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Pandemic politics – an introduction

The outbreak of COVID-19 in early 2020 and the various measures taken subsequently, either by individual countries or by government and non-government bodies with a global reach, have had a profound effect on human lives on a number of levels, be it social, economic, legal, or political. The scramble to respond to the threat posed by the rapid spread of the virus has, in many cases, led to a suspension of ordinary politics whilst at the same time throwing into sharp relief the profoundly political nature of the pandemic. In addition to the new issues that have arisen regarding detection and treatment of the COVID-19 virus, perennial political issues regarding the limits of political authority, racial and gender justice, and populism and demagoguery have thrust themselves to the forefront of mainstream political discourse.

The pandemic has also severely affected academic activities. Academics all over the world have struggled to conduct research under COVID restrictions, to make the sudden switch to online modes of teaching, and to maintain their health and sanity in the face of vastly increased workloads, familial demands, social and economic upheaval, and all too often sickness and bereavement. Closer to home, in line with national regulations, which initially banned and then strongly discouraged large gatherings, the November 2020 Annual Conference of the South African Society for Critical Theory could not take place. In its stead, the Organising Committee arranged this special issue with *Acta Academica*, which directly addresses the cause behind the delay of the conference, viz. *Pandemic politics*. What, then, can the reader expect in this volume?

The special issue, titled simply *Pandemic politics*, is a collection of papers that cast a critical perspective upon the political dimensions of the current pandemic. We have invited papers covering a broad spectrum of pandemic-related topics, especially with the focus on aspects of the pandemic in relation to the Southern hemisphere. The eight papers that made it to this volume are reflective of this broad approach and fall, roughly, into three categories, namely power and mistrust, disaster capitalism, and COVID-19: crisis or opportunity. In the sections to follow, we discuss in more detail the papers constituting each category cluster.

Power and mistrust

True to the promise of this special issue's title, we open this volume with two papers directed at the political aspects of the pandemic involving the questions of the abuse of power for political gain and the mistrust this generates amongst citizens when this happens.

The first paper in this section, by Paddington Mutekwe and Kudzaiishe Peter Vanyoro, is titled *Politicising 'COVID-19': an analysis of selected ZANU-PF officials' 2020-2021 media statements on the pandemic in Zimbabwe*. The authors adopt an interesting theoretical approach by utilising discourse analysis and the Foucauldian concept of biopower to discuss power relations between the state and its citizens. The authors' central claim is that the COVID-19 pandemic has provided the present Zimbabwean government with an opportunity to both protect its own party interests and to exercise its power to crush the opposition.

As the theoretical background for this analysis, the authors introduce a Foucauldian definition of biopower as that which controls a number of biological processes such that those in power can, as the authors call it, "exercise citizen regulation" not just in terms of the population's health but also other related factors such as birth rates, mortality, longevity, etc. While such control may seem innocent and in the best interest of the citizens, it may take a path of subjugation, as envisioned by Foucault. Drawing on this definition, the authors move to the discussion of the COVID-19-triggered lockdown in Zimbabwe.

Firstly, the authors point to pre-existing political tensions in the country, resulting not only from the power struggle amongst political parties but also from the country's multi-ethnic population and these groups' conflicting interests. At the time when COVID-19 was declared by the WHO to be a pandemic, Zimbabwe's economic situation was dire, with galloping inflation, numerous industrial strikes, and a general failure of the state in the provision of goods and services. It was in a situation like this that the state of national disaster and then a hard lockdown was announced.

Mutekwe and Vanyoro do not, by any means, diminish the life-saving role of the lockdown. They openly admit that while "lockdowns violate basic human rights, they are permissible for public health reasons". However, in a number of examples, they show that the saving of the lives of Zimbabweans has quickly become a secondary aim. This is supported by the authors' analysis of the discourse used by government representatives, which forms the second part of the paper.

Methodologically, the authors do not limit themselves to the analysis of just one particular source (a newspaper, a media outlet, a television programme etc.). They use a variety of sources in which they identify several themes in the governmental discourse, such as COVID-19 infections as a blessing in disguise allowing for "selective application" of the lockdown rules, scapegoating the opposition, the nationalistic rhetoric of the ruling party, media censorship, as well as "patronage and elitism" in the vaccine roll-out.

