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THE BROWN PLAGUE AND THE WHITE SICKNESS: FASCISM AND THE CRISIS OF DEMOCRACY IN KAREL ČAPEK'S *THE WHITE SICKNESS* AND ALBERT CAMUS'S *THE PLAGUE*

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Abstract

This essay examines two crucial examples of twentieth-century plague writing through a psychoanalytic and political lens, arguing that psychic repression lies at the heart of both Karel Čapek's play *The White Sickness*, written on the eve of the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia, and Albert Camus's novel *The Plague*, published ten years later in 1947 but begun in 1942 during the German occupation of France. I shall argue that the nature of the calamity in both cases is political rather than biomedical: how could fascism triumph in an apparently stable democracy like interwar France or Czechoslovakia?

Keywords: Karel Čapek; Albert Camus; Plague; Fascism; Democracy

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> "I believe that the major reason why we are furious about war is that there is no way around it."
>
> - Sigmund Freud. 'Why War?' (1933)

Introduction

In this essay I shall examine two key examples of twentieth-century plague writing through a psychoanalytic and political lens, arguing that psychic repression lies at the heart of both Karel Čapek's play *Bílá nemoc* (*The White Sickness*, 1937), written on the eve of the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia, and Albert Camus's novel *La Peste* (*The Plague*), published ten years later in 1947, but begun in 1942 during the Nazi occupation of France. On the face of it, these two works – one a play written as the Czechoslovak state started to crumble under the threat of Nazi aggression in 1938 – the other a celebrated novel that addresses on an allegorical level the Nazi occupation of France in 1940 – seem very different. One has been hailed as an allegory of the Czech democratic resistance to Nazism while Camus's novel is frequently interpreted as an existentialist vision of the modern condition in an absurdist and meaningless world.

But I shall argue that both these traditional readings are to some extent evasive – perhaps even repressive – and that both the Czech play and the French novel reveal the crisis at the heart of interwar European politics; by which I mean not only the crisis of fascism but the inability or unwillingness of the western democracies to stand up to the threat of fascism. Needless to say, denial of the truth is hardly unique to the twentieth century, and plague has often functioned as a metaphor for this human inability to confront the truth. In his famous essay on plague writing from Sophocles to Dostoevsky, René Girard deploys the Freudian repressive hypothesis to show how since Sophocles' *Oedipus Rex* western writers have used the plague motif to explore societal crisis and the concomitant need to find a "scapegoat" to appease an angry god (Girard, 1974). In Sophocles' great play the eponymous King Oedipus is both the source of the plague and the means to its resolution: to this extent he is the scapegoat as well as the perpetrator. In his book *The Scapegoat* (1986) Girard takes this theme further: in his opening chapter he argues that the medieval French writer Guillaume de Machaut represses the French word for the Black Death (*pestilence*) that ravaged Europe in the fourteenth century because of the sheer terror evoked by the word itself. In the infamous prologue to his courtly poem *Le jugement dou roy de Navarre* (*The Judgement of the King of Navarre*), written in 1349 at the height of the Black Death, the narrator Machaut, confined to his house, blames the Jews for poisoning the wells and streams and advocates their wholesale slaughter. The result of such accusations was the

burning of the Jews in the cities of Europe. The Jews became the scapegoat for the Black Death just as Oedipus becomes the scapegoat for the plague that afflicts Thebes. What both texts share, however, is a mechanism of repression – the inability of humanity to accept the truth in the face of an existential threat to its survival.

In her seminal essay 'AIDS and its Metaphors' (2017), Susan Sontag discerns a similar pattern of *repression or denial* in the two twentieth-century plague texts that are the focus of this essay: "As in Čapek's play, characters in Camus's novel declare how unthinkable it is to have a plague in the twentieth century – as if the belief that such a calamity could not happen, could not happen anymore, means that it must" (182). The difference between the medieval and modern psychological response to pandemic is that medieval writers like Machaut repressed the word "pestilence" while a modern writer like Camus foregrounds it (even as the title of his famous novel). Whereas medieval writers present the scapegoat (Jews, lepers, heretics) in *metonymic* terms (usually as polluted lower body parts such as the vagina and the anus), modern writers deploy plague as a metaphor to explore societal crisis such as the failure of democracy in the twentieth century. What gets repressed in modern writing – of which Camus's novel is typical – is the *medieval association of plague with Jews and other denigrated minorities* (lepers, heretics). However, this repressed association re-emerges in a displaced metaphorical form: Jews become identified with the rats that pour out of the plague-stricken city of Oran.

Consistent with the treatment of plague as metaphor in Čapek's play and Camus's novel, I shall argue that the pandemic theme in both works articulates *political* rather than biomedical anxieties: how could fascism triumph in an apparently stable democracy like interwar France or Czechoslovakia? For sure, the political circumstances faced by these two authors may have differed, but in both cases, what is repressed is not the fascist threat or reality (which was obvious) but the writers' inability or reluctance to acknowledge the limitations of the liberal-democratic systems they represented. This denial is especially true of Čapek, who was a life-long advocate of peace, tolerance, and democracy, profoundly reluctant to face the violent anti-democratic impulses within human nature. As Freud discerns in his essay 'Why War?' (in fact a letter written to Albert Einstein in 1932): "There is no point in wishing to wipe away mankind's aggressive tendencies" (229). This is exactly what Čapek does, leading him to deny the "aggressive tendencies" that threatened the interwar Czechoslovak republic (1918–38), but also, as I shall provocatively suggest, the violent and revengeful instincts within himself.

