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By C. L-Stavrvides

While bird flu panic made a return to the UK mainland last autumn, the promised pandemic failed to materialise. What does continue to evolve, however, are repressive forms of population management sustained by hypothetical threats of megadeath – writes C. L-Stavrvides

Do you remember bird flu? It all seems long past. First there were a few sneezes in the East; then panic swept Europe in the form of wild geese, pheasants and domestic poultry. Wetlands were turned into bio-warfare zones, and eyes were fixed on the skies awaiting The End. So much fear, so much violence, so much state – and yet, the bird flu has been a neglected field of analysis. Perhaps it is the embarrassment of the prophets of doom that has led them to keep silent as their morbid predictions for a global pandemic failed, or perhaps it is simply the lack of exquisite corpses that has prevented the extraction of some credible form of surplus enjoyment. And yet, even as a failure, or precisely because it is structurally doomed always to fail and thus endure as a threat, avian death persists as ‘a shared lie [...] an incomparably more effective bond [...] than the truth’.¹ Thus, today the only available critical analysis of the bird flu is Mike Davis’ book, *The Monster at Our Door*.

Unfortunately, the book is full of commonplaces, repeating without critique the media discourse on ‘the threat of avian influenza – a plague-in-the-making that the WHO fears could kill as many as 100 million people in the next few years’.² Davis presents a narrative that could function as a textbook of asymmetrical threats. The virus is personified and criminalised; it is a thief, a burglar, a hijacker, a pirate, a highwayman, a brigand of genetic material – name it anyway you like, this virus is an entity that violates our most sacred right: property. Of course, our good old bourgeois system has been acutely tuned to that most heinous crime, the problem is that this urthief, this biological substantialisation of theft as-a-thing, has one uniquely lethal property which renders our medico-judicial precautions and restrictions inept – speed: ‘the species-jumpers versions are extraordinary shape-shifters that constantly alter the genomes to foil the powerful immune system of human and mammalian hosts. The pandemic threat stems especially from this capacity for ultra-fast evolutionary adaptation.’³

[IMAGE]

Image: Lee Galpin, *Bird Flu*, detail

What is thus needed in order to counter this deadly effect is, according to Davis, to force the state (and science) to hasten, to awaken, to catch up, so as to fulfil its duty: to provide security against thieves and assassins. But in order to do this, the State must first secure itself by upgrading its containment abilities – or to be more precise, by transforming itself into a mode of containment. The military undertones of this suggestion are evident throughout the book: ‘Let me suggest an analogy: during the Second World War, the Allies and Nazis fought a secret high-stakes war over remote weather stations in Greenland, because knowledge of weather-front conditions in east Greenland anticipated western Europe’s weather by several days; such intelligence was of incalculable value in planning strategic surprises such as D-Day or the Battle of the Bulge. Likewise, the March 2003 Dutch epidemic proved how crucial veterinary surveillance has become for anticipating human outbreaks. To avoid a catastrophic pandemic surprise, it is urgent to know what is happening on farms months, even years,

ahead of any human transmission.’⁴

The question of course is where are these epidemiological Greenland weather front stations to be found? Davis is not reluctant to provide us with the answer. After describing how ‘the 1918 flu pandemic dramatically grew in virulence between its initial spring outbreak and the deadly second wave in early fall, so the key variables must have been crowded, often unsanitary conditions with large concentrations of sick victims able to transmit an evolving virus quickly to distant location’,⁵ Davis compares the trenches of Verdun with another ‘disease factory’, the third world slums: ‘while the combustible role of Asia’s thousands of slums in the development of a future pandemic has been oddly neglected in the research literature, the great concentrations of urban poverty in Dhaka, Kolkata, Mumbai, and Karachi are presumably like so many lakes of gasoline waiting for the spark of H5N1’.⁶ Davis explains: ‘the western front of the world’s first industrialised war recapitulated much of the disease ecology of the classic Victorian slum – the locus classicus of most discourse about infectious disease [...] is there any reason to assume that today’s bustees, colonia, and shanty towns are any less efficient ‘disease factories’ than Victorian slums or crowded 1918 army camps?’.⁷

