FACULTY OF
MANAGEMENT & FINANCE
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Book Review

Parker, M. (Ed.), Life After COVID-19: The Other Side of Crisis.

2020, Bristol University Press, Pages: 188,

Price: GBP 9.99 (LKR, 2670 Approx.) (pbk),

GBP 7.99 (LKR, 2636 Approx.) (E-pub)

ISBN: 978-1-5292-1539-7 (pbk)

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Since the start of the pandemic Bristol University Press have commissioned a series of books on the topic of COVID-19 and its impact on business and society around the world[1]. The first of these – *Life after COVID-19: The other side of crisis* – is an edited collection compiled by Martin Parker, Professor of Organisation Studies at the University of Bristol, published on 12th August 2020. This was a Rapid Response book, conceived during the early days of the national lockdown in the UK, where a call for chapter proposals was circulated in late March 2020 with a request for draft chapters just a month later. The timeline from conception to commission,

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[1] For further details please see Bristol University Press (n.d.)

submission and publication is remarkable given the prolonged gestation and peer review process that usually characterises academic publications and is itself an example of the extraordinary response galvanised by the events of early 2020.

At the time of writing none of the authors knew how the pandemic would unfold or could anticipate the lasting impact on their personal and professional lives. What they collectively recognised, however, was the momentous nature of these events and the potential to draw learning and insights for the future. Together the authors were invited to consider what the world might look like in the aftermath of COVID-19 and to capture their reflections in a series of short essays. The intent was to compile ten 4000-word chapters, but the response was so great that eventually 17, somewhat shorter, entries were included even after half of the proposals were rejected.

The background to the book is explored in the opening chapter, written by Martin Parker, where he notes that: "What you have here is a document of a particular time, of a moment when the world seemed to be becoming undone, and many people started to imagine that it might be stitched together differently" (p.10). Now, two-years since reports of an outbreak of a novel Coronavirus in the city of Wuhan, it is timely to reflect on what has been learnt, and what we may have forgotten, since the early stages of pandemic when there was no vaccine and little understanding of the nature of the virus or its impact.

The 37 contributors span a wide array of academic and professional backgrounds although, as Parker points out, are predominantly from the city of Bristol in the South West of England, with few voices from outside the UK and none from the global south. Whilst this might be perceived as 'parochial', it also illustrates the very localised experience of and response to the pandemic. Whilst each of the contributors spoke from their own 'place', the toppling of the statue of slave trader Edward Colston on 7th June 2020, which had stood in pride of place in the centre of the city for over 100 years, showed the deep interconnections between this small corner of England and the rest of the world[2]. There is insufficient space for a detailed analysis of each of the chapters in this review so, instead, I will briefly summarise some of the key themes that emerge.

The first main theme is the notion that, despite the suffering and hardship experienced, COVID-19 provides an important opportunity to reappraise our

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[2] For further details please see Bolden (2020)

priorities and to 'build back better'. In each chapter, contributors highlight what we can learn from the pandemic and how this can be used to create a fairer, more equitable and sustainable world. The ways in which communities have come together and economic agendas paused provides a tantalising glimpse of a future where politicians and organisations serve the interests of the many rather than the few.

Linked to this is the theme of collaboration and care. This stands out particularly strongly in Chapters 2, 3, 4 and 7 but is present throughout much of the book. Authors evoke the principles of 'care' for self and others and the need to move from cultures of competition to collaboration. In Chapter 2, for example, David Hunter discusses a shift in focus from 'wealth' to 'health', which reframes individual and collective understandings of the relationship between business and society within a narrative "powered by compassion, decency and love" (p. 20).

Another common theme throughout the book is the extent to which the COVID-19 pandemic can be seen as a 'dress rehearsal' for even more significant challenges – most notably climate change. In Chapter 15, for example, Ed Gillsepie and colleagues outline how the pandemic might reframe our assumptions around 'Growth' and in Chapter 16, Richard Owen discusses the notion of 'Responsible innovation'.

Several chapters consider the likely impact of the pandemic on employment and working lives. In Chapter 5, for example, Harriet Shortt and Michael Izak outline the experiences of UK and European workers as they transitioned to home working during lockdown, highlighting the 'double-edged sword' of visibility/vulnerability, the significance of 'liminal' spaces and the tensions between control/monitoring as individuals experimented with new ways of working. In Chapter 6 Vanessa Beck and colleagues explore the likely impact of the pandemic on unemployment and zero-hour contracts, highlighting the inequalities that will be exacerbated, particularly for Black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) and female workers. In Chapter 7, drawing on principles from the union co-operative movement, Alex Bird and colleagues make the case for "decent work for all workers" (p. 64).

A further theme, that runs throughout the book, is that of the role of activism and collective action. Each chapter is, in many ways, a mini manifesto calling on readers to step forward and make a positive difference. In Chapter 13, Carol Jarvis and colleagues describe the processes of 'unleadership' through which, in the face of COVID-19, individuals and communities mobilised in the absence of formal

hierarchy or reward. In the final chapter, Miti Kashtan suggests: "I see this crisis as the first opportunity in centuries, if not millennia, to change course […] to abandon the disastrous path of scarcity, separation and powerlessness […] to restore our place within life […] As we consider how to engage with life after COVID-19, we can let the anonymous biblical author remind us: we have been given the choice between life and death, and we can choose life" (p.173).

Together, the contributors to this book outline what we can (and indeed must) learn from the COVID-19 crisis. They highlight the complexities and interdependencies of issues and individuals and the possibility of using these insights to create more equitable and sustainable organisations and societies. Undoubtably there is a fair amount of idealism at play but that, itself, is a useful reminder of the optimism as well as the anxiety that marked the early days of the pandemic. In many ways it seems unfair to critique this book - which is inevitably limited in terms of scope, structure and empirical evidence - as it is the scale of ambition and speed of response which marks it out from most other business and management texts.

As one of the first serious explorations of the implications and impacts of COVID-19 for business and society, this book provides an illuminating insight both into the early response as well as the legacy of the pandemic. To this extent I would recommend it to management and organisational students, scholars and practitioners of all levels and backgrounds. For students, the relatively short and accessible format makes each chapter well suited as a provocation for enquiry and debate either on its own or as part of the larger text. For scholars and practitioners, the book poses important questions about the nature and purpose(s) of business and society. This book highlights what can be achieved when authors are given the opportunity to apply their learning and insights to new challenges. Without doubt there are significant omissions but as an illustration of critical and compassionate scholarship in the face of crisis it is hard to beat.

About the Editor

Martin Parker is Professor of Organisation Studies at the University of Bristol and lead for the Inclusive Economy Initiative. He has a background in anthropology, sociology and cultural studies and has previously worked at Staffordshire, Keele, Warwick and Leicester Universities. He has an extensive publication history, with recent books including *Shut Down the Business School* (Pluto 2018) and *Anarchism, Management and Organization* (Routledge 2020).

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