



## Fay Niker and Aweek Bhattacharya (eds.): *Political Philosophy in a Pandemic: Routes to a More Just Future*

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*Political Philosophy in a Pandemic* consists of twenty chapters divided into five parts. Each part applies a broad theme or concept from political philosophy to the COVID-19 pandemic. The majority of articles treat the United Kingdom and the United States context as their focus, and, more generally, each concerns political problems that arise in liberal democratic and affluent (but unjust) societies. Apart from a brief discussion of vaccine allocation, the book focuses on social and political issues that relate to non-pharmacological interventions—for example, school closures, shuttering non-essential businesses, or stay-at-home orders. The chapters are brief—10–14 pages each—and quite readable. The book could be read by a lay audience or used in an undergraduate course.

The introduction by the editors stresses two themes running through the book. First, the pandemic has highlighted and exacerbated existing injustices and failures of society. For instance, in one chapter David Jenkins, Katy Wells and Kimberly Brownlee discuss how societies that already fail to secure each individual's entitlement to adequate housing have done much worse at securing this entitlement during the pandemic. Second, crises like this pandemic provide opportunities to re-envision and reorganize society. Julia Hermann, Katharina Bauer and Christian Baatz's chapter embodies this theme, as they address how our response to the COVID-19 pandemic could be helpful for responding to the climate crisis. More generally, the themes emphasized in the introduction lead readers to expect that the main work of the book will elaborate on these themes—themes which, arguably, have been explored in many popular articles and scholarship from other disciplines.

In our view, however, some of the strongest and most interesting chapters don't explore the well-documented social inequities and failures made manifest by the pandemic, nor do they envision fundamental reorganizations of society. Instead, these chapters illuminate normative problems posed by the pandemic that haven't been as widely recognized or

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discussed. These essays also showcase the strengths of *political* philosophers in particular; they apply a conceptually precise and empirically informed perspective to problems that arose due to features of policy making or political and social life. Some of these chapters also challenge readers by making arguments that question conventional wisdom or arrive at surprising conclusions. This seems especially valuable in the face of political polarization that leads the public to view pandemic policy making through a partisan (and therefore sometimes reductive) lens.

In perhaps the most interesting chapter in the volume, Felix Pinkert highlights that stay-at-home orders rested on outdated presumptions about what kinds of relationships are most important and thus deserve special protection. Orders that prohibited contact with non-household members while allowing unfettered contact with household members presume that the physical household is the “nucleus” of a person’s social world. Some such orders were eventually modified to allow contact with intimate partners who are not household members, reflecting the perceived special importance of these relationships. But Pinkert persuasively argues that for many single people, their well-being depends significantly on their ability to engage in relationships (including non-intimate ones) with people who live elsewhere—and that during the pandemic, these people suffered especially due to restrictions on how they could associate with others. Pinkert’s chapter thus highlights a unique challenge that arises in the pandemic: how should governments protect public health from pandemics without undermining the well-being of those who don’t conform to traditional models of meaningful relationships? Pinkert then makes several plausible suggestions about how governments could navigate this tension.

Another highlight occurs when Alexandra Volacu considers how, or whether, elections should be held during a pandemic. Volacu suggests that during a pandemic, holding in-person elections, having remote elections, and delaying elections each violate norms that democratic theorists defend. For instance, holding elections entirely remotely—by, e.g., mail-in ballot—risks violating requirements of free choice, because many voters doubt that their mail-in ballots enjoy the same degree of secrecy as they do during in-person voting. Such doubts and accompanying fears of reprisal, in turn, can affect voter’s choices. Delaying elections, on the other hand, violates requirements of popular sovereignty. Moreover, Volacu makes the important point that given the extraordinary powers elected officials enjoy during a pandemic and the profound impact of their decisions, elections are arguably even more important during a pandemic. Volacu deftly integrates normative work on electoral systems with empirical work on the attitudes of voters, and makes some suggestions how to better satisfy democratic norms without endangering public health.

While many bioethicists—public health ethicists in particular—have articulated or responded to questions of *justice* that arise due to the pandemic and policy responses to it, less attention has been paid to questions about the *legitimacy* of policy-making. Rowan Cruft’s chapter on the legitimacy of pandemic policymaking, then, provides a much-welcomed addition. After giving a brief primer on epistemic and authority-conferring defenses of democratic governance, Cruft addresses cases where the legitimacy of pandemic policy making becomes contested. For example, Cruft considers whether leaders who violate pandemic policy restrictions thereby undermine the legitimacy of various decisions. The result is an impressive application of democratic theory to current political controversies. (As we write this, British Prime Minister Boris Johnson and California Governor Gavin Newsome are embroiled in scandal because they engaged in social outings shortly after issuing strict stay-at-home orders.)

One limitation of the book should be noted. Taken as a whole, the chapters tend to reflect left-liberal egalitarian, or even further left, perspectives. In other words, proponents

of an expansive role for the state in realizing principles of social justice that require significant redistributions of resources and robust social programming will find that this book reaffirms their viewpoint. Yet, presumably, we turn to political philosophy partly in order to encounter challenges to our political convictions—especially, as noted above, in times of significant polarization. Classical liberal and libertarian perspectives on the pandemic either did not appear in this volume, or they were straw men. Relatedly, apart from discussions of rights related to democratic participation in Sect. 3 and freedom of speech in Sect. 4, we were disappointed that we did not encounter sustained discussion about how to resolve the tension between respecting individual liberty and promoting public health goals—a tension that arises, for example, with extended stay-at-home orders that restrict people’s freedom of association or mandates that make employment conditional on COVID-19 vaccination. To their credit, the editors note that the volume is not comprehensive and does not address this topic, as no single volume could address all the normative issues raised by the pandemic. Yet this lacuna constitutes a notable limitation given how much public discourse has focused on this tension, as well as how much disagreement there is about whether and how governments may and should restrict individual liberty in extraordinary ways. Moreover, political philosophers are particularly well-equipped to consider how policy-making should proceed in light of the deep disagreement we’ve seen about the right way to resolve this tension.

Despite this limitation, this book is well worth reading, especially Sects. 3 and 4 which contain some of the freshest and most interesting chapters.

## Declarations

**Conflict of Interest Statement** The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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