

The Incalculable: Thoughts on the Collapse of the Biosecurity Regime

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It makes a world of difference where the novel coronavirus travels. For the first time, I feel as vulnerable as my eighty-eight-year-old mother who is locked down in another part of the world. Neither she nor anyone I know has ever, in living memory, been through a moment like this. Has the world woken up to a new catastrophe, or are we pretending that we do not know what we have always known?

This is a terrible thought, and it haunts me as my city, New York, succumbs to the COVID-19 outbreak. Sirens wail day and night on the streets as doctors and nurses struggle to keep critically ill patients alive while exposing themselves to the deadly pathogen. To the astonishment of the world, American society has not prepared itself for a disaster of this magnitude; and worse, many in Europe and America had initially been led to believe that the novel coronavirus might be one of those isolated, regional affairs, not unlike SARS (2003), MERS (2012), and Ebola (2014) or what gets reported from those remote, disease-prone countries of Asia and Africa.¹ Therefore, US travel

1. In February, just as the ICUs in Wuhan hospitals were being overwhelmed by dying patients, the *Wall Street Journal* published Walter Russell Mead's opinion piece, "China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia," *Wall Street Journal*, 3 Feb. 2020, www.wsj.com/articles/china-is-the-real-sick-man-of-asia-11580773677. The uproar on social media over the paper's callous display of racist disregard for the suffering of nonwhites led the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to expel three *WSJ* journalists from China. Instead of taking urgent action to protect the lives of the American people when time was running out, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo tweeted: "mature, responsible countries understand that a free press reports facts and expresses opinions" (Secretary Pompeo [@SecPompeo]), "The United States Condemns the Move by China," Twitter, 19 Feb. 2020, twitter.com/SecPompeo/status/1230182054383562752).

restrictions on flights from China on 2 February and from Iran on 29 February should have taken care of the matter, but they didn't. Recent genomic analyses suggest that the vast majority of coronavirus cases in New York came from Europe, not from Asia.² Blindsided by its own racism, the political calculus of the US biosecurity regime has misfired. It forgets to reckon with the incalculable.

The moral balance sheet of the ruling caste in America is bankrupt. How would you weigh the losses and gains of human lives on the scale of a global pandemic? You simply can't. People are dying, and tens of millions are suffering and face economic hardships. There are so many questions bearing upon the incalculable—and the possibility of a second or third wave of the pandemic in the coming months or years—that we must heed W. J. T. Mitchell's call to reflect on the moment itself.³ When I say that the incalculable escapes the political calculus, I do not mean to suggest that it falls outside of the calculating machine, but, rather, it penetrates the core of that machine by virtue of being excluded from its terms of reckoning. The incalculable contaminates the political calculus with its own shadow—in the manner of the return of the repressed—which is why we must be careful with our facile metaphors and comparisons. The analogies with the Spanish flu and with other plagues from the past may help us talk about the tragic consequences of a major public-health fallout, but they are misleading if we let them guide our thought on the fallout itself. For such analogies often dissimulate what they simulate and, therefore, can do more to obscure the truth of the moment than clarify it. To return to the question I have raised: Are we pretending that we do not know what we have always known?

Take the most recent US biosecurity exercises—code named *Crimson Contagion*—organized by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and the US Department of Homeland Security (DHS) as well as Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA). This is a series of simulation exercises that ran from January to August 2019, involving Washington

2. See Carl Simmer, "Most New York Coronavirus Cases Came from Europe, Genomes Show," *New York Times*, 8 Apr. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/04/08/science/new-york-coronavirus-cases-europe-genomes.html

3. See W. J. T. Mitchell, "Groundhog Day and the *Epoché*," in "Posts from the Pandemic," an online supplement to *Critical Inquiry* 47 (Winter 2021): S95–99.

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and twelve states including Illinois and New York.⁴ During those exercises, the HHS asked its federal and local partners to imagine a fictional scenario where a global pandemic breaks out in China. What should we do to prevent the deadly respiratory virus from spreading to the US? How would the federal government, state governments, hospitals, and private stakeholders coordinate effective operations? Here is the HHS script as summarized by *New York Times* reporters:

The outbreak of the respiratory virus began in China and was quickly spread around the world by air travelers, who ran high fevers. In the United States, it was first detected in Chicago, and 47 days later, the World Health Organization declared a pandemic. By then it was too late: 110 million Americans were expected to become ill, leading to 7.7 million hospitalized and 586,000 dead.⁵

Call it prescience or extraordinary coincidence. Sometimes, fiction provides the kind of insights that intelligence or the facts on the ground cannot. But in this case, the fictional scenario bears uncanny resemblance to the outbreak of the novel coronavirus that would actually happen in Wuhan within three months of the conclusion of *Crimson Contagion*. Chicago, for instance, participated in the simulation exercises in the summer of 2019, and, according to Allison Arwady, commissioner for the Chicago Department of Public Health, “We actually did a preparedness exercise here in Chicago that, believe it or not, was actually written as an exercise for a new virus emerging from China with the first cases seen here in Chicago.”⁶

By contrast, the government officials in Wuhan, a city regarded as China’s Chicago for its central geographic location and its function as the nation’s transportation hub, wasted the summer of 2019 *doing absolutely nothing* to prepare its eleven million residents for the possibility of a SARS-like respiratory disease. Rumors abound as to how the virus—be it crimson or red contagion—got there in the first place; while we await the pending independent WHO investigation, all we can say at this point is that the people of Wuhan became the first casualty of the pandemic. But here is the rub: Had the officials there adopted the same biosecurity regime as did those in Chicago

4. See David E. Sanger et al., “Before Virus Outbreak, a Cascade of Warnings Went Unheeded,” *New York Times*, 19 Mar. 2020, www.nytimes.com/2020/03/19/us/politics/trump-coronavirus-outbreak.html

5. Ibid.

6. Quoted in “Chicago Officials Held Exercise Last Summer Preparing for New Virus Emerging From China,” *NBC Chicago*, 4 Mar. 2020, www.nbcchicago.com/news/local/chicago-officials-held-exercise-last-summer-preparing-for-new-virus-emerging-in-china/2231187/

or other American cities, would Wuhan have had a better chance of averting the initial catastrophe?⁷ Sadly, the answer is “no,” if we look to New York for inspiration.

