail: “Rieux,” he said at last, “you must tell me the whole truth. I count on that.” “I promise it.” Tarrou's heavy face relaxed in a brief smile. “Thanks. I don't want to die, and I shall put up a fight. But if I lose the match, I want to make a good end of it.” (LP, 284)

5. Heroism and Defiance

„There's no question of heroism in all this. It's a matter of common decency. That's an idea which may make some people smile, but the only means of fighting a plague is - common decency.” (LP, 142)

Throughout the book, Dr Rieux carries out his duties with consistent professionalism and an increasing indifference towards the fate of his patients. As the morbid day-to-day realities of the pestilence continue, a physical and emotional distance between the doctor and his patients becomes inevitable: compassion fatigue kicks in. Meanwhile, his wife is sick with an unrelated illness and is dying alone beyond the borders of the quarantine. The pivotal moment of the story occurs when Rambert, a roaming journalist who found himself in the wrong place at the wrong time when the city was closed off, is offered an opportunity to escape and he refuses it. As Doctor Rieux and his colleagues desperately struggle to control a virulent epidemic in the town of Oran, individual agendas are forgotten in order to collectively work towards eradicating the pestilence: Grand - however odd and eccentric he seems - is among the first to volunteer to help fight the plague that threatens Oran, Rieux and his fellow doctors labor incessantly to help victims, Tarrou organizes a militia of volunteers to fight the plague, and even Father Paneloux preaches a heightened sense of public religious observance as a means of stamping out the disease. Gathered together as a body, solitary selfishness becomes combined counteraction, and, ten months after the first outbreak, the plague steadily diminishes into oblivion.

In relation to this, it is worth pointing out that as the plague is finally contained, Camus cites the fate of the criminal Cottard - who, after committing a crime in an unknown place, hid in Oran until it got locked down and resorted to smuggling during the plague ... “he has shut himself in his apartment with a gun, and he has been yelling and firing indiscriminately at people in the street. A dog appears and Cottard shoots at it. Then more police arrive with a machine gun, and they take the screaming Cottard into custody.” (LP, 265) Here Camus underlines the danger of solitary selfishness which eventually leads to anonymity - for anonymity, as personified by Cottard, is a constant threat in the life of man because it reduces a person to a being a “stranger.” And so in order to overcome anonymity or the unknown, one needs to be born into one's self by becoming the “first man”. (Salcedo and Baring 2020, 26). Such movement in the philosophy of Camus is attested by the trajectory of his ideas from *L'Etranger* (1942) to *Le Premier homme* (1996). For him, solidarity

means claiming responsibility, becoming assertive of one's freedom, reaching out to others and being one with suffering humanity.

La Peste commences with the awareness that despite the enormity of suffering and death in the world and the seeming omnipotence of the plague, there are instances of heroism and altruistic struggle as well in the persons of Grand, Rambert, Tarrou and Dr. Rieux. Nonetheless, Camus immediately undercuts their "heroic" efforts by declaring that fighting the plague is the only decent, truly human thing to do, (LP, 142) but this is because he believes that humans are generally good. These "heroes" fit into his idea of Absurdism, as in the face of a harsh, uncaring universe, one must struggle to help others and "fight the plague," even if defeat is inevitable. This kind of struggle in the face of certain death is a possible definition of heroism, however, so Camus is proposing a kind of heroism in everyday life – to embrace the Absurd, but at the same time to struggle hopelessly against it.

Tarrou, Rambert, Grand, and Dr. Rieux all embody the absurd man like Sisyphus for they accepted their fates in the face of the plague only to defy it. They did not evade the plague by seeking refuge in solitary selfishness like Cottard or religious escapism like Fr. Paneloux. They did not allow the magnitude of the plague to lead them to indifference or flight from Oran. They chose to live without relinquishing the uncertainty and embraced a bleak future, a hopeless situation without illusion and without resignation. They stared at death with a passionate attention and with a fascination that liberated them. These firm manifestations attest that, despite experiencing the wrath of the plague, Camus considers these four characters as Sisyphuses in their own right. In upholding their solidarity towards curbing the plague, Camus purports to give meaning to an absurd existence, a meaning that does not negate absurdity yet refuses to succumb to its impact.

