

Empires of Panic

Epidemics and Colonial Anxieties

Edited by Robert Peckham

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Introduction

Panic: Reading the Signs

Robert Peckham

A persistent theme in colonial archives is the anxiety induced by Asia's immensity: by the scale of its territories and the magnitude and diversity of its populations. For many colonial agents, Asia's unruly vastness appeared to defy classificatory logic. The nineteenth-century records of the Dutch East Indies, for example, reveal the uncertain knowledge of those who governed, and the unease generated by rumors of local dissent.¹ Rather than evincing the operations of a centralized and sagacious colonial state, the documents disclose pervasive doubt and uncertainty.

Colonial insecurity prompted the creation of ring-fenced spaces, enclaves of certitude to mitigate the "indefinite and pervasive anxiety about being lost in empire."² As Ranajit Guha has observed, "anxiety" rather than "fear" is perhaps more appropriate to describe this colonial response, since it was not justified by a "definite causality."³ There was frequently no identifiable reason for colonial disquiet, other than an indeterminate foreboding; a sense that something was about to happen.

In the crown colony of Hong Kong and in Britain's quasi-colonial outposts in China (see Chapters 2 and 6 of this volume), where small numbers of colonials presided over much larger Chinese populations, this latent anxiety was often foregrounded by sporadic anti-Western demonstrations. In his report on the 1891 census, Hong Kong's registrar general noted that European residents were beginning to regard the colony "more as a permanent home, which has led to there being more of what may be called a 'family life' than formerly." Nonetheless, out of a total population of 221,441, there were only 795 British men and 300 women.⁴ Although unintelligible to the majority of Westerners who had no knowledge of Chinese, indigenous "placards" and the circulating rumors that invariably accompanied them called forth a language of colonial counterinsurgency. This was certainly the case in 1894, when anti-British

1. Ann Laura Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009).

2. Ranajit Guha, "Not at Home in Empire," *Critical Inquiry*, vol. 23, no. 3 (1997): 482–93 (484).

3. *Ibid.*, 485.

4. The number Europeans and Americans in the colony, including military and naval personnel, was 8,545 according to the 1891 census; "Census Report 1891," *Hongkong Sessional Papers* (1891), 373–95 (374).

notices began appearing in Hong Kong and subsequently in the streets of Canton (Guangzhou), even as colonial authorities sought to manage an outbreak of bubonic plague with draconian sanitary interventions, including house-to-house visitations (for an account of the plague in India, see Chapter 5).

The colony's governor, Sir William Robinson, condemned the "literati" who were responsible for producing the "libellous and malicious placards."⁵ Rumors circulated amongst the Chinese "that the Government had resolved, in order to stop the plague, to select a few children from each School to excise their livers in order to provide the only remedy which would cure plague patients." As a consequence, "a panic spread, like wild fire" among the local population.⁶ Pressure was exerted by the British on the Chinese authorities in Canton to put a stop to the "lying rumours regarding the treatment of the sick in Hongkong,"⁷ to prevent the "falsifications invented by story spreading," and to apprehend the "trouble creating scoundrels."⁸ Panic was both contagious and circular, produced by and producing rumor. The "panic-stricken" Chinese sparked panic in the colonial authorities who were perennially alert to the possibilities of sedition and rebellion, while the plague itself promoted wild rumors and a panicked flight of Chinese and Europeans alike. On May 31, 1894, European susceptibility to the disease was demonstrated when Captain George Vesey of the Shropshire Regiment contracted the plague, dying a few days later. "The flight from the colony to Japan and home was now almost a panic," noted Dr. James Lowson, acting superintendent of the Government Civil Hospital, in his diary.⁹ As Veena Das has observed in her account of rumor in India, such "panic rumors created a kind of screen in which aggressors came to identify themselves and even experience themselves as victims."¹⁰

While seditious placards were being reported in the Hong Kong press, there was intelligence from India of trees being mysteriously daubed with mud.¹¹ In a manner reminiscent of the circulation of *chapatis* (unleavened Indian bread) by watchmen through the districts of northern India immediately before the 1857 Uprising, the daubed-trees were decoded by mistrustful colonials as an ominous sign of pending

5. "Governor's Despatch to the Secretary of State with Reference to the Plague," *Hongkong Sessional Papers* (1894), 283–92 (285).

