

Book reviews/Discussions

DOI : 10.14746/pp.2024.29.4.28

***Lessons for Implementing Human Rights from Covid-19 How the Pandemic has Changed the World*, vol. 1, eds. Jędrzej Skrzypczak, Oscar Pérez de la Fuente, Tylor & Francis, New York 2024, pp. 200.**

Discussing the experience of COVID-19 today may feel like revisiting the past, as we navigate multiple environmental, political, and social crises on a global scale under apparent normalcy. However, the profound impact of the health crisis on numerous areas makes it imperative to reflect on its consequences. For instance, scientific research in 2020 experienced a phenomenon that Riccaboni and Verginer termed the “covidization” of scientific production. According to these authors, five times more scientific articles were published during the first three months of the pandemic than during the same period of the H1N1 influenza crisis (2022). This phenomenon mirrors the current effects of Artificial Intelligence (AI) on international conferences or academic journals, where we observe an accelerated reorientation to studying the positive and negative impacts of AI from diverse fields.

Without dismissing the importance of scientific production in current debates, we have largely lost the capacity for deep, long-term reflection. In this sense, “contemplation” in the Arendtian sense becomes particularly relevant in the face of the relentless dynamics of production that define what, in academia, is often seen as the hallmark of a “good scholar.” However, this necessary balance appears to have been eroded by the severity of the health crisis which, since its onset in late 2019, has claimed nearly seven million lives. Although reflections on the social, economic, and ethical implications of the pandemic have been addressed in various fields, their broader relevance has been overshadowed by the ongoing demand for scientific output. Many researchers, especially those subjected to the pressures of the academic market, have redirected their efforts and resources toward new challenges, prioritizing productivity over a more measured evaluation of persistent issues.

For these reasons, it is encouraging to encounter international academic efforts such as the volume I have the privilege to review. “*Lessons for Implementing Human Rights from COVID-19: How the Pandemic Has Changed the World*”, edited by Oscar Pérez de la Fuente (Carlos III University) and Jędrzej Skrzypczak (Adam Mickiewicz University), serves as an essential reminder of the reflection that remains pending, beyond the immediate crisis. This volume invites us to recognize the fragility of our societies and prepares us to face future ecological, economic, and social challenges. The year 2024 serves as a stark example of this fragility and the urgency of these discussions—not only in response to potential outbreaks, such as those of monkeypox (Mpox) in the Democratic Republic of Congo and other African nations but also the numerous natural disasters that affect thousands of people annually. These include the October floods in Valencia, severe flooding in Kenya and Tanzania, and hurricanes across the Americas annually claiming hundreds of lives (Al Jazeera, 2024; BBC News, 2024; El Universal, 2024; Jakarta Post, 2024; Reuters, 2024).

The book comprises eleven chapters addressing diverse issues, including poor practices driven by immediacy and insufficient preparation regarding healthcare infrastructure and emergency response protocols, which evolved into a medium-term crisis.¹ The first chapter, authored by Oscar

¹ In this context, it is crucial to distinguish between the terms “emergency” and “crisis.” According to the Cambridge Dictionary, an emergency is defined as a situation that occurs suddenly and requires urgent and demanding attention to prevent further negative consequences. In contrast, a crisis is an imminent event, such as an economic crisis, that may require medium-term strategic decisions to mitigate or avoid adverse effects. [Accessed November 18, 2024].

Pérez de la Fuente, “*Accountability and COVID-19: The Spanish Perspective*”, examines the effects of the crisis on transparency and accountability. It highlights how the erosion of the right to information, justified by a “state of alarm” or “state of exception,” has profound repercussions on the rule of law. However, Pérez de la Fuente stresses that such extraordinary measures do not exempt leaders from accountability: “Those in power [must] be held accountable for their decisions, even in exceptional situations” (p. 33).

The second chapter, written by Roman Bäcker and Johanna Rak, “*Enforcement of Equality Before the Law in Poland During the Coronavirus Pandemic*”, explores the democratic risks that emerged during the pandemic, focusing on the case of Poland. One of the leading social conflicts arose from mandatory restrictions that limited fundamental freedoms. This tension between “state power and individual liberties” (p. 46) was a recurring issue in various global contexts. The authors argue that formal equality in Poland was only partially upheld, as political leaders restricted debates on crucial issues (such as abortion and presidential elections). They emphasize the importance of substantive equality in material terms, as mobility restrictions in highly unequal societies not only pose a democratic threat to individual liberties but also directly endanger lives by increasing food insecurity.

