

# Demonising China during Covid-19

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When confronted by problems they cannot solve, people everywhere tend to find someone to blame. ‘The blame game’ is the default technique to shift responsibility for fixing problems by blaming those deemed to have caused the problem in the first place. At least since biblical times, the blame game has been a favoured way of dealing with problems – identify a scapegoat, then send it off into the desert to expiate the sins of the community that brought down the wrath of God and His punishment. Besides scapegoating and finger pointing, the rules of the blame game give expression to another common practice – the creation of binaries that identify agency as good or bad, right or wrong, moral or immoral. The scapegoat, of course, is always bad, wrong and immoral.

But the real attraction of the blame game is that it externalises responsibility, locating it in some external world over which those who are experiencing the problem have no control. The evil empire is always out there, plotting against us and seeking to hurt us, or else a vengeful God is constantly on the lookout for things for which to punish us. The blame game is the preferred sport of the paranoid. So the preacher who runs President Trump’s weekly bible class blames the outbreak of Covid-19 on environmentalism and the “proclivity toward lesbianism and homosexuality”<sup>1</sup>, while another fundamentalist pastor blames abortion and marriage equality.<sup>2</sup> And as the UK’s *Pink News* reports, God’s punishment for same sex marriage has been meted out despite the fact that it is banned in Italy and China.<sup>3</sup> But it is not just conservative Christian ministers who find someone to blame for the current pandemic. *The*

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<sup>1</sup> See Nicole Darrah, “What the Hell”, *The U.S.Sun*, 25 March 2020 <https://www.the-sun.com/news/589777/donald-trump-ralph-dollinger-coronavirus-bible-study-minister/>

<sup>2</sup> See Hemant Mehta, “Pastor: Coronavirus is God’s Punishment for Legalised Abortion and Marriage Equality”, *The Friendly Atheist*, 18 March 2020 <https://friendlyatheist.patheos.com/2020/03/18/pastor-coronavirus-is-gods-punishment-for-legalized-abortion-and-gay-marriage/>

<sup>3</sup> See Nick Duffy, “Preacher claims coronavirus is God’s punishment”, *Pink News*, 19 March 2020 <https://www.pinknews.co.uk/2020/03/19/evangelical-perry-stone-coronavirus-god-punishment-same-sex-marriage-china-italy/>

*Jerusalem Post* tells us that hard-line rabbis, Christian pastors and Muslim preachers have all weighed in on the religious significance of the coronavirus, saying “troubled times often lead to rash conclusions about the cause of such difficulties, none more so than by some religious leaders”.<sup>4</sup>

Those of a more secular bent might dismiss these pronouncements with a tolerant “well, they would say that, wouldn’t they?” But in the serious discipline of international relations and security affairs, analysts and commentators writing in reputable journals are just as prone to the blame game as some of the religious leaders. In the case of the coronavirus pandemic, China is the culprit. Unhygienic practices in a wet market in Wuhan and a concerted cover-up by the Chinese Communist Party and President Xi are blamed for unleashing global havoc, locking down millions of people, killing tens of thousands and collapsing the global economy.

Paul Miller, a member of the US National Security Staff during the Bush administration, writing in *Foreign Policy*, is in no doubt.

US President Donald Trump has repeatedly referred to the “Chinese virus” when talking about the pandemic. Many of his critics insist the term is racist, echoing official Chinese talking points. Others . . . say that we should not politicize the crisis by assigning blame, but focus on pulling together in the common fight against a global disease that makes no distinction between people and recognizes no borders. This is nonsense. The crisis is inherently political because it was caused in part by incompetent, malicious, and corrupt politicians. To ignore the political dimension of the coronavirus pandemic is an excellent way to ensure it happens again. If we do not want another global pandemic, we have to hold accountable the politicians responsible for making it worse, chief among them Chinese President Xi Jinping.<sup>5</sup>

A practised blame gamer, Professor Miller doesn’t hold back.

Simply put, the Chinese government does not give a damn about the Chinese people, which is why it ignores markets where the food is filthy and carries disease. . . . Those markets have now killed thousands of Chinese citizens—and

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<sup>4</sup> See Jeremy Sharon, “Religious leaders: Coronavirus is punishment, sign of the Messiah’s coming”, *Jerusalem Post*, 17 March 2020 <https://www.jpost.com/International/Religious-leaders-Coronavirus-is-punishment-sign-of-the-messiahs-coming-621339>

<sup>5</sup> See Paul D. Miller, “Yes, Blame China for the Virus”, *Foreign Policy*, 25 March 2020 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/25/blame-china-and-xi-jinping-for-coronavirus-pandemic/>

they also turn out to be the greatest threat to the national security and economy of the United States and other countries in 2020. That the Chinese government, beginning in late 2019, lied and directly contributed to the creation of a global pandemic, the deaths of thousands of people, and a global economic collapse, is evidently true, and they deserve blame and accountability for it. . . . The Chinese government, not the wet markets, is the most thoroughly diseased and decaying institution in the world.

