

## Book Review

REVIEW OF HUMAN RIGHTS  
Vol. 7, No. 1, Winter 2020, iv-xi  
DOI: 10.35994/rhr.v7i1.182



**Vinay Lal, *The Fury of COVID-19: The Politics, Histories, and Unrequited Love of the Coronavirus*, New Delhi: Pan Macmillan Publishing, 2020. (300 pages, paperback ISBN, 9389104238, ISBN13: 978-9389104233)**

This book is composed of a set of disparate essays that are grounded in history, political economy, and philosophy. These essays focus on a range of topics addressing different dynamics of the coronavirus pandemic. They include history of pandemics, governmental discourse on health and practical strategies, the role of WHO, neo-liberal economic order and consumerism, social order and human attitudes, nationalism and immigration, and global warming and climate change. Shedding light on these various dynamics, Lal exposes the high claims made by the powerful states like the US, the UK, and European states about their superior political systems, health care programs, and welfare services.

The methodological approach in the book is quite significant to highlight at the outset. It is based in historical analysis and historiography that seeks to build a dynamic collage of instances, events, and reasons gleaned from a vast array of time and spaces. The collage is composed of careful juxtapositions of similarities, dissimilarities, gaps and anomalies. Apart from its quality to create imagery in mind, the collage of textual images grips the reader's imagination and impels her to engage in critical way of thinking. This book is a must read for students of social sciences and humanities as well as a good fit for general audience who seek to understand the coronavirus pandemic in its historical context.

The book expands on sixteen chapters. The arrangement of these chapters departs from traditional organizational structures—for example chronological order, geographic pattern, or inductive-deductive scheme of theorizing. It is rather rhizomatic, to borrow Gilles Deleuze's term. In other words, the train of thought in the book winds and meanders like a rhizome root—back and forth, up and down, sideways and forward. In this way it connects different spaces,

times, peoples, events, and reasons making a collage of spectacular images.

The book opens with a brief introduction of the coronavirus pandemic beginning with the much publicly debated question whether or not it is an unprecedented event. For a historian like Lal it is far from being unprecedented, rather it is a continuum in the continua of viral epidemics. There have always been pandemics and epidemics periodically intervening and disrupting human and biological lives in the past. For instance, Lal points out that the 21<sup>st</sup> century opened with a war and then saw a series of epidemics like SARS, MERS, H1F1, Ebola, and sporadic interventions of plague and malaria. The previous century saw even bigger wars and epidemics, for instance, the Bubonic Plague although starting in 1896 went on for a decade or more, the Spanish flu 1918, Asian flu 1957, Hong Kong flu 1968 and more recent ones like AIDS and Ebola. Similarly, he says that in the entire bygone millennia there was no shortage of wars, epidemics, and emergencies. Lal makes the point that the present pandemic is not an unprecedented one but the response it received from States was just so.

In the next chapter Lal takes a long plunge into the colonial abyss of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century India. He brings to light one of the most devastating plagues in history. At first this plunge in Indian colonial history would appear to be too sudden in the book, but Lal's method like mentioned above is to disrupt the comfort of slow progression into history especially the one that starts from the West and moves to the East. He rather builds a collage of textual images and unsettles the reader in order to make her feel the historical examples from around the world. In this way the reader can be made to realize how the conditions of shortages of food, contagion of disease, poor healthcare, mass deaths, and misery that have been believed to characterize the East or the Third World are already at the doorstep of the First World. They are becoming a general phenomenon around the world created by our uncritical investments in the logic of neoliberal economic order. On the other hand, Lal's emphasis on colonialism at the outset serves to juxtapose it against the growing style of emergency governance in our own time.

After giving a image of the plague during colonialism, the reader is brought back to the present coronavirus pandemic ravaging Italy. Lal discusses the reason of large numbers of deaths caused by the virus

and the epiphenomenon of racism. Old age and older population is identified as the reason for the increased numbers of deaths. Italy is said to have the second largest old population in the world (more than 25% of its population are people above the age of 65). This is why around 80% of initial deaths were of the elderly. The pandemic also results in the spread of racism in the country with the immigrant Chinese population becoming the target of racial hatred despite the fact that they showed least infection rate.

