

Bruce Magnusson and Zahi Zalloua, (Eds.), **Contagion: Health, Fear, Sovereignty**, Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2012, 202 pp., \$30.00 (paperback).

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As an explanatory device, the concept of “contagion” has spread far and wide, or so it is argued by editors Bruce Magnusson and Zahi Alloua in the introduction to the collection of global studies essays titled **Contagion: Health, Fear, Sovereignty**. Loosed from its epidemiological origins, the descriptor has become a “metaphor of choice” (p. 4) in several discourses, but to what ends? The six essays in this collection examine the deployment of the language of contagion as it is used to explicate both the promise and threat of globalization in several of its guises. The book is not an exploration of social contagion theory. Instead, argue the editors, in these chapters, contagion emerges as a “vexed trope for globalization itself” (p. 4), one requiring examination in every context in which it is deployed. While most of the essays in the collection are quite strong (with one egregious exception), readers may be left to wonder after completing the book whether contagion is an adequate organizing construct for this group of essays.



The book’s chapters might be grouped into three subcategories. militancy as a kind of viral contagion (chapter 1); the management of contagion as a global public health concern (chapters 2 and 3); and contagion as represented and performed in popular media forms (chapters 4, 5, and 6). Andrew Lakoff's excellent chapter 2, "Epidemic Intelligence: Toward a Genealogy of Global Health Security," traces the emergence of the GHS approach to infectious disease contagion management to a milieu in which U.S.-based infectious disease experts near the end of the Cold War advanced an "ecological vision of disease emergence as the result of environmental transformation combined with increased global circulation" (p. 54). Lakoff ably shows how the current World Health Organization framework authored in 2007 descends from this strategic vision. He includes a fascinating discussion of a recent dispute between Indonesia and the United States over the sharing of pathogens to illuminate some of the tensions within the GHS paradigm that are related to its imbrication with global capitalism. In the process, Lakoff explains how such GHS concepts as "viral sovereignty" (p. 46) can contribute to the reproduction of inequalities between the global North and South.

Disputes like this highlight the conflict between two dominant global health optics: (a) the GHS model, which sees epidemics as emergent in the world's poorer countries and threatening the richest, requiring the prioritization of prophylaxis and prevention; and (b) the "humanitarian biomedicine" model, which prioritizes intervention at the level of "suffering individuals" rather than at "national public health infrastructures" (p. 51). Lakoff argues that self-protection is the guiding ethos of GHS, which prefers

"global triage to global disease prevention" (p. 63), while the humanitarian approach strives for the protection of all afflicted.

Chapter 3, Geoffrey Whitehall's "The Aesthetic Emergency of the Avian Flu Affect," is concerned with "aesthetic-affective governance" (p. 72), which seeks to generate compliance with global disaster planning dictates through the production of an environment of fear. The possible spread of dangerous pathogens presents an obvious risk ("to" the West and "from" Asia, in the Avian flu case analyzed), but the mode and style by which this risk is represented, the author contends, is a matter of "political aesthetics" (p. 74). Narrative can easily trump facts, creating the impression that a distant possibility requires immediate action and constant surveillance. Governance becomes a matter of managing the fear of contagion, a fear produced in significant part by the aesthetic-affective mode of governance itself.

A second dimension of the mode of governance that Whitehall examines—and one confluent to some degree with Lakoff's analysis—is the use of the threat of infectious disease contagion to produce what he calls an "antigenic shift" (p. 80) from national juridical law to an Agambenian international state of exception. The requirement to protect "humanity" cements the shift from the previous Foucauldian mode of national sovereignty: Where once wars were waged in the name of defending the citizens of a nation, global disaster planning organizes "an internationalized state of exception . . . around the protection of humanity" (p. 80). Just who gets protected, who does the protecting, and what form that protecting takes are problematized in the transformation from a system dominated by juridical sovereignty over national territories to one of "bio-sovereignty . . . operating according to the logic of exception rather than law, applied to material life rather than juridical life, and moving within a global terrain now almost exclusively biopolitical" (p. 82). Whitehall sees in popular media a building logic "for fueling proliferating states of emergency" (p. 91). He concludes that

the expedient and responsible political response to avian flu does not involve empowering a global plutocracy, a global triage, to manage every risk as if it were a world-ending danger . . . what is required is nothing short of a sustained reorganization of humanity's relationship with its animal and environmental self. (p. 93)

Together these chapters make up the most conceptually coherent section of the book.

