

Dueling COVID-19 Banjos: The United States and China Fiddle with Narrative While the Pandemic Burns

Coalition for Peace & Ethics

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Grandin Road/YouTube

(Pix Credit)¹

It appears that, even in the midst of substantial human suffering, there is always time for propaganda and propaganda wars. The extraordinary narcissism of nations, taxed almost to the limits of their capacity to respond to the pandemic, devoting substantial resources to the spinning of propaganda with the objective of producing narratives of their respective greater glory, has now become an essential feature of the battles that later generations will come to understand as the COVID-19 wars.

Thus it is that one finds oneself assaulted by the simultaneous self-aggrandizing and heroic efforts of three leading political authorities to control the narrative of COVID-19 origin stories.² At the same time--and as the complicit, pandering, and enabling media institutions suggest--these heroic efforts extend to the role of each of these states as the leading global force for the defeat of the pandemic. The stakes are high, at least as measured by the lusts of the propaganda ministries of these states. The state that can claim the leading role in the glorious defeat of the plague believes that it can, at the same time, claim that the defeat reveals some sort of divine sign of the "worthiness" of the political apparatus and normative structures of the "victorious" state. The stage on which these performances for mass consumption are undertaken reflect the logic of the institutional apparatus of each of these states.

¹ Grandin Road, Youtube, available <https://youtu.be/Rc3CBcB1yeE>, reposted to Jennifer Reiko, "Get Into The Halloween Spirit With These Skeletons Battling It Out To 'Dueling Banjos'," *Country Music Nation*, available <https://countrymusicnation.com/get-into-the-halloween-spirit-with-these-skeletons-battling-it-out-to-dueling-banjos>.

² Discussed earlier, see, Larry Catá Backer for the Coalition for Peace & Ethics, "Origin Stories and COVID-19: The Value of Stories of the Lab Created Origins of COVID-19," *Law at the End of the Day* (23 arch 2020). Available <https://lcbackerblog.blogspot.com/2020/03/origin-stories-and-covid-19-value-of.html>.

Even to state these suppositions, the "rules" of the "game" that these states now indulge is to suggest the underlying buffoonery at the heart of these antics--but when coupled with the real consequences of the pandemic is assumes a much more macabre shading. Some brief reflections on this theme follow.

The self-serving excesses of state organs in time of pandemic recalls other instances of bizarre (and after the fact) pathetic behaviors of people during times of plague.



“In fact, chronicles from the 14th to 16th centuries are full of reports of people across central Europe being seized by a compulsion to dance – and doing so in their hundreds, sometimes until they dropped dead from exhaustion. . . . In the 1340s and 50s, the Black Death tore its way across the continent – killing up to 60 per cent of the population, wiping out entire communities and causing devastating famines. In response to these horrors, flagellants could soon be seen processing through the streets of villages, towns and cities, singing and lashing themselves in a desperation born out of loss, starvation, and the fear of God. Then in 1360, in Lausitz, bordering Bohemia, something more extraordinary still started happening. A record from the town describes women and girls acting “crazily”, dancing and shouting through the streets at the foot of the image of the Virgin. . . . In fact, chronicles from the 14th to 16th

centuries are full of reports of people across central Europe being seized by a compulsion to dance – and doing so in their hundreds, sometimes until they dropped dead from exhaustion. Saint John’s Dance, as this phenomenon is known (due to the fact that people often called out the name of John the Baptist as they cavorted), traumatised onlookers and triggered a fearsome backlash from a horrified, confused clergy.”³

China, the United States and the European Union are even now dancing and shouting through the global streets at the feet of statues of themselves as the incarnation of a self-reflexive *summum bonum*.⁴ If the analogy holds, each will continue to do so, in their respective madness, until overcome and exhausted from their respective and sterile self-pleasuring they might thereafter return with greater intensity to the fruitful task of caring for their respective masses. But each worships a different god--as manifested in itself. And that makes this dance macabre transform itself from bathos to pathos. For it is in the dueling banjos aspect of these dances--of each of these mad dancers gyrating to the tunes stuck in their heads--that one understands COVID-19 as a manifestation of an ideological opportunity. But more than that, as the way in which each of these

³ Helen Carr, “The medieval dance of death,” *History Extra* (2017) available <https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/the-medieval-dance-of-death/>; the article was first published in BBC History Magazine (December 2017).