For example, the authors posit, rules of the lockdown could serve as a means of limiting nationwide protests against the inefficiency of the present government in service delivery since the opposition could be presented as spreading the virus by organising such events. This, in turn, could justify the use of additional measures of control, such as intrusive surveillance, normally considered an infringement of human rights. Another example is the rhetoric of blaming the West for the virus, the ensuing lockdown, and its detrimental economic effects. This, too, can serve to discredit the political opposition, presented as stooges of the West facilitating the Western sabotage of the country. From this follows the application of censorship of media presentations and other activities of the opposition, within the scope of the new state of disaster/lockdown laws, on a scale much larger than prior to COVID-19. Building on numerous examples, the authors conclude that the situation in Zimbabwe during the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant lockdown is within the scope of the concept of biopower used to achieve political rather than health-related goals.

While the paper by Mutekwe and Vanyoro analyses the effect of governmental abuse of biopower for political gains, the second paper in this group looks at the pandemic from the point of view of the disenchanted and mistrustful citizen.

Approaching the topic from this angle is Adeolu Oluwaseyi Oyekani, in the paper titled *Conspiracy theories and pandemic management in Africa: critical reflections on contexts, contradictions and challenges.* The author develops the paper in several steps, commencing with definitions of both conspiracy and conspiracy theory, through theoretical understanding of the concept, to examples of conspiracy theories regarding COVID-19 circulating in the world, and closes with the analysis of conspiracy theories specific to the African continent and a

brief analysis of the effects of such theories on the activities aimed at curbing the spread of the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

The point of departure for this paper is the widely accepted view that the COVID-19 pandemic's effects reach well beyond those related to health threats alone with, as the author puts it, "significant social, economic and political implications across the world". One of these implications is the significant rise in conspiracy theories surrounding the origin of the pandemic, the need for and effectiveness of lockdowns, or the benevolence (or lack thereof) behind the rapid development of the vaccines.

Searching to clarify the concept of a conspiracy theory, the author opens the paper with an analysis of what constitutes a conspiracy as such, understood as the secret work of a group of individuals with a common goal of affecting another group in a way which, unless attempted in a clandestine manner, would not succeed due to political, social, or other similar reasons. From this understanding of conspiracy, the author claims, the term 'conspiracy theory' arises as a description of societal beliefs that assume conscious malevolent action behind events, incidents, or phenomena. The author skilfully leads us through the theoretical work on conspiracy theories, addressing such notions as misattribution theory, conspiracy theory as pathology, and conspiracy theory as political alienation.

This theoretical background serves as lead-in to the discussion of the world-wide conspiracy theories surrounding the present COVID-19 pandemic. The author mentions several theories, including claims of the laboratory origin of the virus, relating the virus or our greater susceptibility to it to the roll-out of the 5G network, or describing the pandemic as a tool to administer vaccinations through which chips will be inserted into human bodies, allowing distance control/monitoring of the population.

The final section is devoted to specific theories propagated in African countries. While some of these theories bear resemblance to the world-wide ones, such as, for example, the 5G roll-out and its effect on our bodies, some have a more localised flavour. For example, claims have been made by pastors in Nigeria about the virus being an attack of evil forces on the Christian churches. Even governmental bodies, according to the author, were not free from making 'conspiratorial' claims such as, for instance, that help offered to Nigeria by the Chinese in the form of a medical team was intended to accelerate rather than curb the spread of the virus. Similarly, in South Africa, claims about the conscious malevolent action behind either the virus or the vaccine have been made by individual people or professional bodies. Moving to the extreme, Tanzania's president even dismissed the existence of the virus.

On the basis of the careful presentation of the theoretical basis for conspiracy theories as well as examples of such theories arising world-wide and on the African continent during the COVID-19 pandemic, Oyekan reaches the conclusion that none of the theoretical approaches on its own can fully address the mechanisms behind the rise of conspiracy theories during the present pandemic. At the same time, none of the academic lines of thought present a solution to prevent the spread of such theories. This makes a dangerous situation of the pandemic even more treacherous in that conspiracy theories, rather than promoting unity and cooperation, sow mistrust and separation. Finally, the author suggests measures which could help curb the rise and spread of conspiracy theories, such as, for example, greater governmental transparency and a less authoritarian and patronising approach to addressing the pandemic, with more respect for the rights of their citizens.

