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Review of *The Psychology of Covid-19*. by Joel Vos, Sage, 2021. pp 179. ISBN 978-1-5297-5180-2
(hardcover, and e-book)

Psychology in the Covid-19 Dream World

This is an ambitious book, written in extraordinary times, that attempts to sketch out both the psychological consequences of the coronavirus pandemic as well as the multi-disciplinary nature of understanding required to confront it –from a practical point of view as well as a political, or indeed semantic one. As well as these aims, Vos sets out to embrace the possibilities open to us for creating a different kind of future than the one we have inhabited since before Covid-19 struck. The book is heavily referenced and the author has done an admirable job of keeping on top of an exponentially increasing body of non-normal research. Central to Vos’ s analysis is the uncertainty which sweeps through the fabric of all institutional efforts to grapple with the consequences of the virus. As he makes clear, some of these institutional players do not have our best interests at heart. Big Pharma, naturally comes in for criticism without denying that the actions of pharmaceutical companies will likely ultimately determine the length of time we are left swinging over the existential precipice, wherein we currently reside. Journalism too comes under the cross-hairs, with a concise survey of the biased, misinformed, intentionally misleading, and downright conspiratorial content that runs through established as well as digital media. In this section he talks of a “COVID-19 Life Syndrome” where “public consent is manufactured via the media, biopolitics and lobbyists from the pharmaceutical industry.” (Vos, 2021, p.82). In my own reflections on this, I have wondered about the role played by journalistic incompetence in its alliance with misanthropy. There can scarcely be a person alive in the UK –that mythical national entity on a slow Brexit inspired death march to eventual non-existence - that is not hypnotized by the preeminent mythical entity of the pandemic. I refer to the ‘R’ number, the statistic used to assess the average number of secondary infections produced by one infected person.

We are reliably informed that when this figure exceeds one, the epidemic is increasing and when it is below one, decreasing. The threat posed by the virus has provided media commentators with an unparalleled opportunity to instill ever increasing levels of anxiety in the population, uncoupled from any serious critical examination of the uncertain scientific knowledge which has been emerging. As the bank of knowledge has progressively widened, one thing has remained constant; the slavish adherence of the UK media to an ignorant misinterpretation of the information provided by the statistic.

The Spectacle

Despite disagreement in the scientific community about how to actually measure this parameter - and it is important to note that there is little agreement – the figure can be useful when comparing the infectivity of different viruses or for post-hoc explanations of the spread of disease in a population. In the hands of journalists however, it has been nothing short of a source of confusion. For example, on the 5th June, 2020, in its online edition, the *Guardian* LIVE reported that the R number had “gone up.” It had previously been *estimated* to be somewhere between 0.7 to 0.9, whilst now it was reported to be between 0.7 and 1.0. Whoever was responsible for this claim evidently possessed no understanding of what an estimated range actually means. Put simply, the estimate of between 0.7 and 0.9 would be consistent with an actual reproducibility rate anywhere between 0.7 and 0.9. For example, it might have been 0.85. With the estimate the following week that it was between 0.7 and 1, it might actually have been 0.75. In other words, far from having “gone up” the average infectivity may have fallen. On the day in question, consistent with this interpretation, a mere two paragraphs down from the offending declaration, readers were informed that hard epidemiological data, obtained from weekly serological surveys, revealed that the number of people infected in the UK at the time had dropped. These two pieces of information sat shoulder to shoulder. The paper’s journalists were happy to simultaneously

claim that the reproducibility rate of the virus had increased while the actual number of infections in the population had decreased – a biological as well as mathematical impossibility. To clarify, the *Guardian* claimed in the space of a few lines that the R statistic had gone up, meaning infected people were now on average infecting more people than before while at the same time hard data showed fewer people were being infected. The paper is of course not alone in being unable to understand and convey to its readers what a range of estimates actually means. Similar failures of numeracy have been on display in the pages of all the major UK newspapers and mainstream TV outlets throughout the course of the pandemic.

The perhaps willful misinterpretation of R permits journalists to give priority to lurid headlines – sometimes with no basis in fact. The headline of course – as Guy Debord (1992) warned us – is a function of ‘The Spectacle’ - the propensity of media outlets to fashion a ‘newsworthy’ event out of the deluge of information provided by politicians, powerful agencies, actors, celebrities and other journalists, and occasionally the real world. Its primary purpose here is to attract the attention of readers and exacerbate fear in the population. Herman and Chomsky’s (1994) analysis considered shifting newsprint onto the public was ultimately about market share and advertising revenue, but the psychological conduits which facilitate this are growing increasingly powerful. ‘The Spectacle’, Debord saw, was a means of unifying a society, a society of consumers of images, into the domain of delusion and false consciousness. The pandemic has brought with it a tsunami that seemingly devours all traces of normality. Vos describes how Naomi Klein’s (2007) *The Shock Doctrine* provides an appropriate account for how the powerful and unscrupulous seize such moments to redraw the boundaries of economic and political consensus in favour of the previously unpalatable whims of the rich. Alongside this it is a means of creating a new psychological consensus. Thus, we find ourselves in the COVID-19 dream world, where nothing is as it seems and maybe never will be again.

Future Shock

Vos keeps one eye on the future throughout this book – his aspirations being to lay the groundwork for a more resilient and democratic life, one that is more at home, individually, collectively and institutionally with uncertainty, danger and risk; an existentially realist society that utilizes openness, vulnerability and critical thinking as platforms for self-defense, honesty, integrity and transparency. These will all be necessary if we are to negotiate, even moderately well, the dangers we now face. Globalism, neoliberalism, materialism and ecological collapse are the underwriters of our contemporary collective predicament. In the understandable admiration created by the achievements of biological science since the pandemic arrived, we must avoid the temptation to keep it locked away in a scientifically detached box of its own. Science has never been more political than now. We owe it to ourselves and the future to reposition our knowledge enterprises not just as intellectually exciting, or even as necessary—economically or practically, but also as inescapably emotional and political. Science – and indeed art - are important parts of our collective investment in the future. Capitalism, as Vos remarks, is now at a crossroads. So too the nature of our future on this planet. Perhaps also our appreciation of knowledge and our emotional relationship to it.

References

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