

Pandemicism and the Foreknowledge of the Virus Planners



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Dec 13

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When [I write of the pandemic response as a basically undirected social and institutional contagion](#), the same question always comes up: What about Event 201, and the 2017 SPARS exercise, and all those other creepy prophetic pandemic wargames? Don't they indicate some of kind of unified plan? How else to explain the foreknowledge of the planners?

I've given partial replies here and there, but I've never laid out all of my ideas in one place. I think these strange exercises seem much less bizarre when considered against the broader backdrop of the pandemicists and the beliefs they share. You might call their most central article of faith pandemicism, which is the doctrine that pandemics represent a serious threat to human health, and that they can be prevented or substantially ameliorated with the right scientific interventions.

Aspects of pandemicism are as old as 1918, but the proximate origins of this mind virus are much more recent. Tellingly, they don't lie with any kind of pandemic at all, but rather with the WHO campaign to eradicate smallpox. [This started in 1967](#), and it took ten years to complete. Any institutionalised enterprise that persists for a full decade will acquire institutional momentum, such that it can't simply be turned off when the mission is over. Just as the push for trans rights and trans acceptance owes a lot to the institutional forces accumulated by the gay rights movement since the 1970s, pandemicism became the next stage of advocacy for the smallpox eradicators after they had put themselves out of business. All the careers, institutions and grant funding schemes that had been thrown at smallpox needed a second act.

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The smallpox eradicators began their transition to a post-smallpox world by fantasising that the virus they had killed off would someday return. [Donald Henderson, director of the eradicators](#), founded the Johns Hopkins Center for Civilian Biodefense Strategies in 1998, a key pandemicist think tank that was later rechristened as the Center for Health Security, and that went on to hold a series of notorious and well-publicised pandemic war games. The earliest of these – [Dark Winter](#) and [Atlantic Storm](#) – were funded by the US Department of Defence and involved elaborate fictional scenarios of smallpox biowarfare. Later on, with the rise of billionaire philanthropy and the ever waning cultural significance of Variola, the Johns Hopkins pandemicists began peddling horror scenarios of other pandemic pathogens. [Event 201](#) was their first major tabletop exercise featuring a pathogen other than smallpox that entered humans via a natural spillover event.

There are, then, two pandemicist eras – an early period, fuelled by Defence funding and devoted primarily to biowarfare scenarios, with curious parallels to [the 1995 film *Outbreak*](#); and a later period driven by banal third-worldist philanthropy, that is more heavily focused on natural pathogens and [reflected in the film *Contagion*](#). The Hollywood resonances are no

accident; the pandemicists are above all interested in publicity and fundraising, and they try hard to make their mark on popular culture. The earliest wargames were at base morality tales intended to convince the US government to increase its smallpox vaccine stockpiles. The second era of pandemicist thought owes a great deal in turn to the SARS outbreak of 2003. Vaccine development at this stage becomes the central concern, and the pandemicist mission expands with novel projects to predict and preempt the emergence of novel human-infecting viruses. The old roots were still there, [and the Defence Department funds were a major part of this new research.](#)

The primary problem of pandemicism, is that there just aren't very many pandemics, which means that most of the time the pandemicists don't have anything to do. Wargaming attracts publicity and the interest of grantmakers, and it gets scary viruses into headlines in the absence of any reason for them to be there. Pandemicist wargames feature what we should think of as "fundraising viruses." These are either fictional pathogens with very high infection fatality rates (often modelled on SARS), or real viruses like Nipah that are extremely deadly but not very contagious. The pandemicists almost never bother to wargame the most common pandemic virus, namely influenza, because nobody finds it particularly scary. [As founding pandemicist Larry Brilliant said in 2007:](#)

Last year, six hundred thousand people died and we didn't notice. That's a little bit of the reason you find so much hyperbole in the whole question of pandemic flu. Because a lot of public health people are saying, oh goody, we have something that's going to frighten rich people, let's use it as a chance to build up the public health system.

Fundraising viruses are a fictional threat. Any viral pathogen adapted to spread widely via direct person-to-person contact in human hosts [will cause nothing more than influenza-like illness, with mortality well within the familiar range for seasonal respiratory viruses.](#) This important difference, between what grabs attention and what is actually biologically likely to occur, is one reason I think that most scientists, and the pandemicists in particular, ignore the broader behavioural patterns of viruses and the evolutionary pressures to which they're subject. Looking too deeply into these questions threatens to turn up evidence that we don't really need the pandemicists at all.

