

The Colonial Politics of the Plague: Reading Camus in 2020

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Abstract

The global COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 has reignited interest in Albert Camus' 1947 classic *The Plague*, which charts the relentless course of an epidemic raging through a city in Colonial French Algeria, and contains uncanny resonances with our contemporary situation. Camus speaks of official attempts to initially downplay and then manage the virus; the psyche of the populace under quarantine, with its feelings of aimlessness; the attempts of some to profiteer from the disease; and the fatality statistics broadcast as daily figures. Camus coolly dissects the anguish of separation that millions today have experienced in self-isolation, as social bonds break down and the recourse is to nothing other than inwardness.

The novel is also of course read as an allegory, of human defiance and solidarity in the face of an insurmountable and unknown enemy. In most contemporary accounts, this is identified with the French Resistance to the Third Reich occupation during the Second World War, in which Camus fought.

2020 will also be remembered as the year when the legacies of the colonial past began to be reckoned with in an unprecedented way, as the 'Black Lives Matter' movement forced public bodies, companies and educational providers, among others, to grapple with the thorny topic of decolonisation. In that spirit, this paper provides an interpretation that revisits postcolonial critiques, which since the 1970s have challengingly situated Camus' literature and activism within his wider political commitments to *Algerie Francaise*. Through literary analysis of the novel, and Camus' earlier novella *The Outsider*, this paper serves to explain the erasure or vilification of the native majority within both works in the settlers' debilitating fear of revolt and upheaval, as the inexorable rise in political consciousness of the Algerian natives was to issue in their ultimately successful war for secession from the French Republic, a fatal denouement Camus did not live long enough to witness.

Keywords: Camus; Algeria; Post-colonialism; Colonialism; France; Algerian War; The Plague; The Outsider; Coronavirus.

French colonial rule in Algeria: a brief history

The French colonisation of Algeria began in 1830. Justified in the name of a 'civilising mission', the French rapidly took over and encouraged settlement of Europeans. By 1846, some 200,000 European settlers ('pied noirs') had arrived to reside in Algeria, the greater part of them French (Ahluwalia 2010: 26). The most fertile agricultural lands were earmarked for colonisation, and the settlers soon established an impressive array of European-style cities, farms and vineyards in their midst. Indigenous Algerians were relegated to the less productive areas, and cereal production diminished rapidly, leading to deepening hunger problems (Ahluwalia 2010: 28). Algerians were not accorded equal rights with Europeans (Ahluwalia 2010: 30), and skilled jobs were denied to the natives, leaving the Arabs in poorly paid professions such as servants or labourers. Unlike British imperial possessions such as India, *Algerie Francaise* was ruled as a constitutive part of France.

The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu observed that settler pied noir identity was based on two central elements: hostility to Arabs, who were seen as incarnates of "instinct and ignorance", but also mistrust of the metropolitan French, who were viewed as unsensual and mean (in Harrison 2003: 68)

From the outset, the native Algerians resisted the French occupation. However, it was not until the mid-20th century that the Arabs had formed a large-scale political and armed movement that was ready to launch persistent attacks on French Algerian targets. The main such organisation

was the National Liberation Front (FLN) which was formally established by in March 1954. A large-scale war broke out in November of the same year (Ahluwalia 2010: 35) with some 400,000 French soldiers deployed to the colony to defend the settler population which by this time numbered over one million. French military reprisals were brutal and exacted heavy casualties on the Arab and Berber population. By the late 1950s, however, the French authorities belatedly realised that military force had not been able to quell the rebellion and that decolonisation was inevitable. Against the wishes of the settlers, General De Gaulle began negotiations with the FLN. In March 1962, Peace Accords were signed which led to a ceasefire and a promise of an independence plebiscite in the colony. In the subsequent referendum Algerians voted overwhelmingly for independence from France. The 132 years of French rule was abruptly ended, and the pied noirs fled to France but not before having laid to waste most of the factories, homes and farms (Samers in Ahluwalia 2010: 36). Estimates of the total number of dead as a result of the war range from 500,000 to one million, with the overwhelming majority being Algerians (Ahluwalia 2010: 35).

