

The Value of Conscience and Independent Thinking: COVID-19

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ABSTRACT

Recent letter authored by a group of experts in virology/biology published in Science [1] appeals for determining the exact origin of SARS-CoV-2 (severe acute respiratory syndrome corona virus 2).

Reading the letter carefully I find that it is diplomatically worded and relies on the official records of the agencies like WHO/WHA whose commitment to unearth the truth has been in doubt since the disease was first reported in December, 2019 in Wuhan, China. The last paragraph seems political that amounts to shielding the likely culpability of Chinese virologists, and runs counter to the authors' plea for 'promoting a dispassionate science-based discourse'. Unless independent and conscientious scientists muster courage to challenge the nexus of money and political power in controlling the scientific research the humanity is doomed to the perils of this kind of defiled science.

It is inexplicable that the letter fails to take note of a reasonably argued article [2] on the origin of SARS-CoV-2 authored by Wade. In this article Wade highlights the role of the political agendas of governments and scientists in this mystery, and also remarks: “Science is supposedly a self-correcting community of experts who constantly check each other’s work. So why didn’t other virologists point out that the Anderson group’s argument was full of absurdly large holes? Perhaps because in today’s universities speech can be very costly. Careers can be destroyed for stepping out of line. Any virologist who challenges the community’s declared view risks having his next grant application turned down by the panel of fellow virologists that advises the government grant distribution agency.”

In the above quote Anderson group’s argument refers to a letter published in Nature Medicine (17 March, 2020) written by a group of virologists led by K G Andersen of the Scripps Research Institute that categorically rules out that SARS-CoV-2 is artificially generated in the laboratory.

The malady highlighted by Wade is deep rooted in the US system, not just in virology research but also in physics considered to be an exact science. Two examples would suffice. Hestenes in Oersted Medal Lecture 2002 gives details of how ‘the politics of grant proposals ‘operates in NSF [3]. He explains how the so-called prestigious journals like Physical Review are dismissive of new/unorthodox ideas. Physicist E J Post in a letter of 26 April, 1996 addressed to the National Academy of Sciences (US) [4] writes, ‘Editors see to it my manuscripts land on desks of those who curb dissemination of alternate views. I am a person who pursues open discussion, not grants or contracts. I find it disconcerting to be so excluded by people, who have an indirect role in fund allocation or who may even be receiving public funds related to this very topic. I thought I call on NAS as custodian of open communication on valid issues to find a way that freedom of expression is not obliterated by the wages of anonymity under the custody of full-automated editors.’ Unfortunately, there was no response from NAS.

It is well-known that Galileo was subjected to the dictates of Church, yet even under house arrest he completed his second book. I think it was Church divorced of true religion that tormented Galileo. Now science establishment and scientific community minus true science have assumed the role of Church. Alarmed by the declining public funds for science two physicists [5] went to the extent of declaring the conscience-keepers Paul Feyerabend, Karl Popper, Imre Lakatos and Thomas Kuhn as enemies of science. Almost all research in science and technology is under the control of corporations or defense organizations in the US, see a scholarly account given by Dickson [6]. Even public funding for health research has over-riding caveats, and the wordings of the guidelines for granting the funds are deliberately left legally ambivalent. Wade questions the role of National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), a part of the National Institute of Health (NIH), in funding corona virus research at the Wuhan Institute of Virology through EcoHealth Alliance of New York. Note that Peter Daszak, the President of EcoHealth Alliance was the main person behind the Lancet letter of 19 February, 2020 that strongly condemned the conspiracy theories of the laboratory origin of the virus. Curiously at the time of the grant of the funds Francis Collins headed NIH and Anthony Fauci headed NIAID.

Funding either by big corporations or by the governments imposes stringent constraints on the freedom of scientists. Secrecy of research work, incomplete or manipulated research publications, and misleading or exaggerated claims publicized in the media are inevitable. In fact, it is almost always true that research results reported in news/social media by publicity savvy scientists are unbelievably wrong. Public understanding of science is already very poor; now, mobile-internet- social media in the digital age have been exploited by clever scientists to create a global psyche mesmerized by ‘miracles of science.’ Unfortunately, majority of scientists either do not understand

what constitutes the scientific truth and the quest for it or have gone astray in their goal of science. COVID-19 pandemic demonstrates the catastrophic consequences to the welfare of the people in this scenario. Obviously, the value of science and the credibility of scientists have become questionable. It is for this concern that I raised the question [7]: Would these unfortunate events stir the conscience of scientists?

