Review of Michael A. Peters and Tina Besley (Eds.). (2021). *Pandemic Education and Viral Politics*

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Pandemic Education and Viral Politics (Peters and Besley 2021a) is a very well written, complex collection of essays. The collection explores human resilience and the collective response to Covid-19, along with the politicisation of Covid-19. It appears on the stage in the midst of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The collection begins with a useful overview and introduces the reader to some of the important aspects of the response to Covid-19. Countries have responded differently, and this has highlighted how nations have not learnt from past pandemics. As Webb Jr (2015: 322) argues, 'physicians and public health specialists do not usually draw lessons from the historical record of disease control efforts. This can sometimes result in poor policy decisions.' Ignoring past disease outbreaks allows the same mistakes to be repeated. Fears and anxiety are already present due to not only Covid-19 but also crises such as climate change and biodiversity loss, as well as the global economic crisis. Fake news, misinformation and disinformation are all fuelling these crises, and as the authors argue, education is urgently needed to help people identify and deal with these issues. The concepts of 'viral modernity' and 'viral politics' are introduced here.

Chapter 2 covers a substantial amount of ground. The beginning of the chapter explains the biology of viruses. This sets up the remainder of the chapter, especially as the concept of viral modernity is based upon the nature of viruses. If we think of technology as a living organism, it is easy to see the comparison between a biological virus and a computer virus. As biology and the digital merge, giving rise to the

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postdigital, bioinformationalism is bringing forth new research directions. Bioinformationalism has also enabled research results concerning Covid-19 to be shared rapidly. This has been achieved through an increase in the speed of peer review and by academic publishers developing an infrastructure to allow publications to be shared open access or by being made freely available. Whilst this has obviously been of utmost benefit, it also means researchers can struggle to keep up with the amount of information available to them. It is not only researchers who are dealing with information overload but also citizens. Fake news, misinformation and disinformation about Covid-19 are global problems, and new laws have been introduced in Europe, America, Africa and in Middle Eastern countries in an attempt to combat false information (Radu 2020).

Chapter 3 examines three different views for a viral theory of post-truth. The first takes a philosophical approach asking questions about postdigital reality whilst developing the concepts of viral information, viral media, viral modernity and bioinformationalism. The second compares the similarities and differences between biological viruses and information viruses and the human responses to each. The third is a critical pedagogy approach, seeking to solve the problem of post-truth through education, and the development of a socialist alternative to capitalism. For me, the thread which joins all three perspectives is the need for education. Education is required to make sense of information and to understand and differentiate between factual information and misinformation. It is education and knowledge which enables imaginative thinking and creativity (Jandrić et al. 2020). With new ways of thinking emerges new possibilities.

In Chapter 4, conspiracy theories are discussed. This chapter is very relevant for the Covid-19 pandemic. Fake news, misinformation, fabrication and the post-truth environment all form a major part of people's lives. False conspiracy theories can be very damaging to society, affecting both morals and ethics. With interconnectivity with social media, believers of conspiracies can become viral carriers of fake news and misinformation. This can lead to harmful decision making whilst also driving stereotypical thinking, potentially damaging and inflicting pain on minority groups. Fears are often instigated by the direct claims of leaders (Pickersgill 2020), as was evident with Donald Trump, who, as President of the USA, declared drinking bleach as an effective method of controlling Covid-19 (Peters 2021a). The potential harm that could have occurred through the spread of this misinformation from a then world leader could have been catastrophic. I felt this chapter could have gone further in explaining how certain aspects of fake news and misinformation may drive forward commentary that potentially increases suffering for individuals and communities. Campaigners are spreading Covid-19 anti-vaccine propaganda via social media specifically targeting black, Asian and minority ethnic groups (BBC News 2021a). In the UK, these groups have seen the highest infection and death rates from Covid-19 (Office for National Statistics 2021) and so require protection from Covid-19 vaccinations.

The philosophy and the literature of pandemics are the focus of Chapter 5. The philosophy of the pandemic offers an opportunity to examine individual and community self-interest, collective responsibilities and the sacrifice of healthcare workers for the collective good. Healthcare workers have to contend with many

ethical conflicts including long hours at work, separation from their families and the exposure to potential sickness and death from Covid-19. Social distancing and self-isolation only work if the whole community respects the rules derived from ethical principles. The chapter moves on to discuss contagion novels and post-apocalyptic fiction. Contagion creates a variety of emotions in people. These range from those who are carefree and disregard lockdowns through to those who fear an imminent and painful death. Apocalyptic fiction can help people make sense of what is happening around them especially in relation to Covid-19. As academics, perhaps our own writing could appear in more unconventional outlets. This may help others understand the complex situations arising with Covid-19. Pushing the boundaries often reveals and expands new knowledges.

Chapter 6 describes how catastrophes such as Covid-19 bring about differences in individuals and groups in either self-interest or social responsibility. It is important to understand these differences because the pandemic is exposing gaps and widening the known gaps between white, black, Asian and minority ethnic groups, men and women and the rich and poor (Connell 2020). Inequalities arising from digital technologies are also revealed. A lack of access to a smartphone illustrates how the digital divide prevents people from accessing technologies such as contact tracing apps (Price 2020). Healthcare workers and humanitarian groups have risked their own lives to save others, whilst some individuals and groups have looked to profit or take advantage during the pandemic. Covid-19 has shown that a responsible form of globalisation is required which is built on empathy.