While it would be perfectly poetic to finish the novel with a tightly-knit community, at the end of the text Rieux finds himself a lone man whose memories of collective resistance are the only company he has left. At the conclusion to *La Peste*, Dr. Rieux – whose wife has died of illness elsewhere, unconnected with the pestilence – watches families and lovers reunite when the gates of Oran are finally opened. He wonders – in the wake of so much suffering and pointless struggle – whether there can be peace of mind or fulfilment without hope, and concludes that yes, perhaps there can, for those "who knew now that if there is one thing one can always yearn for, and sometimes attain, it is human love" (LP, 300). In one moving dialogue between Dr. Bernard Rieux to Jean Tarrou, Camus writes: "After all," the doctor repeated, then hesitated again, fixing his eyes on Tarrou, "it's something that a man of your sort can understand most likely, but, since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He

sits in silence?" Tarrou nodded. "Yes. But your victories will never be lasting; that's all." Rieux's face darkened. "Yes, I know that. But it's no reason for giving up the struggle." (LP, 128)

Here, Camus made Dr. Rieux fully personify Sisyphus, who having reached the summit, watches the boulder roll down the mountain side, and then trails downwards himself to take up again his eternal torment. With the pause that comes regularly side by side his painful labor in between going down and up, Camus understands that Sisyphus has his moment of consciousness (Camus 1955, 121). Dr. Rieux is conscious of his plight and misery. Yet he continues with his task for he believes that it is precisely in this situation that man can be desperately heroic by sinking his teeth into the absurd. It is this lucid recognition of his destiny that transforms his torment into victory. Dr. Rieux as Sisyphus is a creator able to make sense of circumstances that apparently rob human life of significance. He surmounts his fate by scorning it, stronger than the rock: "I leave Sisyphus at the foot of the mountain!... But Sisyphus teaches the higher fidelity that negates the gods and raises rocks. He too concludes that all is well... The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill a man's heart. One must imagine Sisyphus happy" (Camus 1955, 123).

6. Conclusion: Overcoming the Perpetuity of The Plague

„The plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; ... it can lie dormant for years in furniture and linen-chests; ... it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and ... perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and enlightening of men, it roused up its rats again and sent them forth to die in a happy city" (*The Plague*, 252).

This last sentence of *The Plague* has proved truly prophetic over time. Indeed, this day of the return of the plague has come to us this year 2020 during the Chinese Year of the Rat in the form of the COVID-19 pandemic. And this plague is more recalcitrant than the fictional one of the 1940s in the city of Oran, insofar as it is multifarious: endangering the health not just of one city but of the whole world, entrenching and deepening xenophobia, creating new forms of cruel economic motives, imperialism, capitalism, racial-based violence, and man-planned pauperization of the world are just some of its most conspicuous facets. Indeed, people around the world have become increasingly closed off from one another as sweeping travel bans accelerated, walling regions apart as a viral pandemic unfolds. It is in this context of political, economic and religious nihilism, where peace, security and human dignity have become chimeras, that

Camus's *The Plague*, one of the greatest humanist manifestos since the 20th century, assume its full relevance and timeliness. (Hussein 2016, 164)

We are now all exiles and prisoners but rather than just keeping ourselves from being infected, we need to recognize that our health and fates are inextricably linked to our fellow human beings and so working together as a community of nations in the face of a common challenge is key. An individual's contribution may seem small, invisible, inconsequential - but every small act of 'not doing that selfish act' one is going to do, and 'doing' an act of kindness or support will add up exponentially. That is our greatest act of defiance not just against the COVID-19 pandemic but also against the viral tendency of being egocentric in the midst of a pandemic by forgetting about the most vulnerable sectors of society particularly the poor, elderly, migrants and refugees. We are all connected. We all need to take on the task of rebuilding our society and putting protections in place so that when the next the crisis comes, we are ready to take it on. Yes the plague is timeless but so is the heroism that comes from common decency, empathy, solidarity and cooperation among peoples and nations which is certainly the best way to confront and contain the COVID-19 pandemic and all kinds of environmental crises. Luckily our redemption is as true now as it was 70 years ago when Camus's concluded in *Le Plague* that "there are more things to admire in men than to despise" (LP, 308).

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