

Niklas Toivainen

PROLETARIAT OF THE PLAGUE YEAR
Defoe's description of seventeenth century capitalism

ABSTRACT

Niklas Toivainen: Proletariat of the plague year: Defoe's description of seventeenth century capitalism
Bachelor's thesis
Tampere University
Bachelor's Programme in English Language and Literature
October 2023

This thesis will look at how in his book, *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Daniel Defoe portrays the effects of one's socio-economic status on their life in the plague-ridden city of London in the year 1665. This thesis will mainly rely on Marxist theory and concepts which are applicable to both past and present forms of the capitalist economic system. This enables the results to be compared to those of different eras. Due to restrictions on length in a thesis of this level, the focus will be on only a select few Marxist concepts: Labour power, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. Additionally, the thesis will consider the role of overpopulation and unemployment in a capitalist system according to Marxist theory.

The first research question is: How much can Marxist concepts be applied to Defoe's depiction of London? The society of plague era London differs greatly from the societal structures of Marx's own time. It is therefore possible that his concepts and ideas do not necessarily fit into a book describing a much older period. The second research question is: How did the plague affect the socio-economic development of the city and the manifestation of Marxist concepts? The effects of a deadly epidemic on societal roles and class status provide fertile ground for discussion even in today's world.

As becomes evident in the thesis, Marxist concept can indeed be applied to Defoe's London rather effortlessly. The significant differences in opportunities between the different classes, the total collapse of the value of labour power and the importance of the unemployed as the fuel of a capitalist machine are all on show in Defoe's writings, even 200 years before the emergence of Marxist theory. The impact of the plague on these socio-economic concepts is also observable in the book. London's national emergency created an extreme manifestation of a capitalist dystopia where the bourgeoisie observed from afar while the proletariat was forced to work under deadly conditions to make a living, or else wait for the inevitable death by starvation.

Keywords: Marxism, literature research, Defoe, plague

The originality of this thesis has been checked using the Turnitin Originality Check service.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Niklas Toivainen: Proletariat of the plague year: Defoe's description of seventeenth century capitalism
Kandidaatintutkielma
Tampereen Yliopisto
Kandidaatintutkinto, englannin kieli ja kirjallisuus
Lokakuu 2023

Tässä tutkimuksessa tarkastellaan, kuinka Daniel Defoe kuvaa sosioekonomisen aseman vaikutusta elämään vuoden 1665 rutonaikaisessa Lontoossa A Journal of the Plague Year -kirjassa. Tutkimuksessa tukeudutaan pääsääntöisesti marxilaiseen teoriaan, jonka käsitteet ovat sovellettavissa sekä menneisiin että nykyaikaisiin kapitalistisen talousjärjestelmän muotoihin. Näin myös tuloksia voi vertailla eri aikakausien välillä. Vaikka Marxilaisten käsitteiden varasto on laaja, niin tutkimuksen rajatun pituuden takia siinä keskitytään niistä vain muutama: Työvoimaan, porvaristoon ja proletariaattiin. Lisäksi tutkimuksessa käsitellään Marxin aatteita ylikansoituksen ja työttömyyden roolista kapitalistisessa koneistossa.

Ensimmäinen tutkimuskysymys on: Kuinka paljon marxilaisen teorian käsitteitä voi soveltaa Defoen kuvaamaan Lontooseen? Rutonajan Lontoon yhteiskunta eroaa merkittävästi Marxin oman ajan yhteiskuntarakenteista. On siis mahdollista, etteivät hänen kehittämänsä käsitteet istu vanhempaan aikaan pohjaavaan kirjaan. Toinen tutkimuskysymys on: Miten rutto vaikutti kaupungin sosioekonomiseen kehitykseen ja marxilaisten käsitteiden ilmenemiseen? Tappavan kulkutaudin vaikutukset yhteiskuntarooliin ja eri luokkien asemaan toimivat pohjana hedelmälliselle keskustelulle vielä tähänkin päivään rinnastettaessa.

