

# ASSESSING DANIEL DEFOE'S, *A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR* FROM A COVID-19 PERSPECTIVE, AKONDO Dyfaizi Nouhr-Dine

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## Abstract

Poor sanitary and health conditions have always confronted humanity with epidemics throughout history. A history of plagues Allows us to set *A journal of the Plague Year*, in the series second period of pandemics ranging from the 14th to 19th centuries. The novel presents accounts of people facing the advent of the 1665 Bubonic plague. The reader is exposed to the predicament of a fictional English citizens' perceptions and their reactions to the spreading ail. The present study seeks to develop a reading of *A Journal of the Plague Year* in the light of happenings during the advent of COVID-19. From a socio-critical perspective, as viewed by Karl Marx, Mikhail Bakhtin, the study highlights the representation of society according to time and realities in the face of the Bubonic plague and COVID-19. It has found that the human experience has developed from fear to dilemma and control mechanisms put into place by the institutions entitled to provide for the citizen's welfare.

**Key words:** Bubonic Plague, Covid-19, perspective, predicament, resilience

## ÉVALUATION DE *A JOURNAL OF THE PLAGUE YEAR* DE DANIEL DEFOE DANS UNE PERSPECTIVE COVID-19

### Résumé

Les mauvaises conditions sanitaires ont toujours confronté l'humanité à des épidémies à travers l'histoire. Une histoire des pestes permet de situer *A Journal of the Plague Year* dans la série de la deuxième période des pandémies allant du 14<sup>e</sup> au 19<sup>e</sup> siècle. Le roman présente des récits de personnes confrontées à l'avènement de la peste bubonique de 1665. Le lecteur est exposé aux conditions difficiles des citoyens fictifs anglais et à leurs perceptions et réactions face à la propagation de la maladie. La présente étude vise à lire *A Journal of the Plague Year* à la lumière des événements survenus lors de l'avènement du COVID-19. A partir de la perspective sociocritique vue par Karl Marx et Mikhail Bhaktin, l'étude met en exergue la représentation de la société selon le temps et les réalités face à la peste bubonique et au COVID-19. Il résulte de l'étude que l'expérience humaine est passées de la peur au dilemme et à des mécanismes de contrôle mis en place par les institutions chargées d'assurer le bien-être des citoyens.

**Mots clés :** Peste bubonique, Covid-19, perspective, situation difficile, résilience

### Introduction

It is a well-known fact that humanity has periodically gone through hard times in terms of health issues. Both history and creative literature have deft accounts of how from Ancient Egypt to the 21st century, pandemics have hit

human societies and caused unspeakable losses. In 17th-century Europe, the Spanish Plague and the English Black Death also known as The Bubonic Plague stood as crucial ordeals to the people in those days. A look at the history of plagues reveals that “Between 1603 and 1665, London was beset by pestilence for a total of twenty-eight years, ... comprehending all other sickness in itself” (Paul, 2022, p. 86) Ben Johnson has in focus related to the same evidence when he says that: Many aspects of the plague representations echo peripetia during COVID-19. Historically, it appears that the 17th-century London suffered two terrible disasters. In the spring and summer of 1665, an outbreak of the Bubonic Plague spread from parish to parish causing thousands of deaths and the huge pits dug to receive the bodies became quickly full. “In 1666 the Great Fire of London destroyed much of the center of London, but also helped to kill off some of the black rats and fleas that carried the plague bacillus.” (Ben, 2020, p. no page number)

In the context of pestilence, it must be noted that the spread is favored by vectors such as rodents, birds, insects, and unclean human habits. Daniel Defoe's *The Journal of the Plague Year* epitomizes human predicament under the Bubonic Plague. The book is a fictionalized account of the Great Plague of London also known as the Black Death in 1665 as it traces the advent of the pestilence, the disaster it constituted, and the reactions of individual citizens and the state itself. Daniel Defoe's depictions of the advent of the pestilence proceed through the diary of the protagonist and embodies tropes that call up the 21st century Covid-19, for in terms of origins, it was believed that “The [Bubonic] plague started in the East, possibly China, and quickly spread through Europe. Whole communities were wiped out and corpses littered the streets as there was no one left to bury them.” (Barbara, 2022, p. no page number) Here is evidence that points at China as the origin of the ail in the same way as contemporary science, state institutions, and international media have poked a blaming finger at China as the origin of the 21st century COVID-19 and how it affected people worldwide.