In the next chapter (IV) Lal takes the reader back on a history tour, this time English history. The reader is introduced to the mid-17<sup>th</sup> century plague through the diary of Samuel Pypes. The government of the time had placed strict restrictions on peoples' movement. Social distancing was advised and increased cleanliness of houses was required. Those who did not comply with the standards were quarantined. However, interestingly, alehouses were not shut down just as lately pubs were not shut down at least initially. They have been a trope of the so-called freedom and freedom loving English people. Shutting them down would have amounted to shutting down English concept of freedom, and therefore, they were not even shut down during the World Wars. Here Lal suggests how a peculiar discourse about Englishness of the English grew overtime, which the state saw in line with its own interest of keeping the capitalist economy afloat. Though the plague and later calamities played havoc of the poor and lower middle classes, the discourse of freedom and Englishness went on unabated and unscathed. Even today political leaders try to cash in on the discourse. Lal gives examples from public speeches of Boris Johnson.

Vinay goes on and puts to test a similar discourse on the mainland Europe and the US. He gives examples of the French and the Swedes who flaunt their national history portraying it to be showcasing their strong resolve in the face of challenging times. However, for a historian like Lal who has read so much of their history such discourse is not more than a renewed commitment to the redundant political ideology of nationalism, which has failed them once. On the other hand, in the US political leaders and statesmen leave no stone unturned to sell the notion of American exceptionalism. But fortunately not everyone in the country buys into such discourse. For many the very mobilization of resistance against government's approach to any disaster is thought as the American way of life.

There is a whole spectrum of notions in the country about the nature of the pandemic, existence of the virus, and how to deal with it. So to talk about one national character of the people is for Lal some kind of fallacy to entertain.

In the next chapter (VI) Lal takes the reader back to India. Prime Minister Narendra Modi is depicted handling the growing crisis of the pandemic. His way of handling the crisis is compared to that of a public school headmaster's pedagogy whose favorite instruction for his students in the face of any crisis is to 'stand still and don't move.' When Modi gives a similar order to his Indian public he does not think or seem to care about the disaster he was creating for millions of migrant laborers and daily wagers in urban centers. Because the transport system was immediately shut down with a short notice of few hours, these millions of poor people were left stranded and rendered without any means of subsistence. Then some half-hearted measures were done to address the situation, but those only involved going through cumbersome bureaucratic procedures and hardly took consideration of healthcare guidelines.

In chapters VII, VIII, and IX Lal focuses primarily on the nature of coronavirus pandemic—its scientific understanding and medical pedagogy and the guidelines of social distancing and quarantine. According to Lal there is still much to learn about the virus even though scientists were discovering new information almost everyday. Unfortunately some information and studies contradicted others pointing to the fact that actual progress in science is a slow process. On the other hand, the slow progress makes it difficult for governments around the world to decide the course of action to be adopted for healthcare. Probing into the history of the scientific concept of social distancing Lal tells us that it began to emerge from the groundbreaking work of William F. Wells in early 1930s on the reasons of spread of tuberculosis. His work had suggested social distance of a meter for minimizing transmission of the disease from one person to another. However, Lal points out that social distancing was already in practice, but with not such calculated distance. On the other hand, the concepts of quarantine and cordon (sanitaire) have much older history going back to the plague as mentioned above. Not only does Lal give the historical context of these terms and their progressive scientific-cum-social evolution in public health discourse, he also gives a picture of their manipulation in

international politics and economy. Furthermore, he gives an account of their local understanding in India and makes a comparison with the understanding in the US and Europe. In addition to that Lal explores how social distancing and quarantine have made our sensory world sensible to us, which we often don't give attention to in the everyday life. He tells us about the centrality of the sense of touch, which has overtime suffered at the hands of scientific theories like germs theory and child care theories as well as certain religious and cultural practices such as the caste system and untouchability in India.

After discussing the medical nature of the coronavirus and its precautionary guidelines, Lal brings the discussion back to nationalism and the concept of the other. Lal highlights the history of blame game among states and peoples involved in epidemics. He gives examples of the plague, AIDS, Syphilis, Spanish Flue, and SARS and tells us that different states and peoples blamed one another for their outbreak and spread. In the course of this blame game the already recognized political enemy, minorities and weaker political groups are often made the target. Their cultural and religious practices as well as living standards and lifestyle choices are blamed. Lal points out that such victimization goes on despite the fact that science says otherwise. For instance, in the US there was an opinion that tried to associate AIDS with the blacks or Africa but it could not prove its scientific base. Similarly, in India the relationship between diseases and untouchability could not be maintained.

