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Actuality and relevance of "The Peste" by Albert Camus

Actualidad y pertinencia de "La Peste" de Albert Camus

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"The plague is not tailored to man, therefore tanto man is said that the plague is unreal, it is a bad dream that has to pass. But it doesn't always happen, and from bad sleep to bad sleep, it's men who pass by, and humanists in the first place, because they haven't taken precautions." Albert Camus, The Plague, 1947.

Bernard Rieux and the obstacles to a knowledge

Time, a continuous line, not a loop: yesterday, today and tomorrow meet the demands of a conception of the temporal, inscribed in that it will always exist, supreme repetition, a before and after things. Rome announces it, finite cause. It is from this conception of the temporal in which the need for an exceptional authority to say about origin and destiny nests. Peace of mind for the flock: whatever authority says, the last word. Since Roman law, it's the law. And this conception is postulated as law, at the same level as another, which, unlike this one, does not require any authority to be true: we are born to die.

But there will always be one thing that will insist on revealing yourself either as saying, either as silence, inevitable, and persevering. We represent time as a loop.

If there is today in Camus's work, it is not because she has the value of metaphor, as much as she does because of the fact that the concrete is likely living it now as concrete as possible.¹ The unthinkable as a realization of what nested in scientific speculation or in Hollywood's horror films: The Pandemic!

Settled in a world where the viral referred to the amount of "likes" that a publication provoked, came the viral to remind us of its pre-vital origin, the genetic code, transit between the inert and the living, to declare unites all the supposed ethnic purities, all the Perovic about the descensions and the ancestry: the Real, material and fantastic, was expressed in a forceful way expressing that the sharpest - and much older than human life - is capable of conmancovering the structure of the maximum.

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For some, it is not the unthinkable that is being revealed^{1,2} The possibility of replicating viruses and microorganisms has been investigated for years to intended for military use in laboratories that do not meet the quality standards required for experimental purposes has been investigated. But it is not necessary to go to the recent: Moctezuma and his people succumbed to smallpox that Hernán Cortés Knowles how to infect by sending them blankets that had been used by the variolous of his army. Not to appeal to Egypt's plagues, etc.

And then we went to a display of babbling phrases in all the authorities and of all the inhabitants who have access to technology. And it babbles because what initially installs the pandemic is the sense of novelty and the certainty of not knowing that simultaneously links a progressively diminishing confidence in experts with the increasing effectiveness of the attacker's lethality. Novelty leads to denial and this, in turn, leads to a decrease in confidence with established knowledge.

But it's not the plague, *per se*, that induces all this. It is largely the precaution to be taken in front of it (quarantine, lockdown) that for which no prior preparation is a guarantee of total effectiveness. And *La Peste*, from Camus, offers us the possibility to become a chronicle, the chronicle of a doctor, Dr. Bernard Rieux, the inhabitant of the city of Oran in a year that Camus placed unspecifically, 194... It is in the territory gained by medicine, that of combating infectious diseases, that both in Camus's time and in the present, when she has been able to offer hopeful solutions for the sick. Right there, in the infectious but widespread disease, the strengths of its power infect bear, accelerated, immigrated, where medicine reveals its limits and the obstacles with which it stumbles since the solution goes beyond the actions of the doctors involving, another series of characters and actresses that extend from "outside" the purely clinical realm.

The Deranged City

It is the time of the trade war between powers, of the global spread of neoliberalism without security or clemency, of the transformation of traditional homes into single-parent homes, of the increase of a religiosity tied to devices of power and ideological devices that encrypt the explanation of what happens in the world in the biblical reference and el the apocalypse of St. John, of subjecting the medical criterion to the financial business complex that determines costs and discriminates the scope of service not according to the constitutional precept that we are all equal before the law, but the precept, highly religious, that many can be loved but few. The proletarianization of the physician, already promulgated by Marx in his Manifesto, has been more than fulfilled for the interests of capital: even two sectors that previously accrued wages for their exercise, inmates, and residents, must now pay high sums of money to get their respective graduations.

This brief description of the time I make here to resonate with the presentation that will make in *La Peste* its narrator: a presentation of the city and its inhabitants that recreates the climate of public opinion inferred by those who warn that later we will know their identity.