In March 28, 2020 Book section of the Gardian an interview with Catherine Camus, the daughter of Albert Camus, indicated that for his allegorical novel *The Plague* was outpacing its publisher's ability to print them. Catherine Camus attributed the increase in demand to the relevance of the novel in the midst of our current COVID-19 pandemic. The younger Camus explained that the novel brings to the fore the question of human responsibility in the face of crises whether they be political or natural. While Camus' novel certainly is relevant to our current politics and pandemics it might be that Daniel Defoe's historical novel *A Journal of the Plague Year* is equally if not more relevant in the face of COVID-19 pandemic. (Vearrier, 2021, p. 2)

This goes without saying that the advent of Covid-19 shares a lot in terms of events and human response to the 1665 Bubonic Plague in England. I hereby posit, given the evidence in the novel, that human attitude to the plagues seems not to have varied owing to the sense of emergency and the anxiety that takes hold of victims and generates a morale of alertness and survival.

The present study has no pretension to establish scientific and medical evidence about plagues or their place of origin but to explore Karl Marx's views of

social dynamics and Mikhail Bakhtin's thoughts of cultural and the literary dialogism to analyze human predicament through comparison and analogy between events as read in *The Journal of the Plague Year* and the occurrences of the 21st century COVID-19 pandemic. The study is subdivided into three sections. The first section elaborates on the fit of fear and desperation that has taken over all fictional and real communities upon hearing news of the pandemic. In the second section, attention will be focused on the dilemma of the people in the plague days, namely how people economically struggle to survive the pestilence. The third section will look at how the reactions of governments and the measures taken by state institutions and representatives in Defoe's novel stand as tropes of contemporary states' attitudes to the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **1. Fear and Desperation on the Advent of the Plague**

The morale of people in the fictive world of *The Journal of the Plague Year* shares a lot in common with the 21st-century man on the advent of COVID-19. Fear and desperation tend to have taken over people's composure and mental health. The novel epitomizes characters facing the 1665 London plague and how they psychologically navigate such an atmosphere of fear and alarm. It is clear from Defoe's depictions that "The psychological footprint of pandemics tends to be larger than the medical footprint, in that psychological effects are more pronounced, widespread, and longer-lasting than the purely somatic effects of infection." (Defoe, 2019, p. 6) News of the Bubonic plague seems to have warped the mental stability and composure of the inhabitants of the various parishes of London during the pestilence. Clues of such evidence in the novel lie in the contemporary man's reaction to the supposed "Wuhan pestilence" that took over the globe and the world stability from Spain to New York and from India to Brazil.

In *The Journal of the Plague Year*, the reader is given hints of the advent of the plague in the same way as news about COVID-19 spread worldwide. News of the plague broke like trivial rumors with a great concern in the origins. The reader is told that:

It was about the beginning of September, 1664, that I among the rest of my neighbours, heard in ordinary discourse that the plague was returned again in Holland; for it had been very violent there, and particularly at Amsterdam and Rotterdam, in the year 1663, wither, they say, it was brought, some said from Italy, others from the Levant, among some goods which were brought home by the Turkey fleet; others said it was brought from Candia, others from Cyprus. It mattered not from whence it came, but all agreed it was come from into Holland again. (Defoe, 2019, p. 1)

The gist of the excerpt above is not about whether the ail is real or not but what people believed the ail came from. There is a hint of uncertainty which demonstrates a lurking bewilderment in the people and the society at large. The experience of the narrator navigating such an atmosphere of uncertainty is telling enough and denotes how mankind has always reacted to spreading threats and pestilence. *The Journal of the Plague Year* embodies tropes that refer to the outbreak of COVID-19. Human reactions and attitudes to pandemics seem to

survive time and societies to the point of leaving the impression that pandemics have something in common. In *The Psychology of Pandemics*, Steven Taylor says it well when he holds that:

Pandemics or outbreaks tend to have their own characteristic signatures, such as their historical and sociocultural characteristics and the properties of the disease causing the outbreak. Nevertheless, many of the basic psychological phenomena observed during COVID-19 were apparent in past pandemics or outbreaks. (Taylor, 2021, p. 5)

In the novel, the attitude of decision-makers is identical to the attitude most world leaders had when they were facing COVID-19. As a matter of fact, "... it seems that the Government had a true account of it, and several councils were held about ways to prevent it's coming over; but all was kept private." (Defoe, 2019, p. 1) Far from any mischief, one needs to see beyond this effort of secrecy and reserve, a policy to curb the general panic and maintain social peace. This attitude on the part of the rulers has the merit of preventing people from falling into mental disarray. Such a state of panic resulted in disbelief and denial of the true advent of the plague.

