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**Contemporary Critical Theory
and Decolonial Visual Praxis:
Exploring resistance narratives
and colonial hegemonies in the
pandemic**

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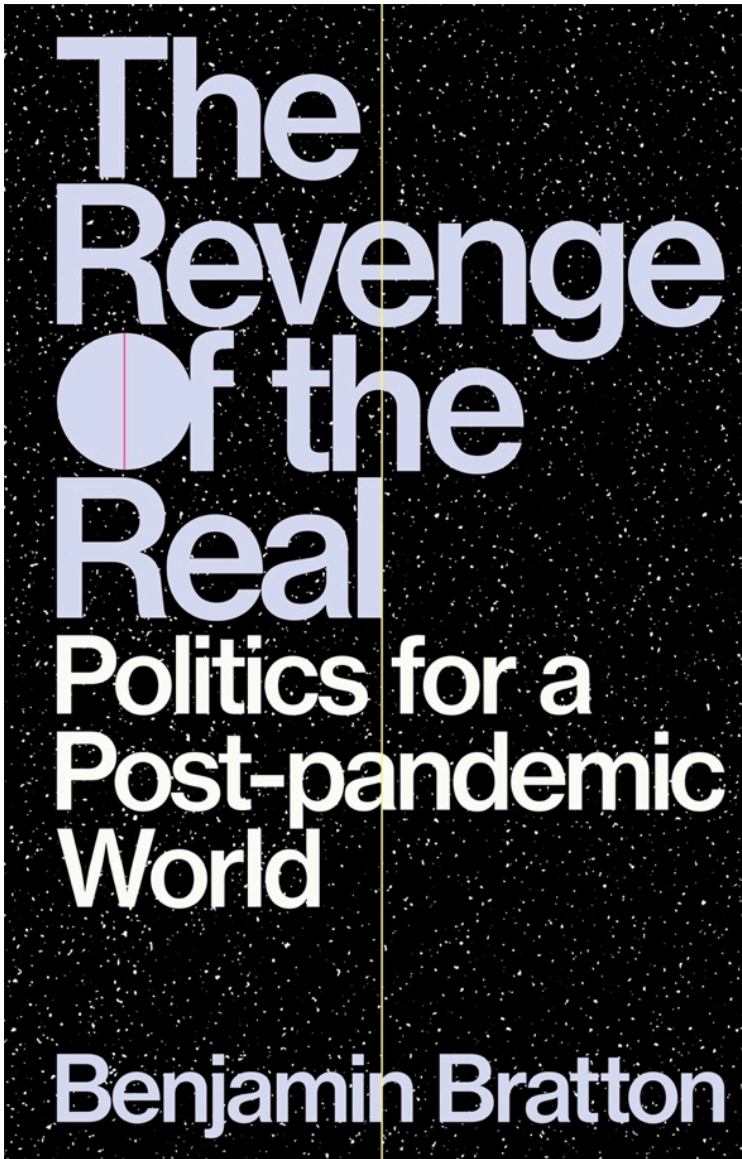


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REVENGE OF THE REAL

JAQUELINE MCLEOD ROGERS

In this short book, Benjamin Bratton addresses all that has gone wrong as the pandemic has spread around the planet without meeting organized resistance. Weak governance in the West in particular has failed to mobilize any systematic defense. Apart from being unprepared by geopolitical compartmentalization, states continue failing to imagine a way forward; too few hear in the success story of viral spread a call for governance based on planetary-scale rationalism aimed at deliberately composing “a world that consults both reason and compassion”(5). Bratton points out that the virus should teach above all else our common biological circumstances, and with this, the need to overcome “subjective cultural divisions and associations” (33). In place of critiques aimed at liberating individuals from state interference or disempowered groups from oppressors, we need to devote shared energy to the project of devising a model of equitable, managed, and responsive planetary governance. Division weakens us; we need cooperation and shared information to be more effective at healing our wounded species in a wounded habitat (142). He argues that healing requires the formation of a positive planetary politics: “An integrated, available, modular, programmable, flexible, tweakable, customizable, predictable equitable, responsive, sustainable infrastructure for sensing, modeling, simulation and recursive action” (145). Of course, his optimism for the prospect of humankind working together to build something new and shared is tempered with fear that we will more likely return to our former ways and selves as soon as the virus clears.



For Bratton, the pandemic is an opportunity to face our failed governance strategies and philosophical perspectives based on inflated

notions of individualism. He reimagines good governance on a planetary scale, urging a biopolitics aimed at promoting the health of citizens and planet. His “epidemiological” social model adjusts current conceptions of citizen subjectivity to realistically reflect the principle of connectivity—so that public transmissibility and responsibility (33) trump individual rights and desires. Our moment demonstrates the need for deliberate action guided by competence and science and for citizens to surrender personal data in support of authoritative imaging of contagion and effective medical response. Apart from the pandemic, other global realities like climate degradation and social and resource inequity require collective address. To deal with these real and world-wide challenges, Bratton argues we need a new form of planetary-scale governance (162).

To battle pandemic spread, we needed the organizational competence of “a real world health organization” to furnish science-based information and global plans—not the whispered suggestions of the current WHO as backdrop to our default position of “resorting everyone back to their country of passport” (144-45). Once divided by geopolitics, citizens then received uneven resources and advice, depending on where they landed. Bratton points out that some authoritarian countries in the East, like Taiwan, provided orchestrated, clear, and effective pandemic responses; while he is not advocating the spread of “Asian technocratic” governance (26), it serves as an instructive contrast to the flabby populist resistance to governance that ruled the West. In place of taking direction and cooperating with state-run programs for disease control—utilizing technological tools at hand to conduct sensing, modelling, and tracing—resistance ranged from flat-out denying the disease to critiquing the organizational efforts of authority—authority being out-of-hand equated with unfair oppression (14).