Tutkimuksesta käy ilmi, että marxilaisia käsitteitä voi soveltaa Defoen Lontooseen melko vaivattomasti. Merkittävät erot yhteiskuntaluokkien mahdollisuuksien välillä, työvoiman arvon romahtaminen ja työttömien tärkeä rooli kapitalistisen koneiston polttoaineena ovat kaikki nähtävillä jo Defoen kuvauksessa ajasta 200 vuotta ennen Marxin teorioita. Myös ruton erityinen vaikutus näihin sosioekonomisiin konsepteihin on kirjassa nähtävissä. Kansallinen hätätila loi Lontooseen kapitalistisen ääridystopian, jossa porvaristo katseli etäältä, kun proletariaatti oli pakotettu työskentelemään hengenvaarallisissa olosuhteissa leipänsä eteen, tai odottamaan nälkäkuoleman saapumista.

Avainsanat: Marxismi, kirjallisuustutkimus, Defoe, rutto

Tämän julkaisun alkuperäisyys on tarkastettu Turnitin Originality Check -ohjelmalla.

Table of contents

1 Introduction.....	2
2 The relevant theories of Marx and Engels.....	4
2.1 The proletariat and the bourgeoisie.....	4
2.2 Labour power.....	5
2.3 Overpopulation and unemployment.....	7
2.4 Why a Marxist framework?.....	8
3 Struggles of the proletariat in Defoe’s London.....	8
3.1 The exodus of the capitalists.....	9
3.2 The army of labour fights certain death.....	13
3.3 The living lie in wait while the dead bury the dead.....	15
4 Conclusion.....	17
Works Cited.....	20

Niklas Toivainen

Bachelor's thesis

31.10.2023

Proletariat of the plague year: Defoe's description of seventeenth century capitalism

1 Introduction

Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1722) describes London in the year 1665 when plague swept through the city, causing the deaths of over a 100,000 people. Based on the diaries of Defoe's uncle who lived in the Whitechapel district of East London during the plague, the book gives us a fascinating glimpse of the societal structures of 17th century London. We also learn a great deal about the societal and governmental actions that took place to minimise the inevitable damage.

To gain a deeper understanding of the class struggles of Defoe's London, our theoretical framework will consist mainly of writings of Marx and Engels such as *Capital, Volume one* (1867). Marxist theory of the 19th century aimed to reveal the mistreatment of the working class and the injustices of the capitalist system as a whole. Many of these critiques still remain relevant today. Viewing *A Journal of the Plague Year* will not only give interesting insight into how deeply rooted the capitalist division of labour already was during nearly over three and a half centuries ago, it especially helps us understand how the repercussions of a deadly pandemic were distributed throughout the socio-economic ladder.

The first research question this thesis will try to answer is just how much can Marxist ideas of e.g. the proletariat, the bourgeoisie and labour power be applied to Defoe's depiction of the

English capital. Having existed some 200 years before the release of Marx's *Capital* and around a hundred before the start of the industrial revolution, this version of London is sure to exhibit a different version of the class division that is the cornerstone of Marxist ideals. After understanding this it is possible to decide whether Defoe's portrayal of 17th century socio-economics can be considered a more egalitarian iteration compared to the system of Marx and Engels two centuries later. And once the first research question has been answered, we can look at the results from a different angle. How much does the plague affect the different aspects of class struggle? Does the emergency lessen or increase the impact of economic concerns on one's position in society? Did the epidemic have an effect on the price of labour power, and should the meanings of the proletariat and the bourgeoisie during that period be reconsidered?

Reading *A Journal of the Plague Year* from a socio-economic point of view is not only interesting because of what can be learned from a historical perspective. The eerily relevant setting of a prosperous capital ravaged by a deadly epidemic is fertile ground for comparing how far society has come in the last four centuries, if far at all. With Defoe's focus being very much on the struggles of the common man, a Marxist framework helps make sense of a time that is nearly as far away from the publication of Marx's greatest works as our current era.

