

The systemic nature of swine flu

TAKIS FOTOPOULOS

The record so far

It is now generally accepted that the first wave of the swine flu (which has been renamed —as a result of heavy pressure by the transnational meat corporations for obvious commercial reasons— H1N1, whereas the Zionist Israeli government decided to call it “Mexico flu” on the grounds that “religious Jews do not eat pork”!)^[1] did not create the havoc that was originally expected. Thus, for instance, as the case of Britain shows, —a country severely affected by the epidemic— the death toll is much lower than the one predicted even a few months ago. In July, shortly after the World Health Organisation declared the first flu pandemic in 40 years, Britain's Chief Medical Officer, Sir Liam Donaldson, published a worst-case scenario suggesting the country should plan for up to 65,000 deaths. That planning assumption has since been revised downwards twice. In September the “worst case” was cut to 19,000 deaths, and in October it was cut again to 1,000 deaths. It should be noted that previous pandemics have had higher death tolls. In 1918 the Spanish H1N1 flu claimed an estimated 230,000 lives in Britain and up to 50 million worldwide. In 1957-58, Asian HN2 flu caused 1.5 to 2 million deaths worldwide and 33,000 in Britain. That was followed by Hong Kong H3N2 flu in 1968-69 which caused one million deaths worldwide of which 30,000 were in Britain. In fact, so far, the flu has caused 6,394 deaths worldwide, of which 154 have been in the UK.^[2]

Of course, the fact that the impact of the swine flu so far has been rather mild, both in terms of its death toll and in terms of its symptoms to most people, does not rule out the possibility that the virus may mutate and come back in a new virulent wave later this Winter or next. In fact, the rapidly evolving strains which constitute the new virus that mix bird, pig and human forms could throw up a particularly deadly variety and health experts have been warning for years about the danger of intensive livestock farming creating new and rampant human diseases. But, even in its present rather mild form, swine flu is very nasty in some people —especially children under-five years of age, pregnant women and those with chronic illnesses— and has killed perfectly healthy young people. In this respect, it is significantly different from seasonal flu which mainly kills the vulnerable elderly —a fact usually ignored by one type of plot theories we shall see next.

Plot theories on the swine flu

In fact, a whole series of plot theories, usually contradicting each other, have been developed and promoted, particularly in the internet, concerning the swine flu.

Thus, one group of such “theories”, which mainly flourished in the Spring and the Summer,

when the flu incidents were still very low in numbers, argued that the disease was not going to be a really dangerous pandemic, despite the warnings of the WHO and the mass media hype all over the world. According to this scenario, the obvious aim of this campaign, which the transnational pharmaceutical corporations had every reason to promote, directly or indirectly, was the creation of panic among the public which would allow the political elites to adopt expensive plans in buying antivirus medicine like Tamiflu or anti-flu vaccines—all of which, “by coincidence”, are made by a handful of TNCs (Roche, Baxter, Glaxo, etc) that have obviously found a very lucrative way to overcome the effects of the world crisis on their finances. The inevitable conclusion was that no one should be vaccinated because of the risks involved and the fact that no need for such action was necessary anyway.

Another group of plot “theories” supported the opposite case, i.e., of the high risks involved in the spreading of the virus, but, also, in the ways suggested by the medical establishment to deal with it. The conclusion drawn was the same with the one derived by the other set of plot theories above, although based on a different rationale. Thus, the scenario here involved the existence of a high-level scheme among the international elites—a plot in which even the arch-plotter (and arch-criminal as well) Henry Kissinger is involved— whose aim is the enforced reduction of the world population by one billion or so, given the extreme pressure that “excess population” creates on the Earth’s resources. The means of achieving this aim, according to one version of this plot theory, is the spreading of the virus itself, whereas according to another version is the anti-virus vaccine!