In her paper, ‘Not What, but Where?’, Mary Sutphen makes the consequences of this discourse quite clear.⁸ She explores the reception of germ theories in late 19th century Hong Kong and Calcutta at the time of the bubonic plague outbreak, arguing that ‘one reason why many in Calcutta and Hong Kong readily accepted germ theories of plague was because the theories did more than simply describe the aetiology of the disease. Instead they confirmed with ‘proof’ which could be seen by looking down the tube of a microscope, long-held views on the aetiology of disease.’⁹ These were centred around space and class: ‘In both cities a faction of physicians and members of the lay public held that the most likely place to find bacilli was in the houses, goods and on the bodies of working-class immigrants, long held to be reservoirs of disease.’ Sutphen makes clear that this class-space aetiological conjunction owed much to miasmatic theories of disease and contagion.¹⁰ In the case of Hong Kong, British colonials first noticed the bubonic plague in March 1894. Dismissing theories of rat-related infestation as folk belief, the colonial authorities targeted the poor as the cause of the pestilence, with a special focus on Taipingshan, ‘the area where many Chinese labourers lived and where Dr. Ayres, the colonial surgeon, had claimed epidemic disease would erupt’.¹¹ Isolation of Chinese migrant labourers was the primary method of containment. The problem was acute, but more of an economic than an epidemiological nature: ‘one colonial official reported that out of a population of about 200,000 Chinese in 1894 in Hong Kong, 80,000 to 90,000 left the island in May and June. According to the governor, the majority of those who left were labourers who worked as rickshaw drivers, on the docks, or in the sugar refinery. They were men who had left their wives and families behind in China and worked for a period in the colony, sending money back to them [...] with the exodus of the Chinese labourers, the colony’s trade, manufacturing and commerce ground to a halt.’¹²

Thus, the policy of containment can be clearly seen as a policy of confining the labour force in its place of production legitimised by the discourse of migrant bodies as miasmatic loci of disease. But the confinement of migrant workers in isolation hospitals or boats was only one half of the colonial plan, to be complemented by a second more violent act of urban planning repression. This included the eradication of the living spaces of the migrant workers themselves. ‘I need hardly tell you,’ commented the governor to the colony’s Legislative Council, ‘that Taipingshan and a great many streets in Taipingshan will probably be razed to the ground and re-erected on proper sanitary grounds’.¹³ The colonial authorities thus proposed and carried out its program burning down 384 houses in Taipingshan, a plan that pleased both ‘those that argued that plague was caused by a specific germ which lurked in Taipingshan and those who held that plague was associated with the filth of the Chinese working-class houses’, thus initiating one of the largest urban planning repression schemes in modern history.¹⁴

The impatient reader will object, yes but aren't all these but some colonial times passed, only vaguely relevant today? The example of Yushu in Qinghai proves otherwise. On 12 July 2005 it was discovered by the Chinese party state that in the farming community of Yushu in Qinghai Province a large number of people had developed acute pneumonia symptoms. The authorities moved into the area and isolated the patients, while forcibly inspecting the surrounding areas. Dr Henry Niman reports that, 'on the 18th July, the decision was made to quarantine the area. This was aimed at preventing/restricting the movement of people in and out of the area'.¹⁵ These measures however 'led the residents to "lose control of themselves" and revolt against the authorities, leading to many casualties. To prevent a chain reaction linked to the Tibetan question [...] on the 20th the PLA sent in huge numbers of reinforcements to quell the uprising. At the moment, the extent of the disturbances there is unclear as the area still remains under martial law.'

When martial law was lifted 8 days later, 'natives living further from the area made a trip to the farming community, they discovered that it had 'vanished' together with 3 of its surrounding villages. Only some ruins, blocks from collapsed walls, remained. Apparently, the farms and villages had been flattened and there were signs that they had been razed. It is believed that some inhabitants from those 3 villages were workers in the farm. Around 200 people were estimated to have inhabited or worked in those 3 villages and the farm. Their whereabouts are, as yet, unknown.'

This was a far from isolated incident, not exotic even in the context of China. For as Li Zhang's ethnography makes clear, the policy of containment of the migrant population and the demolition of its living spaces features centrally in the official policy of the CCP. In *Strangers in the City*, 2001, Li Zhang tells the story of the largest slum in the history of modern Beijing, Zhejiangcun, home to hundreds of thousands of migrants, which the authorities demolished in late 1995 supposedly in order to restore order and prevent the spread of disease.¹⁶ Li Zhang explains that the Chinese characterisation of the migrant workers as a floating (*liudong*) population, has two different meanings: 'one is to be lively and unencumbered; the other is to be rootless, unstable, and dangerous. This double meaning opens the image of floaters to multiple interpretations. The dominant discourse tends to invoke and overamplify the negative meanings by emphasising their relationship with related residual terms such as *liumin* (vagrants, homeless people), *liukou* (roving bandits), *liumang* (hooligans), *liucuan* (to flee), *liudu* (pernicious influence), *liuwang* or *liufang* (exiles), and *mangliu* (an unregulated flow of people), which is a transposition of the sounds in the derogatory term *liumang* (hooligans).

