

Viral terrorism and terrifying viruses: the homological construction of the 'war on terror' and the avian flu pandemic

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Abstract

In the climate of panic following the September 11 attacks, previously little-discussed threats were publicized as potential instruments for terrorist attacks. Anxious discourses in the media surrounding anthrax, smallpox, dirty bombs and 'suitcase nukes' blurred distinctions between viruses, bacteria and radiation, creating a generalized environment of fear which facilitated and legitimized controversial government initiatives. This essay argues that this environment of fear was advanced and maintained not only through explicit discursive invocations of terrorism, but also through seemingly unrelated issues, such as a possible bird flu pandemic. By rhetorically constructing bird flu as a threat that is ontologically homologous to that of terrorism, the nature of pandemic disease – and the policies and programs designed to counter it – have been fundamentally misconstrued, leaving us in some ways more vulnerable to pandemic disease than before. With the recent international swine flu pandemic revealing just how underprepared we are to deal with serious pandemic threats, it is clear that our social and political conceptual frameworks for conceiving of pandemic disease must be rethought. We must sunder the present reality of pandemic threats from the beclouding epistemological influence of the 9/11 attacks, and re-learn the differences between terrifying viruses and viral terrorism.

Keywords

Terrorism
Viral terrorism
War on terrorism
Avian flu
Pandemic
Media panic

Introduction

The twin threats of terrorism and pandemic disease have perhaps been the two defining public fears for much of Western society in the twenty-first century; they have helped to shape, and in turn have been shaped by, the heightened catastrophic imagination of the post-9/11 world. While discourses surrounding global warming have largely implicated the government, industry and citizenry of the United States as complicit alongside their respective counterparts throughout the rest of the world, the same has not held true for terrorism and disease. In the United States, fears of terrorism and the bird flu (the latter an updated version of fin-de-siecle SARS anxieties) have been constructed as pernicious alien forces that operate without regard for national borders or conventional modes of engagement. These threats are presented as imminent dangers, ones that, despite being diabolically diffuse and extra-national, are nevertheless born and incubated 'over there' before coming 'here' to unleash their destructive potential.

The anthrax-laced envelopes mailed to high-profile institutions and individuals in the months following the September 11 terrorist attacks linked the two threats together not only symptomatically, but causally as well. Not only would both terrorism and disease pandemics have potentially the same effect – mass death – but the same force – Islamic fundamentalist terrorists – might cause them, as well. Although some aspects of the initial anxieties surrounding bioterrorist attacks already seem quaint only eight years later – Tom Ridge’s notorious exhortation for citizens to stock up on duct tape and plastic wrap being one such example – the heightened sense of fear and impending doom have continued to play a key role in US politics, reaching a crucial moment of dialectical inversion with the election of Barack Obama, who played upon that pervading sense of fear by offering the possibility, the ‘hope’, that his ascendance might hasten fear’s retreat.

Yet, just as Obama himself did not create this climate of fear – rather, he inherited it, and capitalized upon it – George W. Bush did not cut it from whole cloth either, though his deployment of it was considerably more cynical than Obama’s. Indeed, Ulrich Beck has argued that the entire world, beginning in the late 1980’s, began to undergo a shift from classical industrial society to a new ‘risk society’, wherein the model of risk in classical industrial society, in which ‘the “logic” of wealth production dominates the “logic” of risk production’, is reversed in the new risk society (Beck 1992: 12). For Beck, the risk society was ushered in along with the rise of new threats that fundamentally differed from those of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; while the risks produced by modernity were local or occupational hazards, the threats endemic to the new risk society of the late twentieth and twenty-first centuries are ‘supra-national’, non-class-specific and largely invisible. Importantly, Beck views the rise of risk society as a natural component of modern industrial development, and not as indicative of its perversion or subversion; ‘the epochal irritations aroused by this are all results not of the crisis but of the *success* of modernization’ (1992: 14). While the birth of the risk society may be immanent to the process of modernization itself, its realization is nevertheless largely predicated on a dawning awareness ‘that the sources of wealth are “polluted” by growing “hazardous side effects” . . . [i]n systematic terms sooner or later in the continuity of modernization the social positions and conflicts of a “wealth-distributing society” begin to be joined by those of a “risk-producing society”’ (Beck 1992: 20).

Beck’s line of thinking can be found in leftist critiques who characterize the 9/11 attacks as a form of ‘blowback’ (to use Chalmers Johnson’s term) from the neo-colonized peoples of the Middle East against the heart of the new globalized empire of late capitalism. The record corporate profits and evermore-self-eclipsing heights of the stock market were purchased through conditions and practices that concomitantly marginalized large portions of the world’s population. The underside of the excesses of late Western capitalism have now become manifest in the threat of the newly re-inaugurated term ‘terrorism’, once used as a general term to denote an asymmetrical attack whose intentions were more symbolic than catastrophically injurious, but now refers primarily to acts which threaten perceptions of neo-liberal

capitalism as the ex-nominated norm of global economic and social policy. Along these same lines, Brian Massumi notes that “[s]cary” does not denote an emotion any more than “terrorist” denotes an ideological position or moral value. The words are not predicates expressing a property of the substantive to which they apply. What they express is a mode, the same mode: the imm(a)(i)nce of the accident’ (Massumi 1993: 12). For both Massumi and Beck, ‘accident’ is really a misnomer, as the destructive irruptions experienced in late capitalism are not exceptions to the rule, but rather, are the rule; as Massumi argues, ‘[n]o longer is Keynes’s goal of “protecting the present from the future” of catastrophe the guiding principle of economics. The trick is instead to figure out “how to make money off the crisis”’ (Massumi 1993: 18–19). Seen in this light, George W. Bush is not being naïve (either falsely or earnestly) when he asserts that terrorists ‘hate our way of life and want to destroy it’; not only are the Western lifestyle and standard of living inextricably linked with the self-same policies that generated these violent counter-responses, but indeed, they vitally depend upon them.

