

A Pathology of the Pandemic

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Introduction

Industrial activity and trade nearly came to a standstill around the country. Traffic vanished from the roads, rails, from the sky and seas. People were confined to their homes for weeks on end with little forewarning. Shaking hands and hugging became taboo; even queues and crowds – so much a part of the Indian way of life – seemed anathema to society's healthy existence. Social gatherings were out of the question.

One standout effect is that the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) sometimes temporarily knocks out the infected individual's senses of smell and taste. Imagine now the pathology of the pandemic worldwide, especially at its crests: how devoid it was of comforting touch and familiar sounds, how eerily debilitating it might have been minus the neuro-cultural wonder that is flavour. Indeed, as the pandemic surged across the world, much of our experience was guided by the one sense that remained.

One of the most important things we didn't see, and still haven't perceived, is where the virus originated. The novel coronavirus underwent a zoonosis before the pandemic: it crossed the species barrier, between an animal living in the wild and humans. Knowing which species this was, and which other species the virus could have infected before, could help researchers understand the virus's evolution and identify attributes that help develop medicines against it, and future pandemics of similar provenance.

However, China – in whose Hubei province the first COVID-19 infections were reported – has consistently refused access to the region's wet markets and other sensitive sites, partly to stay in control of the narrative and partly to avoid feeding conspiracies that China 'manufactured' the virus and let it loose on the western world as a form of biowarfare.

Its government has also insisted that only the WHO will be allowed to investigate the virus's zoonotic origins, after the pandemic has wrapped up. If this is what eventually happens, the investigation is likely to be a dud. It may be too long a time after the purported zoonosis, and may leave the WHO further entangled in allegations that it has cut China too much slack.

The virus as villain

While the virus's exact provenance remains obscured, and conspiracy theories about its "true purpose" hover at the edges of mainstream discourse, the image of the virus was cynically linked to other ideas of the enemy.

This new invader, resembling in many diagrams a weapon out of Star Wars, became a pretext to further demonise minorities, supersede rights and liberties, and consolidate power. The virus was 'deadly', making war or martial law appropriate countermeasures.

How the virus looked – to our eyes, to the mind – was and is important because we need to keep the real enemy in sight, and ignore diversions. As the scientist and illustrator David Goodsell has shown, the novel coronavirus is a benign marvel of evolutionary and cell biology, like countless other microbial life-forms. Instead of a sphere studded with foreboding pins, like some kind of Slipknot mask, the virus was a veritable garden of biochemical activity. It just takes the right eye to see it.

All was not lost, however. There were some silver linings – and one of the brightest was the public demonstration of the usefulness of preprint papers, and open science more broadly. The paradigm of scientists freely sharing their findings – effectively putting public welfare in front of personal gain – scored an early victory when Chinese scientists sequenced the novel coronavirus's genome and made them accessible to scientists around the world for further study by February.

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