

Health Emergency or Seizure of Power?

The Political Economy of Covid-19

Kees van der Pijl, April 2020¹

On 11 March 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) officially declared the outbreak of Covid-19 (the respiratory illness caused by the SARS-CoV-2 corona virus) a global pandemic, the first since the H1N1 swine flu in 2009. Within a short time-span, a large part of the world went into lockdown, forcing people into their homes, outlawing jogging or meeting others, etc., all supposedly to ensure their protection. In this piece I challenge this assumption. As with previous events signalling that the era of political compromise in the West was drawing to a close and a politics of fear ushered in instead (first the 9/11 attacks in New York and Washington, then the new Cold War with Russia, dramatised by the downing of Flight MH17), the way the event is being exploited for other purposes is far more important than the forensics of the event itself. In this case as in the two previous ones, *the Atlantic ruling class that presided over the post-war liberal world order, is seizing an opportunity (not necessarily of its own making) to try and stem its loss of control at home and abroad.*

Soon after the epidemic began or, better: was proclaimed to be developing into one, draconic measures were taken completely out of proportion to the real threat to public health. Although apparently a world-wide phenomenon (e.g., India with 1,3 billion inhabitants, of whom some 7.2 million die of various cases each year, ordered a complete lockdown, although only around 10,000 people have been infected and 358 people have died of/with Covid-19 at the time of this writing), the epicentre *of the response* is the West, where the ruling classes have seized on the opportunity to try and radically reverse the trend towards ‘populism’ both in the streets and in the shape of maverick leaders like Trump. The vulnerability of contemporary capitalism and its combination of speculative money flows and the global spread of product chains, as well as the instability of the underlying social contract, is key here (Desai 2020). With the media and governments

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whipping up fear, Naomi Klein's 'disaster capitalism' in this case too serves to advance a ruling class agenda against popular forces (Klein 2007).

In the words of the Belgian journalist, Senta Depuydt,

It is undeniable that the coronavirus epidemic has come on the scene at a crucial moment, when people everywhere are in revolt against the power of international financial institutions and multinational pharmaceutical corporations, whose stranglehold on governments is no longer hidden. Many scandals have shaken confidence. The bankruptcy of an aberrant economic system is accelerating, and attempts to start a third world war are multiplying. While it is impossible to know how the "coronavirus pandemic" will influence the redistribution of power, it is certain that *many are seeking to have Covid-19 serve the political interests of a global governance project* (Depuydt 2020, emphasis added).

The 'global governance project' is just another term for the liberal world order pursued through two world wars and reinvigorated in the wake of the collapse of the USSR, the Soviet bloc and the defeat of states and movements relying on them.

That the new corona virus was recognised first in China in late 2019 only highlights that we are not looking at a grand plan hatched by the West, but at an opportunity seized upon to advance an agenda, of which some elements had been gestating, others were improvised later. Indeed the beginning epidemic in Wuhan and the surrounding Hubei province, to which the Chinese government responded with draconian measures that effectively stopped the spread but also all social activity, was not immediately replicated outside China. Britain and the United States were even among the last to go into lockdown. However, the world-wide standstill of normal life, which is having devastating consequences for hundreds of millions and opens up the prospect of a regimented society for many more, reveals how one after another, governments (not all) saw an opportunity to solve other issues by falling into line with 'battling the pandemic'.

Framing health and other issues as questions of 'security' has been analysed as a way of bolstering state power in times of crisis (Elbe 2009: 15), and that is clearly at play in this case too. The security at stake is the stability of the existing order, a dangerously lopsided, oligarchic capitalism in terminal decline. In the current Covid-19 emergency, a specific factor is the attempt by the established Atlantic ruling class to oust Donald

Trump, the first real outsider having won the presidency of the United States in modern times (De Graaff and Van Apeldoorn 2019).

I will first address the issue of states of emergency and compare the views of John Locke, the founding ideologue of liberalism, with those of Carl Schmitt, who was preoccupied with the state of exception when Germany passed through a short-lived liberal episode in the aftermath of World War I. Because Schmitt theorised a situation of an endangered liberalism, his views are again topical today. With 9/11 a state of emergency was imposed based on the fear of terrorism, but after two decades of war in the Middle East and North Africa, its cogency began to wane and the new Cold War with Russia only compensated the loss to some extent. The virus scare is turning out to be far more effective in freezing society into a state of emergency again although countries like Sweden, Belarus or Japan, which did not resort to a comprehensive lockdown, have no different levels of cases or fatalities than countries that came to a complete standstill. It looks as if the current counterattack against 'populism' (both actual popular movements from below and office-holders like Trump helped to power by them) is successfully applying an idea articulated by Michel Foucault in the 1970s, that sovereignty can also be asserted at the level of humanity's relationship with nature, as global governance..

Secondly, I address the process of class formation through which a bloc of forces executing this radical turn was constituted. Once the health emergency opportunity presented itself, the pharmaceutical industry was obviously first in line to defend, not just a capitalist response, but also its specific, medication-oriented approach to health prevalent in the West. Bill Gates, the Microsoft founder and financier of Obama's re-election in 2012, though his foundation and the World Health Organisation in which he wields huge influence, had long called for pandemic preparedness. Their dress rehearsals more than the actual Covid-19 crisis determined the response, to which the other IT giants, high finance, and the intelligence/surveillance world added their weight to bolster the anti-'populist', authoritarian drive. A paralysed society will not resist the shock-like acceleration of the concentration of capital in fewer hands (by sacrificing the small and middle-sized business) either.

Thirdly, I address how the new virus affected relations between the United States and China. After the SARS epidemic in 2002-3, Washington reached out to China (where that epidemic had its origin) to jointly investigate its consequences. Chinese researchers were funded and hosted (also by Canada). However, in 2019, serious friction became apparent.

The break-up of the collaboration has also laid bare the deep rift between the declining and the ascendant world power, even though many links remain. The fact that the 2008 Nobel Prize for Medicine, the French virologist Luc Montagnier, has established that SARS-CoV-2 was created in a laboratory, requires we investigate this closely.

This takes us to the fourth aspect, the role of biological warfare preparation. The United States especially maintains a massive apparatus of laboratories for this purpose both at home and along the frontiers of Russia, China, and tropical Africa. In light of the claim that a laboratory developed the virus, the closure of the main US bio-warfare facility at Fort Detrick in Maryland and the subsequent participation of a US team in the World Military Games also in Wuhan, deserves to be looked at as an alternative explanation too—especially in light of evidence of an earlier outbreak in the US.

1. Suspending the Liberal Constitution under the State of Emergency

The standard reflex to major disasters in the United States and the larger West since at least 9/11 has been to reinforce state emergency powers. It is not different in the current Covid-19 epidemic. As *ZeroHedge* reported, ‘In a sweeping power grab, the [US] Department of Justice has asked Congress for the ability to go directly to chief judges in order to detain people indefinitely without trial during emergencies’. It cites the *Politico* website which reviewed documents detailing the DoJ’s requests to lawmakers on this and a host of related topics (Durden 2020). It was not different after 9/11, when the Patriot Act was adopted without proper discussion after anthrax letters had been sent to two US Senators who might have held up its passage.

Other countries have adopted broadly identical measures, with the liberal West, the capitalist heartland of the global political economy, leading the way. Normally we do not associate this part of the world with authoritarian intervention, but at least from the latter part of World War II, a repressive infrastructure, usually referred to as the ‘Deep State’, has backed up the power of the ruling classes here as well. Under this heading elements in the military, the intelligence services, and the police, aligned with CEOs and actual owners of capital active in national and transnational planning groups such as New America, the Bilderberg Conferences, or the World Economic Forum, have historically intervened when the stability of the existing order was under threat (see Scott 2015). In the Cold War, the ‘Gladio’ network in NATO countries was an example. Normally held in

reserve, it surfaced (although the Italian name was only made public in 1991) in the ‘Strategy of Tension’ in the 1970s to derail the possibility of Communist government participation in Italy. It was only with the attacks of September 11, 2001, that a state of emergency was imposed on the West at large and this has continued, invoking a series of threats (terrorism, ‘Russian’ fake news and electoral manipulation and Covid-19 are the key landmarks) to the present day. Let me briefly review the relationship between the original liberal constitution and the provisions for its suspension.

The Lockean State/Society Complex

The state/society-complex in which social power determines the state rather than vice versa, emerged at the close of the English Civil War that with a few pauses was fought from 1642 to its conclusion in 1688. In the ‘Glorious Revolution’ of that year the Dutch intervened on the side of the liberals on the British Isles and the North American colonies. John Locke, the councillor of the Whig lords welcoming the regime change, provided his patrons with a comprehensive political doctrine in *Two Treatises of Government* (Locke 1965). Key to his insights was that the state, as the coercive force in the background, serves the interests of property-owning society regulated by law, which is sovereign. This stood in direct contrast to the view of Thomas Hobbes, who in the *Leviathan* of 1651 had argued the opposite: the state must impose itself directly and permanently to avoid a war of all against all. But then, the civil war had not been finally decided when Hobbes wrote (in exile).

Though Locke took an optimistic view of the self-regulating capacity of liberal society he did refer to the possibility that the state would impose itself in an emergency. “Tis fit that the Laws themselves should in some Cases give way to the Executive Power”, he noted in *Second Treatise*. Behind and above ‘the laws’ there is another social force, which alone enjoys what Locke calls a ‘Prerogative [which] is nothing but the Power of doing publick good without a Rule’ (Locke 1965: 421 and 425, respectively). The normal laws were already harsh enough: by the time of the industrial revolution hundreds of different crimes were punishable by death, most related to infractions of property rights (Losurdo 2013: 92). In the North American colonies it was not different. Here slavery added to the cruelty of everyday life until long after Abolition.

On both sides of the Atlantic, the Lockean concept, complete with with the safety

valve of the state of emergency, was elaborated into a novel form of political life in the early 18th century. In the aftermath of defeating absolutist France, the main contender for power against the liberal Anglo-Dutch coalition, a 'public opinion' crystallised in newspapers, café society, and other venues and channels. Here patrons debated the issues of the day, albeit always on the basis of a silent agreement that King and Country were given. Thus a fluid alternation of government and opposition (always 'his majesty's most loyal opposition') became possible, no longer absolutist dynastic succession or the shock-like changes of power as in France or elsewhere (see my 2014: 18-23 for a more elaborate discussion and sources).

Crisis and the State of Exception

France, the country of Louis XIV (*'L'état c'est moi'*) and after the French Revolution, of Napoleon, would retain many characteristics of its contender state experience until well after the world wars in which it sided with the Anglo-American, Lockean heartland. By then, a new contender challenging liberal hegemony had arisen, Germany. Along with lesser European contenders such as Italy and Austria-Hungary, and Japan in Asia, these states all to different degrees relied on a directive state mobilising their societies from above, as France had done before. When Germany after the defeat in World War I adopted a liberal constitution under the Weimar Republic, the safety valve referred to by Locke proved insufficient and the type of fluid government alternation as in Anglo-America, out of reach. In 1918-'24, the country even seemed on the brink of socialist revolution.

In the circumstances, Carl Schmitt, the ultra-conservative legal scholar wary of the liberalism of the new republic, a militant Catholic and anti-Semite, theorised the sovereign state entirely from the vantage point of the ability to impose a state of emergency. Schmitt defines sovereignty in his *Political Theology* of 1922 as vested in 'he who decides on the [state of] exception' (Schmitt 2005: 5). In a way, this was still Locke's 'prerogative', but after the emergency clause of the Weimar constitution had been activated in 1930 to deal with the onset of the Great Depression, Schmitt asked whether a constitutionally grounded emergency would not in the end fall short of breaking the deadlock between the classes. In *The Guardian of the Constitution* he asks how the integrity of society will be maintained in a situation in which none of the classes can

prevail, and in which not just legality, but the constitution itself becomes unstable. In such an existential crisis, the president of the republic, on account of his popular mandate, must 'assert the unity of the people as a political totality against the plurality of social and economic power groups and *articulate [its] political will directly*' (Schmitt 1996: 159).

Only a month after Hitler's investiture as Chancellor by President Hindenburg that ended the liberal interlude in January 1933, the Nazis consolidated their power through a false flag operation, the Reichstag fire (ascribed to the Communists). The following year the SS massacred the leadership of the SA brown-shirts in the 'night of the long knives' to neutralise the working class wing of the Nazi movement. Schmitt, whose patron, General Schleicher, was also murdered, produced a hasty endorsement of the new terror regime in the spirit of *The Guardian of the Constitution*: 'Justice flows from the institution of the *Führer*', he now claimed. 'In the supreme emergency, the supreme law is vindicated and manifests itself as the highest degree of judicially vengeful realisation of this law. All law originates in *the right to life of a people*' (Schmitt 1989: 329, emphasis added).

Continuing Fear of Democracy

After the defeat of the Axis powers in 1945, with more than 50 million dead to mourn, the United States took the lead of the Western heartland, enlisting the services of Nazi and Japanese war criminals where the struggle with the new contender, the Soviet Union, required their experience. The aforementioned Gladio networks and comparable structures elsewhere were also set up, relying on the same combination of forces under Anglo-American guidance. As long as the capitalist ruling class was not strong enough to roll back the Left working class, these forces had to be kept in reserve for an emergency.

The US itself was also considered vulnerable. Especially after J.F. Kennedy began to have second thoughts about the Cold War campaign with which he had won the presidency, a Deep State became active domestically as well. The forces associated with the failed Bay of Pigs invasion in Cuba, both private and public, had by then turned into a reservoir of political violence. They were involved in the 1963 assassination of the president first and in the murders of his brother Robert and black civil rights leader Martin Luther King, both in 1968, later (Scott 1996).

By then, the student anti-Vietnam and black emancipation movements were in full

swing and the working class across the West was testing the limits of the post-war class compromise. Wage rises in tight labour markets coupled to a burgeoning Left political culture demanded a fundamental response. In 1975, one of the most significant ideologues of US imperialism, Samuel Huntington, made the case for restricting democracy in a joint report to the Trilateral Commission, the tricontinental planning body of North American, European and Japanese business and political leaders established to work out a joint, forward-looking approach to the social turmoil. Huntington's report concluded that 'In recent years, the operations of the democratic process do ... appear to have generated a breakdown of traditional means of social control, a de-legitimation of political and other forms of authority, and an overload of demands on government, exceeding its capacity to respond' (Crozier, Huntington, and Watanuki 1975: 9).