Chapter 2 will discuss the class division of the time, establishing the parameters of what is considered the bourgeoisie and the proletariat in this thesis. I will also discuss the key Marxist concept of labour power, which is one of the tools used by the upper classes to control the proletariat. Related to this, I will also discuss the concepts of unemployment and overpopulation. These concepts will then be applied in the main analysis where I will look at Defoe's description of three periods of the plague era; the spread, the retaliation, and the most fatal period after which

the sickness began to slowly abate. In these three periods we can specifically observe the Marxist ideas of class isolation and the army of labour.

2 The relevant theories of Marx and Engels

In the following section I will define the most relevant Marxist theories and concepts that I will use as the framework when analysing Defoe's writings. Most of this theory will be drawn from the most famous works of Marx and Engels, such as *Capital* and *Manifesto of the Communist Party* (1848).

2.1 The Proletariat and the Bourgeoisie

Perhaps best known from Marx's *Manifesto of the Communist Party*, this thesis will use the terms *bourgeoisie* and *proletariat* to separate people into two distinct social groups. Of these groups the *proletariat* will be the one to which this thesis will focus much of its attention to. However, both groups will need to be clearly defined to draw the crucial comparisons revealing the discrepancies between the two.

The term *bourgeoisie*, in a Marxist sense, refers to the social class which owns the means of production, while *proletariat* refers to the working class that works for the *bourgeoisie*. When critiquing capitalism, the role of the former is to acquire the labour of the latter for the cheapest price possible to extract the largest amount of excess value possible (Tucker, xxx). In plague-ridden London, however, the important distinction between classes came from either having enough money to leave the city to escape the disease or having to stay and take the high chance of infection and death. This contrast brings quite the dimension to the concept of freedom which,

according to Marx, begins only when a person has laboured enough to fulfil their basic necessities for living (*Capital*, 441). When the basic requirement for survival is abandoning one's home and being able to stay alive elsewhere (Defoe, 198), the amount of labour needed to fulfil these conditions rises quite dramatically. Freedom is then mostly a privilege of the *bourgeoisie*, who do not depend on their work in the deadly conditions of London.

Once our analysis reaches the point in the book where most of the *bourgeoisie* have already left the city, the analysis will then mostly focus on the powerful who remain, namely the mayor and the magistrate. They are the ones who decide on the restrictions, appoint people for work to keep the city running and handle the economic aid provided for those in need. While this does not directly apply to the concepts of production of goods in a Marxist sense, the city council is the one in control of the labour and money that trickles down to the proletariat in considered amounts.

It should be noted that this division is not perfect as there are many subgroups that fall somewhere between the two. For example, the people who decided to stay in the city despite having enough money to leave, or the poor who decided to take their chances outside the city without having anywhere to go or anything to live on. There are also multiple levels of financial desperation within the *proletariat* themselves. With the focus of this thesis being on those who were forced to stay and work in London these subgroups, though deserving of a mention, are not hugely important.

2.2 Labour power

Labour power, in Marxist theory, is the only resource the proletariat has to offer in a capitalist system. Its value is determined by the value of the product the labourer can produce (*Capital*,

339). For example, if a labourer makes a table in five hours, which is then sold for 100 euros, the value of their hourly labour is 20 euros. The goal of the capitalist is then to try and extract as much *surplus value* from the labourer as is possible. Using the same example, this could mean paying the labourer 10 euros per hour to work a 10-hour-day during which they are able to produce two tables. In such a case, the capitalist would buy the labourers labour power for half the price.

It would be rather difficult for us to consider labour power in relation to the materialistic value of the services the labourer provided, owing to both the nature of work available during the plague, as well as the era itself being a pre-industrialisation period, whereas many Marxist concepts are more easily adapted to a more modern capitalist system. However, what can be considered is another important factor in defining labour power: The cost of work in years of life. (Marx, *Capital*, 363) For most of the working population during the plague, surviving even a month could be considered a small miracle, let alone living through the entire ordeal. The amount paid for a day's work, could thus be considered miniscule when considering the drastic difference in how many years of labour were wasted when performing these highly hazardous tasks.

Another contributing factor to the inflation of labour power was the enormous amount of unemployment, which will be discussed in more detail below. When a massive amount of people became unexpectedly unemployed, their livelihoods were threatened. The people then became rather desperate to find any means to provide for their families, thus creating fierce competition for the little work there was left. The only resource left for the proletariat to compete with in such a situation is the price of their labour power. This led to people working jobs that were incredibly taxing on their health, for meagre amounts of compensation.