As Mike Davis makes clear in his book *The Monster At Our Door: The Global Threat of the Avian Flu Pandemic*, the bird flu threat constitutes a similar, albeit biological, ‘blowback’ against the complicit relationships among governments, corporate agro-business, and pharmaceutical companies. The privileging of profits and appearances above safety and accountability have turned the world’s high-density feedlots – frequently touted as a shining example of the ways in which Taylorist reification has conquered older hindrances to population growth and food supply problems – into hyper-charged breeding grounds for pathogens, capable of engendering viral mutation rates dramatically higher than those found in traditional livestock pens. Like the war on terror, the policies enacted by the US government against the threat of a bird flu pandemic have been subject to intense scrutiny by experts in the relevant fields, who have charged that the Bush administration is more concerned with creating an expedient illusion of preparedness, while profiting those with ties to the administration, than with actually fully addressing the ‘real’ nature of the threats.

In attempting to analyze the efficacy or appropriateness of the policies enacted to fight terrorism or the bird flu, the analytic shortcomings of Beck’s framework are revealed, as his conception of risk society conflates ‘risk’, which operates at the macro-structural level of the global socio-economic totality, with ‘fear’, which is the primary rhetorical strategy employed by the Bush administration (and pharmaceutical companies and foreign governments) to convince the general public of the dire necessity of these risk-related strategies. Here, we benefit from a key distinction made by Massumi, that preemption – the operative logic of the Bush administration, if not the post-Cold War United States writ large – does not function according to the same epistemological or ontological principles as prevention, which was the dominant logic of the Cold War era.¹ Prevention assumes a reliably causal, and ‘objectively knowable’ world, and operates primarily in a reactionary manner, as its ‘object is given to it predefined by other formations, in whose terms and on whose terrain it must then operate’. As such, prevention is derivative, as it has ‘no operational sphere

1 And here is another point that Beck, in all of his persuasive generality, fails to acknowledge.

of its own, and no proprietary logic'; its powers are therefore not self-sustaining, and require the continual infusion of power from an outside source (Massumi 2007: 2). In the Cold War, the limits of prevention were supplemented and extended by the logic of deterrence, however the new asymmetrical model of post-Cold War relations has instated a new operative logic, that of preemption.

Preemption, for Massumi, is an operative logic whose core epistemological tenet is that of uncertainty – uncertainty not only 'because the threat has not fully formed', but also because 'it has not yet even emerged'. This epistemological tenet entails an ontological premise, as well, that 'the nature of threat cannot be specified'. The global situation, then, 'is not so much threatening as threat-generating', and this uncertainty is 'unex-pungeable because its potentiality belongs to the objective conditions of life today'. Under this rationale, the motives of the enemy are made to be wholly inscrutable, a move which renders this 'other' as inhuman and thereby serves to accrue a false patina of moral legitimacy to any acts 'we' commit against this 'other' (Massumi 2007: 5). In such an asymmetrical field of engagement, the state must overcome the problem of its enemy's radical alterity by introducing some homological relationship between itself and the opponent; because it would be impossible to elevate the enemy to the status of human (for that would undermine the central purpose of preemption), the state 'must transform a part of its own structure in[to] the image of that which it fights' (Massumi 2007: 6).

It is my contention that this operative logic of preemption, once set into motion, cannot be contained solely to its declared target; rather, in order to justify its underlying epistemological and ontological precepts, it must dilate to include otherwise unrelated adversaries (be they human or not), so as to demonstrate an ostensible countenance of universality, and, therefore, inherent validity. One instructive example of this dilation is the Bush administration's deployment of a potential bird flu pandemic as a new source of fear; while the bird flu is undoubtedly of a vastly different ontological order than the threat of terrorism, the rhetorical strategies employed by the US government largely elided these differences, and thereby served to further entrench and naturalize the strategy of preemption as a necessary and effective operative logic for our times. Yet, as will be shown, this conflation is potentially quite dangerous for a number of reasons; not only does it ignore the unique nature of the threat posed by bird flu (or any lethal pandemic) and offer false comfort by portraying all threats as being alike, but also, in point of fact, the actual tactics employed in the pandemic preparedness plan do *not* conform to logics of preemption, despite rhetorical overtones to the contrary.

Non-existent entities and actor-network theory

Yet, in dealing with situations that may or may not ever come to pass, all information about such events is ultimately little more than mere rhetoric. Whereas 'risk' is a relatively objective, stable and calculable entity, 'fear' is a modality of subjectivity, through which all information becomes refracted. While Massumi describes the mass media's effect as being one of 'fear-blur', which works to 'short-circuit the event' and 'blur the event's

specific content into an endless series of “like” events’, this may perhaps overstate the media’s powers, as the example provided by the bird flu suggests that the Bush administration, media and pharmaceutical companies all engaged in various forms of fear-blur. In all cases, what is ultimately being (both rhetorically and materially) exploited is the unknowability of the bird flu, and it is for this reason that Bruno Latour’s Actor-Network Theory (ANT) is helpful, as it offers an effective theoretical perspective with which to engage non-existent (or not-yet-existent) entities.

ANT accomplishes this inclusion of non-existent entities into its rubric by positing that there is no subject/object distinction, that everything should be treated in roughly the same class, as ‘actors’ in a greater social collectivity. While ANT does distinguish between ‘humans’ and ‘nonhumans’, it stresses that the differences between the two are much less profound than we typically believe, as the two ‘exchange properties in order to compose in common the raw material of the collective’ (Latour 2004: 63). Humans can only realize themselves as such through interactions with an environment composed of non-humans; while these non-humans may not have as much agency as humans, they nevertheless afford or deny certain subsequent possibilities, thereby playing a vitally central role in social collectives.