6. "Educational Report for 1894," *Hongkong Sessional Papers* (1895), 447–63 (450).

7. "Government Notification No. 318," *Hongkong Government Gazette*, September 1, 1894, 731.

8. "Government Notification No. 223," *Hongkong Government Gazette*, June 9, 1894, 506.

9. G. H. Choa, "The Lowson Diary: A Record of the Early Phase of the Hong Kong Bubonic Plague 1894," *Journal of the Hong Kong Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, vol. 33 (1993): 129–45 (135).

10. Veena Das, *Life and Words: Violence and the Descent into the Ordinary* (Berkeley: California University Press, 2007), 111.

11. On the placards, see, for example, "The Hongkong Government and Chinese Traitors," *Hongkong Telegraph*, May 24, 1894, 2; on tree daubing, see "Tree Daubing in India," *Hongkong Telegraph*, June 30, 1894, 3.

native insurrection.¹² The coincidental enumeration of singular events, namely the posting of malicious placards and the daubing of trees, could suggest spatial and temporal continuities. Signs read as evidence of imminent revolt in one place at one time might provide a key for decrypting similarly inscrutable signs in another setting.¹³ Rumor and panic, Das writes, “actualize certain regions of the past and create a sense of continuity between events that might otherwise seem unconnected.”¹⁴

Colonial responses to such events highlight the uncertain knowledge that structured colonial protocol, the misrecognition that this gave rise to, and the critical role of (mis)communication in producing panic. As Alison Bashford aptly remarks in the epilogue to this book, panic is closely connected “with communication, the touch of words, so close etymologically, to contagion. Communication and its means—its media—are always required for panic to become a phenomenon beyond the individual and beyond the local. This ‘touch’ is how panic spreads, how it is communicated or ‘made common.’” The precise meaning of these communications, however, was often in doubt. As an article entitled “What the Chinese Really Think of Europeans” noted in *Fraser’s Magazine* in 1871: “Outwardly the Chinese appear to be on friendly terms with foreigners, but in their secret hearts they thoroughly dislike them.”¹⁵ Here was the ambiguity of communication in a colonial context, where outward forms and inner intent were invariably assumed to be discrepant, even as society was organized around the black-and-white racial politics of face value. Agents of the colonial state tended to assume that operative governance involved getting beneath “the surface of affairs” in order to anticipate the violent manifestations of native “dislike” in agitation and open revolt. This was a process that called for surveillance, information gathering, and elaborate intelligence-assessment practices—crucial dimensions of what Bernard Cohn has called colonialism’s “investigative modalities.”¹⁶

The entangled panics in southern China and India in 1894 illustrate a number of themes explored in this book: first, the ways in which panics across the British Empire were understood to reprise earlier panic events with history providing a critical context for reading the present and anticipating the future; second, the extent to which panics were invariably conceptualized as imperial, transcolonial phenomena, intimating a spatial and temporal continuum; third, the role of technologies, including the telegraph, in the creation of new communication circuits that enabled novel

12. Kim A. Wagner, “‘Treading Upon Fires’: The ‘Mutiny’-Motif and Colonial Anxieties in British India,” *Past & Present*, vol. 218, no. 1 (2013): 159–97.

13. Kim A. Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857: Rumours, Conspiracies, and the Making of the Indian Uprising* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2010), 61–77.

14. Das, *Life and Words*, 108.

15. “What the Chinese Really Think of Europeans,” *Fraser’s Magazine. New Series. Vol. III. January to June 1871* (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1871), 395–406 (395).

16. Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1986), 4–5.

forms of panic; fourth, the interrelationship between epidemics and panics, and particularly a contagionist model of panic, which accentuated its “pathogenicity” and “infectivity”; and fifth, the complex manner in which indigenous and colonial panics were coproduced.

Empires of Panic provides comparative and historical perspectives on panic as an imperial phenomenon, particularly, although not exclusively, in relation to epidemics: of cholera, plague, influenza, and late twentieth-century emerging infectious diseases. Although there is now a considerable literature on the effects of panic, surprisingly little attention has been paid to the nature of panics themselves and to the ways in which they have been historically produced, defined, and managed in different settings. In a series of case studies ranging from East Asia to the twenty-first-century United States, contributors explore attempts made by Western government agencies, policymakers, planners, and other authorities to understand, deal with, and neutralize panics elicited by epidemic episodes and other crises. *Empires of Panic* examines how technologies—from telegraphy to medical science and public health—served to convey information about and constrain “panicked” bodies; it investigates the relationship between networks of empire and panics; and, finally, it considers disease threats as producing particular sites of anxiety and forms of collective panic.

