



Plagues and the Prose Informing Our Shared Condition

By Paul Goldsmith



I did a deep read in search of the virus and found out it is us.

Plagues and epidemics of yore were simple affairs, manifestations of evil caused by angry gods, hidden forces, or bad air. Death and survival were karmic outcomes. The pandemics of the information age are considerably more complicated. They kill relatively few but infect millions with angst and paranoia. They spawn feedback across a spectrum bookended by scientific rigour on one side and inventive conspiracy on the other. We are updated in real time with wave after wave of imperfect statistics, breaking science, experiential perspectives, and ideology-driven commentaries.

For much of the world, quarantine time is being spent on social media, watching journalists morph into screeching owls on CNN, and catching up on films and TV series - a format that now appears custom-made for lockdowns. But some of us have also used the time to study the phenomena that are sweeping away the cadences of life as we knew it, and to process its stories and tropes.

Situational analyses and political narratives

Thomas Puelo is a one-man “coronology” resource. He posted an analysis on *Medium* that almost overnight was translated into 37 languages. His March 19th follow-up, “[The Hammer and the Dance](#)”, made the case to immediately enforce total lockdowns (the hammer). This comprehensive call to

arms beat all the university departments, institutes, and the World Health Organization (WHO) to the punch: “The world has never had to learn about anything so fast. The hammer is the best response for buying time for the fightback (the dance).”

The curves of the nations most affected created a baseline for three options: 1) do nothing; 2) mitigation; and 3) suppression. His analysis covered detailed projections of infections and fatalities, the prospects for virus mutation, political barriers to hammer implementation, and many related sectoral ramifications. Up to now the hammer and dance in the countries most affected has encompassed variations on these three strategies, influenced to different degrees by the Chinese lockdown of Hubei Province.

Puelo’s projected numbers for infections in the United States under option 1 (do nothing) are 25 million. Implementing option 3 (suppression), after the initial wave, reduces this estimate to tens of thousands. The role of the states complicates the US numbers, but taken as a whole, the million-plus currently recorded infections approximate the rate expected under the option 2 mitigation strategy. Most of the world is on the same pathway with areas of high infection rates under lockdown, with a number of countries edging into dance mode.

In addition to hosting Puelo’s updates and other in-depth posts, *Medium* is one of the more useful sources of information on the pandemic. Their business model generates an algorithm-driven selection of punchy short reads. Articles like the gazillion-hit “The Hammer and the Dance” are outliers in an eclectic sample dominated by personal development and the gig economy. The elite publications of the English-speaking world are still the primary source of high clout policy pieces and opinion shaping analyses.

The *New Yorker’s* [“Its Not Too Late To Go on the Offense Against the Corona Virus”](#) is one example. After reviewing his international civil servant CV, the author, the former World Bank boss, Jim Yong Kim, tells us, in the Bank’s typical take-your-medicine tradition, “I’ve been fighting pandemics for most of my adult life.” I almost stopped reading what turned out to be a compact overview of the five weapons that need to be deployed to defeat the enemy: social distancing; contact tracing; testing; isolation; and treatment. It is a parsimonious argument based on the collective experience of front line coronavirus warriors – all of which are wealthy industrialised nations.

But the experience of recent pandemic responses does not augur well for such glib technocratic solutions in many regions. In [“The Politics of Disease Epidemics: a Comparative Analysis of the Sars, Zika, and Ebola Outbreaks”](#), Lydia Kapiripiri and Alison Ross show why. The authors use four categories to unpack the literature published in peer-reviewed journals: attribution of infectious disease sources; responsibility for their socioeconomic distribution; credibility of evidence informing response pathways; and the decision-making informing research and development. Their findings converge on the observation that “the narratives accompanying these events contrasted power and privilege with the disproportionate impact of the epidemics on the economically disadvantaged”.