The most convenient way to get to know a city is to find out how you work on it, how you love it, and how you die. In our city, for the effect of the climate, all this becomes the same, with the same frenetic and absent air. That is, one gets bored and is dedicated to acquiring habits. Our fellow citizens work hard, but always to enrich themselves. They are primarily interested in trade and are mainly in charge, in their own expression, of doing business. Naturally, they also like simple expansions: women, cinema, and sea baths. But, very sensibly, they reserve the pleasures for Saturday afternoon and Sunday, trying the other days of the week to make a lot of money. In the afternoons, when they leave their offices, they meet at a fixed hour in the cafes, stroll along a certain boulevard, or pee out onto the balcony. The desires of young people are violent and brief, while the vices of the elders do not exceed the revelry, the banquets of camaraderie, and the circles where it is played loudly at random from the cards.

Therefore, an accurate synthesis of a modern, modern, quoted atmosphere, that of Oran. The disruptive is something so distant that imagination reduces it to stories to intimidate children by turning morals into true horrific red avoidable provided that good behavior is preserved. Their life circulates in the three-dimensionality chosen by the narrator: how one works on it, how it is loved, and how it dies. At the out with us, we will know that it will be at all three coordinates that the disruptive will be reported progressively and relentlessly.

From work: regulars to him during the week, booking for Saturday the fun as a rest. Make money, that's the slogan.

The way we love: something precious that we don't know where the chronicler gets it from about what we might call the psychology of Oran's masses. It is a city where its inhabitants lack the suspicion that there is something else. Conclusion: Oran is a modern city precisely because their people do not suspect that there is anything else. Then love: between two extremes, that of marriage in perpetuity and fleeting encounters. In Oran, he is loved only for lack of time and reflection.

The way he dies: in Oran, it is difficult to die because those who agonize do so in the midst of great loneliness typical of the ways of dying in modernity. La de Camus is an anticipation of the works of a historian of mindsets, Philippe Aries³, who speaks of "dry death", in reference to the disappearance of the end-of-life rituals that accompanied thermos before modernity^{4,3} The chronicler of La Peste will conclude: "You will easily understand what may be uncomfortable in the bite, even in modern death, when it survives like this in a dry place. "

Break-in and interruption: the surprising sinister

It is the chronicle not of what happened, put in the position to study as well as physics, that is, science, they do (statistics, rates, etc.) but to whom and how the epidemic happened in what has to do with their jobs, their ways of living and dying.

This will already be expressed from the outset by recording a dissimilar stance between an ordinary citizen and the character of the chronicle, Dr. Bernard Rieux:

On the morning of April 16, Dr. Bernard Rieux, as he left his room, stumbled upon a dead rat in the middle of the landing on the ladder. At first, he only pushed the animal aside and came down without worrying. But when he got to the street, he came up with the idea that that rat shouldn't stay there and went back on his steps to warn the doorman. Faced with old Michel's reaction, he saw more clearly what his find was unusual about. The presence of that dead rat had seemed only strange to him, while for the doorman it was a real scandal. The goalkeeper's position was categorical: there were no rats in the house. The doctor had to tell him that there was one on the first-floor landing, apparently dead: Michel's conviction was left intact. There were no rats in the house; therefore, someone should have brought her from outside. So it was a joke.

While Rieux quickly repairs the unexpectedness of the find and inspires his sense of strangeness, the doorman does an immediate interpretation that we can continue to deny as double denial: he denies that there are rats in the house and, by arbitrarily assuming the origin of the rats, denies other possibilities of provenance. Very quickly, then, the chronicler notifies us of the spirit of that doctor in the face of the facts. There won't be any data yet, it's just a dead rat. But...

How does the chronic know what they do and think at that very moment? I think the key is later and a careful reading will allow us to infer that the narrator has to necessarily be one of the characters involved in the "story", a kind of alter ego of Camus. In other words, in our view, Camus does not invent only a success few events but creates the narrator of them. The key to making this inference is in this paragraph:

Moreover, the narrator, who will be known in his time, would have no title to kneel in such an enterprise if death had not led him to be a custodian of numerous confidences and if the strength of things had not mixed him with everything he tries to recount. This is what authorizes you to do historian work. Of course, a historian, even if he's a mere amateur, always has documented. The narrator of this story has his own: first of all, his testimony, then that of the others since by the role he played he had to collect the confidences of all the characters of this chronicle, and even the texts that fell on his hands. The narrator intends to use it all when he thinks it's right and whenever he pleases. In addition, it is proposed... But it is time, perhaps, to leave the comments and the precautions of language to get to the narrative itself. The account of the early days requires some thoroughness.

