

About the book

The Plague (1947)

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In his work *The Plague*, Albert Camus succeeds in a remarkable and hardly to be overestimated masterstroke – in my opinion a desirable feat for every reader: Camus combines clear-sightedness, straightforwardness and a sense of reality with optimism, philanthropy and committed solidarity in the face of catastrophic abysses. In this novel he processes observations and reflections from his personal experience in occupied France at the time of National Socialism. A suspicion or concern that reading this novel would amount to a pessimistic and depressing examination of an overly human approach to a catastrophe is not confirmed: Camus offers us an illustration and reflection of the possibilities of humanity, without recourse to a moral forefinger, without ever appearing encroaching, but instead clearly and uncompromisingly humanitarian.

From the perspective of Rieux, a doctor in the ordinary city of Oran, we learn of mysterious events that soon turn out to be a plague outbreak. In the following months, first the rats in the streets die, but soon also the people. Even though some officials at first find it very difficult to call the catastrophe by its name, any ousting tactics are unsuccessful and soon the inhabitants of the city, which is cut off from the outside world, can only be concerned with dying, fleeing – or fighting the disease together as best they can.

Disarming and fascinating is, among other things, how Camus succeeds in making many different voices heard through the different, each very individual and finely worked out figures, which together make a polyphonic plea for impartiality, magnanimity and humanity. Camus makes it clear: It is not about being a hero ("But, you know, I feel more fellowship with the defeated than with saints. Heroism and sanctity don't really appeal to me, I imagine. What interests me is being a man." 1947¹, 1948), nor is it a question of sacrificing oneself in a particular way ("For nothing in the world is it worth turning one's back on what one loves." 1947¹, 1948) — perhaps it can only be a matter of not taking the side of the murderers and standing on the side of the victims ("I can't say I really know him, but one's got to help a neighbor, hasn't one?" 1947¹, 1948. "All I maintain is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims, and it's up to us, so far as possible,

not to join forces with the pestilences. That may sound simple to the point of childishness; I can't judge if it's simple, but I know it's true." 1947¹, 1948)

In addition to the unagitated and clear depiction of the events and the philanthropic view of the very different characters, the reflections of the protagonists that come together in this novel are particularly captivating. In the midst of the catastrophe, friendships are forged between some of them, inviting them and the readers to reflect on personal happiness and sacrifice, worthy goals and the means to think about important and unimportant things. Here, what has already been incorporated into the composition and portrayal of the protagonists is revealed in an elaborate form, namely Camus' idea of the value of each individual: Basically, we find literary illustrations of his idea of *revolt* in numerous constellations, actions and conversations.

What is this revolt about? Camus's work is generally divided into three creative phases: the phase in which the *absurd* is at the center (especially in "The Myth of Sisyphus", "The Stranger", "Caligula") is followed by that of the *revolt* (especially in "The Rebel"), before in the third phase (especially, unfortunately unfinished, in "The First Man"), moderation and love come to the fore in his thinking. The plague can be assigned to the second phase: the novel is an illustration of what it can mean to act as an individual for and with one's fellow human beings in a committed way that satisfies an attitude of solidarity resulting from the recognition of a fundamental human commonality. The basic common ground is what human existence means to each individual and to all equally – namely to live as a human being in a world in which the search for meaning necessarily remain unanswered, and needs for justice and grace remain unfulfilled. We find ourselves as sentient and reflective beings in a world that simply ignores our desire for an order (which also creates meaning): "The absurd is born of this confrontation between the human need and the unreasonable silence of the world." (1942¹, 1955).

But the hope for and the need for justice - nevertheless! - not to get rid of it, not to give up, but to recognize and appreciate the value that lies in the fact that man can ask, hope and act accordingly, that is the revolt demanded by Camus. "The slave asserts himself for the sake of everyone in the world when he comes to the conclusion that a command has infringed on something inside him that does not belong to him alone, but which he has in common with other men – even with the man who insults and oppresses him. " (1951¹, 2013: 4). Remarkably, revolt, well understood, also implies the limits of its own execution and enforcement: Since it is basically and ultimately about honoring the human being on the basis of his core of freedom and possibility, acts of revolt can never be about sacrificing an individual – be he executioner, judge, victim or witness – and thus depriving him of his possibility to (re)make something good.

Thus, it is clear that Camus cannot be about condemning even a single person to death in the name of a great cause or for an abstract idea (which is by no means only done by court order, even in everyday life an action can amount to sentencing another person to death).

Hannah Arendt wrote that there is no such thing as the absolute good, but that absolute evil does exist, and that this is the case when someone believes he has found the absolute good. If revolt is based on preserving and respecting the core of each individual, it is also a rejection of the ruthless enforcement of an idea of good. Part of being good is also to appreciate the different goodness of others.

Not least in this sense, we can understand the many different characters who fight (and sometimes lose) the plague in this novel as examples of individual questioning and searching as well as individual finding, not in the sense of heroic, but in the Camusian sense of humane and dignified ways.

References:

Camus (1942¹, 1955): *The Myth Of Sisyphus*. In: *The Myth Of Sisyphus And Other Essays*. Translated from the French by Justin O' Brien. New York: Random House, 1955 [Original: *Le Mythe de Sisyphe*, Paris: Gallimard, 1942].

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