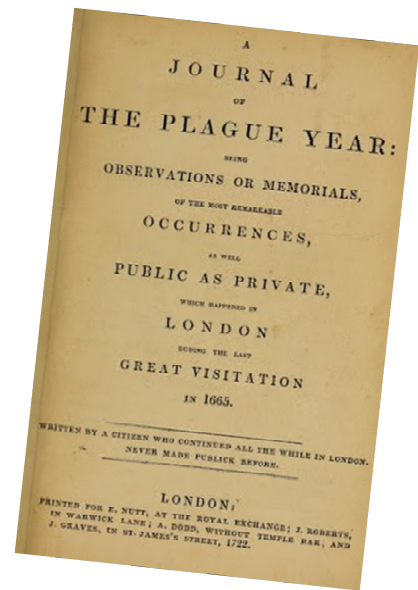


The plague year

by John Phillips

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The coronavirus pandemic we are living through is something the likes of which we have never experienced before. But pandemics, epidemics and plagues are nothing new and many people (perhaps with more time to pick up a book than they normally have) are looking back at historical and fictional accounts and comparing them with the situation today. A newspaper article which came out last week told us that certain books on the topic have found their way into the bestseller lists. One of them is Albert Camus's *La Peste*, set in North Africa in the 1940s but based on a cholera epidemic which took place a century earlier. Other people are avidly reading accounts of the **Spanish flu** which raged through many parts of the world in 1918 and 1919.



The article brought to my mind a book which I read (or, put more accurately, a book which I was told to read) nearly fifty years ago. It's a book called *A Journal of the Plague Year*. You may not have heard of it, and I don't think I have heard mention of it since my school days either. But you may well have heard of the author: **Daniel Defoe**, who lived from about 1660 to 1731. Yes, he's the one who wrote **Robinson Crusoe**.

As soon as I remembered about the book, I went online to *Project Gutenberg*¹ and within a few minutes I was reading it as an e-book on my smartphone.

A Journal of the Plague Year written by a citizen who continued all the while in London is an early example of modern "journalism" and it describes the last epidemic of the **bubonic plague** which hit London. That was in 1665. However, since Defoe was only about five years old when that epidemic took place, he cannot be the adult narrator of that story. The story, published in 1722, is probably based on the experiences of Defoe's uncle, Henry Foe, a saddler in East London.

Fifty years ago my classmates and I found Defoe's *Journal* rather dry reading, to say the least. But now, in the middle of a pandemic, I am finding it quite fascinating. Of course the *Journal* describes a reality very different (and many times more terrible) than what we are going through now. But what struck me as I read it is that there are so many similarities between the way people reacted to the 1665 outbreak of the plague and the way people today are reacting to Covid-19.

Here are a few of the surprising similarities (and some differences). I'll quote the original too, so that you can get a feel for Defoe's quaint but elegant eighteenth-century English.



¹ www.gutenberg.org

Statistics were important then as now. Defoe didn't have access to statistics about rates of infection and recovery. He was only able to trace the alarming progress of the plague across London by quoting "the bills of mortality". These were weekly published lists of how many people had died and were buried in each London parish, and these figures rose steadily in the first few weeks of 1665. As people saw the figures go up, they became alarmed.

It was observed with great uneasiness by the people that the weekly bills in general increased very much during these weeks.

However, statistics in those days as in these, were misleading and the people didn't have much confidence in them. In fact, they suspected a cover-up.

The burials in St Giles's were fifty-three – a frightful number – of whom they set down but nine of the plague [they said that only nine died of the plague]; but on an examination more strictly by the justices of peace, and at the Lord Mayor's request, it was found there were twenty more who were really dead of the plague in that parish, but had been set down of the spotted-fever [typhoid?] or other distempers [illnesses], besides others concealed.

In the plague year there was no *World Health Organization* or *Johns Hopkins University* to collate and communicate statistics for the public at large, but Defoe uses the data available to him. In the first week of January 1665, 291 deaths were recorded in London. By the first week in September, that figure had risen to a staggering 8297. But by then things had got out of hand. The dead were being buried in mass unmarked graves, the people responsible for keeping records were themselves falling sick and dying, and people were fleeing the city in panic and some of them died unrecorded by the roadside. Defoe believed that the real death toll was in fact much higher than what was officially reported.