There is someone who only misses and someone who thinks they already know the truth about the provenance of the find. For the first one, what's unusual is that the rat is there, dead. For the second, what is unusual is that there is someone capable of throwing a rat into the building in a heavy joke.

One cannot fail to recoil this encounter from the equivocal to the present when there is fierce debate about the origin of the Pandemic between those who recognize the agent and those who deny its existence. We can question whether the scope of this pandemic has had, to the point of interrupting all activities involving closeness between people, including ordinary economic activities, it is largely due to the "no known" existence of knowledge about the harmful, lethal, potentiality of the virus, a knowledge of some (but by the unknown majority), involved in the genetic modification maneuvers of structures and microorganisms, which results in the health determination agreed upon and imposed by governments, reported by the intelligence services to which they are attached-

Rieux, in the chronicle, is still far from acknowledging that the multiplication of dead rats in the city is the beginning of a plague. But something knows about the usual ways of dying from rats so as not to go from the initial strangeness, throughout the first part of the chronicle, to confirm that it is a plague that will force the entire city to declare quarantined.

On the other hand, on the side of those who know nothing about it and therefore every event that happens in the world will only be confirmation of their prejudices, what is characteristic will be the negation, in the face of the impossible towns do the reality (the multiplication of the number of dead rats first and then, the multiplication of affected humans), the tendency to interpret the event, progressively going on to explain the presence of the dead rat as the act of a jerk who threw it there, to the idea that everything that happens obeys a divine punishment, sent by God to punish human misbehavior in Oran.

It is what will happen there and the sermons of a Paneloux Father will be kept for good time insisting that the plague will severely punish some while it will be opportunity god's opportunity for survivors to interrupt their sinful customs.

This is therefore the first facet of Rieux: his inquiry into what is happening will progressively lead him to conclude what is happening and to proceed according to his own way of working.⁴

There are no other means of fighting plague which is honesty

Another facet of Rieux, his idea about honesty. Very close to the idea of Zen spirituality (committing deeper to what is done) Rieux knows that his commitment installs him in a singularity that contrasts with the idea of opportunists and deniers who make denial - deliberate or neurotic - opportunity to justify militancy in fundamentalism. That's why he will intervene in the dialogue with his assistant, Tarrou, and the press correspondent, Rambert,⁵ who discuss the lawfulness of dying for a cause such as love. Rambert starts the conversation with a question:

-Tell me⁶ Tarrou, are you able to die for love?

"I don't know, but I don't think so, at the moment.

-You see. And you're capable of dying for an idea, this is clear. Well, I'm sick of people dying for an idea. I don't believe in heroism: I know that's very easy, and I've come to convince myself that deep down it's criminal. What interests me is that you live and die for what you love.

Rieux had listened to Rambert carefully. Still looking at him, he said sweetly:

-Man is not an idea, Rambert. Rambert jumped out of bed with his face burning with passion.

-It is a small idea and idea, from the moment it does from love, and precisely no one is able to love anymore. Let's resign, Doctor. Let us hope to become so and if this is truly not possible, we will wait for general liberation without becoming heroes. I don't get past there. Rieux rose with a sudden appearance of tiredness.

"You're right, Rambert, you're absolutely right and I didn't want to divert you from what you're going to do, which I think is fair and good. However, it must make you understand that this is not about heroism. It's just about honesty. It's an idea that may make you laugh, but the only way to fight the plague is honesty.

"What is honesty?" said Rambert, getting serious all of a sudden.

-I don't know what it is, in general. But, in my case, I know it's just my job.

"Ah!" said Rambert, furiously, "I don't know what my trade is. You may be wrong choosing love.