In 1978, Huntington was made Coordinator for Security in the Carter administration. With his ally, National Security Adviser Zbigniew Brzezinski, he set about redesigning the emergency planning system, notably by creating the Federal Emergency Management Agency, FEMA, which was to provide the infrastructure for emergencies including natural disasters (Scott 2015: 149). Originally, in the Eisenhower years, emergency planning in the US had been focused on how to survive a nuclear war, under the heading of 'Continuity in Government' (COG). In the 1970s, when the Strategy of Tension was rolled out to contain democracy in Western Europe, the COG infrastructure was reoriented to cover domestic unrest in the US as well, something Huntington was particularly concerned about.

In his book *American Politics. The Promise of Disharmony* of 1981, Huntington elaborated on the dangers the United States was exposed to in this respect. The US in his view lacked the European tradition of institutionalised class conflict which allowed governments to recognize dangerous upheaval early on. The US on the other hand, 'Lacking any concept of the state, lacking for most of its history both the centralized authority and the bureaucratic apparatus of the European state' has 'historically been a weak polity' (Huntington 1981: 232). Clearly, by this time, the main thrust of COG thinking was to be prepared for social protest and the Covid-19 emergency should also be considered in this light.

When Reagan took over, a COG committee was formed under Donald Rumsfeld and Dick Cheney. The two men had first emerged as key players following the removal of Nixon. As Secretary of Defence and White House Chief of Staff, respectively, they forced

President Ford to switch to a tougher stance against the USSR. Now, with no official status, they were secretly entrusted with updating the COG planning system, basically the blueprint for a shadow government. This was the machinery, with its \$8 billion communications and logistics headquarters in Arizona and a series of ground command centres, some mobile, connected to four Boeing E-4 flying command posts (so-called Doomsday planes) at Offut Air Force Base in Nebraska (Scott 2015: 39), that swung into action on 9/11. The Patriot Act, rushed through Congress with the help of the anthrax letters mentioned above, effectively made the state of emergency proclaimed after the attacks (in conjunction with the declaration of the War on Terror) permanent.

Biopolitical Power

Because today the liberal constitution in the West is under threat by mounting popular discontent. Schmitt's thinking has acquired new relevance too. 9/11 and the War on Terror, the new Cold War and hybrid warfare (including 'fake news') by Russia, and now Covid-19 each (have) work(ed) to transmute 'the politics of the exception ... into the politics of fear as a socially integrative device' (Teschke 2011:72-3). Following the Wikileaks disclosures and Edward Snowden's revelations about 'Five Eyes' surveillance (the original Lockean bloc of the UK, US, Canada, Australia and New Zealand), the German magazine, *Der Spiegel*, raised the question whether the United States should not be characterised as a 'soft totalitarianism' (see also Greenwald 2014; Zuboff 2019).

On the surface, the political process in the West is still a matter of parties alternating in power—but only on the surface. The ruling class can switch from one angle to another depending on the nature of the forces supporting a particular concept of control and the receptivity of the public for this or that solution (see Bode 2019). However, this is no longer a matter of hegemony, rule by consensus; it is primarily a politics of fear. This also applies to sovereignty at the level of global governance that Michel Foucault calls *biopolitics*.

Foucault distinguishes between a natural environment (the environment of the life of the species) and an artificial environment (cities, politics, states, etc.). How the natural environment impacts on the artificial environment by imposing constraints, and vice versa, is also a terrain on which power and sovereignty are exercised. Yet the subject of this interaction, says Foucault, is not the sovereign who wields political power in a

definite geographical space. Here,

[Sovereignty] is something which relates to... the perpetual geographical, climatic, physical entanglement of the human species, to the degree it has a body and a spirit, a physical and moral life; and the sovereign will be the one who will have to exercise his power at this point of articulation, where nature in the sense of the physical elements, interferes with nature in the sense of the nature of the human species... Here the sovereign will intervene and if he wants to change the human species... it will be through acting on this environment (Foucault 2004: 24).

As so often with Foucault, *who* wields power remains unclear and also whether he is critical of this development (towards biopolitical sovereignty) or merely observes it as a fact of life. Here it is enough to establish that state sovereignty (anchored in the monopoly of violence and the ability to impose the state of emergency) and the sovereignty that is established at the interfaces between humanity and nature (geography, climate, health), are jointly mobilised in the context of the Western project of global governance. Schmitt's 'right to life of a people' is now posited at the global level, by forces operating on that scale, as in the current health emergency.

Indeed under the circumstances of a pandemic, 'political rule is practised through a complex triangle of "sovereignty, discipline and governmental management, which has [the] population as its main target and [uses] apparatuses of security as its essential mechanism"' (Elbe 2007: 59, citing Foucault). Power thus rises above the level of the single state, but also reaches deeper, 'taking charge of life itself' (Elbe 2007: 79, citing Foucault). This I would argue is happening before our eyes in the case of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

Across the West, indeed the world, the sort of emergency powers granted to the executive in the United States are being replicated, covered also by increasingly provocative military manoeuvres on the Russian border—partly disrupted by the Covid-19 outbreak. Even though levels of infection are not different in countries with far lighter or even no restrictions, the mainstream reading of events is that we need the state of exception because of the virus. Yet mass surveillance, invasive policing, tracking people's movements via their mobile phones, by drones flying over public spaces filming passers-by, and other steps, are completely out of proportion to the actual impact of the virus. The

discrepancy can only be explained by the hidden agenda of suppressing social unrest.

The transnational sweep of this new, biopolitical state of emergency is a world first. That countries like Hungary, Poland, France, Chile, India, or the Philippines reinforce authoritarian tendencies already in evidence before the virus emergency, should not surprise. But as the *New York Times* reports, in Britain, too, ‘a coronavirus bill that was rushed through Parliament at a breakneck pace affords government ministries the power to detain and isolate people indefinitely, ban public gatherings including protests, and shut down ports and airports, all with little oversight.’

Some of the provisions ... will give the government unchecked control. The legislation gives sweeping powers to border agents and the police, which could lead to indefinite detention and reinforce “hostile environment” policies against immigrants, critics said. “Each clause could have had months of debate, and instead it’s all being debated in a few days,” said Adam Wagner, a lawyer who advises a parliamentary committee on human rights. “Everybody’s been trying just to read it, let alone properly critique it,” he said of the legislation, which runs to 340 pages (Gebrekidan 2020).

Another critic expressed her fear that Britain henceforth will ‘swing from crisis to crisis, health panic to health panic, and then find what we’ve lost’. In France, which for more than a year has seen an unprecedented social movement, the Yellow Vest demonstrations, as well as mass protests against the pension law (which was then rushed through parliament without a vote, using the constitutional provision in article 49 that only a successful motion of censure can force a vote), the lockdown is particularly severe. As president Emmanuel Macron declared on TV, ‘we are at war’—but that was already the case before this trump card was played.

Taken together, the authoritarian response to Covid-19 is in full swing. The lockdown has become an exercise in bolstering the strong state against democracy and individual freedom. The result, not of the virus but of the government clamp-down, is to transform a potentially resisting population into what has been called, ‘a malleable mass, a docile subject, and a yielding terrain of domination’ (cited in Halper 2015: 180). For those governments already facing protests bordering on insurrection, such as Macron’s in France, this is a welcome relief, and the chance to postpone the second round of a

damaging election was not missed.

The Permanent Shadow Government

The key factor in activating the state of emergency, whether legitimated by constitutional crisis or biopolitical reasons, is the readiness of a shadow government, or 'Deep State'. In the West, the United States, with NATO, related intelligence infrastructures, and the world-wide Five Eyes surveillance system, is at the heart of this. It is all in place. 'Trump has vast emergency powers that he could legally deploy right now to try and slow the coronavirus outbreak', *ZeroHedge* notes (Durden 2020). Since Trump was not eager to exercise these powers and states took their own initiatives instead, he once again exposed himself as the security risk.

The COG infrastructure remains at the heart of the emergency powers in case the US government would be disabled. In a recent *Newsweek* article it was revealed that the COG plans are effectively to prepare a military take-over, 'not just to protect Washington but also to prepare for the possibility of some form of martial law' (Arkin 2020). The current 'combatant commander' in charge of COG is Air Force General Terrence J. O'Shaughnessy. He has three contingency plans to implement, code-named Octagon, Freejack and Zodiac. After 9/11 a Continuity of Government Commission was established to delve into these matters, but it turned out there was little interest in the US Congress in who would rule under a true state of emergency.

As commander of US Northern Command (or NORTHCOM), the homeland defence military authority created after 9/11, General O'Shaughnessy received orders from the Pentagon to execute nationwide pandemic plans on 1 February of this year. The Secretary of Defense, Mark T. Esper, signed Warning Orders alerting NORTHCOM and a host of east coast units to 'prepare to deploy' in case of extraordinary operations, which may involve actual warfare on US soil, assistance to civil authorities, or the securing of the Washington DC area in the COG framework. The measures envisaged include provisions for evacuating the president and cabinet members and the shift of the seat of government to Maryland. Except on 9/11, when everything miraculously failed ('many of the procedures written down on paper were either ignored or thrown out the window', Arkin 2020) most of the security measures are routinely applied during presidential inaugural and State of the Union addresses. They are also activated during the annual Capital Shield

exercise, simulating a surprise attack by a nuclear—or biological—device. As always, the mission statement centres on a failure to control civil disturbances.

COG has been renewed under every president. In 2016, his last year in office, it was Obama's turn with the classified Presidential Policy Directive 40. Indeed in January 2017, days before Donald Trump assumed office, Federal Continuity Directive 1 was issued, specifying the conditions under which authority should be passed down to ensure essential functions. Military force can be used to suppress 'insurrection, domestic violence, unlawful combination, or conspiracy', whenever civil authorities cannot or do not want to handle these disturbances properly.

Under Defense department regulations, military commanders are authorized to take action on their own—in extraordinary circumstances—where “duly constituted local authorities are unable to control the situation.” The conditions include “large-scale, unexpected civil disturbances” involving “significant loss of life or wanton destruction of property.” The Joint Chiefs of Staff codified these rules in October 2018, reminding commanders that they could decide, on their own authority, to “engage temporarily” in military control in circumstances “where prior authorization by the President is impossible” or where local authorities “are unable to control the situation.” A new Trump-era Pentagon directive calls it “extreme situations.” In all cases, even where a military commander declares martial law, the directives say that civil rule has to be restored as soon as possible (Arkin 2020).

Importantly, Federal Continuity Directive 1 rules that if the US government fails to provide '*leadership visible to the Nation and the world ... [while] maintaining the trust and confidence of the American people*' (my emphasis), a replacement, or military command, may take over. 'The question is whether a faceless elite could ever provide that confidence, preserving government command but also adding to public panic', Arkin wonders by way of conclusion.

This I would argue is not just a safety valve, it is an explicit provision for a seizure of power by the Deep State through the military. Since we cannot assume it was kept from the incoming president, it also can have been meant as intimidation. Clearly Trump is seen by a powerful transnational coalition of forces as part of the problem. Now that his removal on account of 'Russiagate' (and 'Ukrainegate' next, the immediate reason for his

impeachment) has failed, the coalition ranged against him will not fail to seize on the Covid-19 issue as a means to prevent his re-election. This is what we turn to next.

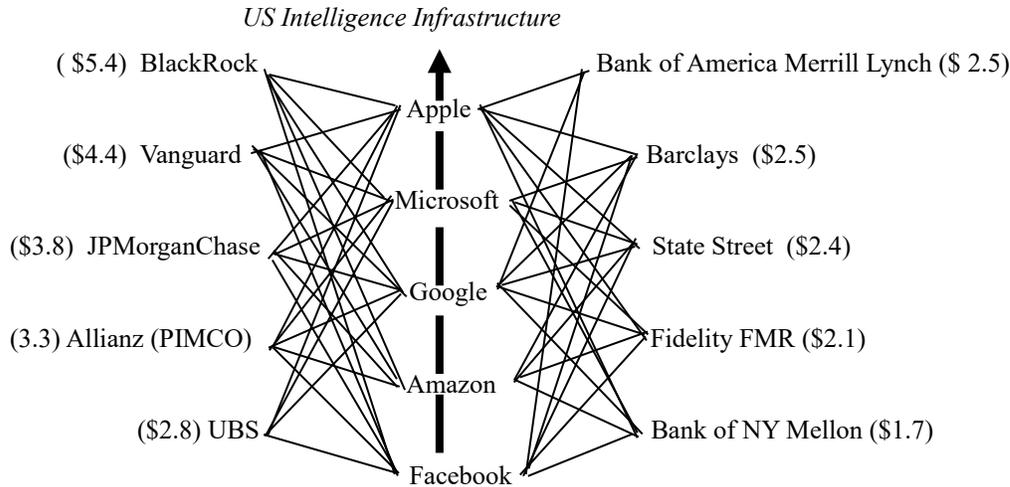
2. The Biopolitical Predicament and the Global Governance Perspective

The state of emergency that is being kept in reserve permanently through the COG system in the United States and which actually was set at hair-trigger level right before Trump's assumption of the presidency, is currently being activated on account of the Covid-19 epidemic. This is not the place to analyse at length the forces ranged against the president, exploiting his erratic behaviour and his lack of a constituency in the established ruling class. It is enough to see that the intelligence services, Wall Street and the large Internet monopolies, along with the Democratic Party establishment and the mainstream media, as well as key forces in NATO Europe, are all lined up against the Trump presidency. The hardening of the Democratic Party stance led, inter alia, to the formation of the Alliance for Securing Democracy, a transatlantic initiative under the umbrella of the German Marshall Fund, led by a former foreign policy advisor to Hillary Clinton side by side with an avowed neo-conservative (Greenwald 2017; ASD 2020).

