



ARTICLE

Plague, Foucault, Camus

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ABSTRACT. In January 1975, Michel Foucault contemplated the nature and formation of what in subsequent years he would come to know as governmentality. For Foucault, plague marks the rise of the invention of positive technologies of power, where these relations center around inclusion, multiplication, and security, rather than exclusion, negation, and rejection. In a point that might at first seem ancillary to his central argument, Foucault comments on stylized works about plague, such as those, according to the lecture series' editors, exemplified by Albert Camus. In footnote fifteen of the January 15, 1975 lecture, in reference to what Foucault deemed the "literary dream of" plagues, the editors list Camus' 1947 novel *La Peste*, among other works, as representative of what Foucault described as "a kind of orgiastic dream in which plague is the moment when individuals come apart and when the law is forgotten.". This article places Camus' novel and other works in conversation with Foucault on governmentality, subjectivation, and truth to demonstrate the ways in which individualism itself can be viewed biopolitically. In so doing, it offers an urgent intervention that speaks powerfully to and is exemplified by the current global pandemic. Plague serves both as this literary dream and as a discursive mechanism engaged simultaneously with regimes of truth and the individuals constructing them. By pairing Foucault's historical understanding of the invention of positive technologies of power with Camus' treatment of "the absurd" in and out of the plague context, one uncovers the interrelation of governmentality, subjectivation, and truth.

Keywords: Albert Camus, plague, governmentality, subjectivation, truth

INTRODUCTION

Though "plague" is a rather ubiquitous word that serves as a stand in for many types of annoyances or even as a metaphor for an abundance of things one simply does not like,¹

¹ I am thinking of catty middle school putdowns like "you're a plague on my existence" or as a more gendered reference to something like a "plague of boys that that just won't leave me alone..." Obviously, the absurdity of juxtaposing something as serious, devastating, and pathological as "the plague" with the banal exploits of adolescence is not lost on me, however, hopefully this article makes clear that even the benign

most concretely, plague is a reference to the many historical pandemics/epidemics where some pestilence² ravages a community. This word has reared its gnarly head again and again in the preceding few years³ – tossed around cautiously as the modern world has been forced to endure its own pandemic, with its own complexities and its own mechanisms of regulation.⁴ Of course, that begs the question about what modern society can or has learned from plagues of the past. Are we conducting ourselves in the same manner? Are we reacting to the same fears? What can plague in the historical sense tell us about our current predicament? Foucault suggested that the plague of the middle ages in Europe was a turning point in the formation of “positive technologies of power” that would begin to structure existence from the 16th and still into the 17th centuries.⁵ But, was that a solitary event indebted to a particular *épistémè* and a particular discursive regime? Or are we destined to experience similar phenomena each time disease sprawls throughout and across global communities, no matter the ways in which a population is subjectivized or otherwise engaged with truth?

It is one thing to recognize the ways in which a series of historical developments have shaped and shifted the trajectory of humanity, but it is quite another for such an analysis to highlight the ways in which those, what in the grand scheme of existence account for little more than momentary fluctuations, are constantly and repeatedly reified both in similar situations and in that which is only homologous in some abstract or esoteric capacity. Existence does not require something as monumental as plague to tighten the reins of governmentality, to perpetually and emphatically lay down the hammer of subjectivation, or to structure the nature and interplay of varying regimes of truth. Applying these Foucauldian concepts and mechanisms to life’s commonalities, idiosyncrasies, and even what the future has in store is, if anything, academically expected. Works of that nature are useful if idealistic, helpful if grandiose, and even poignant if unnoticed. But what happens when the cataclysmic heuristic happens again? When no analogy – “it was *like* a plague” – is required? Should anything change now that the literary device is back on our doorstep and not just an exercise in elegant historicity and sublime theorizing?

metaphorical usages of “plague” are rooted in mechanisms of governmentality, processes of subjectivation, and ultimately technologies of truth.

² Most commonly, those caused by the bacteria *Yersinia pestis*, but other diseases or viruses can also rightfully be called “plagues.” See Robert J. Littman, “The Plague of Athens: Epidemiology and Paleopathology,” *Mount Sinai Journal of Medicine* 76:5 (2009), 456-467.

³ With a heavy dose of irony, cf., e.g., Landon Y. Jones, “Camus’s ‘Plague’ Foretold Coronavirus,” *Wall Street Journal*. <https://www.wsj.com/articles/camuss-plague-foretold-coronavirus-11586386641> (accessed November 23, 2023).

⁴ For a general discussion analyzing how Foucauldian concepts can be useful in facing the COVID-19 global pandemic, see Daniele Lorenzini, “Biopolitics in the Time of Coronavirus,” *Critical Inquiry* 47:S2 (2021).

⁵ Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1974-1975* (2003); Michel Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-1978* (2007); Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* [1974] (1995). See also, Michel Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”: *Lectures at the Collège de France 1975-1976* (2003) and Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (2008).

This article argues all and none of those points, suggesting instead that plague is as allegorical as it is historical – as trans-actional⁶ as it is a function of reality. Plague serves as a discursive basis for governmentality, subjectivation, and truth, all while being neatly nestled within biopolitical mechanisms and man’s interaction with “the Absurd.” In turn, this paper will be *partitioned* into three parts. First, using Camus’ novel *The Plague*⁷ as a *commensurate*, literary representation of plague, I will recount Foucault’s exploration of plague as it bequeaths governmentality, utilizing his descriptions from both *Abnormal* and *Discipline and Punish* (as well as briefly summarized in *Security, Territory, Population*). Utilizing Camus’ prose as an allegorical vehicle for Foucault’s philosophical insights, the existentialist impact of governmentality becomes clear and sets the stage for the ways in which the subject is born. As such, I will follow the emergence of these techniques of governing conduct through subjectivation and the biopolitics of the individual, pairing Foucault’s epoch most directly concerned with biopower⁸ with Camus’ philosophical treatment of “the Absurd” in *The Myth of Sisyphus*.⁹ Through this combination of concepts, “the absurd” can be realized as a biopolitical driver in and of itself. Lastly, with this biopolitical subject in tow, I will follow each author and return to plague to uncover the ways in which manifestations of truth and truth acts are in and of themselves absurd discoveries.

Ultimately, it is not my intent to simply analyze the similarities between these two authors’ treatment of plague, *per se*; instead, through collocation, I seek to pair these authors in ways that uncover something newfangled for each. For Foucault, the ability to build a Camusian account of both biopolitics and subjectivation will uncover the ways in which both are fundamentally absurd, and for Camus, the addition of Foucauldian frameworks to his philosophical project will reveal the *discursive* structure that undergirds man’s inevitable engagement with absurdity. Throughout each section, I will integrate contemporary examples from the COVID-19 global pandemic as both concise examples of the ways in which our current condition proliferates the plague phenomena but also as an ironic catharsis for all the predictable ways the “plague” paradigm is explicated and has

⁶ Though possibly a tad esoteric, I am using “trans-actional” here as Foucault did in *The Birth of Biopolitics* when he went great lengths to describe civil society: “Civil society is like madness and sexuality, what I call transactional realities (*réalités de transaction*). That is to say, those transactional and transitional figures that we call civil society, madness, and so on, which, although they have not always existed are nonetheless real, are born precisely from the interplay of relations of power and everything which constantly eludes them, at the interface, so to speak, of governors and governed.” Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 297. The professor that introduced me to the world of Foucault, Ed Cohen, insisted on the importance of this notion when reading Foucault during a seminar I took in 2017 where a *very* preliminary version of this paper was concocted. Like sexuality and society, plague too is a discursive construct that “although [it has] not always existed [is] nonetheless real” and as such “born precisely from the interplay of relations of power and everything which constantly eludes them.” *Ibid.* Juxtaposing this reality as it is across (trans) *actions/acting* with how it serves functionally as a causal instrument is key for understanding the concept.

⁷ Albert Camus, *The Plague* [1947] (1991).

⁸ In terms of Foucault’s lectures at the Collège de France, this epoch begins with *Abnormal* and “*Society Must Be Defended*,” but becomes more explicit in *Security, Territory, Population* and *The Birth of Biopolitics*. See also Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: An Introduction* [1976] (1990).

⁹ Albert Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus* [1942] (2018).

remained the same.¹⁰ Coronavirus marks a clear occurrence of plague as a totalizing force, both in the Foucauldian and Camusian senses.