To do his trade, an office that in the present circumstances has put the doctor in the place of the sacred and the execrable, the life-saving and the healthy. As an extension of the pharmacopoeia, a drug that relieves and poison that kills, each doctor embodies what la médecine, not doctors, has become the cultural: a tool of healing and ideology of dominance. In the name of public health, the government exercises its authority, and for the purposes of proceeding nimbly declares the emergency.

But what happens when the authorities, invoking the public good, demonstrate with the facts that their concern is not so much the healthy well-being of the population as it is to impose laws that benefit the economic interests of the powerful by ignoring the dire consequences of such laws on collective health? In La Peste, we see that Rieux gets the authorities to take measures to protect the population from the epidemic, that is, it is not limited to the art of healing or the organization of the care of the sick but that his word manages to be taken into account, even if it is snookered, by the authorities of the city.

Among us, honesty, especially with regard to the political and administrative exercise of power, does not enjoy bios and many supporters because its status of existence is not easily verifiable. The delivery of subsidies for the poorest has not been completed when criminal gangs are already doing the "work" of diverting those resources into their own coffers. A government that is not engaged in doing its trade cannot qualify as honest or in the eyes of ethics practiced from far-away convictions from which they help elect rulers. An entity that is simultaneously conviction in scopes yes, but also at the limits of a knowledge combined with another even more intimate conviction: the confidence that every act of solidarity is an act of healing...

Rieux/Camus (is Rieux the narrator that the chronicler had announced to us pages further back? For life to happen, she has not had the need to correspond with a certain sense for her to translate into acts of courage or acts of heroism. We are here, and every attempt to explain to us the supposed meaning of living is nothing but a variant of the illusion that we are a created work and not an inescapable destiny.

When Rieux is asked from the city Health Commission if he is sure that it is plague he replies, unperturbable: "It is not a matter of vocabulary, it is a matter of time". Rieux does not appeal to a good God who provides comfort, not even a universal morality through whose laws have put a limit to abuse, its answer "it is a matter of time" not of vocabulary, refers to that of a leader who knows that the spread of plague will be possible to stop it provided that, threatened all, it is a common purpose, the joint struggle of all, what can stop it: in other words, a sum of acts of honesty consisting in each one doing his trade.

Spirituality as an in-depth commitment

The issue of freedom will also put Rieux in tension with the authorities who will see in the plague the opportunity to limit the freedoms and rights of the inhabitants of Oran. Let us not forget that the narrator, when he says that Oran is the most common of the cities, is telling us that what happened there may be fiction, but that not because it is, it will stop representing what happens in reality. When the stadium, for example, is converted into a hospital and concentration camp, we keep evoking what happened with the Santiago de Chile stadium in the days following Pinochet's criminal coup on September 11, 1973.

But Rieux's work on freedom is precise to shape the fact that the acts of honesty of many must be organized for the benefit of controlled havoc. Let us insist: for this, he does not need any religious belief or universal morals. You're doing, your trade, will be what you know how to do: know about the disease, know about diagnosis and treatment, and know how to organize the health care of the sick in such a way that the spread of contagions can be contained.

Because he didn't choose to be at the time of the plague, but with everything and that, he did choose to practice a profession called to occupy the front line in combat.

We return to honesty as an exercise in freedom: Rieux, the act of Rieux, is to become a notion of spirituality that in the West we do not know how to weigh as it is done in the East. Spirituality is, for Zen philosophy, to engage in-depth in the performance of an office. But this is also the truth that the chronicler shows as solidarity, as a commitment to the conviction that plague can only be fought with the commitment, in-depth, of all. In a word: decency.

The one that puts under control not only the growing spread of contagions but also selfish acts, the inaction from the justification that comes from, and the opportunistic use of the misfortunes of others. The one that, observing the behavior of some in the current quarantine, is absolutely missing.

Those who fight in common become decent in action. Probably the unconscious determinisms of his act can be unraveled at a certain time (it must be remembered that the character's medical vocation does not come from altruism as if from the intrigue that has been on his death forever). But when it comes to acting what is revealed to be effective and exclusive, it is the act of fighting in common.

The non-place topped by the determinism of life

As a way of the coda of this tour. To the remarkable presence of invisible things...