In 2010 the US Supreme Court in the *Citizens United* case ruled that corporations are entitled to free speech as much as individual citizens. This enabled a quantum leap in election campaign funding in the form of 'Super-PACs' (Political Action Committees). The change brought various billionaires such as the Koch brothers, casino mogul Adelman, and others directly into the political arena, indeed so directly that their personal preferences cancelled each other out and Obama was able to mobilise his own Super-PAC with the help of Bill Gates, the founder of Microsoft. This helped him getting re-elected in 2012 (Mayer 2016: 317-8, 320).

Gates thus positioned himself at the heart of the Democratic Party power bloc. Indeed the Internet monopolies—besides Microsoft, notably, Apple, Google, Facebook, and Amazon (whose owner Jeff Bezos also owns the *Washington Post*), are an important interface between the intelligence services, finance, and the two political parties. The readiness of the IT giants to rush to provide states with surveillance possibilities to monitor possible carriers of the SARS CoV-2 virus (and their other activities of course) is not new. They form part of a single overarching surveillance and power structure with the national security state and the large financial houses, a situation formalised around the

time of the financial collapse of 2007-8. The diagram below depicts the resulting axis of surveillance capital linked to the US national security state. All the top ten finance houses hold large stakes in the big five Internet companies; only UBS has not invested in Amazon and Bank of America/Merrill Lynch has no holdings of Amazon or Microsoft stock. Note that the financial giants include Barclays, Allianz and UBS (and French AXA just outside the top-10), so we are looking at an Atlantic network, not just a US one.



Source: Compiled from Phillips 2018: 37, 39-47. in brackets, assets under management (in trillions),; Google officially listed as ‘Alphabet’.

Since the top ten finance companies are also investors in the three large US military producers, Lockheed Martin, Northrop Grumman, and Boeing (Phillips 2018: 228-9), finance, IT/intel and US/NATO defence-industrial power are densely interconnected at the top. From day 1, Trump found this complex of forces ranged against him, acting through the Democratic Party establishment and the mainstream media. This, then, is the Atlantic ruling class that has occupied the commanding heights practically without interruption in Anglo-America, drawing Western Europe into its orbit after 1944-5 (see my 1984 and Carroll 2010).

Throughout, different class fractions in the Atlantic force-field were able to impose their preferences on the others. Thus under Bush Jr, the Neo-Con ‘Project for a New American Century’ succeeded in swinging the entire Atlantic bloc behind a long-term strategy of fighting Israel’s enemies in the Middle East and North Africa; Obama then changed tack from the ‘War on Terror’ to the new Cold War with Russia (and the ‘Asia

pivot' against China). When Hilary Clinton, the candidate of the mainstream Atlantic ruling class, failed to get elected in 2016, frustration was expressed by the attempt to turn the Russia scare against Trump. Indeed Trump represents a complete break with the mainstream Atlantic ruling class; not a single figure in his foreign policy team is a participant in the Bilderberg and Trilateral Commission networks that were central in the previous three administrations, both Republican and Democrat, or to the equally nodal points of the Aspen Institute or Atlantic Council (De Graaff and Van Apeldoorn 2019: 19-20).

It is my thesis that with Trump's re-election in the balance in November 2020, the anti-Trump forces, apparently disarmed in the wake of the impeachment debacle, have seized on the Covid-19 epidemic for a second chance. In the circumstances Bill Gates, the saviour of Obama in 2012 after Citizens United had turned US elections into straightforward oligarchic competition, was in a position to lead the process of class formation by which a particular fraction of capital guides the regrouping of the capitalist class as a whole behind a new concept of control (Bode 2019). In this case, by directing the Big Pharma/World Health Organisation response to the epidemic and turn his long-standing views on health issues into a salvage operation for the Atlantic ruling class in its entirety (including Macron and his supporters in France and the US, the pro-EU forces in the UK and Italy, and so on).

The Gates Foundation and the Universal Vaccination Project

Ever since the founder of the Rockefeller dynasty in the late 19th century followed the advice of his vicar to move a large part of his wealth out of reach from the taxman and into a charitable foundation, corporate dynasties have exercised their power by having these charities pursue their private visions of society. Unhindered by democratic deliberation or state control, this has allowed the capitalist dynasts to exercise real class power. Health has been a key concern of the \$52 billion Gates Foundation (and of the Rockefeller Foundation for that matter) and Bill Gates has pursued his private views on a grand scale as a result. One of his preoccupations is to raise sanitary and health conditions world-wide to try and stem the growth of the Earth's population by 10 to 15 percent from the expected maximum; another is the propagation of genetically modified seeds, a perspective he shares with Obama (Parry 2020; cf. Louv 2012: 22-4).

The Gates Foundation is one of the largest benefactors of the World Health Organization, allowing these views to gain even more global traction. The WHO was among the functional bodies of the UN system that in the 1980s and 90s came under attack from the Reagan and Thatcher governments; as a result the UN ended up being placed under the tutelage of transnational capital through the so-called *Global Compact*. The WHO was targeted in particular by the large US tobacco companies. With the help of nominally independent academics and journalists publishing ‘expert’ articles, the tobacco interests were able to discredit the WHO as a ‘socialist’ bulwark (Paul 2001: 107-8). Starved of contributions, the WHO was brought into a position of financial dependence on corporate interests and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation was among the sources of funding making up for the shortfall. From 2000 it gave \$ 2.5 billion to the WHO (around 5 percent of its endowment of \$ 52 billion—Frei 2020; figure to 2017).

Now to be able to direct a process of class formation towards a new configuration of forces, it is not enough to have a stake in the world health infrastructure. Gates is a class-conscious advocate of the system as such, viewing his and the Gates Foundation’s mandate as ‘creative capitalism’ or ‘catalytic philanthropy’. The Foundation must leverage ‘all the tools of capitalism to connect the promise of philanthropy with the power of private enterprise’ (cited in Schwab 2020). This might well have served as the motto of the UN Global Compact and it also extends to the WHO. Among beneficiaries of the \$2 billion in tax-deductible charitable donations by the Gates Foundation to private companies are drug giant GlaxoSmithKline and others tasked with developing new drugs, improving sanitation in the developing world, and the like. Besides Glaxo, the Gates Foundation also donates to, *and* owns stock and bonds of, other major pharmaceutical companies such as Merck (the monopoly producer of measles vaccine), as well as Sanofi (France) and Novartis (Switzerland). In addition, the Foundation has given money to pressure groups such as the Drug Information Association (directed by Big Pharma) and the International Life Sciences Institute (funded by Big Agriculture) (Schwab 2020). It also subsidises national health institutes, e.g. the Dutch RIVM.

Because of his close affinity with big pharmaceutical companies, both as a donor and an investor, Gates has effectively stood in the way of making drugs affordable for poor people and supported the company’s intellectual property rights. Yet in public speeches in 2013 and ‘14, Gates boasted of the lives his Foundation was saving—in one speech he said 10 million, in another 6 million—through ‘partnerships with pharmaceutical

companies' (cited in Schwab 2020).

Pandemic preparation is key in Gates' thinking, and for obvious reasons it is steeped in the Western medication philosophy in combination with the interests of Big Pharma: testing, vaccination, treatment. In 2010, a 'Global Vaccine Action Plan' was launched that saw the Gates Foundation team up with the WHO, the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID). Dr. Anthony Fauci, the director of NIAID, was prominent in the Leadership Team of this project alongside Anthony Lake, Executive Director for UNICEF; Margaret Chan, Director General of WHO; Joy Phumaphi, Chair of the International Advisory Committee and Executive Secretary, African Leaders Malaria Alliance; and Tachi Yamada, President of Global Health at the Gates Foundation (*FortRuss* 2020).

In 2015 Gates was again one of the speakers at the Vancouver TED conference, where he spoke about the Ebola crisis in West Africa. He observed that we are not prepared for the next epidemic. 'If anything kills over 10 million people in the next few decades, it's most likely to be a highly infectious virus rather than a war—not missiles, but microbes', he warned (cited in Sault 2020). What was needed according to Gates, is a system to mobilise hundreds of thousands of health workers at short notice, and of course, tests, vaccines, and treatments, the stock in trade of Big Pharma and hospitals.

In 2018, on the occasion of the hundredth anniversary of the Spanish Flu, the World Economic Forum celebrated the coming together of a number of institutions committed to fighting a pandemic it was certain to arrive but which it claimed the world was badly prepared for (not least because of the slashing of public health expenditure under austerity policies propagated by the same WEF, one would think). Yet the WEF statement (*World Economic Forum* n.d.) claimed that 'with increasing trade, travel, population density, human displacement, migration and deforestation ... as well as climate change, a new era in the risk of epidemics has begun'. Luckily pharmaceutical industry was making great strides, as 'revolutionary new biotechnologies promise miraculous advances'. Certainly the risks involved are also momentous, but given that a major flu pandemic alone would cost the world economy half a trillion dollars, it was time to step up preparations irrespective of the cost.

The organisations involved in the 2018 WEF event included (still according to *World Economic Forum* n.d.), besides the Gates Foundation,

- the Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness and Innovations (CEPI);

- Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance;
- the International AIDS Vaccine Initiative;
- the International Federation of Pharmaceutical Manufacturers Associations (IFPMA);
- GlaxoSmithKline;
- Becton, Dickinson and Co. (a health safety equipment and testing firm);
- Henry Schein (a dental equipment firm also active in vaccines);
- Air Asia, and
- IBM.

Besides the medical schools of two universities (Johns Hopkins and Georgetown) and the BBC, another participant was Edelman, the world's largest PR firm. On its website it boasts that it 'introduced the concept of *telling stories through the media* (including the creation of the first media tour) to sell products and build corporate brands, .. With its grounding in consumer marketing, the firm then diversified into health, public affairs, technology and crisis management'. One might reasonably infer that Edelman (and the BBC) were brought on board of the event to assist in the propagation of the preferred response, should a real emergency arise.

Fast-forward to October 2019 and key members of the same group, Johns Hopkins again, the Gates Foundation, and the World Economic Forum held a symposium in New York, *Event 201—A Global Pandemic Exercise*. This was a large-scale simulation, or 'germ-game' (as in war game), Indeed for Gates, preparation for a large epidemic should resemble preparation for war; rapid advances in biotechnology were needed that 'should dramatically change the turnaround time' for vaccines and therapeutics (Sault 2020). The Event 201 'germ game' was based on a fictional scenario in which a coronavirus called CAPS, emanating from Brazilian pigs, infected people globally. The exercise estimated that a year and a half into the pandemic, the number of deaths would run into the tens of millions (Parry 2020).

While many will wonder to what extent the current Covid-19 response is based on these 'germ game' simulation outcomes than on the real threat, we must leave that for virologists and epidemiologists to establish—if they ever can. For once we are in the post-lockdown condition, it can always be claimed that thanks to government intervention the world over, the impact was kept at a minimum. Meanwhile Bill Gates has been expounding on a global vaccination regime that should follow the current epidemic. In an interview with the non-profit TED organisation he also spoke for in Vancouver in

2015, Gates said that ‘he and a large team are moving fast to test anti-virals, vaccines and other therapeutics and to bring them to market as quickly as possible’, with the Wellcome Trust and MasterCard also involved. As Rosemary Frei writes,

It appears that rather than let the population be exposed to the virus and ...develop antibodies that give them natural, long-lasting immunity to COVID-19, Gates and his colleagues far prefer to create a vast, hugely expensive, new system of manufacturing and selling billions of test kits, and in parallel very quickly developing and selling billions of antivirals and vaccines. And then, when the virus comes back again a few months later and most of the population is unexposed and therefore vulnerable, selling billions more test kits and medical interventions (Frei 2020).

At Event 201 a poll was circulated that showed that 65 percent of the US population would volunteer to be inoculated against a coronavirus even if it were still an experimental vaccine. The income generated in this way would of course be astronomical—unless of course, a far cheaper alternative would be available that would spoil the whole enterprise.

Biotechnology Versus Over-the-Counter Medicine

The process of class formation led by the Gates/Event 201 vanguard, with its swelling ranks of Big Pharma companies, venture capital associated with biotechnology start-ups, the national security sector comprising the military and intelligence, and the IT companies developing the surveillance infrastructure for it, still has to deal with forces in the way of the global vaccination/surveillance project, also in the medical sphere itself. They are also competing against established medications against malaria that can reduce the impact of the virus considerably.

The first company in the news for developing a medication for Covid-19 was the multi-billion, California-based biotech firm Gilead Sciences, which also works with the US Army. Its prototype drug (not a vaccine) *remdesivir* is already being administered on a ‘compassionate’ basis, which means that those whose lives are at stake, are given the drug as a last resort (and of course, test for others). Should Covid-19 become a seasonal illness

similar to influenza, then a vaccine would probably be ready for the winter of 2020-'21. Other companies too are rushing to develop a drug against the virus, but Gilead is clearly ahead (Baumann 2020). After the WHO commended the company's experimental drug as the best bet for a treatment, its stock surged, with financial analysts expecting it to bring in a one-time revenue of about \$2.5 billion whilst already adding \$12 billion to the company's market value (*BloombergLaw* 2020).

Gilead is a biotech success story operating at the highest levels of science after it was founded in 1987 by Michael L. Riordan, a young medical doctor and Harvard Business School alumnus at the time. He recruited several Nobel Prize winners as advisers and also brought in key politicians such as aforementioned Donald Rumsfeld and George P. Shultz, Secretary of State under Reagan, as directors. The company had to deal with several lawsuits on account of allegedly delaying the introduction of new antiretroviral drugs to maximise profit on older medication; it has also been criticised for legal practices impeding attempts by countries such as India to develop generic alternatives (*Wikipedia*, 'Gilead Sciences').

Now whilst Gilead and other biotech companies in the billion dollar asset bracket, several of which are associated with the Gates/WHO/Big Pharma complex, are racing to consolidate their position in the market for a Covid-19 drug, in France and in China a ready alternative was identified, hydroxychloroquine (Chloroquine or Plaquenil). Chloroquine is a simple, inexpensive malaria treatment (its introduction dates from 1955) with a good track record in reducing the viral load of corona infections such as SARS, and it looks promising as a treatment for Covid-19 too. 'Chinese scientists published their first trials on more than 100 patients and [in mid-February] announced that the Chinese National Health Commission would recommend Chloroquine in their new guidelines to treat Covid-19' (Depuydt 2020; *Wikipedia*, "Chloroquine").

