

## Daniel Defoe: A man in advance of his times



*I write about Daniel Defoe for two reasons. The first is to remind comrades that he wrote a very interesting book, especially for our times, *A Journal of the Plague Year* and second to point out that Defoe was an advanced political thinker.*

The *Journal of the Plague Year* was written in 1722 towards the end of Defoe's life. It is re-imagining of the Plague visitation of London in 1665 told through a fictitious inhabitant but using the actual statistics and occurrences and remembrances as recorded officially and unofficially at the time. In other words it combines Defoe's two skills; that of the journalist and the novelist. The story of reaction to the plague shows that in some respects not much has changed. The slowness of authorities to react, the lockdown for households known to have the plague and later for hard hit districts with penalties for breaches of regulations. The rumour mill was very active then, as now but with a whole lot more superstition. Just as today, there were the unscrupulous ready to prey on the situation. In those days, with the lack of scientific knowledge and a general health service, the streets thronged with quacks, charlatans and magicians promising cures and potions designed to prevent infection. Our quacks and charlatans are Tory politicians promising ventilators, mass testing, safeguarding equipment, often lying and ultimately, miserably failing to deliver.

Defoe's progressive outlook was rooted in his family background. They were Presbyterian and had been thoroughly in favour of Cromwell and the English

Revolution. As small traders and producers they represented the petty bourgeois, hoping to advance and as such they were the harbingers of the new commercialism, heralded by the English Revolution and laying the basis for industrial capitalism that would emerge towards the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Defoe was only 3 years old during the Plague year of 1665. After the Great Fire of London his father was able to establish himself as a successful butcher and sent his son to a progressive Presbyterian-run school in Newington Green. The emphasis there on the Cromwellian tradition of liberty of conscience and free and open debate helped to draw the young Daniel to politics. He also dreamed of commercial success and became a successful haberdasher only to fall prey to a rash of speculations and collapse that followed the euphoria of the 1688 return of a Protestant King. This led to an acute period of bankruptcy, hiding from bailiffs and a turn to writing. He moved in Whig circles and was interested in reforming commerce. He wrote *An Essay upon Projects* in 1692 that is remarkable for its far seeing ideas, many of which took 200 to 300 years to be implemented. Among his proposals were the establishment of a central bank, income tax and a roving commission to check evasion (now there's a good idea!), the direction of labour, the building of national highways, various academies for improving education with special mention for women (this is an extremely progressive section for its time), a military academy, introduction of insurance and pension schemes, a Lottery and so on. This is kind of blueprint for a young capitalism. In a world of continued powerful monarchy, aristocracy and a large peasantry this was a progressive programme merging into a more democratic vision.

We remember Defoe in this *our* year of the Plague.

*Derek Gunby, March 2020*