Professor Miller's argument is conveniently unencumbered by any recourse to science, or to health policy for that matter. Rather, the coronavirus is a political problem, because it represents a failure of governance. Who better to blame than an autocratic regime that is more invested in face-saving than in the welfare of its own people, or people anywhere else in the world?

He is not alone in his allocating blame to China's leadership. Reacting, perhaps, to the racist overtones in the term "Chinese virus", *The Hill's* opinion writer has no hesitation in blaming President Xi for the pandemic, though President Trump is blameworthy for having failed to act quickly enough. And when, as now seems inevitable, the US public health system is overwhelmed by Covid-19 cases, the blame will lie even more squarely with President Xi rather than decades of American underinvestment in public health and growth in social disadvantage.

Amid the worldwide pandemic caused by the novel coronavirus, one must acknowledge that we face many deep-rooted political problems in the United States. President Trump is certainly to blame for failing to act quickly on the threat posed by the virus. But blame for the widespread impact of this palpable global pandemic is on the hands of one person alone: Chairman of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Xi Jinping.<sup>6</sup>

And just in case anyone thinks that the blame game is a particularly American preoccupation, Australian commentators and scholars are equally attracted to it. Here's Michael Shoebridge of the Australian Strategic Policy Institute.

Coronavirus is a hazard that is thought to have arisen from the sale of exotic live animals in meat markets. But its early spread and movement towards a global pandemic were stoked by the damaging effect the fundamental design

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<sup>6</sup> See Austin Lowe, "Blame Xi, not China, for the impact of the coronavirus", *The Hill (Washington)*, 25 March 2020 <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/489017-blame-xi-not-china-for-the-impact-of-the-coronavirus>

of Chinese Communist Party rule had on early identification and containment. The party sees early reporting on a novel virus as rumour-mongering that might reflect poorly on its rule and cause 'social instability', so such information must be denied and repressed.<sup>7</sup>

The other dimension of the blame game, of course, is to note China's trickery and disinformation in turning its pandemic containment lockdowns into a stunning "people's victory" in the coronavirus war. Natasha Kassam, writing in the *Nikkei Asian Review*, comments:

China can present itself as a benevolent and responsible world power, stepping up to the plate. This accords with the ambitions of China's leaders to demonstrate that China's system is more effective than that of the West. Xi Jinping's long-standing emphasis on governance reform seeks to show that authoritarian states, like China under him, can coexist and compete in an effective way with established democracies. But China's approach has also evolved into a global push, and most countries are in no position to argue. The shortcomings of others in preparing for this public health crisis have made it almost too easy for China to pivot. Buried in our own crises that we should have seen coming, China's leaders are rewriting history so that they are not held responsible for the world's fatalities, disruption and inevitable economic recession. By buying this propaganda line, we are effectively erasing the many missteps and governance failures at the outset of this crisis and the thousands of documented and likely undocumented deaths of victims in China, many of whom were front line health care workers. But the story of China's victory in the "people's war" against COVID-19 has already been written.<sup>8</sup>

As President Trump ramps up his anti-Chinese rhetoric in support of his re-election strategy, the blame game is taking on an even more competitive character with calls for an independent international inspectorate to determine the source of major disease outbreaks.<sup>9</sup> In what is widely interpreted as an attempt to marginalise China internationally, the US President, supported by the Australian Prime Minister, is

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Shoebridge, "Coronavirus and the death of Xi's 'China Dream'", *The Strategist*, 28 February 2020 <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/coronavirus-and-the-death-of-xis-china-dream/>

<sup>8</sup> See Natasha Kassam, "China is rewriting Coronavirus history and nobody will stop it", reprinted in *The Interpreter*, 23 March 2020 <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/publications/china-rewriting-coronavirus-history-and-nobody-will-stop-it>

<sup>9</sup> See Malcolm Farr, "Australian PM pushes for WHO overhaul including power to send in investigators", *The Guardian* (Australia), 22 April 2020 <https://www.theguardian.com/australia-news/2020/apr/22/australian-pm-pushes-for-who-overhaul-including-power-to-send-in-investigators>

demanding that China submit itself to an independent international inspection of the origins of the coronavirus and the transmission of the virus from Wuhan to the world. And because of alleged shortcomings on the part of the World Health Organisation (WHO) – also attributed to China – there are demands for reform of the WHO. So blame is now extended to a UN agency that is dismissed as a Chinese puppet.