2.3. Overpopulation and unemployment

Overpopulation and unemployment are two key concepts in both the Marxist critique of capitalism and the hardships of the plague era London. Defoe describes how after the English civil war London had seen a massive upsurge in population (18). Especially the poorer parishes outside the city walls were crowded with people, making it easier for the plague to spread there (14), thus beginning the socio-economic divide between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie. When the plague eventually reached the richer parts of the city within the walls, most public activities were shut down with tens of thousands of people left unemployed. Despite great efforts by the mayor's office to deliver relief to those in need (97), it was the poorest people, who suffered in greatest numbers. Being homeless, for example, prevented people from receiving their part of the aid, as it was given for the parishes to divide among their habitants (96). This did not account for those who lived on the streets of the parishes. Defoe also mentions how the massive death-toll was somewhat of a necessity, as it would have been impossible to provide aid for every person in need in a city as massive as London (98).

As briefly mentioned above, a key concept in determining the going value of labour power in Marxist theory is the amount of unemployment. The more the proletariat are required to compete over the available work, the less they can expect to be compensated for their work (*Capital*, 426, *Wage Labour and Capital*, 214). In the plague era, this was very true, and made even more absurd by the quality of the work they were competing over. According to Marx, this relationship between unemployment and labour power, is a core aim of the capitalist system (*Capital*, 423). The capitalist thrives when unemployment is high, and it is the owner of the means of production who can determine the value of labour power. These conditions are most often met when the population numbers are high, such as was the case in London before the plague.

2.4 Why a Marxist framework?

In his book *Why Marx Was Right* (2011), Terry Eagleton debunks multiple points of criticism often projected at Marxism in the twenty-first century. One of his main observations is that Marxism lives in many different forms of capitalism, not just the one of Marx's own era (2). According to Eagleton, the past was to Marx "one wretched form of oppression and exploitation after another" (98) and served as both a warning and a reminder of the injustices we should look to set right in our own time.

The effects in societal stature based on one's material value in the socio-economic system are still very much prevalent in today's world (Schutz, *Inequality and Power: The Economics of Class*, 153). Applying Marxist principles to different manifestations of a capitalist system, including to those of the seventeenth and the twenty-first centuries, invites comparisons between the two. Such a process can reveal, not only the problem areas that remain comparable between them, but also warnings of the horrors that can yet raise their heads should history repeat itself.

3 Struggles of the proletariat in Defoe's London

The analysis of the book is divided into three different parts. The first part goes over the start of the plague period, from the news breaking into London to a large amount of people leaving the city. The second part focuses on the everyday life and development of the rules and living conditions once the disease starts making its way through the city. The final chapter discusses the final months of the plague, when the weakly death tolls reach their absolute peak before eventually decreasing towards normal.

3.1 *The exodus of the capitalists*

Defoe describes the plague as having started late in the year 1664 (2), and the earliest victims were those who lived in the poorer parishes outside city walls: “But we perceived the infection kept chiefly in the out-parishes, which being very populous, and fuller also of poor, the distemper found more to prey upon than in the city, as I shall observe afterwards. (14)” These earliest days of the plague already exhibit the consequences, and even the purpose of isolation based on social class in the capitalist system. The cries of the suffering surplus-population act as an alarm for the bourgeoisie in the inner city, warning them of the havoc that is about to ensue.

The Marxist idea of the division of classes not being natural (*Capital*, 338) but rather a result of the socio-economic systems of bygone ages is exemplified well in *Journal of the Plague Year* by the social division of London’s parishes. The reserve army of labour is placed out of sight and out of mind for as long as is convenient, waiting for an opportunity to work and become welcomed inside the city walls. In *Capital, Volume One* Marx wrote how “the absolute general law of capitalist accumulation” is to keep the reserve army as large as possible, as it is their number and consequent suffering that allows the exploitation of the proletariat (429-30). Therefore, it is by design that the poorest should also be the first to suffer in the face of a deadly epidemic and, as will be later discussed, their misfortune does not end there.