Disaster capitalism

The next group of papers also directly engage with the political dimensions of the COVID-19 pandemic, and though each differs significantly from the other with regards to the theoretical framework that they employ in their analyses, they all view the pandemic as offering a singular moment of insight into the political structures of the contemporary world. For these authors, the pandemic fractures (and/or reveals the pre-existing fractures in) the political system. In so doing, it allows a rare moment in which other, alternative forms of politics can be made visible and/or imagined. For all three authors, the COVID-19 crisis is inherently political and holds open the potential for both understanding and opportunity.

Lawrence Hamilton's paper titled *Democracy in crisis* argues that the global crisis caused by the pandemic has thrown into stark relief both the significant differences between democratic forms of government, and the pre-existing tensions and inadequacies within each form. He further argues that in addition to providing a moment of analytic clarity, the crisis also holds out an opportunity for political transformation and renewal that can address and overcome the current failings of democratic government. Hamilton calls for a transformation from what he refers to as a system of formal democracy to a system of substantive democracy in which the political leaders are induced to exhibit empathetic leadership by the institutional structures put in place and in which the politically marginalised are institutionally empowered.

Following the work of the political scientist Adam Przeworski, Hamilton suggests that democracy is better understood as a means of structuring social conflicts and processing them in a rule-governed manner. For Hamilton, such an understanding places the focus on the ability of political institutions to manage

social conflict effectively. Indeed, Hamilton notes, in the current pandemic it is precisely this ability to manage social conflict that has been most severely tested. Taking South Africa as an example of a functioning participatory democracy, Hamilton uses the South African government's response to the pandemic to emphasise the failings of even this supposedly model form of democratic government. On Hamilton's account, the SA government, after a promising start, subsequently bungled their responses by attempting to calculate and address the populace's 'basic needs' by employing an understanding of 'basic needs' derived without any consultation with the poverty-stricken majority of the people regarding what their 'basic needs' might actually entail. This failure, Hamilton stresses was not due to a deficit of democratic participation in South Africa, but rather to the wrong kind of participation taking place.

Hamilton calls for a reconfiguration of the forms of representation in order to facilitate greater popular control over the representatives. And as part of this reconfiguration of democratic politics Hamilton calls for the increase rather than reduction of the powers given to representatives such that those representatives are sufficiently empowered that they may independently arrive at their own decisions. Hamilton advances what he terms a 'dynamic' model of representation whereby representatives are not assumed to either respond to pre-existing interests among the populace, or to use their own judgment to choose amongst them. Rather, Hamilton suggests, a sufficiently empowered representative can create a dynamic space in which the representatives can generate novel interests with which sections of the populace can then identify. Hamilton closes by identifying four possible institutional reforms to the structures of representative democracy that he feels can instantiate the enhanced representation that he calls for, in addition to safeguarding the level of transparency necessary for the populace to judge the judgments of their representatives.

The next paper of this cluster, Jason Howard's *Something eventful this way comes: on pandemics, events and capitalism*, takes its inspiration from the work of Alain Badiou, and considers the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to Badiou's concept of the event. Howard argues, against Badiou's own views on the nature of the pandemic, that COVID-19 should in fact be considered an event, or in other words, that the pandemic represents a radical break in the social fabric through which we can glimpse the outlines of alternative forms of ourselves and the social world. Howard argues that the evental character of the pandemic is evident in the singular disruption that it has wrought upon the capitalist system, a disruption that exceeds the standard boundaries of parochial political thought, and which despite its singular nature is radically multifaceted in its social and political effects. Howard concedes the possibility that the event of COVID-19 could yet in principle be managed and normalised by the existing political framework,

perhaps by reducing it to merely a natural phenomenon, but argues that this has not yet occurred. For the moment at least, the political nature of the pandemic is discernible.