Clearly this is bad news for the biotech giants and it would seem, they have the silent support of the WHO and several governments. As I suggested above, the world-wide lockdowns at least partly serve the interests of ruling classes faced with growing public dissatisfaction, which will only be compounded by the economic depression that is imminent. Therefore they will not easily give up the hold on public life obtained by reference to the pandemic, just as business will not let go of the opportunity for commercial exploitation.

Anthony Fauci, the NIAID director close to Bill Gates, spoke out against Chloroquine

because obviously this would spoil the prospects for Big Pharma to a considerable extent (*FortRuss* 2020). Indeed as one financial analyst commented, ‘If a Covid-19 Therapy Doesn’t Benefit A Stock, Does It Even Exist?’ (cited in Depuydt 2020). The WHO originally had Chloroquine in second place on its list of drugs to be evaluated for corona virus treatment, but has so far not reacted to the four clinical trials that have been undertaken and have received EU approval. In its praise of China’s and South Korea’s handling of the epidemic, the WHO emphasises their draconian quarantine measures, but no mention is made of the fact that those countries have been using Chloroquine as an efficient Covid-19 treatment (Depuydt 2020). But then the Chinese response was not unified and the Beijing leadership apparently intervened to change the initial strategy.

In France, Professor Didier Raoult, of IHU—Méditerranée Marseille, one of the world’s top five scientists on communicable diseases, has argued against mass quarantine, advocating large-scale testing and treatment instead. His recommendation to use Chloroquine (in combination with zinc and an antibiotic) proved successful but was initially rejected by the government in Paris and by Sanofi-Pasteur, the aforementioned pharma company which is in the race for a Covid-19 treatment and vaccine. In October 2019, before the virus outbreak was public, the French minister of health in fact decided, without explanation, to put Chloroquine on the list of ‘controlled substances’, making the common over-the-counter malaria drug (Plaquenil) into a prescription medication. Only after Raoult’s results received widespread acclaim in France did the government accede to new trials, whilst Sanofi-Pasteur announced it would begin producing enough Chloroquine to treat 300,000 patients. Britain too has shown it wants to have Chloroquine as a fall-back option and in the last week of February put it on the list of drugs that can no longer be exported from the UK (Depuydt 2020).

However, the interests behind commercial exploitation of the corona virus outbreak are enormous. Medicine generally is taking great strides, including a new super-drug for genetic diseases into which biotech firms like Allergan, Cellgene, GlaxoSmithKline, Novartis, and others of the Gates cohort have already invested more than \$1 billion (Sullivan 2020). It is clear that they are not in the mood to be out-competed by a \$5 drug like Chloroquine when it comes to battling the Covid-19 epidemic.

Now how will the population in the countries under lockdown ever accept that public life and large swathes of the economy will go down the drain to allow Bill Gates and his friends in the world health-Big Pharma complex to realise their plans for dealing with

what may well be a very limited and manageable virus epidemic? This takes us to a key aspect of dealing with public protest, the ideological front.

Neutralising the Political Effects of an Impending Economic Collapse

Once a depression sets in, something which is now inevitable, protest will target the oligarchy and the capitalist organisation of the economy. How can this be prevented? This concern is not new. It goes back to the fear among mid- and late 19th-century ruling classes and their organic intellectuals that the rising working class might be swayed by radical leaders. At the time, it was proposed to strip Political Economy, ‘public householding’, originally developed in Britain with Adam Smith and David Ricardo as its main exponents, of the adjective ‘political’ to make it sound more neutral and remove the idea it can be changed by political intervention. Especially after Karl Marx had taken the classical labour theory of value to its logical conclusion (that all profit is traceable to unpaid ‘surplus value’), a rupture with value theory itself was mandatory. Marginalism, the theory extrapolated from the idea that marginal land produces lower yields, offered an alternative concept of value: the last unit of product that still brings profit to the person investing in it (or the last hour worked by a worker), is the value measure for the entire output or effort. What it yields above that (the preceding units) is profit.

One key adherent of marginalism, W. Stanley Jevons (1835-’82; he actually was the one proposing to drop ‘political’ from political economy) in 1879 argued that business cycles were not governed by overproduction or underconsumption, inherent in capitalism, but by *sun spots*. As he put it in 1879, ‘I am perfectly convinced that these decennial crises do depend upon meteorological variations of like period, which again depend, in all probability, upon cosmical variations of which we have evidence in the frequency of sun-spots, auroras, and magnetic perturbations’ (Jevons 1879, abstract). So nothing to be done about.

The abandoning of the labour theory of value for the notion of marginal, subjective value was not just a ploy of class-conscious ideologues. It was also a reflection of the ascendancy of a class of investors no longer involved in actual production, the *rentier* class. They looked at the return on investment in an objectively marginalist fashion, withholding further investment when the rate of return diminished.

During the interval from the 1930s to the 1970s, capital-labour compromise, a social

contract centred on mass production industry, in turn marginalised the financiers, as famously recommended by Keynes. However, they were given free rein again under Reagan and Thatcher. Hence the characteristics of *rentier* dominance returned (Burn 2006). As a result,

- fear of the lower classes;
- the primacy of the financial asset investment element in actual capitalism, and
- the need for a *natural*, politically neutral explanation of economic downturn,

—are all at play in the current collapse again. As one Dutch newspaper headlined, ‘Corona crisis pushes economy into the abyss’; not speculative capitalism, not even a misguided government policy, but a fact of nature.

This was different when the 2008 financial collapse put an end to the successive attempts by Western governments from around 1968 to maintain a (narrowing) social contract and domestic class peace by inflation and/or debt accumulation (Streeck 2013). In 2008 the irresponsible business practices of speculative capital were in full view as the immediate cause of this collapse; it began when the sub-prime mortgage crisis exploded the derivatives markets, in which irredeemable debt was packaged into triple-A-rated ‘financial products’. Yet the political and ideological power of the financial asset investors was not broken and they succeeded in making their respective governments, first of all the US and UK’s, bail them out at public expense. Thus the sector that had precipitated the descent into crisis was put on its feet again. ‘The success of the rescue operations’, François Chesnais writes, ‘has allowed them to preserve their domination’ (Chesnais 2011: 66). In fact, *after* the banks had been saved for the benefit of their owners and shareholders, the provision of free liquidity through Quantitative Easing and near zero interest rates continued, with the same groups the main beneficiaries. This had little or nothing to do with stimulating real investment, production, and jobs. ‘It was about restoring the [financial elite’s] wealth and assets, not just rescuing their banks’ (Rasmus 2016: 264).

With business-as-usual officially sanctioned, it was therefore no secret that a new financial collapse was only a matter of time. Towards the end of 2019, some of the main beneficiaries were evidently voting with their feet, signalling the bull market was about to end. As NBC reported in November,

Chief executives are leaving in record numbers this year, with more than 1,332 stepping aside in the period from January through the end of October, according to new data released on Wednesday. While it's not unusual to see CEOs fleeing in the middle of a recession, it is noteworthy to see such a rash of executive exits amid robust corporate earnings and record stock market highs (Snyder 2020).

As CEOs they knew of course, from data like the graph below showing the overheated US stock market, that the bonanza could not be expected to hold out much longer.



Source: Bourbon Financial Management, July 30th, 2019

The trend of CEOs stepping down continued in January 2020 and now the coronavirus epidemic was probably also a factor. Top executives, leaving to the tune of more than two hundred that month, must have considered that their personal finances were more important than their responsibility for the companies entrusted to them on behalf of the stakeholders (Snyder 2020). This is a reminder that CEOs in contemporary capitalism are financial asset investors first, buying up their own stock to push up its price and raise their company's market value, which usually is also part of their own compensation package (cash plus shares). That the globalised, fragile capitalist world economy subject to volatile finance will also disintegrate, is obviously not their prime concern (Desai 2020).

Now that the lockdowns in most of the West and a number of countries on its fringes

are exterminating large swathes of small and medium business, throwing millions and millions out of work, the oligarchy, with its liquid holdings at the ready, will pound on the loot that is waiting for them. As the *Guardian* reported in March 2020, the number of multimillionaires (\$30 million or more) was growing fast, swelling to more than half a million ‘*despite the global growth slowdown*’. Almost half of them live in the United States (240,575); China is next with 61,578 (although it has more *billionaires* than the US), Germany next with 23,078, then France (18,776), Japan (17,013), the UK (14,367), Italy (10,701), Canada (9,325), Russia (8,924) and Switzerland (8,395) (Neate 2020, emphasis added).

Yet unless the ideological coronavirus spell is broken, a revolt against the super-rich is not to be expected. After the 2008 collapse, a brief period of anger against the banks ensued, until 2010 when the crisis was successfully redefined as a Greek debt crisis (Lynteris 2011). The financial asset investors could still be bailed out at the expense of society at large as people were satisfied that it was all to blame on the ‘lazy Greeks’. This time, ‘nature’ has struck in the form of the coronavirus and no questions will be asked, or at least they will not be answered otherwise than by dismissing them as ‘conspiracy theories’, ‘fake news’, etc. Indeed the financiers are bailing themselves out before the event, whereas all others must fear the worst.

3. Origin of the Virus and the US-China Divide

Let me now turn to the actual virus outbreak and how it followed on the first SARS epidemic. That event led to serious tension between China and the West, which only learned about it after a long delay. This in turn stimulated international collaboration in studying the coronavirus phenomenon.

Viruses are tiny droplets of nucleic acid (DNA or RNA) wrapped in protein. Compared to other coronaviruses such as Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) or Middle East Respiratory Syndrome (MERS), SARS-CoV-2/Covid-19 turned out to be more contagious. However, for respiratory complications to occur, the weakness of patients is the key factor. Advanced age and existing, underlying illnesses are the main factors in explaining the death rate of patients. In relatively hard-hit Italy, half of the dead had three other illnesses, one-quarter two, and the other quarter, one; only 0.8 percent of the dead had been in good health (*Bloomberg* 2020).

The prior coronavirus epidemic, SARS, erupted in Guangdong in November 2002, presumably in a market where live animals were sold freshly slaughtered. At the time the Chinese government took several months before reporting the incidence of the illness to the WHO. In the meantime, a local Guangdong doctor who had travelled to Hong Kong had infected several thousands of others (Elbe 2010: 36-7). The presumed cause of this SARS epidemic was the leap of the virus from bats to market animals, and via them (or directly) to humans, followed by human-to-human infection. The encroachment on forests by human settlement, with arable land or grazing meadows and urbanisation coming behind, the vast herds of domestic animals kept alive only by antibiotics to be slaughtered prematurely as calves, piglets, etc. have created bridges for microbes to leap to humans. Bird flu, inherent in water fowl, jumped to chickens and mutated into H5N1, a virus infecting humans and killing half its hosts, but so far, with only a limited human-to-human infection rate (Shah 2020: 21; Elbe 2010: 49).

This jump was a matter of interest to scientists and its occurrence was expected to become more frequent given the ongoing process of *habitat compression*. As a result of the destruction of wildlife habitats by deforestation, pollution, precipitate climate change, and other forms of destruction of the biosphere, hundreds of types of pathogenic microbes have appeared in regions where they had been unknown before, especially in the most recent decades. HIV, Ebola in West-Africa, or Zika on the American continent are examples. 60 percent of them are of animal origin, of which one-third originate in domestic animals; two-thirds in wild animals. Microbes that are no problem for wild animals have had a greater chance to come in contact with humans (Shah 2020: 1).

Viruses can also cause epidemics more easily because of the time/space compression as a result of air travel in ever-greater numbers. This has created a direct contiguity between disease-prone regions with patchy medical infrastructure and better-equipped, richer areas (Elbe 2010: 31-2, 34). Air pollution aggravates the effects of a respiratory disease caused by a virus infection: if lungs have been subjected to foul air for decades, they will have greater difficulty dealing with pneumonia once a virus has been inhaled. The same for a weakened immune system as a result of substandard food, obesity, and illness/age.

Thus the crisis of the biosphere as a result of the growth of humankind under conditions of industrialisation and urbanisation is the general background of any epidemic. Ebola according to a study of 2017 appeared in West-African regions where

deforestation was rampant and bats, carriers of microbes that humans should not be exposed to, came in close proximity to human habitats. Besides Ebola, Nipah (in Malaysia and Bangla Desh), and Marburg (mainly in East Africa) have made this species-to-species leap. In North America, birds (in rapid decline) are carriers of the Western Nile virus, which via domestic birds can leap to humans by mosquito bites (Shah 2020: 1).

A Laboratory Virus?

Chinese virologists, writing in *Nature*, conclude that ‘despite intense research efforts, how, when and where new diseases appear [is] still a source of considerable uncertainty’ (Fan Wu et al. 2020). The first patient down with what the WHO later labelled Covid-19 was hospitalised in December 2019, probably picked it up at a seafood market in Wuhan, where he worked. ‘The virus was most closely related (89.1% nucleotide similarity) to a group of SARS-like corona viruses (genus Betacoronavirus, subgenus Sarbecovirus) that had previously been found in bats in China’. The subsequent infection of others in the area suggest ‘the ongoing ability of viral spill-over from animals to cause severe disease in humans’. Notably, in addition to fish and shellfish, a variety of live wild animals for sale in the market—including hedgehogs, badgers, snakes and birds (turtledoves)—were available before the outbreak began, as well as animal carcasses and meat (but no bats) (Fan Wu et al. 2020).

Early on there were voices claiming that this was not a natural virus. ‘Researchers throughout the world, including in the US and China, have conducted research involving the creation of ... hybrid corona viruses’ (Makowski 2020). Steven Mosher, president of the Population Research Institute in Front Royal, Virginia, in February was reported as claiming that the new virus accidentally escaped from China’s National Biosafety Laboratory at the Wuhan Institute of Virology, where scientists study bat corona viruses (Makowski 2020). China’s ambassador to Washington, Cui Tiankai, called this theory ‘crazy’ (Swan and Allen-Ebrahimian 2020), but then Luc Montagnier, the French virologist who won the 2008 Nobel Prize for Medicine (with Françoise Barré-Sinoussi) for his discovery of the HIV virus, established that SAR-CoV-2 is spliced with HIV in the quest for an AIDS vaccine at the Wuhan Institute. Indian researchers had already found sequences of the HIV genome in the coronavirus (which can only come about as a result of laboratory work at the molecular level), but were forced to withdraw their paper. In

Montagnier's view, nature itself will eliminate this molecular impurity but in the meantime, the virus will kill many people; China should owe up to its responsibility (Montagnier cited in Durden 2020b).