The terms social distancing and lockdown were not used in those days, but the ideas existed surely enough. Defoe describes how people in the Holborn district of London behaved:

...they walked in the middle of the great street, neither on one side or other, because, as I suppose, they would not mingle [mix] with anybody that came out of houses, or meet with smells and scent from houses that might be infected.

One of the disturbing things about Covid-19 is the world's obsession with finding out where it comes from (and passing the blame on to them). That was no different in 1664/5. The *Journal* begins by reporting a rumour:

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.

But it didn't end there. It must have been brought to Holland from somewhere else.

...some said from Italy, others from the Levant [the eastern Mediterranean], among some goods which were brought home by their Turkey fleet; others said it was brought from Candia [Crete?]; others from Cyprus.

There is just something familiar about Defoe's report that two of the earliest confirmed cases in London (despite an attempted cover-up) were not from England:

...at the end of November or the beginning of December 1664, two men, said to be Frenchmen, died of the plague [...] at the upper end of Drury Lane [in London]. The family they were in endeavoured to conceal it as much as possible.

However, the authorities of the time seemed to be surprisingly efficient and committed to establishing the facts as far as that was possible:

...the Secretaries of State got knowledge of it; and concerning themselves to inquire about it, in order to be certain of the truth, two physicians and a surgeon were ordered to go to the house and make inspection. This they did; and finding evident tokens of the sickness upon both the bodies that were dead, they gave their opinions publicly that they died of the plague.

As the coronavirus epidemic started to take hold, it became clear that special facilities would be needed to look after Covid-19 patients. So, for example, a large exhibition centre in East London was rapidly converted into the *NHS² Nightingale Hospital*. When it opened on 4th April 2020 it had capacity to take 500 coronavirus sufferers who needed intensive care, and a potential for being enlarged to take 4000 patients. At the time of the plague London had just two so-called *pest-houses*, which turned out to be totally inadequate.

It's surprising to see how people (let's call them a 'loud minority') have reacted to the extraordinary events by grasping on to all kinds of wild theories. Many of us thought that this pandemic was caused by a particular kind of virus which mutated into something very infectious and which got spread around very rapidly because of our 21st century lifestyle. That was, until those who know better informed us that it was really part of a plot by which Bill Gates wanted to seize supreme power over the world. Wild theories and practises abounded even more in 1665.

These terrors and apprehensions of the people led them into a thousand weak, foolish, and wicked things ... and this was running about to fortune-tellers, cunning-men, and astrologers to know their fortune, or, as it is vulgarly expressed, to have their fortunes told them.

Every crisis has winners and losers. Today we hear about all kinds of internet scams which prey on people's fear. The "winners" in 1665, at least in the short term, were those who turned the crisis to financial gain. Defoe describes a whole wave of quacks and mountebanks who offered (at a price) such wonders as 'Anti-pestilential pills', 'Neverfailing preservatives against the infection', 'Sovereign cordials against the corruption of the air' and so on and so on. Defoe shakes his head in disbelief at:

...how a set of thieves and pickpockets not only robbed and cheated the poor people of their money, but poisoned their bodies with odious and fatal preparations; some with mercury, and some with other things as bad...

The losers in the 1665 crisis were definitely the poor, who often lost their livelihood.

I think we can safely say that we have never seen a situation where our economy has ground to such a halt as in this coronavirus crisis. In 1665, when it became obvious that the plague was inevitably going to hit the city of London, anybody who could afford to, left the city.

...indeed, one would have thought the very city itself was running out of the gates, and that there would be nobody left behind; you may be sure from that hour all trade, except such as related to immediate subsistence, was, as it were, at a full stop.

Those who could afford to leave, did leave. Those who couldn't, stayed. When the rich left, their servants were left without work. The makers of luxury goods had no more clients, the

² NHS: the UK National Health Service

tailors had no one to make clothes for, builders were idle because no one was having a house built. Defoe's description of the economic consequences of the plague gives us a fascinating insight into the kind of work that people did in those days. Just to look at one example, here are all the tradespeople who were affected by the fall in sea-trade.