Hence it was that this rumour died off again, and people began to forget it as a thing we were very little concerned in, and that we hoped was not true; till the latter end of November or the beginning of December 1664 when two men, said to be Frenchmen, died of the plague in Long Acre, or rather at the upper end of Drury Lane. The family they were in endeavoured to conceal it as much as possible, but as it had gotten some vent in the discourse of the neighbourhood. (Defoe, 2019, p. 1)

Through the narrator's diary, the author puts the reader in a real pandemic context and gives an insight into the fear and anxiety experienced by the citizens of London during the plague. Rumors of the plague became facts and London Parish Clerks began, like the media in Western countries during the COVID-19 outbreak, to publish bills showing the spread of the pestilence.

...it was printed in the weekly bill of mortality in the usual manner, thus: Plague, 2. Parishes infected, 1.

The people showed a great concern at this, and began to be alarmed all over the town, and the more, because in the last week in December 1664 another man died in the same house, and of the same distemper. And then we were easy again for about six weeks, when none having died with any marks of infection, it was said the distemper was gone; but after that, I think it was about the 12<sup>th</sup> of February, another died in another house, but in the same parish and in the same manner.

This turned the people's eyes pretty much towards that end of the town, and the weekly bills showing an increase of burials in St Giles's parish more than usual, [...] This possessed the heads of the people very much, and few cared to go through Drury Lane, or the other streets suspected, unless they had extraordinary business that obliged them to it. (Defoe, 2019, p. 2)

The spread of the disease, panic and irrational due to the threat justifies the psychotic morale that took over many inhabitants of China, New York, Spain, Italy, France, and Germany in 2019. Many chose to limit their movements if not

necessary. A study has shown that in the advent of the novel coronavirus, for instance, in a study of more than 6,500 adults from the USA and Canada surveyed in early 2020 during lockdown, approximately 20% had elevated anxiety and depressive symptoms, whereas only 2% had been diagnosed with COVID-19 (Taylor, 2021, p. 6) The quotation indicates that the psychological impact of the plague in an infected community is much deeper and can be devastating. In the case of COVID-19, it appears to have caused an increase in the New York exodus as people were prone to flee from the city going to less infected states or safer places where the contagion was lesser. The effect of the plague as highlighted in *The Journal of the Plague Year*, is how people are pushed to either lock themselves up or escape their abodes. As the bills of contagion and mortality continued to increase in the novel, people took to exodus. It can be read that:

...at the other end of the town their consternation was very great: and the richer sort of people, especially the nobility and gentry from the west part of the city, thronged out of town with their families and servants in an unusual manner; and this was more particularly seen in Whitechapel; that is to say, the Broad Street where I lived; indeed, nothing was to be seen but waggons and carts, with goods, women, servants, children, [...] besides innumerable numbers of men on horseback, some alone, others with servants, and, generally speaking, all loaded with baggage and fitted out for traveling, as anyone might perceive by their appearance. (Defoe, 2019, p. 7)

It is clear to see how people in Whitechapel have chosen to run away out of fear and a sense of preserving their lives. Defoe deftly depicts cases of mental health as people do not think about accurate solutions but they run away. Similarly, to HF, most of the characters lose composure and self-control. As an eyewitness of the spreading plague and the disaster it constitutes, HF has this to say: "This was a very terrible and melancholy thing to see, and as it was a sight which I could not but look on from morning to night (for indeed there was nothing else of the moment to be seen), it filled me with very serious thoughts of the misery that was coming upon the city." (Defoe, 2019, p. 7)

The aspects of fear and anxiety discussed in this section, are common to most Pandemics, namely,

The Bubonic plague or Black Death (multiple outbreaks, e.g., 1346–1356; attributed to *Yersinia pestis*), Russian flu (1889–1890; attributed to the H2N2 or H3N2 influenza virus or possibly the OC43 coronavirus), Spanish flu (1918–1920; H1N1 virus), the 1957 flu pandemic (1957–1958; H2N2 virus), the 1968 flu pandemic (1968–1969; H3N2 virus), HIV/AIDS (1981–present), severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) (2002–2004; an epidemic of SARS-CoV-1), Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) (2012–present; an epidemic of MERS-CoV), swine flu (2009–2010; H1N1 virus), the Zika virus pandemic (2015–2016), and the COVID-19 pandemic (2019–present; SARS-CoV-2). (Taylor, 2021, p. 4)

