Political Compassions under Pandemic Spectacles

Once again, nature has presented us with a daunting challenge: the possibility of an influenza pandemic. . . . Together we will confront this emerging threat and together, as Americans, we will be prepared to protect our families, our communities, this great nation, and our world.

*President George W. Bush, November 2005*

World-order compassions that take place under pandemic threats provide an additional way to understand the various implications of the vorticity model. Similar to the increasing worry over global warming, (re)emerging pandemic threats lead to communal sentiments, which perceive in them a common enemy to the human polity as well as a hierarchical vision of that polity. Pandemics also directly bind individual bodies with the hegemonic body, thereby leading to what may be considered politico-somatic links. I will review here how the changing global hierarchy—the post-9/11 wars in Afghanistan and, more particularly, in Iraq—were reflected in the politico-somatics of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) and avian influenza. In order to realize the admittedly ambitious aims of this chapter, I will contextualize the present pandemic sentiments in a long history of encounters with lethal epidemic diseases. The main idea is that “dis-ease” at the level of the individual somatic body may be seen as a part of a larger movement in the global political hierarchy.

This chapter reviews different historically and culturally conditioned roles and positions available to actors in pandemic dramas. Although it concentrates on the contemporary pandemic scene, the aim is to examine also precursor epidemic scares such as bovine spongiform encephalopathy (BSE, or mad cow disease), tuberculosis and Spanish flu, going back all the way to the plague. The politics of pandemics can be better appreciated though the
concepts of legitimacy and pedagogy plays that have been developed in the last two chapters. International actors use pandemics to further their own visions of world order. This means that pandemics are turned into demonstrations, theaters of proof of the value of the hegemonic order. Lethal epidemic diseases occur all the time without pushing their way up into global awareness—for example, HIV/AIDS and malaria. At the same time, the alarm and panic over these short-term human and animal epidemics have often reached spectacular proportions even though the actual human health consequences have been less than dramatic. The aim is to review specific cases to determine what situations in international politics are predisposed to the politicization of diseases and what types of diseases are especially prone to this.

Contemporary Visions

In his *New York Times* book review published on November 27, 2005, Matt Steinglass examines Mike Davis’s book, *The Monster at Our Door: The Global Threat of Avian Flu*. The debate that ensues highlights the discourse dynamics of recent epidemic scares. Mike Davis’s argument is that humanity is going to face a catastrophic encounter with a pandemic influenza if it does not stop sleepwalking. His rhetoric or, more clearly, pedagogic strategy is to alarm though powerful descriptors given to the emerging viruses: These “monsters at our door” are “extraordinary shape-shifters” capable of “ultra-fast evolutionary adaptation.” He explicates the “root” causes for the coming into being of such threats: the profit-focused pharmaceutical industry and the breakdown of the leadership in world health, together with social changes in the globalizing world (e.g., Third World urbanization). He sees that these twofold factors pose an extraordinary strain on “human solidarity.” On the other hand, environmental changes, such as global warming, are going to cause an upheaval in the nature–humanity relationship. In his review, Steinglass considers these often-mentioned points valuable, but considers the main argument rhetorical. In other words, it is not the description it claims to be, but an advocacy piece meant to hype up the book and to foster a particular way of thinking about global health: “[People like Davis] are wielding apocalyptic anxiety as a tool toward a greater end: the construction of a global system of influenza surveillance and vaccine research and delivery to protect mankind wherever the next pandemic does, inevitably, break out.” If the review is of value, what may be considered “pandemic-speak” is closely related to the earlier genre of health propaganda, which serves multiple purposes under the shadow of pandemic anxiety.

Davis argues for the importance of “human solidarity,” or together-minded compassion for each other. This way of defining human polity