Chapter 4, Priscilla Wald's "Bio Terror: Hybridity in the Biohorror Narrative, or What We can Learn from Monsters," probes the animation of the microbe in the "biohorror-bioterror" narratives of contemporary fiction, film, and TV. The monsters of the biohorror genre are judged monstrous, Wald shows, not merely because they are infected but also—perhaps even most significantly—because of their capacity to infect others. Biohorror narratives offer stark metaphorical reminders of the permeability of individual bodies in an ineradicably social world, where contamination fear may lurk in even the most mundane social encounter. Wald lucidly argues that, most of all, these narratives make manifest anxieties over political conflicts between individuals and populations and the failure of states to adequately regulate the threat of contagion endemic to social interaction. Transformed by microbes, the hybrid monsters of biohorror "ultimately turn the infected into deliberate transmitters, enemies of humanity: bioterrorists" (p. 108). Nodding to Lakoff's analysis of the post-war linking of emerging infections with terrorism, Wald

concludes by arguing that the biohorror narratives she examines "register underlying connections among the existence of the state, the survival of the species, and the preservation of an intangible notion of humanity" (p. 119).

Christian Moraru's brilliant entry, "Contagion, Contamination, and Don DeLillo's Post Cold-War World-System," (Chapter 5) posits that "the problem of culture—no matter how strong its antibodies are or are thought to be—is the problem of the body" (p. 124). All that is cultural is transmissible, and thus "what touches off culture is touch itself" (p. 124). Parsing the work of Baudrillard and Jean-Luc Nancy, Moraru offers a haptic analysis of globalization after the end of the Cold War. The collapse of the Berlin Wall is cast by Baudrillard as the impetus for the spread of "contagious germs of collapse" (p. 127). "World qua globe (rather than mundus) . . . comes into being through new generalized contagious contacts undergirded by a recursive rationality" (p. 127), and what is spread here is, above all, sameness itself. Virality replaces the conviviality (living-with) of the pre-globalized world with the "convirality" of another less globalized one (p. 130).

For Moraru, the centrality of body art in Dom DeLillo's oeuvre, and his creation of a literary world-system shaped by repetitions of all sorts implicating the body, points to the irreducibly haptic quality of culture in his work. "In DeLillo . . . to make art is to metabolize" (p. 138); further, "culture and the body are multiply [*sic*] and significantly isomorphic" (p. 144), proof that the embodiment of culture is inseparably linked to the enculturation of the body. Following Derrida's analysis of Nancy, Moraru sees a contest between paradigms in the age of globalization:

[T]he first speaks to the world as globe; the second to the world as mundus. . . . A mondializing world is still a world . . . because its haptic makeup—its self-touching, its overall connectivity—does not result in the kind of self-relation that bolsters only one self, thought, or worldview. (pp. 144–145)

In Chapter 6, Alberto Galindo's "Contagion of Intellectual traditions in Post-9/11 Novels" analyzes Claire Messud's *The Emperor's Children* and Zoe Heller's *The Believers*. Weaving in observations from Judith Butler's *Precarious Life*, Galindo sees in these novels an effort to present bourgeois liberalism ironically. As espoused by the characters in its thrall, bourgeois liberalism brooks no disagreement with its own premises, making it just as "ideological" as the inflexible belief systems it opposes. The ultimate irony of the bourgeois liberalism espoused by Heller's characters in *The Believers* is that it makes them "unwilling to accept a discourse that is not theirs" (p. 165). The observation called to this reader's mind the infamous exchange of 1997 between John Le Carre and a still-in-hiding Salman Rushdie in the pages of the *Guardian* in which Le Carre, while acknowledging his objection to Rushdie's being targeted, nevertheless chided Rushdie for taking "on a known enemy and scream(ing) 'foul' when it acted in character" (Guardian Research Department, 2012).