In each of the cases above, people were terrified of contracting the disease and dying of it. Panic became the order of the day and either the state or the citizens tried to find ways to survive. The characters representing 17th century England in *The Journal of the Plague Year* display a sense of fear and anxiety towards the disease, its spread, and the threat it poses to their lives. This section has

shown that people became terrified, and even resorted to fleeing from the areas they lived in to escape contagion and death. Daniel Defoe's *The Journal of the Plague Year* provides grounds for aspects of mental health and panic observable during the outbreak of the novel coronavirus. The novel also represents people in a dilemma of survival as they face distress, and hardships, which force them to develop survival strategies.

## 2. The Dilemma in Plague Days

Under this section, the focus is on the economic, and social, hardships experienced by people navigating in the context of the epidemics. In Defoe's representations of the 1665 Bubonic Plague and the advent of COVID-19, one is left with the impression that the people's standards of living and the sense of community spirit have suffered a huge blow that action need to be taken to maintain the people's economic situation or straighten up their values.

While the lockdown is intended as a measure to reduce the outbreak of COVID-19 and prevent its transmission in the affluent world, it represents a race against death to survive among many in Africa, where life has become an "avoidance–avoidance" conflict situation; be locked in at home and die of starvation, or violate the lockdown regulations to work and collect food and die from the disease. Whatever citizens choose to do, the race is against death, from starvation, or the virus. (Melkamu, 2020, p. 3)

While the emergency lay in avoiding any contagion it was necessary not to die but to live to see the end of the pandemic. People made provisions by storing food or avoiding unnecessary expenses that might weaken them financially. People quickly found ways to preserve themselves against starvation and death. Similarly, as the modern factory worker in China, the United States, and the Western world as a whole, Job insecurity was the order of the day. As we can read from HF's accounts, the most vulnerable were "the middling people and the working laboring poor." the dilemmas they experienced lay in the worries they had about their possessions and whether their masters will keep them or sack them. (Defoe, 2019, p. 25) The implicit motives behind such worries lay in how they will survive the visitation and its aftermath. The novel reveals the reaction of characters who quickly sought to preserve themselves against one another, economic strains, and starvation. The struggle to survive stood as one of the dilemmas because provisions were made against all and for oneself. The author has HF, the narrator, say:

I must here take further notice that nothing was more fatal to the inhabitants of this city than the supine negligence of the people themselves, who, during the long notice or warning they had of the visitation, made no provision for it by laying in a store of provisions, or of other necessaries, by which they may might have lived retired within their own houses, [...] I acknowledge I was one of those thoughtless ones that had made so little provision that my servants were obliged that my servants were obliged to go outdoors to buy every trifle by penny or halfpenny." (Defoe, 2019, p. 27)

Through this excerpt, HF deplors the neglect and imprudence of the people who failed to make provisions that would keep them safe from contagion

and starvation as they observe the lockdown measures. However, one can also read the evidence the narrator affirms the necessity to secure food and take measures to avoid being exposed to the ail and also make sure that the lack of means of subsistence does not push people to get exposed to the spreading disease.

HF reveals that following Dr Heath's entreaties to store provisions, However, I attempted though it was very late to do something towards it; and first, as I had convenience both for brewing and baking, I went and bought two sacks of meal, and for several weeks, having an oven, we baked our own bread; also I bought malt, and brewed as much beer as all the casks I had would hold, and which seemed enough to serve my house for five or six weeks; also I laid in a quantity of salt butter and Cheshire cheese; (Defoe, 2019, p. 69)

From this quotation, it is clear that HF has prepared just as many citizens in the U.S. and in Europe to scramble for food provisions and toilet paper in supermarkets to overcome the strains of the pandemic and the situations of lack that it augurs. By making these provisions for his household he is in one way or the other participating in curbing the spread of the pestilence and also in making sure he and his family survive the visitation.

It must be marked in the light of developments above that: "As the prevalence of the COVID-19 outbreak and its associated morbidity and mortality are dramatically increasing, it poses significant limits on freedom of social life, [...], social cohesion, and productivity among the global community." (Melkamu, 2020, p. 2). The sense of social cohesion became undermined as everyone had to cater for themselves. The economic hardships mentioned afore contributed to a sort of social and ethical degeneration of citizens in their relationships with one another.