PLAGUE BEGETS GOVERNMENTALITY

In January of 1975, during a lecture at the Collège de France¹¹ and later that year in *Discipline and Punish*,¹² Foucault contemplates the nature and formation of what he would soon come to know as governmentality or the structured techniques by which subjects are governed.¹³ For Foucault, plague marks the rise of the invention of positive technologies of power, where these relations center around inclusion, multiplication, and security, rather than exclusion, negation, and rejection. As opposed to the exiling of lepers,¹⁴ Foucault suggests that the partitioning and regulation of both populations and bodies became¹⁵ the response; “the replacement of the exclusion of lepers by the inclusion of plague victims as the model of control was a major phenomenon of the eighteenth century. [...] A certain territory was marked out and closed off: the territory of a town, possibly that of a town and its suburbs, was established as a closed territory.”¹⁶ This alludes to what Foucault describes more succinctly two years later in *Security, Territory, Population*: “[t]hese plague regulations involve literally imposing a partitioning grid on the regions and town struck by plague, with regulations indicating when people can go out, how, at what times, what they must do at home, what type of food they must have, prohibiting certain types of contact, requiring them to present themselves to inspectors, and to open their homes to

¹⁰ More often than not, I will use political and cultural incidents from the United States of America: not because these examples are any more or less paradigmatic or any more or less poignant but only because of my increased familiarity given my own positionality. That is not to say what happened in America should always be extrapolated elsewhere, but it stands to reason that if this American experience at all resembles that of 16th and 17th century Europe or of Camus’ early 20th century Algerian creation, it might just as well bear resemblances with other spatiotemporal realities.

¹¹ See Foucault, *Abnormal*.

¹² Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*.

¹³ Though Foucault gives three meanings for his use of governmentality, the first is most crucial for our purposes: “the ensemble formed by institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, calculations, and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific, albeit very complex, power that has the population as its target, political economy as its major form of knowledge, and apparatuses of security as its essential technical instrument.” Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*, 108. Translator Graham Burchell utilized multiple previous translations of this February 1978 lecture when completing the English translation of *Security, Territory, Population*. This first English translation was based on an Italian version as transcribed and edited by Pasquale Pasquino, first published in *Aut Aut* 167-8, September-December 1978, and it read as follows: “[t]he ensemble formed by the institutions, procedures, analyses and reflections, the calculations and tactics that allow the exercise of this very specific albeit complex form of power, which has as its target population, as its principal form of knowledge political economy, and as its essential technical means apparatuses of security.” Michel Foucault, “Governmentality” [1978], in *The Foucault Effect: Studies in Governmentality* (1991), 102 (reprinted as, “Governmentality” [1978], in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984. Vol. 3, Power* (2000))

¹⁴ *Abnormal*, 43. For a direct contrast of the two societies, see *Discipline and Punish*, 198-200.

¹⁵ Foucault stipulates this different model was “reactivated” rather than newly established: “something else, a different model, was not established but reactivated.” *Abnormal*, 44.

¹⁶ *Abnormal*, 44-45.

inspectors.”¹⁷ So, in turn, plague, and more specifically the plague-stricken town, is the culminating event where mechanisms of power broadly concerned with conduct become explicit and inescapable systems of surveillance, discipline, and regulation.

This phenomenon, this historical moment, this system of surveillance and partitioning stands in stark contrast to what Foucault calls the “literary dream of” plagues.¹⁸ Editors Valerio Marchetti and Antonella Salomoni expand on this “literary dream” citationally in a footnote, listing works spanning millennia,¹⁹ of which Albert Camus’ 1946 novel *La Peste* (English translation 1947, *The Plague*) is the most recently penned. Taking this footnote as referential,²⁰ what Foucault utters in his lecture suggests that these texts represent “a kind of orgiastic dream in which plague is the moment when individuals come apart and when the law is forgotten.”²¹ This deduction may be apt for Thucydides and Lucretius, but a reputable reading of Camus’ tome clearly indicates the same system Foucault postulates.

Consider Foucault’s analysis, that “[i]n each street there were overseers, in each quarter inspectors, in each district someone in charge of the district, and in the town itself either someone was nominated as governor or the deputy mayor was given supplementary powers when plague broke out.”²² Camus paints this picture vividly in his novel as overseers inspect “house by house” the town of Oran,²³ partition “particularly affected central areas,”²⁴ and inordinate power was given to solitary individuals, in this case, the prefect

¹⁷ *Security, Territory, Population*, 9-10.

¹⁸ *Abnormal*, 47

¹⁹ “Cette littérature commence avec Thucydide, *Istoriai*, II, 47, 54, et T. Lucretius Carus, *De natura rerum*, VI, 1138, 1246, et se prolonge jusqu’à A. Artaud, *Le Théâtre et son double*, Paris, 1938, et A. Camus, *La Peste*, Paris, 1946.” Michel Foucault, *Les Anormaux: Cours au Collège de France, 1974-1975*, (1999). In the English edition, the footnote is largely the same, “This literature begins with Thucydides, *Istoriai* (History of the Peloponnesian War), vol. 2, 47, 54, and Lucretius, *De natura rerum* (On the Nature of the Universe), vol. 6, 1138, 1246, and continues with A. Artaud, *Le Theatre et son double* (Paris, Gallimard, 1938). English translation: *The Theater and Its Double*, translated by Mary Caroline Richards (New York: Grove Press, 1958), and A. Camus, *La Peste* (Paris: s.l., 1946) English translation: *The Plague*, translated by S. Gilbert (London: s.l., 1948).” *Abnormal*, 54 fn. 15.

²⁰ It is hard to imagine that Foucault did not have Camus in mind when he refers to this “extremely interesting body of literature in which the plague appears as the moment of panic and confusion in which individuals, threatened by visitations of death, abandon their identities, throw off their masks, forget their status, and abandon themselves to the great debauchery of those who know they are going to die.” *Abnormal*, 47. And in *Discipline and Punish* shortly thereafter: “[a] whole literary fiction of the festival grew up around the plague suspended laws, lifted prohibitions, the frenzy of passing time, bodies mingling together without respect, individuals unmasked, abandoning their statutory identity and the figure under which they had been recognized, allowing a quite different truth to appear.” *Discipline and Punish*, 197. I know not whether Foucault was referencing *The Plague* either time, but some scholars do admit that Foucault was “more of an enthusiastic reader of Camus than of Sartre” [in the original Portuguese “mais leitor entusiasta de Camus do que do próprio Sartre.”]. Ernani Chaves, “Do ‘sonho literário’ ao ‘sonho político’ da peste: Foucault, leitor (crítico) de Camus,” [From the “literary dream” to the “political dream” of the plague: Foucault (critical) reader of Camus] *Voluntas: Revista Internacional de Filosofia* 11:e21 (2020), 2, which gives me pause.

²¹ *Abnormal*, 47.

²² *Abnormal*, 45.

²³ “[H]e had no idea what had happened, but knew that several districts of the town had been isolated for twenty-four hours for a house-to-house inspection.” Camus, *The Plague*, 159-60.

²⁴ “The authorities had the idea of segregating certain particularly affected central areas and permitting only those whose services were indispensable to cross the cordon.” *The Plague*, 168.

rather than the governor or deputy mayor Foucault describes.²⁵ In some ways, Camus' work serves only to imagine the historico-legal descriptions with a new setting and a cast of characters that experience the disciplinary mechanisms firsthand that Foucault illuminates decades later. In one instance, Camus writes that "[t]he authorities had the idea of segregating certain particularly affected central areas and permitting only those whose services were indispensable to cross the cordon. Dwellers in these districts could not help regarding these regulations as a sort of taboo specially directed at themselves, and thus they came, by contrast, to envy residents in other areas their freedom."²⁶ This indicates the direct effect "regulations" have on the conduct of citizens through partitioning and segregation but also how discursive mechanisms like "the taboo" have an ancillary, social effect on second-order conduct (envy at the freedom of others) as well. I would venture as far to say that Camus elucidates how governmentality can only be realized through engaging with this notion of the absurd – or maybe more poetically, "that revolt of the flesh."²⁷

At this point, one must define "the absurd" and in turn question how such a notion is ever engaged. Camus is relatively illusive in terms of the definition itself, preferring instead flowery language, metaphor, or any other of the masking rhetorical tricks one might imagine to lead readers toward a more holistic confrontation with the term instead.²⁸ In a delectable sense of irony, this illusiveness is nothing less than the absurd pursuit applied to that which is only slightly less monumental than human purpose and existential meaning. For Camus, "the Absurd" is the inability for man to find answers to the very questions that spur their own being. How one might engage with such a notion is yet another pursuit, and an absurd one at that. Still, it requires a kind of subversive traversing for man to submit to this disciplinary power. Man must transcend their corporeal capacities – those inherent in their being – to join the multiplicity of relations structuring existence as such. And it is that "revolt of the flesh" which allows man to set aside this human predicament (the Absurd) and engage. To engage is to be governed.