The objection that laboratories have strict safety protocols, does not hold water because after the first outbreak of SARS, the virus reappeared as a result of poor safety practices in laboratories in Singapore, Taipei and Beijing (Elbe 2010: 41). For this reason the WHO updated SARS surveillance guidelines and China replaced the responsible official (Makowski 2020).

None of the findings of the Chinese researchers cited in fact contradict the Montagnier conclusion per se. The first Wuhan patient's RNA was closely related to a bat SARS-like coronavirus (CoV) isolate that had previously been sampled in China. By tracing the evolutionary relationship between Covid-19 (which they still called WHCV), the researchers came to the conclusion that whilst close to SARS and MERS, recombination had occurred in this group of viruses in the past.

The high similarities of the amino acid sequences and predicted protein structures of the RBD domains of [Covid-19] and SARS-CoV suggest that [Covid-19] may efficiently use human ACE2 [Angiotensin-converting enzyme 2] as a receptor for cellular entry, which could potentially facilitate human-to-human transmission. There was no significant evidence for recombination across the genome as a whole. However, some evidence for past recombination was detected in the *S* gene of WHCV, SARS-CoV and bat SARS-like CoVs (Fan Wu et al., 2020).

A preliminary study on Covid-19 found that the receptor (ACE2), which is identical to the one used by the SARS coronavirus, is more prevalent among East Asians. 'East Asians present a much higher ratio of lung cells that express that receptor than the other ethnicities (Caucasian and African-American) included in the study. However, such findings are preliminary and the sample size too small to draw any definitive conclusions from that preliminary data' (Webb 2020). Also, Western societies (Spain, Italy, the US...) have so far been hit much harder.

The putative recombination events in the evolutionary history of the sarbecoviruses, the whole-genome sequence of [SARS-CoV-2] and four representative coronaviruses—bat SARS-like CoV Rp3, CoVZC45, CoVZXC21 and SARS-CoV Tor2—were analysed

using the Recombination Detection Program v.4 (RDP4). The new corona-virus was most closely related to bat SL-CoVZC45 and bat SL-CoVZXC21. However, whilst recombination events seem relatively common among sarbecoviruses, ‘there is no evidence that recombination has facilitated the emergence of [Covid-19]’ (Fan Wu et al. 2020). Besides SARS, the MERS outbreak in 2012 was also a forerunner of Covid-19. Even so, ‘*the exact origin of human-infected coronaviruses remains unclear*’ (Fan Wu et al. 2020, emphasis added). Not according to one of the most authoritative voices in this area, Professor Montagnier: SARS-CoV-2 was made in and escaped from a laboratory.

Chinese/North American Interest in the Study of Coronaviruses

Right after the original SARS epidemic, researchers from the United States joined forces with Chinese colleagues working in the Wuhan Institute of Virology to study the origin of the virus. Scientists from the US military virology and infectious diseases facility at Fort Detrick in Maryland (which we see below is also the centre of US bio-warfare research) have worked for decades in close partnership with the University of Wuhan’s Institute of Medical Virology, located near the alleged epicentre of the Covid-19 outbreak. In 2018 a study jointly funded by the Chinese government’s Ministry of Science and Technology and USAID and the U.S. National Institute of Health (both institutions with a long history of imbrication with US intelligence and involvement in bio-warfare research) sequenced the complete genomes for two coronavirus strains. It noted that existing MERS vaccines would be ineffective in targeting these viruses, leading them to suggest that one should be developed in advance (Webb 2020; Owens 2019).

The Wuhan Institute actually conducted experiments on bats found in the caves of the southernmost Chinese province of Yunnan, one thousand miles south of Hubei province, supported by a US grant of \$3.7 million (Mulraney and Owen 2020). Another study, focusing on bats in Kazakhstan with coronaviruses, was entirely funded by the Pentagon’s Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) as part of a project investigating coronaviruses similar to MERS. Kazakhstan is dotted with US-funded bio-research laboratories. Duke University in the US, a key partner of DARPA’s Pandemic Prevention Platform (P3) programme, is involved in this project; it also partnered with China’s Wuhan University. Duke was a partner in setting up Duke Kunshan University (DKU) in China as recently as 2018. Wuhan University’s Institute of Medical Virology has even

worked closely with the US Army Medical Research Institute for Infectious Diseases, USAMRIID at Fort Detrick, since the 1980s (Webb 2020).

However, collaboration appeared to be entering choppy waters in the course of 2019. In July, a presumed ‘policy breach’ at the National Microbiology Laboratory (NML) at the University of Manitoba in Winnipeg led to barring a Chinese Canadian virologist, her Chinese husband (a biologist) and a number of students from Canada’s only high-containment disease laboratory (Owens 2019). According to a former NML scientific director, the laboratory was not a likely target for academic or industrial espionage because there is little that is secret and all or most work was published in open literature.

The Chinese-Canadian virologist in question, Dr. Xiangguo Qiu, had been working on a treatment for Ebola virus that was fast-tracked through development during the 2014–16 outbreak and which already earned her several awards. Whether the measure to bar her had anything to do with the deteriorating relations with China because of the kidnapping by Canada of the Huawei CFO, Meng Wanzhou in December 2018, at the behest of the US authorities, could not be confirmed. Undoubtedly though there were forces such as the Security Intelligence Service which had been warning against Chinese industrial espionage for a much longer period already (Owens 2019). It was also found that the NML had shipped Ebola and Henipah viruses to Beijing in March 2019, although the relevant Canadian authorities denied any risks had been taken. Yet the US Center for Disease Control (CDC) classified these viruses as Category A and C bioterrorism agents, respectively, and they can be easily disseminated. As Risk Group 4 pathogens, they can only be handled in a laboratory with the highest level of biosafety controls in place. In addition, the shipment lacked the necessary intellectual property rights certificate confirming Canadian ownership (Lanese 2019).

Although China joined the biological weapons convention in 1984, Dany Shoham, a former Lieutenant Colonel in Israeli military intelligence, a microbiologist and researcher at the Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, has made extensive claims about China’s bio-warfare capacity. Shoham became notorious by claiming, at the time of the passage of the Patriot Act in the wake of the 9/11 attacks, that the anthrax letters sent to US Senators to nudge it along, had been dispatched by Saddam Hussein (they were found later to have come from the US bio-warfare laboratory at Fort Detrick in Maryland). Shoham too emphasises that the viruses shipped to China from NML by Dr. Qiu were dispatched surreptitiously. Further he claims that the Wuhan Institute of Virology is one of four bio-

warfare labs in China and Dr Qiu worked with them to produce a drug against Ebola and other viruses, successfully tested by the Chinese Academy of Military Medical Sciences. Even this manifestly anti-Chinese source concedes that Dr. Qiu collaborated, as part of a study supported by the US Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), with three scientists from Fort Detrick in Maryland, the US centre for bio-warfare (Shoham 2020).

A strange and possibly unrelated incident in this respect occurred when the Harvard nano-scientist, Charles Lieber, was arrested by the FBI in January 2020. In 2013, Lieber signed an agreement between Harvard and Wuhan University of Technology to work on nano-wired lithium ion batteries for electric vehicles, although none of Lieber's 400 or so scientific papers makes any mention of batteries, vehicles or other aspects of that particular application. A few years ago, Lieber's Harvard lab had in fact shifted its focus towards integrating nano-wires with biology. The wires are injected into 'the brains or retina of animals, unfurl and wrap around neurons, and eavesdrop on the electrical communication between cells' (Service 2020). Whether such ground-breaking research was directed from China and enlisted US academics, or the other way around, has not been established.

Clearly the Covid-19 epidemic has erupted at a time of friction in the scientific field, aggravating the tensions between the US and China in the geopolitical and economic domains. At the time of this writing, Gilead Sciences too is in a legal battle with the Wuhan Institute of Virology to secure its exclusive patent on its Covid-19 medicine, remdesivir (*Wikipedia*, 'Gilead Sciences'). Trump's insistence on calling SARS-CoV-2 'the Chinese virus' has gone down badly on the other side of the Pacific. The question, then, is whether the US-China rift, which involves both intellectual property rights issues and espionage, is also related to actual biological warfare research.

4. The Role of US Biological Weapons Research

Biological research involving viruses, bacteria, and other microbes serves many ends, from the quest for vaccines and medication to the development of pathogens to use in combination with explosives, as aerosols, or otherwise transmitted to a military target. As with earlier incidents occurring on the fault lines of geopolitical rivalry, China responded to the accusations that it was to blame for the virus outbreak with a counterclaim, that it was US bio-warfare research that was responsible. Indeed the United States has a vast

infrastructure at home as well as in Eurasia and Africa devoted to military biological research. This is not easily classified as offensive or defensive, since the same research can serve offensive purposes and for protection, e.g. by finding vaccines or treatments. Since the United States in July 2019 closed down its main bio-warfare laboratory at Fort Detrick, Maryland, for breach of safety rules, the Chinese claim was not just a matter of propaganda.

Pathogens for Military Use

The exposure to viruses (which our bodies are replete with) is given by ethnogenesis, the process by which humans were transformed from groups of primates to communities occupying separate social spaces and geographic conditions (climate, topography, exposure to microbes) and considering each other as outsiders (see my 2007: 16-24). Exposure to classes of microbes unknown to a given population might entail mass extermination, as when Iberian explorers encountered Amerindian natives.

Now the experience of meeting ‘outsiders’ often takes the form of what anthropologists call ‘pseudo-speciation’, the tendency to look at different peoples as a different species. In the modern world the Nazis and other racist movements considered others sub-humans in this sense. Such an attitude makes the use of extremely cruel types of weapon acceptable, and just as chemistry placed combat gases in the hands of the belligerents in World War I, advances in molecular biology and medicine also made it possible to consider the use of pathogens for military use. So there are two levels at which racist pseudo-speciation is involved in the development and use of biological weapons: one, the development and use of any such weapons against others because they are enemies, and two, the development and use of particular biological weapons *designed* to target them (as foreigner/enemy/subhuman) alone.

In 1925, the Geneva Protocol banning biological weapons was agreed. Japan signed but did not ratify the Protocol; in World War Two it bombarded Chinese cities with pathogens whilst its scientists experimented with cholera and haemorrhagic fevers on prisoners. Unit 731 of the Japanese Imperial Army collected data by performing deadly experiments on humans and testing ‘plague bombs’ on Chinese cities to see whether they could start disease outbreaks (Parry 2020). Nazi experiments in the extermination camps for people of Jewish descent and other ‘subhumans’ were of the same order.

Since 1942 the US had its own biological warfare laboratory in Fort Detrick in Maryland, where experiments with anthrax, botulism, plague, tularaemia, Q fever, Venezuelan equine encephalitis, and brucellosis were undertaken. Other Allies (Britain and the USSR) also had bio-warfare branches but not as comprehensive (Elbe 2010: 70). After the war the US granted Japanese and Nazi scientists immunity from war crimes prosecution on the condition they hand over their findings. During the Korean War the US military used germ warfare targeting both North Korea and China ‘by dropping diseased insects and voles carrying a variety of pathogens—including bubonic plague and haemorrhagic fever—from planes in the middle of the night,’ writes Whitney Webb (2020). ‘Despite the mountain of evidence and the testimony of US soldiers involved in that program, the US government and military denied the claims and ordered the destruction of relevant documentation.’

The post-war CIA’s Project MKULTRA (experiments with LSD and other substances, on the pretext of the Korean War era story of communist ‘brainwashing’), coordinated with the US Army Biological Warfare Laboratories, according to Stephen Kinzer, author of *Poisoner in Chief: Sidney Gottlieb and the CIA Search for Mind Control*, was ‘Essentially a continuation of work that began in Japanese and Nazi concentration camps. Not only was it roughly based on those experiments, but the CIA actually hired the vivisectionists and the torturers who had worked in Japan and in Nazi concentration camps to come and explain what they had found out so that we could build on their research’ (cited in Parry 2020). Gottlieb, a CIA employee with credentials as a top chemist who joined the agency in 1951 as a poison expert, was involved in MKULTRA. He also worked on poisons to be used against Fidel Castro and Congolese independence leader Patrice Lumumba and worked for defence contractor Lockheed. Frank Olson, one of the bio-warfare scientists and CIA employees in the programme, who died under mysterious circumstances in 1953, may have been a potential government whistleblower on the CIA’s activities and US bio-war crimes (Parry 2020).

In 1969, President Richard Nixon ordered the destruction of all US biological weapons. His Statement on Chemical and Biological Defense Policies and Programs declared that the United States would renounce the use of lethal biological agents and that it would only conduct biological research for protection, such as immunization and safety measures. The ratification of the 1972 Biological Weapons Convention should have terminated the bio-warfare programmes of the main signatories (including the USSR and

Britain) once and for all. The US Army's Biological Warfare Laboratory at Fort Detrick now changed its name to the US Army Medical Research Institute of Infectious Diseases (USAMRIID). 'The CIA merely transferred its bio-war programs to USAMRIID and continued bio-warfare research under the cover of "non-proliferation" enforcement and research,' writes Wayne Madsen (2016). The Agency held on to 'anthrax and shellfish toxins and cultures for tularaemia, brucellosis, Venezuelan equine encephalocitis and smallpox'; in 2001 it was revealed the US had continued to work on bio-weapons (Elbe 2010: 73).

According to questions asked in the House of Representatives in July 2019, in the period between 1950 and 1975 the United States may also have been experimenting with weaponising insects and Lyme disease (Webb 2020). In a letter from CIA director Admiral Stansfield Turner to Senator Daniel Inouye (D-Hawaii) of 2 August, 1977, Turner explained that Fort Detrick was working on projects part of the MKULTRA programme, with bio-warfare coming under the Project MKNAOMI.