Indeed, characters have also found themselves in moral and ethical dilemmas. Such dilemmas as we can identify in the contexts of COVID-19 and Defoe's plague mainly concern citizens who are confronted with situations that test their sense of honesty and deception. HF describes the circumstances in which people wrongly choose to conceal their status for survival's sake. Immorality has become the order of the day because people want to avoid being stigmatized and isolated. Healthcare workers were torn between treating patients according to their class or not. Some characters even appeared prone to scam others with false drugs to extort money from them. In *Plague*, the author does not overlook class divisions. "The social class which HF is concerned with is the poor" (David, 2024, p. 169)

It is not my contention that poverty is an alibi for immorality, but, class dynamics from the angle of Karl Marx justify why the poor are the most exposed to risks and appear likely to indulge in acts that delineate criminal acts of delinquency and robbery. Indeed, the novel embodies incidents that highlight Londoners' utter disobedience to the lockdown measures put in place by the authorities of the parishes to limit contagion and deaths.

For example, in Coleman Street there are abundance of alleys, as appears still. A house was shut up in that they call White's Alley; and this house had a back-window, not a door, into a court which had a passage into Bell Alley. A watchman was set by the constable at the door of this house, and there he stood, or his

comrade, night and day, while the family went all away in the evening out at that window into the court, and left the poor fellows warding and watching for near a fortnight. (Defoe, 2019, p. 47)

We hereby have evidence of civil disobedience to rules set to protect citizens in the times of the pandemic. Such attitudes have prevailed in almost all contemporary societies people protested against news on the real advent of COVID-19 falling into conspiracy theories. Some even held the Pandemic to be caused by the 5G internet connection and therefore will abide by the rules set by the authorities. The same realities are what the reader is led to witness in Defoe's accounts of the Bubonic Plague as he shows how people deliberately leave their domicile without notice to the watchmen who become wasted as they continue to stand guards to the house while nobody is in the house. One can discover in the novel that the citizens in London did not only flee and waste the local authorities' efforts, but they indulged in criminal acts.

Not far from the same place they blew up a watchman with gunpowder, and burned the poor fellow dreadfully; and while he made hideous cries, and nobody would venture to come near to help him, the whole family that were able to stir got out at the windows one storey high, two that were left sick calling out for help. Care was taken to give them nurses to look after them, but the persons fled were never found, till after the plague was abated, they returned. (Defoe, 2019, p. 49)

The extract above depicts blunt metaphors of delinquency coupled with the murder of people who were supposed to cater to the families' safety and survival. This is a show of immorality and lawlessness before the local authorities and in a context of emergency. People faced the dilemma of choosing between obeying the law and dying. Most people rather chose the wrong way. In many ways, Defoe's characters resemble anti-conformists in our current society who in the American, European, African, and Asian contexts made COVID-19 a scam and challenged the authorities to prove that the pandemic is real. At worst, some even refused to wear facemasks and also observe the lockdown measures or social distancing methods believing that if the disease is real and they ever catch it, God or their health insurance will remediate it. Such displays of immorality and civil disobedience find an echo in the *Plague* as "HF doubts the statistics of plague deaths published in the Bills of mortality. It is not likely that records will be accurate in a time of such dislocation. (David, 2024, p. 99) Moreover, some parish officers will probably be bribed by households to keep their plague deaths out of the official record, so that they can avoid having their houses quarantined. (David, 2024, p. 170).

Such mentalities were similar to the unethical attitudes that prevailed among the health workers represented in the *Plague* by the nurses and improvised nurses due to circumstances. While it is universally admitted that "The COVID-19 pandemic was a stress test to our human condition and values on a global basis." (Vearrier, 2021, p. 2) Defoe's novel indicates that the attitude of health workers during the 1665 Bubonic Plague visitation was not the least.

The health workers in *Plague* are nurses and sometimes improvised nurses due to circumstances. People's standards of morality were so low that even ethical



considerations were turned down for the sake of survival. “The women and servants that were turned off from their places were likewise employed as nurses to tend to the sick in all places, and this took off a very great number of them.” (Defoe, 2019, p. 87) No priority was given to professionalism. Anyone could take up a position as a health worker because the sector needed manpower. However, it must be noted that the consequences of such enrolments were disastrous as to the practices that nurses became involved in.

