

## *An Introduction to “Pandemic as Polemic”*

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This Coolabah issue Nr 33 (2022) is a small selection of papers originally presented at an online seminar on the Covid-19 pandemic taking place 4 and 5 November 2021 at the University of Barcelona, which was hosted by the Observatory: Centre of Australian and Transnational Studies OCEAT (formerly CEAT) at the Faculty of Letters and Communication. The international seminar explored how the Covid-19 pandemic has put our society under great stress and to the test on both the local, regional, national and international level, and how its impact has raised a host of questions about lifestyle, environment, social and economic inequality, health policies, science and especially governance and politics. Now, three years have passed of constrictive lockdowns alternating with returns to “normalcy” and easing up on Covid-19 measures globally, but despite vigorous vaccination campaigns all over the world, the pandemic’s development, impact and effects remain a hot issue in our media and politics, and the Covid virus’s adaptability and changeability indicate we have not seen the last of the pandemic yet; the illness has become a rich, polemic interface of tension that exacerbates contemporary inequalities and creates new ones. Yet, polemic can also generate renovation and construction, and as such, Covid-19 needs to be discussed from a multidisciplinary, global perspective. It is this interface that the papers in this issue mean to address and explore with an open mind. In content, the papers presented in this Coolabah move from more theoretical to more practical approaches towards the pandemic, and will be introduced in these editorial lines in that same order.

In his article “Pandemic: One Small Step for Oblivion and a Big Leap into Managed Democracy,” Alejandro Escobar-Vicent takes a philosophical stance on the pandemic’s political impact on democracy and governance. Introducing the term “managed democracy”, Escobar-Vicent takes issue with the imposition of a selective memory and oblivion of pandemic events that enables authoritarian government and rule. Escobar-Vicent exhorts citizenry to reject life in an ahistorical “bubble” and to pool our pandemic experience so as not to forget. As he writes, “We will still have to wait for this pandemic to become a constitutive part of our collective memory, although not because of what we

have experienced as a whole and how we have experienced it, but because of the way we will remember how to tell it.”

In “Pandemic as Polemic: Free Will in an Age of Restrictions?”, Jytte Holmqvist shows herself equally concerned with the quality of democracy in Covid times. She reaches back to Simone de Beauvoir and Søren Kierkegaard’s existential approaches to life so as to formulate an answer to the traumatic loss of agency due to the pandemic’s impact on individual freedom, and “ask[s] if we can find our way back to becoming somewhat free agents in a Western world grappling with new complexities where we have been stripped of our own freedom to move – also in an abstract sense.” Investigating both philosophers’ existentialist approach to the world, Holmqvist argues that the pandemic both sharpens our existential fears as well as reinforces our individual potential and reliance on ourselves.

In “Engaging with the Great Pandemic War: Citizens, Artists, Academics”, Stephen Alomes’s personal and practical account of the Corona crisis, engages with the pandemic in three different arenas: scientific, literary and visual-artistic. His stance is critical with social media, politics and government and the way they have been dealing with the health crisis as well as the general lack of critical thinking that has affected Covid’s management, and made citizens buy into a series of truths that are questionable, such as those that blatantly refuse vaccination and denialists of the illness. With a keen eye for inconsistent behaviour and willing to fight a “war” in the “dirty trenches of social media”, Alomes describes how through his scientific work, painterly effort and poetic fervour he has achieved to be seen and heard, not always willingly, and shows how in the critical exercise of civil rebellion democratic space and agency may be recovered and defended in the lines suggested by Escobar-Vicent and Holmquist in their articles.

This Coolabah issue finishes with the article “The impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on teaching and learning Business English: Face-to-face, online or both?”, in which Andrea Ruiz Cirlot takes the pandemic as an opportunity to investigate the virtual option of business English teaching, and how its results compare to those of traditional face-to-face teaching. Rather than taking the fight against Corona into the realm of philosophy, democracy and healthcare policy, Ruiz Cirlot is interested in a practical, hands-on approach to the new *fait accompli* of Covid’s undeniable presence among us, and aims to make the best of the technological solutions that are currently available to create meaningful and successful teaching contexts, and turn a setback into an advantage. Her applied research into the matter through interviews and questionnaires suggest that a combination of the two approaches—face-to-face and online—is a good way forward.

Due to the extraordinary conditions imposed on social and working life by the pandemic, the edition and publication of this Coolabah volume has taken longer than originally envisaged. The main editor apologizes for this unexpected and unwanted delay.