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CICERO FOUNDATION COMMENTARY

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**THE VIRUS DOES NOT CARE
WHAT YOU THINK**

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The Virus Does Not Care What You Think

Tim Aistroke

The virus is a bio-weapon, developed and released by China or Russia or the US; Pharmaceutical companies in possession of patents for anti-viral drugs are behind the pandemic; no, it's a coverup to distract from deaths caused by the roll out of Huawei 5G networks; no, it's a hoax, cooked up by progressives to ruin the Trump Presidency or as a pretext for the introduction of a police state. Global crises have always been lightning rods for conspiracy narratives and this is especially so now, with the rise of post-truth politics and strident populism at both ends of the political spectrum. Yet the pandemic currently sweeping the world presents uniquely high stakes. Policies like social distancing and stay at home orders rely on public trust in scientific expertise and government, while the prevention of future epidemics rests on an accurate understanding of how this one came about. Meanwhile, the blame game risks heightening international tensions in an already volatile circumstance.

So what solutions are available?

It depends on the account of conspiracy thinking we adopt. The most common perspective is rooted in the liberal tradition and an understanding of populism as a threat to normal politics, characterised by a rational process of bargain and compromise. Here the propensity to suspect nefarious conspiracies begins on the fringes, fuelled by status anxiety and resentment, but can spread to the mainstream in times of socio-economic upheaval, often aided by a demagogic leader. In this tradition, responses are usually framed in terms of the reassertion of reasonable discourse. This might entail, for instance, fact-based engagement with people thought vulnerable to misinformation or removing problematic material on prominent media platforms.

A second tradition positions conspiracy thinking as a crude if understandable form of critique, which may nevertheless highlight important problems with the systemic status quo. This account is informed by an understanding of populism that emphasises its progressive impetus and the way it acts as a check on fundamental institutions and elite power. Where there are clear disjunctions between purported ideals and socio-political reality, conspiracy narratives often emerge and resonate. They can help explain, for instance, structural inequalities around class, race and gender, which seem to silently co-ordinate discriminatory regimes from micro-behavioural norms through to high-level institutional exclusion. In this tradition, the appropriate response to conspiracy thinking is good government, including closer fidelity between ideals and practice, and political responsiveness to the critical essence of protest movements.

Of course, none of these approaches have proven decisive and their limitations are particularly evident in the current circumstances. On the one hand, we need only reflect on the speed at which expert advice from epidemiologists and virologists has been politicised to see how fraught 'fact based engagement' can be. In the US and elsewhere this situation is doubly hard because key political leaders actively dispute expertise and promulgate flawed information. On the other hand, responding to perceived shortcomings of government or the status quo is a long run enterprise unlikely to make a difference while the virus rages.

More broadly, the focus on individual interpretation misses the extent to which dubious content spreading through social media is seeded by state and non-state actors as part of well-articulated information operations. For instance, evidence is now emerging of Chinese state-led efforts to shape perceptions around Covid-19, including muddying the waters on the origins of the virus and promoting a range of alternative narratives. The other side of such strategies involves the delegitimization of opposing views, including by labelling them paranoid or conspiratorial, which further undermines political discourse. Once again, though, addressing these issues is difficult, especially in the context of a fast moving calamity where resources are stretched and the focus is on saving lives.

There is one razor that may cut through all the contending perspectives.

The virus itself presents a stark material reality that ultimately cannot be argued away. It is a brute fact, barrelling forward irrespective of our opinions. Expert predictions, policy planning and speculation of all stripes will sooner or later confront a future that puts them to the test. More than any time in recent memory, entire political communities will experience a common calamity that cannot be shouted down. Indeed, the more traction misinformation about Covid-19 gains, the harder the reckoning will be when it comes. It may also be true that the more traction robust policy gains, the more room available for outlying voices to cast doubt on the reality of the worst case scenario. But the majority of people will see the worst case playing out elsewhere and draw the contrast.

In the course of the pandemic and in its aftermath, one possibility is that legitimacy accrues to those people and institutions that were reliable and effective, whose words and deeds corresponded most closely with the character of the epidemic. They would speak thereafter with deep credibility, underwritten by an undeniable common experience that nullifies politicized gainsaying. This trajectory is suggested by the way medicos, essential services, and health care systems have been venerated in many contexts, and the praise heaped on political leaders like Jacinda Ardern and Angela Merkel for their decisive crisis management. In this possible future, credibility would also leak away from those people and institutions refuted by the epidemic's catastrophic proportions and the ensuing tragedy. This line of thinking parallels a broader point concerning what the virus has revealed about the societies it afflicts – the things that are truly essential, alongside many inequalities, vulnerabilities and dysfunctions. So can our political discourse be renewed and our societies reformed? Or will things return to the way they were before? One need not be a pessimist to discern a worrying slide towards business as usual, as the US and China jockey for control over the Covid-19 narrative and corporate pundits contemplate morbid trade-offs.

Only time will tell.

Dr. Tim Aistrophe is the author of *Conspiracy Theory and American Foreign Policy*, published by Manchester University Press. <https://manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/9781526139382/>

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