Bohuslava Bradbrook has argued that Čapek's play is an allegory of the fascist threat to liberal democracy posed by Nazi Germany with the scientist Dr Galen symbolizing the beleaguered Czech nation exercising "passive re-

sistance" in the interest of peace (1998: 67). Čapek also believed that Galen stood for a small nation's right to defend itself. But this identification of Galen with Czech democracy creates more problems than it solves. For one thing, unlike Galen, who uses his panacea for the white sickness as a bargaining chip to advocate peace against the aggressive policies of the bellicose Marshal, the Czechs had no leverage against Nazi aggression. Moreover, Galen is killed at the end of the play by the murderous mob, thus undermining the playwright's democratic principles and reinforcing his darker (repressed) instinct that democracy is inherently unstable and that war and violence – not peace and pacifism – ultimately prevail. Similarly, Camus's novel – "as subtle as *The White Plague* is schematic," to quote Sontag – can be read less as a crisis of existentialism than a study in political failure at the heart of interwar French democracy itself. As we shall explore in the second half of the essay, what is repressed in *The Plague* is not only the fate of the Jews deported from Paris to Auschwitz in 1942, at the very time that Camus began work on his novel, but also the French collaboration with the Nazis that allowed this tragedy to happen.

"Czechoslovakia is not a contagious disease."

Czechoslovakia had been formed on the ruins of the Habsburg Monarchy after the end of World War I and had come into being thanks to the Treaty of Versailles of 1919. It was cobbled together from the ancient Crown Lands of Bohemia and Moravia, which had been under Austrian rule since the sixteenth century, and Slovakia, which had belonged to Hungary. Not only was this new state something of an artificial amalgam; it was also a source of ignorance in Britain even among the diplomatic circles that had helped to create it. For Jan Masaryk, the founding president's son and Czech foreign minister in London, the British ignorance of Czechoslovakia was something of a joke: "I spend most of my official time in there explaining to the gentleman inside that Czechoslovakia is a country and not a contagious disease," he told his friend Robert Bruce Lockhart as they were passing 10 Downing Street (quoted in Lockhart, 1951: 221).

The interwar democratic state of Czechoslovakia was founded in 1918 by Thomas Garrigue Masaryk who became its first president. Masaryk was a philosopher and academic turned politician, whose creed of *humanita* (loosely translated as "democratic humanism") was developed in his book *Ideály humanitní* (*Ideals of Humanism*, 1901) and formed the ideological basis of the new Czechoslovak state. Masaryk rejected outright revolution for the creed of *drobná práce* ("small-scale work"). This creed became the ideological cornerstone of the democratic state established by Masaryk that lasted from 1918

until 1939 when the Nazis invaded and dismantled Czechoslovakia, turning Bohemia and Moravia into a protectorate and Slovakia into a puppet state.

Masaryk's system was predicated on an aggregate of other philosophical systems (Marxism, Nietzscheanism, Schopenhauerism). Eclectic in spirit, Masarykian democracy – and by implication Čapek's own political philosophy – is ultimately defined in terms of *other* political and philosophical systems. At its heart is a metaphysical void. In fact, we might speak of a correlation between the epidemiological and epistemological crises in the play: the lack of metaphysical truth in the Masarykian system is inseparable from the mysterious yet deadly "white sickness" itself.

Čapek's early play *R.U.R.* (*Rossum's Universal Robots*, 1921) was an exercise in philosophical relativism – the idea that truth is merely the aggregate of different perspectives personified by various characters in the play. The only character to survive the annihilation of humanity by the ruthless robots is the character Alquist, whose gradualist philosophy of *drobná práce* was meant to reflect Čapek's own investment in Masarykian humanism. *R.U.R.* thus exemplifies the weakness inherent in the democratic relativism of Masaryk's creed, since all the characters are given an equally valid voice in their interpretation of and response to the threat posed by the machines. Paradoxically, although the play appears to be even-handed in allowing different and equally valid perspectives, it ends up reinforcing Masaryk's (and Čapek's) creed, as its spokesman Alquist is the only human (rather inexplicably) to survive the robot revolution. In other words, the putative relativism of the play is undercut and contradicted by its univocal investment in Masaryk's notion of "small-scale progress." As the spokesman of Masarykian liberal democracy, Alquist presides over the equally implausible humanization of the robots at the end of the play. The weakness of the play consists in its *a priori* ending, since there is nothing logical or inevitable about the triumph either of humanity at the end of the play, nor the Masarykian philosophy that underpins the transformation from machine back to human.

The White Sickness

By the late 1930s the Masarykian model of democracy which Čapek championed found itself caught between two increasingly polarized political positions. On the far right were the German-speaking supporters of Hitler, who were clamoring for the integration of the Sudetenland into the Reich. At the other extreme, the Czech left was closely affiliated with the Communist Party of the Soviet Union; and most of Czech writers of the interwar period were Communists in name if not in spirit.

Czech proletarian poets of the time like Jiří Wolker (1900–1924) equated Soviet communism with youthful virility, in contrast to bourgeois democracy, which was presented as an old, weak woman:

> The sun is a wild revolutionary, it demolishes the day and reconstructs it overnight;
>
> We prefer ruddy maidens to grasping old widows;
>
> We will tell each other stories about great Russia and brave Lenin,
>
> Our thoughts are as green and high as trees in a forest. (Wolker, 1951: 49)[1]

Wolker himself was a product of a middle-class family, and his poetry is permeated with imagery of male impotence and sterility; in 'The Ballad of the Unborn Child' these are projected onto the narrator's female lover, who is forced to undergo an abortion. He reifies male impotence as a wounded female body:

> I am no longer brave and shall weep
>
> That from all the riches
>
> Have remained only a bottle of eumenol,
>
> That I am only a wound
>
> Embraced by the dead hands of a child. (1951: 108)

Wolker succumbed to tuberculosis at the age of twenty-four – a poignant backdrop to his assertions of youthfulness and masculine strength. *The White Sickness* is similarly permeated with images of masculine weakness and illness, reflecting Čapek's own sickliness as well as that of the doomed democratic system he advocated. (Intriguingly, he died at the young age of forty-seven, just a few weeks before the Nazi invasion of Czechoslovakia). Given the playwright's ill health and middle-age, it is significant that those who succumb to the deadly "white sickness" in the play are all aged forty-five or over. Important here is the name given to the mysterious plague – *Bílá nemoc*. The title of the play is usually translated as *The White Plague*, but the literal meaning of the title is *The White Sickness*, thus placing the emphasis on illness rather than plague. Grammatically feminine in Czech, the word *nemoc* also implies a female threat to masculinity. Of great relevance to this is the fact that Čapek was sexually impotent; indeed, anxiety with male sexual inadequacy pervades the earlier *R.U.R.*, which ends with the "cutting" of the robots. Ostensibly a surgical experiment to uncover the lost secret of the robots' manufacture, this

scene in fact suggests the male fear of castration. Wolker's poem 'The Ballad of the Stoker's Eyes' similarly encodes a fear of male castration projected onto the eponymous stoker in the poem, whose blindness articulates the bourgeois poet's own fear of sexual impotence:

> At that moment Antony, the calloused stoker,
>
> Recognized the twenty-five years at the furnace and shovel,
>
> In which a flaming knife was cutting his eyes,
>
> And having recognized that it suffices a man to die like a man,
>
> Began to shout across the entire night and the entire world:
>
> "Comrades, electrical workers,
>
> I am blind—I cannot see." (1951: 144)

The psychosexual anxiety at the heart of *The White Sickness* can be similarly understood in terms of authorial projection. Peter Bugge has argued that the modifier "white" denotes tuberculosis, a fatal disease from which the sickly Čapek himself suffered. In *The White Sickness* illness is personified by middle-aged men – most prominently the ailing Marshal who succumbs to the disease, requiring his daughter to take control by mediating between her father and the scientist Galen.

If *R.U.R.* implicitly equates the weakness of democracy with middle-aged men, the threat to its survival is personified by the feminist Helena Glory, who comes to the island of robot production to advocate for the rights of the oppressed and exploited robots. Helena's sexual ascendancy over the male characters coincides with the rise of the robots and their eventual triumph: female sexuality is thus equated with the power of the machines in a way that recalls the castrating robot Maria and the revolt of the workers in Fritz Lang's movie *Metropolis* (1926). As in *Metropolis*, where the powerful vamp-machine Maria has to be annihilated for male order and control to be restored, Helena becomes infertile and fades away so that humanity can be reinstated and the robot threat neutralized. Both endings are thus fantasies of male power restored.

In *The White Sickness* women also assume a powerful role, although, unlike in *R.U.R.*, the influence is beneficial rather than destructive: the daughter of the ailing (and aging) Marshalattempts to resolve the crisis of the stand-off between the Marshal and Galen by agreeing to call off the war, so that her father can be cured by the panacea. Curiously, Hugo Haas's film version of the play, released in 1937, depicts the dying Marshal as a young man in his prime, thus

contradicting the play's premise that only middle-aged men of forty-five and over succumb to the plague. Conversely, Galen, a young idealist in the play, is portrayed as an embittered middle-aged man in the film, with Haas himself playing this role. On an unconscious level at least, Haas was responding to the play's counter-intuitive insight that it was the western democracies rather than fascism that seemed doomed to extinction. The triumph of the mob at the end of the play reinforces the insight that fascism was in the ascendancy and democracy in decline. This bleak conclusion is repressed in the film's alternative ending, with the dying Marshal agreeing to peace even though the cure to the white sickness had been destroyed along with its inventor. Significantly the play also fails to present us with a viable spokesman for democracy – only for the polarized extremes of fascism and communism. We might conclude that democracy corresponds to the "white sickness" – the epistemological void or "thing" at the heart of Masaryk's *humanita*.

Unlike the relativist optimism and happy ending of *R.U.R.*, Čapek's later fictional and dramatic work takes on a distinctly dark and dystopian form, reflecting not only Hitler's coming to power in Germany in 1933 and the escalation of geopolitical tensions in central Europe, but also the failure of Masarykian democracy to withstand the forces of communism and fascism. Both *The White Sickness* (1937) and *Válka s mloky* (*The War with the Newts*, 1934:, an allegorical science-fiction novel about fascism taking over the world) were written during this critical period leading up to the German annexation of Austria (*Anschluss*) and the Munich Crisis of 1938, when the western allies France and Britain capitulated to Hitler's demands for the absorption of the Sudetenland (the border region of Czechoslovakia consisting mainly of ethnic Germans) into the German Reich. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain flew to Munich to negotiate with Hitler and returned to London, announcing "peace for our time." But this act of appeasement only made things worse; and a year later, on March 15, 1939, Hitler's armies occupied the whole of Czechoslovakia, paving the way for the invasion of Poland and the outbreak of World War II.

Ignoring the playwright's interpretation of the play as a political struggle against Nazism, Susan Sontag argues that "Čapek is not interested in identifying political evil with the incursion of the foreign: rather, he scores his didactic points by focusing not on the disease itself but on the management of information about it by scientists, journalists, and scientists." (2017: 181) As in today's America, where COVID-19 has been equated both with right-wing racism *and* left-wing political correctness, the naming of the pandemic becomes a site of discursive conflict between polarized political opponents: in the play the most famous specialist in the disease, which originated (like COVID-19) in China, reprimands a fellow scientist for using the popular terms

"the white sickness" and "Peking leprosy" instead of the scientific name "the Cheng syndrome." This is precisely what has characterized objections to the description of COVID-19 as the "Chinese virus" by former President Trump and his supporters, while the Republicans have accused the left of refusing to call a spade a spade by denying the origin of the pandemic in Wuhan Province. Sontag's argument reinforces my claim that what the play actually shows are divisions within democracy itself. When the eminent scientist chides a journalist for using the glib phrase "the disease of the hour," he is engaging not in a debate about the disease and its biomedical causes but about how it is named and defined for popular consumption. The irony is that such a series of debates about the naming of the disease could only take place in a liberal democracy. In a truly authoritarian or fascist state such debates would be foreclosed by the authorities. Certainly, after Hitler consolidated his power after 1933, no such pluralistic discussions were possible in Germany, let alone the existence of a free press.