Within this system, objects ‘gain’ or ‘lose’ in reality depending on the strength and number of connections they have within the collective. Actors who have no connections are cast outside the collective, and it is the unanticipated return of these outcasts back into the collective that typically constitutes major catastrophes. In this construction, ‘natural’ catastrophes such as floods or fires are not a manifestation of ‘Nature’s wrath’ or the like, but, rather, the forceful re-introduction of certain outcast actors back into the social collective. Latour stresses that ANT moves beyond outdated binaries of Man versus Nature, instead recognizing that ‘we no longer have a society surrounded by a nature, but a collective producing a clear distinction between what it has internalized and what it has externalized’; moreover, if ‘an explicit collective decision has been made *not* to take [externalized elements] into account; they are to be viewed as insignificant’ (Latour 2004: 124, italics original). During Hurricane Katrina, for instance, it was not Nature striking back at Man, but rather the re-introduction into the social collective of a whole constellation of previously disregarded actors and properties – from poorly constructed floodwalls and ineffective emergency management plans to widespread poverty and racism – which ultimately formed strong associations and generated the disaster in New Orleans.

Indeed, the inclusion here of Hurricane Katrina, which occurred in late August and early September of 2005, is valuable not only for its instructive value in explicating ANT, but also for its relationship with the bird flu pandemic preparedness plan, which was introduced by President Bush on 1 November 2005. Given the Bush administration’s infamously inept response to Hurricane Katrina, which caused widespread public doubts about the government’s disaster readiness, it may seem rather odd that they so quickly introduced a new object of fear and uncertainty in the figure of the bird flu. As Massumi notes, fear must be carefully managed,

2 It should also be noted that the threat of the bird flu was, in its size and type, perfectly suited for invocation and exploitation by the Bush administration. Like terrorism, its threat, if realized, would be immediately discernible, unlike say, global warming, which is vastly more diffused in the scope of its effects. Furthermore, unlike global warming, guarding against bird flu does not, we are told, require a radical reorganization of our socio-economic structure and institutions.

3 Though the highly contagious nature of bird flu distinguishes it from one of the most well-known bioterrorist agents, anthrax, which, while quite deadly, is not contagious.

4 Project BioShield, initially proposed in Bush's 2003 State of the Union address, is a 2004 federal program designed primarily 'to develop and make available modern, effective drugs and vaccines to protect against attack by chemical, biological, radiological or nuclear (CBRN) weapons' (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/infocus/bioshield/>). The 2002 Bioterrorism Act essentially outlines new federal policy to institute tighter controls on dangerous biological agents and toxins and to ensure the safety of the food and water supply in both peacetime and during bioterrorist

as an overabundance of fear can retard economic growth and social stability (2007: 7). However, in the face of the devastating 'natural' disaster of Katrina, and the unique fear it subsequently generated (that the government was too focused on preventing terrorism, and not on protecting its citizens from 'natural' disasters), the bird flu pandemic preparedness plan intervened as a means for simultaneously mollifying those anxieties (by demonstrating that the government was proactively guarding against other such 'natural' threats) and exacerbating them, albeit it in a way that rhetorically re-inscribed the government's central locus of fear (the war on terror), and made that fear economically productive. Moreover, it displaced the lingering present-tense fear associated with Katrina to that of the future-conditional, thereby strengthening (in the Latourian sense) the reality of the object-cause of the war on terror; that is to say, fear itself.²

Beginning of the war on terror and viral anxieties

One important aspect of the threat posed by the bird flu is that, despite its fear-blurred associations with bio-terrorism, it is nevertheless an incontestably organic development (albeit one facilitated and expedited by neoliberal economic policies) and not the product of a diabolical terrorist germ lab. In this way, the bird flu pandemic preparedness plan synecdochically served as the government's response to pandemic situations of all types, buttressing the rhetorical strength of previous legislation in this area. While other bills addressing potential disease pandemics have been passed by Congress, such as Project BioShield³ and the 2002 Bioterrorism Act,⁴ these bills primarily concern themselves with bioterrorist pandemic threats (not organic ones), and are explicitly part of the war on terror, such that they do not significantly extend the war on terror's discursive field or material domain beyond its accepted boundaries. In this sense, the proliferative effect through which preemption operates is clearly evidenced (Massumi 2007: 9), though early moments in the war on terror nearly saw an inversion of these two entities.

For instance, the Jungian psychologist Luigi Zoja, writing in late 2001, recounts that he 'would gauge [that] in mid-October 2001, the U.S. TV channels [had] been broadcasting hours of information dedicated to bacteria for each 10 minutes dedicated to the war in Afghanistan' (Zoja 2002: 46). Zoja's observation suggests that the nation's discourse was focused not on the success of its foreign military retaliation against the 9/11 attacks, but was instead preoccupied with the possibility of disease and contamination in the now-wounded homeland. Our borders were penetrated by antagonistic foreign bodies, and our circulatory patterns – usually reliable and efficient – were re-purposed to destroy our symbolic organ(izational) centres. In this sense, it is little wonder that Derrida likened the attacks to an auto-immune disorder, as the country not only believed itself to be 'infected', but this disease-oriented fear of contagion nearly consumed its own ordinary fear, that of physical terrorist attacks. The careful balance of fear threatened to run amok, as new entities gained too much reality too quickly.

In light of this collective sense of lethal infection, it is perhaps not surprising that the nation's attention turned inward; indeed, it would not

seem unusual for an individual whose body has been vitiated by polio to be far more pre-occupied with the possibility of the disease bringing further damage, or even death, than being concerned with the success of a national polio vaccination program. One is reminded of Artaud's construction of the plague as a 'psychic entity', one that 'takes images that are dormant, a latent disorder, and suddenly extends them into the most extreme gestures' (Artaud 1958: 27). The possibility of bioterrorist attack was just as likely before 9/11 as it was after,⁵ but it was only afterwards that the United States began to see itself as 'infected', responding by extending dormant images into 'the most extreme gestures' – endless hours of coverage on bacteria; how they spread, their effects on the body, and methods of containment and treatment. Indeed, according to Massumi, the operative logic of preemption assumed its cultural centrality in the early 1990's, after the end of the Cold War; thus it might be said that this new model of fear lay dormant from that period until it was activated by the 9/11 attacks, and the subsequent enfoldment (by the media and government) of the attacks into the newly minted 'war on terror'.