In each of the chapters, the focus is on continuities and discontinuities in responses to panic and its interpretation from the early nineteenth century to the present. As Alan Lester notes in Chapter 1, “Empire and the Place of Panic,” each of the chapters is concerned with panic’s *emplacement*: from the topography of pre-Opium War Canton to the hill stations of India, the mapping of disease epidemics, and the containment of panic and infection with the imposition of quarantine measures. The emphasis is predominantly on the British Empire and the English-speaking world with chapters on South Africa, Canton, Hong Kong, India, New Zealand, and the United States. While this Anglo-focus is clearly a limitation, the purpose has been to provide a preliminary overview of imperial panics, paving the way for more in-depth, comparative, and inclusive studies in the future.

Primitive or Modern?

“The frequency of panic has been over-exaggerated,” the sociologist Enrico Quarantelli asserted in the middle of the twentieth century: “Compared with other reactions panic is a relatively uncommon phenomenon.”¹⁷ Since then, many scholars have challenged popular and official representations of panic, arguing that its occurrence is in fact rare in disaster events. Yet, notwithstanding this growing body of evidence and doubts about the value of “panic” as an explanatory category, representations of panic

17. Enrico L. Quarantelli, “The Nature and Conditions of Panic,” *American Journal of Sociology*, vol. 60, no. 3 (1954): 267–75 (275).

continue to pervade the popular media, even as policymakers persist in strategizing on the assumption that panic is a common, if not typical, response to disaster.¹⁸

Today, in part as a result of mass media and digital communication technologies (including the Internet), governments and state agencies around the world are increasingly focused not simply on mitigating the “real” threats posed by natural disasters, pandemics, conflicts, and financial crashes, but equally on handling and allaying virtual anxieties triggered by the potential for such cataclysmic happenings. As Lee Clarke and Caron Chess have commented, “planners and policy makers sometimes act as if the human response to threatening conditions is more dangerous than the threatening conditions themselves.”¹⁹

Panic has been defined as a psychological state or an emotionally charged group response—invariably construed as irrational—to some external menace, whether natural or manmade, actual or imagined.²⁰ It connotes “*a collective flight based on a hysterical belief*.”²¹ Defined as an emotive response, the history of collective panic should, perhaps, be studied in relation to the history of emotions, opening up the question of what emotions are, and how emotion relates to cognition. For example, is panic a social construction or does collective panic, as a particular kind of emotional arousal, have a basis in biology? What is the relationship between the experience of panic and its expression?²²

Panic has been understood, at least from the nineteenth century, as the expression of a “primitive” fear. As the early twentieth-century psychologist William McDougall asserted in his influential analysis of collective psychology, panic was a vestige of man’s animalistic past: “The panic is the crudest and simplest example of collective mental life.”²³ A tension has pervaded and continues to pervade definitions of panic. On the one hand, panic is defined as a throwback to prerational (and premodern) responses, an identification underscored by the word’s etymological derivation

18. There is an expansive bibliography on the “problem” of panic. For a useful overview, see Lee Clarke and Caron Chess who cite Quarantelli: “Elites and Panic: More to Fear than Fear Itself,” *Social Forces*, vol. 87, no. 2 (2008): 993–1014 (994). See also Ben Sheppard, G. James Rubin, Jamie K. Wardman, and Simon Wessely, “Viewpoint: Terrorism and Dispelling the Myth of a Panic Prone Public,” *Journal of Public Health Policy*, vol. 27, no. 3 (2006): 219–45.

19. Clarke and Chess, “Elites and Panic,” 994.

20. As Clarke and Chess note, definitions of “panic” have been inconsistent; *ibid.*, 996. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) defines “panic” as a “sudden feeling of alarm or fear . . . lead[ing] to extravagant or wildly unthinking behaviour.”

21. Neil J. Smelser, *Theory of Collective Behavior* (New York: Free Press, 1962), 131. Original emphasis.

22. See William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001). For an insightful discussion of key issues in the history of emotions, see the “AHR Conversation: The Historical Study of Emotions,” *American Historical Review*, vol. 117, no. 5 (2012): 1487–531.