The Marshal falls ill from the plague; only when he promises to abandon his war plans does Galen agree to administer him the cure. But the play ends tragically as Galen, who is approaching the Marshal's residence with his cure, shouts "peace" in opposition to the mob's clamor for war. He is set upon by the furious crowd and killed, and his ampoule containing the panacea is smashed to pieces. The play thus concludes with the triumph of the mob and the inevitable outbreak of war. The power of this play resides in the stark logic of its ending and the insight that both political extremes – one represented by the authoritarian Marshal, the other by the socialist Galen – merely reinforce each other. Neither the right nor the left wins in the end, but the inchoate mob. Here the mob is associated with chaos since they smash the ampoule which contains the cure to the plague and kill its inventor. Chaos and social disintegration have often been associated with democracy, in contrast to the order and stability provided by fascism and totalitarianism. Hitler, for example, attacked the western democracies as inherently weak and decadent; for him, as J. P. Stern points out, their leaders stood in abject contrast to the *Willensmenschen* ("men of will") he so much admired: Frederick the Great, Mussolini, Stalin, and Lloyd George (1992: 57). The fascist linkage between democracy and chaos is curiously replicated in the mob scene at the end of Čapek's play. If Galen was intended by the playwright to represent pacifism and the cause of peace, his murder by the mob at the end of the play serves to demonstrate the inevitability of war and conflict.

Camus's *The Plague*

Around the same time that Karel Čapek was writing his allegorical play about the triumph of fascism in central Europe, the young French writer Albert Camus paid a visit to the Czech capital of Prague. Camus arrived in 1936. Camus relates his depressing experience in this doomed city in his autobiographical essay 'La mort dans l'âme' ('Death in the Soul') from his earliest collection of stories *L'Envers et l'endroit* (*The Wrong Side and the Right Side*, 1937). Camus contrasts his lonely stay in Prague with his happy memories of Algiers and the light and *joie de vivre* of the Mediterranean. The atmosphere of Prague as a death-like place in some ways anticipates the evocation of Amsterdam as Dante's *Inferno* in his last novel *La Chute* (*The Fall*, 1957). Both cities are gloomy and dark in marked contrast to the luminosity of Camus's native Algeria, whose hedonism he celebrates in his first novel *L'Étranger* (*The Outsider*, 1942).

As Conor Cruise O'Brien has astutely argued, the dream-like Amsterdam of Camus's *The Fall* is in many ways Algeria in a northern guise: the protagonist of *The Fall*, Jean-Baptiste Clamence, in self-imposed exile from Paris, is a disillusioned and divided character, reminiscent of the author himself, increasingly torn between his love of universal justice and his ultimately tribal identification with his French Algerian compatriots. Just as the setting of Amsterdam in *The Fall* can be viewed as an unconscious stand-in for Algeria, so the setting of Camus's earlier novel *The Plague* – the colonial town of Oran in Algeria – can be understood as an unconscious depiction of Paris during the Nazi occupation. To be sure, Camus claimed that his novel *was* an allegory of the Nazi occupation, but this too can be understood in terms of Freudian repression: what is being repressed in the novel is not so much the Nazi occupation itself, as the collaborative role of the French in aiding and abetting the Germans in deporting the Jews from Paris to Auschwitz. Of course, there are undoubtedly autobiographical traces in the character of Bernard Rieux, the doctor who devotes himself tirelessly to treating the victims of the plague, which probably reflects Camus's own decision to join the French Resistance in 1942. Like the central character, Camus was separated from his wife, who had returned to Oran from France. Like Čapek, Camus suffered from tuberculosis, and, as his biographer Edward Hughes points out, he had a relapse in 1942 at the very time he began to work on *The Plague* (2015: 78). It is intriguing that in the novel it is Rieux's wife who suffers from tuberculosis, this illness providing the pretext for her departure from Oran before the city is placed under quarantine. Not only are the real-life settings reversed, so too is who of the couple has tuberculosis. In Camus's making the husband healthy and the wife sick we can again detect a measure of repression and displacement. If Rieux

is to be the omnipotent (and omniscient) hero of the novel, he must be spared ill health. Camus's own recurrent ill health is probably a psychological factor in this transference of tuberculosis onto Rieux's wife.

Rieux mediates between ideological extremes personified by other characters like the priest Paneloux and Cottard. In stark contrast to Rieux – who resists and fights the plague – the initially suicidal Cottard perversely welcomes its arrival and takes to reading right-wing newspapers. Just as Rieux has been viewed as a veiled allegory for the French Resistance, so can Cottard be viewed as a symbol of Vichy collaboration. The priest Paneloux, who ultimately succumbs to the plague, provides another ideological contrast to the stoic Rieux. In many ways, Paneloux embodies the traditional religious view of the plague as God's punishment for human sin. His fiery sermons are characteristic of the medieval vision of the Black Death as the scourge of God. But what exactly is God punishing? Is sin here to be understood as the weakness of French democracy in the face of the Nazi threat? The novel does not say so explicitly, but a Freudian reading seems to bear out the insight that the repressed sin here is the failure of democracy itself. This collaborative aspect of the Occupation – in particular the fate of the Jews deported from Paris to Auschwitz – is repressed in the novel only to emerge in metaphoric details such as the "deratization vans"[2] that disturb the apparent normality and tranquility of everyday life in the town of Oran. On one level, as O'Brien argues, the airbrushing of the Arabs from Oran fits the city's allegorical function as a stand-in for colonial France. But taken to its logical conclusion, the mechanism of displacement from France onto Algeria implies a repression of the French role in deporting Jews from occupied France. It is striking that in his *Notebooks* (*Cahiers*) from the years 1941 to 1942, where he jotted down ideas for his novel and even includes passages later to be reproduced in it, Camus mentions the Jews only once in relation to the Black Death: "1342 – The Black Death in Europe. The Jews are murdered." (2010: 201) Intriguing here is Camus's misdating of the Black Death, which broke out in 1348 not in 1342. Was Camus unconsciously evoking the fate of the Jews in Paris in 1942, six hundred years after the Black Death? Was this simply a slip of the pen or is it a more revealing Freudian slip? Either way, Camus seems to be conflating the first transportation of the Jews to Auschwitz in 1942 with the fate of the Jews murdered during the Black Death.

