

Reducing the Demand for Bio-Weapons

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Editorial

Fifteen years ago I published in the *Lancet* appealing for a reduction in the threat of biological weapons by reducing global inequalities [1]. That was before the terrorist attacks on the US on September 11, 2001, before the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and before the emergence of the Islamic state and other organizations such as Boko Haram [2]. It was also before climate change emerged as a definite “threat multiplier” of conflict, famine, mass migration [3] and, by extension, of biological war.

In 2000, global inequality already far exceeded that of any country [4]. Piketty [5] and the Nobel Laureate Stiglitz [6] have marshalled overwhelming evidence that shows that inequality, both globally and within many nations, has increased since then. This is despite the global financial crisis, which confirmed (at least to naïve children) that the economic profession, like Hans Christian Andersen’s emblematic Emperor, is naked, and which could have led to fundamental economic rethinking, but did not.

Global inequality is not approaching a dangerous threshold. It has long exceeded it. Revolution has long been motivated by local resentment and injustice. Today, as global consciousness has expanded, aided by the internet and social media, there are signs of an inchoate revolution on a much larger scale, albeit called non-state terrorism. Although poorly accepted by the majority, dissident opinions have long linked inequality with global and regional terrorism [7], including in South Asia [8].

State violence has in recent decades avoided the deployment – and perhaps the development – of biological weapons, but can we be sure that the dark technologies that facilitate bioweapons will not spread, including to rogue states and non-state actors? Many previous monopolies of information have been broken, not only by hints, but sometimes by whole templates given or sold to the other side, sometime to deliberately try to even the playing field. Examples range from atomic scientist Karl Fuchs to Eric Snowden.

Pinker [9] has argued forcefully and persuasively that many forms of violence have declined. Even if this is still true, given the civil war in Syria and the rise of the Islamic state, the conceptualization of violence used by Pinker is narrow, excluding, for example, assaults against nature, other species, and future generations [10]. Others are less convinced that Pinker’s optimism will be sustained, even for violence as conventionally described. There is growing support for the hypothesis that climate change has exacerbated the brutal civil war in Syria [11,12]. As climate change worsens, more such conflicts appear inevitable.

Donald Henderson, who headed the international effort to eradicate smallpox, has called for a long term solution to bioweapons through education of the public and policy makers by the medical community

about bioterrorism and to also foster a global consensus that condemns its use [13]. But we should aim higher; we should think deeper.

As I wrote in 2000, there are two ways in which powerful nations can respond to the threat of bioweapons and other (currently more feasible) forms of terrorism. Those two ways are by attempting to maintain or increase inequality, or by defusing it; that is, by enunciating and promoting policies that enhance fairness. Neither path is risk free. Reaching out towards enemies rarely wins public support, especially when the public has been conditioned that the other side is less than human. However, following World War II, there was greater public acceptance that the second path would ultimately pay a greater dividend and lead to a safer world [14]. Today, this view seems largely lost, except among the United Nations.

Increasing the global flow of information is one way to reduce inequality, because it can empower education, self-help and allow the poor to make better use of existing technologies (such as weather and climate forecasts). However, many privileged persons rely on information asymmetry; they will perceive their interests to be placed at risk. Freer information might also facilitate the spread of techniques used to manufacture weapons of mass destruction, including of bioweapons. But the genie of resentment is out of the bottle; attempting to suppress information may just drive more inequality and resentment. In any case, international security cannot be left to the market; deliberate policies designed to give real hope to the world’s poor and excluded populations are needed. So too are steps to slow the rate of climate change and other forms of “planetary overload” [15].

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