As merchandising was at a full stop, for very few ships ventured to come up the river and none at all went out, so all the extraordinary officers of the customs, likewise the watermen, carmen, porters, and all the poor whose labour depended upon the merchants, were at once dismissed and put out of business.

We've heard the word 'epidemiology' a lot over the last few months. The epidemiologists have not always been in agreement about how the world should react to covid-19, but in general we have benefitted enormously from scientific insights into how viruses in general behave, and how this particular virus is behaving. In the seventeenth century, scientific insights were a lot vaguer. Many people thought that the plague was something carried about in the air, a kind of cloud of infection which passed across the city, and for a while they lit a lot of smoky fires in the streets of London, until they realised that this was also causing health problems. In general it was felt that the infection was passed on through foul smells, so if you could afford it, it was reasonable to protect yourself by carrying "bottles of scents and perfumes".

But despite all this, by simple observation people realised the plague was being spread by personal contact. People learned to avoid those who were obviously infected with the plague. But Defoe recognises that there was another more dangerous kind of infection by contact with people who were apparently "well":

By the well I mean such as had received the contagion [infection], and had it really upon them, and in their blood, yet did not show the consequences of it in their countenances [faces]: nay, even were not sensible [aware] of it themselves, as many were not for several days. These breathed death in every place, and upon everybody who came near them; ...

Medicine has since demonstrated that the bubonic plague was spread by bites from infected fleas (for example in clothes or blankets) or contact with infected bodily fluids. Defoe comes tantalizingly close to the truth when he adds:

...nay, their very clothes retained the infection, their hands would infect the things they touched, especially if they were warm and sweaty, and they were generally apt to sweat too.

One of the effects of the corona crisis is that people have become concerned about picking up an infection from cash. As a result, payment by card or other electronic means such as "Twint" here in Switzerland, is on the increase. In the plague year there was no alternative to hard cash, but people realised that it represented a real risk:

It is true people used all possible precaution. When any one bought a joint of meat in the market they would not take it off the butcher's hand, but took it off the hooks themselves. On the other hand, the butcher would not touch the money, but have it put into a pot full of vinegar, which he kept for that purpose.

In the current crisis, our governments have been quick to promise financial support in the form of short-time-working compensation for employed people and interest-free loans for businesses. In the seventeenth century it was up to the rich to be charitable, and apparently many were:

It must be acknowledged that the absent citizens, who, though they were fled for safety into the country, were yet greatly interested in the welfare of those whom they left behind,

forgot not to contribute liberally to the relief of the poor, and large sums were also collected among trading towns in the remotest parts of England;

Defoe was in general critical of royalty who lived a life of luxury and vice, (and well away from the focus of the epidemic). But even he has to admit that King Charles II – newly returned to the throne after the Civil War – was reported to have been generous.

The king also, as I was told, ordered a thousand pounds a week to be distributed in four parts [to London].

But he also has to admit that these reports of royal generosity are unconfirmed:

But this latter I only speak of as a report.

And lastly, as the coronavirus crisis passes its worst point, we're already hearing a lot of criticism of the way the crisis was managed. And to be honest we can expect to hear a lot more criticism.

You'll remember perhaps that Daniel Defoe published this *Journal of the Plague Year* in 1722, a full fifty-seven years after the events he described. And with the benefit of more than half a century of hindsight he is not slow to point out what could have been done better.

Surely never city, at least of this bulk and magnitude, was taken in a condition so perfectly unprepared for such a dreadful visitation

There was, he says, a lack of what we would call contingency planning:

They were, indeed, as if they had had no warning, no expectation, no apprehensions, and consequently the least provision imaginable was made for it in a public way. For example, the Lord Mayor and sheriffs had made no provision as magistrates for the regulations which were to be observed.

So, what did they fail to do?

They had gone into no measures for relief of the poor. The citizens had no public magazines or storehouses for corn or meal for the subsistence of the poor.

As a linguist and language teacher I notice that Defoe uses *third conditionals* – you know, those sentences containing words like **would have**, **could have** or **should have**.

...if they had provided [storehouses for corn and meal] ... many miserable families who were now reduced to the utmost distress would have been relieved.

I'm sure we are going to be hearing a lot more third conditionals over the next few weeks and months.