For Badiou an event is a situation in which new political pathways become visible but one in which awareness of these new pathways is ultimately contingent upon the desire of those involved to bring it forth. The event discloses new possibilities for social existence and, in its transformation of political subjectivity, can constitute an epistemological rupture with the truth conventions of the preceding status quo. Howard argues that the pandemic meets these criteria. As evidence he points to the ways in which the pandemic has disrupted both the normal workings of capitalism and the ways in which the ideology of capitalism had become naturalised, such that no other form of social organisation was thought possible despite the system's manifest dysfunction. Though the effects of the pandemic are international, Howard notes, the forms of governmental response are idiosyncratic and local. In different countries the flows of capitalism have been disrupted in different ways, in each case incurring economic costs that are not offset by concomitant gains elsewhere in the system. In other words, capitalism has been constrained by choice in order to prevent harms to the populace. This disruption subverts the 'natural' order, whereby the needs of capitalism inevitably outweigh the needs of the collective, and clears a space for the manifestation of unlimited political alternatives. And thus, Howard concludes, COVID-19 does indeed constitute an event in a Badiouan sense.

Although he approaches the pandemic from the vantage point of ideology theory rather than Badiou's philosophy, Rafal Soborski's paper titled *Taking ideology seriously in the time of plague: insights versus distractions* takes a similar stance with regards to COVID-19 in that he argues that it offers a moment of disruption in the normal functioning of neo-liberal capitalism through which we can penetrate the ideological veil that normalises and naturalises the capitalist status quo and hides the social actuality from view.

For Soborski, the current pandemic reveals the shortcomings of the term 'populism', which is frequently bandied about in contemporary political discourse as an explanatory political category, particularly with regards to the analysis of the behaviours of certain democratic governments in response to the pandemic. The idea behind such analyses is, Soborski suggests, that there is some sort of internal coherence to the category "populism" such that a government's adherence to it could be used to explain their subsequent policy decisions in response to COVID-19 and thus, if a government is known to be "populist" then it will manage (or mismanage) the response to COVID-19 in predictable and consistent ways.

Soborski points to the conceptual fuzziness of the concept of populism, noting that the term 'populist' is regularly applied to governments on both the left and the right of the political spectrum, assuming a paradoxical commonality of those who claim to represent class interest and those who claim to represent ethnic interests, for example. He also observes that both populist and non-populist governments employed much the same policies in response to COVID-19.

Soborski suggests that a far more informative view of the current political situation is to be gained by analysing governments and their pandemic responses not in terms of populism but through the prism of ideology theory. The real explanatory factor behind various governmental responses to COVID-19 is to be found in the hegemony of neo-liberalism, such that the greater the extent of 'marketisation', i.e. the extent to which social needs and institutions are subjected to market logic, the less adequate the governmental response. Soborski, like Howard, points to the ways in which neo-liberal capitalism has become a second nature, its values viewed as social 'facts' and its ideology as social reality. And Soborski too views the pandemic as delivering salutary political lessons: firstly, in that it reveals the real worldview driving governmental responses to COVID-19, i.e. neoliberalism rather than populism, and secondly in that it reveals the fragility of neo-liberal ideology in the face of social disruption. If, Soborski suggests, the opponents of neo-liberalism can see past the smokescreen of populism to the ideology of neo-liberalism behind it, then the pandemic can be viewed as an opportunity.

COVID-19: crisis or opportunity

And it is opportunity in the crisis that the last cluster of papers also addresses, providing for a 'glimmer of hope' amongst the usually bleak views regarding the current pandemic.

Stephen Vertigans, Natascha Mueller-Hirth, Fredrick Okinda and Christopher Waithaka's paper titled *Resilience in a Kenyan informal settlement during the COVID-19 pandemic* presents the authors' fieldwork in Korogocho, an informal settlement in Nairobi, Kenya, conducted both pre-COVID and during restraining measures, as an avenue to explore the question of informal settlement resilience. The authors demonstrate how informal settlements have been identified as locations where the spread of COVID-19 has generally been slower than within the Global North, and investigate how measures to restrain the pandemic have further intensified local peoples' marginality as income decreases without welfare or financial safety nets. Their paper discusses the fieldwork done in Korogocho both immediately prior to national COVID-19 restrictions, focussing on a community-based project and investigated the basis for resilience in transforming local lives,

and the next 12 months of the pandemic, exploring experiences and reactions to restraining policies.