MKNAOMI was the code name for a joint Department of Defense/CIA research program lasting from the 1950s through the 1970s. Unclassified information about the MKNAOMI program and the related Special Operations Division is scarce. It is generally reported to be a successor to the MKULTRA project and to have focused on biological projects including biological warfare agents—specifically, to store materials that could either incapacitate or kill a test subject and to develop devices for the diffusion of such materials (*Wikipedia*, 'MKNAOMI')

Besides pathogens targeting humans, the project also involved substances meant to affect animals and crops. Richard Helms, who was director of the CIA from 1966 to 1973, ordered the MKNAOMI files destroyed (Madsen 2016).

Madsen suggests that Gottlieb may have been involved in the emergence of two novel viruses in the 1980s during the CIA's illegal war in Zaire and Angola, Ebola and HIV, but according to *Wikipedia*, Gottlieb resigned from the CIA in 1972 (*Wikipedia*, 'Sidney Gottlieb'; Madsen 2016). Towards the end of the Cold War, the germ warfare stocks assembled by the Apartheid regime in South Africa, developed under 'Project Coast', were transferred to Fort Detrick and USAMRIID. They included West Nile virus and anthrax (Madsen 2016). As Max Parry writes, the documentary *Cold Case*

Hammar skjöld, which won an award at the 2019 Sundance film festival, 'puts forth a chilling theory that a South African white supremacist organization deliberately spread HIV/AIDS among black Africans through vaccines in previous decades.' In 1998 a document surfaced in the Truth and Reconciliation process in post-apartheid South Africa authored by a paramilitary unit called the South African Institute for Maritime Research (SAIMR) with evidence about this programme (Parry 2020).

Under Clinton but unbeknownst to him, the US military worked on a variety of anthrax resistant to vaccine. When the president learned about it he ordered it to be discontinued, but the incoming Bush administration had the project resumed. In July 2001 it also withdrew from negotiations about a verification scheme concerning biological weapons (Elbe 2010: 73-4).

After 9/11 Fort Detrick made headlines when the aforementioned letters containing weaponised anthrax were sent to US media and to two members of Congress including Senate Majority leader Tom Daschle. The Ames type of anthrax made clear this had a domestic origin (Elbe 2010: 77-8); Webster Tarpley considers this dispatch of deadly pathogens to politicians who could have held up the passage of the Patriot Act, as the clearest sign that 9/11 was a seizure of power within the United States (Tarpley 2007: 311ff). The weapons-grade anthrax was found to have originated at USAMRIID and a scientist working there, Dr Bruce Ivins, was identified as a suspect by the FBI in spite of limited evidence. Ivins took his own life in 2008 after learning the FBI was going to charge him with terrorism. Fort Detrick was placed under tighter restrictions and the Bureau declared the case closed, naming Ivins the chief perpetrator (Madsen 2016; Parry 2020, who claims there is evidence suggesting Ivins was framed by the FBI). Here Israel's role has to be taken into account as well: the spurious claim by the aforementioned Israeli military intelligence agent and bio-warfare specialist, Dany Shoham, that the 2001 anthrax letters had been sent by Iraq was obviously part of the propaganda to bolster the plans for invading that country. In fact it was Israel, which according to reports in the late 1990s, had been developing 'a genetic bioweapon that would target Arabs, specifically Iraqis, but leave Israeli Jews unaffected' (Webb 2020; *Wired* 1999).

The continuation of bio-warfare research according to Wayne Madsen may be concluded from a Top Secret/Special Intelligence/Talent-Keyhole Signals Intelligence Directorate newsletter dated November 6, 2003, in which the National Security Agency

(NSA), headquartered at Fort Meade, Maryland, not far from USAMRIID, referred to it (without using the USAMRIID acronym) as the ‘US Army’s bio-weapons research facility’. The newsletter also noted that the facility worked closely with the Defense Intelligence Agency’s Armed Forces Medical Intelligence Center (AFMIC) (Madsen 2016). Of course this was the year when the invasion of Iraq was legitimated among others by the alleged threat of biological warfare on the part of Saddam Hussein.

The *Project for a New American Century* (PNAC), which played an important role in the run-up to the 2000 election of George W. Bush and 9/11 (and has since folded) among its proposals in ‘Rebuilding America’s Defenses’ included the development of ethnically specific bio-weapons, after the example of Israel’s alleged anti-Arab bio-warfare project. Thus it mused that in the future, ‘combat likely will take place in new dimensions: in space, “cyber-space,” and perhaps the world of microbes... advanced forms of biological warfare that can “target” specific genotypes may transform biological warfare from the realm of terror to a politically useful tool’ (cited in Webb 2020).

There are several examples of suspected ethnic targeting. According to Russian military sources, the harvesting of DNA from Russians and Chinese is part of a covert bio-weapon program. The US Air Force has been specifically collecting Russian RNA and synovial tissue samples, raising fears in Moscow of a covert US ethnic bio-weapons programme. Chinese DNA was obtained through a Harvard research project in China, involving 200 000 peasants whose data were obtained without their consent. I already mentioned that a preliminary study found that the receptor enzyme of Covid-19 (and SARS) in lung cells is more prevalent among Asians although this still requires further study (Webb 2020).

Officially of course, there does not exist research and development of ethnic bio-weapons, However, Dilyana Gaytandzhieva found documents that show that the US collects biological material from certain ethnic groups—again, Russians and Chinese. The US has also been collecting cancer patients’ data in China. Still according to Gaytandzhieva, the National Cancer Institute has collected biological samples from 300 subjects from Linxian, Zhengzhou, and Chengdu in China. Another federal project, titled Serum Metabolic biomarkers, a study of Esophageal Squamous Cell Carcinoma in China, includes analysis of 349 serum samples collected from Chinese patients. The US National Cancer Institute has been collecting biological material from patients of the Chinese Cancer Hospital in Beijing as well. Chinese biological material has been

collected under a series of federal projects including saliva and cancer tissue, and so on (details and sources, Gaytandzhieva 2018).

In 2004 the United States championed the adoption of Resolution 1540 by the UN Security Council, tightening the control regime concerning weapons of mass destruction including biological weapons. This aimed at ‘rogue states’ harbouring terrorists—whilst the US itself withdrew from a universal regime for these weapons (Elbe 2010: 81). Indeed in 2010, a report for the US Air Force speculated about the threat of ‘binary biological weapons, designer genes, gene therapy as a weapon, stealth viruses, host-swapping diseases, and designer diseases’, suggesting ongoing interest in these type of weapons (Webb 2020 citing Almosara 2010).

Since the NSA also monitors all communications of the WHO, Doctors Without Borders, and the International Red Cross, it will know of any virulent disease outbreak anywhere without delay. Thus in 2003 the NSA and AFMIC were aware of the SARS epidemic in China, cholera in Liberia, and a series of epidemics in Iraq. The NSA’s Target Office of Primary Interest (TOPI) had health ministries, hospitals, international and local Red Cross and Red Crescent chapters in affected countries under permanent surveillance (Madsen 2016).

The US Army produces and tests bio-agents at a special military facility located at Dugway Proving Ground (West Desert Test Center, Utah), as proven in a 2012 US Army report. The facility is overseen by the Army Test and Evaluation Command. The Life Sciences Division (LSD) at Dugway Proving Ground is tasked with the production of bio-agents. According to the Army report, scientists from this division produce and test aerosolized bio-agents at Lothar Saloman Life Sciences Test Facility (LSTF). The Life Sciences Division consists of an Aerosol Technology branch and a Microbiology Branch. The Aerosol Technology Branch aerosolizes biological agents and stimulants. The Microbiology branch produces toxins, bacteria, viruses and agent-like organisms which are used in chamber and field testing (Gaytandzhieva 2018).

The 2009 H1N1 swine influenza “novel” strain, which became a worldwide pandemic in 2009, was the product of resurrecting the deadly 1918 Spanish flu from DNA extracted from the corpse of a female Inuit teen who died from the disease in 1918 by scientists from the US Armed Forces Institute of Pathology in Rockville, Maryland, not far from Fort Detrick. Although there were the usual denials from the

US government about genetic engineering of various pathogens, on October 16, 2014, the Obama White House announced that it was cutting off funding to risky government experimentation that studied certain infectious agents by making them more dangerous (Madsen 2016).

In fact in 2018, after Trump had taken over, the Pentagon's Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA), began spending millions on research into novel coronaviruses again, specifically those transmitted from bats to humans. At the same time 'these DARPA-backed companies are developing controversial DNA and mRNA vaccines for this particular coronavirus strain, a category of vaccine that has never previously been approved for human use in the United States' (Webb 2020). Below I come back to the military vaccine projects in a separate section.

At least two of DARPA's studies using this controversial technology were classified and 'focused on the potential military application of gene drive technology and use of gene drives in agriculture' (Webb 2020). The co-director of an NGO that obtained FOIA emails documenting this, argued that the dual use nature of altering and eradicating entire populations is as much a threat to peace and food security as it is a threat to ecosystems. 'Militarisation of gene drive funding may even contravene the [convention] against hostile uses of environmental modification technologies.' A participant of one of the projects confirmed that 'the US military's centrality to gene tech funding meant that researchers who depend on grants for their research may reorient their projects to fit the narrow aims of these military agencies'. Between 2008 and 2014, the US government spent about \$ 820 million on synthetic biology, most of it funded through DARPA and military agencies (Neslen 2017).

A private company, Battelle Memorial Institute, also operates at the National Biodefense Analysis and Countermeasures Center (NBACC) at Fort Detrick, under a Department of Homeland Security contract awarded for 2006-'16 and a smaller one for 2015-'26 (details in Gaytandzhieva 2018). The experiments at Fort Detrick include tests of aerosolised toxins, powder dissemination, and testing Meliodosis, a viral disease with the potential of a biological weapon, on primates. At Fort Detrick Battelle already produced other bioterrorism agents at Biosafety Level 4 (the highest).

Insects too have been an area of US military interest. New recombinant DNA technologies have also made it possible to use insects to transmit diseases. Transgenic

manipulation of wasps, bees and mosquitoes could be developed to deliver protein-based biological agents on a large scale (Elbe 2010: 75). The US Army Chemical Research and Development Command, Biological Weapons Branch, studied outdoor mosquito biting activity in a number of field tests at Dugway Proving Ground, Utah, in 1960. USAMRIID still in 1982 experimented with sand flies and mosquitoes could be vectors of Rift Valley Virus, Dengue, Chikungunya and Eastern Equine Encephalitis – viruses, which the US Army researched for their potential as bio-weapons. Gaytandzhieva writes that ‘a US Army report in 1981 compared two scenarios – 16 simultaneous attacks on a city by *A. Aegypti* mosquitoes, infected with Yellow Fever, and Tularemia aerosol attack, and assesses their effectiveness in cost and casualties’. The Zika virus, which causes genetic malformations in newborns and recently emerged in Latin America, was among the diseases carried by *Aedes Aegypti*, also known as yellow fever mosquito. In 2003 during the US invasion of Iraq American soldiers were severely bitten by sand flies and contracted Leishmoniasis which if left untreated the acute form of can be fatal (Gaytandzhieva 2018).

A Military-Pharmaceutical Complex?

Above I referred to the fact that the US military worked on a variety of anthrax resistant to vaccine in the 1990s and 2000s (Elbe 2010: 73-4). This highlights the offensive nature of the military biological research, and this one publicised instance will probably not have been the only one. However, it would be more logical that new pathogens developed by bio-warfare laboratories would be accompanied by dedicated vaccines to prepare for inadvertent spread to one’s own population. The same goes for treatments other than vaccines.

In the case of Covid-19, the US Army Medical Research and Development Command has signed an arrangement with aforementioned Gilead Sciences. Gilead’s *remdesivir* was originally developed to treat Ebola and by chance had some demonstrated success in treating coronavirus infections, including MERS and SARS. It was approved for clinical research into its effectiveness on Covid-19 by the Food and Drug Administration last February and the US Army plans to have it available for its troops once authorised.

Under the agreement between Gilead and US Army Medical Materiel Development

Activity, *remdesivir* will be provided to the Defense Department at no cost.

“Together with our government and industry partners, we are progressing at almost revolutionary rates to deliver effective treatment and prevention products that will protect the citizens of the world and preserve the readiness and lethality of our service members,” Army Brig. Gen. Michael Talley, commanding general of USAMRDC and Fort Detrick, Maryland, said in a statement (cited in Kime 2020).

Clinical trials in China and in the United States were undertaken to bring the medicine, so far supplied to the US Army for free, to the market as fast as possible, although as noted, a legal battle has erupted with China over intellectual property rights.

The Pentagon meanwhile has also responded to other industries, not strictly speaking pharmaceuticals, to work on medication for epidemics. Thus DARPA has invested a large sum in research into vaccines from tobacco plants. Not unexpectedly, the companies involved are subsidiaries of the large tobacco firms—Mediacago Inc. is co-owned by Philip Morris, Kentucky Bio-processing is part of Reynolds, itself owned by British American Tobacco. As Dilyana Gaytandzhieva found, these firms are producing Flu and Ebola vaccines extracted from tobacco plants. The \$ 100 million project, ‘Blue Angel’, was launched in response to the H1N1 pandemic in 2009. By manipulating the tobacco, an antigen is obtained that will activate the human immune system against a virus. That the Pentagon would choose the tobacco giants is partly in response to strenuous lobbying: Medicago spent half a million dollars on lobby efforts targeting the Department of Defense and Congress and this will pay off (for the companies) once successful vaccines have been developed (Gaytandzhieva 2018).

In another project, DARPA’s ‘Pandemic Prevention Platform’ is attempting to cut short research for a treatment for the current Covid-19 virus. A vaccine may take years to produce and then again a certain period to take effect in the body; instead the search is to identify specific monoclonal antibodies that the human body naturally produces against a virus. This might produce a temporary protection, even against Covid-19 if the antibodies are found soon enough (Tucker 2020). Meanwhile the connection between the US military and the forces behind global governance also transpires in the search for vaccines, merging the two forms of sovereignty referred to above into a single complex, with the US at the centre.