With this engagement in mind, returning to plague, the culmination of forces makes for a clear enough situation – one whose magnitude is evident only through its mechanics. The evolution from the regulation of conduct, through partitioning and visual

²⁵ "An order to that effect can be issued only by the Prefect" and "The most he could do was to put the matter up to the Prefect." Ibid. 30.

²⁶ Ibid. 168-69.

²⁷ Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 14. It is fitting that our introduction to Camus' most celebrated work of philosophy begins here, with "time carr[ying] us." Ibid. 13. This foreshadowing –this "enumeration of the feelings of the absurd" – will have to serve us for now, until this "worst enemy" is truly recognized. Ibid. 13-14.

²⁸ To demonstrate, albeit mirroring the illusiveness, contrast Camus' first usage of absurdity in *The Myth of Sisyphus*: "[w]hat, then, is that incalculable feeling that deprives the mind of the sleep necessary to life? A world that can be explained even with bad reasons is a familiar world. But, on the other hand, in a universe suddenly divested of illusions and lights, man feels an alien, a stranger. His exile is without remedy since he is deprived of the memory of a lost home or the hope of a promised land. This divorce between man and this life, the actor and his setting, is properly the feeling of absurdity" with his last: "[t]he absurd thing is that it should be the soul of this body which it transcends so inordinately. Whoever would like to represent this absurdity must give it life in a series of parallel contrasts." *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 6 and 127 (the latter quote being from the *Appendix: Hope and the Absurd in the Work of Franz Kafka*).

surveillance, to the continuous documentation of the information gathered (as well as the structure of the system in place that necessitates any data to be collected)²⁹ represents a discursive shift in the disciplinary mechanism. Foucault shows this, stating that “everything thus observed had to be permanently recorded by means of this kind of visual examination and by entering all information in big registers.”³⁰ This discursive shift is what allows for the newfound multiplicity to structure man in new ontological ways, mediated through both time and space. In relation to coronavirus, this shift was expounded again, this time through digitalization. Gone were the strictly visual observances and manual recordings as algorithms and data conceptualizations came to continually update the status of the virus on every scale imaginable.³¹ Access to the registers faces a shift as well, for with COVID-19, the ability for individuals to check the number of cases in their area and eventually the number vaccinated became the stated purpose of what in the Foucauldian context is an explicit means of disciplinary power.

Camus predicted this phenomenon as well, writing, “[o]n the following day the next of kin were asked to sign the register of burials, which showed the distinction that can be made between men and, for example, dogs; men's deaths are checked and entered up”³² and “[h]e knew that, over a period whose end he could not glimpse, his task was no longer to cure but to diagnose. To detect, to see, to describe, to register, and then condemn, that was his present function.”³³ This personal description of these acts of surveillance brings governmentality to life in a way that induces readers to vicariously experience the emotions and affects enmeshed in this disciplinary conduct. In that sense, Camus’ prose functions as what Foucault often describes as “the art of government,” if only on this individualized scale; nevertheless, these words reify many of the implications of the conduct in which they describe.

The first of these two Camus quotations acknowledges the perspective of the governed as they are required to confront life and death, albeit repackaged and stripped of their magnitude now that they are mere statistical information. A contemporary analogue from the early days of our pandemic – say, an astute individual searching a COVID-19 tracker³⁴ in their area for an uptick in cases before a trip out in public – takes on a similar tone,

²⁹ It is not particularly ground-breaking that a system of regulation would record the laws themselves, how they function, and when they were enacted; that was in existence centuries prior, but for the surveilling techniques to be self-surveilling as well adds an additional layer to this disciplinary model. For a clear representation of this disciplinary model, see *Discipline and Punish*, 196-97.

³⁰ *Abnormal*, 45

³¹ Manners of surveillance extend past even what my imagination could create, but for an introductory review of how epidemiological surveillance was handled, see Nahla K. Ibrahim, “Epidemiologic surveillance for controlling Covid-19 pandemic: types, challenges and implications,” *Journal of Infection and Public Health*, 13:11 (2020), 1630-38 and for a general review of state surveillance measures see Kristine Eck and Sophia Hatz, “State surveillance and the COVID-19 crisis,” *Journal of Human Rights* 19:5 (2020), 603-12.

³² *The Plague*, 176.

³³ *The Plague*, 192.

³⁴ See generally, CDC COVID Data Tracker. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, <https://covid.cdc.gov/covid-data-tracker/#datatracker-home> (accessed November 23, 2023). But, for an analysis of the ethical concerns involved in COVID-19 tracking apps, see Renate Klar and Dirk Lanzerath, “The ethics of COVID-19 tracking apps – challenges and voluntariness,” *Research Ethics* 16:3-4 (2020), 1–9.

delimited again through digitalization but with the expansion of ubiquitous access to this type of information in turn making the structure of this disciplinary power less obvious or pronounced. The second quotation recenters the state actor – in this case, Rieux the medical doctor – largely in a position of power and control. This character is forced to reconcile what once was his role (curing the ill) with what it is now (diagnosis, detection, registration) and what it will ultimately be (condemnation). In all of these cases, confronting the absurd nature of these disciplinary mechanisms seems just out of reach for the individual in question given the immediacy of their needs in terms of the everyday actions required to continue “living,” but, lingering just to the side, at the precipice of their endeavor, is a sneaking suspicion that their current predicament is unlike that which has come to resemble existence. However, outside of such an ephemeral and situational epiphany, these predicaments show just the opposite: how ordinary disciplinary regimes of this function and potency have become, how quotidian surveillance can be, and how accustomed one becomes to governmentality altogether.

Still, in the plague-stricken town, surveillance is compounded by the notion of inspection, “[t]he gaze is alert everywhere: ‘A considerable body of militia, commanded by good officers and men of substance’, guards at the gates, at the town hall and in every quarter to ensure the prompt obedience of the people and the most absolute authority of the magistrates, ‘as also to observe all disorder, theft and extortion.’”³⁵ This gaze was on full display during the COVID-19 pandemic as lockdown and quarantine measures were not only enacted,³⁶ but enforced.³⁷ Their warrantability, both ethically and in terms of what was legally justifiable, became a matter of contestation around the globe.³⁸ Now, for

³⁵ *Discipline and Punish*, 195-96.

³⁶ The vastness and variation of legal measures taken in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic were immense. For data at the global level, see Thomas Hale, Noam Angrist, Rafael Goldszmidt, Beatriz Kira, Anna Petherick, Toby Phillips, Samuel Webster, Emily Cameron-Blake, Laura Hallas, Saptarshi Majumdar, and Helen Tatlow, “A global panel database of pandemic policies (Oxford COVID-19 Government Response Tracker),” *Nature Human Behaviour* 5 (2021), 529-38. In the United States, collection and analysis of the initial state legal reactions to the onset of the pandemic can be found at Center for Public Health Law Research, “Covid-19: State Emergency Declarations & Mitigation Policies,” *LawAtlas.org* <https://www.lawatlas.org/datasets/covid-19-emergency-declarations> (accessed November 23, 2023).

³⁷ Enforcement mechanisms differed all across the world. In Nigeria overreach and illegalities were reported, Aliiu O. Shodunke, “Enforcement of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown orders in Nigeria: Evidence of public (non)compliance and police illegalities,” *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 77 (2022), 103082, whereas in the United States many laws were left unenforced. Griff Witte, “Coronavirus Shutdowns Have Gone Nationwide. Many Police Departments Aren’t Enforcing Them.” *The Washington Post*. https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/coronavirus-shutdowns-have-gone-nationwide-many-police-departments-arent-enforcing-them/2020/03/25/56be5ed2-6e00-11ea-a3ec-70d7479d83f0_story.html (accessed November 23, 2023). Further, to see examples of the political impact of this enforcement, see Damien Bol, Marco Giani, André Blais, and Peter John Loewen, “The effect of COVID-19 lockdowns on political support: Some good news for democracy?,” *European Journal of Political Research* 60:2 (2021), 497-505.