The work of Foucault, Agamben and Žižek is the focus of Chapter 7. Foucault's description of the procedures of quarantine in the Middle Ages being a form of panopticism begins the chapter, but the discussion then moves to Agamben. The work of Agamben focuses on how a state of exception is a normal paradigm for government. The emphasis here is on the response to Covid-19 by different nations and how Agamben's thesis of a state of exception only holds for certain countries such as Italy. In Italy, all non-essential business activities were closed and its people were prohibited to move. However, the thesis does not hold in countries such as the USA, where markets and the economy are bailed out and kept open at the expense of health.

The next section of the chapter focuses on Žižek, with attention turning to the panic buying of toilet paper and how it became a commodity during the pandemic. However, for me, the most important part of the discussion concerning toilet paper is the lack of sanitation for two billion people around the world. Poor sanitation can help spread pandemic diseases whilst also reducing human well-being through a perpetual cycle of disease and poverty (World Health Organisation 2021). It is easy to forget how the Covid-19 pandemic will devastate communities in developing countries because of a lack of infrastructure including healthcare. Here, this reminder is brought to the fore.

The final part of the chapter returns to Foucault and his work on biopolitics. The argument put forward is that because Foucault died before the genetic revolution began, bioinformation and the bioinformational paradigm are missing from his analysis. Here it is possible to see how the arguments laid out in Chapters 2 and 3 concerning bioinformation fit with Foucault's ideas. Certainly, biopolitics has been

brought to the fore during the pandemic. Whilst the trends of increased surveillance by governments, and the racial disparities of individuals having to take responsibility for risk to their own lives have always been present, biopolitical practices are now more evident (Sylvia IV 2020).

Attention turns to economics in Chapter 8. The Covid-19 pandemic has created a downturn in production for most industries, and there are historic declines in travel, tourism, hospitality and international education around the world. Covid-19 has illustrated how neoliberalism has operated to bring about inequalities in the distribution of wealth and disadvantages for women, children and the poor. These issues have always been prevalent; now, they are just more so (Braidotti 2020; Connell 2020; Irwin 2020). The chapter moves on to discuss the new buzz words of solidarity, community and collective responsibility and how even neoliberal governments and agencies are calling for this type of response. The possibilities may mean a move to the decentralisation of communities and regions, a return to cooperatives and an emphasis on community care, responsibility and community work schemes. However, community care and responsibility can be problematic, as can be seen in the UK with the provision of food aid from food banks. As Caplan (2016: 9) argues, 'charity in the form of food banks and food aid is highly depoliticizing. It allows the state to evade its obligations.' Here, as volunteers and charities are viewed as those able to provide the assistance citizens require, the inequalities of income and wealth fail to be addressed by government.

Imagination is the focus of Chapter 9. The argument is made for the need of imagination in order to understand the world, as well as how imagination is required for rethinking the possibilities of a new world. What is also striking with this chapter is the statement of the number of deaths from Covid-19 recorded at the time of writing in April 2020. This was 200,000 worldwide (Peters 2021b). Whilst I am writing this book review, in February 2021, the UK death toll is 117,166 (UK Government 2021), and the worldwide figure stands at 2,369,734 (BBC News 2021b). These figures illustrate why imagination is desperately needed at present. New possibilities for greater equity and fairer distribution of resources are urgently required, not just for humans but for all species. Braidotti (2020: 29) argues that 'it is time to accept multi-species inter-dependence not as a wound, or a form of exposed vulnerability, but rather as a strength and a mutually enforcing form of solidarity'. Courage and solidarity are required to overcome the difficulties on the journey to a better world, and imagination can assist in addressing social and environmental inequalities.

The subject of Chapter 10 is China. The chapter was written when China's economy had slowed and contracted at the start of the pandemic. This economic contraction illustrates just how interconnected the world's economy has become. China's economy has already started recovering, and this is vital for the world's economic recovery. China is the world's largest trading nation, bulk purchasing raw materials including iron ore, coal and precious metals from the USA, Australia, Japan and South Korea, whilst selling goods internationally (Peters 2021a). The chapter moves on to discuss how information warfare and conspiracy theories have been generated throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. President Trump's administration blamed China, whilst Chinese officials blamed the USA. This according to Pickersgill (2020:

348) is a 'pandemic of explanation and moralisation' and has led to blame being apportioned to governments, the World Health Organisation, businesses and citizens for spreading Covid-19. However, these blame games have jeopardised the circulation of correct information and diverted attention away from battling the virus.

The final chapter of the book examines biopolitics, conspiracy and the immuno-state. The arguments made within this chapter are wide-ranging and cover a substantial amount of ground. Its layout may be considered unconventional as it is divided into headings and sub-headings, and these cover three main themes. These are (1) biopolitics-the relation of politics to life and the state to the body; (2) global governance, viral politics and government by conspiracy; and (3) the immune-state: biosafety, biosecurity, bioterrorism and biowarfare (Peters and Besley 2021b). These different themes illustrate a changing relationship between biology and politics. Peters and Besley (2021b: 109) argue that the importance placed on individuality and neoliberalism in Western culture may need to change, and instead, the focus should be on 'an immune-biopolitics of the state'. As the themes in this chapter illustrate, this change in focus increases the chances of humanity's and the more-than-human world's survival through both social justice and environmental justice.

Whilst there is no concluding essay which pulls all of the individual strands together from each chapter, this is not a problem as all of the essays can be read as either stand-alone pieces of writing or as a collective monograph. *Pandemic Education and Viral Politics* (Peters and Besley 2021a) is highly recommended for anyone interested in the Covid-19 pandemic. The chapters illustrate human resilience and the collective response to Covid-19. Combating the virus comes not only from mask wearing, social distancing and social isolation but also from tackling the issues of misinformation, disinformation and fake news. This complexity of overcoming the virus on different levels is a global problem and struggle. However, the changing relationship between biology and politics may help us to reconceptualise a more socially and environmentally just post-pandemic world.

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