In my book [8] scientific logic and unbiased contemplation on the COVID pandemic led me to conjecture that this new corona virus was perhaps artificially designed at Wuhan laboratory targeting specific genes as a part of the biological warfare program. In contrast, recent debate and controversy on the origin of this virus pertain to two possibilities: (1) natural origin in wildlife, and (2) it leaked from a laboratory experiment at the Wuhan Institute of Virology. The third possibility suggested in my book may seem too

radical to be true. However, there are at least two strong arguments supporting my conjecture. First, historical precedence of secret development of biological weapons. Second, the kind of experiment carried out at the Wuhan laboratory and the secrecy involved.

Chisholm in a thought-provoking note in [9] makes strong statements that deserve attention. He states that, 'Our governments are not fooling any potential enemies by the deep secrecy with which they surround the facts of biological warfare. Our governments are fooling only us, their own people, apparently for the purpose of maintaining the myth of the value of military preponderance in ensuring our security.' My remarks in [8] that China-US trade war was at the backdrop of COVID-19, and that in spite of May, 2020 WHA declaration of investigating the origin of SARS-CoV-2 nothing would come out of this cosmetic exercise as China was not even mentioned in the WHA resolution, have to be seen in the perspective of Chisholm's statement. Wade [2] underlines the dubious role of Fauci and points out that, 'The US government shares a strange common interest with the Chinese authorities.' The role of intelligence agencies is also somewhat obliquely mentioned. Bloom et al letter [1] states that the outcome of the investigation by WHO team is inconclusive but does not analyze the reasons behind this.

Chisholm further states that, 'It seems that even our legislative bodies, our Congresses, and parliaments are being kept in the dark about what is going on in this dangerous field of biological warfare.' Many biological weapons had been experimented with at least since 1936 that include Botulinic toxin, influenza, plague, cholera and smallpox.

If the deadly corona virus was not designed at Wuhan laboratory and China had no hidden agenda of biological weapon development then for the safety of the world the Chinese authorities would have immediately isolated and confined the infected people within China, and alerted the WHO and the foreign governments of the potential danger of the corona epidemic spreading to other parts of the world. Instead of this, misleading reports emanated from China. It needs to be emphasized that Chinese virologists are experts in corona research, and their collaboration with US virologists [2] could not have happened without the support of the Chinese government. Therefore, the role of the Chinese government and their science establishment in the wake of COVID-19 pandemic unequivocally points to some kind of secret conspiracy. Bloom et al [1] rightly applaud individuals of Chinese origin who shared the initial information about the corona epidemic, however ignoring the crucial issue related with the Chinese science establishment the letter becomes no more than a political statement.

The Editors' Foreword [9] explains the importance of the Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists in educating fellow scientists regarding the relationship between science and politics, and to help public understanding on the application of nuclear energy for warfare and its impact on the future of the mankind. The articles in [9] on the biological warfare by Chisholm (May, 1959) and chemical warfare by Dubinin (June, 1960) highlight the dangers from weapons other than the nuclear ones. In the era of cold war Nature published a report [10] that claimed that Soviet Union had spent tens of millions of roubles in psychic research for military applications as compared to the US funding of 179500 dollars only between 1971-1978. Psychic phenomena include extra-sensory perception, psychokinesis (PK), distant perception, precognition, retrocognition, and even reincarnation. As an example, micro-PK effect may cause malfunctions in microelectronic circuits. There is hardly any awareness on this new wave of secret research aimed at psychic war. Is great interest world-over in Yoga linked with the objective of psychic war? If realized in concrete form the psychic war would prove to be the deadliest of all. Thinkers are urged to ponder over it.

