

Dr Shahaduz Zaman, Reader in Medical Anthropology and Global Health at BSMS, shares his reflections during the lockdown period.

"Yet always, plagues and wars take people equally by surprise," writes the Algerian-French Nobel Laureate writer Albert Camus in his book *The Plague*. *The Guardian* newspaper tells us that publishers around the world are reporting booming sales of *The Plague* after the COVID-19 outbreak. I remember reading the book many years ago in my medical college days, and underlining the following lines which I have seen being quoted by others as well:

"The plague bacillus never dies or disappears for good; that it can lie dormant for years and years in furniture and linen-chests; that it bides its time in bedrooms, cellars, trunks, and bookshelves; and that perhaps the day would come when, for the bane and enlightening of men, it would rouse up its rats again and send them forth to die in a happy city."

Locked down in my house in a small town near London, I am observing with much apprehension how the Coronavirus pandemic is unfolding in the UK and Bangladesh, both of which are my home – the former where I live and the latter where I was born. Although the case numbers are still low in Bangladesh, with its weak healthcare system the country will struggle to cope with the situation. But I can see that the UK with its far more developed health system and the tremendous job done by the NHS staff is also struggling. I am reminded of Paul Robeson's song 'We're in The Same Boat, Brother'.

I have given lectures on the history of epidemics, but it is a different matter entirely to live in the midst of one. I am seeing how some aspects of the response have a lot in common with historical epidemics like the medieval 'Black Death' or the 19th-century cholera epidemic in Europe. Both followed the sequence of panic, then blaming particular groups for the epidemic, and then using armed forces to mitigate the situation. I am observing how the same form of panic, 'othering', citizen surveillance as well as strategic negligence are emerging in the context of the coronavirus. Since the appearance of this novel virus, which has no cure and no vaccine, creating a panic throughout the world, we have observed attempts to racialise coronavirus as a Chinese virus; on the other hand Chinese, Russian and Iranian media outlets portrayed the coronavirus as a biological weapon. We are also observing the unprecedented level of state surveillance to control the epidemic that started from Wuhan city, gradually spreading all over the world, and finally we are observing the unfolding of Necropolitics in action, when in a given situation the state decides whom to expose to death.

It looks like history has given us the unique opportunity to serve the greater good of humanity by just washing our hands and staying at home. Along with adopting myself to these new virtual teaching and global health group meetings, I am also pondering how by staying at home we have brought back the dolphins to Venice's canals, swans to the Thames and how reverse learning is taking place with the Prince of Wales adopting the Asian hygienic way of greeting in the form of a 'Namaste' instead of a handshake.

I am also thinking of what the post-coronavirus world will look like. Will society rise above itself, be more kind to nature, will it realise that we are not atomised actors and that suffering is a shared experience, and that it's empathy, love and solidarity that makes a society worthwhile?

I have been listening to Bob Dylan, and would like to share his lyrics:

The line it is drawn
The curse it is cast
The slow one now
Will later be fast
As the present now
Will later be past
The order is rapidly fading

*And the first one now
Will later be last
For the times they are a-changing.*

Dr Shahaduz Zaman
Reader in Medical Anthropology and Global Health