“Populism” in Bratton’s view is not progressive—not to be confused “with the political and/or cultural project of the working class” but devolved to “folksy scapegoating, simplistic emotional appeals, fear mongering and boundary policing, empty theatrics and sham symbolism” (9). Expertise or competence is rejected for experience (73); affect is privileged over reason; narrative and spin define reality.

Combining these with “the myth of individual autonomy” (12) has spawned factionalized blaming in a war of words and shows of protest, making politics all rhetorical and aesthetic. For Bratton, the March on the Capital shares commonalities with the campaign to defund the police. Neither is a viable political response to human and planetary crisis: both provide venues to perform the belief that government is oppressive and obedience is submission.

Alike in the West, the Right and Left harbour work against governance. The Right claims unbridled personal freedoms and are as far as possible ungovernable. Yet, as Bratton relentlessly demonstrates, the Left also damage the commons by resisting government and conducting “endless critique and constant dismantling” (12). Imagining government as the source of propaganda and panoptic power, they struggle against it, using “prisoner’s dilemma tactics” (14) rather than taking advantage of opportunities to forge cooperative plans that recognize our planetary connections and responsibilities. He suggests the Left has laboured under a misreading of Foucault that inaccurately reads control as corruption, whereas in reality “[control] is also a means of protection from, composition of, form giving, structure making, enforcement of, and the freedom not to die early and pointlessly” (146).

Bold in Bratton—and likely to offend colleagues devoted to equity projects aimed at dismantling systemic power—is his call for abandoning critique in favor of developing new cooperative alliances. Pandemic times have made it something of a trope to talk about a new sense of collectivity and solidarity—to praise movements like MeToo and Black Lives Matter as pinnacles of empathy that promote universal improvement. Yet for Bratton these protests are irrational, narrow, and even parochial, and he calls instead for more broad-based coalition and transnational politics.

In his view, there is an ethics to accepting a view of self as object among other objects (103). Bratton as architect and educator never loses sight of humans as makers and sees the sense of putting tools and machines to good use to promote health and order—rather than ignoring or hating what we have made. We are not locked into a

fixed algorithmic grid, for computations can be adjusted as multi-levelled data provide new information. For Bratton, the planet is not pre-programmed and inflexible world, but a “model-driven recursive composition” (163). The governance he envisions is not by law and edict but responsive to data-informed “decisions,” in a system always open to remaking (163).

Bratton barely constrains his outrage in the face of our confused and dangerous response to real crisis: the deliberate ignorance and misinformation and the maintenance of siloes of privilege. As some of the source quotes will have shown, his anger spawns dark-humoured prose, making readers laugh out loud—before sighing—as he recites the ludicrous inefficiencies of current practices that have done everything but put the common weal first. For fearing the wrong things, Giorgio Agamben is a particular target, skewered for his “all-encompassing post-structuralist medievalism” (118).

Yet tragedy sounds in the final chapter when Bratton shares his fear that post-pandemic times will find us attempting a return to business as usual. In a future of “evolved stupidity” (164), we will ignore collective for individual needs and rights, leading some to protect their health by practicing social distancing and paying for shopping services and delivery of wellness gadgets and potions; in opposition, others will make a show of fellowship with hugs and handshakes. If we continue with nationhood and capitalism, we will reset class-driven inequities that allow one group to thrive, another to serve, and those left to fail. Here’s how Bratton describes the threatening new normal: “Those who are able will attend to themselves with renewed abilities, and those who can’t will provide attention as a service to the former or risk becoming themselves unattendable” (166). Bratton is not calling for computation and design to win out over compassionate human and life principles, but notes that equity and ease are enabled by computation and control. Whereas some post-colonial theorists (like Kate Crawford in *Atlas of AI*) argue the inter-activity and -culpability of capitalism, computation, and control (227), Bratton advocates for computation, the smart use of data, and social control as indispensable to remaking a safe and reasoned society—“how

any complex, adaptive system recognizes itself and its own capacity for deliberate self-composition” (146).

To avoid a same-but-worse future scenario, Bratton calls for something new, for “something like a long-delayed next beginning” (20). There may be, he fears, few takers—his new world order contradicts values and practices ingrained in Western culture. Yet other speculative theorists have offered similar blueprints proposing deliberate wholesale change: Marshall McLuhan comes to mind, with his insistence on the need for humans to understand and control technologies in the environment (McLuhan, *Playboy*, 22). In a vision corresponding to Bratton’s, McLuhan imagined as the only positive way forward an interdisciplinary human cohort managing technologies to support a responsive programmed environment (McLeod Rogers, 67).

Indeed, amongst those who write about technology and responding to crisis, there is support for Bratton’s overall claim that the best way forward is to control what we have made by crafting environmental conditions optimal to both human and planetary life. Writers who take up this position tend to come from design fields and recognize the design principle as essential composite, not as artifice; they acknowledge we have created and loosed technology as a force and now need to attend to managing, adjusting, and redirecting it. Holly Jean Buck writes convincingly of engineered solutions for planetary recovery—we need to use and cultivate the science at hand for good and healing outcomes. James Bridle also makes the case that the range of technologies shaping the present reality should not be wished away but managed as “life support systems” (252). Those calling alongside Bratton for design and management to control technologies are not craven optimists—but better described as realists pleading with citizens and states to work with and attempt to save the world we have.

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