



Review of  
Vinay Lal,  
*The Fury of Covid-19: The Politics,  
Histories and Unrequited Love  
of the Coronavirus.*

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This is a belated response to the historian Vinay Lal's brief but illuminating book, written as early as August 2020, and published the same year by Macmillan. The volume accomplishes something that a lot of academics would have dreamt of doing in that first "pandemic year," namely, expressing in real time one's understanding of a singular event in world history as it unfolds, using one's disciplinary lens to do so, while also delineating the various areas of uncertainty and incomplete knowledge, employing a world-view and/or axiological framework in adjudicating what is known, and touching upon the numerous anxieties unraveled by humanity's encounter with the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2. At the time of publication, there was no vaccine in sight, and the death toll was climbing steadily in most countries of the world, including both the United States, the country where the author lives and works, and India, the country of his origin, and an important focus of his research. Works of this kind are valuable for capturing current responses to historic occurrences —it is no coincidence that Lal refers to Samuel Pepys's diary from the time of the Black Death— while communicating one's "hot take" to readers around the world is made possible in part by the patterns of academic and literary production that are the norm today. But this is not a book that aims to ride the wave of the pandemic. Rather, it emerges from the imperative to understand, to live through the churn of numerous ideas, historically salient memories and worries that jostled for space with the advent of the coronavirus, and say what one makes of them all. This is what makes it the important document that it is.

One of the motivations behind Lal's book is to build a narrative history around what he identifies as "political epidemiology"—a field of enquiry in which one seeks answers to "a... set of questions on how national histories and conceptions of national character have shaped the response of politicians and populace alike to [public health crises] across countries and political systems" (p. 56). Such a story might reveal patterns in how the origins of trans-national epidemics are inscribed into public memory. (Diseases have historically been thought to travel from the East to the West.) By examining the language used by rulers to present their chosen measures to contain a disease, we learn something about the construction of national identities as well as presumptions about the beliefs of the populace. (Thus Emmanuel Macron's government emphasized that lockdown measures would not violate such treasured Gallic values as liberty, and Prime Minister Modi admonished Indians in various ways, infantilizing and expecting obedience from his devoted constituents.)

From a social epistemological perspective, these issues are of great interest. Is political rhetoric meant only to "push through" measures that are aligned with a government or party's ideological beliefs, or are they meant to reinforce existing beliefs about the nation and its people? Does trust in the state (e.g., to ensure a percentage of one's salary when lockdown restrictions make it impossible to go to work) invariably depend upon a "track record" of doing good by its citizens, or something that, assuming rational choice on the part of citizens, *ought not* to count for much in a democracy (e.g., promissory notes about "*achhe din*")? How does one understand faith in science —Lal points to the effective use of homoeopathic prophylactics by the Cuban state to query scientism in the US— or its opposite number, namely, paranoid rejection of sensible recommendations such as handwashing etc. because they are "imposed" by the state? The book demonstrates ways in which the pandemic offers an opportunity to study the creation of meaning of big-ticket philosophical ideas such as liberty and state power across the political spectrum.

These questions are closely tied to that of who the restrictions are for: who is picked out by the "we" in slogans such as "We are in this together"? The answer to that is political. The populist democratic state has to reassure only so many citizens as it considers itself accountable to, and their number is a function of

the power that those citizens have in relation to their economically weaker and socially marginalized compatriots.

To this reader, the two most important skeins in Lal's argument appear to be the following. First, the extraordinary interventions by states in the social lives of their citizens in the course of the pandemic have caused great harm to vulnerable individuals. By now, several countries have published deeply worrying data on rates of unemployment, domestic violence, and loneliness-induced mental health disorders. Lal expends a few chapters working out the implications of "social distancing" in a country already riven by the caste system. He sees the pandemic as having reinforced the divide between towns, where the "work" is, and villages, where those who once sold their labour in the towns flee in order to live among their own. The story does not end there, unfortunately, because the reasons why people are forced to migrate to the towns don't go away, as it suits both the state and the capitalists to perpetuate this arrangement.

Secondly—and this is one possible interpretation of the phrase "unrequited love" in the title of the book—just as the enforced solitude of the lockdown helped many to reevaluate their desires and priorities, perhaps societies worldwide would have a chance to value anew such things as social cohesion, and care for one's fellow-being, so badly undermined by the scientifically kosher strictures that they bought into. Perhaps they would learn to respect the natural environment by limiting the spheres of human activity, because not doing so would simply bring another novel pathogen into our lives? Would the pandemic clear our vision, such that we finally learn to reject what we do not need, and seek to enrich our lives in ways envisioned by such thinkers as Gandhi? Lal toys with a pessimistic answer to these questions, but in the end, appears to reserve judgment on the whole business.

The events that unfolded during the second wave in India—the graveyards and crematoria bursting at the seams—would, one hopes, be hard for most Indians to put behind them. Emerson, whom Lal quotes at one point, remarks that the death of his young son a few years prior strikes him now as the loss of "a beautiful

estate,” lamenting that he cannot get that unspeakable grief “close to [himself].”<sup>1</sup> But, one might argue, this fact gives him pause, and challenges him to make meaning of it. In a similar way, one hopes that the pandemic would abide as a scar in our collective memory, demanding creative resolutions to what we are forced to remember. (1138 words)

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1 R. W. Emerson (2000). “Experience,” *The Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson*. New York: The Modern Library, p. 309.