Camus' background

Two important factors set Camus apart from other illustrious French intellectuals of the 20th Century: the extent to which he was conditioned by French rule in Algeria; and the fact that he grew up in poverty, brought up by his mother and extended family, his father having died before Camus reached his first birthday. Camus rose from

humble beginnings to attain a scholarship which enabled him to study philosophy at the University of Algiers. In 1938 Camus worked as a journalist and writer in Algeria, later moving to France and working as the editor of the French resistance newspaper *Combat*. It was in the 1940s that Camus established himself as a world-class novelist and writer. Even one of his sternest critics was to forcefully say in tribute to Camus: "Probably no European writer of his time has left so deep a mark on the imagination and at the same on the moral and political consciousness of his own generation, and of the next." (O'Brien 1970: 84)

The Plague

Not a single Arab character appears in Camus's tale of the deadly plague that ravages the poverty-stricken city of Oran, Algeria. The story begins with the main protagonist, Dr Bernard Rieux, discovering a dead rat in the landing outside his surgery. Attending to other matters, he initially ignores the discovery. That afternoon, he has a visit from a young journalist named Rambert from a major Paris newspaper, who has travelled to Oran to report on the living conditions and state of health of the Arab community. He wants an assessment on this from Rieux. Rieux informs Rambert that their health is not good, but before he discusses it further, Rieux wishes to establish from Rambert that he is able to tell the truth about the Arabs' situation in his report, an "unqualified indictment" if necessary (Camus 2013:11). Rambert replies that he is not able to publish an unqualified indictment. He asks Rieux if there are grounds for unqualified criticism of the

Arabs' situation. Rieux answers that there is no basis for a total condemnation of the state of health of the Arab community. However, because Rambert does not have the freedom to publish an unfettered account, Rieux politely declines to provide an assessment: "I can only countenance a report without reservations, so I shall not be giving you any information to contribute to yours." (Camus 2013: 12).

When his concierge dies from fever, Dr Rieux consults with his colleague, and both reach the conclusion that an epidemic of the plague has hit the city. They warn the City's Prefect. Rieux is initially rebuffed, and in a meeting some officials question whether the disease is in fact the plague, and whether drastic measures are necessary. In a debate that recalls the agonising discussions at government level around the world between politicians, scientists and public health officials about how to respond to the Coronavirus, Rieux replies:

When a microbe [...] is capable of increasing the size of the spleen four times in three days, and of making the mesenteric ganglia the size of an orange and the consistency of porridge, that is precisely when we should rush to do something. The sources of infection are multiplying. At this rate, if the disease is not halted, it could kill half the town within the next two months. Therefore it doesn't matter whether you call it plague or growing pains. All that matters is that you stop it killing half the town. (Camus 2013: 39)

Official guidance is provided to the public about measures to take to control the spread of the disease, but these are measured and do not emphasise the severity of the situation. However, the daily death toll continues to rise, and officials are forced into stricter policies, including

quarantine of infected homes. Rieux is incensed that the authorities are dithering in the face of the evidence. The pestilence continues unabated, and the death toll reaches 30 a day, finally forcing the Prefect to officially declare the presence of the plague and to lockdown the city, with all entries and exits prohibited. The lockdown is to last nearly a year.

In the ensuing chapters, Camus richly and vividly depicts the psychological strain on the residents under quarantine, who adopt various ways of dealing with the isolation:

Without memory and without hope, they settled into the present. In truth, everything became present for them. The truth must be told: the plague had taken away from all of them the power of love or even of friendship, for love demands some future, and for us there was only the here and now. (Camus 2013: 140).