This conflation is reflected in the scene of the infected rats in the early pages of the novel. The citizens of Oran become increasingly nervous about the sheer number of dying rats issuing from factories and warehouses rather in the way that the French looked with alarm at the rounding up of Jews in the summer of June 1942, not out of altruistic concern for the Jews but out of fear for their own future security:

> It was about this time that our fellow citizens began to be anxious. For, from April 18 onwards, factories and warehouses disgorged hundreds of rat corpses. In some cases, they were obliged to kill the animals to put an end to their long agony. (1972: 24)

The sign announcing the official decision to exterminate the rats with poison gas may also be a repressed allusion to the fate of the Jews during the Holocaust.[3] The additional reference to the supervision ("surveillance") of the water supply does not make strict biomedical sense since no one could be infected with bubonic plague by drinking tainted water. But it does make sense in terms of the repressed medieval belief that Jews poisoned the wells and streams. Invariably the perpetrators of violence against Jews saw themselves as victims of Jewish violence. The Nazis are the most obvious exemplars of this victim-psychology, since they frequently used pandemic imagery to articulate their fear of Jews taking over. Friedrich Katzmann, the Nazi police chief of Galicia, writes in a report dated June 30, 1943:

> Despite the extreme stress, which every single SS and police member had to contend with during these actions, the mood and morale of the men from the first to the last day was exceptionally good and praiseworthy. It was only by a personal sense of duty that every officer and man was able to *overcome this pestilence* in the shortest space of time. (quoted in Klee et al., 1988: 106)

What Camus seems to acknowledge on an unconscious level, the Nazis brought back to the surface of consciousness and articulated *ad nauseam*. The medieval view of Jews as the source of plague and poisoners of wells resurfaces in Nazi writing. SS-Untersturmführer Max Täubner justified his platoon's shooting of 459 Jews in Alexandriya (Ukraine) in 1942 because "the rumour also reached his ears that the Jews intended to poison the streams". (Klee et al., 1988: 97) In order to encourage ever greater cruelty to the inmates of Auschwitz, the Nazi commandant of the infamous death camp, Rudolf Höss, informed his SS subordinates that the Jews had sabotaged the war effort by blowing up bridges and poisoning the wells. Fear of contagion from Jews was also common among those staffing the death camps in the east. According to the Holocaust historian Nicholas Wachsmann, one paranoid member of the SS, Bernhard Kristan, used his elbow rather than his hand to open the door handle to the office of Jewish clerks in the Auschwitz political office. (2015: 370) Jews were even compared with the buboes that broke out on the skin of victims afflicted by the Black Death. Theodor Malzmüller, an SS-man who worked at the Chelmno (Kulmhof) extermination camp in Poland, quoted the

commandant as saying that "in this camp the plague boils of humanity, the Jews, are exterminated" (quoted in Klee et al., 1988: 217). Hitler set the stage for the metaphor of Jew-as-plague in *Mein Kampf*: "[The Jew] is a pestilence, a moral pestilence, with which the public was infected –… worse than the Black Death." (quoted in Contino, 2014: 127) He reiterated the same metaphor in conversation with a visitor to the Landsberg Prison where he had written his memoirs. When the visitor asked if Hitler's attitude to Jews had changed, Hitler replied: "Yes, indeed… I've realized that I was far too mild! In the course of working on my book, I've come to see that in future we will have to employ the most severe means if we are to triumph. I'm convinced that this is a question of survival, not just for our people, but for all peoples. The Jew is a global plague." (quoted in Ullrich, 2015: 178).

The French collaboration with the Nazis in deporting and persecuting the Jews is evident in submerged imagery in the novel such as the loud machine-gun-like sound of the exhaust of the "deratization vans",[4] which evoke the infamous "gas vans" used to exterminate Jews, Soviet POWs, and other minority groups before the implementation of permanent gas chambers at Auschwitz, Treblinka, Majdanek, and other death camps. The French authorities were instrumental in rounding up Jews for mass transport to the death camps, even though they did not actually kill them. Initially the Vichy government would only hand over the thousands of Jewish immigrants who had fled the Third Reich and were not actually French citizens. René Bosquet, the Chief of Police in Vichy France, willingly orchestrated the round-up of thousands of these Jewish immigrants in 1942. Philip Morgan has shown that under his command, 4,500 French policemen were deployed for the raids of 16–17 July 1942, and they arrested nearly 13,000 men and women, short of the 22,000 target. (2018: 276–77) Initially, it was the non-French Jewish refugees fleeing persecution in Nazi Germany and elsewhere who were rounded up. The early scene of the dying rats emerging onto the streets is redolent of these round-ups:

> On the fourth day the rats began to come out and die in batches. From basements, cellars, and sewers they emerged in long wavering lines into the light of day, swayed helplessly, then turned on themselves and died next to the humans. (2018: 24)

The phrase "in long lines" ("en longues files") evokes the long lines of arrested Jews waiting to enter the winter stadium in June 1942.

Fritz Hippler's notorious anti-semitic propaganda film *The Eternal Jew* (1940) had been released in Germany just two years before Camus started work on his novel. By the time Camus came to write *The Plague*, the association of Jews with rats was well established in the collective unconscious.

Certainly, a purely literal reading of the plague does not make sense: life in Oran goes on in a way that would not be possible in a city under strict quarantine. The fact that the citizens of the town go about their regular lives, such as taking trams, going to cafés, and attending the theatre, makes Oran more a metaphor for occupied France than a city stricken by pandemic.