⁴ For a brief introduction to the notion in philosophy, see Greg Ciliberti, “The summum bonum (highest good),” *Philosophical Guidance* (23 January 2020) available <http://philosophicalguidance.com/2019/01/23/the-summum-bonum-highest-good/>.

states begins to conceive of the COVID-19 plague as some sort of divine test, victory over which will secure the divinely touched legitimacy of the political-economic model (and of the leadership of the governing core). Internal victory must then be manifested in some sort of internationalism in which the vindicated state system is offered as a "light onto the world."⁵

Were each of these states engaged in a solitary project of narrative building, one might wonder at the effort, but leave things to individual idiosyncrasy. The problem, however, is that these are not strategies for internal development. Rather, they appear to serve as means of capitalizing on the COVID-19 plague itself to advance national political agendas. That advancement has several objectives.

The first is to convince domestic masses that the COVID-19 plague is not a judgement of the heavens, an indictment of the contemporary political-economic system and of its leaders. That requires the construction of an internal narrative (1) to show either that the plague is not a divine sign (e.g., the Chinese efforts to blame the U.S. for the plague rather than "nature"), or (2) that it is not a judgment of legitimacy but rather a test of the power of the system itself in which victory against the plague would serve to cement the internal legitimacy of the political economic model (eg, the efforts of President Trump to avoid the invocation of the Defense Production Act in favor of encouraging public private partners to overcome the plague).

The second, is to convince external audiences (the masses and their elites in liberal democracies, the ruling elites elsewhere) that there is an identity between the political-economic model of a leading state and success (as a function of the expenditure of resources and the loss of life) in vanquishing the COVID-19 plague. This has been a position taken both by the Chinese and the American leadership--but to very different ends. In each case, the character of the response was tightly aligned with the political-economic model. In both cases the resulting responses served as proof of the strength and inherent legitimacy of the political-economic model. But it has an additional purpose, and one that serves as the foundation for much of the invective of this essay. The purpose is this: having turned national response into a vindication of an ideologically framed political-economic model, it becomes necessary to protect that narrative from critique or challenge. That, in turn produces two types of responses. The first is to frame national narrative against a narrative of the failures of rivals. The second is to frame the virus itself as a manifestation of the illegitimacy, of the sickness, that is the rival system.

And that is what is the most interesting fight over the question of controlling narrative. This is not merely a question of system validation. Rather, it is the use of the plague itself--of its character as a disease that kills--as the representation of the character of the system against which it is deployed. To control narrative, then, can be measured by the extent to which it is possible to convince people that COVID-19, as illness, as plague, as disruptive force, is little more than the incarnation of the true character of the United States, or of China. ,

Both the U.S. and Chinese governments have passed blame back and forth. U.S. officials, including Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and President Donald Trump

⁵ Matthew 5:14-16 King James Version (KJV) ("Ye are the light of the world. A city that is set on an hill cannot be hid").

himself, have upped their use of the terms "Chinese virus" and "Wuhan virus," framing the outbreak as a Chinese issue. Pompeo urged G-7 leaders to [adopt the language](#), as well, according to a report from the German magazine Der Spiegel. They've also accused Beijing of withholding information. Similarly, Chinese officials have regularly criticized the U.S. handling of the virus and played up America's failures around the outbreak, in addition to expelling American journalists and perpetuating the Army conspiracy.⁶

The European Union itself has sought to push back on narrative that disturbs its own.