Formally, it seems that this bland pandemic theatre is supposed to familiarise "stakeholders" and "decision-makers" with the expected mitigationist response. As late as Event 201 in Fall 2019, this response consisted of not doing very much. Before Corona, the pandemicists didn't like the idea of travel restrictions or lockdowns. These might be used to contain very local

outbreaks, but once a virus had achieved pandemic status, closures were considered counterproductive and likely to increase poverty and disease in the developing world. The pandemicists preferred things like travel advisories and fast-tracking vaccine development. The idea of mass containment emerged in the wake of SARS; it was never a part of Western pandemicist doctrine, though brief lockdowns were trialled [in Mexico in 2009 against the nothingburger Swine Flu](#), and [again in 2014 against Ebola](#).¹

As I never tire of typing, what happened in the West was a hybrid response. Via China and pressure from the WHO, mass containment came to be added at the very last minute to the standard mitigationist playbook that the pandemicists had been peddling for a generation. This is why the messaging shifted so suddenly after February 2020. Until that date, we were in the standard world of Event 201, and authorities talked down the risk of the virus in an effort to prepare us all for the inevitable infections and deaths. Mass containment, adopted with the Italian lockdown in March, required a vastly more hysterical and overblown messaging strategy, in an effort to convince all of us to hide at home.

All that wargaming about how we'd stay open didn't matter very much in the end, because well-publicised pandemic wargames aren't actually planning exercises and have very little strategic importance. They're for fundraising and publicity.

Probably the most obtrusive feature of pandemicist material – and the least discussed – is its extremely low quality. This is above all why I have a hard time buying theories that these events reflect any nefarious plan. They are just so, so stupid, it is actually hard to put into words. While earlier wargames were fairly textured and elaborate, there's been a steady decline, worsened by the arrival of Big Philanthropy. I strongly advise that you not waste your life [watching the extremely insipid Event 201 videos](#). Far more digestible is the SPARS pandemic exercise, which is often cited [as another ominously prophetic document](#), particularly for its lengthy discussions of anti-vaxxers and pro-vaccine public health messaging. There are some parallels to recent events, but if you read carefully, you'll see that the whole thing is firmly rooted in vintage 2016 anxieties about social media disinformation. And, again, it's just really, really dumb. Every chapter concludes with tiresome questions for discussion by “public health risk communicators,” whoever they are. It feels like a weird textbook written for virusphobic primary school children in an alternate reality, where the hot new social media platform is called ZapQ and the big antivaxx disinformationist is a “science blogger” named EpiGirl and public health officials recruit a “hip hop icon” named BZee whose fictional tweets get fewer retweets and likes than mine do (see the figures on p. 25).

Nevertheless, the SPARS scenario and others like them have their moments of foreknowledge. I would never exclude malfeasance outright, but the general explanation for this phenomenon is that we get the virus freakouts we plan for. Virus fantasies like Event 201 and SPARS reflect a prior epidemiological interest in specific pathogens, and they serve to focus the attention of the public health brigade further on specific viral species. Monkeypox and the 2009 Swine Flu show that pandemicist attention alone – in the absence of any serious mortality – is enough to generate widespread hysteria. These are prophecies, but they are mostly self-fulfilling ones. That is also why the laboratory origins of SARS-2 are such a big piece of this puzzle.

What's missing from all these planning scenarios – what every last one of them fails to predict – is the steely biomedical dictatorship that emerged to ruin all of our lives in 2020. Nobody in any of these wargames is ever locked up in their homes. Public health officials respond to the off-message EpiGirl with press releases, not threats and deplatforming. There are no green passes. The unvaccinated are never deplored or fired. Part of the reason is that, before 2020, lockdowns had never been part of the plan, and they gave public health bureaucrats a chance at overt and direct repression, which they'd never counted on before. But it's also true that the basic project of pandemicism has authoritarian and repressive elements baked into it, which I think the pandemicists themselves never really noticed. They're just not the most intelligent or introspective people.

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- 1 In the years after SARS, some public health bureaucrats and pandemicists played with ever more restrictionist mitigation regimes, contemplating school closures and work-from-home orders, but their focus remained firmly mitigationist. The purpose was only to slow infections to spare the healthcare system. Mass containment, by contrast, is eradicationist in outlook, aiming not to slow infections but to stop the virus altogether.
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