In an important essay on the novel, Conor Cruise O'Brien has argued that, notwithstanding its powerful and realistic depiction of a city under quarantine, the setting of the Algerian city of Oran is far from convincing. As O'Brien points out, the Arab inhabitants of the city do not feature in the novel at all; and the areas where they live are depicted as eerily empty, even though the journalist Rambert had arrived from mainland France to explore their plight (1970: 52). Moreover, as O'Brien states, only the French characters in the novel are given names and distinct identities – Rieux, Tarrou, Grand, Rambert, Cottard, and the priest Paneloux. O'Brien also highlights the fact that the airbrushing of the Arabs from the setting of the novel not only looks back to the nameless status of the murdered Arab in *L'Étranger*, but also reflects the contemporary situation in mainland France. As O'Brien explores with excruciating logic, the French characters in the novel are not just fighting the plague; as colonial occupiers of Algeria they *are* the plague:

> The difficulty derives I believe from the whole nature of Camus's relation to the German occupiers on the one hand and to the Arabs of Algeria on the other. It comes natural to him, from his early background and education, to think of Oran as a French town and of its relation to the plague as that of a French town to the Occupation. But just below the surface of his consciousness, as with all other Europeans in Africa, there must have lurked the possibility of another way of looking at things – an extremely distasteful one. There were Arabs for whom "French Algeria" was a fiction quite as repugnant as the fiction of Hitler's new European order was for Camus and his friends. For such Arabs, the French were in Algeria in virtue of the same right by which the Germans were in France: the right of conquest. (1970: 54–55)

If the Arabs are airbrushed from the novel, as O'Brien argues, the same may be said for the Jews: Camus simply does not refer to them at all, even though the novel is supposed to be an allegory of the *peste brune* ("the brown plague" or Nazi occupation). But as James S. Williams has pointed out, there are several *submerged* allusions to the fate of the rounded-up French Jews in the description of the football stadium converted into a quarantine camp: this recalls Le Vélodrome d'Hiver (Winter Sports Stadium) in Paris, where 13,152 Jews were interned on July 16–17 (2000: 20). 5,802 (44 percent) of those ar-

rested were women and 4,051 (31 percent) were children. Conditions were harsh: the Jews could take only one blanket, a sweater, a pair of shoes, and two shirts with them. The Jews were detained in the stadium in terrible conditions (there were no lavatories) for five days after which they were sent to Drancy, a holding camp in the northern suburbs of Paris, and thence to Auschwitz where they were murdered. The "Vél d'Hiv Roundup," as it was called, accounted for more than a quarter of the 42,000 Jews sent from France to Auschwitz in 1942, of whom only 811 returned to France at the end of the war.

The stadium on the outskirts of the city can equally be read as a repressed reference to Drancy, the holding camp in the suburbs of Paris used to house the arrested Jews before they were deported to their deaths in Auschwitz. The scene where Tarrou and Rambert choose to visit the stadium (in part four) complicates the ethos of solidarity that is supposed to unite the plague-beleaguered citizens of Oran. On the contrary, Tarrou's report about the stadium merely underscores the difference between the inmates and everyone else, reflecting the Jews' new-found status as arrested inmates of Drancy and non-persons:

> The stadium lies on the outskirts of the town, between streets along which runs a car line and a stretch of waste land extending to the extreme edge of the plateau on which Oran is built. It was already surrounded by high concrete walls *and all that was needed to make escape practically impossible was to post sentries at the four entrance gates* (my italics). (1972: 237–38)

Although the narrator appears to express sympathy for the inmates, phrases like "and all that was needed to make escape practically impossible was to post sentries at the four entrance gates" imply the perspective of the authorities rather than an impartial observer, reflecting the fact that the Jews confined in the "Vél d'Hiv" and Drancy were guarded by French gendarmes and that the mass round-up had only been possible with the complicity of the French authorities.

Dating is crucial here. Camus began writing *The Plague* in the French Alps in 1942 and the novel was published in 1947. The novel's post-war publication ostensibly freed Camus from the restrictions imposed by wartime Nazi censorship but, given the self-mythologizing of France as a nation of resistance and defiance in the immediate post-war years, Camus continues to repress the moral predicament raised by French collusion with the Nazis in the deportation of the French Jews. Camus's own attested chronology is revealing in this regard: he claimed that he was motivated to join the French Resistance by the Germans' execution of Gabriel Péri on December 19, 1941. As he explained in an interview conducted after the war: "It seemed to me, and it still seems to me, that you cannot be on the side of concentration camps. I understood then

that I hated violence less than I hated the institutions of violence." (quoted in Cruise O'Brien, 1970: 34) What is revealing about these comments is that Camus does not mention the Jews directly. Rather they are identified through the spaces they occupy (the concentration camps).

Another example of the elision of Jews in the novel is the fact that Camus's narrative does not feature any scenes of scapegoating, invariably an epiphenomenon of plague. Of course, one can read the killing of the rats as a form of scapegoating. If so the metaphorical linkage of the rats with the deported Jews of Paris merely reinforces the fact that the Jews are unconsciously functioning as the unnamed scapegoats in the novel.

La Chute: French Guilt in the Post-War Era

Like the Arabs of Camus's fictional Oran, the Jews of Camus's novel (as well as in his later interview about it) are significant by their absence. While the theme of plague is made explicit – even featuring as the title of the novel – the fate of the Jews is elided. The same mechanism of repression and displacement is apparent in *The Fall*, published in 1957, ten years after *The Plague*. As Cruise O'Brien points out, *The Fall* is the only one of Camus's novels which is not set in Algeria, yet it is "the one in which Algeria is most painfully present" (1970: 101). Cruise O'Brien sees the novel's setting and its purgatorial metaphor as a reflection of Camus's own ambiguous and increasingly liminal attitude to the struggle in his native Algeria: "Torn between justice and his mother, Camus was drawn into a long hesitation which seemed to many like neutrality" (1970: 101).

It seems to me that an even deeper political subtext to Camus's Amsterdam, with its concentric circles reminiscent of Dante's hell, is Nazi-occupied France: cold-war Amsterdam can also be seen as a veiled wartime Paris. It is only in this later novel that Camus addresses the deportation and extermination of European Jewry, but significantly, even here – more than ten years after the end of the war – he does not address the fate of the French Jews directly, but the *Dutch* Jews, a further example of displacement. Intriguingly, the number of deported Dutch Jews cited by the narrator Jean-Baptiste Clamence in his monologue (75,000) was the same number as the deported French Jews, suggesting that the Dutch Jews are a repressed stand-in for the murdered French Jews. Clamence is talking to an anonymous compatriot – in effect his own alter ego – in a bar in what had been the Jewish quarter of Amsterdam:

> I live in the Jewish quarter or what was called so until our Hitlerian brethren made room. What a cleanup! Seventy-five thousand Jews deported or assas-

> sinated; that's real vacuum cleaning. I admire that diligence, that methodical patience! (1984: 11)

The sardonic reference to "our Hitlerian brethren" ("nos frères hitlériens") is a tacit acknowledgment not only of the Nazi extermination of the Jews but, more significantly, of the collaboration of the Dutch (and the French) with the Nazi occupiers. Yet the fact that the French are not mentioned suggests a tension in the narration between concealment and disclosure, repression and avowal of French collusion in the Holocaust.