[IMAGE]

Image: Lee Galpin, *Bird Flu*, detail

Chinese official ideology, Li Zhang claims, is saturated by 'the metaphysics of sedentarism'. This is based upon 'the idealized images of spatially bound social life constructed by Confucius and Taoist texts [which] are often invoked today as a desirable moral way of life' closely related to property, which the migrants, just like the bird flu virus, are presented as lacking or being prone to steal. Employing this discourse the Chinese State criminalised and pathologised the migrants of Zhejiangcun, facilitating their expulsion and the demolition of the area that harboured them. Since then, the policy of the CCP has been to hit hard against the development of slums and to require migrant workers to be preemptively contained within living compounds provided by their employers or industry.

What is thus being problematised here by the medico-military governmentality of the Chinese State, is not so much the migrant workers as a population but as a movement. Similarly it is not the living space of these migrants as *topos* that concerns the State, but as a transit point. Consequently, it is not surprising that in the discourse on avian flu the chief culprit, the messenger of death, has been none

other than migratory birds. By attacking this movement of species across the skies, the biopolitical security complex has in effect tried to state that all unregulated movement is not only criminal, but effectively lethal. This mortification of unregulated movement is of course related to the targeting of two spaces where regulation can be actually achieved: the stations and destinations of migration. In the case of birds, this corresponds to the migration stations between North and South, and the final destination of their big seasonal flight. In the case of workers, it corresponds to state or province borders and other passage points, as well as to the slums where the dispossessed seek their means of survival in a hostile environment.

We can thus conclude that for the CCP, the causal agent of pestilence and collective mortality is migration as a form of subjectivation, not the migrants as a substantial subject: it is the becoming-dirty and becoming-dangerous by means of moving around in space seeking labour, rather than the fact of labour itself. In this way, the CCP can retain its 'socialist' image by not targeting labour per se, while imposing a state of exception on the agents of labour, thus interrupting, mediating and regulating the passage of migrant labour, and confining this labour force in selected and if possible isolated loci near the preferred units of production. This strategy requires both pure violence (such as the razing of unruly slums) and the creation of a regime of fear amongst the non-migrant population – an affective community chez Virilio – based on an imaginary construction of asymmetrical threats.¹⁷ Through these two interlinked biopolitical strategies, both capital and state can secure the reproduction of labour power and guard against any self-organising commotion in its ranks.

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Footnotes

1 Slavoj Žižek, *The Metastases of Enjoyment*, London: Verso, 1994.

2 Mike Davis, *The Monster at Our Door; The Global Threat of Avian Flu*, New York: The New Press, 2006, p.4.

3 Ibid p.10.

4 Ibid p.89.

5 Ibid, p.152.

6 Ibid, p.153.

7 Ibid.

8 Mary P. Sutphen, 'Not What but Where? Bubonic Plague and the Reception of Germ Theories in Hong Kong and Calcutta, 1894-1897', *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, no. 52, 1997, pp.81-113.

9 Ibid, p.83-84.

10 Ibid, p.84.

11 Ibid, p.89.

12 Ibid, p.93.

13 Ibid, p.89.

14 Ibid, p.101.

15 All quotes from Henry Niman, 'Avian Flu Pandemic: Chinese Government's Answer "Make Villages Disappear!"', 2005, <http://globalsearch.ca/index.php?context=viewArticle&code=Nim20050804&articleId=800>, see also Henry Niman, 'Chinese Government's Answer To Containing H5N1 & Recombinants - Make Villages Disappear!', 2005, <http://www.rense.com/general67/recomb.htm> <http://www.rense.com/general67/recomb.htm>

16 Li Zhang, *Strangers in the City; Reconfiguration of Space, Power, and Social Networks within China's Floating Population*, Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2001.

17 Paul Virilio, 'Fear and Cold Panic Lead to Collective Inertia', *Eleftherotypia*, 17 January 2006, Athens.