Attribution often reduced multiple causal factors to the role of ethnic minority groups, even though *socioeconomic distributions* for the diseases implicate poor nutrition, cramped unhygienic living conditions, and inadequate health services. During the Ebola crisis, the evidence informing interventions tended to support short-term response horizons, tracing responsibility for the outbreak to bush meat and traditional funereal customs. Here, and in other cases, this diverted attention from long-term issues, such as poor public health infrastructure.

Although poverty is the greatest risk factor in epidemics, *decision-making processes* instead highlight institutional policy biases prevailing in global centres of power. Kapiripiri and Ross concede that the neoliberal roots of policy biases appear to be too deep to uproot. They state that to

re-balance the equation, “It is critical that narratives of those most vulnerable are represented in mainstream narratives.”

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Global coronavirus narratives are flipping these categories. Attribution is now a focal point in the larger info war being waged by China and the United States. The response hammer has benefited from a socioeconomic distribution highlighting the array of high profile and celebrity first wave infections. Evidence and developmental decision-making processes have focused on the shared methods contributing to individual nations’ dance strategies.

This choreography is generating the diverse natural experiments underway across the world. Besides showing different pathways to recovery, before it is over, the dance is going to reveal how variations on political leadership impact on the contrasting national curves. We can also expect it to cut a path through the jungle of viral conspiracies and sweep away some of the ideological myths being propagated in its wake. For now, however, the fightback is proceeding in a world of noise and fuzzy information.

A sense of shared peril checked the forces opposed to the multilateral world order, for a while. The controversy over WHO provided an entry point for the populist insurgency to fight back. By contesting the scientific guidance behind the lockdowns, the antics of American alt-right experts have distinguished themselves from the consensus guiding the vast majority of the world’s population. But this is a sideshow.

In the *N+1* journal article, “Chinese Virus, World Market”, [Andrew Liu](#) explains how China’s new elites’ pursuit of exotic food displays as a marker of wealth and status created the conditions for the emergence of the corona viruses. Wuhan, a city far from the areas of traditional wildlife consumption, became the epicentre. COVID-19 is the first capitalist-created virus to directly attack capitalism.

“[The Pandemic is Just Getting Started](#)”, but we are not on new ground. The system-changing function of infectious disease is a well-documented phenomenon, and the latest chapter is being written before our eyes.

Big picture social science

The 1975 publication, [Plagues and People](#), by William H. McNeill marked a major pivot away from the great civilizations and influential actors focus of historical scholarship. McNeill concluded that epidemics will continue to be one of the fundamental determinants of human history. Forget Bill Gates, over five decades ago, McNeill predicted that the next system shock will come from a rapidly mutating form of the influenza virus.

Jared Diamond’s first book, [Guns, Germs, and Steel](#), originated with a simple question in 1972 proffered by a local friend in New Guinea: “Why do you people have most of the cargo and the rest of us do not?” Diamond’s answer came after two decades of research, and was published in 1994. Subtitled *A Short History of Everybody for the Last 13,000 Years*, the book underscored how Europeans’ conquest of the world originated with their long history of settled farming. High population densities catalysed a process of agriculture intensification and technological innovation.

Generations of close contact with domestic livestock conferred the disease immunity that proved to be a decisive factor when they came into contact with new populations.

Diamond is master storyteller. The popularity of this book made him a popular purveyor of big picture social science. His books are displayed in all the world's airports; his arguments have burrowed their way into introductory anthropology courses. He brings massive detail to bear on his subject. The "germs" chapter serves up an excellent overview on how the evolutionary dynamics of contagion favoured Eurasia over most of the planet's other regions.

But there are problems beyond the undiluted environmental determinism highlighted by his critics. *Guns, Germs, and Steel* conveys a linear, mechanistic version of history. And, as [one anthropologist](#) remarked: "So when Europeans 'succeed' at colonialism, that was not their doing, nor their fault. When other societies falter, that was their choice to fail." He who gets the head start wins the power to distribute smallpox-infected blankets.