Months after its onset, the fatalities begin to subside, but public morale is yet to recover:

Although this sudden decline in the disease was unexpected, the townspeople were in no hurry to celebrate. The preceding months, though they had increased the desire for liberation, had also taught them prudence and accustomed them to count less and less on a rapid end to the epidemic. (Camus 2013: 207)

Almost a year after it began, the plague is finally under control, and the decision is taken to reopen the city, reuniting loved ones. Camus has a character say by way of conclusion:

Everyone has a plague in him. The decent man, the one who doesn't infect anybody, is the one who concentrates most. All I say is that on this earth there are pestilences and there are victims – and as far as possible one must refuse to be on the side of the pestilence.” (Camus 2013: 195)

In his analysis of the novel, O'Brien casts his gaze on the meeting between Rieux and Rambert, prior to the plague being identified. That meeting serves as an early corroboration of Rieux's integrity, his uncompromising commitment to principles that he will articulate later in the story, since he will not reveal information to the journalist unless the latter is willing to publish the whole truth. Yet, after this, the Arabs, O'Brien observes, “absolutely cease to exist” in the story. (O'Brien 1970: 46) This is the case, despite their pre-plague health problems as a community being notorious enough for a journalist in a major French paper to come all the way from Paris to enquire about. Later in the story, Rieux and Rambert walk through an Arab part of the city, indifferent to the fate of its inhabitants:

They went down through the narrow streets in the African quarter. Evening was coming, but the town, which had once been so busy at that time of day, seemed oddly deserted [...] [A]long the steeply descending streets, between the blue, ochre and violet walls of the Moorish houses, Rambert spoke in a state of great agitation. He had left his wife behind in Paris. (Camus 2013: 65)

O'Brien's indictment that “Neither Rieux, the doctor, nor Rambert, the reporter, ever goes into

these houses. We hear nothing of the progress of the plague among them [the Arabs]" (O'Brien 1970: 47) inevitably invites comparison with the significant racialised health inequalities demonstrated in COVID-19 in the form of disproportionately higher mortality rates for ethnic minorities within the official figures in Britain, the US and other Western societies, which have been posited as being caused by structural racism and neglect. (Mathur et al.,2020)

Back in colonial Algeria, the anonymity of Arabs in the dominant narrative was for the psychiatrist Fanon a manifestation of the psychological degradation of the native:

If psychiatry is a medical technique which aspires to allow man to cease being alienated from his environment, I owe it to myself to assert that the Arab, who is permanently alienated in his own country, lives in a state of absolute depersonalisation. (Fanon 2001: 154)

If Algerians are conspicuous by their absence in plague-ridden Oran, Camus' most widely read² work, *The Outsider*, does find a central role for Arab characters, even though they are not accorded full personhood.

The Outsider

Regarded as "a paradigm of the philosophical novel" (Sharpe 1995) which confronts the central issues of the human condition, *The Outsider* is a story about a young pied noir clerk called Meursault who works in Algiers, and narrates the story. The novel begins with Meursault receiving a telegram in which he is informed of the death of his mother, whom he had some years before sent to live in an old people's home. The funeral has been arranged for the following day. At the funeral, Meursault shows no apparent emotion and dreams of being elsewhere. Back at home and with the weekend in full swing, Meursault goes swimming with a young lady, Marie, that he has a liking for. Later that day, they visit the cinema to watch a film that Marie wants to see, a comedy. They then go back to Meursault's flat where they sleep together.

On the next day, Meursault meets a neighbour by the name of Sintes. Sintes is a criminal and pimp, and he asks Meursault for some help with a girlfriend whom he claims has 'let him down' and he wants to take revenge against. Sintes asks Meursault to write a letter for him that he shall send to her that would be both insulting to her and encourage her to return to Sintes. On her return, Sintes plans to beat her badly and throw her out. Immediately recognising on hearing her name (although the reader is not informed of what the

² A 2006 poll of the most favourite books of novel-reading males in Britain placed *The Outsider* at the top of the list (Higgins 2006)

woman's name is) that she is a 'Moor', Meursault agrees to write the letter.