³⁸ In the United States in particular, this contestation was prevalent to say the least, but for an analysis regarding the trends in the types of laws introduced and passed, whether they expanded or limited public health authority, and how they managed to do so, see Elizabeth Platt, Katie Moran-McCabe, Amy Cook, and Scott Burris, “Trends in US State Public Health Emergency Laws, 2021-2022,” *American Journal of Public Health* 113 (2023), 288-96.

Camus, these agents likewise symbolize the militarization of space and time,³⁹ but they have also come to represent the sheer absurdity of the townspeople's existence—how the order and control of the police is never out of step with the fear and angst that comes with inspection.⁴⁰ This absurdity might have boiled over during the COVID-19 pandemic as new fault lines between ideological groups emphasized the ways in which the conventional “us vs. them” attitudes were malleable in ways that kept them untethered from anything resembling classical dogmatism.⁴¹ A political divide did grow in new and perhaps unexpected ways,⁴² but the same sectarian hegemony was all but entrenched through an unbridled reactionaryism that just happened to maintain the conventional partisan alignment.⁴³

Both authors show us that “[t]he plague is met by order; its function is to sort out every possible confusion: that of the disease, which is transmitted when bodies are mixed together; that of the evil, which is increased when fear and death overcome prohibitions.”⁴⁴ Yet, for one, Foucault, plague serves as the linchpin for the introduction of governmentality, while the other, Camus, is concerned with the impact this phenomenon has on the individual. That being said, Foucault is not inherently silent on this phenomenon: “[plague] lays down for each individual his place, his body, his disease and his death, his well-being, by means of an omnipresent and omniscient power that subdivides itself in a regular, uninterrupted way even to the ultimate determination of the individual, of what characterizes him, of what belongs to him, of what happens to him.”⁴⁵ However, this is the backdrop to which Foucault contrasts the competing dreams of plague.

First, the literary dream where “[a] whole literary fiction of the festival grew up around the plague suspended laws, lifted prohibitions, the frenzy of passing time, bodies mingling together without respect, individuals unmasked, abandoning their statutory identity and the figure under which they had been recognized.”⁴⁶ A similar allusion has certainly been present in regard to the COVID-19 pandemic; news reports have painted

³⁹ *The Plague*, 146.

⁴⁰ *The Plague*, 111-12. See also *Ibid.* at 303-06.

⁴¹ Lauren Jodi Van Scoy, Bethany Snyder, Erin L. Miller, Olubukola Toyobo, Ashmita Grewal, Giang Ha, Sarah Gillespie, Megha Patel, Aleksandra E. Zgierska, and Robert P. Lennon, “‘Us-Versus-Them’: Othering in COVID-19 public health behavior compliance,” *PloS One* 17:1 (2022), e0261726. See also, e.g., Lei Han, “Reading Chinese anti-COVID-19 pandemic narratives on facemasks as the art of disaster governance: a semiotic and biopolitical survey,” *Social Semiotics* 33:2 (2020), 278-285.

⁴² See, for example, Sarah K. Cowan, Nicholas Mark, and Jennifer A. Reich, “COVID-19 Vaccine Hesitancy Is the New Terrain for Political Division among Americans,” *Socius* 7 (2021), 1-3.

⁴³ Ann-Kathrin Rothermel, “What anti-gender and anti-vaccines politics have in common – the construction of gender and the Covid-19 pandemic in right-wing discourses,” *Engenderings – London School of Economics and Political Science*. <https://blogs.lse.ac.uk/gender/2022/04/11/what-anti-gender-and-anti-vaccines-politics-have-in-common-the-construction-of-gender-and-the-covid-19-pandemic-in-right-wing-discourses/> (accessed November 23, 2023).

⁴⁴ *Discipline and Punish*, 197. See also, *The Plague*, 128 (“‘After all,’ the doctor repeated, then hesitated again, fixing his eyes on Tarrou, ‘it’s something that a man of your sort can understand most likely, but, since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn’t it be better for God if we refuse to believe in Him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence.’”).

⁴⁵ *Discipline and Punish*, 197.

⁴⁶ *Discipline and Punish*, 197.

isolated incidences as “chaos”⁴⁷ and “panic,”⁴⁸ or worse, as indicative of the impending deterioration of society’s most treasured, time-tested, and functionally imperative conventions.⁴⁹ The social configuring inherent in this type of sensationalism certainly cognizes an interesting phenomenon where the disciplinary conditions of governmentality create or uncover a new discursive reality, and for Foucault, it is this hyperbolic retelling that “allow[s] a quite different *truth* to appear,”⁵⁰ but, in terms of the disciplinary mechanisms themselves and that which they are more readily said to configure, this same moment constitutes “a political dream of the plague,”⁵¹ where something parallel occurs:

[N]ot the collective festival, but strict divisions; not laws transgressed, but the penetration of regulation into even the smallest details of everyday life through the mediation of the complete hierarchy that assured the capillary functioning of power; not masks that were put on and taken off, but the assignment to each individual of his 'true' name, his 'true' place, his 'true' body, his 'true' disease.⁵²

Interesting here is this interplay between truth and the individual. The truth *of* the individual is created by these plague regulations and their strict divisions. This truth is what allows for the individual – what necessitates individuality even. In some ways, this connected realization is premature, as plague not only structures and orders this collection of individuals: it births them as such, the individual *through* a population. Strikingly, and in somewhat reciprocal terms, Camus describes this as inherent bleakness and the destruction of individuality:

Some [...] even contrived to fancy they were still behaving as free men and had the power of choice. But actually it would have been truer to say that by this time, mid-August, the plague had swallowed up everything and everyone. No longer were there individual destinies; only a collective destiny, made of plague and the

⁴⁷ Searching google for COVID-19 articles from early 2020 to the end of 2021 with “chaos” in the title presented interesting results. For one shining example among many, see, e.g., Angela Giuffrida and Lorenzo Tondo, “Leaked coronavirus plan to quarantine 16m sparks chaos in Italy.” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/08/leaked-coronavirus-plan-to-quarantine-16m-sparks-chaos-in-italy> (accessed November 23, 2023).

⁴⁸ Similar results abound when it comes to “panic,” though toilet-paper panic-buys seemed to catch the majority of the headlines: see, e.g., Noor El-Terk, “Toilet paper, canned food: What explains coronavirus panic buying,” *Al Jazeera*. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/3/13/toilet-paper-canned-food-what-explains-coronavirus-panic-buying> (accessed November 23, 2023). Articles specific to US related panic buys struck a different chord, Ed Pilkington, “US sales of guns and ammunition soar amid coronavirus panic buying,” *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/16/us-sales-guns-ammunition-soar-amid-coronavirus-panic-buying> (accessed November 23, 2023).

⁴⁹ Amy L. Fairchild, “Science Can’t Save Us From Coronavirus Panic,” *Foreign Affairs*. <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-03-10/science-cant-save-us-coronavirus-panic> (accessed November 23, 2023).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.* 197. (emphasis added)

⁵¹ *Ibid.* 197-98.

⁵² *Ibid.* 198.

emotions shared by all. Strongest of these emotions was the sense of exile and of deprivation, with all the crosscurrents of revolt and fear set up by these.⁵³

Perhaps what Camus describes is more similar to the present. COVID-19 was a totalizing force that through quarantine and lockdowns created some kind of universalized experience that privileged progress over desire.⁵⁴ Largely, the pandemic forced individuals to embrace a collectivist attitude, even if only momentarily and without sincerity. In many ways, what Foucault demonstrates in terms of disciplinary power is all but recapitulated each time a fresh pandemic arises.⁵⁵ Yet, should it be said that each instance forges individuality anew? Here, the discrepancies between authors amount to the strongest argument in favor of their unity. For Camus, the central focus is on the ways in which individuality collapses, while Foucault is primarily concerned with the ways in which this disciplinary power creates. It would appear that this political dream is multi-faceted and uneven. Both authors are describing the regulation of conduct, though Foucault describes that regulation in a way that we will come to see as the moment the subject is born, whereas Camus is describing what at least conceptually comes next: how individual subjects contemplate and endure this enforced individuality. The question remains whether the fruits of that contemplation are always already constituted *within* subjectivation.