Not only was New York involved in the *Crimson Contagion* exercises last year, but it was also the location of a high-level pandemic exercise code-named *Event 201* that took place in October 2019, just four weeks before the actual novel coronavirus outbreak.⁸ Led by the Johns Hopkins Center for Health Security, this tabletop exercise partnered with the World Economic Forum and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to simulate the outbreak of a novel zoonotic coronavirus modeled on SARS. The fictional pathogen, originating from Brazil, is transmittable from bats to pigs to people and then becomes highly transmissible from person to person. One poignant detail predicted by *Event 201* is that the coronavirus spreads more efficiently in the low-income, densely packed neighborhoods, and this is exactly borne out by New York, Detroit, and other American cities where African American and Latinx working-class communities have suffered the highest death rates. The close parallel with *Event 201*'s fictional scenario is so unnerving that it has prompted the Johns Hopkins Center to issue a statement to disavow its uncanny prediction of COVID-19.⁹

This is a shocking revelation. The political calculus of the world's most advanced biosecurity regime has failed miserably. Bear in mind that the US is ranked at the top of the 2019 Global Health Security Index,¹⁰ with the United Kingdom running a close second, in the most recent worldwide survey of 195 countries conducted by the same Johns Hopkins Center and Nuclear Threat Initiative and published four weeks before the actual coronavirus

7. Under unprecedented lockdown measures, Wuhan's pandemic was actually contained by the central government, who swiftly moved in and implemented its military style campaign. According to *South China Morning Post*, the campaign was literally led by the PLA army, navy, and air force medical personnel who swooped down in full protective gear as if they engaged in a large-scale defense exercise against some bioterrorist attack. See Minnie Chan, “How China's Military Took a Frontline Role in the Coronavirus Crisis,” *South China Morning Post*, 17 Mar. 2020, www.scmp.com/news/china/military/article/3075396/how-chinas-military-took-frontline-role-coronavirus-crisis

8. See Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, “The Event 201 Scenario: A Global Pandemic Exercise,” *Center for Health Security*, www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/event201/scenario.html

9. See Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health, “Statement about nCoV and Our Pandemic Exercise,” *Center for Health Security*, www.centerforhealthsecurity.org/news/center-news/2020-01-24-Statement-of-Clarification-Event201.html

10. See “Global Health Security Index: Building Collective Action and Accountability” (Oct. 2019), pp. 1–316, www.ghsindex.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/2019-Global-Health-Security-Index.pdf

outbreak in China.¹¹ With our best-funded research, farsighted preparations, carefully designed simulation exercises, and timely warnings, we are supposed to outperform all other nations in coping with a pandemic. Instead, we are currently ranked highest in the number of deaths and COVID-19 cases as of late May, when I last checked. It is not as if there had been no political will or that the biosecurity regime had not seen action until 2019, leaving the federal and state governments little time to fix the vulnerable links they identified, such as the stockpile of masks and ventilators.

Has knowledge failed to translate into action? This seems unlikely. We will have learned nothing from this fiasco if we think that COVID-19 is just another worldwide public health disaster like the Spanish flu, pretending that we do not know what we have always known since the HIV/AIDS pandemic.¹² The US imperial biosecurity regime, both before and since Trump, has been unusually active in leading the world in preparations, mobilizations, and simulation exercises like *Dark Winter* (2001), *Atlantic Storm* (2005), *Clade X* (2018), *Crimson Contagion*, and *Event 201*, to name just a few. And then, how do we end up in a state of unpreparedness in the midst of advanced preparedness? The biosecurity regime is the key to understanding this, not the pandemic nor the virus itself. Driven by its imperial fantasy of world control, the regime has allowed itself to operate on a logic of racism in its conceptualization and implementation of the political calculus; yet it forgets to reckon with the unintended consequences of its own logic.

It is my hope that a safe and effective vaccine for SARS-CoV-2 (the virus responsible for the disease COVID-19) will become available and get us out of the mess in a year or so. Even so, will the scientists be able to put us back in control of our destiny by bringing uncertainty to tolerable levels as suggested by Lorraine Daston?¹³ I confess that I feel some trepidation: Is there the likelihood of SARS-CoV-3 or SARS-CoV-4 coming in the wake of SARS-CoV-2? *What if* the incalculable—be it the infinitely small or the infinitely gigantic—escapes the political calculus of the imperial biosecurity machine time and again?¹⁴

11. See “Biosecurity: Reducing Biological Risk and Enhancing Global Biosecurity,” *NTI*, www.nti.org/about/biosecurity/

12. There are many academic studies on how this biosecurity regime came into being. See Andrew T. Price-Smith’s *Contagion and Chaos: Disease, Ecology, and National Security in the Era of Globalization* (Cambridge, Mass., 2008).

13. See Lorraine Daston, “Ground-Zero Empiricism,” in “Posts from the Pandemic,” pp. S55–57.

14. The “gigantic” is an allusion to one of Martin Heidegger’s observations that applies to the current situation very well (Martin Heidegger, “The Age of the World Picture,” in *The Question Concerning Technology and Other Essays*, trans. William Lovitt [New York, 1977], p. 135).