With the first signs of the plague appearing, the bourgeoisie immediately started arranging their escape from the inevitable calamity. Defoe writes how by May, the city streets were full of people who had loaded their families, servants and necessities on horses and carts and formed a steady stream towards the city gates (7). He also accounts for how “there was no getting at the Lord-Mayor’s Door without exceeding Difficulty [sic]”, as there was such a demand for the certificates of health from the city council. These certificates were a testimony of a traveler not having the plague

and were essential for any person who wished to be welcomed to any town or inn outside the city walls. The bustle throughout May and June was made all the greater by the rumors of the Government planning a ban on travelling to stop the sickness from spreading to the other parts of the country.

The constant flow of people leaving the city was a grim sight for those who would stay and wait for what was to come. But why would anyone stay, then? Let us consider for a moment the requirements for being able to leave. First one would need somewhere to go. A second home outside the city was certainly out of question for most of the proletariat, but many people also went to live with friends or family. Then, even if shelter wasn't the issue, transportation could well have been. It was not common for the working class to own horses in the city and Defoe describes how "there was hardly a Horse to be bought or hired in the whole City for some Weeks [sic]" (9). It would be rather difficult for an entire family to move between cities on foot. Lastly, even if relocating to a safe part of the country was not an issue, surviving could prove to be the final barrier for leaving. With the largest city in the country on the run, there certainly were not enough jobs for everyone to just start earning money in a new town. This is exactly why Defoe explains how the majority of those who fled were rich enough to not be tied down by their trade in the city. Although he too eventually stayed, the protagonist H.F. seems to be counted among those who at least had the luxury of deciding their own fate.

With the exodus of the bourgeoisie, the class division and alienation became more pronounced than perhaps ever before. And evidently, as Marx proclaims, the capitalist is very content with this isolation, whereas the proletariat see it as a sign of their own powerlessness (*Alienation and Social Classes*, 133). "In fact, the realm of freedom actually begins only where labour which is determined by necessity and mundane considerations ceases" (*Capital*, 441).

With the city's most powerful leaving, many people became afraid for their livelihood, even if they did not plan on going anywhere. Many businesses were shutting down, and servants of the rich were especially stressed about what was going to happen to them (Defoe, 28). This sudden uncertainty brought about those who looked to exploit the public distress. Defoe (26-35) describes in detail how suddenly there were fortune-tellers all over the city looking to make a coin from desperate people worried about the future. These foretellings were more detrimental than useful, as many chose to pay from what precious little they had in the first place and were quick to throw precaution to the wind if the cards gave them reassurance of their future health and prosperity.

There were also many quacks that began advertising their medicines and other rituals as protection or a cure against the distemper. Defoe (32) describes a particular false doctor who advertised to help anyone for free. However, the help was nothing more but a recommendation to purchase their own brand of medicine, which they said to assuredly be the only way of keeping the illness at bay. The magistrate eventually came down on the quacks and seemingly drove them out of the city, and the mayor sought to hire actual doctors to relieve the poor (Defoe, 35).

To make matters worse for the proletariat, one of the first measures of the city council to stop the spread of the illness was to shut down public houses, theaters, and other establishments where people would normally gather in large numbers. It is an understandable measure to take, but one that also significantly brought down the public mood and drove the desperate people even further to the arms of all sorts of con artists. If the bourgeoisie could be considered free thanks to their financial status, the rest of the socio-economic ladder were almost prisoners. Confined to only the most necessary of interactions outside their homes, they were restricted to wait for the impending doom from the confines of their homes.

With around 200 thousand people having left the city (Defoe, 73), and with most of them having been very rich, the fabric of the bourgeoisie in the city had changed. There were some of the rich who had decided to stay for their business or other reasons, with the protagonist HF counting among those people. But these people were still mostly subject to the same rules as the proletariat and the poor. Their life was constrained, and their wealth did not guarantee them the sort of freedom that it had done before, although it did still carry certain benefits.

