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Opinion

While the coronavirus' spread is blamed on communism, are Americans tracking the ills of their own political culture?



- Following US President Donald Trump's impeachment trial and in the run-up to November's presidential election, the US seems set for an outbreak of rage and partisan politics. Americans must ensure the political virus of fascism remains contained

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Illustration: Craig Stephens

All epidemics are not alike, even as they all have the powers to threaten the public's health, broadly defined.

The latest coronavirus is one tough enemy of the people, as doctors of medicine will tell you. But there is another category of menace, no less frightening when you think about it, for which we will have to turn to the doctors of etymology who tunnel through the centuries seeking the origins of words.

It turns out, the word “epidemic” hails from the Greek “demos” (population or people) and “epi” (upon). My point: a moral or political plague upon the population can be quite virulent too, a pestilence whose containment is no easy matter.

China has been having a tough, tragic time with the outbreak of a new coronavirus. Although local authorities were slow to report the outbreak, Chinese President Xi Jinping did not choose to duck into a cave: an epidemic-sized erosion of the body politic could wind up shaking the political foundations of China.

Xi taking charge of the fight against the coronavirus is better late than never, as we always say when an action is truly late. The cadres now know that this all-out war is of the highest priority. Though the Communist Party believes in no god, Beijing is religious in its belief in the restorative power of science.

China’s historical self-confidence and the Chinese tendency to believe they or their ancestors have seen it all can prove helpful as a means of survival. Yes, there will always be a China and, while the sources of epidemics are not easily instantaneously identified, on balance it is probably better for governments to assume the worst at the first sighting of a suspicious agent than cross their fingers and hope it’s no more than the common cold.

Authorities in China should have learned not only from their own slow-boating during the severe acute respiratory syndrome outbreak but also from the United States’ unforgivable foot-dragging over Aids, another virus empowered in part by delinquency at almost every official level.

Without living cells to host it, a virus is, in effect, lost in space and cannot multiply. So too with political viruses, such as fascism of any sort. Without roiling social malaise, moral decay or debilitating economic injustice, a political plague would remain stuck in a refrigerated test tube. But careless handling of issues germane to the body politic can poke holes in this containment policy.

This can all happen fast. While some commentators in the West criticise the coronavirus outbreak as further evidence of the unrelenting evils of communism, perhaps they should quit throwing ideological darts at Mao-era totalitarianism.



Chinese Premier Li Keqiang talks to frontline medical workers at Wuhan Jinyintan Hospital in Wuhan in central China's Hubei province on January 27. Li has been tasked with directing the efforts to contain the spread of the novel coronavirus by Chinese President Xi Jinping. Photo: Xinhua

How alertly are Americans monitoring the overall health of our political culture? The US has just endured a most emotionally draining week. The US Senate's vote, by a slim majority, to acquit the US president of all impeachment charges was hardly unexpected. What was even worse was that immediately afterwards political temperatures in Washington got increasingly feverish.

Although US President Donald Trump wisely avoided declaring the coronavirus the unique product of an evil one-party system, and in fact praised Xi's efforts, he sadly passed up the chance to rise above the mean streets of bipartisan politics to try to heal the nation.

Trump's re-election campaign seems to be planning to go the "get even" route between now and November's presidential election. The opinionated American populace is not so much divided as deliberately split asunder by the crude hatchet men in the White House. Groundwork for a civil war played out at the level of politics seems to have been all but laid.

What we face in America, then, is a psychological outbreak of rage and revenge that threatens to boil over into social plague.

"The whole town was running a temperature," says the narrator of *The Plague*, a novel by Albert Camus, the legendary French journalist and Nobel Prize-winning writer. The novel, first published in 1974, is set in the Algerian town of Oran, which bears some resemblance to today's Wuhan, the epicentre of the latest coronavirus outbreak.

In the Camus' plague scenario, the sick die "in a stench of corruption", there's always a shortage of supplies and the authorities are slow beyond reason to respond. One of the characters in the novel says: "I was in China for a good part of my career, and I saw some cases in Paris 20 years ago. Only no one dared to call [the epidemics] by their name ... The usual taboo, of course; the public mustn't be alarmed."

You can also see in *The Plague* an arresting allegory for the French resistance to the Nazi invasion and occupation. Similarly, with only a little imagination, we can understand why many Americans are not just opposed to but fearful of the prospect of the re-election of their current president.

Of course, Camus himself knew he did not have all the answers to epidemics of the political or any kind. At one point he seemed almost fatigued, with an old man in the novel saying: "But what does it mean, the plague? It's life, that's all."

Then again, Camus never seemed to give up hope. A doctor in the novel observes: "What's true of all the evils in the world is true of plague as well. It helps men to rise above themselves."

Well, we'll see soon enough whether we rise or fall. But Camus certainly knew a plague when he saw one. Let's hope Americans do too.

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