Recounting the Plague

By Samuel Weber

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I. "The End of the World As We Know It"

Like the plague itself, this paper on the plague has its history. It originated in what now appears as a strange coincidence. Last November, just before Thanksgiving, my colleague and friend Michael Loriaux visited the seminar I give each year in Paris as part of the Paris Program in Critical Theory. Michael directs Northwestern's undergraduate Paris Program and has been a loyal participant in the Graduate Paris Program for decades. Each year he, as well as other colleagues, visits the seminar to present some aspect of his ongoing research. This year the title of his presentation seemed a bit excessive at the time, but it soon turned out to have been premonitory: "The End of the World as We Know It". Michael was referring to the serious problems that have haunted efforts at European integration since the Second World War. Little however did he or I dream that the world that was about to "end" was not just that of Europe but of the entire globe. In any case, as preparation for his visit, Michael suggested a series of readings, which included selections from Vatican II, Emmanuel Mounier's writings on Personalism, and the Preamble to the Treaty of Rome -- all closely related to the development of postwar Europe. But included in his list of suggested readings was another text that seemed somewhat less closely related to this topic, and indeed, when he discussed it, this last text was completely ignored. It was a section from Camus' second novel, "The Plague", written in 1941 and

published in 1947, in which one of the main characters, Tarrou, reviews his life and thought in conversation with his friend, Dr. Rieux, from whose perspective the events of the novel arte mainly narrated. In preparation for Michael's visit I reread Camus' novel and was very moved no just by Tarrou's speech, but by the novel as a whole. But since there was no time for Michael to discuss it in the seminar, I also wasn't able to ask him why he had bothered to include it in the first place, given what seemed to me its rather remote relationship to postwar European integration. To this day I am not entirely sure why it was included in the list of readings. But in the meanwhile, the question no longer seemed as interesting to me – mainly because the idea had come to me that the plague would be an extraordinarily interesting subject for the undergraduate seminar I was scheduled to teach in the winter quarter at Northwestern. What fascinated me was the possibility of comparing and contrasting a large number of texts reaching back to the Bible and Thucydides and extending into the present (I was thinking more of Ebola and HIV than of SARS and MERS, acronyms that were soon to become buzz words again). The history of the plague, or more properly of pandemics, not only was as old as history itself, but it also seemed to be increasing due to technological and social developments in the contemporary world. The title of a very informative French essay collection published in 2015 on the subject summed the situation up concisely: *Le retour des épidemies*.[1] Another aspect of the topic that fascinated me was the way it seemed to concretize issues that I had been working on for years, but in far more abstract mode. The seminar I had been giving in Paris, and which I continued at Northwestern in the winter, was devoted to Derrida's initial reading and critique of Emmanuel Levinas, a thinker who subsequently became a close friend and who exercised a growing influence on his thought. At the center of their ongoing dialogue was, of course, the question of the encounter with the other – with other persons, to be sure, but also with what is radically other, which includes and is

[1] Auriane Guilbaud, Philippe Sansonetti, *Le retour des épidémies,* PUF : Paris, 2015.

perhaps exemplified by one's mortality. But Derrida's early essay remained at a high level of philosophical abstraction, as its title – "Violence and Metaphysics"[2] – indicates. What drew me to "the plague" as a possible seminar topic was precisely that it involved many of the same issues, but in a way that was – and is – anything but "abstract". For that reason, I thought it would make a fascinating topic for an undergraduate course, raising questions and issues whose constancy and evolution could be retraced throughout all of recorded history. And the texts most obviously related to the plague were multidisciplinary: theological, historical, journalistic, cinematic and above all "literary," involving all three of the major "genres" of literature: narrative, theatrical and poetical.