Because the 'war on terror' has meant different things at different times in the past eight years,⁶ for present purposes of clarity the exoteric scope and ambitions of the 'war on terror' will be drawn from late 2001, when the very idea of a 'war on terror' was itself being constructed in the public consciousness. Latour might argue that the shifting justifications and associations surrounding the 'war on terror' reveal it to be a poorly constructed network, one constantly in need of reformulation to maintain itself, though, for Massumi, this is precisely the nature of preemption. Preemption effects itself 'through an essential openness in its productive logic', it is 'as shape-shifting as it is self-driving' (Massumi 2007: 9), and, because of this, in addition to the points outlined above, it becomes impossible to capture the essence of the war on terror through recourse to a particular moment or event.

Nevertheless, having established the shared epistemological and ontological ideology underlying the bird flu preparedness plan and the war on terror, an analysis of the similarities and differences in the rhetorical and legislative strategies used to construct these two threats will demonstrate both foreseeable parallels and unexpected points of divergence between the two programs. Because most are far more familiar with the war on terror than the bird flu pandemic preparedness plan, a brief summary of the early construction of the war on terror will precede a more thorough analysis of the bird flu plan. For as Massumi advises, 'recursivity and co-causality (multifactor analysis) may be beginnings' for an analysis of the ways in which preemption and other operative logics are materially and rhetorically enacted, 'but in the end, the very concept of the cause may have to go, in favor of effects and their interweavings (syndromes)' (Massumi 1993: 31).

Introducing the war on terror

Nine days after the September 11 attacks, President Bush stood on the floor of the US Capital, in front of a large American flag, and introduced a 'lengthy campaign' that 'will not end until every terrorist group of global reach has been found, stopped and defeated'. Rather than acknowledging

attacks (<http://www.fda.gov/oc/bioterrorism/bioact.html>).

- 5 And perhaps, given the improvements in domestic security and heightened awareness of terrorism and bioterrorism since September 11, it might be that it was actually *more likely* for bioterrorist attacks to occur before September 11.
- 6 Many would argue that the war on terror's diachronic uncertainty is eclipsed by its synchronic uncertainty.

- 7 That is, because much less money was allocated to fight the bird flu than terrorism, the public may have actually feared the bird flu more, because it was possibly not receiving the support it deserved.
- 8 Thirteen per cent replied that they were equally concerned about both, and twenty three per cent stated that they were concerned about neither being a victim of a terrorist attack nor catching bird flu.

that terrorism is a tactic, and not an identity, terrorism is constructed here, if not as a fixed-sum problem that can be permanently and wholly eradicated, then at least as one which has a determinate basis in a particular ideology, people and place. This rubric characterizes the enemy as those who 'practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism that has been rejected by Muslim scholars and the vast majority of Muslim clerics', and are led by Osama bin Laden. As will be shown, in much the same way that the bird flu – specifically, the H5N1 virus – is the particular strain targeted by the government's pandemic preparedness plan, so too is 'militant Islam' the particular strain of terrorism that the government seeks to extinguish through the 'war on terror'. Pushing Bush's construction of the terrorist threat a bit further, the radical Islam he attributes to the terrorists' worldview, that 'fringe form', can be seen as a destructive mutation of traditional Islam, not unlike the deadly strain of bird flu that is feared to arise through a mutation in the H5N1 virus.

Furthering the disease metaphor, Bush explains that every resource at the government's command will be directed towards this campaign, which will 'starve terrorists of funding, turn them one against another, drive them from place to place, until there is no refuge or no rest . . . [and] will pursue nations that provide aid or safe haven to terrorism'. This notion of 'starving' the terrorist groups casts them as parasitic or cancerous, capable of being defeated by denying them their unnatural forms of sustenance. Yet, the plan is not characterized solely by outwardly aggression, as it also provides 'defensive measures against terrorism to protect Americans', to be directed by the newly created Office of Homeland Security. In addition to improving airline security, these defensive measures also include '[giving] law enforcement the additional tools it needs to track down terror here at home. . . . [and] to strengthen our intelligence capabilities to know the plans of terrorists before they act, and find them before they strike', all suggesting an apparatus not unlike some specialized medical equipment designed to monitor specific aspects of a patient's infirmity (Bush 2001).

Since its introduction, the 'war on terror' has, as one might expect, received substantially more attention and funds than the bird flu pandemic preparedness plan, with Congress appropriating roughly \$430 billion for 'war on terror' spending, while \$3.8 billion was allocated for pandemic flu preparedness in the 2006 federal budget (Office of the Press Secretary 2006). Intriguingly, despite the enormous discrepancy in funding – or perhaps because of it⁷ – an October 2005 Fox News poll found that, when asked whether they were more concerned about being the victim of a terrorist attack or catching the bird flu, 32 per cent of respondents said they were most concerned about terrorism, while 29 per cent indicated that they were more concerned with the bird flu.⁸ Taking the poll's 3 per cent margin of error into account, it seems as though, at this point in time (i.e., the height of media coverage of the bird flu), the American public believed they were equally likely to be a victim of either threat. The poll also suggests that the public believed the threat of bird flu to be quite imminent, as 63 per cent of the poll's respondents indicated that they were 'very concerned' or 'somewhat' concerned about the spread of bird flu in the United States, while only 32 per cent indicated

that they were ‘not very’ or ‘not’ concerned with it (Blanton 2005). The question’s discursive associations are quite revealing; the poll contained no other questions gauging respondents’ concerns about becoming victims of any other threat or disaster. Whether this reveals more about the mindset of the pollsters or the general public is debatable, but suffice it to say that the Bush Administration did little to disabuse people of any mimetic association between the two programs.