23. William McDougall, *The Group Mind: A Sketch of the Principles of Collective Psychology with Some Attempt to Apply Them to the Interpretation of National Life and Character* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), 24. See Jackie Orr who quotes and discusses McDougall in *Panic Diaries: A Genealogy of Panic Disorder* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 6.

from the Greek goat-god Pan, associated with the wild, whose presence engendered “panic” in those he moved among. Panic is associated with herd behavior, affecting “collective outbursts” including rumors, crazes, and riots, and viewed in terms of a base animal fight-or-flight instinct or the “intensification of instinctive excitement.”²⁴ As McDougall observed:

The panic of a crowd of human beings seems to be generated by the same simple instinctive reactions as the panic of animals. The essence of the panic is the collective intensification of the instinctive excitement, with its emotion of fear and its impulse to flight. The principle of primitive sympathy seems to afford a full and adequate explanation of such collective intensification of instinctive excitement.²⁵

This articulation of panic as a facet of the primitive clearly overlaps with empire’s claim to dominion over “primitive” peoples. As a number of contributors note in this volume, panic has frequently been conflated with the primitive within colonial and imperial discourses. “Orientals,” for example, were viewed as particularly susceptible to panic. In the words of the colonial civil servant and historian William Wilson Hunter: “Panic acts on an Oriental population like drink upon a European mob.”²⁶ The study of panic within a comparative, historical framework may thus help to furnish “a phenomenology of the West’s own representations of other cultures.”²⁷

However, in the latter part of the nineteenth century, panic was also increasingly associated with the modern collective. Accordingly, panic was deemed a preeminently modern condition: one that was produced by new forms of mechanized transportation and communication, by the pressures of urbanization and the dynamics of industrial mass culture. In the 1890s, the French social psychologist Gustave Le Bon identified the crowd’s irrational behavior as a feature of modernity, developing a theory of the social that was to influence US military thinking and practice through the Second World War.²⁸ At the same time, the sociologist Gabriel Tarde examined the crowd’s tendency to panic through “affect contagion,” understood as a form of imitation or mimicry.²⁹ Panic was equated with modern life and viewed as the expression of a modern psychopathology. As Anthony Vidler has suggested, the alienating

24. McDougall, *The Group Mind*, 25.

25. *Ibid.*, 24–25.

26. William Wilson Hunter, *A Brief History of the Indian People* (London: Trübner & Co., 1884), 217.

27. Christopher B. Steiner, “Travel Engravings and the Construction of the Primitive,” in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, ed. Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 202–25 (203).

28. Gustave Le Bon, *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (New York: Macmillan, 1896); J. W. Bendersky, “‘Panic’: The Impact of Le Bon’s Crowd Psychology on U.S. Military Thought,” *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences*, vol. 43, no. 3 (2007): 257–83.

29. Gabriel Tarde, *The Laws of Imitation*, trans. Elsie Clews Parsons (New York: Henry Holt, 1903).

and “paranoiac space of modernism” transmuted into “panic space.”³⁰ It might be argued that this “saturation” of social space with fear remains a feature of contemporary societies, preoccupied with catastrophe and characterized by “high anxieties.”³¹

Others have argued that panic reflects a “pervasive set of [modern] anxieties about the way technologies, social organizations, and communication systems may have reduced human autonomy and uniqueness.”³² In this context, panic becomes a strategy for conserving “a long-standing model of personhood—a view of the individual as a rational, motivated agent with a protected interior core of beliefs, desires, and memories.”³³ Panic is understood as a specifically modern response to the erosion of human agency in a progressively technological and interconnected world. As Alan Blum has suggested, within postmodern approaches panic has continued to be treated “as unreservedly equivalent to the mood of our time.”³⁴

The contemporary emphasis on normalizing and personalizing panic, which coexists with the notion of panic as a collective and exceptional experience, may be related to this anxiety of modern “personhood.” Hence, people are now prone to “panic attacks” and have “panic buttons” fitted by their bedsides in the event of a fall or break-in. Here, panic is construed in terms of “mental operations” with a focus on “perceptions, emotions, and self-discipline.”³⁵ During the Cold War, strategies to deal with private panic coincided with the political handling of collective panic in the face of a potential nuclear crisis. Self-control and the management of mass panic converged. The 1950s saw the development and mass production of antidepressants in the United States, with the claim that an individual’s mental health could be regulated. Concurrently, this period witnessed

an elaborate propaganda campaign involving films, literature, town meetings, and educational programs designed to teach Americans to fear the bomb; to

