

Forum: Corona-Lektüre
Amelia Bonea über A. Bashford u.a.
by Amelia Bonea

Alison Bashford / Claire Hooker (Hrsg.), *Contagion: Historical and Cultural Studies*, London 2001.

Contagion is not only corporeal experience – or „flesh“, as the introduction to this volume suggestively puts it – but also metaphor. The resurgence of the term „infodemic“ in the context of the current pandemic is an apt illustration of this. „Infodemic“ is employed to refer to the digitally mediated information overload that many of us have been experiencing first-hand since the beginning of this crisis. As the World Health Organization cautions, this ‘over-abundance of information’ can hinder the effective communication and implementation of public health measures.¹ A more nuanced stance would be to understand „infodemic“ not merely as information overload, but also as an „epidemic of meanings or signification.“² In other words, an epidemic of meaning making, in which we all scramble to make sense of the unfolding situation and grapple with the myriad uncertainties it raises.

The twelve essays in this book delve into this complicated and interconnected world of experience and meaning making, as they discuss

¹WHO, „Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV): Situation Report 13“, 2 February 2020, https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf?sfvrsn=195f4010_6.

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Paula A. Treichler, *How to Have Theory in an Epidemic. Cultural Chronicles of AIDS*, Durham 1999.

Neben unseren Beiträgen sammeln wir Hinweise zur aktuellen Entwicklung, die für die Geschichtswissenschaften von Relevanz sein können sowie Wortmeldungen von Historiker/innen. Außerdem möchten wir Ihnen eine erste Übersicht über Einstiegs- und Orientierungspunkte zu digitalen Fachangeboten bieten.

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how people, from the nineteenth century to the present, have lived with contagion, attempted to make sense of it and used it to various ends. A central argument of the book is that one cannot understand the corporeal experiences of contagion without also engaging with the bewildering array of signifiers associated with it. The reason for contagion’s „powerful metaphorical reach“, the authors argue, are to be found in its ability to spread through contact, which imbues it with a remarkable potential to reconfigure relationships between humans, animals and objects, to break and erect barriers and expose multiple vulnerabilities in the process.

The essays explore the geographies, policies and identities associated with public health – what one of the contributors, Margrit Shildrick, fittingly calls „the dream of hygienic containment,“ the „uncontrollability and unknowability of contagion.“ But the book explores contagion as both „incapacity“ and „capacity“. Indeed, in contrast to the first part, which tends to focus on fears of contagion, both physical and moral, in a historical perspective, in the second part of the book attention turns to the „contaminating capacities“ of postmodernity. An interesting example is Shildrick’s essay on disability, which investigates widespread perceptions of disabled bodies as „contaminatory“ to conclude that „the threat of contamination is illusory, for each of us was, and is, already vulnerable“.

Margaret Pelling’s chapter is particularly useful for tracing the genealogy of „contagion“ and its cognate „infection“, nowadays regarded as almost synonymous, but which were previously distinguished on the basis of the existence of direct or mediated contact, respectively. The remarkable bacteriological advances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries helped simplify the complex histories of these concepts, leading to a situation in which the germ theorists, with their alleged „scientific, laboratory-based, objective“ approach, were rather simplistically pitched against the „bureaucratic, unscientific, politically motivated“ sanitarians. From the perspective of a history of concepts, Pelling’s analysis is a reminder that while

notions like „miasmas“, „contagion“, „infection“ and „germs“ need to be understood in the historical context of each period of study, it is equally crucial to reflect on the layers of meaning that they acquired over long stretches of time.

The volume's insights into the history and signification of contagion as it played out in colonial settings are also worth emphasizing, more so since in public discourse the idea that the historical study of disease cannot be separated from the study of colonialism is often buried in triumphalist narratives of medicine as a tool of civilization and modernity. The connections between disease and colonialism run much deeper than the mere fact that colonies often functioned as laboratories for medicine and public health. As the Introduction reminds us, „like contagion, colonisation is about „contact,“ self-multiplication and, not infrequently, destruction.“ The discussion of smallpox vaccination and inoculation in the Australian colonies, American public health measures in the Philippines and leprosy management in Australia demonstrate how certain bodies were constructed as foreign and dangerous and how the vocabulary and practices of contagion and colonialism reinforced each other, with long-lasting political and socio-economic consequences. The „colonies“ of bacteria or lepers, the „immunity“ of the nation or diplomatic „immunity“ are but a few examples of the power of such vocabulary to permeate multiple spheres of life.

The book is commendable for its interdisciplinary approach to the study of contagion. By weaving together perspectives from history, sociology, cultural studies, health sciences and art, this collection of essays is a timely reminder about the importance of drawing on different types of expertise to understand and solve complex health crises like the one we are currently facing.