They did tell me, indeed, of a nurse in one place that laid a wet cloth upon the face of a dying patient whom she tended, and so put an end to his life, who was just expiring before; and another that smothered a young woman she was looking to when she was in a fainting fit, and would have come to herself; some that killed them by giving them one thing, some another, and some starved them by giving them nothing at all. But these stories had two marks of suspicion that always attended. (Defoe, 2019, p. 75)

The extract pinpoints the author's representation of euthanasia against the will of the patients. Such a practice being not legit, falls under the category of crimes committed on patients during the visitation. The excerpt reverberates in the race-ridden administration of health care services in the advent of COVID-19 by health workers. Black Americans and Hispanics in the American context were not given the same attention as their white counterparts. People with no health insurance were denied access to ventilators and left to tragically die.

At the peak of disaster and spread of the ail, HF presents situations whereby healthcare workers were vicious enough to steal from dead bodies: Indeed,

...there were a great many robberies and wicked practices committed even in this dreadful time I do not deny. The power of avarice was so strong in some that they would run any hazard to steal and to plunder; and particularly in houses where all the families or inhabitants have been dead and carried out, they would break in at all hazards, and without regard to the danger of infection, take even the clothes off the dead bodies and the bed-clothes from others where they lay dead. (Defoe, 2019, p. 75)

It is against the ethics and the Hippocratic oath to desecrate the dead body and reveal information connected to the intimacy of the sick or dead person. However, the extract above bluntly shows how healthcare workers proved unprofessional and unethical in the treatment of dead bodies. The immorality in their attitude lies in stealing clothes from corpses and it appears unbecoming with their profession. In addition to this attitude on the part of the health workers,

It was reported by way of scandal upon the buriers, that if any corpse was delivered to them decently wound up, as we called it then, in a winding-sheet tied over the head and feet, which some did, and which was generally of good linen; I say, it was reported that the buriers were so wicked as to strip them in the cart and carry them quite naked to the ground. But as I cannot easily credit anything so vile among Christians, and at a time so filled with terrors as that was, I can only relate it and leave it undetermined. (Defoe, 2019, p. 74)

Beyond the tint of doubt that overshadows the quote above, it is clear that HF chastises the irreverent attitude of buriers who desecrate the corpses in the same way as the nurses. Profuse are the examples of felony and robbery that the narrator puts forward to the readership to present the immoral but gloomy practices that prevailed in the atmosphere of uncertainty induced by the plague. These moral and ethical dilemmas portrayed in historical accounts and depicted in Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* reflect the complex choices individuals faced during the plague. They reveal the ethical challenges that arise in times of crisis and the various ways people respond to them. The urge to survival is the ground root of such moral degeneration. However, HF's accounts of the visitation rather show fictive Londoners who stooped below ethics and morality against one another and against the state authorities in the latter's endeavor to curb the spread of the disease.

### **3. Institutional Resilience in the Context of the Plague**

This section looks at the policies and institutional measures taken to contain the 1665 Black Death epidemic as represented by Defoe. It also establishes analogies with the endeavors of contemporary body politics in curbing the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is a well-known fact that the outbreak of a disease on a large scale is the prime affair of the state authorities whose responsibilities lie in protecting the citizens and making sure they don't fall victim to the ail and survive it (Cummins, 2016) most efficiently. Through HF's eyes, Defoe's novel portrays the efforts of officials to control the outbreak, enforce quarantine measures, and maintain order, but also highlights their limitations and the shortcomings of their actions.

The advent of COVID-19 echoes almost the same measures that resulted in border closure as provided by the International Health Regulations (IHR, 2005). Indeed,

The IHR 2005 stresses the importance of taking measures at points of entry, such as ground crossings, to strengthen national capacities to prevent, prepare for, detect and respond to health emergencies. A point of entry refers to a passage for international entry or exit for travelers, baggage, cargo, containers, conveyances, goods, and postal parcels as well as the agencies and areas providing services to them. (Organization, 2020, p. 1)

Abiding by the regulations of the IHR, countries worldwide took measures that resulted in the grounding of all flights in home and international airports to limit the spread of the disease. In the same line of emergencies, countries also shut down schools, supermarkets, and public places where contagion could be favored as stated in the IHR report, maps were made as facilities that would be used to curb the contagion. As per international requirements, "The maps should show health facilities, traditional healers, markets, transport hubs, places of worship, schools, informal settlements, and other places that draw people across the borders." (Organization, 2020, pp. 1-2)

In addition to quarantine, and the fact that people worked from their homes, the transit of goods and travel from most infected places like China, the U.S., and other countries were banned. People were prevented from crossing

international borders. Such measures were due to the resilience of states and governing bodies facing the new reality. The media played their part, by spreading news on the progress or retreat of the disease at different places. It is proven that the news spread by media tended to expose the dark side of the pandemic insisting on the death toll and the progress of contagions.