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30. Anthony Vidler, *Warped Space: Art, Architecture, and Anxiety in Modern Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), 1; *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1992), 225.
31. Brian Massumi, “Preface,” in *The Politics of Everyday Fear*, ed. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), vii–x (viii); Patricia Mellencamp, *High Anxiety: Catastrophe, Scandal, Age & Comedy* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1990).
32. See Timothy Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy: The Culture of Paranoia in Postwar America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2000), 7; see also Kirsten Drotner, “Dangerous Media? Panic Discourses and Dilemmas of Modernity,” *Paedagogica Historica*, vol. 35, no. 3 (1999): 593–619.
33. Melley, *Empire of Conspiracy*, 14.
34. Alan Blum, “Panic and Fear: On the Phenomenology of Desperation,” *Sociological Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 4 (1996): 673–98 (677). As Blum notes, for Baudrillard “panic” is identified with “the particular character of contemporary life” (674). On postmodernity and panic, see also Arthur Kroker, Marilouise Kroker, and David Cook, “PANIC USA: Hypermodernism as America’s Postmodernism,” *Social Problems*, vol. 37, no. 4 (1990): 443–59.
35. Joseph Masco, “Atomic Health, or How the Bomb Altered American Notions of Death,” in *Against Health: How Health Became the New Morality*, ed. Jonathan M. Metz and Anna Kirkland (New York: New York University Press, 2010), 133–53 (144).

define and limit that nuclear fear in ways useful to the Cold War project; and to move responsibility for domestic nuclear crisis from the state to citizens, enabling all citizens to have a role in a new collective form of American militarism.³⁶

Simulated nuclear attacks trained citizens how to react to a future crisis, the aim being to transform the debilitating paralysis and mass panic occasioned by “nuclear terror” into an energizing “nuclear fear.” As the head of the Federal Civil Defense Administration asserted in 1953: “Like the A-bomb, panic is fissionable. It can produce a chain reaction more deeply destructive than any explosive known. If there is an ultimate weapon, it may well be mass panic—not the A-bomb.”³⁷ With this “fissionable panic” in mind, a process of converting panic-prone citizens into “Panic Stoppers” was conceived with a checklist of how to “Make Fear Work For You.”³⁸ Consequently, although civil defense policies aimed to cultivate anti-panic instincts in susceptible US citizens, this panic politics and the language of fear it perpetuated also had its benefits. It functioned as a means of facilitating public cooperation, justifying interventions, and sanctioning extreme measures in the name of security.

Empires, Networks, and Oppositional Knowledge

The aim of this book is to historicize this process of securitization further by exploring different species of colonial and postcolonial panic, tracking the interrelationship between panic and changing imperial formations. The continuities and discontinuities of empire provide a major thread throughout the book: from quasi-colonial Canton (Chapter 2) to US “imperialism” in the twenty-first century (Chapters 7 and 8). Particularly following 9/11, scholars across the political spectrum have noted the ways in which inherited imperial models have been reconfigured in US foreign policy. As the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* pronounced in 2003, immediately before the US invasion of Iraq on March 19, “American Empire: Get Used to It.”³⁹

Given the varieties of empire that have existed in history, observes David Harvey, “we can easily conclude there is considerable room for manoeuvre as to how empire should be construed, administered, and actively constructed. Different and

36. Ibid.

37. Ibid.

38. Ibid., 144–45.

39. See Michael Ignatieff, “The Burden,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 5, 2003, 22–54. Cited in David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 3. For works that focus on the American “empire,” see Chalmers Johnson, *Blowback: The Costs and Consequences of American Empire* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2000); Niall Ferguson, *Colossus: The Price of America’s Empire* (New York: Penguin, 2004); Andrew J. Basevich, *American Empire: The Realities and Consequences of U.S. Diplomacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004); Rashid Khalidi, *Resurrecting Empire: Western Footprints and America’s Perilous Path in the Middle East* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2004); and Anne-Marie Slaughter, *A New World Order* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004).