Their research suggests that the sense of strengthened bonds between community members and deeper local chains of interdependence, as noted in the first 12 months of the pandemic, will continue to underpin processes of resilience in such informal settlements through increasing connection to local knowledge, social cohesion, and resources. However, their findings also reinforce concerns about the impact of COVID-19-related restrictions on marginalised peoples' income, food security, health, safety and gender-based violence. Furthermore, they discuss how the local people's reaction to these effects highlight their creative resilience and adaptability – particularly in terms of shifting gender dynamics in these contexts. The paper concludes by examining the impact of, and responses to, the controlling measures on the social relationships and cohesion that underpin the community resilience.

Luis de Miranda's paper titled *The healing-growth future of humanity: regenerative politics and crealectic care* argues that, despite our Cartesian fantasies of control, the 2020 coronavirus pandemic served to remind us that naturing nature (*natura naturans*) is still active in the form of an untamed Other. They suggest that the dominant response to the pandemic, on most political sides, was anthropocentric. Furthermore, the political response promulgated a perspective of active doing – a doing generally framed within the scope of technique and management – that would return nature to a kind and submissive non-viral neutrality, as a supposedly passive resource for productivism. De Miranda asks how humanity, as a pandemic species itself, and not only metaphorically, could be better attuned with the powers of naturing nature and how humanity could take in a posture of co-creation rather than that of a reactive technocratic war against the non-periodic or 'monstrous' aspects of life.

For De Miranda, this question is a matter of philosophical health: the future of humanity does not depend on statistics and logistics, but on the possibility of a philosophical (re)generative politics, a trustful care for creative singularity rather than an anxious control and production of regularity. The healing-growth future of humanity is a goal that remains to be sympoietically co-created, they argue. De Miranda suggests that humanity's collective health presupposes a reconciliation with naturing nature and the deployment of a global shared cosmology based on the creative healing-growth flux of originative creativity – what De Miranda terms a regenerative and life-affirming creative Real that they call 'Creal'. In this regard, 'crealectics' represents the generative philosophical health (and a meta-pandemic regenerative politics) that favours healing growth as counter to the morbid politics that seem to dominate our anthrobotic worlds.

Gwyn Easterbrook-Smith's paper titled *Shame, subjectivity, and pandemic productivity* describes the working from home movement necessitated by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic across the globe due to the lockdown, isolation, and quarantine restrictions which were put in place in many countries. They trace advice (in the form of articles and social media posts) which emerged during this period and which urged people to use the 'opportunity' of isolation during the pandemic to engage in self-improvement activities or to launch a business. In their paper, Easterbrook-Smith considers the ways that the temporal collapse between private and work life could be seen to exacerbate the degree to which these productivity discourses played upon neoliberal conceptions of identity formation through self-commodification and optimisation.

Easterbrook-Smith argues that a failure to be productive in neoliberal terms has been understood and promulgated as not only a failure to maximally develop oneself, but also a failure to be an effective part of a cohesive whole. They describe how the discourses frequently use a combination of shame and the suggestion that productivity is an obligation to the community, as well as to the self, to justify themselves. This entangled justification, as Easterbrook-Smith points out, makes finding purchase to engage in a critique of the broader structural issues at play more difficult rhetorically. Indeed, the collapse of private and public spaces leaves individuals with no space to reflect on what these discourses mean, or how they operate.

Conclusion

As has been stated initially, the present special issue is in *lieu* of the 2020 Annual Conference of the South African Society for Critical Theory. Do the papers included in the volume exhibit features characteristic of a critical theoretical approach? We are of the opinion that they do.

As the reader has seen, the first cluster includes papers which deal with the issues of power, the resultant/possible authoritarianism and 'pandemic policing', and the ensuing use of the pandemic for political purposes. Aiming to address the other side of the political, this cluster also discusses the issue of conspiracy theories surrounding the pandemic as well as actions taken against it.

The second group of papers focusses on how the pandemic may have acted as a factor either disruptive of or serving as an accelerant to the neoliberal normality in its capitalist guise.

As a countermeasure to the relative pessimism of the first two clusters, the third one, more optimistic, presents the COVID-19 crisis as an opportunity for progressive social politics as well as the role of humanity in the times of crisis.

Despite their diverse theoretical and methodological backgrounds, all the paper in this volume continue the traditional mission of Critical Theory to "penetrate the world of things to show the underlying relations between persons" (Aronowitz 2002: xiii) while, true to this tradition, remaining explanatory, normative, and practical.

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