I have never experienced a syllabus that seemed to write itself, and with great rapidity. The only problem fitting the texts that spontaneously suggested themselves into the relatively short 8 ½ week teaching period of the winter quarter. A selection had to be made, but it was not difficult to decide. The seminar would start with selections from the Old Testament, in particular Genesis and Exodus, before jumping to Thucydides' account of the Athenian plague and its effects upon that city's war with Sparta. The reading then jumped almost 2000 years to Boccaccio's Introduction to The Decameron, before advancing to Luther, LaFontaine, Kleist, Defoe and finally finishing with Artaud and Camus. And so, when Michael entirely ignored the Camus novel in discussing "The End of the World as We Know It," it no longer bothered me as much as it might have, since he had given me an exciting idea for my next seminar. One month later, news began to filter out of China about a strange illness that was spreading rapidly in Wuhan…

II. Preexisting Conditions

[2] J. Derrida, « Violence and Metaphysics, » in: *Writing and Difference,* translated by Alan Bass (Northwestern UP: Evanston, 1978), 79-153.

The section of Camus' novel that Michael Loriaux suggested we read or reread, involves a long monologue of one of the main characters, Tarrou, who is speaking to his friend, Dr. Rieux. Here is how he begins:

"To make things simpler, Rieux, let me begin by saying (that) I had (the) plague already, long before I came to this town and encountered it here. Which is tantamount to saying (that) I'm like everybody else."[3] (245)

There would be a lot to say about this opening gambit: But I will put that off until I have had a chance to juxtapose this text with *two* other passages, written by another French writer whom we have been reading recently in my seminar. In 1933, the year that Hitler come to power and that thus initiated the sequence of historical events that ultimately provided the background for Camus' novel, "The Plague," Antonin Artaud gave a lecture at the Sorbonne entitled, "The Theater and the Plague" which he subsequently published first in a journal and then as part of a collection of essays, "The Theater and its Double." The *first* passage from this essay comes at its beginning, which recounts how the Viceroy of Sardinia, Saint-Rémys, was visited one night in 1720 by a violent nightmare in which he dreamt that he was afflicted by the plague; as a result of this dream, the Viceroy decided, against the better judgment of his counsellors, to deny permission for a vessel, the Grand Saint-Antoine, to lay anchor the next day in Cagliari, a port of Sardinia. Under threat of being sunk by the harbor's cannons, the boat had to withdraw and continue its course, which led it past Livorno to its final destination, Marseille, where it finally was able to unload its cargo of cotton and silk fabrics. This event – the unloading of the cargo – is generally regarded as the origin of the plague that went on to claim about half of the population of Marseilles and one-quarter of that of Provence. It. was also this plague this that motivated Defoe, another of the authors we have been reading this quarter, to write his "Journal of the Plague Year" two years later (1722) as a solemn reminder of the great London Plague of 1665 and as a warning to his fellow citizens to prepare

[3] A. Camus, *The Plague,* translated by Stewart Gilbert (Vintage International: NY, 1991), 245.

for the possibility of the Marseille plague spreading from the continent and reaching London as had happened previously. (Fortunately, this did not occur). But to return to Artaud: without contesting the fatal importance of the ship docking in Marseille in spreading the plague, Artaud does add a peculiar and characteristic remark, which as you will see immediately, resonates with the way Tarrou begins his story. (Camus knew and valued Artaud's writing on Theater, so there may have been a direct influence at work here). After emphasizing that the Viceroy, St-Rémys, had through his courageous decision saved Sardinia from the ravages of the plague by taking his dream seriously, as a portent of an imminent reality – indeed, Artaud describes it as the equivalent of a kind of mental vaccination, producing symptoms of the plague but only in the dreamer's imagination -- Artaud goes on to make a rather surprising statement:

The *Grand-Saint-Antoine* did not bring the plague to Marseille. It was already there. And at a point of particular recrudescence. But its centers had been successfully localized." (16) In other words, the vessel did not simply bring the plague to Marseille – it reactivated the virus that was already there, but which had been isolated, compartmentalized and thereby kept under control.[4]

Both Artaud and Tarrou begin their respective recounting of the plague by asserting that although it definitely came from the outside, it was also already inside: inside the person, Tarrou, and inside the city it was to ravage, Marseille.

