

Covid-19 Pandemic : The Virus - Apocalypse Now ?

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Phil Hearse argues that coronavirus is set to become a global catastrophe that will tear society apart and that our rulers are not to be trusted.

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Pentecostal Christians - and probably many others - believe that at 'the end of days', which precedes the Second Coming of Christ, the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse will ride out.

The Four Horsemen are generally interpreted as being pestilence, death, famine, and war. If Pentecostals are thinking logically (as if) they should be expecting to see the Lamb of God some time soon.

In the wake of wars that have killed more than 500,000 since 2001 and an accelerating environmental crisis dramatised by the Australian firestorms, the current Covid-19 outstrips dystopian science fiction stories like [Outbreak](#). What American Marxist author Mike Davis described as '[The Monster at Our Door](#)' has, in a rather different form, burst through the door.

At the time of writing (6 March), more than 100,000 people globally are now thought to have contracted coronavirus, and 3,400 or more have died. There seems little hope now of significant containment, especially as many states lack the health infrastructure or social organisation to impose Chinese-style restrictions. In Britain, the full horror of the virus is yet to be unleashed. But it is coming.

So is a massive international financial crash - it is already underway. It looks every bit as bad as the 2007-8 crash, in a situation where recourse to massive government bailouts will be much more difficult.

The Tories and the NHS

On March 4, Health Minister Matt Hancock revealed the truth about the potential scale of coronavirus in Britain. It will certainly spread widely, and in a worst-case scenario, hundreds of thousands will perish, with one in seven over-80s dying. Hancock refused to deny that, in this eventuality, Hyde Park might be turned into a temporary morgue.

Way before the worst-case outcome, a fifth of the workforce could be off sick, impacting public services, especially the NHS. If schools close, hundreds of thousands of parents will have to take

time off for childcare.

There are two obvious features of the situation which the Left needs to address. The first is that the NHS is fearfully overstretched, with an acute bed shortage in hospitals, overwhelmed GPs, and hospitals officially 99% full – in other words bursting at the seams, with staff unable to care adequately for many patients.

Mainly as a result of Brexit, 40,000 EU nurses have gone home or never came. Anyone who has been in an NHS hospital recently, especially outside London and the South East, knows hospitals do not have the staffing or drug resources to cope. The sight of end-of-life patients being left in agony because there are no staff to administer pain-killing drugs is particularly shocking.

The virus also threatens a catastrophe in care homes for the elderly, who are especially vulnerable. Staff in the care homes will also be particularly at risk. Multiple deaths in care homes could generate panic. The example of the [Life Care Center](#) in Washington State shows how the virus can spread with lethal effect in care homes.

To prepare for even an attempt to meet the scale of this crisis, the Treasury floodgates must be opened to allow local hospitals trusts the finance to build or recommission new wards and boost nursing staff as much as possible. Care homes also need to be boosted, where they face genuine financial difficulties (i.e. not like [Care UK Homes](#), owned by mega-rich Boots).

In his March 3 Channel Four interview, Matt Hancock was blunt : doctors will have to make harsh decisions about who to treat. The second part was left unsaid – who they would have to let die.

Although the government has made noises about helping gig economy workers, the plight of zero-hours and low-paid workers has not been solved. Unless the government moves radically on this, zero-hours workers risk losing all their (precarious) income if they self-isolate. The temptation will be to go to work, even if they are sick.

The demand of the TUC and Unison for sick pay for all zero-hours contract workers should be backed by the whole labour movement. Boris Johnson's decision to allow sick pay from day one for those entitled to statutory sick pay does not do anything for zero-hours workers, who have no such entitlement.

State lies, state cover-ups

At least in Britain the true scale of the pandemic seems to be officially recognised. Some other countries are failing to tell the truth, however – notably Iran and the United States. As Alex C Madrigal [says in The Atlantic magazine](#) :

We know, irrefutably, one thing about the coronavirus in the United States : the number of cases reported in every chart and table is far too low.

The data are untrustworthy because the processes we used to get them were flawed. The Center for Disease Control and Prevention's testing procedures missed the bulk of the cases. They focused exclusively on travellers, rather than testing more broadly, because that seemed like the best way to catch cases entering the country...