McNeill disagreed. In a [1997 exchange in the New York Review of Books](#), he accused Diamond of overlooking the importance of human "cultural autonomy" in determining human development. Diamond replied that the large time-scale of his analysis necessarily smoothed out such factors.

Although this reductionism worked well when demolishing racial and cultural assumptions about the world's vast developmental differentials, Diamond's method shares the problems of other single matrix analyses. Small variations in initial conditions that drop out of view in Diamond's big picture approach underpin the cultural and socioeconomic complexity of contrasting regional trajectories. Despite the weight of factual information, in the chapter on Africa, the book's focus on linguistics, plants, and agriculture shortchanges distinctive features of the continent's historical processes.

In "Ecology Control and Economic Development in East African History", Helge Kjekshus works within the same environmental history paradigm Diamond champions, but the research reinforces McNeill's emphasis on cultural syntheses as one of the primary forces driving historical adaptation. Kjekshus documents in great detail the efficacy of the region's indigenous knowledge traditions and how inter-ethnic social networks worked well to contain the scourges of Brazilian sand fleas, yaws, tsetse flies, malaria, and dengue fever, and to limit the damage from smallpox and other disease vectors.

Rinderpest, however, proved to be the exception, conforming to Diamond's "Lethal Gift of Livestock" thesis. The rinderpest epidemic devastating the herds of the Maasai and other warrior pastoralists opened the door for colonial occupation. Monkeys, bats and pangolins are still small-time players compared to the disease-incubating contribution of cows and pigs to human history. But *Homo sapiens* trump the mammal crowd on the global level of analysis.

The epidemiology in *Plagues and People* highlighted the constantly evolving relationship between micro-parasites (e.g. bacteria, viruses) and macro-parasites like rats, livestock, and humans. This led McNeill to theorise that humankind itself is a type of disease, a parasite on its host, Earth - and warned that it could self-destruct if humans continue to over-stress their host.

Long the province of science fiction, the cultural industry now generates a constant feed of dystopian futures and zombie apocalypses. The rise of artificial intelligence is the latest source of plots based on McNeill's hypothesis. In *The Matrix*, Agent Smith tells Keanu Reeves, "Humans are a virus." In the current season of *Westworld*, the "Man" played by Ed Harris declares humanity to be a bacteria consuming the planet.

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The coronavirus pandemic, the latest example of fiction predicting reality, is also reinvigorating real world science linking the environmental costs of unbridled capitalism to the prospects of societal collapse.

Narratives of collapse and anti-climax

Jem Bendell is a professor of sustainable business practices who argues that the time for incremental responses to climate change has passed. He sums this up in a [2018 paper](#) that proved too disturbing for publication in a peer-reviewed journal he once edited. Pandemics are a second order effect of climate change that, among other things, is bringing us into direct contact with the new ecologies we have created for bats and other wildlife species. Such narratives have become both truth and truism.

Disaster is now a common theme in Western culture. The real-life world of new viruses Richard Preston described in [Crisis in the Hot Zone](#) is actually more frightening than most of Hollywood's monetised virus-infected zombies, including the movie version of his book. Fictionalisation is arguably one of the reasons not much has changed despite the very real prospects of ecological cataclysm. COVID-19 is the latest omen.

These second-order emergencies have sustained a curious dualism. Our universities and institutes figure out the problem, develop palliatives, and advocate sensible policies. Our governments lag behind, and citizens resist preventative measures until they are in the crosshairs of the next scourge. Epidemics trigger multinational responses only to revert, as Kapiripiri and Ross concluded, to the standard narrative.

The [history of cholera](#) is the classical example of partial response in the presence of full knowledge. Coronavirus is more contagious than cholera. The author of this *Guardian* long read regretted the fact that the corona story will play out the same way if we allow global health to be funded and governed by the same unredeemed colonial logic.

This is why, as Bendell stated in a [recent interview](#), "Returning to business as usual is a "fantasy. Policy makers and business leaders must recognize that climate change will be even more disruptive than the coronavirus." But restating these warnings at a time when a more proximate enemy threatens us can have the opposite result in a world inured to disaster inflation.