Being financially secure during the plague allowed the bourgeoisie to take many precautions that the proletariat and the poor could not. For example, those with servants did not have to leave their house to procure food and other supplies. Roaming the streets was a dangerous proposition, and the bourgeoisie would often send their servants to face the risk of infection instead. However, Defoe does note that this ended up being one of the most common ways the illness entered those richer households (73). Another way to combat the risks of being outside was to buy provisions in such bulk that further trips to the market were not needed nearly as often. In the book H.F. himself did this: "...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 all 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..." (77). One could still not buy protection against the psychological toll of the situation; Defoe also gives an account of a rich merchant hanging himself, seemingly unable to keep going in the dire conditions (81).

Apart from the part of the bourgeoisie who simply had a more accommodating position in the plague-ridden city, there were also those who now held nearly all the power: the city council. They were left with the task of protecting the city to the best of their ability. The bourgeoisie who had left were sending monetary aid from a safe distance (Defoe, 93) but the mayor and the magistrates

needed to find ways to keep the sickness from spreading as much as possible, and to keep order at a time when everyone's sanity was being tested daily by the ever-worsening conditions. They were facing a war against the plague, but they also had an army.

3.2 *The army of labour fights certain death*

With the bourgeoisie having left the city, the fears of the proletariat came true, and a massive wave of unemployment hit London. Defoe lists manufacturers, merchants, sailors, smiths and servants among many others as professions that were suddenly left completely out of work and without pay. And as very few of these people could realistically afford not working, the city was essentially filled with people desperate for work of any kind. This desperation would soon become the most important resource for the city council to exploit.

Although it might seem as though this large unemployment rate was simply an unfortunate repercussion of the plague, Marx explains how it is actually the fundamental rule of the capitalist system (*Capital*, 423). High unemployment rates are what creates competition for jobs, and competition forces the proletariat to accept worse conditions and payment for their work, lest they wish to be replaced. In the *Journal of the Plague Year* the horrifying working conditions this thesis is about to examine closer are described as a necessary evil. It is considered work somebody is required to do for the common good, but a closer examination will quickly reveal the benefits to be weighed unevenly across the socio-economic ladder.

As the rest of this chapter will mostly focus on the portion of the labour army that is only unemployed because of the ongoing crisis, I will first briefly discuss the state of the poorest who were not working to begin with. If the role of a homeless person in the 17th century was far from enviable to begin with, the plague stripped them of their last remains of humanity in the eyes of

the society. As they had no home to stay in, they were constantly exposed to the illness while wandering the city. Therefore, the city council gave the order that “no wandring Begger be suffered in the Streets of this City, in any fashion or manner, whatsoever [sic]” (Defoe, 45). As any traveler was already unwelcome outside of the city as well, especially without a certificate of health, the mere existence of a homeless person became either unlawful or strongly frowned upon, depending on where the existing took place. This was only further exemplified by the fact that homelessness prevented one from receiving any financial aid from the city, as it was only distributed to residents of certain parishes (Defoe, 96).

To start extracting value from the mass of unemployed workers, Defoe describes how the city council created jobs to help keep track and slow down the spread of the illness. They appointed plague inspectors, whose job was to keep track of the number of houses and people that were infected (38). As these houses were then ordered to be locked down, and the people were not permitted to leave, the city also hired watchmen to guard the houses, one for the day and one for the night (39). By Defoe’s account, there could have been as many as ten thousand quarantined houses at a time, which “gave opportunity to employ a very great number of poor men at a time” (97). When the members of such households happened to perish, there would be searchers sent to the houses to take account of whether it was the plague, or something else that killed them. Only women were appointed to this role for modesty reasons (McDowell, 97). Finally, there were the buriers and death-cart drivers, who would pick up the corpses from the houses and streets to deliver them to a mass grave.

All the jobs listed above required roaming around the streets and getting into some contact with the sickness, making them very hazardous for one’s health, and Defoe describes how difficult it would have been to fulfill these duties had it not been for the desperate state of the poor, who

were willing to do any work available (102). The nature of the work led to many of those accepting it dying anyway, which in turn allowed for the next workers to try their luck at their only chance of survival. Defoe even notes how necessary it was for so many of the poor to perish, as the city would have otherwise found it impossible to support them all, which in turn could have led to the poor resorting to looting and robbing in their desperation (98).