Language matters, and China has evidently taken offence at the word ‘independent’, to the point of threatening trade retaliation.<sup>10</sup> Careless threats to key economic relationships by any party are self-defeating. What matters in this case is an internationally supported, evidence-based and properly scientific investigation into the origins and aetiology of the Covid-19 virus – an investigation that will necessarily involve China – and consequent expert recommendations regarding best international practice in pandemic management.

As they stand, Prime Minister Morrison’s proposals – the creation of an inspectorate and WHO reform – have little chance of success. China will no more open itself to an independent international inspection than would the US, Russia or any of the other permanent members of the UN Security Council. These proposals are another example of the politicisation of an international crisis when calm collaboration and cooperation are required. And, of course, the chances of effective international cooperation are eroded when patient and unobtrusive diplomacy is replaced by the megaphone broadcasting loose language.

The blame game may well make its players feel vindicated and provide an engrossing distraction to the significantly more difficult task of problem solving, especially when those problems are ‘wicked’, revealing systemic breakdowns as contributors to contagion. Demonising the Chinese Communist Party and President Xi certainly externalises the Covid-19 problem, but it does not resolve it. China is an easy target: it’s big, it’s often clumsy in its diplomacy, overbearing towards its neighbours, and just as susceptible to the blame game as its competitors. Blaming ‘the West’ for a century of slights and disrespect is part of China’s contemporary national narrative and feeds its particular form of xenophobia. And, of course, China is just as capable of exploitative and predatory practices as are its great power competitors: witness the

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<sup>10</sup> See Andrew Tillett, “China consumer backlash looms over Morrison’s coronavirus review”, *Australian Financial Review*, 26 April 2020. <https://www.afr.com/politics/federal/china-consumer-backlash-looms-over-morrison-s-coronavirus-probe-20200423-p54mpl>. See also the interesting report by Anthony Galloway and Eryk Bagshaw, “Australia could lose billions from Chinese government boycott threat”, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 April 2020, where the Foreign Minister Marise Payne is reported to have “slapped down” China’s threat. <https://www.smh.com.au/politics/federal/australia-could-lose-billions-from-chinese-government-boycott-threat-20200427-p54nmh.html>

behaviour of the two Chinese property developers that purchased several hundred tonnes of drugs and PPE from Australian pharmacies and medical suppliers during January and February 2020 and airfreighted them to China as the epidemic in Wuhan gathered momentum.<sup>11</sup> The mass purchases of baby formula in 2018<sup>12</sup> had only limited impact in Australia due to the relative strength of the Australian dairying industry, associated manufacturing and Australia's rates of breastfeeding. But the medical supplies exported to China were probably manufactured there, making their replacement less reliable. China is relentless and ruthless when its national interests are at stake.

*The Harvard Business Review* observed a decade ago that playing the blame game never works.

Blaming is contagious. [A set of recent studies](#) . . . showed that merely being exposed to someone else making a blame attribution for a mistake was enough to cause people to turn around and blame others for completely unrelated failures. This is different from the “kick-the-dog” phenomenon, where a person is more likely to blame the person below them in the hierarchy when they, themselves, have been blamed by a higher-up. Instead, it appears that all you have to do to “catch” the blame virus is to be exposed to someone else passing the buck. How does this happen? Our findings, reported in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, demonstrated that goal contagion is at work. The “germ” that spreads is the goal of protecting one's self-image. When people observe others protecting their egos, it spreads. Mood and social learning were ruled out as alternative explanations.<sup>13</sup>

The 'knock on' effect of the blame game is a lack of cohesion and coherence in problem solving strategies. Allocating responsibility is a distraction when the first order issue is 'what to do' rather than 'who did it'. That is one of the many difficulties confronting governments everywhere in dealing with this pandemic. It is as much a problem for President Trump as he seeks to transform a national calamity into political advantage as it was for President Xi whose tardiness transformed an epidemic into a pandemic. But

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<sup>11</sup> See Kate McClymont, “Second developer flew 82 tonnes of medical supplies to China”, *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 March 2020 <https://www.smh.com.au/national/second-developer-flies-82-tonnes-of-medical-supplies-to-china-20200326-p54e8n.html>

<sup>12</sup> See Rebecca Puddy and Rhett Burnie, “China's thirst for baby formula creating problems for Australian shoppers and staff”, *ABC News*, 11 December 2018 <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2018-12-11/abc-investigation-uncovers-chinese-baby-formula-shoppers/10594400>

<sup>13</sup> See Nathanael Fast, “How to Stop the Blame Game”, *Harvard Business Review*, 13 May 2010 <https://hbr.org/2010/05/how-to-stop-the-blame-game>

they are both external actors, neither of them causing the pandemic and neither of them resolving it.