Indeed, funding for programs related to the ‘war on terror’ and the bird flu – both of which, it should be noted, were budgeted through the Department of Defense – was announced simultaneously on 30 December 2005,⁹ with the release of a White House press statement titled ‘Bush Signs Law Funding War on Terror, Pandemic Flu Preparedness’. The second line of the President’s Statement states that ‘this funding will help us continue to hunt down the terrorists, pursue our strategy for victory in Iraq, and make America more secure’. By associating these three distinct endeavours together on the list, preparing for the bird flu becomes as important to the country’s security as fighting terrorism, while terrorism and the elective war in Iraq are simultaneously naturalized, a ‘fact of life’ every bit as inevitable as the flu (International Information Programs 2005). Preemption thus proliferates on three fronts that are at once distinct, yet singular – stopping the terrorists before they attack the United States, disarming Saddam Hussein before he could use weapons of mass destruction against the United States, and inoculating America against a virus that does not yet exist, but could.

Bird flu takes flight

Several months before that press statement, on 1 November 2005, President Bush made a well-publicized speech at the National Naval Medical Centre in Bethesda, Maryland, wherein he introduced the bird flu preparedness plan and outlined its major points. Even at the time, the press noted the similarities between Bush’s bird flu speech and the rhetoric employed in the war on terror: *Time* magazine opened its feature article on the bird flu address with the line; ‘In announcing plans today to prepare the nation for combating a future worldwide wave of bird flu, President Bush used vocabulary and tactics that are familiar from his confrontation with global terrorism’ (Allen 2005). As evidenced in Figure 1, *Time* is certainly correct in asserting that the vocabulary President Bush employed is quite similar to that employed in the ‘war on terror’,¹⁰ yet as will be seen, the claim that similar tactics are being employed – presumably that of preemption – deserves further scrutiny.

Because the bird flu has not, as mentioned before, received nearly the coverage afforded to the war on terror, a brief summary of the disease and the government’s response to it is in order before a complete comparison of the two programs can be made. Like human influenzas, there are a number of different bird flu subtypes (144 total), and only some of them can be transmitted from fowls to humans. Most of the strains are quite mild, affecting birds in much the same way that humans are affected by a typical human influenza infection, though some bird flu strains are both deadly and quite contagious, and can quickly wreak havoc throughout a bird population. Over the past decade, the H5N1 strain has proven to be a

9 The timing of the press release, the day before New Year’s Eve, falls in a period of time known by many to be a sort of ‘black hole’ for news, an odd time for a major funding announcement regarding the ‘war on terror’, to be sure. When one realizes that the spending bill also includes new legislation that denies the ‘right for terrorists to sue anyone, including our men and women on the front lines in the war on terror’, it perhaps becomes clearer why the bill was released in the period of time that it was.

10 *Time* reporter Mike Allen’s use of the personal possessive ‘his’ in describing Bush and the confrontation with global terror is rather telling. That is, these threats are given form and meaning through the rhetoric and language used in Bush’s speeches; properly speaking, insofar as the threats are constructed through and from this language, they do, in fact, then belong to Bush.

Bird Flu Speech – 1 November 2005	'War on Terror' Speech – 20 September 2001
'Our country has been given fair warning of this danger to our homeland and time to prepare'.	'Our nation has been put on notice: We are not immune from attack. We will take defensive measures against terrorism to protect Americans'.
<p>'While avian flu has not yet acquired the ability to spread easily from human to human there is still cause for vigilance. The virus has developed some characteristics needed to cause a pandemic: It has demonstrated the ability to infect human beings and it has produced a fatal illness in humans'. 'And unlike seasonal flu, it can kill those who are young and health as well as those who are frail and sick'.</p> <p>'To strengthen domestic surveillance, my administration is launching the National Biosurveillance Initiative'.</p>	<p>'It is my hope that in the months and years ahead, life will return almost to normal. We'll go back to our lives and routines, and that is good. Even grief recedes with time and grace. But our resolve must not pass'.</p> <p>'The terrorists' directive commands them to kill Christians and Jews, to kill all Americans, and make no distinction among military and civilians, including women and children'.</p>
'A flu pandemic would have global consequences, so no nation can afford to ignore this threat, and every nation has responsibilities to detect and stop its spread'.	<p>'We will come together to give law enforcement the additional tools it needs to track down terror here at home. We will come together to strengthen our intelligence capabilities to know the plans of terrorists before they act, and find them before they strike'.</p> <p>'This is not, however, just America's fight. And what is at stake is not just America's freedom. This is the world's fight. This is civilization's fight'.</p>

Figure 1

singularly deadly and fast-moving flu type, spreading quickly throughout bird populations in Asia and into Eastern Europe and manifesting few symptoms before inflicting a mortality rate that often approaches 100 per cent (WHO 2006). Currently, the only airborne transmission of the H5N1 virus occurs among birds – humans can only contract the disease if they come into direct contact with the blood or leavings of an infected fowl; importantly, at the present time, the virus is incapable of inter-human transmission (Russell 2005).

Because of its pathogenic destructiveness and wide area of infection, the H5N1 subtype became the primary strain of concern among scientists. This focus has been manifested in the media, as well; when the generic term 'bird flu' is used in news reports, it is referring to the H5N1 strain

(except in rare cases, usually in local media, announcing that a case of bird flu was found and that it was *not* the H5N1 strain). Despite H5N1's somewhat limited window for transmission, more than 230 humans have contracted the strain, and 132 have died from it (Fox 2006). The heavily hyped 'bird flu pandemic', then, refers to a (currently) hypothetical situation in which the H5N1 virus has mutated into a form capable of human-to-human airborne transmission while retaining its lethality.

Because of the vast poultry populations and the close proximity in which humans live with their flocks, impoverished areas of rural Asia have been home to most of the human H5N1 infections. Health experts worry that as more humans are infected with the H5N1 virus, the odds will become increasingly higher such that the virus could mutate into a form capable of human-to-human airborne transmission (*New York Times* 2005a). For the most part, the popular press in the United States has depicted these rural Asian areas as the 'hot zone' of the H5N1 virus, though this is rather misleading. While most cases of human infection have occurred in these areas, Mike Davis has convincingly argued that most of the rapid mutations occurring within and across the various bird flu strains have occurred due to the practices of globalized corporate agriculture and livestock production. Dangerously unsanitary high-density feedlots, government corruption, global poultry shipping and the deliberate sale of infected poultry to consumers have, according to Davis, forged a turbo-powered viral breeding ground that places the entire planet at risk (Davis 2005). Discussions of the relationship between global capitalism and bird flu have been largely absent in both the popular press and government rhetoric, suggesting that, as with terrorism, a symptom has come to stand in for the underlying disorder. Although given the truncated and wildly misallocated pandemic provisions that eventually passed through Congress; it is unclear if it is even possible to speak of a correspondence between the rhetoric structuring the bird flu and the material tactics used to counter it.