PLAGUE BEGETS SUBJECTIVATION

What Camus leaves unsaid, Foucault speaks of explicitly; this second central theme regarding plague is that of subjectivation or the process of becoming a subject. The process of subjectivation is crucial to maintaining the disciplinary model brought on by the positive technologies of power introduced through plague: “[i]t is therefore not a matter of taking the individual at the level of individuality but, on the contrary, of using overall mechanisms and acting in such a way as to achieve overall states of equilibration or regularity.”⁵⁶ These overall states are a clear indication of the transition towards “population,”⁵⁷ yet still, the centrality (or to use Foucault’s verbiage “instrumentality”) of the individual and individuality cannot be ignored.⁵⁸ In fact, and perhaps surprisingly, paired with these structural forces, this notion of individuality becomes the nexus for Foucault’s understanding of biopolitics. But without Camusian absurdity, it must be asked whether this analysis ever rises to the level of free will or anything involving agency. This question is answered in the negative regardless, but Camus’ declaration that “[t]here is but one moral code that the absurd man can accept, the one that is not separated from God: the

⁵³ *The Plague*, 167.

⁵⁴ This sentiment might be best captured through the ubiquity of platitudes like “15 days to stop the spread” or “we’re all in this together,” but the impact the pandemic had on collectivism cannot be ignored. See Niklas Harring, Sverker C. Jagers, and Åsa Löfgren, “COVID-19: Large-scale collective action, government intervention, and the importance of trust,” *World Development* 138 (2021).

⁵⁵ Cf. Kathryn A. Glatter and Paul Finkelman, “History of the Plague: An Ancient Pandemic for the Age of COVID-19,” *The American Journal of Medicine* 134:2 (2021), 176-81.

⁵⁶ Foucault, “*Society Must Be Defended*”, 246-47.

⁵⁷ *Security, Territory, Population*, 42.

⁵⁸ *Abnormal*, 46

one that is dictated"⁵⁹ is dependent on Foucault's formulation of the subject. As we will see, for the absurd man, "[h]e who, without negating it, does nothing for the eternal,"⁶⁰ plague serves as the discursive framework that makes dictation both possible (as in the analysis of governmentality) and required (that of subjectivation).

Taking a step back momentarily from the absurd man, we see that "the plague implies an always finer approximation of power to individuals, an ever more constant and insistent observation. With the plague, there is no longer a sort of grand ritual of purification, as with leprosy, but rather an attempt to maximize the health, life, longevity, and strength of individuals."⁶¹ However, though plague (or, as was the case, a particular historical plague from the 16th and 17th centuries)⁶² is the spark, this regulation of bodies and the intersection of power and purity does not depend on plague alone as its biopolitical driver. For this, we must direct our attention to a particular historical development, considered broadly, that Foucault alludes to in his history of governmentality:⁶³ *homo oeconomicus* and the establishment of the subject of interest through the subject of right.

With the development of various forms of counter-conduct within the Christian pastorate,⁶⁴ the break between the function of pastoral power and that of the subject becomes clear, but there is still something to be uncovered before the formation of civil society: the economic man. This economic man, latinized as *homo oeconomicus*, "is someone who pursues his own interest, and whose interest is such that it converges spontaneously with the interest of others."⁶⁵ This again seems eerily similar to Camus' absurd man as the Algerian posits that "[a] mind imbued with the absurd merely judges that [moral] consequences must be considered calmly"⁶⁶ and that "such a mind will consent to use past experience as a basis for future actions."⁶⁷ This description is nothing more than the pursuit of interest applied to ethics. As such, it can be said that both the absurd man and *homo oeconomicus* are the people "who must be let alone,"⁶⁸ so for the time being, at least conceptually, how these positive technologies of power can *subject* an individual remains unanswered.

Regardless, this notion of being let alone conjures up the expectation that man will facilitate his own interest by nothing more than his being in the first place. Again, the

⁵⁹ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 66-67.

⁶⁰ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 66.

⁶¹ *Abnormal*, 46.

⁶² *Security, Territory, Population*, 9-10.

⁶³ "Basically, if I had wanted to give the lectures I am giving this year a more exact title, I certainly would not have chosen "security, territory, population." What I would really like to undertake is something that I would call a history of "governmentality." *Security, Territory, Population*, 108.

⁶⁴ An earlier version of this paper involved an analysis of what Foucault describes as the "five main forms of counter-conduct" developed during the middle ages. *Ibid.* 204. However, with the help and advice of Prof. Daniele Lorenzini, I have come to realize how such an in-depth analysis of counter-conduct was ancillary to the principal aims of this paper. However, as an introduction into this subject, as an investigation into the philosophical nature of Foucault's shift from counter-conduct to critical attitude, see Daniele Lorenzini, "From Counter-Conduct to Critical Attitude: Michel Foucault and the Art of Not Being Governed Quite So Much," *Foucault Studies* 21 (2016), 7-21.

⁶⁵ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 270.

⁶⁶ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 67.

⁶⁷ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 68.

⁶⁸ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 270.

analogy to the COVID-19 pandemic is glaring where we encountered vast swaths of society unable to discern how even their being might impact others.⁶⁹ However, if we can assume some degree of existential turmoil within this pursuit,⁷⁰ for Camus, this dilemma becomes fundamental as a means for facing life itself: “[f]rom the moment absurdity is recognized, it becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all. But whether or not one can live with one’s passions, whether or not one can accept their law, which is to burn the heart they simultaneously exalt—that is the whole question.”⁷¹ Still, this leaves the relation between interest and subjectivation underdefined. Foucault continues,

The person who accepts reality or who responds systematically to modifications in the variables of the environment, appears precisely as someone manageable, someone who responds systematically to systematic modifications artificially introduced into the environment. *Homo œconomicus* is someone who is eminently governable. From being the intangible partner of *laissez-faire*, *homo œconomicus* now becomes the correlate of a governmentality which will act on the environment and systematically modify its variables.⁷²

The introduction of a temporal element is key here as this added metaphysical dimension serves to qualify *homo œconomicus* as a subject with the ability to discursively straddle the present and the future and thus the interest in question is either attained or attainable. Camus threads that same concept of time but into consciousness or, maybe more specifically, being conscious of life’s inherent absurdity:

[O]ne day the “why” arises and everything begins in that weariness tinged with amazement. “Begins” — this is important. Weariness comes at the end of the acts of a mechanical life, but at the same time it inaugurates the impulse of consciousness. It awakens consciousness and provokes what follows. What follows is the gradual return into the chain or it is the definitive awakening. At the end of the awakening comes, in time, the consequence: suicide or recovery.⁷³

Conflating this economic man with the absurd man Camus illustrates is not an exact analogue; *homo œconomicus* is governable *because* consciousness begins, because his own interests can be realized, yet the absurd man is in some ways forced to confront what that pursuit would entail. The irony here is that for the economic man, time is revelatory – that which allows him the chance to attain; but for the absurd man, time is what forces him to confront the potential meaninglessness of life. The COVID-19 man, if you will, is somewhere in between, equipped with hope for an inevitable post-pandemic life where that

⁶⁹ At the risk of sounding too cynical, I should acknowledge that research shows some degree of the inverse occurred as well. Bojana Bodroža and Bojana M. Dinić, “Personality and context-related factors of helping and helping-related affect during early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic,” *Scandinavian Journal of Psychology* 64 (2022), 89-98.

⁷⁰ For Foucault, I think this assumption is negligible if not wholly unimportant.

⁷¹ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 22.

⁷² *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 270-71 (emphasis added).

⁷³ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 13.

chance to attain resumes, while stuck in the present confronting the degree to which that inevitability is certain. Consciousness here is that which induces the vitality of the absurd.

Still, for Foucault, consciousness alone is not what delivers the economic man, for there has been an introduction of “a subject who is not so much defined by his freedom, or by the opposition of soul and body, [...] but who appears in the form of a subject of individual choices which are both irreducible and non-transferable [in relation to the subject].”⁷⁴ This subject of individual choices is the “truly serious philosophical problem,”⁷⁵ even if those admittedly high stakes are not immediately obvious. Foucault asks “[w]hat do I mean by irreducible?”⁷⁶ And, perhaps Camus already provided an acceptable answer: that which made any simpler would become paradoxical.⁷⁷ What is clear for each philosopher is that choice is not synonymous with freedom. And for many, COVID-19 made tangible that discrepancy as individuals have had to face just how little freedom is present in the irreducible choices one faces in a pandemic: Why do you lock down? Why do you wear a mask? Why did you get vaccinated? Why do you quarantine? If pressed, most if not all of those questions are reducible to the same paraphrase Foucault used when referring to Hume, “why is illness painful?”⁷⁸

Further, Foucault questions “whether this subject of interest or form of will called interest can be considered as the same type of will as the juridical will or is capable of being connected to the juridical will.”⁷⁹ To put it another way, he is asking the degree to which an irreducible question (like choosing between pain and not-pain, i.e., the basis for interest) is constitutive of that which makes one a *legal* subject. Again, Camus answers, though this time more illusively, “[w]hat interests me, indeed, is knowing and describing the force that leads them back toward the common path of illusion.”⁸⁰ Though Foucault does

⁷⁴ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 271-72.