sometimes rival conceptions of empire can even become internalized in the same space.⁴⁰ Harvey's interest is in defining US imperialism in relation to the logics of territorial power and global capitalism. Meanwhile, other scholars have drawn attention to the role of science and technology in the processes of imperial governance. Sheila Jasanoff, for example, has suggested that contemporary biotechnology may be complicit in empire-making by different means, including "bottom-up resistance, top-down ideological imposition, administrative standardization, and consensual constitutionalism."⁴¹ Empires, for Jasanoff, "can be seen as analogous to large technological systems, like electric power grids or civil aviation: so complex, heterogeneous, loosely pinned together, even jerry-built on close inspection that their stability is the thing that needs explanation."⁴²

As Nicholas King suggests in Chapter 8, tracing the evolution of panic through the history of evolving technologies may provide an invaluable perspective on the operations of a "new" imperialism in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Similarly, in Chapter 7, Amy Fairchild and David Merritt Johns delineate an imperial narrative as they trace shifting responses to epidemic panics in the United States: from yellow fever to George W. Bush's "War on Terror" and the incorporation of epidemic threats into a homeland security agenda via a Cold War politics of disease-invasion.⁴³

Jasanoff is surely right to note that empires are "patchier constructs" than is often assumed, characterized by "diversity rather than homogeneity" and by an often contradictory impulse to integrate and differentiate.⁴⁴ A critical theme in *Empires of Panic* is how panic makes visible the discrepancies between the template for a regulated state and the often-improvised policies and scant resources available to meet the social, political, environmental, and biological challenges on the ground.

Much has been written about the extent to which transnational networks underpinned the creation, expansion, and entrenchment of Western empires in the modern era. Global conduits, enabled by new technologies such as the railway, steam-powered shipping, and telegraphy, facilitated transnational flows of people, animals, commodities, capital, and information.⁴⁵ While these novel pathways helped to knit diverse dominions together, supporting global governance and a system of incipient global

40. Harvey, *The New Imperialism*, 5.

41. Sheila Jasanoff, "Biotechnology and Empire: The Global Power of Seeds and Science," *Osiris*, vol. 21, no. 1 (2006): 273–92 (292).

42. *Ibid.*, 275.

43. On the colonial context of the yellow fever epidemics, see, for example, Mariola Espinosa, *Epidemic Invasions: Yellow Fever and the Limits of Cuban Independence, 1878–1930* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009). See also Alejandro Colás and Richard Saull, eds., *The War on Terrorism and American 'Empire' after the Cold War* (Abingdon, UK and New York: Routledge, 2006).

44. Jasanoff, "Biotechnology and Empire," 274.

45. See, for example, Alan Lester, "Imperial Circuits and Networks: Geographies of the British Empire," *History Compass*, vol. 4, no. 1 (2006): 124–41.

surveillance, the complexity of these selfsame networks also acted as a destabilizing influence working to undermine empire.⁴⁶

The interconnectedness of national markets, and in particular the importance of the United States to the world economy, had become evident in a series of crises from the 1850s. Writing in the wake of the 1873 financial panic, which had precipitated a global economic recession, the economist Walter Bagehot was struck by the fragility of the global financial system and by the contagious nature of market crises. Panic had begun with the collapse of the Vienna Stock Exchange in May, and then spread to North America in September before returning to Europe (Figure 0.1). London, the imperial capital, for all its size, wealth, and power, was nonetheless patently susceptible to the vicissitudes of such “panics”:

In exact proportion to the power of this system, is its delicacy—I should hardly say too much if I said its danger . . . even at the last instant of prosperity, the whole structure is delicate. The peculiar essence of our financial system is an unprecedented trust between man and man; and when that trust is much weakened by hidden causes, a small accident may greatly hurt it, and a great accident for a moment may almost destroy it.⁴⁷

Like the global money markets (Lombard Street), which empire helped to produce, the imperial system was perceived as being at once “powerful” and “delicate,” prone to contagious panics: global networks could be “weakened by hidden causes” and “greatly hurt” by untoward occurrences, including wars, famines, and epidemics. As the British geographer Halford Mackinder observed in 1899:

The dispersion of economic and commercial activity will tend to give a whole world character to every considerable problem of the future, and to every considerable economic problem underlying politics.⁴⁸

In this new interconnected world, Mackinder suggested that local occurrences had a tendency to escalate into global crises. As he noted tersely: “We are now a closed circuit—a machine complete and balanced in all its parts. Touch one and you influence all.”⁴⁹

46. As Warwick Anderson has noted, “in imagining the ‘global’ as the product of unprecedented flows and circulations,” there has been a tendency “to ignore its uneven terrain, heterogeneity, and contestation”; see “Making Global Health History: The Postcolonial Worldliness of Biomedicine,” *Social History of Medicine*, vol. 27, no. 2 (2014): 372–84.