Disjunctures between rhetoric and reality

While President Bush's November 2005 speech outlined how stopping the bird flu at its (presumably) foreign source was a core desideratum of the plan, only \$251 million of the initial \$7.1 billion package was allocated for detecting and containing outbreaks around the world. The largest share of the package was earmarked for the domestic stockpiling of antiviral drugs and vaccines (Allen 2005). For the 2006 financial year, Congress approved only \$3.3 billion of Bush's initial request; of these funds, \$1.78 billion was used for vaccines, \$731 million for antiviral drugs, and \$160 million for medical supplies, leaving the fate of funds for international aid uncertain, at best (MSNBC 2006c).

Domestically, Health Secretary Michael Leavitt said in March 2006 that it would take at least 6 months from the outbreak of a bird flu pandemic before a vaccine could be produced, as any flu strain capable of airborne human transmission would be different enough from the current H5N1 strain to require the development of a wholly new vaccine. Indeed, in 2005, while several pharmaceutical companies were in the midst of testing vaccines derived from a flu strain that infected individuals in

- 11 One treatment pack of Tamiflu lasts 5 days.
- 12 Gilead Sciences Incorporated is the creator and patent-holder of Tamiflu. Donald Rumsfeld was CEO of Gilead from 1997 until 2001, when he joined the Bush administration as Secretary of Defense. His current stock interests in Gilead are valued at somewhere between \$10 million and \$50 million (Schwartz 2005). On 28 October 2005, three days before Bush announced his bird flu plan, Rumsfeld recused himself from making any government decisions concerning bird flu medications in order to continue to hold his stock in the company without creating the appearance of a conflict of interest (*New York Times* 2005c). That was probably a wise financial move on Rumsfeld's part, as Gilead's stock price has risen from \$30 in September 2004 to a later value of \$60. George Schultz, US Secretary of State from 1982 to 1989, serves on Gilead's board, as does the wife of Pete Wilson, former governor of California (Schultz has sold \$7 million worth of Gilead stock since the beginning of 2005). Andrew McDonald of Think Equity Partners says, 'I don't know of any biotech company that's so politically well-connected' (Schwartz 2005). One is reminded of Dick Cheney, CEO of

Vietnam in 2004, at least two new mutated strains appeared that were different enough to require entirely new vaccine formulations. Given this cat-and-mouse game of vaccine development, it is not surprising that the US government is also stockpiling Tamiflu and Relenza, two anti-viral drugs that function by disrupting a virus' ability to propagate once it has infected a human host. While Leavitt has said that it is hoped that the government will have 26 million anti-viral treatment packs stockpiled by the end of 2006, this would still only provide enough medication for roughly 9 per cent of the US population (MSNBC 2006c).

It could be, though, that the inadequate stockpile of anti-viral drugs is not as calamitous as it first appears, for the simple reason that the drugs may not be particularly effective against the bird flu. In laboratory tests on regular flu infections, Tamiflu has been confirmed to reduce the severity of symptoms by 38 per cent, while reducing the duration of the influenza infection by 37 per cent; helpful, sure, but not a definitive cure, even for common flu strains (Page 2005). The few animal studies that have been conducted have shown that Tamiflu is only effective if it is taken before the infection occurs (Zwillich 2005). Furthermore, once taken, the drug's benefits cease to be effective within 48 hours of ending treatment¹¹; in a major pandemic scare, it might be necessary for people to take the drug for several weeks in order to fully realize its benefits (meaning that significantly less than 9 per cent of the population would receive treatments)¹² (Greene 2005).

Because of these numerous shortcomings in the vaccines and anti-viral drugs associated with bird flu, most health experts agree that the most urgent domestic pandemic concern is that of the available 'surge capacity' among hospitals and emergency health responders. Hospital officials readily admit that they are currently running at nearly full capacity; preparing for a pandemic situation that may not come is 'not a sustainable business plan', in the words of Dr Edward Miller, chief executive officer of Johns Hopkins Medicine. Health officials contend that hospitals throughout the United States and the rest of the world lack sufficient amounts of drugs and basic supplies (such as latex gloves) to adequately respond to a pandemic crisis (MSNBC 2006b). One particularly glaring deficit is the number of ventilators in the United States: while there are currently 105,000 ventilators in US hospitals, roughly 100,000 are in use during a normal flu season; a 'worst-case human pandemic' in the United States would require 742,500 ventilators.¹³ Because President Bush's preparedness strategy leaves emergency medical care planning to the state and local levels – which have received almost no funds from the preparedness plan – it is unlikely that any appreciable quantity of ventilators will be purchased. As with the inadequate stockpiles of Tamiflu, though, this situation may not be as bad as it seems, for even if an adequate number of ventilators were purchased, there would not be nearly enough medical workers to operate them in a pandemic situation (McNeil 2006).

Rather than allocating sufficient funds for international aid or investing in domestic health-care infrastructure, more than 90 per cent of the funds have been designated for vaccines and anti-viral drugs (McNeil 2006). Considering that the efficacy of both the anti-viral drugs and vaccines is

entirely unknown, the pandemic preparedness plan places nearly all of its eggs in one enormously uncertain basket. Moreover, if some other disease (such as smallpox or bubonic plague) were to turn into a pandemic situation, the drugs stockpiled to counter the bird flu would be ineffective. A substantial investment in health-care infrastructure, on the other hand, would not only serve to guard against any disease pandemics, but also any possible bioterrorist attacks. While a preparedness plan designed to counter a bird flu pandemic might achieve a discursive metonymy with the concept of 'pandemic preparedness' writ large, in practice the former's material reality will, in this case, ultimately fail to function as an adequate form of protection against either a bird flu pandemic or any other disease pandemic that might occur.