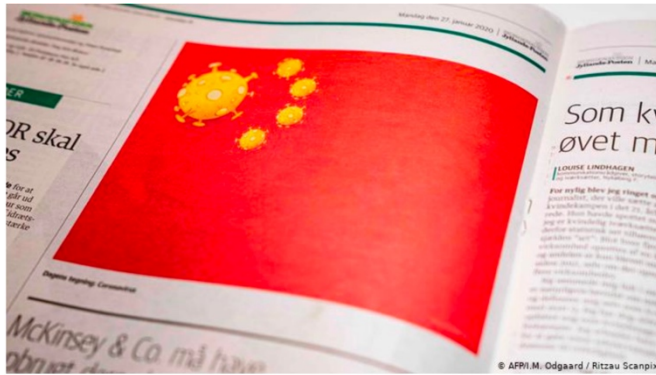
In an unusual choice of language, the bloc's foreign policy chief Josep Borrell called on EU countries to stand ready for a "struggle for influence" in a "global battle of narratives". . . . "There is a global battle of narratives going on in which timing is a crucial factor," he said, noting that the focus had shifted from Europe helping China to the other way round. "China is aggressively pushing the message that, unlike the US, it is a responsible and reliable partner. "In the battle of narratives we have also seen attempts to discredit the EU as such and some instances where Europeans have been stigmatised as if all were carriers of the virus. "The point for Europe is this: we can be sure that perceptions will change again as the outbreak and our response to it evolves. But we must be aware there is a geopolitical component including a struggle for influence through spinning and the 'politics of generosity'," Borrell said.⁷

In this context, it becomes clearer why it is that both superpowers have expended so many resources, and why their media apparatus (public and private, directly or indirectly) have been so eagerly complicit in expanding this battle (for example Secretary Pompeo's efforts at the G7 meeting on 26 March 2020 to align EU states against the Chinese and "their" "Wuhan Virus").⁸ It also explains the intensity of responses to assertions by either side of this effort to conflate COVID-19 with the essence of the Chinese or the American way of life. That the entire exercise is unnecessary and a distraction is beyond question. That it evidences the problem of internal control of factions in times of crisis, leaving core leadership little space for de-escalation. And even the effort to contest efforts by each side to paint the other as the disease behind the epidemic itself underlines the fundamental ideological battle the contest represents. The little skirmish around a Danish satirical cartoon nicely frames the context and the quantum of distraction that these elite battles over "authorized" versions of discourse pose for COVID-19 measures.

⁶ Kimmy Yam, "House members introduce resolution to pin coronavirus blame on China," NBC News (25 March 2020) available https://www.nbcnews.com/news/asian-america/house-members-introduce-resolution-pin-coronavirus-blame-china-n1169051?cid=sm_npd_nn_fb_ma.

⁷ , "EU fires warning shot at China in coronavirus battle of the narratives," *South China Morning Post* (24 March 2020) available <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/diplomacy/article/3076728/eu-fires-warning-shot-china-coronavirus-battle-narratives>.

⁸ Shaun Tandon, "Pompeo attacks Chinese virus campaign at G7 as Europeans seek cooperation," Yahoo News (26 March 2020) available <https://news.yahoo.com/pompeo-says-g7-agrees-china-spreading-virus-disinformation-164946927.html>.



“Jyllands-Posten has remained calm. The paper previously caused a stir in 2005 when it published twelve [cartoons depicting the central prophet of Islam, Muhammad](#). Editor-in-chief Jacob Nybroe said the point of the cartoon was not to make fun of China and added that the newspaper is not considering apologizing for

something it does not believe is wrong. "As far as I can see, we are dealing with two different cultural views," Nybroe wrote in the paper. "We have a strong tradition of freedom of expression and caricature in Denmark, and we will continue to have it in the future." He added he did not feel the cartoon violated Danish law. Cartoonist Niels Bo Bojesen has often made fun of other countries' flags: He gave the Turkish flag a bullet hole and Saudi Arabia's green flag a dollar bill of the same color. As of Thursday, the paper had maintained its position and not issued an apology. However, it did publish an opinion from Feng Tie, China's ambassador to Denmark, arguing why he believed it was wrong and offensive to publish the cartoon.”⁹