Irrationalism in medical practice and research

I will not consider in more detail these nonsensical “theories”, as they are obviously not based on the rational method of drawing conclusions, i.e., the development of logically consistent and coherent hypotheses which are compatible with empirical data. Particularly so, as a basic tenet of the Inclusive Democracy project is that democracy is only compatible with a democratic rationalism, namely, a rationalism founded in democracy as a structure and a process of social self-institution, as I have defined it elsewhere^[3]. However, it is important to stress the significance of this phenomenon that is indicative of a much wider slide towards the irrationalism^[4] characterising our era, which sometimes even takes the form of a pseudo-scientific rationalism^[5]. In this context, it is not surprising that the same irrationalism dominates the various forms of “alternative” medicine, which, exploiting the anxiety of patients (particularly in life-threatening diseases), push them into irrational and therefore unreliable practices, for which they later pay a high price, even with their own lives. This does not mean of course that orthodox medicine is anything near perfect. Far from it, particularly today when it suffers from the same concentration of power at the hands of economic and political elites that is the cause of every other aspect of the present multidimensional crisis.^[6]

Thus, the role of transnational corporations (TNCs) in determining not only medical practice but even medical research is well known.^[7] On top of this, public health suffers also from the shrinking of welfare states in the West, following the collapse of social democracy and the slashing of the growth of expenditures on health, the introduction of various schemes of private-public finance in medical research, or even the criminal straightforward privatisation of health services. In other words, various versions of the criminal US model are being implemented, despite the fact that this model deprives almost 50 million Americans of any

sort of adequate health provision, whereas the “Obama plan” still maintains the dominance of the profit-seeking private sector in covering the most basic human need! Furthermore, medical errors^[8], sometimes due to the fact that unsupervised junior doctors are forced to work many hours (so that hospitals are “efficient” and consultants can have more time available for other activities) are also common. However, all these are just symptoms of letting medical practice and research to be determined by the needs of the market system rather than by human needs. At the same time, it should not be forgotten that orthodox medicine, unlike the various forms of ‘alternative’ medicine, is part of science, which is based on rational methods of inquiry. Science is a basic element of autonomy itself, given that it is not based on any kind of dogmas or permanent “truths”, irrational beliefs, etc.^[9] Therefore, recognition of the serious flaws of orthodox medicine, particularly in the era of TNCs, should never lead to a regression to medieval forms or methods of medicine!

In the same climate of mistrust which the activities of TNCs create, it is not surprising that many people all over the world, including a large part of people in the medical profession itself, do not trust the vaccines against the swine flue, and consequently are not willing to get vaccinated. There is no doubt, of course, that the new vaccine, as any other vaccine or drug, may have significant side effects —sometimes dangerous even to life itself. However, as a rule, these risks weigh much less than the diseases themselves and, although over 60 million people all over the world have already been vaccinated, no dangerous side effects have yet been discovered. Yet, many are concerned that the hasty way in which the vaccine has been prepared and tested by the TNCs to meet demand may hide serious long-term risks, which may have not been adequately evaluated.

The systemic character of the swine flu and of the measures taken against it

This brings us to the systemic nature of the flu and the ways suggested to deal with it by the medical establishment and the elites. “Systemic”, according to the Inclusive Democracy project, means that it is fully compatible with the system of the capitalist market economy and its political complement, representative “democracy”. It is important to stress this because at the present time, the reformist Left in particular tends to obscure the meaning of the term “system” to include anything from the entire era of modernity up to neoliberal globalisation, so that the most blatant reformist policy could be correspondingly defined as anti-systemic!

The systemic nature of the new flu is confirmed by the following facts:

1. The development of the new flu has been persuasively shown that is mainly due to the intensive factory farming system, which is a by-product of capitalist (neoliberal) globalisation. As Mike Davis points out^[10]:

“Virologists have long believed that the intensive agricultural system of southern China is the principal engine of influenza mutation: both seasonal “drift” and episodic genomic “shift”. But the corporate industrialisation of livestock production has broken China’s natural monopoly on influenza evolution. Animal husbandry in recent decades has been transformed into something that more

closely resembles the petrochemical industry than the happy family farm depicted in school readers.”

Thus, whereas, for instance, in 1965 —before neoliberal globalisation was set in motion— there were 53m US hogs in more than 1m farms, today, 65m hogs are concentrated in 65,000 facilities!^[11] In fact, it was in one of these “facilities” that, according to all available evidence, the new flu originated. The epicentre of the flu outbreak was a giant industrial pig complex jointly owned by the world’s largest pig processor, Smithfield Foods, just inside the Mexican side of the border with the US.