Thus, the instantiation of the bird flu as a global threat reveals a number of smaller, more immediate crises in the health care system, which the government cannot even acknowledge without revealing the completely overwhelming implications of a real pandemic. Here, we witness a clear example of Brian Massumi's argument that '[t]he political-economic expression of the capitalist accident-form (generalized deterrence) cannot actualize itself without simultaneously alienating itself in the often horrendous content of a local disaster' (1993: 28). To consider the situation somewhat more sympathetically through a Latourian perspective, it could be said that, while the bird flu preparedness plan is internally well-constructed (insofar as it has been accepted, to varying degrees, by Congress and the American people, and has been implemented without any glaring internal failures), it is not congruent with the constellation of most-accepted 'truths' surrounding the threat.

Far-ranging myopia

This type of myopia is also seen in the 'war on terror', which, as President Bush explicitly stated in his 20 September 2001 speech, is against 'the terrorists [that] practice a fringe form of Islamic extremism' (Bush 2001). Troublingly, under this rubric, domestic terrorist plots by non-Muslim individuals have been selectively exempt from the 'war on terror'. In the fall of 2002, for instance, William Klar was arrested in Texas after investigators searched his home and found 'a sodium-cyanide bomb capable of killing thousands, more than a hundred explosives, half a million rounds of ammunition, dozens of illegal weapons, and a mound of white-supremacist and antigovernment literature'. Suffice it to say that, while Klar would seem to fit just about any conceivable definition of 'terrorist', the type of terrorism he represented was not deemed newsworthy by the federal government or the popular press, as more than nine months after the arrest, there had been 'two government press releases and a handful of local stories, but no press conference and no coverage in the national newspapers' (Axtman 2003). Here, the limits of fear-blur are made evident, as 'the media short-circuiting of the specificity of the event opens the way for mechanisms of power to reset social boundaries along roughly historical lines—in other words, in favor of traditionally advantaged groups (whites, males, heterosexuals)' (Massumi 1993: 26). Klar represented an outdated enemy, the far-right American militant of the 1990's, necessary only in

Halliburton from 1995 to 2000, a firm in which Cheney owns stock options, and has been running the logistical operations in Iraq while providing Cheney with hundreds of thousands of dollars in deferred salary payments every year (CBS News 2003).

- 13 The ventilators cost \$30,000 each, and the world's largest manufacturer of ventilators has a maximum output of approximately 20,000 ventilators a year (McNeil 2006).

that uneasy interim period between the end of the Cold War and the dawn of the war on terror. To publicize his arrest, then, as a dangerous non-terrorist of sorts, would be to draw limits to preemption's dominion, which is antithetical to an operative logic that calls itself into being through its ostensible universality; the case of Klar exemplifies Massumi's argument that, under preemption, '[b]oundaries are set and specified in the act of passage. The crossing actualizes the boundary—rather than the boundary defining something inside by its inability to cross' (1993: 27).

The new epistemology and ontology ushered in by preemption demand not a 'new kind of warfare for a new kind of enemy', but 'a new kind of enemy for a new kind of war.' This new mode of engagement works in silence and secrecy, such that its effects can only be registered by the fact that the world carries on as normal, saturated with fear. Since the ground of preemption is potential, 'there is no actual cause for it to organize itself around'; preemption 'compensates for the absence of an actual cause by producing an actual effect in its place' (Massumi 2007: 9). In this sense, the anti-viral drugs and experimental vaccines currently touted as the first line of defence against the bird flu might be less important for what they can actually *prevent* and are more valuable for what they *generate* in the discursive construction of the bird flu threat. Whereas greater numbers of ventilators and emergency staff represent only a quantitative, 'more of the same'-type improvement, the anti-viral drugs and vaccines are structured as qualitatively different – 'a new kind of drug for a new kind of threat'. If the bird flu is seen as a new actor within the network of contagions, then surely, so the rhetoric goes, it can only be stopped with a new type of drug. And so long as the pandemic never arrives, the drugs have done their job.

It must be underscored, however, that the self-generating reality of preemption realizes its effects in both the discursive and the material realms. For instance, the concept of 'sleeper cells' received a considerable amount of attention after the 9/11 attacks, with many Americans deeply concerned about the possibility that Islamic terrorists might be covertly living in their communities, waiting to receive orders that would 'activate' their deadly terrorist plans. In these past 8 years, however, not a single person has been arrested in the United States and identified as a member of a terrorist 'sleeper cell', though there have been arrests of those who were *seemingly* members of a sleeper cell. The closest the seven Miami men arrested on conspiracy charges in June 2006 ever got to Islamic terrorism was the FBI informant who posed as an Al-Qaeda agent while gathering evidence in support of their arrests (MSNBC 2006). These men, while not Al-Qaeda members, seemed to believe that the only way they could pose a real threat would be as members of the notorious terrorist syndicate; identifying Islamic terrorism as the primary villain has, then, actually produced *more* Islamic terrorists, even among those with no real interest in the religion itself.

Infinite war and ever-elusive victory

In choosing to limit its discursive construction of terrorism to solely those acts which could be linked to a particular form of Islam, the Bush administration not merely circumscribed the field of possible suspects (though

the warrantless wiretapping and electronic eavesdropping programs show that, contrary to the rhetoric, *everyone* was really a suspect), but, more importantly, narrowly delimited that which could qualify as an officially recognized terrorist attack (and therefore constitute a 'loss' in the war on terror). Similarly, the narrow focus on the bird flu as *the* most pressing pathological threat connotatively raises a state of alarm about disease writ large, while the official government actions move only against the one (somewhat remote) threat in particular – fear proliferates in infinite directions, but accountability is rendered definitionally elusive. This myopic specificity, then, paradoxically proliferates fear well-beyond its borders, though this may well be precisely the intention.