Global catastrophes, whether in the form of general war, tsunamis, climate change induced disasters or pandemics, always reveal deep systemic and structural problems that provide the political and social ‘petrie dishes’ in which catastrophes incubate. While it is as yet too early to identify all the causation factors that underlie the Covid-19 pandemic, it is becoming progressively clearer, as governments everywhere struggle to contain the virus and provide appropriate medical treatment to those suffering the effects of the virus, that major economic and social fault lines have exacerbated the problem. Did they cause it? That’s uncertain. Are they helping to resolve it? Absolutely not.

In an elegant essay published on 21 March 2020, *The Australia Institute’s* Richard Denniss argued that one of these major fault lines – neoliberalism – lies at the heart of the global economic architecture.

For decades, Australians have been sold an imagined poverty. We have been told we need to “rein in” government spending – that if we want to spend more on health or education, we will need to spend less on the aged pension or childcare. The Coalition even has an arbitrary cap on the size of the public sector – 23.9 percent of gross domestic product. Such bizarre targets, which have nothing to do with economic theory, have proved a powerful rhetorical tool.

But the reality is that if we had a bigger public sector today, we would be better prepared to weather the health and economic crises triggered by the coronavirus. Hopefully, by the time we come through this, we will have learnt the lesson once and for all. Because nobody thinks “the market” is best placed to tackle the coronavirus. Nobody thinks governments should step back and let the private sector step in. One of the first casualties of Covid-19 in Australia is the neoliberal rhetoric about government spending being a “cost” to the economy.

As China has shown, if you are interventionist enough, and crush economic activity hard enough, you can stop the spread of Covid-19. As Italy has shown, if you are laissez-faire, you will overwhelm your hospitals. There is no avoiding this

choice. Delay and dissembling will deliver the worst health and economic outcomes.<sup>14</sup>

In many ways, Reaganism and Thatcherism represented the capitulation of government to an unconstrained form of capitalism managed by ‘the market’, itself an amoral and anomic ecosystem run by an economic elite that put profit before people, and convinced governments that unbridled free-marketeteering, with all its unfulfilled (and unfulfillable) promises of ‘trickle down’, was the real engine of prosperity. ‘The market’, with its emphasis on short-term return on investment rather than long-term investment itself, has provided the main constraints on nations’ ability to enact effective climate change mitigation policies, and has established the preconditions for a pandemic disaster. What the coronavirus is doing is to highlight what happens when governments fail to provide the social infrastructure required for a healthy and happy community. People die because the public health system is under-resourced because of chronic under-funding.

President Xi’s “capitalism with Chinese characteristics” is just another autocratic version of the same philosophy that sees people as simply another economic input.

Because a biological phenomenon like Covid-19 relies on systemic issues for its lethality, those systemic issues – most of them global in nature – are what must be addressed. Governments must regain control so that communities have the scientific resources to identify vectors like Coronavirus early and treat them quickly. Governments must invest in the well-being of the governed, whether they are electors (in the democracies) or subjects (in the autocracies). Fundamentally, governments of whatever character need to recognise their responsibility for (and accountability to, one might hope) the people who constitute the nation state.

This, as our present crisis is reminding us every day, demands a new global consensus that allows governments to design and implement the rules by which the global community operates in the interests of humanity as a whole. And a new global consensus requires all states, especially the rich and powerful, to collaborate in the interests of the global community. In re-writing the global rules (and China, incidentally, was excluded from the rule-writing that took place in the immediate aftermath of WW2), as in managing the Covid-19 pandemic, that includes China. Demonising China, seeking to penalise China by squeezing its economy, will not generate the outcomes that the global community demands. Rather, the key to ‘fixing’ both the present coronavirus

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<sup>14</sup> See Richard Denniss, “Spending the right message”, *The Saturday Paper*, 21-27 March 2020 <https://www.thesaturdaypaper.com.au/opinion/topic/2020/03/21/how-australia-can-avoid-economic-collapse-the-wake-covid-19/15847092009558>



pandemic and preventing, so far as possible, a reoccurrence lies in an active, confident, constructive and energetic international diplomacy that reflects and promotes the fundamental truth that all human beings have dignity and worth because of our shared humanity.