

Book Reviews

National and Global Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Do Leaders Matter?
By A.S. Bhalla.
Palgrave Macmillan Cham, 2023.

National and Global Responses to the COVID-19 Pandemic: Do Leaders Matter? is the most recent book by Ajit S. Bhalla. While great deal of attention has focused on the tangible aspects of the pandemic, such as its economic impact, relatively little has been written about the intangible aspects, such as leadership. The overarching message of the book is that leadership failures in Western governments are responsible for their poor performance in handling COVID-19, when compared to other governments' responses.

The first two chapters of the book provide the history and context. Chapter 1 gives a historical perspective on previous pandemics from the Russian Flu in 1889 up to an including COVID-19. It documents the origins, number of people affected, vaccines and therapeutics used, and how the pandemics were brought under control, as a way of highlighting the differences between COVID-19 and what came before. Chapter 2 then provides a comprehensive overview of global health systems. With what is the best chapter of the book, Bhalla goes into meticulous detail with regards to health care spending, number of physicians, numbers of hospital beds, as well as COVID-19 specific information such as number of deaths, infection fatality ratios, and excess deaths. The purpose of this is to demonstrate how the supposed superior Western systems fared just as bad in the pandemic as other under-equipped and under-funded systems.

Chapters 3 and 4 then discuss the role that leaders played in the pandemic. Chapter 3 outlines the framework for analysing the role that leaders (prime ministers and presidents), agents (political and scientific institutions), and followers (the public). Chapter 4 then provides a series of case studies on 16 different world leaders throughout the pandemic, as well as smaller case studies on agents and followers in those same countries. The case studies are analysed using the framework from the previous chapter.

The final part of the book is dedicated to global cooperation. Chapter 5 highlights the challenges to global cooperation that leaders faced, such as nationalism and populism. Chapter 6 details the different policy responses that took place at a global and regional level. This chapter, very much in the spirit of Chapter 2, provides an insight into the policies and organizations that were proposed after the pandemic, and how they intersect with policies and organizations that existed pre-pandemic. Finally, Chapter 7 offers some lessons for the future.

This book is ambitious in its attempts to map relatively nebulous concepts, such as leadership style, on to concrete outcomes, such as numbers of cases

and deaths. While the primary focus of the book is on the role that leadership played in the pandemic, the authors sole concentration on this issue detracts from his argument in places. A case in point would be the discussion around New Zealand prime minister Jacinda Arden. Bhalla praises her leadership and notes that she was decisive and collaborative. However, the final sentence of her study notes that a contribution factor to her success might be because New Zealand is a small, sparsely populated, isolated country. I would find a discussion that confronts these potential confounders directly, and can still make the argument for her leadership qualities being a causal factor in success, more convincing than an argument which refuses to engage with them. Similarly, there are time when it can appear to the reader that the outcome of the analysis has been preordained, and the interpretation of the facts is done to suit the outcome. For example, the author routinely praises China's zero-COVID policy for China's success, only to use the Epilogue to explain why they have now abandoned it. Other countries, whose democratically elected leaders decided not to pursue a zero-COVID policy, are treated more acrimoniously.

This book is at its best when it highlights the facts around pandemics (Chapters 1, 2, and 6), even when the interpretation of those facts has a clear ideological bent. For this reason alone, I could see this being a useful addition to a reading list for health economics, public health, or epidemiology courses that cover COVID-19 in the future. It does an excellent job at collating and presenting the minutes of the pandemic. However, what the author feels is the main contribution of the book, the role that leaders played in the COVID-19 pandemic, will likely be forgotten in the next election cycle (for the democracies, at least).

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Masters: The Invisible War of the Powerful Against Their Subjects.

By Marco D'Eramo.

John Wiley & Sons 2023.

In his book "Masters: The Invisible War of the Powerful Against Their Subjects", Marco D'Eramo, journalist and social thinker, navigates the reader through the war that the powerful have unleashed against the people. The book includes a contingent plan and an abundance of resources, while critiquing the contemporary left for failing to stand up to the circumstances. The book astutely delves into families behind the 'capitalist revolutions' and 'counterrevolutions' against people's vested rights. D'Eramo exposes how charity organisations and foundations manipulated progressive US laws in the early 20th century to evade corporate taxes, ultimately operating far from nonprofit motives. The

book is flooded with evidence over the entanglement between the state and the most conservative parts of American capital, dispelling the notion that the state shrinks under neoliberalism—arguing that it in fact, becomes gigantic and more oppressive.

A recurring theme is the portrayal of 20th and 21st century ‘democratic’ and ‘free’ developed capitalist economies through a history of environmental, health, human trafficking, and murderous scandals. This plethora of attacks that the powerful have employed – in what the author concludes to be a class war between capitalists and the people – is shocking but not surprising. This book reminds us how inhumane economics and particularly Neoclassical, New Classical and Austrian economics can be. With examples such as the economics of the ‘baby market’ readers are horrified to be remembered of analyses such as Posner’s on setting prices on the infants and the risks of the baby as a commodity that cannot be returned if they are defective. The book scrutinises similar contributions such as the Coase theorem and ‘the optimal level of pollution’ (pervasive in environmental economics teaching). D’Eramo is shining a light on the economic discipline’s objectification of people and the environment frequently witnessed, not as a mistake but a conscious choice of a system of ideas, tools, and methods. D’Eramo also offers a fervent critique of the contemporary left, accusing it of being Thatcherite, based on a TINA (There Is No Alternative) doctrine, having accepted their defeat by restricting their ‘alternatives’ within the boundaries of the capitalist system itself. The book is pointing out the triumph of the capitalist class of being more consistent in securing successful revolutions, even in accordance with the lessons of Lenin and Gramsci – but for the opposite class, that of the masters!

D’Eramo could have enhanced the book by bringing up the real-life problems faced by capitalists in the late ’60s and ’70s, with their falling rates of profit, and reproduction, and accumulation. Despite the usefulness of a Keynesian management of capitalist economies in previous decades, falling rates of profit and subsequent capitalist crisis appeared inevitable, forcing capitalists to re-evaluate their mode of accumulation, restructure economy’s sectors and launch relevant ideologies to the people. It would not come as a surprise if the end of neo-liberalism comes with a New 21st century Deal, restructuring capitalism afresh, only to save the once again falling rates of profit and the accumulation process; both expansionary and contractionary economic policies aim to serve the survival of the capitalist system and its exploitative nature. Although mentioned, it is not a central point that neoliberalism, with its effortless infiltration to the traditional (social)-democratic parties is related to the demise of the USSR at that time. Western capitalism, by having a rival socialist awe – even with its many problems – was a significant factor to think twice, and thrice before attacking peoples’ vested rights. This also explains the ruthlessness of the “masters” attacks and the weakness of the western left by demanding a longer chain for the subjects instead of its complete abolition. In conclusion, this war is not invisible after all. D’Eramo, with optimism of both

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intellect and will, concludes his book with Macchiavelli's saying that 'good laws arise from tumults' (p. 233), suggesting that the subjects should proceed, and not being afraid of revolts and revolutions.

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