There are now at least [130 known coronavirus cases across 13 states](#). Nine people have died – all in Washington State and eight from the same county. Five of the dead had ties to [Life Care Center](#), a

long-term nursing home in a Seattle suburb.

Attempts by Donald Trump to dismiss the coronavirus as insignificant for the United States have proved futile.

State action or inaction has evidently played a significant role in the spread of the virus in several countries. [A health policy expert in Iran](#) told Robin Wright of The New Yorker Magazine that the Iran epidemic was greatly worsened by the refusal of the regime to cancel the 21 February elections and the 11 February celebrations on the anniversary of the Islamic revolution.

Emergency government measures to combat the virus, and the development of a vaccine are the key priorities today. But world solutions are needed, because even if the outbreak dies down in more advanced countries, it is likely to continue to rage in countries with less developed health systems.

If the small number of cases in South Africa spreads, in a country where hundreds of thousands are HIV-positive with rock-bottom immune systems, the impact could be devastating. The Republic's President Cyril Ramaphosa has already warned that we will be a national crisis. If the virus rages in poorer countries, it will rebound back into countries where the virus has died down.

Agribusiness, slum cities, and globalisation

In the longer-term, humanity needs to ask pointed questions about the wave of pandemics that have swept the world in the last 20 years. A key issue is that most major diseases seem to originate with animals - animals we eat or animals that bite us.

This appears true of all flu viruses, HIV, Zika, malaria, SARS, Ebola, etc. Humanity needs to change the way it eats, but also the way it farms. Mike Davis, author of *The Monster at Our Door*, said (in a private email) :

There are two areas where wild mammals have become diet staples and thus transmission belts for novel infections : China and rainforest West Africa. In the Chinese case, the culprit is traditional medicine and its promotion of the magical properties of exotic animals.

The West African case is more complex. There fishing has always been the major protein source for coastal populations, but from 1980s the Gulf of Guinea was invaded by European and Japanese factory fleets, depleting the catch and ruining local fishermen.

At the same time, exploitation of forest resources was increasing and the big foreign-owned logging companies decided to keep labour costs low by hiring hunters to feed the crews. Some 70 or so species, including primates, ultimately found the way to the table. Soon this bush-meat trade expanded to urban populations as a replacement for fish. This is the origin of the Ebola pandemic and other emergent diseases.

Second, mass travel by plane is a key transmitter of disease worldwide. Planes circulate viruses and bacteria more efficiently than any other form of transport. Business travel in particular needs to be massively reduced.

Global travel will spread the virus out from the slums in poorer countries where it is raging. As Mike Davis points out :

The global health situation is reminiscent of Victorian England, particularly the three successive cholera pandemics. Originally, the bourgeois classes disregarded the appalling sanitation conditions in Whitechapel etc, but cholera (which originates to the faecal-rich warm waters of the Bay of Bengal) easily made the leap across the class divide.

As the middle classes faced decimation, the famed sanitary reforms were undertaken to guarantee safe water in all parts of London. Similarly in other European and American cities.

Today we face the same situation on a global scale (here in San Diego, for example, our vulnerability will be equally shaped by health conditions next door in Tijuana), but radical reforms of a scale that could prevent or limit such outbreaks are unimaginable.

Thus an obvious question : are economic globalisation and multi-national production chains biologically unsustainable in the absence of immense improvements in the sanitation and health services of poor countries ? ... even if emergence occurs in a relatively rich city like Wuhan, the global mortality will be determined in the slums.

Almost 70% of the deaths from the Spanish Flu in 1919 occurred in India under conditions of semi-famine created by massive grain exports to the UK and imperial armies. This will probably be the case today, and coronavirus already has a beachhead in Lagos.

Davis goes on to decry the self-absorption of the Left in the United States and the absence of international solidarity (which would require demands for massive aid to countries like South Africa and Nigeria).

It is not just in the United States that international solidarity of the Left has declined. A massive programme to defend the population in rich countries should not obscure the need for international aid.

Phil Hearse

P.-S.

- Time to Mutiny. 6 March 2020 :
<https://www.timetomutiny.org/post/the-virus-apocalypse-now>
- Phil Hearse is a veteran revolutionary active in Mutiny and Socialist Resistance.