The incredible rate of unemployment led to all the available work being heavily contested. The proletariat could not afford the luxury of being concerned about their working conditions or whether the payment corresponded to the requirements of the job. When the price of labour power should take into account the number of years the nature of the work might shorten the lifespan of the worker (*Capital*, 363), the amount of money paid for the duration of the plague should correspond to an entire lifetime of earnings in a normal occupation. While there is no account for the wages paid in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, it can at least be estimated that with the city already struggling with the financial aid given to the poor the thousands of inspectors, watchmen and searchers were most likely not paid exorbitant amounts of money for their service. From a Marxist perspective, this plague-ridden version of London was the capitalist system functioning at maximum efficiency.

3.3 The living lie in wait while the dead bury the dead

As the plague hit its terrifying peak in London, the streets were littered with bodies and morale was so low that “people began to give up themselves to their fears and to think that all regulations and methods were in vain, and that there was nothing to be hoped for but an universal desolation” (Defoe, 171). Defoe notes how a common misconception was that there were not enough living

people left to bury all the dead. However, he assures that it was only certain parishes where the mortality was so high, that the living were not populous enough to notify the officials about all the corpses, which in turn led to them being left to rot for weeks, spreading the sickness even further (174). The numbers provided by Defoe himself also provide evidence that this too was a problem in the poorer parishes, where death counts of a single parish could be over double the amount of all the deaths inside the walls (187).

The ever-diminishing labour army did gain reinforcements as first cases of the plague having spread by domestic trade were spotted (Defoe 220). Merchants and sailors were already left wanting for work when international trade partners cut their connections to England, and especially London completely (Defoe 214), but the restrictions on domestic trade meant that even more of them now joined the ranks of the desperate unemployed and were likely to soon perish either wanting for work, or doing the deadly tasks the city had left to offer.

Despite being the ones handling all the dirty work around the city, the proletariat garnered no sympathy from the more fortunate. In fact, Defoe notes how they were even blamed for the spread of the disease because they moved around the city when searching for work (210). There was a truth to the complaints, however, and Defoe also writes that should another similar disease ravage the city in the future, it would be for the best for as many people as possible to be relocated from the city, including the poor (198).

With the state of things as it was, the city council together with the rest of the bourgeoisie were trying to provide enough monetary aid to keep enough of a reserve population in working health so that there would not be a shortage of workers to keep up the fight against the disease. In this task every unemployed person to perish were simultaneously a relief to the charity funds, which

did not have to cover for as many people (Defoe 98), and a toll on the workers which they could not afford to run out of.

September was the absolute peak of the death toll, after which the sickness started to slowly abate (Defoe, 179). For the proletariat, however, this was a double-edged sword. As glad as they were to see the light at the end of the long dark tunnel, the bourgeoisie outside the city took the declining death toll as a sign of the war having already been won. Defoe describes the plight of the poor as having been even greater during this period, as many of the rich stopped the donations as soon as it seemed things were returning to normal (231). This is definitely a clear indication of the charity not having been, for many, about the amount of people that could be helped, but rather a necessary measure to try and preserve the conditions they had left behind, throwing money at the problem until everything was well again. The casualties suffered after reassurances of the sickness passing over were not of any significance to the bourgeoisie. They had won the war and the rest was damage control.

Once things were back to normal and the city itself livable again the charitable ways and other comradery between classes quickly returned to normal (235). Defoe even notes how the English trade boomed for seven whole years after the plague: "There never was known such a trade all over England for the time as was in the first seven years after the plague, and after the fire of London" (224). The system had not suffered from the crisis but rather benefitted from it, building itself back on top of the countless bodies resting in the mass grave underground.

4 Conclusion

To answer the first question established at the start, it is evident that a fair few of the Marxist concepts can be employed in Defoe's London to gain an understanding of how the pre-industrial

system functioned. A division can clearly be seen of a higher and a lower class in the style of the bourgeoisie and the proletariat i.e. those who provide the working opportunities and those who then carry out the work itself. The drastic inflation in the value of labour power could also be observed throughout the book, whereas the outer parishes of London bring to light the problems of overpopulation and unemployment, which are in Marx's view so crucial for the capitalist system to keep functioning.