Camus was back in Paris in 1943 as the transportation of the French Jews from the holding camp Drancy to Auschwitz was continuing (the last train left in July 1944).[5] Like other civilians living in Paris, the writer would surely have known what was happening not far from the center. Many French men and women would have been passive bystanders in the face of the deportation of the Jews. This urge to look the other way forms the central scene in the entire novel, the moment at which Clamence began to see the moral emptiness behind his virtuous façade of social justice. Walking along the bank of the Seine one evening, Clamence sees a young woman leaning over a parapet. A few moments later the woman throws herself into the river, but Clamence simply pauses and then walks away:

> I had already gone some fifty yards when I heard the sound – which, despite the distance, seemed dreadfully loud in the midnight silence – of a body striking the water. I stopped short, but without turning around. Almost at once I heard a cry, repeated several times, which was going downstream; then it suddenly ceased. The silence that followed, as the night suddenly stood still, seemed interminable. I wanted to run yet didn't stir. (1984: 70)

The obvious objection might be that the Jews – unlike the young woman – did not commit suicide but were murdered on an industrial scale. So much is true, but it is worth recalling here what another existentialist philosopher, Martin Heidegger, reveals in his *Black Notebooks*, written during World War II as the Jews were being exterminated. Donatella di Cesare shows that Heidegger saw the Jews as the agents of modernity that had disfigured the spirit of the West and presents the Holocaust both as the means for the purification of Being and of the Jews' own "self-destruction" – a process of death on an industrialized scale that was the logical conclusion of the acceleration in technology that they themselves had brought about (Di Cesare, 2018). In Camus's novel *The Fall* this position is both repressed and avowed in the figure of the young woman jumping to her death while Clamence walks away. This scene on the bank of the Seine is not really about how the young woman died, but,

rather, Clamence's failure to intervene and try to save her. This was precisely the moral failure of Parisians in 1942, including Camus himself: the role of the bystander as opposed to the perpetrator. A confessional narrative that purports to confront the truth of human evil ends up repressing and displacing France's own culpability and collusion in the deportation and murder of the Jews from metropolitan France during the Vichy collaboration. Clamence's statement – "I have no more friends; I have nothing but accomplices" – is a tacit acknowledgment that the French were in effect *accomplices* in the crime of the Holocaust.

As in *The Plague*, Camus represses the moral predicament of French collaboration with Nazism by displacing it onto a foreign setting (Amsterdam). Clamence's callous analogy of the deportation of the Dutch Jews with "vacuum cleaning" ("le nettoyage") can be viewed as Camus's unconsciously guilty response to the fate of the French Jews. If, as O'Brien argues, Camus's hallucinatory portrait of Algeria expresses a colonialist wish to eliminate the Arab population from the country, the same might be said of the French Jews. O'Brien has accurately characterized *The Plague* as a kind of fable or "allegorical sermon," while its narrator – rather implausibly revealed at the end as Rieux – is really the author Camus in disguise (1970: 49). As O'Brien suggests, there are really only three characters in the novel: the narrator, the city, and the plague; the other "characters" are little more than figures in a morality play, just as Čapek's *R.U.R.* consists of *dramatis personae* who simply stand for divergent points of view. But in fact, it might be more accurate to say that there are really two narrators in the novel: a first-person voice (Camus) and a third-person voice (Rieux) corresponding to the split within the French psyche between collaborators and resisters.

Recent studies of collaboration with the Nazis in countries like France, Belgium, and Denmark have highlighted an oscillation between professed collaboration and resistance. Even an avowed collaborator like Marshall Pétain, the head of the Vichy government, insisted in his final radio broadcast to the French people in August 1944 that he was fighting for, not against France: "If I could not be your sword, I tried to be your shield. […] I held off from you certain dangers; there were others […] I could not spare you." (quoted in Morgan, 2018: 327) Pétain does not specify the identity of these "dangers": are they the Nazi outsiders or the Jewish insiders? Or perhaps both? There is something of this denial in *The Plague*. It is only at the end of the novel that we discover that the anonymous narrator was in fact Rieux all along; but as Conor Cruise O'Brien points out, this is implausible since Rieux could hardly have been the omniscient witness of everything that transpired in the story. We can interpret this attribution of omniscience to Rieux in terms of the need to displace Camus's own denial and evasiveness about the fate of the French

Jews onto Rieux who has become the "scapegoat" for Camus's own repressed reaction to France's complicity in the Holocaust. We can see this ambivalence exemplified in the description of the camps used to house the infected citizens of Oran:

> There were other camps of much the same kind in the town, but the narrator, for lack of first-hand information and in deference to veracity, has nothing to add about them. This much, however, he can say; the mere existence of these camps, the smell of crowded humanity coming from them, the baying of their loudspeakers in the dusk, the air of mystery that clung about them, and the dread these forbidden places inspired told seriously on our fellow citizens' morale and added to the general nervousness and apprehension. (1991: 243)

Significant is the narrator's apparent reluctance to enquire too deeply into the number of other camps under quarantine out of "deference to veracity' ("par scrupule") and "for lack of first-hand information" ("par manque d'information directe"). These evasions, attributed to the anonymous narrator, ironically suggest the denial of truth. As such they recall official French responses to the fate of the deported Jews who had suddenly become non-persons. It is "our fellow citizens" ("nos concitoyens") outside the camps that the narrator singles out for sympathy and concern, not for the inmates inside.