⁷⁵ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 3.

⁷⁶ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 272.

⁷⁷ “The very simplicity of these paradoxes makes them irreducible.” *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 17. Foucault’s answer is lengthier but still poignant, “I will take Hume’s very simple and frequently cited passage, which says: What type of question is it, and what irreducible element can you arrive at when you analyze an individual’s choices and ask why he did one thing rather than another? Well, he says: “You ask someone, ‘Why do you exercise?’ He will reply, ‘I exercise because I desire health.’ You go on to ask him, ‘Why do you desire health?’ He will reply, ‘Because I prefer health to illness.’ Then you go on to ask him, ‘Why do you prefer health to illness?’ He will reply, ‘Because illness is painful and so I don’t want to fall ill.’ And if you ask him why is illness painful, then at that point he will have the right not to answer, because the question has no meaning.” The painful or non-painful nature of the thing is in itself a reason for the choice beyond which you cannot go. The choice between painful and non-painful is a sort of irreducible that does not refer to any judgment, reasoning, or calculation. It is a sort of regressive end point in the analysis.” (emphasis added). *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 272

⁷⁸ To demonstrate using just one of my examples: “You ask someone, ‘why do you lockdown? They will reply, ‘I lockdown because I do not want to catch [or spread] coronavirus?’ You go on to ask them, ‘Why do you not want to catch coronavirus?’ They answer, ‘Because I desire health’” and from there the hypothetical is identical. However, these examples may differ slightly in that with COVID-19 precautions there was inherently (or maybe optimistically) a degree of acknowledgement of the role of the collective in vaccination, quarantine, wearing masks, and perhaps even lockdowns. Still, no matter how many questions involved in the reduction, some version of preferring life over death is always the end result.

⁷⁹ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 273.

⁸⁰ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 102.

not go as far as to suggest a common path of illusion, he does state that “in the state of nature and before the contract, these interests are threatened,”⁸¹ and thus “to protect at least some of their interests they are forced to sacrifice others.”⁸² This notion of the contract is key as it is representative of interest altogether, “interest appears here as an empirical source of the contract. And the juridical will which is then formed, the legal subject who is constituted through the contract, is basically the subject of interest, but a purified subject of interest who has become calculating, rationalized, and so on.”⁸³

However, Foucault reminds us that “the appearance and the emergence of the contract have not replaced a subject of interest with a subject of right”⁸⁴ and thus sews some doubt as to the uniformity between juridical will and interest:

[J]uridical will does not take over from interest. The subject of right does not find a place for itself in the subject of interest. The subject of interest remains, subsists, and continues up to the time a juridical structure, a contract exists. For as long as the law exists, the subject of interest also continues to exist. The subject of interest constantly overflows the subject of right. He is therefore irreducible to the subject of right. He is not absorbed by him. He overflows him, surrounds him, and is the permanent condition of him functioning. So, interest constitutes something irreducible in relation to the juridical will.⁸⁵

The crucial insistence at issue is less about the construction of a contract and more about what the contract constructs. The interplay here is interesting because the governable subject is manifested *through* the juridical instruments that structure their existence: *homo oeconomicus* is situated in a duplicitous field of governed conduct on the one hand and the discursivity of interest on the other.

Perhaps expectedly, “the subject of interest is never called upon to relinquish his interest.”⁸⁶ However, it would appear that if interest can be linked to passion, not only the economist would be shouting absurdity:⁸⁷ “[f]rom the moment absurdity is recognized, it becomes a passion, the most harrowing of all. But whether or not one can live with one’s passions, where or not one can accept their law, which is to burn the heart they simultaneously exalt—that is the whole question.”⁸⁸ It stands to reason that the passion of interest is imbued with the absurd, as the “absurd is the confrontation of this irrational and the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart.”⁸⁹ Foucault cements this “wild longing” as “[n]ot only may each pursue their own interest, they must pursue it through and through by pushing it to the utmost, and then, at that point, you will find the elements on the basis of which not only will the interest of others be preserved, but will

⁸¹ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 273.

⁸² *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 273.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.* at 274.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.* at 274.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.* at 275.

⁸⁷ See *ibid.* “The economists’ [response] to this is: Absurdity!”

⁸⁸ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 22.

⁸⁹ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 22.

thereby be increased.”⁹⁰ That being said, in Camus’ rigid adherence to the individual, he misses the key trait that sets interest/passion apart, “the will of each [individual subject] harmonizes spontaneously and as it were involuntarily with the will and interest of others.”⁹¹ COVID-19 demonstrates just how necessary individual interest is in the creation of a collective interest.⁹² Moreover, Camus misses that “[t]he production of the collective interest through the play of desire is what distinguishes both the naturalness of population and the possible artificiality of the means one adopts to manage it.”⁹³ Still, Camus acknowledges that “[t]he mind’s deepest desire, even in its most elaborate operations, parallels man’s unconscious feeling in the face of his universe: it is an insistence upon familiarity, an appetite for clarity,”⁹⁴ and thus the cycle continues.

All in all, plague has now left us with governable subjects, yet this subject of interest is not without predicament: “interest [...] is dependent upon on an infinite number of things. The interest of the individual will depend on accidents of nature about which he can do nothing and which he cannot foresee.”⁹⁵ Whether it be through the political tensions of the present or the developmental limitations of the past, even in the face of a “chaos of an experience divested of its setting and relegated to its original incoherence,”⁹⁶ “all these involuntary, indefinite, uncontrollable, and non-totalizable features of his situation do not disqualify his interest or the *calculation* he may make to maximize it.”⁹⁷ Hence, the question remains, for the economic man, the absurd man, and the COVID-19 man as to whether, “all the knowledge on earth will give me nothing to assure me that this world is mine.”⁹⁸ Truth, as a cutting example of counter-conduct, is obstinate, “[y]ou must not because you cannot. And you cannot in the sense that “you are powerless.” And why are you powerless, why can’t you? You cannot because you do not know, and you do not know because you cannot know.”⁹⁹ Moreover, “the constitution of a specific subject, of a subject whose merits are analytically identified, who is subjected in continuous networks of obedience, and who is subjectified (*subjectivé*) through the compulsory extraction of truth.”¹⁰⁰

⁹⁰ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 275.

⁹¹ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 276.

⁹² Clifton Van der Linden and Justin Savoie, “Does Collective Interest or Self-Interest Motivate Mask Usage as a Preventive Measure Against COVID-19?” *Canadian Journal of Political Science/Revue Canadienne De Science Politique* 53:2 (2020), 391–97.

⁹³ *Security, Territory, Population*, 73.

⁹⁴ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 17.

⁹⁵ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 277.

⁹⁶ Originally this line is in reference to “the spiritual adventure that leads Kierkegaard to his beloved scandals,” but I find it useful outside of that explicit context. *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 26.

⁹⁷ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 278 (emphasis added).

⁹⁸ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 19.

⁹⁹ *The Birth of Biopolitics*, 283.

¹⁰⁰ *Security, Territory, Population*, 184-85.

PLAGUE BEGETS TRUTH

Foucault's initial interest in plague did not begin with governmentality and the positive techniques of power exhibited in Europe during the middle ages. No, Foucault began exploring plague as a discursive mechanism much, much earlier, both in terms of his career and historical developments. Foucault's first voyage into plague and the plague-stricken society instead begins with Oedipus,¹⁰¹ Thebes, and "Truth" as Foucault analyzes a particular aspect of truth, namely its relationship with power-knowledge.