The following day, with Marie in his apartment, Meursault hears screams from Sintes' flat. They come out on to the landing to see Sintes beating the Arab woman. Marie is horrified and asks Meursault to call the police. Meursault agrees to be Sintes' witness. Later in the week, a worried Sintes calls Meursault and asks him for help: "I've been shadowed all the morning by some Arabs. One of them is the brother of that girl I had the row with. If you see him hanging round the house when you come back, pass me the word." (Camus 1961: 47) Meursault agrees. At the police station, Sintes is released with a warning after Meursault gives evidence about the woman having been false to him. The police do not check the veracity of Meursault's statement.

On leaving the police station, Sintes tells Meursault to look across the street: "I saw some Arabs lounging against the tobacconist's window. They were staring at us silently, in the special way these people have – as if we were blocks of stone or dead trees." (Camus 1961: 54) Sintes whispers that one of the Arabs is the brother of the woman he had beaten. Sintes, Marie and Meursault take the bus to the beach where they had arranged to stay with a friend. They are followed by the Arabs. A fight on the beach ensues, and the Arab attacks Sintes with a knife, drawing blood on the latter's arm and face. The Arabs then disappear, and Sintes hands Meursault his revolver and goes away for treatment, leaving Meursault alone on the beach in the intense midday sun. After walking some

way, with the sunshine blazing down on him, Meursault sees the Arab again with his knife drawn. He approaches the Arab and shoots him several times, but without apparent malice.

The second part of the novel describes the trial and sentence of Meursault for the murder of the Arab. In the courtroom, the prosecution depicts Meursault as a callous man citing such evidence as his refusal to see his Mother's body, his smoking of cigarettes at the funeral and his failure to cry there, and his sexual liaison and cinema-visit on the day after the funeral. Found guilty, he is sentenced to be guillotined. In the poignant closing scenes of the novel, Meursault refuses the persistent calls from the prison chaplain for religious consolation, violently rejecting his confident entreaties for a belief in God and the afterlife.

Conventional reception of the novel within the philosophical and literary tradition has often been to regard it as highlighting essential existential and moral themes. For instance, Connolly sees the novel as demonstrating an heroic affirmation of life and a defiance of death; a joyous Mediterranean celebration of sensuality and self-coming, even and especially, in the most trying circumstances of human adversity (Connolly 1961: 8) At the same time, the novel represents a revolt against the self-righteousness of bourgeois French morality that condemns a young man to death simply for failing to cry at his mother's funeral, Connolly states (Connolly 1961: 9). Making a contrast with British imperial juridical norms, Connolly reminds us that:

A few hundred miles farther south and 'a touch of the Sun' would have been readily recognised, no doubt, as a cause for acquittal, in the case of a white man accused of murdering a native, but part of the rigidity of the moribund French court is the pompous assumption that Algiers is France. (Connolly 1961: 9)

For Camus and his philosophical heirs, *The Outsider* is the manifestation of the philosophy of the 'Absurd', which is to say the unbridgeable gap between human aspirations and the structural indifference of the world. Meursault represents the archetypal absurd man in an absurd world: he bravely confronts an arbitrary and oppressive system with his own, equally absurd and obdurate insistence on refusing to lie, no matter what the consequences. He is a Nietzschean martyr for integrity whose unshakeable resolve and refusal of guilt, religious comfort and sentimentality shakes the values of his society in a way that only a social 'outsider' is able to. The travails of this everyman evidence a universal reality. As Camus puts it:

He refuses to disguise his feelings and immediately society feels threatened. He is asked, for example, to say that he regrets his crime according to the ritual formula. He replies that he feels about it more annoyance than real regret and this shade of meaning condemns him. [It is] the story of a man who [...] accepts death for the sake of truth." (in O'Brien 1970: 20)

This high-minded self-assessment has been undermined by postcolonial critics such as O'Brien and Said. These critiques of *The Outsider* are based on the idea that through the

novel Camus reveals – sometimes involuntarily – his own decidedly colonial view of Algeria, its Arabs and the Europeans settlers. O'Brien argues that far from being a martyr for the 'truth', Meursault shows himself to be happy to tell all manner of vicious falsehoods: "He concocts for Sintes the letter which is designed to deceive the Arab girl and expose her to humiliation, and later he lies to the police to get Sintes discharged, after beating the girl up." (O'Brien 1970: 21) The 'truths' for which Meursault is prepared to fight and die are therefore self-serving ones and ones that can only be understood, in O'Brien's account, as the justification of the colonial status quo.

