

Book Review: *Pandemic Education and Viral Politics* by Michael A. Peters and Tina Besley

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BOOK REVIEW

PANDEMIC EDUCATION AND VIRAL POLITICS

BY MICHAEL A. PETERS AND TINA BESLEY

ROUTLEDGE, 2021. 126 PAGES

\$49.95 (PAPER), \$170.00 (HARDCOVER), \$44.95 (E-BOOK)

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Pandemic Education and Viral Politics is a collection of essays edited by Michael Peters and Tina Besley. Most of the essays were first published as editorials in the spring of 2020 in *Educational Philosophy and Theory*, a journal for which Peters serves as executive editor. This slim volume gave this reader the opportunity to revisit a peculiar moment of pandemic panic and possibility, as seen through the eyes of a senior scholar and his colleagues. The editors have brought together disparate lines of philosophical inquiry to provide an initial understanding of a still-emerging period of global upheaval. Many threads of the two years and more of global debate about the COVID-19 pandemic are already visible in this relic of that early moment: the rapid spread of mis- and disinformation is juxtaposed against science, such as the varied perceptions of the need for social distancing, and the wisdom of the Chinese response is compared to the American, including the Chinese government's totalitarian imposition of restrictions versus the more limited American response. Missing from the authors' anticipation of key lines of public pandemic debate is any foreshadowing of the two years of discussion about viral spread in school, learning loss, and online education, which is not surprising, considering the early stage of the pandemic in which these essays were written.

The introduction, written by Peters and Besley, and first few chapters—"Viral Modernity? Epidemics, Infodemics, and the 'Bioinformational' Paradigm" (chap. 2, written by Peters with Jandrić and McLaren), "A Viral Theory of Post-Truth" (chap. 3, by Peters with McLaren and Jandrić), and "On the Epistemology of Conspiracy" (chap. 4, Peters alone)—are driven by the juxtaposition of a viral pandemic with an age of viral memes. The authors compare the spread of biological viruses with the viral spread of information, and highlight how the early stages of the pandemic sparked rapid scientific discovery and accelerated peer review of COVID-related research. They recognize that, as scientists published preprints and presses offered free access to COVID-19-related research, the moment offered the promise of a more open and accessible scientific community. In chapter 2, Jandrić called for philosophers and other "experts in knowledge development" to address the peril of "questionable verifiability" in the "data deluge" (22). In chapter 4, which addresses conspiracy theories, Peters muses about how to maintain a

coherent epistemology in the face of the baseless conspiracies that spread through the viral media environment and conspiratorial politics. Other contributors contrast the potentially valuable viral spread of scientific information through scholarly networks to the “infodemic” of misinformation spread by politically motivated actors. McLaren’s reflection on the bioinformatics of viral spread raises an important question: What strategies used to contain biological viral spread might be used to contain the spread of dangerous viral information (50)?

In “Love and Social Distancing in the Time of COVID-19: The Philosophy and Literature of Pandemics” (chap. 5), “*The Plague: Human Resilience and the Collective Response to Catastrophe*” (chap. 6), “The Disorder of Things: Quarantine Unemployment, the Decline of Neoliberalism, and the COVID-19 Lockdown Crash” (chap. 8), and “Reality Is an Activity of the Most August Imagination’. When the World Stops, It’s Not a Complete Disaster—We Can Hear the Birds Sing!” (chap. 9), Peters explores the possibility of what a post-COVID world could look like. He writes, “The threat of contagion creates two opposite emotions” (64). He goes on to say that, for some, the threat gives rise to a form of extreme individualism that rejects guidelines on social distancing and other modes of prevention; in others it sparks a paralyzing and stigmatizing fear of both the illness and the ill. However, he also observes that these base impulses can be transformed into an ethos of solidarity and a shared focus on keeping all of us safe. The reactions of economic institutions and the leading prophets of neoliberalism that seem, in Peters’ analysis, to be softening neoliberal impulses and advocating something like cross-class solidarity encourage the analysis of a possible post-COVID social and economic shift.

