Peter Baldwin. *Fighting the first wave. Why the Coronavirus was tackled so differently across the globe*. Cambridge University Press, 2021.

Around the first anniversary of the pandemic in March 2021, my colleague Norbert Götz at the Institute for Contemporary History invited me to participate in a panel discussing Peter Baldwin's book *Fighting the first wave* that had just been published. I was both sceptical and intrigued: sceptical of how we can write the history of something we are in the midst of; intrigued for the same reason. Approximately two weeks after the book arrived in my mailbox, I contracted Covid myself. The pandemic became even more personal; it entered my body. While before it directed and constrained my mobility, it was now inside of me. I became dangerous to others and had to isolate. Reading the book and continuing to work helped me cope with Covid anxiety, but it also put the reading into perspective – the perspective being that of the lived experience of being sick with the virus, which becomes the book's central nemesis.

The book documents the development, strategies and outcomes of the first wave on a global scale with clarity. It draws a picture of international polarization between three major ways of handling the pandemic: 1) targeted quarantine and testing the potentially ill with a focus on contact tracing; 2) hands-off mitigation strategy with partial measures to slow down transmission; and 3) suppression strategy including strict lockdowns and strong restriction of movements for citizens.

Baldwin navigates around central events across most countries describing in impressive detail how different national governments have tackled the pandemic, while arguing that neither history nor political systems or ideology alone can explain the different paths taken.

In one episode, the author for example makes comparisons between European countries with female political leaders including Norway, Finland and Denmark. Was it their female leadership that led to the implementation of successful strategies? During the abovementioned panel discussion, Baldwin argues that it is an interesting, even curious aspect, but that he doesn't believe that the gender of state leaders is significant for the success or failure in handling the crisis.

Although the book takes a transnational approach, Sweden assumes a central role in the story. This outlier, a democratic country, in the middle of Europe, with a national culture that is based on the principle of *lagom* – just right – that also implies a command not to stand out, was now choosing a completely different path than its European fellows. It became the control group of a global experiment in handling a pandemic. It is in this prominent placement of Sweden that Baldwin's own position takes shape: Sweden chose the wrong way, and Swedish citizens have had to bear the consequences of a political inability to handle the crisis. He also points to the democratic problem of leaving the responsibility to a leadership of experts – the Public Health Agency (Folkhälsomyndigheten) with its state epistemologist Anders Tegnell – that is not democratically legitimated through elections and hence lacks the political accountability of a government. Throughout the book national variations are repeatedly

contrasted with the Swedish *Sonderweg*, moving from questions of politics, histories of handling previous health crises, the role of geography for the spread of the corona virus, the role of scientific knowledge production at high speed, as well as the role of the state and individual citizens' behaviour in tackling the crisis.

In order to assess the contribution of the book, it first needs to be pointed out what it is *not* doing: It does not provide a statistical model explaining why the coronavirus was tackled so differently across the globe. It is also not an assemblage of graphs and curves tracking death numbers, spreads of infection or predicting future developments of the pandemic that have become one of the central ways in which the pandemic has been made visible for us by mainstream media. The book makes do without a single graph – as Yohann Aucante (EHESS Paris), one of my co-panelists pointed out. Neither does it offer an orderly historical narrative of why countries are reacting so differently to a crisis on a global scale.

Instead, it documents how the first wave unfolded on a meso level, trying to trace and describe in detail what happened in different states, and what the consequences for the national populations were. Scholars always have to make choices, and Baldwin chose the meso level as a fruitful angle, which of course leads to the mitigation of other perspectives including the micro level of lived experiences. Baldwin is not interested in questions such as living in lockdown, being forced to continue with everyday life with the trade-off of high death tolls and a health system at its limit. The book also does not speak of the different kinds of trauma – collective or individual – that Covid has caused; the book rarely pays attention to societal divisions along class, race and gender lines that were made visible as the pandemic unfolded. It also does not provide a discussion of what success would mean in light of a global pandemic. Is it the number of deaths, degree of spread of the virus or something else that become markers of success?

Writing the history of events as they unfold requires payoffs in terms of theorizing and backward-looking reflections. Given that we are still moving in and out of Covid waves, the existence of these kinds of blind spots is not surprising. However, the book represents an important contemporary document of the pandemic, and I am looking forward to its sequel.

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