A closer look suggests that Camus performed a slight of hand in which the facts of colonial oppression in Algeria were ignored and made to seem incidental to the story, when in fact that background and that history are key to what occurs. Meursault is made to seem an 'innocent' victim of a bureaucratic injustice which condemns him for refusing to express the necessary emotions at his mother's funeral when in actual fact he has remorselessly murdered a man. Camus skilfully portrays the trial and capital punishment of Meursault as being a far worse crime than the initial murder of the Arab – which is portrayed as an incidental fact. As O'Brien observes - and *contra* Connolly's uncritical acceptance above of Camus' depiction of the legal process - the story is profoundly unrealistic when it distorts the reality of how a pied noir who killed an Arab armed with a knife would actually have been treated by a racialised French judicial system:

In practice, French justice in Algeria would almost certainly not have condemned a European to death for shooting an Arab who had drawn a knife on him and who had shortly before stabbed another European. (O'Brien 1970: 22)

Several features of the plot help to construct the necessary fiction that Meursault is innocent. Perhaps the most obvious is the narrator's refusal to name any of the Arab characters. The Arabs appear as menacing background characters; not well-drawn, undifferentiated and distant. Indeed, the stereotypes that Camus lays bare are ones that Fanon was later to identify as being key components of the racial demonisation of the Algerian as congenital criminal. This 'official theory' stated:

The Algerian kills savagely: first, the favourite weapon is the knife [...] The Algerian kills for no reason: very frequently magistrates and policeman are taken aback by the motives for a murder. (Fanon 2001: 239)

No Arab witnesses are called to the trial. O'Brien argues that this neglect of the Arab populace reflects Camus' desire to depict Meursault's murder as seemingly inconsequential, and this is best achieved by ensuring that the victim is a non-European:

When the narrator shoots down this blank and alien being and fires 'four shots more into the inert body, on which they left no visible trace', the reader does not quite feel that Meursault has killed a man. He has killed an Arab." (O'Brien 1970: 25)

Thus, the placing of the story in an Algerian, colonial context is imperative, rather than (as many readers have it) simply coincidental. Rejecting some of the universalist, philosophising

pretensions of mainstream interpretations, O'Brien proceeds from a basis rooted in material existence, stressing the primacy of social setting and context in making sense of the particular perspective advanced in the text:

[Men] live and die in particular places and conditions, and their sense of life's meaning, or meaninglessness, derives from their experiences in these places and conditions, and only in these..." (O'Brien 1970: 26)

That is, the perspective championed by Camus is merely that: a particular viewpoint, rather than a lofty insight into the fundamentals of the 'human condition.' It can also be said to be the surfacing of the profound anxieties of both metropolitan French and pied noir society in the middle part of the 20th century.

Placed within his wider project of 'Orientalism' and cognisant of the historical moment of Camus' life, Said takes O'Brien's critique further. Describing Camus as a "very late imperial figure" from "whose work the facts of imperial actuality [...] have dropped away" (Said 1994: 208). Said claims that the text can be interpreted as ultimately giving justification to the French colonial venture. When, for example, Meursault recounts that his mother at the end of her life was "ready to live everything again" (Camus 1961: 120), Said understands this to be a latent manifestation of the "tragically unsentimental obduracy" of the pied noirs (Said 1994: 224). Philosophical accounts have seen this as Camus' commitment to self-mastery in accordance with

