*Review of The Pandemic Within: Policy making for a better world*, Policy Press, 2021, Hendrik Wagenaar and Barbara Prainsack

John Boswell, University of Southampton, [j.c.boswell@soton.ac.uk](mailto:j.c.boswell@soton.ac.uk)

The profound and ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic have prompted a flowering of thoughtful political commentary. The long durée crisis – and the missteps in governing responses along the way – have thrown the pitfalls and pathologies of current orthodoxies into sharp relief. In *The Pandemic Within*, Hendrik Wagenaar and Barbara Prainsack have made a customarily original and thought-provoking contribution to this important discussion. What sets their book apart is that it is not really about the COVID-19 pandemic in a literal sense. Indeed, the COVID crisis makes only occasional appearance and is treated as background or context, only the latest and most extreme manifestation of much more deep-rooted problems with modern democratic societies: rampant inequality; widespread precarity; corporate greed; timid government; and, above all, looming climate catastrophe. The disruption of the pandemic affords these influential thinkers in policy scholarship a new opportunity to grapple with these much more fundamental concerns, and present a flourishing, sustainable and richly democratic alternative vision.

As this ambition might suggest, this ‘small’ book is not in the rich idiographic tradition that typically defines interpretive policy analysis. In fact, it is not a ‘small’ book at all. Wagenaar and Prainsack, as pioneers in this field, set their scope much wider than in much of their preceding work. They present an impressive, magisterial sweep, drawing inspiration and stories from across geographical and sectoral boundaries. Though there are occasional success stories – most notably the historical account of the progressive Red Vienna administration, which reappears frequently in the discussion – the more poignant stories are ones of decay and decline, especially in the Anglo world where the precarities wrought by the capitalist economy in rural America or northern England are most acute. But the book also showcases a rare mastery of wide-ranging intellectual inspiration, drawing threads from sociology, science and technology studies, continental philosophy, feminist theory, public administration, public choice, political economy, history, anthropology and human geography. Best of all, the book is beautifully crafted, piecing these elements together in a compelling and easy-to follow narrative that will appeal to policy scholars but should also keep a wider range of readers interested and engaged.

The story is anchored on the concepts of complexity and hegemony. Each is a rich theoretical discussion in its own right, layered across the first 3 chapters of the book. As Wagenaar and Prainsack explain, they focus on complexity in order to foreshadow the intricate interconnection between economy, society, public services and the environment, but – contra much of the literature on complexity theory – they assert the importance of human agents and agency in knitting and navigating this complexity in practice. Likewise, they focus on hegemony to argue that taken-for-granted assumptions about how the complex world works favour powerful actors and constrain the democratic imaginary. These discussions pave the way for what Wagenaar and Prainsack call – borrowing from Ruth Levitas – ‘utopian thinking’, in the effort to disentangle the complex factors that are leading to the sorts of frailties and dysfunctions laid bare in the aftermath of COVID, and to reimagine in a comprehensive and interconnected way how things might work much better.

The heart of the book lies in the forensic chapters focused on these key interlocking factors. Wagenaar and Prainsack start with the intimate and immediate everyday realms with which citizens have direct experience – housing and shelter (chapter 4) and the world of work (chapter 5). They then progress to the far-reaching institutions that impact on citizens’ lives, in government (chapter 6) and corporations (chapter 7). They then move on to the surrounding contexts which structure democratic life, pleading for greater mastery over the abstract world of finance in chapter 8, and lesser mastery over the physical environment in chapter 9 (the call is for ‘gardening, not engineering’ in their evocative phrasing). The effect is to build cumulatively and seamlessly towards a conclusion promoting an ‘ecological society’ founded on fairness, sustainability, and solidarity.

This account is one that is intuitively appealing and – more to the point – convincingly and astutely conveyed. Something of a tensions lies, however, in trying to get to this utopia from our starting point of rampant inequality, democratic decline, and ecological frailty. Utopian thinking does a service in expanding the imaginary. But what does it mean in practice on the ground? How do we actually get there from here? It is, of course, not a challenge about which Wagenaar and Prainsack are unaware. Their conclusion speaks directly to the dilemma – they confess to having been uncertain, in the confines of the genre, whether to present a compelling vision or lay out a practical blueprint to get there. Understandably, given the nature of the book, they end up leaning heavily towards the former. Perhaps the task for critical policy scholars taking inspiration from the book is to do much more to flesh out the latter.