Galindo skillfully plumbs two instances of death in the novels (one real, and one presumed but false) to explore the lengths one must sometime go to escape from the constraints of dominant ideology and also to illustrate the workings of privilege in the capacity to use certain kinds of deaths (Butler's "grievable" variety) as a means of transformation. Yet his chapter seems less related to the previous ones

reviewed here, reflecting the disunity sometimes evident with respect to the concept of contagion in the collection.

This otherwise impressive collection is marred somewhat by the inclusion of "Rethinking the War on Terror: New Approaches to Conflict Prevention and Management in the Post-9/11 World," an ill-conceived and myopic first chapter authored by Paul B. Stares and Mona Yacoubian. The authors suggest a "different way of thinking about the new strategic challenge confronting the United States" (p. 26). This is to treat militant Islamism "as one would a global public health threat or epidemic" (p. 28). The authors note that Islamist militancy is already referred to by U.S. officials as a kind of "virus" that can infect disaffected Muslims under certain geopolitical conditions, with mosques and madrassas identified as the sites of transmissions (p. 29). This virus—the essence of which is the willingness to use "violence in support of political goals" (p. 32)—has "epidemic-like qualities" (p. 31); worse, its "pool of 'susceptibles' . . . is large and expanding in certain countries" (p. 33). Reconceptualized in this way, the goal then becomes to contain Islamist militancy, to protect the susceptible, and to "remedy the environmental conditions that fostered" (p. 34) its emergence and spread.

For a book published in 2012, this "way of thinking" can hardly be called "different"; Stares and Yacoubian find examples of it in political speech immediately after the 9/11 attacks. In fairness to them, the chapter appears to have been written in or around 2006, but this staleness is problematic. More troubling, in explicating their prescription, the authors write clinical, unreflective prose that borders on the propagandistic. The sociopolitical factors that produce Islamist militancy are treated at only the most general of levels. By beginning their analysis with the challenge faced by the United States in the aftermath of the September 11 attacks, the authors avoid saying anything about their precipitants. They adopt a thinly coded set of neoliberal policy recommendations, for example, "economic reforms that create an environment that is more appealing to foreign investors" (p. 38). These come off as short-sighted and nonresponsive to the deeper sources of social discontent in Middle Eastern countries which, as was made plain during the Arab Spring, include Western sponsorship of corrupt, autocratic regimes.

This nonresponsiveness to the complexities of militant resistance is the most problematic shortcoming of their chapter. Stares and Yacoubian ignore the fact that, unlike biological pathogens that may develop for reasons completely unrelated to the volitional actions of their target/host, militantcies do not. They are motivated by political grievances and employ highly purposive logics and tactics (though they of course may be viewed as impractical, self-defeating, reckless, and even heinous). Why is it, the reader may wonder, that the United States is "confronting" this "new strategic challenge"? What has made it a main target of this viral militancy? The authors do not discuss this. They also fail to supply the argument that warrants characterizing Islamic militancy as infectious while withholding the descriptor for, say, the varieties of U.S.-sponsored imperial violence that spread around the globe in the post-WWII era. This failure will lead many readers to conclude that their essay amounts to a particularly stark example of what the volume's editors rightly label a value-laden, "ethico-political" usage of contagion (p. 18).

Any political actor can deploy epidemiological rhetoric to justify its own actions; we see, for recent instance, Hezbollah's Hassan Nasrallah speaking of Hezbollah's entry into the Syrian conflict on the side of Assad "as a fight to 'immunize' Lebanon from the Israeli invasion he said would surely follow if

Syrian rebels prevailed" (Barnard, 2013). The language of contagion is very much the highly charged discursive "doubled-edged sword" (p. 4) the editors of this volume—and the majority of its contributors—show it to be. But at times in this collection, contagion seems so elastic a term that readers may wonder if it has simply become a synonym for transmission itself (epidemiological, ideological, bodily) rather than a particular kind of it. Nevertheless, taken together, the strength and diversity of the individual essays overcome the lack of unity in the book's title concept.

References

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