Foucault first explores Oedipus, and this specific manifestation of truth in the final lecture of his first year of lectures at the Collège de France, *Lectures on the Will to Know*.¹⁰² Foucault instills in us that "[t]he whole of the Oedipus tragedy is permeated by the effort of the whole city to transform the enigmatic dispersion of human events (murders, plagues) and divine threats into [certified] facts. When the *miasma* reigns in the city, it is because there is something to be known."¹⁰³ So, here, from the outset, Foucault is imbedding the "phenomenon" of plague, the literary dream of the plague even, with/in the search for truth – plague *is* a problem *because* there is something to be known/there is something to be known *because* plague *is* a problem. But, he continues, "[t]he truth is what makes it possible to exclude; to separate what is dangerously mixed; to distribute the inside and outside properly; to trace the boundaries between what is pure and what is impure."¹⁰⁴ Truth is mechanistic, a positive technology of power, utilizable as a technique for governing.

Foucault does not elucidate on this relationship with governmentality this early in his tenure at the Collège de France, because he is instead focused on the dichotomous nature of what is being separated and distributed. In fact, one year later, Foucault continues and expands in a lecture held at Buffalo University entitled "Oedipal Knowledge," where these duplicitous binaries set the stage for the symbolic "halves" Foucault uses to paint the play thematically,

The halves which come to complement each other are like the fragments of a symbol whose reunited totality has the value of proof and attestation. Oedipus is a "symbolic" story, a story of circulating fragments, which pass from hand to hand and the lost half of which one is looking for: from Phoebus to the seer, from Jocasta to Oedipus, from the messenger to the shepherd—so from the gods to the kings and from the kings to the slaves. And when, finally, the last slave leaves his hut with the last fragment of knowledge still needed in his hand, then the "narrative" half has joined the "oracle" half, the "incest" half has joined the "murder" half, the "Theban" half has joined the "Corinthian" half, and the total figure is

¹⁰¹ Sophocles, "Oedipus the King," in *The Three Theban Plays* (1984). Foucault notes that he is focused on "the tragedy of Oedipus, the one we can read in Sophocles" and that "I'll leave aside the problem of the mythical background to which it is linked." Michel Foucault, "Truth and Juridical Forms" [1974], in *Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984. Vol. 3. Power* (2000), 17. As such, we will leave this mythical background aside as well.

¹⁰² Michel Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1970-1971* (2013).

¹⁰³ Foucault, *Lectures on the Will to Know*, 185.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.* 187.

reconstituted. The tessera has been reformed from its scattered fragments. The *sumbolon* is complete.¹⁰⁵

This mechanism is crucial for the uncovering of the particular power-knowledge component at issue. In fact, the play “is representative and in a sense the founding instance of a definite type of relation between power and knowledge [savoir], between political power and knowledge [connaissance], from which our civilization is not yet emancipated.”¹⁰⁶ The “fitting together and interlocking”¹⁰⁷ nature of these halves is a tacit reminder that “[t]he exercise of power consists in guiding the possibility of conduct and putting in order the possible outcome.”¹⁰⁸ For Oedipus as well as the reader, the existence of the halves themselves is not where the “action” lies but the coming together and buttressing of those halves that incite and develop what comes next – what is to be known. Of course, this play rests holistically on competing knowledges. There is the divine knowledge of the Oracle and the mystical Teiresias.¹⁰⁹ The human knowledge that “Oedipus and the whole city of Thebes are seeking”¹¹⁰ is multifaceted; on the one hand, the citizens seek knowledge through testimony and confession, which leads to truth, which stands in sharp contrast to the tyrannical knowledge that Oedipus conjures: “the king and those around him held a knowledge that could not and must not be communicated to the other social groups. Knowledge and power were exactly reciprocal, correlative, superimposed. There couldn’t be any knowledge without power; and there couldn’t be any political power without the possession of a certain type of knowledge.”¹¹¹ Still, Foucault surmises that “[Oedipus] himself *is* the plague the gods have visited on the city”¹¹² and that

It is this power-knowledge that is exposed, risked, endangered by the plague of Thebes: if the king does not know what is to be done, if he does not know who is responsible for the defilement, if he does not know to whom the purifying rite must be applied, then he will be lost along with the city.¹¹³

What is interesting here is that the “cure,” so to speak, for plague is the same exclusion/partitioning that begets governmentality a millennium or so later. However, that manifestation of governmentality occurring in the 16th and 17th centuries was levied onto a population through a totalizing and structured multiplicity of discursive power which then served to regulate the conduct of individuals, whereas, in Ancient Thebes, according to Foucault, the king alone functions as the totalizing and structured multiplicity of discursive power and his access to truth/the truth is what determines or accounts for the

¹⁰⁵ “Oedipal Knowledge,” in *Lectures on the Will to Know*, 234-35.

¹⁰⁶ Foucault, “Truth and Juridical Forms,” 17.

¹⁰⁷ “Truth and juridical forms,” 19.

¹⁰⁸ Michel Foucault, “The Subject and Power,” *Critical Inquiry* 8:4 (1982), 789

¹⁰⁹ For a splendid analysis of Foucault’s continued and constant use of Oedipus, see Corey McCall, “Oedipal fragments: Reconsidering the significance of Oedipus for James Bernauer and Michel Foucault,” *Philosophy & Social Criticism* 47:8 (2021), 951-52.

¹¹⁰ “Truth and juridical forms,” 18.

¹¹¹ “Truth and juridical forms,” 31.

¹¹² “Oedipal Knowledge,” in *Lectures on the Will to Know*, 243. (emphasis added).

¹¹³ “Oedipal Knowledge,” in *Lectures on the Will to Know*, 244.

directionality of the hypothetical biopolitical prerogative, in this case a habitable and even prosperous city. Of note, as was the occurrence in the Christian Pastorate between these two historical moments, the birth of the subject is required to shift the matrix of salvation (as an axial and indexical phenomenon) from being held within an individual (the sovereign) to being conceptually (and spatially) determined by an entire population.

In some ways, we have seen a similar prognostication during our own contemporary plague. Exchange oracles for the medical community attempting to understand the novel coronavirus, and kings with the political leaders attempting to make manifest solutions to the global crisis, and you have a similar story. Key for each is access to knowledge and access to truth, both delineated through relations of power.

Foucault again delves into the Sophocles play in 1980 in his *On the Government of the Living* lectures, dedicating the first four lectures of the year to Oedipus and truth.¹¹⁴ Inescapably, this exploration now begins by connecting truth with governmentality, “one cannot govern without in one way or another entering into the game of truth.”¹¹⁵ Likewise, “there cannot be any government without those who govern indexing their actions, choices, and decisions to a whole set of bodies of knowledge.”¹¹⁶ Knowledge here is of course discursive and so too is this process of “indexing.” However, Camus is not silent on this matter either. Relatedly, in an invocation for subjectivity and a certain nostalgia for contentedness, Camus beckons that “relative truths are the only ones to [stir him];”¹¹⁷ he harkens more directly elsewhere “that no truth is absolute or can render satisfactory an existence that is impossible itself.”¹¹⁸ Emphatically, neither philosopher is suggesting that an ultimate and discernable body of knowledge need exist to bring forth the governable subject, but, and Foucault utilizes Oedipus directly to make this point, the tertiary space connecting subjectivity and truth requires *action* (the truth-telling of the slaves in Oedipus’ case) as “what was said in a sort of enigmatic and suspended truth at the beginning of the play [become[s] the inevitable truth to which Oedipus is forced to submit and the spectators themselves have to recognize.”¹¹⁹ Camus bears witness to this as well, early in his 1947 novel, though outside of the Oedipal context, stating, “The truth is that everyone is bored, and devotes himself to cultivating habits. Our citizens wor[k] hard, but solely with the object of getting rich. Their chief interest is in commerce, and their chief aim in life is, as they call it, “doing business.””¹²⁰ It is this understanding of the townspeople of Oran that predicts their eventual reaction to plague. In other words, in each

¹¹⁴ Michel Foucault, *On the Government of the Living: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1979-1980* [2012] (2014), 1-92.

¹¹⁵ Foucault, *On the Government of the Living*, 13.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹¹⁷ Albert Camus, “Summer in Algiers” [1950], in *Lyrical and Critical Essays* (1970), 90. The translation here is “that move me,” but, in addition to shifting the pronoun reference, I have utilized an older and perhaps more colorful translation of “m’êmeuvent” that captures the inner turmoil and cause to action that these “relative truths” conjure for Camus.

¹¹⁸ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 25-26.

¹¹⁹ *On the Government of the Living*, 41-42.

¹²⁰ *The Plague*, 4.

instance, truth is not revealed so much as it is revealed *again*, and then with a multiplicity of connections between the bodies of knowledge and action.