The negative implications for the long game cues up the third book in Diamond's trilogy, [Upheaval: How Nations Cope with Crisis and Change](#). Diamond builds his discussion around examples of wars, coups, and military dictatorships; natural disasters, pandemics, and famines do not feature. Plagues, as the historical record shows, disrupt and redirect more than they destroy the societies they attack.

Thucydides' [History of the Peloponnesian War](#) is both enlightened historiography and great literature. The author provides the earliest written account of a plague and its impact on political events. The war was a response to decades of Athenian dominance, and for the first time Sparta had Athens on the defensive. The Athenians retreat behind the city walls, creating the crowded and unhygienic conditions contributing to the outbreak of a highly contagious disease in 430 BC.

The first wave of the epidemic killed 100,000 Athenians, but it also saved the city. When the Spartans saw the smoke of thousands of funeral pyres, they abandoned their siege and fled. The

anomie that followed was yet more unexpected. Thucydides remarked, “The catastrophe was so overwhelming that men, not knowing what would happen next to them, became indifferent to every rule of religion or law.”

Both the wealthy and the nouveau riche elevated by inheriting dead relatives’ property spent recklessly, assuming that death may strike any time. The social value of virtue and reputation plummeted. Non-Athenians were scapegoated and their rights abrogated. The gods did not fare much better; they were demoted. Refugees and the dying camped out at their temples. Athenians accused Apollo, the god of disease and medicine, of siding with the enemy.

The disease returned twice over the next fifteen years. Athens did not collapse, nor did it recover its former influence and glory. But different pandemics create different trajectories.

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The Black Death wiped out almost half of Europe at the end of the fourteenth century and continued to wreak havoc across the continent over the next 400 years. The dirge composed by English satirist Thomas Nashe, [A Litany in the Time of Plague](#), conveys the sense of resignation when the plague reappeared in Shakespeare’s London.

“Sing me some doleful ditty to the lute,” he requests the poet, “That may complaine my neere approaching death.” The bard responds:

*Adieu, farewell earth’s bliss;
This world uncertain is;
Fond are life’s lustful joys;
Death proves them all but toys;
None from his darts can fly;
I am sick, I must die.
Lord, have mercy on us.*

*Rich men, trust not wealth,
Gold cannot buy you health;
Physic himself must fade.
All things to end are made,
The plague full swift goes by;
I am sick, I must die.
Lord, have mercy on us.*

By breaking up the feudal order, the bubonic plague both slowed down and set the stage for European expansion. Around the same time that Nashe was composing his ditty, the diseases Hernando Cortez imported into central Mexico were killing 80 per cent of the population. The Aztec empire disintegrated.

But collapse, as defined by the case studies in Joseph A. Tainter’s [The Collapse of Complex Societies](#), is not to be confused with invasions like the one that caused the slow-moving genocide reducing 24 million indigenous Mexicans to 1 million survivors a century after the conquistadores’ arrival. The book traces collapse to the point when solutions for the problems facing a society become too complicated and costly to implement.

[Other archeologists](#) studying ancient societies attribute collapse to an abrupt political change, reduction in social complexity, and their knock-on effects throughout society. Biomedical progress minimises the probability of fast-moving epidemics turning into a mass Athenian death sentence or the poet's toxic darts. Their impact can, however, signal the directionality of processes that either result in transition to a new order or to system-deadening entropy.

Modern plagues have exacerbated global inequality, and so far [this one is doing the same](#). It is collapsing some economic sectors and accelerating change in others. The economic damage is enormous, and based on past experience, the recovery period will be long, with serious ramifications for labour and capital. Surveillance of bodies is on the rise. The Davos elite and Xi Jinping's cohorts will still hoard most of the cargo.