In Defoe's *Plague*, the government took composure against the general panic and skepticism. "... it was the same thing abroad, for the bad news was gone over the whole world that the city of London was infected with the plague, and there was no inquiring there how the infection proceeded, or at which part of the town it was begun or was reached to." (Defoe, 2019, p. 192) There was no way trying to conceal the visitation and its progress. The local government, led by the Lord Mayor of London and the Privy Council took measures to contain the spread of the disease. News rose that:

The justices of Peace for Middlesex, by direction of the Secretary of State, had begun to shut up houses in the parishes of St Giles-in-the-Fields, St Martin, St Clement Danes, &c., and it was with good success; for in several streets where the plague broke out, upon strict guarding the houses that were infected, and taking care to bury those that died immediately after they were known to be dead, the plague ceased in those streets. [...] in the parishes of Bishopsgate, Shoreditch, Aldgate, Whitechappel, Stepney, and others; the early care taken in that manner being a great means to the putting a check to it.. (Defoe, 2019, p. 33)

Henceforth, information updates became vital to survival. The need to make the people aware of the disease and its spread was answered by the publication of the bills of mortality. The measures taken by the government stop the progress of the disease and its death tolls. As the narrator HF puts it:

...from the time that the plague first began in St Giles's parish, it was observed that the ordinary burials increased in number considerably. For example:

From December 27 to January 3	{St Giles's	16
	{St Andrew's	17
"January 3 " "	10 {St Giles's	12
	{St Andrew's	25
"January 10 " "	17 {St Giles's	18
	{St Andrew's	28
"January 17 " "	24 {St Giles's	23

The people showed a great concern at this, and began to be alarmed all over the town, and the more, because in the last week in December 1664 another man died in the same house, and of the same distemper. (Defoe, 2019, p. 3)

Such measures were rewarding. Contemporary readers get an echo of the bills of mortality in the use of the 2019 COVID Visualizer which is a digital medium used during the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic to share interactive data on contagion, deaths, and the progress of healing and vaccine distribution in countries around the world. Every citizen worldwide could follow the progress of the disease worldwide, irrespective of their location. All people need is a digital device, a phone or a tablet, and an internet connection. The millions of people

dying in Europe, China, and the U.S. were displayed instantly.

Though many people saw it as a source of alarm and panic, COVID Visualizer had the merit of supplying people with current news and allowing them to prepare for the worst. Similarly, as contemporary media in the context of COVID-19, we obtain evidence from the novel that other means of communication were used to spread the news and make it available to people. Accounts from the narrator state that:

We had no such thing as printed newspapers in those days to spread rumours and reports of things, and to improve them by the invention of men, as I have lived to see practised since. But such things as these were gathered from the letters of merchants and others who corresponded abroad, and from them was handed about by word of mouth only; so that things did not spread instantly over the whole nation, as they do now. (Defoe, 2019, p. 1)

It is worth noting that making the information available to the citizens was the result of the policies adopted by various government and city officials to secure their lives and the population. These contributed to state resilience because the letters and the transmission of messages by word of mouth stood as the means of awareness raising and telecommunication in the 1665 pestilence. Situations might have been worse without such measures taken by the authorities. Aldermen, deputies, and common councilmen were even made to meet regularly to follow up on the implementation of the measures taken by the authorities. As a result, a ban was imposed on all public gatherings

...all public feasting, and particularly by the companies of this city, and dinners at taverns, ale-houses, and other places of common entertainment, be forborne till further order and allowance; and that the money thereby spared be preserved and employed for the benefit and relief of the poor visited by the infection. (Defoe, 2019, p. 35)

The excerpt delineates one aspect of the many measures that the governing bodies took to order to keep the disease under control. While the above stresses the economic and financial emergency, it must be noted that the management and the spread of information by the governing bodies remain one of the vital issues in those days.

A parallel could be made to COVID-19 to say that a greater arsenal of media was put into play to raise awareness and prevent people from spreading the ail. While a great portion of the population abided by the new dispensation, a good deal of people proved stubborn in following what the government had recommended for people's safety in such periods of uncertainty. Part of the measures taken by the state and city authorities consisted in dispatching police and security throughout the cities to maintain law and order following lockdown measures in public places. Any citizen caught breaking the lockdown regulation was liable to a fine and punishment. While these measures resulted in acts of violence and killing in some African and Asian countries, they were worthwhile when we consider the people's disbelief and resistance to decisions made by authorities.