The second question this thesis sought to answer was how the arrival of the plague affected the city from a Marxist perspective. I would argue that the deadly epidemic turned Defoe's London into a textbook example of how the system is built to unevenly take from those who already have very little to give. The bourgeoisie certainly gave generous sums to the charitable cause of keeping the city alive in their absence. But the proletariat gave what Marx considers their only asset they truly own: Their labour power. While under regular conditions this labour power would be sold for what the worker would consider at least a somewhat acceptable compensation, the perilous working conditions made it so that the pay they received could be considered as good as a lottery ticket for a chance to stay alive.

As the army of labour was consumed as fuel for the malfunctioning machine that was plague-ridden London, why did the rich and powerful allow this to happen? As Defoe's writing comes from the perspective of an obvious member of the bourgeoisie, someone who stays in the city but doesn't have to risk his life in horrible jobs, it can be seen how from his perspective there is no alternative. To him donating money and decreeing life-threatening work mandatory are the extent of what can be expected from the bourgeoisie in these conditions. It is never questioned in the book, whether it should be the poor and downtrodden whose lives should be most at risk. It is simply accepted as the way things are.

An obvious critique that has to be covered is, that although some Marxist concepts can be applied into a societal setting from 200 years before they were even first thought of, they should also be considered in their proper context by connecting them to the means of production of the time. This, however, is too much of an undertaking for the scope of this thesis and is perhaps something that could be expanded upon in the future. Another caveat is the fact that a horrible pandemic will assuredly cause unforeseen consequences for most structures in society, and that perhaps a system, especially one that existed so long ago, should not be scrutinised on its tendency to buckle under extreme duress, but rather its ability to overcome that adversity and enable a period of rebuilding, which is certainly what actually happened.

Overall, Defoe's book can still be considered as an educational tool for our society today. With all the knowledge we have gained in the 400 years since the plague hit London, our society should certainly be better prepared for any such emergencies. Observing bygone ages through a more modern lens can remind us how far we have come, but also of how little some things have changed. The number of lives lost in the event of a future pandemic may not be as drastic, at least from a percentual standpoint, but will the distribution of pain throughout the socio-economic ladder remain the same?

Works Cited

- Defoe, Daniel. *A Journal of the Plague Year*. Edited by Louis Landa, Oxford University Press, 1972.
- Eagleton, Terry. *Why Marx Was Right*. Yale University Press, 2011.
- Marx, Karl. "Alienation and Social Classes." *The Marx-Engels Reader. 2. Ed.*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, Norton, 1978, pp. 133-35.
- Marx, Karl. "Capital, Volume One" *The Marx-Engels Reader. 2. Ed.*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, Norton, 1978, pp. 294-438.
- Marx, Karl. "Capital, Volume Three" *The Marx-Engels Reader. 2. Ed.*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, Norton, 1978, pp. 439-42.
- Marx, Karl., et al. *The Marx-Engels Reader. 2. ed.* Norton, 1978.
- Marx, Karl. "Manifesto of the Communist Party." *The Marx-Engels Reader. 2. Ed.*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, Norton, 1978, pp. 203-17.
- Marx, Karl. "Wage Labour and Capital." *The Marx-Engels Reader. 2. Ed.*, edited by Robert C. Tucker, Norton, 1978, pp. 203-17.
- McDowell, Paula. "Defoe and the Contagion of the Oral: Modeling Media Shift in 'A Journal of the Plague Year.'" *PMLA*, vol. 121, no. 1, 2006, pp. 87–106. *JSTOR*, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/25486290>. Accessed 11 Oct. 2023.
- Schutz, Eric A. *Inequality and Power: The Economics of Class. 1st ed.*, vol. 140, Routledge, 2011, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203828878>.
- Tucker, Robert. "Introduction" *The Marx-Engels Reader. 2. Ed.*, Norton, 1978, pp. xix-xxxviii.