Here is a graphic description of this corporation’s activities and their impact on local population:^[12]

It is the very nature of today’s globalised meat industry that is at the heart of this emerging swine flu pandemic. The factory unit near La Gloria fattens nearly a million pigs a year. Globally Smithfield slaughtered 26 million pigs in 2006, generating sales of \$11.4bn (£7.6bn) and profits of \$421m. It already controls over a quarter of the total US processed pork market and it has expanded by acquisition in Europe (...) Smithfield’s intensive factories of densely packed hogs, like those of the rest of the large-scale industry, produce vast lagoons of foul-smelling discharges. In many of the areas where it has sited its factory farms or slaughtering and processing complexes, activists and locals have campaigned against it, accusing it of environmental pollution, labour rights abuses and in some places operating without proper permits. The people of La Gloria have had long run-ins with the company’s nearby subsidiary Granjas Carroll. When 60% of the town’s population became ill in March with flu-like symptoms, they quickly blamed the pigs (...) In Mexico as in many poorer countries, industrial pig and poultry farms are increasingly sited close to crowded urban populations, making simultaneous infection by different flu strains more likely.

As another report^[13] stresses, on top of any questions about the barbaric treatment of the pigs, the sheer quantities of manure that have to be disposed of when thousands, or tens of thousands, of animals are housed together make it impossible to run this business in a safe way. Smithfield’s past record with respect to the environment is well known. Thus, in 1997 Smithfield was fined \$12.6m for violation of the federal Clean Water Act. Its most recent financial reports show it is being sued in Missouri by residents near a facility there who accuse it of being a public nuisance, while a farm in Pennsylvania is under federal investigation over releases into the local water in 2007. Of course, Smithfield is far from an isolated “bad nut” —as reformists present similar cases. It is very much a typical TNC working under the conditions created by the present internationalised form of the system of the market economy.

Finally, as a recent study^[14] concluded, there is no doubt today that the intensive farming of animals is at the heart of the swine flu pandemic. This is particularly so today, when a study from Andrew Rambaut’s lab at the University of Edinburgh confirmed the existence of a direct link from pigs to the human swine flu virus. As the same study pointed out, the virus comes from a tribe of flu viruses that emerged in US pigs in 1998 and became the dominant pig flu in North America. In fact, scientists, as early as 2003, warned about the indications showing that

“after years of stability, the North American swine flu virus has jumped onto an evolutionary fasttrack” that was posing a real risk of making a species jump and becoming a human pandemic.

2. The spreading of the flu is directly related to the economic interests of the tourist industries and airlines. Thus, whereas the first flu incidents appeared in Mexico, in February of this year, the Mexican elites did not inform the WHO and other international organisations before another two months had lapsed, presumably, in order not to harm their tourist industry —their “heavy industry” in terms of its economic significance in this country. Thus, as Stephen Foley reported at the time, “starting in February, one in six of the 3,000 residents reported health problems. The government initially dismissed the spike as a late-season rise in ordinary flu, but by April, health officials sealed off the town and sprayed chemicals to kill the flies that residents said were swarming about their homes”.^[15] Needless to add that even when the Mexican elites did inform the international health organisations, no steps were taken for the restriction or even the cancelling of flights to the infected areas, so that the interests of the tourist industry and airlines could not be significantly affected. It is not surprising, therefore, that when the European Union’s health commissioner urged Europeans to avoid nonessential travel to Mexico and the US, she was immediately reprimanded by the European and US elites and the WHO itself!