Another important fear-proliferating effect generated by the bird flu pandemic preparedness plan (and here it is in clear accord with the war on terror) is a complete exoneration of any possible American culpability in creating the threat; this, of course, is not fear-generating in itself, but by displacing accountability onto the lifestyles and ideologies of exotically unfamiliar and 'primitive' peoples, a general suspicion of the Middle and Far East regions is further strengthened. In yet another of the many seeming paradoxes that typify the operative logic of preemption, this rhetorical construction (of 'dangerous' Asiatic lifestyles) called forth into being precisely those factors which it sought to ameliorate. That is, when *The New York Times* noted that the \$251 million in foreign aid allocated by the Bush pandemic preparedness plan 'seems far too little to help poor nations in Asia or elsewhere snuff out any outbreaks that might threaten the rest of the world', what they failed to acknowledge is that this sum is *conspicuously* insufficient enough to help poorer nations eliminate outbreaks (*New York Times* 2005b).

Both the war on terror and the bird flu pandemic preparedness plan are not merely content to reduce foreign populations to a subaltern position, as epistemological uncertainty regarding the 'true disposition' of domestic bodies has led to certain extreme provisions in the domestic components of these plans. Just as the disclosure of the domestic warrantless wiretapping program has shown that the 'war on terror' interpolates all American citizens as already-possibly a terrorist, so too would the pandemic preparedness plan interpolate large numbers of Americans as already-possibly diseased in the event of a pandemic outbreak. According to the laws passed by Congress and the Bush administration, should such an outbreak occur, mass quarantines would be enforced – possibly by the military (CBS News 2005), as the uncertainties associated with individual prognosis would simply be circumvented by assuming that everyone is in some stage of infection; if someone is not already diseased and infecting others, then they are in a dangerously exposed state of pre-infection.¹⁴ Similarly, the domestic warrantless wiretapping program has been largely justified through an appeal to the unknowability of the country's own citizenry, that some might be terrorists or in a state of dangerous pre-terrorism. As distinctions between 'us' and 'them', and 'here' and 'there', break down, the material reality of possible dangers begins to overrun the discursive coordinates of official fear; the proliferative effect of fear turns back in upon itself, the disease and the infected body become pathologically and inextricably one.

14 Indeed, under the Bush administration this preemptive logic of biopower was extended to include all pre-menopausal women as being 'pre-pregnant'. Federal health guidelines were announced that admonished women to police their bodies as though they were actually with child (Taylor 2006).

Conclusion

On 20 September 2001, the same day President Bush made his 'war on terror' speech, a reporter asked Donald Rumsfeld during a Department of Defense briefing what he thought would constitute victory in America's new struggle against terrorism. After some initial digression and equivocation, Rumsfeld offered this answer; 'Now, what is victory? I say that victory is persuading the American people and the rest of the world that this is not a quick matter that's going to be over in a month or a year or even five years. It is something that we need to do so that we can continue to live in a world with powerful weapons and with people who are willing to use those powerful weapons. And we can do that as a country. And that would be a victory, in my view' (Rumsfeld 2001). For Rumsfeld, victory in this situation is not something that can be derived from the defeat of one's enemy or the continuing safety of the homeland. Rather, it is achieved by convincing the American body politic that it is afflicted, that it is in a constant state of disease, which may occasionally appear to be in remission, but will nevertheless always be present. Once initiated, the state of emergency becomes a chronic condition, as, through the very act of calling itself into being it evacuates the sovereignty upon which it granted itself exception. This is a fundamentally unstable structure, and, as suggested above, one which already evidences signs of having turned in upon itself. Rumsfeld is remarkably candid in admitting that preemption, states of exception, and the politics of fear are necessary if we wish to 'continue to live in a world with powerful weapons and with people who are willing to use those powerful weapons', for what is being preserved in both the war on terror and the bird flu pandemic are the social and economic assets of those willing to use powerful weapons. Crucially, what Rumsfeld is referring to here is *not* the 9/11 attack itself, but the subsequent war on terror, as the relationship between the two events is an arbitrary and contingent one, and by no means a causally determined one. While the war on terror no doubt enlisted the 9/11 attacks as its principal alibi, the rhetorical *meaning* of the attacks was generated retroactively by the proliferative discursive effect of the war on terror. On this point Brian Massumi has argued that '[t]he only way to have the kind of epistemological immediacy necessary for deterrence is for its process to have its own cause to hold it fast within itself. The quickest and most direct way for a process to acquire its own cause is for it to produce one' (2007: 10). While the potential proliferative effects of fear may be infinite, the process is not inherently self-generating, nor is it without its limits. For just as the 9/11 attacks represented a physical inversion of America's very symbols of strength and prosperity, so too might the proliferating fear and unmitigated profiteering – of which the war on terror and the bird flu pandemic are but a part – ultimately turn autophagic, devouring the very institutions and ideologies they sought to further.

Understood in this way, the global financial crisis of 2008–2009 is not unlike the clinical pathologization of cripplingly excessive fear – anxiety, depression and generalized neuroses which leave the sufferer unwilling and unable to act in a productive fashion, sinking ever further on a downward spiral of self-pity and despair. As mentioned before, Barack Obama

sought to exploit this pervasive fear during his campaign, when he offered the 'hope' that we could change to a new operative logic. However, after being inaugurated into the central position of responsibility for an ever-worsening economic meltdown, Obama's transitional rhetoric of hope gave way to fearful, future-conditional discourses about the need for strong, preemptive government intervention in the various parts of the economy – indeed, many of Obama's opponents accused him of using 'the fear card', of rhetorically overstating the country's real financial situation in a deliberate attempt to justify the creation of new socialist programs. While the ends may have seemingly changed (from an economics of stratification to one of equality) for the better, the means most certainly have not. It seems doubtful that preemption and fear can be applied toward more benevolent ends without poisoning the very aims they seek to further; thus, so far the only real change has been the site upon which we are made to engage in the same never-ending conflict.

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