Research in corona virus has been of prime interest at Wuhan Institute of Virology for past many years. In November, 2015 a new virus was generated taking the backbone of SARS 1 and relacing its spike protein with that from a bat virus. Genome of this virus contains genes from two strains of virus, and it is known as a chimera. It has great potential to directly infect human cells. This project is a part of so-called gain-of-function experiments that aim at the enhancements of viral capabilities using genetic engineering. Virologists have recreated Spanish flu virus, polio virus, and novel viruses using a typical method of converting RNA genome to DNA, altering or adding genes in DNA, and re-converting the genetically modified DNA genome to infectious RNA virus. Wade [2] asks if SARS-CoV-2 was generated in a gain-of-function experiment.

An important component of this methodology pioneered at Wuhan laboratory is to generate a series of chimeric viruses and to test their infectivity for human cells by in vitro (human cell culture) and in viva (humanized mice) experiments. Effectively humanized mice experiments imply that virologists could classify chimeric viruses according to their level of infectivity on specific genes of human

cells of different people, e. g. Asian, European or American. There could be diametrically opposed applications of this research. To foresee the likely impact of such novel corona viruses and prepare a roadmap to mitigate its dangers for the mankind. Alternatively, to develop chimera corona viruses as biological weapons targeting specific human population. Was Wuhan laboratory engaged in the secret biological warfare program using novel corona viruses genetically engineered in the laboratory? The answer seems to be yes in view of the facets of COVID-19 pandemic. It is a fact that COVID affected Chinese population in a very small measure as compared to Americans, and that too only at the initial stage of the outbreak of the disease. It is quite plausible to argue that Chinese people were used to test the infectivity of SARS-CoV-2 initially as a part of a pilot project. There had been a continued ugly trade war between US and China; in the new age of advanced technology Chinese authorities might have opted for chimera corona virus as a biological weapon against US. China has aggressively opposed and thwarted any attempt to unravel COVID mystery and the origin of the deadly virus. Virologists at Wuhan laboratory have been actively pursuing corona research at least since SARS 1 epidemic of 2002 and MERS of 2012. Chinese virologists led by Shi Zheng-li continue to have enormous support of the authoritarian regime in China. It is not by chance or by accident that Zheng-li has all the expertise to develop such biological weapons. In the post-COVID pandemic scenario there is no evidence to show that Chinese virologists have come out with open statements or articles on this issue with pure scientific motivation.

Though US is a democracy and claims to be an open society the intelligence agencies and departments of defense in the US government wield enormous power. Why is it that even after more than 18 months of the pandemic US authorities and science establishment are clueless on the origin of the virus and COVID-19? Is it a failure of US espionage system? Is it a sign of moral degeneration of US scientists? Is there a connivance between US and China for developing biological weapons? I think all the three factors are at work. Zheng-li not only collaborated with US virologist R S Baric, Wuhan laboratory's corona research was also funded by US government through EcoHealth Alliance of New York led by Daszak [2]. Surprisingly Daszak got more funds even in August, 2020 from NIAID of US. It would seem that there was a strategic alliance between US and China on developing such biological weapons, however Chinese out-witted Americans and employed this weapon against them. This angle needs urgent attention and response similar to the one witnessed after the nuclear attack on Japan in August, 1945 [9].

Virologists and molecular biologists capable of resisting various kinds of external pressures seem to have fallen into the trap of conventionalism and orthodoxy on the genesis of COVID-19 problem. Natural viruses, in general, cannot have unpredictably long life-span. Genetically engineered chimera viruses are like synthetic polymers. Though materials used to manufacture polymers exist in nature, it is the artificial process that makes the difference in their properties. Similarly the additional attributes acquired by chimera viruses are due to the laboratory process; long life and unpredictably strange mutations could be due to it. Since the virus was adapted to human cells from the time of its origin [2] its mutation may have different trajectory than the natural one in the environment of human cells. A corona infected person wearing face mask would repeatedly inhale the virus, and the random process of corona mutation may drastically change. Is this mechanism responsible for variety of variants?

To conclude, COVID-19 pandemic is a strong warning signal to the independent and conscientious thinking and outlook of scientific community in the era of trade wars among so called developed countries.

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