

Does the Coronavirus Make the Case for World Government?

02/26/2020 [Jeff Deist](#)

Sometimes terrible things happen without any human malfeasance, and the novel Wuhan coronavirus may in fact be one of those things. It is entirely plausible the virus emerged from "[wet markets](#)" in the Hubei Province of China rather than as a fumbled (or worse, intentionally released) bioweapon cooked up by the Xi Jinping government.

We may never know, of course. But easy or readily apparent answers to the question of how this could have been avoided should be viewed with the skepticism appropriate to any state propaganda. Crises of all kinds, whether economic, political, military, or health, send ideologues scrambling to explain how such events fit neatly into their worldview. In fact, political partisans often attempt to paint any crisis as *having occurred in the first place* precisely because their policies and preferences have not been adopted.

The Wuhan coronavirus seems tailor-made for this. Alarmists who argue for (i) much more robust and comprehensive "public health" measures by national governments and (ii) greater supranational coordination inevitably point to infectious diseases as justification for increased state power over personal medical decisions. Scary and fast-spreading viruses are perfect fodder for their busybody argument that people cannot simply be left to their own devices.

Cross-border outbreaks of illnesses are particularly well suited to the preexisting bureaucratic desire for power over populations: they make the public much more willing to accept forced quarantines and arrests for noncompliance; forced immunizations; involuntary commitments to state facilities; curfews; restrictions on business operations and travel; and import controls. They also allow public health officials to commandeer and manage efforts to find "the cure," who then take credit when the virus eventually relents.

These are the sorts of things that authoritarian politicians want *all the time*. Crises simply provide an opportunity to ratchet up their power and also to accustom the public to being ordered around and taking cues from centralized government sources.

Antistate libertarians are not immune to this phenomenon of attempting to place square events into round holes. We tend to explain crises as the result of state (or central bank) interference, either created or made worse by the lack of market discipline, incentives, and property rights lacking due to state action or state regulation. Libertarians think the Food and Drug Administration, for example, kills more people than it saves by approving bad drugs and delaying regulatory approvals for promising treatments.

Moreover, an individualist libertarian perspective on bodily sovereignty poses an obvious challenge to public health. No individual should be forced to accept quarantine or immunization against his will, and in fact no individual should be forced to consider herd immunity or other collectivist notions when making medical decisions. Just as most libertarians don't think Doritos and Mountain Dew should be banned because their consumption imposes "public" healthcare costs in a statist/fascist system of mandatory insurance and tax-funded Medicaid, most don't think that individual health decisions should be overridden by politicians—even in an "emergency" outbreak situation.

So how do we reconcile public health with individual rights? Should the latter be sacrificed to protect the former?

Three observations present themselves.

First, even the highly authoritarian Chinese national state has been unable to contain the virus, though it

can cordon off whole cities by dictatorial fiat and impose wholesale [house arrest](#) over cities in a manner unthinkable in Western countries. Chinese state police [literally drag](#) people suspected of carrying the virus out of their cars, forcibly put them handcuffed in hazmat vehicles, and haul them off to what amount to prison hospitals. Chinese citizens who speak out publicly against the Xi government's handling of the crisis [are arrested](#). So, if the Chinese government can't contain it, even with martial law and control over media, how in the world do Western countries expect to do so? Imagine trying to quarantine, say, Dallas and Fort Worth!

Second, poor countries (and China is quite poor per capita compared to the West, ranking around sixty-fifth internationally) almost invariably suffer from worse public health conditions. Sanitation, nutrition, and access to drugs, facilities, and competent doctors matter a great deal when it comes to incubating infectious diseases. Richer countries are healthier countries, and the West benefits when conditions improve and modernize in the Third World.

Third, we *already have de facto* supranational bodies such as World Health Organization tasked with preventing and lessening the spread of diseases like the coronavirus. The WHO has been around since 1948 and hasn't prevented a host of modern epidemics like SARS and Zika; exactly what new international agency or organization will do better?

If anything, pandemics call for *decentralization* of treatment. After all, the best approach is to isolate infected people rather than bringing them into large hospital populations in crowded city centers. What doctor or nurse wants to work in a hospital full of coronavirus cases?

We might wish for a utopian libertarian answer to public health crises like the coronavirus, along the lines of a [Rothbardian externality argument](#) for airborne pollution. But sometimes bad things simply happen. The best hope is market incentives, the rapid application of individual human ingenuity and self-interest to the situation. Liberty is better, not perfect. And governments, including the Chinese government, are clueless as always.