At the same time, the pandemic's shock factor should not be underestimated. Historically, jolts like the one we are experiencing open new windows for human agency. There are promising background developments. *The Lancet* has called for a [reformed social contract](#), and methodologies promoting [collective intelligence](#) are gaining ground. The carbon energy endgame is underway; the passing of the post-9/11 forever war is in sight. Women in leadership are showing the way.

Watching how the new corona-capitalism will play out is the most fascinating aspect of the pandemic. Is the coronavirus a tipping point? Will we dance our way to collective adaptation? Can a million burning pyres save the planet?

The novel and the dance

The species is at war with an invisible enemy, and the War on the Rocks experts tell us [the best way to prepare for it is to read fiction](#):

Novels hone powers of observation and insight. They increase mental flexibility and help policymakers anticipate situations. They illuminate other mindsets, cultures, places, and times. The best ones induce a sense of empathy in their readers, and they help render policy approaches more effective and more humane.

This advice marks a radical departure from the gospel of the war on terrorism. Although 9/11 did initiate a new learning cycle, for the most part it centred on a narrow "with us or against us" assessment of the others' mindsets, cultures, and places. Policy approaches to the problem ended up midwifing a new generation of Islamist extremists. They created new breeding grounds for the virus. Maybe reading fiction can help us figure out some new moves.

The Plague by Albert Camus does not feature at the top of the 80 titles listed in the Goodreads [selection of popular pandemic books](#). But its understated portrayal of a society suddenly trapped in an atmosphere permeated by dread and the absence of normality has made it the most cited work of fiction in the stream of coronavirus commentaries.

The story, published in 1947 and immediately translated into nine languages, revolves around a cast of everyday characters. The story centres on Doctor Rieux, who copes with the city's inert bureaucracy while retaining his minimalist but positive view of humanity, the priest who blames the sins of his congregation for the calamity, the smuggler who wants the quarantine to continue, the self-pitying journalist obsessed with escape, the indifferent public officials who go through the motions and the lowly municipal clerk who tries to do what they will not, the Spanish invalid who spends his days counting peas from one bowl into another.

Literature and the domain of myth are the repositories where society's collective knowledge and experience is stored. Camus scores high in both. He redefined heroism as ordinary people doing

extraordinary things out of simple decency. For most of humanity, the moral responsibility of choosing to not be part of the problem is heroic enough. All but one of the city's misanthropic characters eventually come around to empathising with the public's suffering.

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If the "best novels" induce a sense of empathy in their readers, "leading to more humane and effective policies", it is clear that Kenya's decision-makers are reading from their own script. The government's violent implementation and cynical exploitation of low friction policies that are working elsewhere has resulted in empty hospitals and the public's refusal to be tested. [Dauti Kahura's reportage](#) of a Kenyan doctor thrown out on the street in Wuhan reveals the brutal callousness of both the Chinese and Kenyan governments.

Midway through Camus's account, the narrator takes stock: "The plague had swallowed up everything and everyone. No longer were there individual destinies, only a collective destiny made by the plague and the emotions shared by all."

This is where we all stand right now. Athenian democrats are waging a defensive battle against Steve Bannon's Spartans. All the numbers and models and deep insights notwithstanding, we still do not know where the coronavirus will lead us.

When I first read *The Plague* as a high school student, I understood it as an existential parable set in a small North African city. I was drawn to the story as metaphor of resistance to the Nazi occupation when I picked it up again at a university. By coincidence, I read *Le Peste* again six weeks before the Wuhan coronavirus story broke, and realised that is a universal allegory that could be set in any city anywhere at any point in time.

I believe if enough ordinary people listen to the right music, the dance will take us to a better place. But the narrator of *The Plague*, now revealed to be Dr. Riuex, ends on a cautionary note. The quarantine is over, the doctor and Grand, the redeemed municipal clerk, view the people celebrating in the streets. As they watch the townspeople's dance of deliverance and newborn freedom, Grand remarks: "But they're just the same as ever, really."

As crises pass and give way to a new normalcy, amnesia soon sets in. The Nazis are restless, the virus will never go away. Great literature helps us remember, and stay awake.

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