The great, the world, reducing its inhabitants to locking up because of what, at first glance, is not seen. Some compare it to other things that are not visible, but God is a concept, a belief, and for many, Truth. The truth is not always visible and because certain viruses are embedded not in the genetic code but in the unconscious.

Fragile in the face of soap foam and temperatures greater than 56 degrees Celsius, the fear of contracting the possible consequences of its presence in the body has led us to quarantine, to set aside, to the declaration of the other as potential carrier or vehicle. The virus is, at the same time, potent in its ability to exterminate and labile in its material constitution.

Nor do you see the atom, but the atomic bomb tragically informs us of its existence. Atom, virus, and unconscious are there, exploding or disguising, the unconscious in the synod. Affecting, members of a non-place, fleeting as the greeting of two conductors on a highway, but blunt.

They warn of their existence through misstep or alveolitis or disseminated vascular coagulation or the bewilderment of the authorities.

They are intolerable, both the virus and the atom and the unconscious, for those who declare that the only possible truth is the one they postulate as the One. That's why they deny the existence of the atom, the virus, and the unconscious. Because they feel that the non-place is populated by the deterministic force of life. And because their spells and harangues and healings fail miserably in the face of other truths so true that they make remarkable the presence of more invisible things, beyond being concepts.

Every plague can be compared to what the symptom is: a revelation that something in societies (like something in the individual) is not going. This pandemic reveals that something in the world does not go: the opportunity for us to survive on condition that we do not yearn for the chains and embrace freedom with all the fervor of those who want to take advantage of this possibility that plague gives us to try to go out on the other side in conditions very different from those that brought us to tragedy.

The world was no different after Oran, but Oran is the world: the particular traces that we award gulls to a doctor Bernard Rieux who did not exist is because gullible in the goodness of the imagination and literature that expresses it, we can think about what happens to us from a different place than the victimization of the pusillanimous or the predicator needed or inputs to keep together his parishioners or their voters.

Oran is not just the world, it is life itself. The main precedent of every deceased is that of having been alive, life is that "affection", endearing moments of happiness woven with others, let's say not happiness, but both in constant pulsion, in constant flow. Madness is disguised according to the ages: the current one seems to be conducive so that out of madness we understand the collective, group, desire to die relieved. By becoming an end-of-life ideal, we are all imprisoned, confined, to reduce life to mere survival. Perhaps today we lack a lucid Oedipus capable of deciphering the new riddles of the Plague, but we know that Oedipus failed to escape the tragedy, and on the contrary, he delved into it more deeply, after doing his act of alertness to the Sphinx.

Because a man was able to invent Rieux, he managed to do it because he knows about men much more than he usually modifies them. We will finally remember on purpose the words of the poet Leon de Greiff: "Man is told to know yourself! not only to bring down his pride but also to make him feel what he is worth."

Santiago de Cali, March 23 of the year of the Pandemic

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¹Now the unthinkable has proved possible!" exclaimed Paul Valéry at the end of the First Great War: it was no longer the dream of the reason that produced monsters, it was the realization of reason articulated to technological advances that made it possible to link aviation with espionage and bombardment, chemistry with mustard gas, the need to defeat the enemy with the desire to make it disappear from the face of the earth.

²Not the unthinkable, but the thoughtless. With regard to the creation, in laboratories, of viruses with increased lethal effect, see: https://www.elconfidencial.com/alma-corazon-vida/2014-07-04/yoshihiro-kawaoka-el-cientifico-ha-creado-el-virus-mas-mortal-de-la-historia_156185/

³"The act is able to make in the subject a loss without compensation, a loss to dry. after the first world war, death expects no less. we no longer vociferous together against her; no longer gives rise to the sublime and romantic encounter of lovers transfigured by her. but it turns out that, in the absence of funeral rites, his current savagery is in return for death pushing mourning into the act. dry death, loss to dry."

⁴Rieux will be a treating physician, organizer of the necessary care services, and medical authority before the city authorities.

⁵Rambert is a press correspondent from Paris, who despairs because he fears that he fears, forced to stay for the declared quarantine, to be late for the meeting with a woman he is in love with. He appeals to all means, legal and illegal, to escape the prohibition of leaving, in the name of what he considers supreme justification, love.

⁶Rieux's closest collaborator. Both make their collaboration endearing friendship.