The Coalition for Epidemic Preparedness Innovations (CEPI) founded in 2017 by the

governments of Norway and India, the World Economic Forum and the Gates Foundation, is funding two pharmaceutical companies, Inovio Pharmaceuticals and Moderna Inc. and the University of Queensland in Australia to develop a vaccine for Covid-19. As Whitney Webb has reported, Inovio and Moderna have close ties to and/or strategic partnerships with DARPA. They have been developing vaccines involving genetic material and/or gene editing, an area overlapping with bio-warfare research (the University of Queensland also has ties to DARPA, but then in actual armaments hardware—Webb 2020).

DARPA and the aforementioned Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) have been funding Inovio, which specializes in DNA immuno-therapies and DNA vaccines, to develop a vaccine for Ebola. The company also has a DNA vaccine for the Zika virus, but it has not yet been approved for use on humans in the United States. USAMRIID at Fort Detrick is another sponsor of Inovio's work, among others to develop a small portable device for delivering DNA vaccines. With its experience in DNA vaccines for corona virus infection such as MERS, plus the CEPI grant, Inovio may well break through to producing a Covid-19 vaccine although the viruses are possibly too different. The MERS DNA vaccine is currently undergoing testing in the Middle East. Moderna, the other company at the CEPI-DARPA interface, is developing not DNA, but a 'messenger RNA', mRNA, vaccine. However, DNA and mRNA vaccines would involve bringing foreign elements into a human body and will have potentially unexpected effects (Webb 2020).

Both Inovio and Moderna, although funded by the 'globalist' CEPI, are primarily part of the Military-Pharmaceutical Complex.

Inovio's collaboration with the US military in regards to DNA vaccines is nothing new, as their past efforts to develop a DNA vaccine for both Ebola and Marburg virus were also part of ... its "active biodefense program" that has "garnered multiple grants from the Department of Defense, Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA), National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), and other government agencies (Webb 2020).

That the US military is promoting permanent gene modifications as a means of protecting its troops from biological weapons and infectious disease, highlights that research is never defensive or offensive, it is a battlefield provision that allows US

military to prevail in a situation where chemical and biological weapons would be introduced. The US bio-warfare research centres abroad also take part in the effort to develop vaccines for the military. As Dilyana Gaytandzhieva reports, this concerns notably the Lugar Centre in Tbilisi. In 2007, Georgia terminated its compulsory anthrax vaccination programme for livestock; as a result morbidity caused by anthrax increased, peaking in 2013. In the same year, two major US defence research projects started in Georgia. One involved human-based anthrax vaccine tests, begun under NATO auspices; the other a DTRA project titled ‘Epidemiology and Ecology of Tularemia in Georgia’, that lasted until 2016 (Gaytandzhieva 2018).

US Bio-Warfare Research Abroad

The Pentagon sees Russia and China as the two greatest threats to its military pre-eminence and the inclusion of biotechnology in its defence research is clearly directed against them. The international dispersion of US bio-warfare facilities has been analysed exhaustively by Bulgarian journalist Dilyana Gaytandzhieva, already cited several times. Most of this section summarises her work.

Article 8 of the Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) defines biological experiments as war crimes. The US, however, is not a state party to the treaty, and cannot be held accountable. The 1972 UN Convention on the prohibition of Biological Weapons is being violated with impunity as the US Army regularly produces deadly viruses, bacteria and toxins, exposing hundreds of thousands of people to dangerous pathogens and the often incurable diseases they cause. The Pentagon operates bio-warfare laboratories in 25 countries across the world. These laboratories are funded by the Defense Threat Reduction Agency (DTRA) via a Cooperative Biological Engagement Program (CBEP) to the tune of \$2.1 billion and are located in former Soviet Union countries such as Georgia and Ukraine, the Middle East, South East Asia and Africa. The location of bio-warfare laboratories on the frontiers of Russia and China, but also on the northern perimeter of black Africa stands out.

The map below shows the US laboratories abroad.



Source: Gaytanzhieva 2018

Of the former Soviet republics, Georgia is prominent as a testing ground for bioweapons. The Lugar Center, named after US Senator Richard Lugar, 17 kilometres from the US military airbase Vaziani, near the capital Tbilisi, employs biologists from the US Army Medical Research Unit-Georgia (USAMRU-G) and private contractors. The US federal contracts registry consulted by Gaytanzhieva reveals that research included work on biological agents such as anthrax and tularaemia as well as viral diseases (e.g. Crimean-Congo Haemorrhagic Fever, CCHF, a variety of haemorrhagic Dengue fever). In the run-up to the US invasion of Afghanistan CCHF emerged among civilians there (and in Pakistan) (Madsen 2016).

The outsourcing of research to private contractors by the DTRA has the advantage of by-passing Congressional control and removes it from legal constraints. Gaytanzhieva identified three private American companies that work at the US bio-laboratory in the Georgian capital, Tbilisi: CH2M Hill, Battelle and Metabiota. Diplomatic status for all researchers under the 2002 US-Georgia Agreement on defence cooperation also grants them immunity from Georgian law enforcement. In addition to the Pentagon, the private contractors perform research for the CIA and various other US government agencies. CH2M Hill also has DTRA contracts for work in Uganda, Tanzania, Iraq, Afghanistan,

and South East Asia, but the Georgian contract, at half the total, is the largest. In 2014 The Lugar Center in Georgia was equipped with an insect facility, which among other things may have had a connection with the fact that Tbilisi has been infested with biting flies since 2015. Flies similar to those in Georgia have appeared in neighbouring Dagestan (Russia). Also in 2014, under another DTRA project a tropical mosquito *Aedes albopictus* appeared in Georgia as well in the Krasnodar region in Russia and in Turkey (Gaytandzhieva 2018).

Bio-warfare scientists also work for Battelle Memorial Institute, a subcontractor at the Lugar Centre. It has bio laboratories working for the Pentagon and other US government agencies in a number of other countries, and ranks 23 on the Top 100 US government contractors list. It also worked with the CIA, on a project to reconstruct and test Soviet-era anthrax bomblets. Metabiota Inc., finally, also had contracts under the Pentagon's DTRA program in Georgia and Ukraine for scientific and technical consulting. Its work was concentrated in global field-based biological threat research, pathogen discovery, outbreak response and clinical trials. During the Ebola crisis in West Africa it was awarded a large contract for work in Sierra Leone, one of the countries at the centre of the epidemic in 2012-'15.

Besides Georgia, Ukraine, another former Soviet republic bordering on Russia, also hosts US bio-warfare experiments. DTRA has funded eleven bio-laboratories in the country, over which Kiev has no control. In 2005, an agreement between the Pentagon and the Ministry of Health of Ukraine was concluded which prohibits the government in Kiev 'from public disclosure of sensitive information about the US program and Ukraine is obliged to transfer to the US Department of Defense (DoD) dangerous pathogens for biological research. The Pentagon has been granted access to certain state secrets of Ukraine in connection with the projects under their agreement' (Gaytandzhieva 2018). One of the Pentagon laboratories is located in Kharkiv, where in January 2016 at least 20 Ukrainian soldiers of a flu-like virus infection in two days, and 200 more were hospitalized, but Kiev did not report this incident. In March 2016, across Ukraine, 364 deaths were reported, mostly caused by Swine Flu A (H1N1), which according to intelligence from the Donetsk authorities leading the separatist rebellion there, was due to leakage from the US bio lab in Kharkiv. A suspicious spread of Hepatitis A infection in the south-east of Ukraine, where most of the US labs are located, as well as cases of cholera, was reported to have been caused by contaminated drinking water.

Finally, a new, highly virulent variety of the cholera agent *Vibrio cholera*, with a marked genetic similarity to the strains reported in Ukraine, hit Moscow in 2014. According to a Russian Research Anti-Plague Institute study in that year, the strain isolated in Moscow was similar to the bacteria which caused the epidemic in neighbouring Ukraine. Still according to Gaytandzhieva, Southern Research Institute, one of the US contractors working at the bio-laboratories in Ukraine, has projects on cholera, as well as on influenza and zika—all pathogens of military importance to the Pentagon. Southern Research Institute has been a prime subcontractor under the DTRA program in Ukraine since 2008. Southern Research Institute was also a subcontractor on a Pentagon program for anthrax research, at a time when the prime contractor was Advanced Biosystems, led by Ken Alibek (a former Soviet microbiologist and biological warfare expert from Kazakhstan who after the collapse of the USSR moved to the US). There have also been allegations that field tests were performed within Russia itself: ‘In the spring of 2017 local citizens reported on a drone disseminating white powder close to the Russian border with Georgia. Neither the Georgian border police, nor the US personnel operating on the Georgia-Russia border, commented on this information’ (Gaytandzhieva 2018).

Covid-19: An Outcome of US Military Research?

The latest instalment of DARPA-funded bio-warfare research happened to involve bats as transmitters of deadly pathogens for humans. Since 2018 claims have surfaced that this research, which uncannily corresponds to the source of coronaviruses, was ongoing. According to the *Washington Post* the Pentagon’s interest in this line of research was motivated by Russian efforts to weaponise bats. However, as Whitney Webb writes, although the Soviet Union engaged in covert research involving the Marburg virus, this did not involve bats and ended with the collapse of the USSR (Webb 2020).

Bats are allegedly the reservoir of the Ebola virus, MERS and other deadly diseases. Bats have also been blamed for the deadly Ebola outbreak in Africa (2014-’16). However, since no conclusive evidence of exactly how the virus jumped to humans has ever been provided, this confirms the conclusion of Montagnier that we are dealing, in the case of SARS-CoV-2, with an artificial, not a natural virus.

The Pentagon and its bio-warfare laboratories at Fort Detrick and abroad have done

numerous studies under the DTRA programme, CBEP, in a search for deadly pathogens of military importance in bats. MERS too has been experimented with under Pentagon auspices, as well as Influenza and SARS. Confirmation of this practice was Obama's temporary ban on government funding for such 'dual-use' research. The moratorium was lifted in 2017 by the Trump administration and experiments have been resumed.

Enhanced Potential Pandemic Pathogens (PPPs) experiments are legal in the US; they aim to increase the transmissibility and/or virulence of pathogens (Gaytandzhieva 2018).

The Pentagon claim that its research is for defensive uses, a response to mythical Russian efforts, has been a familiar refrain ever since the Cold War arms races. DARPA's most recent programme, the Insect Allies programme, likewise is not a defensive project at all; it is aimed at a 'new class of biological weapon'. This was the conclusion of a group of scientists writing in *Science*, led by Richard Guy Reeves, from the Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Biology in Germany. They warn that using insects as the vehicle for horizontal environmental genetic alteration agents (HEGAAS)—revealed 'an intention to develop a means of delivery of HEGAAS for offensive purposes' (cited in Webb 2020).

It is the same with DARPA's bat research. Whitney Webb lists a number of research projects under this umbrella meant 'to unravel the complex causes of bat-borne viruses that have recently made the jump to humans, causing concern among global health officials'. Other US military-funded studies discovered several strains of novel coronaviruses carried by bats, both within China and on its borders (Webb 2020).

DARPA's Preventing Emerging Pathogenic Threats (PREEMPT) was officially announced in April 2018. It focuses on animal reservoirs of disease, specifically bats.

This is an example of 'gain-of-function' studies, defined as a

type of research ...ostensibly about *trying to stay one step ahead of nature*. By making super-viruses that are more pathogenic and easily transmissible, scientists are able to study the way these viruses may evolve and how genetic changes affect the way a virus interacts with its host. Using this information, the scientists can try to pre-empt the natural emergence of these traits by developing antiviral medications that are capable of staving off a pandemic (cited in Webb 2020, emphasis added).

It needs no great leap of the imagination to understand that the same research allows

weaponising the pathogens discovered. DARPA's PREEMPT programme and the Pentagon's open interest in bats as bioweapons were announced in 2018 and the US military—specifically the Department of Defense's Cooperative Threat Reduction Program—began studying bats and the corona viruses MERS and SARS they carried. (Webb 2020).

It was this research that was interrupted when Fort Detrick, the military's key laboratory involving the study of deadly pathogens, including coronaviruses, Ebola and others, was shut down in July 2019 by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) on grounds of major 'biosafety lapses' (Webb 2020). USAMRIID was forced to halt all research into deadly pathogens at Fort Detrick because it lacked 'sufficient systems to decontaminate wastewater', although in November it was allowed to 'partially resume' research. A USAMRIID spokesperson told a local newspaper that 'no disease-causing materials have been found outside authorized areas at the site' (cited in Williams 2019), but that would not be enough to counter the accusation made later by the Chinese foreign ministry spokesman (Williams 2019). This was not the first time the lab was closed: Fort Detrick's germ warfare research had also been suspended in 2009, the same year as the last pandemic of the H1N1 swine flu outbreak, after the Pentagon found discrepancies in the inventory of its infectious agents (Parry 2020). The most recent closure came after Fort Detrick's sterilisation system had broken down a year earlier.

The *New York Times*, quoting a statement from USAMRIID, reports that the lab received the cease and desist order in part because the CDC found it did not have "sufficient systems in place to decontaminate wastewater" from its highest-security labs. The USAMRIID spokesperson tells the *Times* that the facility's steam sterilization plant was damaged in a flood in May 2018, and that it has since been using a chemical decontamination method (Williams 2019).

Failure to follow local procedures and a lack of periodic recertification training for workers in the bio-containment laboratories, were also cited as cause for closure (Leng Shumei 2020). Perhaps most importantly the wastewater decontamination system of the lab also failed to meet standards set by the Federal Select Agent Program. The USAMRIID spokesperson, Caree Vander Linden, told the local paper that many projects were on hold because of the CDC's order (Williams 2019).

From Fort Detrick to Wuhan: Fatal Trail or Coincidence?