Still, in regard to Oedipus, the king must reconcile himself, his truth, and his role as the sovereign: “[i]n order to govern the city, does one need to transform those who do not know into those who know? Is it necessary to transform all those who do not know into people who know?”¹²¹ These questions beget another: what truth must be known for one to be governable? For Oedipus, that answer is relatively simple: uncovering the truth was the answer to both plague and his own demise; his speaking the truth of himself freed the city and in turn kept them governable. For the rest of us, since “[w]e are obliged to speak of ourselves in order to tell the truth of ourselves;”¹²² it is not enough to be in the presence of truth or to simply access the truth:

In this obligation to speak about oneself you can see the eminent place taken by discourse. Putting oneself in discourse is in actual fact one of the major driving forces in the organization of subjectivity and truth relationships in the Christian West. Subjectivity and truth will no longer connect so much, primordially, or anyway not only in the subject’s access to the truth. There will always have to be this inflection of the subject towards its own truth through the intermediary of perpetually putting oneself into discourse.¹²³

And just like that, we are back to the individual. But as such, we are incised with the juridico-discursive framework that comes with it; we are in control and controlled for. We are simultaneously the means for accessing truth and a truth within itself. Likewise, here we see the formation of the self, “[t]he self has, on the contrary, not to be discovered but to be constituted, to be constituted through the force of truth.”¹²⁴ It is this creative constitution of the force of truth that allows for the individual to even be discursively possible. As such, this individual is constantly in motion and constantly changing. Applied to our current situation, in the midst of a global pandemic,

[O]ne no longer needs to be king, to have killed one’s father, married one’s mother, and ruled over the plague to be forced to discover the truth of oneself. It is enough to be anyone. One does not have to be Oedipus to be obliged to seek one’s truth. No people in the grip of the plague asks it of you, but merely the whole, institutional, cultural, and religious system, and soon the whole social system to which we belong.¹²⁵

And if COVID has actually shown us anything, it is the grandiose ways in which an individual’s *own truth*, for some, is to be privileged above all else. This was made manifest from the outset of the pandemic as skepticism about the medical consensus or even the

¹²¹ *On the Government of the Living*, 56.

¹²² *Ibid.* 311.

¹²³ *Ibid.*

¹²⁴ Michel Foucault, *About the Beginning of the Hermeneutics of the Self, Lectures at Dartmouth College, 1980* (2016), 210.

¹²⁵ *On the Government of the Living*, 311-12.

presence of anything troubling at all was the reaction from a sizeable portion of society.¹²⁶ This grew into competing imaginaries of the state of existence, where all truth became not only contested but, in many cases, weaponized. In a way, Camus predicted this emphatically in the first moments of “plague;” it was doubt and hope that served to structure how everything was handled. In fact, it was this connection to a truth, albeit if only hopeful, that allowed for living at all:

But these extravagant forebodings dwindled in the light of reason. True, the word “plague” had been uttered; true, at this very moment one or two victims were being seized and laid low by the disease. Still, that could stop, or be stopped. It was only a matter of lucidly recognizing what had to be recognized; of dispelling extraneous shadows and doing what needed to be done. Then the plague would come to an end, because it was unthinkable, or, rather, because one thought of it on misleading lines. If, as was most likely, it died out, all would be well. If not, one would know it anyhow for what it was and what steps should be taken for coping with and finally overcoming it.¹²⁷

Everyone is permitted some semblance of epistemological access to what they think might occur in the future and the degree to which any other truth shapes them further, but this capacity for unraveling is marked not by any objective, ontological truth but instead only by one’s relation to truth as such. Still, Oedipus is the shining example of the hubris that comes with the ability to seek, and worse to attain, what constitutes truth. The succinctness that comes with the truth – with knowing the truth – keeps the subject governed and, in some ways, eliminates the possibility for freedom altogether. For certain, “[i]n the end, what befell Oedipus was that, knowing too much, he didn’t know anything,”¹²⁸ and that might just be what absurdly befell/s us all, both in and out of Coronavirus.

So, truth itself is not the answer but the mechanism that binds the population together. Truth is required for that which makes governable subjects possible altogether but, more importantly, truth is the final variable within the power-knowledge relation that keeps everything in motion. In that sense, the answer to Rieux’s question is the same no matter if we ask it about plague or if we ask it about truth, “[b]ut what does that mean— ‘plague’?”¹²⁹ That is the question. “Just life, no more than that.”¹³⁰ That is the answer. And still, to take Camus’ sentiments even further, in the face of such surreal/mundane sublimity/ordinariness, how might one “[j]udg[e] whether life is or is not worth living[?]”¹³¹ If it takes place every day, might we not wait for this last judgment?¹³²

¹²⁶ Ashley Kirzinger, “The COVID-19 Pandemic: Insights from Three Years of KFF Polling,” *KFF.org*. <https://www.kff.org/coronavirus-covid-19/poll-finding/the-covid-19-pandemic-insights-from-three-years-of-kff-polling/> (accessed November 23, 2023).

¹²⁷ *The Plague*, 40-41.

¹²⁸ “Truth and juridical forms,” 32.

¹²⁹ *The Plague*, 307.

¹³⁰ *The Plague*, 307.

¹³¹ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 3.

¹³² Albert Camus, *The Fall* [1956] (1991), 111.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

With that, we have come full circle. From Camus to Foucault and back again, the notion of plague has demonstrated the degree to which governmentality must exist for the birth of the subject and, in the biopolitical sense, the regulation of conduct in the plague-stricken town is a prerequisite for a preservable life, inescapable from a discourse of truth thrust on a population. This reality rears its head in ancient Greece, in medieval Europe, in fictional 20th century North Africa, and even in the present. The COVID-19 Global Pandemic, *inter alia*, has shown us that there is still conduct to be governed, there is still truth to create, and there are still life processes to manage. If anything, this article hopefully shows the degree to which current predicaments are comparable or even indistinguishable from how we have come to discern historical moments of the past. As such, plague is little more than a discursive framework for how to engage that which brings death, thrust on a society already condemned to decipher a multiplicity of ways of living.

Still, what does plague mean for one *to live* truly? And what does plague mean for Sisyphus?—the one who pays the price “for the passions of this earth.”¹³³ Is that in and of itself a sign of having been governed or presently being governable? The passions of this earth? What of absurdity? Is the search for truth an absurd pursuit? Camus states that “[t]here exists an obvious fact [...] that a man is always a *prey* to his truths. Once he has admitted them, he cannot free himself from them. One has to pay something. A man who has become conscious of the absurd is forever *bound* to it.”¹³⁴ Surely Foucault would agree. Prey and bondage both indicate regimes of discipline, and they are not particularly subtle. What does it mean to be prey to truth? What does it mean to be bound to the absurd? In each the attachment is hierarchical though solitary. And for Foucault, admitting these truths requires a specific and hegemonic positionality: “there is no establishment of the truth without an essential position of otherness; the truth is never the same; there can be truth only in the form of the other world and the other life (*l’autre monde et de la vie autre*).”¹³⁵ Caught between these two characterizations of truth, the absurd and the other, is a milieu of subjectivation and choice. In the face of this other world and the other life, Camus declares “I want to know whether I can live with what I know and with that alone”¹³⁶ and that “[l]iving is keeping the absurd alive,”¹³⁷ whereas Foucault postulates “how to live if I must face up to the fact that ‘nothing is true?’”¹³⁸ Choosing to live with the truth and choosing to live at all. Perhaps it is actually Sisyphus that “constantly reminds us that very little truth is indispensable for whoever wishes to live truly and that very little life is needed when one truly holds to the truth.”¹³⁹ And perhaps instead, if

¹³³ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 120.

¹³⁴ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 31 (emphasis added).

¹³⁵ Michel Foucault, *The Courage of Truth: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1983-1984* (2011), 340.

¹³⁶ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 40.

¹³⁷ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 54.

¹³⁸ Foucault, *The Courage of Truth*, 190.

¹³⁹ *The Courage of Truth*, 190.

Sisyphus does not exist, everything is permitted.¹⁴⁰ Might that be what it means to “imagine Sisyphus happy[?]”¹⁴¹ Must that be the truth?

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¹⁴⁰ Both Foucault in *The Courage of Truth* and Camus in *The Myth of Sisyphus* allude to this cardinal Dostoevsky passage.

¹⁴¹ *The Myth of Sisyphus*, 123.

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