From nationalism Lal takes the discussion to the vicissitudes of global economy (Chapter XI). Lal claims that with the pandemic capitalism has come to meet its viral match. Just as capitalism's consumer culture has spread endemically so has the coronavirus. It's only been the virus that could halt the entire global economy. Even when some businesses go online there are myriad of other businesses, especially the small scale ones and those in developing countries that immensely suffer. In the US and Europe where consumer spending makes a sizeable portion of their GDPs, the blow to consumerism was also badly felt. Moreover, unemployment around the world increases, for example in India from 8.7% to 23.5% within a couple of months. And some of the vulnerable groups feel the brunt of the pandemic, for example women workforce who are already vulnerable and often discriminated. On the other hand, in

order to bring consumers back to markets, capitalist owners have cut down the workforce to essential workers and announced bonuses for them. In this way they also presents themselves as paragons of generosity. Apart from these challenges, Lal points to the larger debate in international economy about the future of capitalism. He identifies two schools of thought: one that says that the pandemic has cast adverse affect on the international economy and the other that says that capitalism not only thrives in crises but also invites crises to feed on. Although the major task in this chapter for him is to explain the debate, he takes the second view as more pressing and urgent to understand. He again returns to this debate in the last chapters of the book.

In the next chapter (XII) Lal writes with a touch of irony that the coronavirus is democratic/discriminate in its own way. Typically a virus would not discriminate among people but the coronavirus actually did so. On the global level for instance it hit the rich countries more than poor countries. It led to the humbling of the United States, one of the richest countries that used to boast about its health care system. On the other hand, it spared the poor African countries with poor health care systems. In Asia Lal gives the example of Vietnam where coronavirus did not claims a single life. He juxtaposes it with the United States and recalls the problematic historical relationship between the two. He gives credit to the decisive actions taken by the Vietnamese government that led to stopping the spread of the virus. However, Vinay also points out that inside the rich countries, like the United States, it was the poor and lower middle class that suffered the most.

Lal goes on to comment on the failures of the US government in the next chapter. The lack of preparedness despite the warnings from China and Europe was unwarranted. It speaks of the false pride in the health care system and American exceptionalism. There was dearth of ventilators, PPEs, medicines, and funds for the already existing infrastructure in the country. Lal writes that it was American neo-liberal capitalism and the narrative of exceptionalism that pushed the country to a public health crisis. Moreover, as the country faced shortages of medicines, food, and other necessities due to lockdowns, the menace of racism began to rise, and there was also upsurge in the sale of firearms. The people seemed to believe that the political system might collapse and they might have to fend for

themselves. Thus a country that thinks of itself to be a superpower and founder of democracy fell short in the eyes of its own people.

The last three chapters bring the discussion back to international politics—the role of WHO, climate change, and ‘human condition.’ According to Lal, the initial response of the WHO was not only slow, but also wanting. For example the WHO was split on whether or not to proclaim the coronavirus spread as public health emergency until the end of January. It was also not clear in the initial months whether or not the virus spread through air and whether or not asymptomatic transmission was possible. The WHO could not also quickly develop guidelines how people could keep themselves safe. For all these failures Lal points to the history and politics involved in the making and sustenance of the institution. He writes that the WHO was made after the WWII and tasked to fight diseases like smallpox, cholera, yellow fever, malaria, and polio, but not those of the zoonotic origin. Secondly, he points to the international politics with powerful states like China and the US who donate funds to the organization and therefore influence its working. Similarly he points to nationalism and state sovereignty that have often stood in the way of effective working of the organization.

About the climate change Lal writes that it has become a reality no matter what some powerful states have to say. Lal informs us that human economic activity in this age of capitalist production has expedited if not initiated the course of climate change. However, powerful lobbies in powerful states, like the US and China, have neither been accepting nor allowing for the enforcement of international environmental laws. Moreover, Lal writes that the consumption culture in developed world on the one hand and production wastes in developing countries on the other are casting devastating impact on the global environment.

Finally, borrowing Hannah Arendt’s term of ‘the human condition’ Lal comments on the potential for people’s attitudes to change in the everyday life after the pandemic. For this Lal takes his longest plunge in history going as far back as Greek city states; then passing through early Biblical times and the Middle Ages and finally returns to our modern time marked by capitalism, colonialism, and globalization. Gleaning examples from a number of sources like religious texts, literary and history write-ups, biographies, artwork, and social science writings Lal demonstrates how little social and political ways

of life of people changed in the aftermath of pandemics of the past. For instance, in the Athens of 430 BCE and the Europe after the Black Death there instead occurred a loss of virtuous life and people 'gave themselves up to a more disordered and shameful life than they had led before.' However, in the case of the coronavirus pandemic Lal feels hopeful and observes that although poverty, unemployment, and class differences increased, and also some capitalist businesses made undue profits, the society in general has not witnessed the lowering of virtue. Rather what we witness is people, organizations, and states coming out to help each other and making generous donations.

-Syed Sami Raza  
Assistant Professor in Political Science,  
University of Peshawar.