No wonder that in today’s globalised world, linked by air travel, flu, which is a highly infectious disease, spread to a dozen countries in as many days. And of course, the more it spreads the higher the number of serious incidents and deaths, even if the average expected death rate is currently low. The 1957 pandemic, for instance, had only a 0.1 per death rate, but because it infected 30 to 70 per cent of the population it killed two million people worldwide; even seasonal flu infects up to 6 per cent of the population in an average year.^[16]

3. The measures taken by the elites to deal with the swine flu are such that they directly promote the interests of the pharmaceutical industry. Thus, even at this stage of the first wave of the flu that is characterised by relatively mild symptoms, the significance of preventive measures is minimised (apart from the vaccines themselves), whereas vaccines and antivirus drugs are distributed widely despite their potentially serious long-term effects. In other words, health systems all over the world do not even wait for a serious deterioration of the situation due to the appearance of a new wave involving a nastier mutated version of the virus, i.e. a development which would surely make necessary the immediate taking of drastic measures at a massive scale.

Conclusions

Today’s global crisis is not just a multidimensional crisis extending from the economic to the ecological fields and from the political to the social; it is also a serious biological crisis which is expressed with the dramatic worsening of the public health, as a result of its deadly embrace by the pharmaceutical TNCs and the planetary catastrophe brought about by the intensive agricultural system that accompanied the flourishing of neoliberal globalisation and the reproduction of consumer society all over the world. Factory animal farming in particular has delivered enormous growth in global meat production over the last three decades, with consumers persuaded to buy its cheap products with the same ease as they were getting the freely-offered loans of the financial boom, without asking any questions on how such

consumption could be sustained or what the eventual consequences might be. It is, therefore, not surprising at all that the outbreak of swine flu in Mexico is linked to industrialised farming methods designed to provide cheap food for consumers.

The multidimensional crisis and now the biological crisis provide ample evidence that what is good for the elites who control not only our way of living but our survival itself is far from good for us. Furthermore, the elites' actions show why it is so imperative to build a massive movement for the establishment of a genuine democracy, an Inclusive Democracy, so that it is ourselves, rather than criminal elites interested only in making more money, who decide what our needs are and how best to meet them.-

[1] Chris McGreal, Severin Carrell & Patrick Wintour, "Pandemic level up from 3 to 4", *The Guardian* (28/4/2009).

[2] Jeremy Laurance, "Pandemic? What flu pandemic?," *The Independent* (10/11/2009).

[3] See Takis Fotopoulos, *Towards An Inclusive Democracy*, (Cassell/Continuum) ch. 8 and in .pdf form at: <http://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/journal/>

[4] See Takis Fotopoulos, "The Rise of New Irrationalism and its Incompatibility with Inclusive Democracy," *Democracy & Nature*, Vol. 4, Nos. 2/3, issue 11/12, double issue (1998), http://www.democracynature.org/vol4/fotopoulos_irrationalism.htm ; see also the Dialogue on irrationalism at: <http://www.inclusivedemocracy.org/journal/dialogues.htm>

[5] See Takis Fotopoulos, "The Rise of the Techno-scientific Irrationalism", (in this issue).

[6] See Takis Fotopoulos, *The Multidimensional Crisis and Inclusive Democracy* (IJID, 2005), www.inclusivedemocracy.org/journal/ss/ss.htm

[7] See e.g., Johann Hari, "Drug companies are the biggest funders of university research – and they want a return," *The Independent* (17/11/2009); see also Sarah Boseley and Rob Evans, "Drug giants accused over doctors' perks," *The Guardian* (23/8/2008).

[8] Sarah Hall, "Medical error death risk 1 in 300," *The Guardian* (7/11/2006).

[9] See Takis Fotopoulos, *Towards An Inclusive Democracy* (Cassell/Continuum), ch. 8.

[10] Mike Davis, "The swine flu crisis lays bare the meat industry's monstrous power," *The Guardian* (27/4/2009).

[11] Ibid.

[12] Felicity Lawrence, "The pigs' revenge," *The Guardian* (2/5/2009).

[13] Stephen Foley, "For La Gloria, the stench of blame is from pig factories," *The Independent* (29/4/2009).

[14] Debora MacKenzie, consultant, "Pork industry is blurring the science of swine flu," *New Scientist* (30/4/2009).

[15] Stephen Foley, "For La Gloria, the stench of blame is from pig factories."

[16] Jeremy Laurance, "Global panic or media hype? After the week swine flu went worldwide," *The Guardian* (2/5/2009).