This ambiguous voice is also true of *The Fall*. Camus's last completed novel takes the form of a dialogue between the self-exiled Parisian lawyer Clamence, the first-person narrator, and an unidentified person addressed throughout the novel as "mon cher compatriote" ("my dear compatriot"). The neutral "nos concitoyens" of *The Plague* has now become the sardonic "mon cher compatriote." Clamence and his silent interlocutor are, of course, split versions of the same person: the morally tainted French bourgeois who looked the other way during the deportation of Jews from France in 1942. As a result of this betrayal of human decency and courage, all vestiges of shared communitarian values have vanished, reflecting both Clamence's and Camus's disenchantment with notions of universal justice. Ironically, if *The Fall* is marked by disenchantment with left-wing ideals of social justice, it is equally characterized by the same mechanism of repression and displacement that we find in *The Plague*. In both novels what is elided is the crisis of French democracy with its morally tainted reputation as a colony of Nazi Germany and as a colonizer of Algeria. In a sense both these inglorious episodes in French history are repressed and displaced (respectively) onto pestilential Oran in *The Plague* and infernal Amsterdam in *The Fall*. The real but unacknowledged setting of both these novels

is – I would conclude – Paris, where the humiliation of German invasion took place in 1940 and where the plan to colonize Algeria was hatched in 1830.

Conclusion: Paris and Prague

From an unconscious perspective at least, the city of Prague, visited by Camus in 1936, can be viewed as a veiled version of Paris in the prelude to the Nazi invasion of France in 1940. Both cities suffered the same ignominious fate within a year of each other; and both countries were caught between an extreme left-wing and an extreme right-wing, and their liberal middle-ground collapsed. In Czechoslovakia the German-speaking population of the Sudetenland collaborated with the Nazi invaders just as Vichy France collaborated with the Nazi occupiers. Like Čapek before the war, Camus in his post-war career tried to steer a middle ground between both extremes of the left and right; but toward the end of his life he moved away from his initially centrist position to a more right-wing identification with the French colonizers of Algeria. Just as Camus's final novel *La Chute* is a kind of *cri de coeur* acknowledging the failure of his centrist position over Algeria, so too Čapek's penultimate play *The White Sickness* can be viewed as an agonized admission that the relativist philosophy that the Czech playwright had espoused throughout his life had failed and that the violence of a European war was inevitable. We might even argue that the pro-war exclamations of the destructive mob at the end of the play articulate, on a deeply submerged level, the playwright's own desire for retribution and revenge against a bellicose and threatening Nazi Germany. As Sontag points out, on one level Čapek deploys the plague metaphor as an agency of retribution, since, in the end, the plague strikes down the dictator himself (2017: 181–82). But the mob scene can be read as a further instance of retribution in giving voice to the liberal playwright's repressed desire for violent revenge.

On some level, the two texts I have discussed acknowledge the extent of the interwar political crisis by presenting it in terms of a lethal pandemic. What is strange, however, and what makes both these metaphors of the white sickness and the brown plague oddly inadequate, is the authors' relativist response to an absolute problem. The problem with Camus's metaphor of the plague as a designation for the *peste brune* (the Nazi Occupation of France) has been well expressed by Roland Barthes in his article on the novel published in 1955. Barthes questioned whether an ethics of solidarity (implicit in the phrase "nos citoyens") was enough to combat the evil of the world, and reasoned that Camus's philosophical relativism only made that solidarity less possible, since every character must be allowed to make his own choice. This is also the drawback with Čapek's humanist philosophy: that truth is an aggregate of different

perspectives rather than an absolute. The question, as Barthes poses, is how can the combatants of *La Peste* overcome a specifically human scourge like Nazism if they refuse an absolute response to it? Barthes argued that the evils of history could only be faced "dans leur proprieté absolue, et non comme les symboles ou des germes possibles d'équivalence." (quoted in Williams, 2000: 69) James S. Williams argues that Camus failed to rise to Barthes's challenge because he was beginning to see his colleagues in the Resistance fall prey to the lure of world communism, which Camus perceived as the latest plague to afflict mankind.

In his final play, *Matka* (*The Mother*, 1938), Čapek makes the eponymous Mother the mouth-piece for his repressed violent instincts of revenge. A pacifist at the beginning of the play, by its end the mother has become the clarion-call to conflict as she sends her last surviving son, Tony, into the fray impulse after she has lost her other two sons, Peter and Kornel, to war. Here again we see the role of powerful women in Čapek's drama. In a similar fashion, Camus also invokes his mother as the solution to the crisis in his political philosophy. When an Algerian student asked him about the Algerian situation in an interview in Stockholm,[6] Camus admitted that if he had to choose between justice for the Algerians and solidarity with his fellow colonial *pied-noirs*, he would choose his "mother." Camus is echoing Dostoevsky's famous dictum that, if he had to choose between Christ and truth, he would choose Christ. In denying justice, Camus is not only denying his democratic principles; like Čapek, he represses what Freud calls "mankind's aggressive tendencies" and in so doing elides the fate of the French Jews from his novel. Ultimately what is repressed in both texts is the human inability to acknowledge the truth of the human condition in all its darkness – a denial, as Girard states, that lies at the heart of all plague narratives from Sophocles to the present.

Notes

1. The English translations of Wolker's poems from the Czech are my own.
2. One of the commonplaces of Nazi antisemitic propaganda was the depiction of Jews as rats. (More on this Nazi trope below).
3. "L'affiche annonçait, ensuite des mesures ensembles, parmi lesquelles une dératisation scientifique par injection de gaz toxiques dans les égouts et une surveillance étroite de l'alimentation en eau." (Camus, 1972a: 67).
4. "La voiture de dératisation passa sous leur fenêtre dans un grand bruit d'echappement."
5. The persecution of the Jews in France had begun as early as 1940, shortly after the Nazi occupation. The first-wave deportation of Jewish immigrants to France from Nazi Germany and other occupied countries took place

just a few months after Péri's execution. Of the 340,000 Jews living in metropolitan France in 1940, more than 75,000 were deported to death camps, where about 72,500 were murdered.

6. Where Camus received the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1957.

Declaration of competing interest

None.

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