Nietzsche's doctrine of 'eternal reoccurrence'³, where one ought not to regret any of one's actions in life and indeed be prepared to live life again, in exactly the same way, infinitely. Said does not deny this interpretation and how it may positively influence readers seeking to overcome adversity, but sees a political statement writ large. Unabashed about the historical seizure of Algeria, even as they contemplate the possibility that their reign may be coming to an end, the pied noirs are essentially declaring: "We have done what we have done here, and so let us do it again." (Said 1994: 224)

Overview and Conclusion

In his political journalism, Camus was among the first pied noirs to bring to wider attention the wretched lives of Algerian Arabs and call for political and social reforms in Algeria. From 1939 until shortly before his death, Camus castigated the colonial authorities for oppressing the Algerians and denying them democratic rights. Following the French army's massacre of thousands of Algerians in Setif in 1945, Camus wrote denouncing the 'collective punishment' of the Arabs and compared French state terror to the actions of Nazi Germany (Carroll 2007: 52). For Camus, the solution to the Algerian problem was the assimilation of Arabs and Berbers into a

democratic and multicultural Algeria, still under the sovereignty of the French Republic, even if most Algerians wanted France out.

The Algerian conflict placed Camus on the horns of a traumatic dilemma that reached the very depths of his identity. Appalled at the atrocities of the French State, he nonetheless could not bring himself to endorse the pro-independence demands of the Algerians. His ultimate failure to rise above his tribe was demonstrated in the rigid colonial stereotypes of his most brilliant works, in the nonchalance of the murder of the Arab on the beach, and the absence of Arabs in the plague-ridden city. A large part of the reason for this was his enclosure within the politics of pied noir identity, a particularist attachment he was unable to relinquish even as he was hailed by the post-war liberal European intelligentsia as "illuminating the problem of the human conscience in our time." (in Cruickshank 1970:19).

Those on the left in France and the colonies saw Camus differently at this stage. Sartre and De Beauvoir were unable to reconcile their erstwhile friendship with him, and the legendary Arab-Jewish anti-colonial intellectual in the Maghreb, Albert Memmi (who died in 2020), lambasted Camus as the archetypal "good-willed coloniser", schizophrenically decrying colonialism's worst

³ Nietzsche's cosmological idea that everything is part of a perpetually repeating cycle of events. Nietzsche employs the concept as a personal test for an

individual to judge whether they have lived their life to the fullest.

excesses without challenging its basis (Shatz 2020). Refusing to accept the structural causes of oppression in Algeria that resulted inexorably from the colonial framework and tied to an identity and discourse that was increasingly being discredited by the theory and practice of decolonisation, Camus, who was a profoundly humane person, failed to see the continuity between his heroic struggle against fascism with the subjection and deprivation of the indigenous Algerians. In this, Camus can be seen as presaging contemporary worries among progressives of the perils of identity politics.

Camus was not alone in his ambivalent feelings. George Orwell, Camus' English contemporary, with whom he shared a championing of individual dignity against totalitarian systems, felt the full force of the dilemma too at first hand, as an imperial policeman in Colonial Burma in the 1920s. Orwell described thus the brutalising dissimulation at the heart of colonialism:

All I knew was that I was stuck between my hatred of the empire I served and my rage against the evil-spirited little beasts who tried to make my job impossible. With one part of my mind I thought of the British Raj as an unbreakable tyranny, as something clamped down [...] upon the will of prostrate peoples; with another part I thought that the greatest joy in the world would be to drive a bayonet into a Buddhist priest's guts. (Orwell 2003: 32)

Camus seldom fantasised about inflicting injuries on the Algerians – the murder on the beach being the notable exception - and even wrote to De Gaulle asking the commute the death sentences of captured FLN militants (Lottman 1970: 607). Unlike Orwell, however, Camus was unable to decisively break with his country's socio-political system of oppression in the colonies. The

tragedy of Camus was pithily summed up by Edward Said as that of "a moral man in an immoral situation" (Said 1994: 210). Besides other legacies, the unequal health outcomes of our own plague throw into sharp relief how we still live under the shadow of the vacillations of Camus and others of his era.

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