This raises the question: How can something like the plague be both inside and outside, at the same time? Artaud's explanation is suggestive of an answer: It was there "at a point of particular recrudescence – but its centers had been successfully localized." In other words, it had been confined, a word we have rediscovered in recent months. Tarrou, for his part describes a somewhat similar condition: the plague, he asserts, was always already in him, as it is in everyone else; the only

[4] A. Artaud, *The Theater and the Plague,* in: *The Theater and its Double,* translated by Mary Caroline Richards (Grove Press: New York, 1958), 16.

difference is “that there are some people who don’t know it or feel at ease in that condition (while) others know and want to get out of it.” (245). In short, in a certain sense, the plague preexists its most destructive appearance and outbreak, which depends not so much on its existence or non-existence as on the way it is confined, or, as Artaud puts it, “localized.”

Now to avoid a potential misunderstanding: by citing this passage I do not mean to endorse what Tarrou, and possibly Camus, might have wanted ultimately to imply, namely that we are all plague-ridden to begin with. This can easily become a modern version of the Biblical doctrine of original sin, which, throughout history – European history at least – has been (and remains today) a very widespread way of endowing the plague with meaning by construing it to be the justified punishment visited upon an iniquitous society by its Divine Creator. This response can ultimately be retraced to the way death is introduced in the first book of Genesis, namely as divine punishment for the transgression of an equally divine prohibition. This depiction of mortality as punishment suggests the possibility of a life that would originally and essentially be capable of existing without death and suffering. Both Camus and Artaud, in different ways to be sure, are very much indebted to this Biblical tradition and more particularly to its Christian version – even though both were adamantly opposed to organized religion. But opposition always remains to a degree dependent upon that which it opposes.

It is not then to reinforce a traditional view of life based on original sin that I find it useful to begin my discussion of “recounting the plague” with the passages just quoted, but rather because they can serve to complicate a certain tendency relating to the use of names. When something is named, for instance as “plague,” it is often assumed that it is self-contained, self-identical, and can therefore be considered in relative isolation from everything else. However, the etymology of the word “plague” and its Indo-European counterparts, suggests that this is not entirely accurate. In English, as in Latin (*plangere*), Greek (*loimos*) and Hebrew (*Maggefah*), the word suggests a violent and sudden “blow”, which causes that which it strikes to lose its

balance. This confirms of course that the blow comes from without. But it also indicates that its devastating effects can be understood only in terms of that which it strikes.

This suggests that to talk about "the plague", then, requires us to consider it not just as a self-contained object or process but as an incursion that interacts with what it affects. It is in short relational. It interacts with what, in a different context, is today called "preexisting conditions". I choose this term because it designates both a *general* situation – the conditions that predate the advent of the virus but that influence its effects – and also a *particular* state of affairs relating to the practice of private, for profit-run health insurance companies to make healthcare into a commodity and therefore to pick and choose whom they wish to insure and at what cost.

"Preexisting conditions," then is meant to suggest that the effects produced by "the plague" and by pandemics in general cannot be considered independently of the history of the collective it affects. Through a strange coincidence, this aspect of pandemics is even more applicable to viruses than to bacteria, which were the actual causes of what is known as "the plague." It is interesting that Artaud uses the word "virus" in his discussion of the plague, although he knew quite well that its cause was a bacterium. For a virus is interactional in a way that bacteria are not. Viruses cannot reproduce themselves on their own, and for that reason were for a long time considered not to be living entities at all, a view that seems to be evolving, but only insofar as the definition of what constitutes life changes with it. Bacteria have internal systems of self-reproduction whereas viruses do not. A virus must penetrate living cells and take over their reproductive capacities in order to self-reproduce. It cannot do this on its own.[5]