The narrator reveals the authorities made it mandatory that watchmen be appointed day and night to make sure people in infected houses do not move out to receive visitors. They have decided “ That to every infected there be appointed a watchman, one for every day, and the other for the night, and that these watchmen have special care that no person go in and out of such infected house whereof they have a charge, upon pain of severe punishment. (Defoe, 2019, p. 35) These measures were therefore put into place to stop or slow down contagion. The watchmen are the representation of the government's presence in every single street and house and they are there to make sure the people are safe as required by state obligations. This resulted in what people tended to see as restrictions to their inalienable civic rights in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is true that the locking up the doors of people's houses, and setting a watchman there night and day to prevent their stirring out or any coming to them, when perhaps the sound people in the family might have escaped if they had been removed from the sick, looked very hard and cruel; [...]) (Defoe, 2019, p. 43)

The supposed cruelty lies in the restrictions imposed on individual liberties and also the suspensions of the economic activities through which people could survive if they escaped the pestilence. Many economic sectors were weakened. “The weakening of some of the sectors [...] was caused by the implementation of government policies to reduce community activities which resulted in an economic slowdown” (Nugroho, 2021, p. 270). Owing to the economic slowdown, people could no longer go on errands and do their usual trades. The lockdown has caused many to lose their jobs or shut their shops and companies down to turn dependent on their governments and charities to survive the pandemic. The authorities' resilience in *The Plague* is evoked by H.F. who rhapsodizes the action

“of the magistrates for the supplying such poor families as were infected — I say, supplying them with necessaries, as well physic as food — was very great, and in which they did not content themselves with giving the necessary orders to the officers appointed, but the aldermen in person, and on horseback, frequently rode to such houses and caused the people to be asked at their windows whether they were duly attended or not;...” (Defoe, 2019, p. 41)

The magistrates' action, which appears humanitarian, should be viewed as an attempt to maintain the government's sovereign duty, which consists of ensuring that the population is well-fed. Such a duty becomes more necessary in a state of emergency in which people no longer have any source of revenue apart from their savings because they live a life of confinement and can no longer go to their respective jobs. As COVID-19 presents replica situations of Defoe's novel, one finds a resonance of the magistrates' action in the policies designed by many contemporary states to spare the population from starvation and disaster.

Financial assistance was supplied to the most vulnerable. In New York, and in Georgia, to mention but a few, people lined up in rows to benefit from food donations. In some African countries like Togo, people benefitted from financial assistance through mobile money. Such forms of resilience on the part of the governmental authorities contributed to easing the most vulnerable and allowed

them to overcome the hardships caused by the pandemic.

## Conclusion

In light of the developments above, the present study has discussed Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* with reference to the happenings during the advent of COVID-19. From a sociocritical stance, it has been shown that COVID-19 mirrors The Bubonic Plague despite the difference in time and people experiencing the visitation both in the 18th and 21st centuries. The two plagues justify the realities of their time, and societies. The study has shown that the fear and desperation that took over people and alarmed them was a shared experience over time and periods. Panic-stricken people hardly composed to think deeply and rationally, they took to their heels in the 18th century London just as they did in 2019 despite the advanced science and technologies that could contribute to informing people and reassure them and promise better days. Moved by a sense of survival many people fled their homes and even lost the sense of community life and solidarity. Many hid their contagion and did not want to abide by the measures taken to curb the contagion as it has been noticed in the attitudes of the people when news of the novel coronavirus spread. This contribution also reached the evidence that both the pestilence in the novel and COVID-19 have caused people to go through moral and financial dilemmas. They experienced economic and financial hardships that tested people's sense of morality and citizenship. In addition to fear, people had to cope with dire conditions of lack that led them to spare their savings and store food in case there was starvation. The institutional support has been outstanding. Defoe's novel represents situations that correspond to the indulgence of governments at the local and international levels to limit the contagion, protect the citizens, and also make sure people survive The Bubonic Plague and COVID-19. Lockdown measures, and enforcement of security at borders and in cities to limit mobility. Measures were also taken to provide for people in situations of lack and starvation. It is clear from the novel and situations caused by the advent of COVID-19 that human response to pestilence has mainly consisted in acts of resilience on the part of individual members of the society and state institutions that took on themselves to shake themselves off their predicament and survive these hard times.

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