The Deutsche Welle article also noted that the irresistible impulse to respond in kind. “So far, the Chinese have responded by denigrating the Danish flag and circulating images online depicting it with swastikas, sanitary towels and as a coffin.”¹⁰ The scuffle reminds people of the obvious: that liberal democratic and Marxist-Leninist systems are founded on different sensibilities, and different ways of looking at the world, that both have insisted on their missionary role in the world (Marxist and liberal democratic internationalism), and that both immorally see in every crisis an opportunity not merely to meet the crisis but to use it in furtherance of their missions to spread the gospel of their supremacy, legitimacy, and authority to impose their own sensibilities on both the willing and unwilling masses. One ought to have no quibble about these titanic contests over narrative—certainly these have gone on in contemporary forms since the consolidation of Western (Roman) and Asian (Han dynasty consolidation) around the time that Jesus of Nazareth walked the Earth. Yet their human costs in the shadow of pandemic ought to give pause as to the cost of these impulses in context.

Plague is not the only instance in which political societies seek to conflate disease or moral disorder with the political weakness of a rival.¹¹ And it is here that one hears the strains of the dueling

⁹ “China angry over coronavirus cartoon in Danish newspaper,” Deutsche Welle available <https://www.dw.com/en/china-angry-over-coronavirus-cartoon-in-danish-newspaper/a-52196383> (internal cite to “Mohammed cartoons have lasting effect,” DW available <https://www.dw.com/en/mohammed-cartoons-have-lasting-effect/a-15878492>).

¹⁰ “China angry over coronavirus cartoon in Danish newspaper,” supra.

¹¹ For a discussion in the context of the conflation of sexual, religious, and moral behavior, and the alignment of corruption that follows from breach of each, see, Larry Catá Backer, “Emasculated Men, Effeminate Law in the United States, Zimbabwe

banjos playing the music of the *dance macabre* which both states appear to be unable to resist. There is little to say about the global campaigns of both states to blame the other for the manufacture of the plague, or to the laxity or cultural failings that led to its spread. Both seek to play the basest--but usually most effective--tune to inflame mass opinion, conflating the plague with military objectives that seek to destabilize the other state. These are effective though pathetic in the most basic sense of that term (to cause suffering or calamity). More interesting, however, is the popular expression of this dueling banjos tune when the door is opened by the state--the Chinese and American efforts of (private) elements to seek to assert legal claims against the government of the other for plague related damages. It is here that states indulge their love of *opera buffa* the principal requirements of which have always been clear diction and a facility with patter. That is evident from both Chinese¹² and US¹³ efforts. A publicity stunt?--of course; a sign (in the semiotic sense) of the popularization of the narrative at play in this contest among great powers?--certainly.

In the end, however, one is left empty. The great battles--and the national resources devoted to them--over the characterization of the plague suggests one of the more unsavory elements of the COVID-19 crisis. That is the irresistible temptation for states to use the plague not just to further their own interests but also to reaffirm (or perhaps to reassure themselves) of the value and legitimacy of their political-economic model.

and Malaysia,” *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* 17(1);1-63 (2005) available <https://digitalcommons.law.yale.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1220&context=yjlf>.

¹² 反击！中国律师对美总统发出律师函：必须向全国 14 亿人道歉 中创法律人 (25 March 2020), available <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/9DLXfeQr5mzEpx20rJWOw>.

¹³ Logan Alters et al. v. People’s Republic of China, Case 1:20-cv-21108-UU (S.D.FI) (13 March 2020) available <https://images.law.com/contrib/content/uploads/documents/392/85094/Coronavirus-China-class-action.pdf>; discussed in Amanda Bronstad, “Class Action Filed Against China Over COVID-19 Outbreak,” *Law.com* (13 March 2020) available <https://www.law.com/dailybusinessreview/2020/03/13/class-action-filed-against-china-over-covid-19-outbreak/>.