[5] Recent biological discussions have relativized this contrast, arguing that even bacteria cannot reproduce themselves under all conditions – they also require external help. But it would seem as if this requirement is far less extensive with bacteria than with viruses, which only reproduce

Something similar applies to the way Tarrou and Artaud construe the plague. Artaud rejects the notion of contagion in the sense of direct physical contact as the main explanation for the spread of the plague and instead prefers the notion of "communication" that stresses the interactive dimension of contagion. Without pursuing this particular aspect any further, what is important to consider is the way the plague functions through interacting with conditions that antedate it – and will also survive it. In short, the plague – like many other phenomena – only produces its effects by interacting with preexisting conditions.

From Thucydides to Defoe to today many of these conditions seem to have remained relatively constant over centuries. In the case of the Athenian plague, for instance, we already find the tendency to hyper-urbanization taking place as Athens draws population from the surrounding agricultural areas, something that will ultimately prove fatal in its conflict with Sparta. Over two thousand years later, Defoe, toward the end of his *Journal of the Plague Year*, recognizes the sae problem as a basis for certain practical recommendations that he makes. To deal with future plagues, he argues, will require something like reducing the population density of London, as well as improving the living conditions of those who reside in its poorer quarters. These recommendations, never really implemented, remain valid today. But they also remain as unlike to be realized now as they were in the past since they would involve great expense and in the short term at least limited profit. In societies whose politics and policies are driven by more or less short-term profitability, such changes are extremely difficult to realize. De-urbanization, de-densification of living conditions, healthy and hygienically favorable public housing, for instance, are not the most profitable projects to undertake.

This "cost-benefit logic" of relatively short-term profitability brings me finally to the *second* passage from Camus' novel that I would like to discuss. It comes toward the

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themselves after penetrating and then captivating the reproductive capacities of cells. See, Nigel Brown, David Bhella, "Are Viruses Alive?" Microbiology Today, 10 May 2016, *What Is Life?*

end of the book, and once again involves Tarrou, who has been working as a volunteer in an emergency hospital run by Dr. Rieux. Tarrou is visited by a journalist, Rambert, who has been trapped in Oran by the quarantine of Oran – the city visited by the plague –who spends much of the novel trying to escape from the city so that he can return to his girlfriend in Paris. Here is the brief scene:

There was a knock at the door. A male attendant, wearing a white mask, entered. He laid a little sheaf of cards (*fiches*) on Tarrou's desk and, his voice coming thickly through the cloth, said "Six," then went out. Tarrou looked at the journalist and showed him the cards, spreading them fanwise.

"Neat little gadgets, aren't they? Well, they're deaths. Last night's deaths." Frowning, he slipped the cards together. "The only thing that's left us is accountancy." (206-207)

A word here is necessary concerning the translation, generally quite good, by Stuart Gilbert, well-known in the English-speaking world for his work on Joyce's *Ulysses*. As always with translations, the challenge is to retain not just the denotative meaning of words, but their connotations. The French word that Gilbert translates as "accountancy" is: "*comptabilité*". Yet something important is lost when the French word is rendered as "accountancy" – even if in French its main use, this probably does come closest to its denotative meaning, which is closely related to accounting in the sense of bookkeeping and financial calculation. However, "*comptabilité*" suggests both more and less than "accountancy" – at least in the sense of double-bookkeeping. And this discrepancy is heightened by that which materializes the *comptabilité* in this scene, which in English is rendered as "cards" – cards that Tarrou lays out in the shape of a "fan". The French reads: "*des fiches qu'il déploya en éventail*" (Fr 188) *Fiches*, of course, are not simply cards, at least not in the sense of playing cards or postcards: they are more like what we used to call, at the beginning of computing, "punch cards": they enumerate a series of essentially homogeneous events. They thereby imply and presuppose a system of classification, in French a

fichier -- in which that which is classified is seen as a mere example of a more general category[6]. Whatever is classified in this way is always submitted to a kind of general control or categorization. And in this particular scene, what is involved is particularly resistant to such classification, since it marks the termination of *singular* lives. The gesture of spreading out the "fiches" in the form of a "fan" demonstrates their discreteness while also suggesting its irrelevance – the individual deaths have become part of a general homogenizing statistic. Whereas death marks the end of life in the singular, the "fiche" reinserts it into a *fichier* – not a fan -- and thereby effaces the memory of its singularity. Death thereby becomes countable.