Regarding the significance of substantive equality, the third chapter, authored by Marianne Séverin and Hannah Muzeé, examines the unequal effects of the pandemic across different contexts. The chapter, titled “*COVID-19 Entrepreneurs: Corruption and the Violation of the Rights to Health and Development in South Africa and Uganda*”, illustrates how, despite the apparent universality of human rights, economic and redistributive factors play a decisive role in translating moral equality into equitable access to healthcare and the resources needed for a healthy life.

The critique of the inadequacy of the human rights model became glaringly evident during the pandemic. This generated significant criticisms of the mechanisms for addressing global issues. In the chapter titled “*New World Order After Pandemic: Can ‘New Political Thinking’ Be Reinvented?*” Yu Sungurov asserts that while the values upheld by the United Nations (UN) remain valid, the post-COVID era requires new collective solutions to transnational problems. This involves discussing potential reforms to the current human rights framework to make it “more adaptable, moving away from trends that excessively protect sovereignty” (p. 73).

Another weakness exposed during the pandemic was the shortage of healthcare personnel. Jędrzej Skrzypczak and Tomasz Maksymuik address this challenge in “*Models of Human Resource Management in Healthcare Systems During the Pandemic*.” The authors highlight how even the most robust healthcare systems resorted to overburdening medical staff. This issue remains relevant today, as the urgency to ensure not only access to healthcare for populations but also dignified treatment for healthcare workers appears to have diminished.

Technology could offer positive responses to these challenges. However, during the crisis, many regions opted for immediate measures based on coercion and restriction, even when these proved counterproductive in specific contexts. In “*Smart Quarantine vs. Strict Lockdown: Restrictions on Political Rights in Anti-Pandemic Strategies in the Czech Republic*,” Maciej Skrzypek provides a critical analysis of how social crises can lead democratic governments to adopt draconian policies, exposing the risks of prioritizing population control over crisis management itself.

Another critical issue that sparked intense debate during the pandemic was mandatory vaccination. Tomasz Litwin addresses this topic in “*Is Obligatory Vaccination Against COVID-19 Acceptable from the Human Rights Perspective?*”. This chapter offers an accessible analysis of valid arguments from a human rights perspective, such as freedom of choice and the lack of accountability from vaccine developers regarding potential adverse effects. However, the author notes that less relevant – and even dangerous – arguments, such as conspiracy theories, often dominated public debates. The chapter underscores the harmful effects of the proliferation of false

information online, which undermines trust in health policies and complicates effective management of future health crises.

Jedrezej Skrzypczak and Krzysztof Duda examine the phenomenon of misinformation, also known as “infodemic,” in “*Threats to Freedom of Expression in the Era of the COVID-19 Pandemic*.” The authors highlight how undetected and improperly addressed misinformation became a significant threat during the pandemic. Today, it continues to endanger democracies due to its influence on electoral processes. This leaves an enormous task: developing effective strategies to mitigate the risks of misinformation and protect societies from its harmful effects.

A primary driver of this misinformation was the emergence of non-traditional media, which gained significant traction during the pandemic. This influence disrupted traditional outlets like newspapers and broadcasters, forcing them to adapt and improve their processes. Wojciech Adamczyk, in “*The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Changes in the Media Market and Information Pluralism*”, argues that during the crisis, governments sought to limit media pluralism to hide errors and omissions during the most critical phases systematically. Vladyslav Zinichenko supports this thesis in “*The COVID-19 Pandemic as Another Pretext for Information Control*” through a comparative study of Belarus and Ukraine, concluding that significant press freedom violations occurred in both countries despite their differing political contexts.

Finally, Anna Jach underscores the importance of solidarity and grassroots organizations in designing and implementing reforms to prevent catastrophes similar to those experienced during the pandemic. Her chapter, “*Grassroots Activity of Russian Citizens in Response to the Worsening Pandemic-Related Crisis of the State*,” thoroughly analyzes the impact of grassroots initiatives. These efforts represent a hopeful movement emerging in contexts of crisis, where, driven by uncertainty or governmental inaction, civil society plays a transformative role. A recent example is the series of grassroots initiatives that arose in Spain during the early days of the DANA disaster, showcasing the power of collective action in moments of emergency.

This volume offers a multidisciplinary and global analysis of societal challenges through the lens of the COVID-19 pandemic. From structural challenges related to inequality, such as infrastructure deficiencies, exclusion, and vulnerability, to ethical and political issues stemming from restrictive policies during social contingencies, the book not only examines the weaknesses exposed by COVID-19 but also highlights their ongoing presence. This work not only seeks to understand the pandemic’s impacts but also invites critical reflection on how to shape societies in an increasingly unstable world.

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Competing interests: The author have declared that no competing interests exist (Sprzeczne interesy: Autor oświadczył, że nie istnieją żadne sprzeczne interesy)

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