Peters examines a potential social shift by contrasting the impulses of the Chinese government’s strong hand with the widespread resistance to the limited restrictions put on American “freedom.” In “Philosophy and Pandemic in the Postdigital Era: Foucault, Agamben, Žižek” (chap. 7), “The Chinese Dream Encounters COVID-19” (chap. 10), and “Biopolitics, Conspiracy and the Immuno-State: An Evolving Global Politico-Genetic Complex” (chap. 11, written with Besley), Peters and Besley bring philosophers and the differing political contexts of China and Western nations into conversation in an effort to understand the way state power uses what Giorgio Agamben (2020) calls the “state of exception” to create and entrench technologies of control. A pandemic is a perfect excuse to pursue what Philipp Sarasin (2020) calls a “biopolitical dream”—that is, the extension of government power over citizens to reduce them to a “pure biomass,” thanks to the canny exploitation of public health advice (72ff, 98-99). Peters highlights the way Xi Jinping’s cultivation of a “Chinese Dream,” driven by reliable economic growth, is essential to both Xi’s political power and global economic stability;

the pandemic's interruption of commerce endangered both. In Peters' estimation in the spring of 2020, the Chinese exercise of power as a "strong socialist state" seemed to be getting the country "back to work" more reliably than the American approach, an evaluation that hasn't been disproven (95-96, 102).

Peters and the book's other contributors provide generous excerpts from the work of the scholars whose work they built on, which provides an effective boost for a reader looking to assemble a set of references with which to develop a philosophy of the current pandemic moment. As a "rapid-response" collection of thoughts expressed during the first COVID spring, the essays in this volume provide a useful touchstone and a guide to some of the more interesting and provocative thinking of the moment. I appreciated Peters' sober engagement with Slavoj Žižek's (2020) and Agamben's (2020) works from that spring, which caused heated discussion, and was glad to see that Arundhati Roy's (2020) "The Pandemic Is a Portal" served Peters as much as it served me in that difficult season. I appreciated the company these essays provided as I tried to make sense of an uncertain world; however, I wished for a more substantive central argument. I struggled to identify a line of thought that tied the essays together, and would have appreciated more explicit introductory and concluding chapters that helped the reader understand the purpose behind assembling these essays and that united the disparate lines of inquiry and analysis across the chapters.

Readers of this journal may find the chapters on the viral spread of mis-/disinformation the most useful and interesting of the book. These early chapters reflect on how the mis-/disinformation spread like their biological analogues and on how their sources were motivated. Readers also may look to other recent books that offer sociological, anthropological, and neurological views on how people come to distrust medical and public health information. For example, in *Stuck*, anthropologist Heidi Larson (2020) examined pockets of resistance to vaccination campaigns and concluded that one reason viral misinformation spread was because people and communities felt that their local and communal expertise and input were ignored and condescended to. An implicit lesson educators might gain from the book is that building students' capacity and ability to evaluate evidence and make their own decisions can meaningfully reduce their vulnerability to the viral spread of mis- and disinformation. The concreteness of Larson's cases and social science approach might have served as a useful check on the theoretical work in *Pandemic Education and Viral Politics*. In *The Sleeping Beauties*, neurologist Suzanne O'Sullivan (2021) covered some overlapping territory, outlining how physical illness and ailments can be the product of helplessness and curtailed autonomy. Reading the two books together, informed by Peters and colleagues'

philosophical approach, might suggest prescribing a vaccine of meaningful social and individual autonomy as a way to both make individuals unwelcome hosts to viral mis- and disinformation and prevent its spread.

After Peters and Besley sent this book to press in mid-2020, reporters increasingly recognized the disparate impact the pandemic was having on different social groups and the way biopolitics was being used to deepen existing racial and socioeconomic inequity. The disparate impact of the pandemic and any resultant expanded state powers appear in these pages only in passing. The book's themes of viral modernity, biopolitics, and how different systems of state power interact with a viral pandemic remain urgent and continue to reverberate in systems of racialized power throughout the world. For instance, while reading *Pandemic Education and Viral Politics*, I found myself thinking often of the lines of thought explored by journalism professor Steven Thrasher in *The Viral Underclass* (2022).

Agamben's worry about the totalitarian possibilities of expanded state power might be productively contrasted with Thrasher's analysis of the violence of organized state abandonment.

Peters and Besley's book provides a useful exploration of early lines of thought and inquiry that have been productive in the years since they wrote; I look forward to seeing how scholars build on the lines of thought set out in this book.

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