It is by such enumeration that societies seem to account for the plague and the innumerable suffering and destruction that it involves. Such suffering is innumerable not simply because in quantitative terms and because it always involves groups and collectives, rather than only individuals, but because what is involved – the irreplaceability of a singular life -- cannot be enumerated in this way.

And yet societies cannot respond to plagues without some such enumeration. It becomes the basis for many of the counter-measures they decide to take. But as individuals we depend on such devices as well, to track the progress, regress or stagnation of the plague – or today of the pandemic. We are all too familiar with the many different and interrelated statistics: the number of new confirmed cases, the number of hospital admissions, the number of ICU beds used and available, the number of ventilators, the reproduction ratio (so-called R0) measuring the contagiousness of the plague, the positivity ratio of those infected to those tested, the fatality ratio, etc. But however useful, such apparently objective quantification

[6] At the moment of this writing – June 2020 – there is a heated debate in France regarding the question of whether the mobile phone "app", Stop-Covid, which the French government has adopted as its official means of tracing the epidemic, would not involve a serious reduction of privacy by providing data to a centralized *fichier,* that could then be used by the authorities for the "tracing" and surveillance of activities unrelated to Covid-19. Germany has refused this app, developed in cooperation by Google and Apple, for precisely these reasons.

cannot adequately "account" for the pandemic. Not just because the figures are almost always unreliable, but even more because the numbers do not simply enumerate homogeneous events: what they count is inevitably conditioned by relationships that escape quantification, at least of the simple enumerative kind. For instance, the mortality ratio varies not just among age groups but among socio-economic groups and their very different living conditions; it varies also depending on the ability of the health system to treat victims, on the kinds of treatment administered and many other variables.

This is why "counting" the plague is inevitable but insufficient and often deceptive. It must be supplemented by what I am calling a "recounting" – to account for the plague, it must be recounted, and this in a dual sense. First, it must be recounted retrospectively in the sense in which an election result can be "recounted" when the outcome is in doubt. The recounting here either confirms or corrects the original count. But recounting is called for here also in the literary sense, in which what has happened and is happening is retold, re-counted, repeated and in the process inevitably modified: whether in discourses that consider themselves "historical," such as Thucydides, or literary, such as Camus, or theatrical, in the very strong sense given that word by Artaud, or in hybrid forms, such as Defoe's *Journal of the Plague Year*, which is the result both of research and of imagination – what I like to call not fiction but friction, since it involves not so much exactitude as the transformation of elements taken from a variety of sources, which are often not fictional in the traditional sense of lacking a "real" referent, but real in the sense of preserving and modifying elements taken from non-literary "reality". One model of this is given by Freud, who in his Interpretation of Dreams describes how dreams take remnants of daily experience – *Tagesreste* – to serve as raw material that then signify something radically different from their ostensible meaning. But the "frictional" element involved here also implies something else, characteristic of literary narrative: namely the complex and overdetermined involvement of the teller in the tale.

This involvement of the teller in the tale recalls Walter Benjamin's distinction between a certain type of novel and the story-teller. Whereas the former, with his readers, attempt to keep a certain distance from what is being narrated, the story-teller and his listeners (or readers) are involved in the story be told. This story responds to a desire for "advice" (in Benjamin's German, *Rat,* often translated as "council"). The storyteller is never an author, in the sense of a creator, but rather always more or less of a re-teller, taking previously heard stories and recounting them, and modifying them in the process. And the process is discontinuous but also open-ended: at the end of each story, the response always implies the question, "And what happened next?" (*Wie ging es weiter?*). But this response is very different from anything like an answer. The advice sought and given by stories, by recounting, does not seek to provide a definitive answer but rather to encourage the continuation of the story. But it is a continuation that is discontinuous. As discontinuous as a singular life. The storyteller has, Benjamin writers, "borrowed his authority from death." That borrowing must be repaid, and it is repaid by the inconclusiveness of each story. Stories of this sort end but they do not conclude. They constitute discrete links in a vast and ongoing chain of recounting.