After the Covid-19 outbreak, the July 2019 closure of Fort Detrick was bound to become the focus of attention in discussions as to where the virus, a laboratory-engineered, artificial virus, had actually originated. In August 2019 the first death with characteristic symptoms of Covid-19 had been recorded in the United States, but it was attributed to ‘vaping’ (electronic cigarette smoking) (Roberts 2020). The 2019-’20 flu season in the United States was an unusually severe one: more than 26 million Americans fell ill, 250,000 were hospitalised, and at least 14,000 people died according to CDC estimates, but the ‘deadly respiratory virus ... circulating throughout the United States, [besides the influenza wave]... *was not* [the] *novel coronavirus*’ (Thompson 2020).

The ‘mysterious and life-threatening’ vaping affliction on the other hand was spreading fast during the summer, ‘becoming an epidemic’ according to one physician cited in the *New York Times*. ‘Something is very wrong’ (Kaplan and Richtel 2019). Most patients suffered from difficulty breathing, chest pain, vomiting, and fatigue, all symptoms of Covid-19, but they were mostly adolescents or young adults. In Italy, on the other hand, GPs noticed strange forms of pneumonia among old people as early as November 2019 (Roberts 2020).

A Chinese newspaper in March 2020 also noted the high incidence of flu patients in the US and reported that a petition submitted to the White House website on March 10 demanded of the US government clarity whether the closure of the Fort Detrick facility had anything to do with the virus outbreak.

The petition also noted that many English-language news reports about the closure of Fort Detrick were deleted amid the worsening Covid-19 pandemic, raising suspicions over the lab’s relationship with the novel coronavirus. Petitioners urged the US government to publish the real reason for the lab’s closure and to clarify whether the lab was related to the novel coronavirus and whether there was a virus leak (Leng Shumei 2020).

By then, however, the US and China were in a war of words over the issue.

The World Military Games in Wuhan

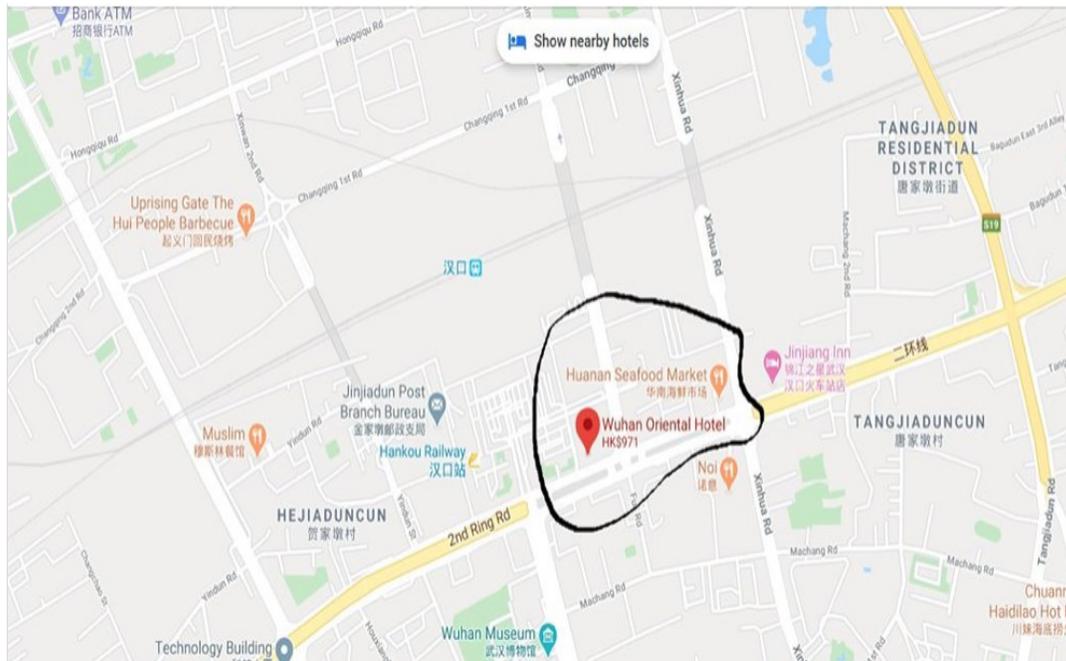
The World Military Games were held in Wuhan from 18 to 27 October 2019. When US officials accused China of being slow to react to the virus and of not being sufficiently transparent, China reacted by raising the possibility that American participation in these games might have something to do with the outbreak. When US National Security Adviser Robert O'Brien said the tardy reaction of China to the emergence of the coronavirus 'had probably cost the world two months when it could have been preparing for the outbreak' (*Straits Times* 2020), China's Foreign Ministry spokesman, Zhao Lijian, distributed an article from *GlobalResearch*, the Center for Research on Globalization website in Canada, which claimed that the US team had brought the virus to China. 'When did patient zero begin in US? How many people are infected? What are the names of the hospitals?' Zhao Lijian asked in his Twitter message. On 27 February, a leading Chinese epidemiologist, Dr Zhong Nanshan, also stated that 'Though the COVID-19 was first discovered in China, it does not mean that it originated from China' (*Xinhua* 2020).

The *New York Times* called the accusation an 'unfounded conspiracy theory' for which there was 'not a shred of evidence' (Myers 2020), but Zhao was not disowned by his superiors and it is not the Chinese state's, and certainly not its Foreign Ministry's habit to speculate. Diplomacy is a conservative branch of government generally, and contender states consider state sovereignty (and non-interference with domestic matters) the cornerstone of foreign policy. This implies extreme caution in breaking diplomatic conventions and certainly, avoiding unfounded accusations potentially causing serious damage in the relations with China's main rival in world affairs, the United States. On the other hand, when China's ambassador to Washington, Cui Tiankai, was asked whether he still stood by his 'crazy' verdict about a laboratory virus after Zhao's intervention, he did so (Swan and Allen-Ebrahimian 2020). Obviously Luc Mantagnier's conclusion that the SARS-CoV-2 virus was an artificial virus must be rated higher than a diplomat's word. But which laboratory was involved?

The following is a summary of online discussions in China and not official statements, so they must be interpreted with caution (Hon Wing 2020, cited by Godfree Roberts 2020).

- The American Military Games team trained in Maryland at a location near Fort Detrick before leaving for Wuhan (see also McClanaghan 2019);

- The 300-strong US contingent stayed at the Wuhan Oriental Hotel, 300 meters from the Huanan Seafood Market where China’s outbreak began (encircled area); (the Wuhan Institute of Virology, the source of the virus according to Montagnier and others, is 20 miles to the south of the market, with a river in between—Mulraney and Owen 2020).



Source: Roberts 2020

- Five of the US troops developed a fever on 25 October and were taken to an infectious-diseases hospital for treatment (according to *Veterans Today*, the US team, coming 35th in the competition, put the ‘finest army in the world’ to shame).
- 42 employees of the Oriental Hotel were diagnosed with what later turned out to be Covid-19, becoming the first cluster in Wuhan. At the time only seven people from the market had been thus diagnosed (and treated before the hotel staff). All seven had contact with the 42 from the hotel. From this source, the virus spread.

Now irrespective of whether these facts are causally related (Fort Detrick closure and waste water problem—the US team’s Maryland training ground—illness of team members and hotel staff in Wuhan—contact with the market vendors), there remains the

alternative explanation of Professor Montagnier and others about the Wuhan Institute.

At any rate it is not to be assumed that the virus infection was intentionally carried to China and Beijing has not made that accusation either. It did demand an explanation from Washington and significantly, still according to Roberts, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in mid-March phoned Yang Jiechi, Chinese State Councillor for Foreign Affairs, asking the Chinese not to publicize what they had found. Normally Pompeo would be dealing with Foreign Minister Wang Yi; Yang is Wang's boss, indicating this was a priority issue for the United States government. Yang's reply: 'We await your solemn explanation, especially about Patient Zero' (cited in Roberts 2020). Also the Tweet of the Foreign Ministry spokesman was not removed.

The Propaganda War

Whenever the interpretation of a major event or incident has reached the stage where an official narrative is available, departing from it will be labelled a 'conspiracy theory'. This dates from the CIA warning to US media to use this phrase to dismiss criticism of the 'lone gunman' thesis in relation to the assassination of President J.F. Kennedy. For academia, the availability of historian Richard Hofstadter's article, 'The Paranoid Style in American Politics', made academics extra wary of investigations of conspiracies for fear of being dubbed paranoiac. Hofstadter based his lecture on the powerful Far Right conspiracy tradition in the US, which had peaked in 1950s McCarthyism, but the thesis owed its resonance to the Kennedy murder (an abridged version appeared in *Harper's Magazine* in 1964) (Hofstadter 2008). Since the 2016 election in the United States, the term 'fake news', allegedly peddled by Russia, has been added to the accusation of conspiracy theory and paranoia. So whom do we believe?

There was no immediate official narrative concerning the Covid-19 outbreak other than that it began in China, but the claim made by the Chinese of a possible involvement of the US team's participation in the Wuhan games worked to close the ranks of the mainstream media and academia in the West. As reported by the *New York Times*, Julian B. Gewirtz, a scholar at the Weatherhead Center for International Affairs at Harvard, did not fail to label the Zhao Lijian tweet a conspiracy theory. 'The conspiracy theories are a new, low front in what they clearly perceive as a global competition over the narrative of this crisis,' Gewirtz said, adding that 'There are a few Chinese officials who appear to

have gone to the Donald J. Trump School of Diplomacy' (cited in Myers 2020). In the same way criticism of the Big Pharma advocacy of Covid-19 vaccines and treatments, is being dismissed as 'conspiracy theory'

An example of a more sophisticated line of countering the Chinese claim is to emphasise the habitat compression aspect (cf. above) and even concede that laboratory accidents happen frequently. Thus *Future Tense*, a website in which Slate.com, the New America Foundation and Arizona State University collaborate, gives both the bat story as a source and concedes leakages from a laboratory happen. It does not even exempt US laboratories in general, but stops there (Evans 2020).

On the other hand, there were also US news media that simply turned around the Chinese claim, viz., that China's own bio-warfare facilities were at the source of the outbreak (as we saw, one virology institute that could be designated as such is in Wuhan). Whitney Webb tracked claims back to dubious sources: the first was *Radio Free Asia*, the US government funded media outlet targeting Asian audiences that used to be run covertly by the CIA and was named by the *New York Times* as a key part in the agency's 'worldwide propaganda network'. Today it is managed by the government-funded Broadcasting Board of Governors (BBG), which answers directly to Secretary of State Mike Pompeo. *Radio Free Asia* had one source, a former Chinese Red Cross functionary who claimed that genetic experiments at the Wuhan facility may have resulted in the creation of this new 'mutant coronavirus'. This was picked up by the ultra-conservative *Washington Times*, which invented a military aspect by its headline, 'Virus-hit Wuhan has two laboratories linked to Chinese bio-warfare program'. The one source for this claim was the aforementioned Israeli biowarfare specialist, Dany Shoham (of 'Iraqi anthrax' fame), who actually was very careful not to make pertinent statements on this issue (Webb 2020).

Meanwhile the prize for the most primitive propaganda should go to *EU vs. Disinfo*, a special bureau of the EU tasked with tracking down 'fake news'. Obviously this institution is under-funded and has to work with less gifted ideologues. Here everything is simple: Russia! Russian 'state-funded *Sputnik News*' began its malicious work on 22 January: 'The narrative was in place from the beginning: the virus is man-made; a weapon created by NATO. With minor variations, we see the same claim repeated *ad nauseam* this week' (*EU vs. Disinfo*. 2020).

The poverty of the EU's contribution to the propaganda war is perhaps best understood

as a sign that the liberal West is losing ground in the relations with the main contender states, Russia and China, even though they are weakened by their conversion to (state) capitalism. The Fukuyama myth of an End of History following the triumph of liberal capitalism in the Cold War, has largely evaporated. Of course a key aspect of that narrative was that the authoritarian contender state representing a real historical alternative had disappeared as well. Now as I argued, the contender state role in controlling society is fundamentally different from the state/society-complex in the liberal West. Historically the contender states have been just strong enough to resist formal or informal colonisation by the West. To do so, they have had to rely more structurally on state direction, with limits on social self-regulation and individual freedom, including intellectual and artistic expression. It may well be that they will now also reinforce their authority again relative to private interests (like the oligarchs in both countries, from Jack Ma to Oleg Deripaska and their friends). In the liberal West, on the other hand, it is the capitalist class that will accelerate the process of concentration and centralisation of capital, large business devouring smaller enterprises.

Yet in the current Covid-19 crisis, states with a strong contender legacy have done much better than the liberal West because the state is already in command, even though they have mutated to capitalism again. Their success cannot be simply dismissed as authoritarianism either, because the element of social protection too has been prominent in their history. The images of Chinese, Russian, and Cuban teams arriving to help hard-hit Italy deal with the epidemic whilst the neoliberal EU has nothing to offer except having ordained the systematic slashing of health expenditure (and a demonstration how to wash your hands), illustrate the point.

* *

Summing up, the Covid-19 crisis is best understood in light of the mounting ideological and political crisis undermining liberal Western hegemony at home and over the rest of the world. Whether the virus escaped from a laboratory in Wuhan or in Fort Detrick, Maryland, is secondary. The main issue is that mass social discontent, both in the form of actual movements challenging neoliberal capitalism such as in France or Chile and in the form of the appearance of uncontrollable populist politicians from outside the historical Atlantic ruling class (Trump, Bolsonaro, Salvini...), was becoming more and more

difficult to contain. The immediate prospect of a severe downturn of the 2008 type only made this more threatening.

So when the Covid-19 outbreak was first recognised in Wuhan and Hubei province, and a severe lockdown succeeded in effectively defeating the illness at (and with the help also of existing medications such as Chloroquine), a fraction of the Atlantic ruling class, already mobilised against Trump, regrouped behind the coalition that had been formed around the Gates Foundation and its allies from the pharmaceutical industry, IT, finance, and the military. Today we are experiencing, in a large part of the world, how the broader social economy is effectively being sacrificed whilst the civil rights of the population are being suspended and normal social intercourse, let alone demonstrations, strikes, or political meetings outlawed.

The consequences of the depression that this will usher in, cannot be foreseen and may in fact turn against those trying to instrumentalise the epidemic for their own purposes. At any rate it makes clear that the social and political system of the original liberal West has run its historic course and after 300 years has dropped all pretence of a social contract other than the state of emergency.

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