

Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy: Conversations on Pandemics, Politics and Society edited by Fernando Castrillón and Thomas Marchevsky. London and New York: Routledge, 2021. ISBN: 9780367713669.

Journalism is sometimes referred to as the first draft of history. This can be taken at least two ways. The idea may be self-congratulatory, self-aggrandizing...it's usually heard coming from journalists themselves, in fact. But they are also a self-deprecating bunch, and it could be referring to the pointlessness of journalism. We all want to read as much about the current moment as quickly as we can: but whoever goes back to read last year's newspapers? The owl of Minerva takes flight at dusk, philosophy is *post festum*...We want to know how things ended up, from people better informed than anyone who was living in the moment.

For a historian, of course, there is tremendous value in going back to these first drafts of history: the discovery of forgotten details, perspectives that got drowned out...For the rest of us, the publication of *Coronavirus, Psychoanalysis, and Philosophy* shows us that there is value as well. This volume gives us a chance to read accounts of a moment like none other in the recent past, written very much from within that moment. Each essay in the volume is, in fact, appropriately accompanied by the date of its original publication. And what is especially interesting is that, of course, these essays are not just reporting on *faits divers*, but are efforts by some truly significant and interesting thinkers to address the broader philosophical, political, moral, psychological, and existential implications of the pandemic, at a time when the future was very much uncertain (vaccines were not expected to be available any time soon, for example).

Originally published between February and May 2020 on the *European Journal of Psychoanalysis* website, the essays in this volume are very readable (the longest is about six pages), well translated (only a few were written in English) and, as the editors themselves observe, somewhat risky, in the sense that at the time of publication, all the authors were exposing themselves to potential critique, and maybe even ridicule, from the judgment of a better-informed future. Were the authors over-reacting? Under-reacting?

In fact, the volume exists in large part due to the very much in-the-moment thinking of Giorgio Agamben, who published 'The Invention of an Epidemic' in late February 2020. Flirting with pandemic denialism, this essay notoriously argued that the pandemic was being used as a pretext for expanded government powers and limits on freedom that could well outlast whatever there was of the pandemic. The first group of essays in this volume ('Philosophers Speak') are mainly reactions to that piece and later ones Agamben wrote, preceded by a reprint of part of Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* about regulations and practices during a plague outbreak. It includes essays by a wide range of thinkers: Zsuzsa Baross, Néstor Braunstein, Massimo De Carolis, Divya Dwivedi, Roberto Esposito, Shaj Mohan, Jean-Luc Nancy, and Rocco Ronchi. These authors are very much in dialogue with Agamben as well as each other; Nancy responding to Agamben (rather entertainingly), Esposito to Nancy, Dwivedi and Mohan to Agamben and Nancy, Nancy back to Esposito...Nancy expresses some doubts about the entire framework Agamben uses, including the concepts of biopower and the state of exception, but does not doubt the gravity of the pandemic and urges us to think the exceptionality of the moment, and the virus, in a different way. Most of the authors in this part, however, accept that biopower is indeed a relevant way to think the present configuration, even if they do take issue with Agamben's concerns about a sempiternal

state of exception. Perhaps only Braunstein's essay, 'The Return of Antigone: Burial Rites in Pandemic Times,' can be described as somewhat sympathetic to Agamben's alarmism. Braunstein writes compellingly about the high psychic cost brought on by deaths unaccompanied, last wishes dishonored...we know how Antigone turned out! But she, at least, was able to persevere with her desire...

The last two parts are 'Philosophers Act' and 'Psychoanalysts Speak'. These address broader philosophical issues and the impact of the pandemic on the practice of psychoanalysis. The second part features an interview with Julia Kristeva on finitude and mortality, an essay by Dany Nobus on how, if at all, the pandemic might really affect what we value. As the editors point out, many of the essays in this section (by Sergio Benvenuto, Dwivedi, Roberto Esposito, Nancy, Elettra Stimilli, and Miguel Vatter) reflect on how the virus is changing and affecting our daily lives. The last section, 'Psychoanalysts Speak,' features essays by Néstor Braunstein, Monique Lauret, Rene Lew and Duane Rousselle, generally reflecting on how the pandemic has affected the practice of psychoanalysis. Lew, seemingly somewhat of a pandemic skeptic, is strongly against any form of distance analysis, since the presence of mechanical filters (phones, screens) disrupts the social bond analysis requires. Most of the other analysts in this section disagree. This section also includes a 'Diary from the Quarantine' by Sergio Benvenuto. Probably the most journalistic essay in the volume in style and tone, but highly effective and entertaining: finally a psychoanalyst explains why everyone was hoarding toilet paper!

Overall, how well do the essays hold up? In her recently published memoir, Sherry Turkle writes about her disappointment as an American student living in Paris during the events of May 68: every intellectual seemed to be using the events as an opportunity to promote and develop their own, pre-existing, theoretical orientation! Inevitably, there is some of that going on in this volume. It is hard not to be a prisoner of the moment, or a prisoner of an orientation one has spent a lifetime developing. I would disagree with the idea that this is a bad thing, however. It would be rather ridiculous, and highly questionable, to expect anyone to think from ground zero, from a blank slate: furthermore, did the pandemic show us or expose us to anything all that new? In fact, what this volume shows us in part is that the pandemic highlighted aspects of contemporaneous life that we were all already thinking about, problematizing, and questioning: biopower, the influence of technology on our lives, frayed social bonds, globalization, capitalism... Regardless of who was right or wrong about how events panned out -- regardless of who was appropriately concerned or worried versus who wasn't -- these essays bring to light the strengths and limitations of a variety of important and influential orientations. If you want to get a sense of how well some orientations withstood the crucible that the pandemic provided, or didn't, or, what's more, were in a particularly strong position to shed some unexpected light on it, this volume is well worth a look.

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References

Agamben, G. (2020). The Invention of an Epidemic *The European Journal of Psychoanalysis*: <https://www.journal-psychoanalysis.eu/coronavirus-and-philosophers/>