The recounter of plagues also "borrows his authority from death" He acknowledges this debt in part through the role assigned to enumeration in his recounting. Nowhere is this more powerfully and yet more soberly exemplified than in Defoe's Journal. Numbers play a constant role in his account, which throughout refers again and again to the "Bills" that enumerate and categorize the deaths caused by the plague to date and to place. They thus retrace its progress in space and time. Defoe's narrator is a certain H.F. often identified with the author's uncle, Henry Foe, who may have played an important part in the prehistory of the work, since Defoe himself was only five when the 1665 London plague he is recounting took place, which however he chooses to describe as though through the eyes and ears of a fictional eyewitness. In the following description this narrator acknowledges the inaccuracy of the accounting of the plague, while also giving reasons why this was

inevitable: namely because of the involvement of those doing the accounting in what they were trying to enumerate:

Now when I say that the Paris Officers did not give in a full Account, or were not to be depended upon for their Account, let any one but consider how Men could be exact in such a Time of dreadful Distress, and when many of them were taken sick themselves, and perhaps died in the very Time when their Accounts were to be given in... [7]

At this point the narrator provides a formulation that caused me to stumble at first, and then to run to my dictionary for help: HF continues:

Indeed the Work was not of a Nature to allow them Leisure, *to take an exact Tale of the dead Bodies*, which were all huddled together in the Dark into a Pit, which Pit, or Trench, no Man could come nigh, but at the utmost Peril." (Ibid, – my italics—SW)

The work was not of a nature to allow those counting "to take an exact *Tale* of the dead Bodies" – suddenly the use of the word "tale" here – meaning of course "tally" -- reminded me that in many European languages the practice of *telling* is indeed linked to the notion of *tallying*; in Germany most obviously, where to "tell" has as its lexical root the word that means to "number" – *Zahl, Erzählen*, or in French: *conter, raconter*, and similarly in other Romance Languages. Etymologically the notion of telling was initially related to that of tallying and that remains at least virtually, dormant in the word today.

But to tell is to tally in a different way from the homogenizing quantification that claims to organize and dominate the singularity of what it is counting. This is where frictional recounting comes in, especially where something like the plague is concerned. For frictional recounting bears witness both to the proximity of the process from what is being recounted and to the unbridgeable distance that

[7] Daniel Defoe, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, (Norton Critical Edition: New York, 1992), 82-83.

separates the two, as it separates life from death. Just as the London officials did not dare to approach too closely to the pits in which the corpses of the dead were thrown and then buried.

The re- in the process of re-counting thus does not simply designate an identical repetition of what is recounted but a different kind of comptabilité, of count-a-bility. It is the accountability of a certain memory – the memory of what can never be known as such but which nevertheless must be remembered. It is the reason why Boccaccio, in his introduction to the Decameron, excuses himself for having to begin with the account of the plague that devastates Florence:

If in all honesty I could have led you where I want to go by any route other than by such a difficult path as this one … I would have done so gladly. But … without recalling these events, I could not explain the origins of the things you will read about later on, I have been forced by necessity, as it were, to write it all down.[8]

It is the memory of mortality that first opens access to what is alive in life – and this is something that can only be the result of recounting – the plague, for instance, but not only. It does not provide answers to the conundrum of mortal life, but it does invite and make possible responses.

[8] G. Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, Translated and edited by Wayne Rebhorn (Norton Critical Edition: NY, 2016), 5.