47. Walter Bagehot, *Lombard Street: A Description of the Money Market* (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner, 1896 [1873]), 17.

48. Halford Mackinder, “The Great Trade Routes: Lecture II,” *Journal of the Institute of Bankers*, vol. 21, no. 3 (1900): 137–55 (151–52). See also Robert Peckham, “Infective Economies: Empire, Panic and the Business of Disease,” *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 41, no. 2 (2013): 211–37 (216–17).

49. Halford Mackinder, “The Great Trade Routes: Lecture V,” *Journal of the Institute of Bankers*, vol. 21, no. 5 (1900): 266–73 (271).



Figure 0.1
 “Black Friday” at the Vienna Stock Exchange, May 9, 1873.

Bagehot had earlier observed how panics spread through the ramifying capillary-like networks of an increasingly global, intra-institutional system; beginning as “incipient panic,” which amounted “to a kind of vague conversation,” it intensified as the network of actors grew, becoming proportionately more “diffused” and attacking “more virulently than at first.” “A panic,” he asserted in what was to become a characteristic pathological analogy by the end of the century, “is a species of neuralgia, and according to the rules of science you must not starve it.”⁵⁰ Here, then, was an irony not lost on Bagehot: transnational networks, which underpinned imperial power and wealth, coincidentally produced the conditions for disequilibrium through contagious panics.

According to such formulations, the history of panic is closely related to the history of crisis. As Janet Roitman has recently argued, building on the work of Reinhart Koselleck and others, “crisis serves as the noun-formation of contemporary historical narrative; it is a non-locus from which to claim access to both history and knowledge of history.” According to Roitman, “crisis moments are defined as instances when normativity is laid bare, such as when the contingent or partial quality of knowledge claims—principles, suppositions, premises, criteria, and logical or causal relations—are disputed, critiqued, challenged, or disclosed.”⁵¹ Understood as the laying bare of

50. Bagehot, *Lombard Street*, 53.

51. Janet Roitman, *Anti-Crisis* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014), 3–4.

partial knowledge claims, crisis has clear affinities with the uncertain knowledge and consequential “epistemic anxiety” revealed by Ann Laura Stoler in her readings of the colonial archive.⁵² Indeed, as many of the contributors argue in this book, panic, like crisis, may function as a device “permitting and enabling certain narrations and giving rise to certain questions, but not to others.”⁵³ Panic is both a reflection of—and a response to—uncertain knowledge, while functioning in conjunction with crisis as “an enabling blind spot for the production of knowledge.”⁵⁴

As the chapters in this volume make clear, state agencies, policymakers, and planners, as well as emergency responders, often evoke panic in formulating and implementing policy. “Panic” has invariably been employed by an elite to categorize the irrational reactions of those deemed to be in some way subordinate. As Clarke has argued, a top-down approach persists in the association of panic with an undifferentiated “general public,” or more precisely, with a populace lacking authority.⁵⁵ Panic, in other words, reflects a fundamental social asymmetry: it is what *others* do. In the past, studies of panic have tended to be superior accounts of popular ignorance and naivety, with a focus on the psychology of “irrational” crowds.⁵⁶ Although the social anthropology and history of the 1960s and 1970s—including the work of E. P. Thompson, George Rudé, and Eric Hobsbawm—encouraged scholars to rethink “the masses,” today it might be argued, the emphasis is turning back to panic as the demonstration of a collective and often violent irrationality.⁵⁷

Panic is rarely attributed to those in power. Yet, as the contributors to this book show in their accounts of specific historical panics, “public” or popular responses have always been entangled with “elite” responses. In his discussion of outbreaks of bubonic plague and influenza in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India, David Arnold illustrates the extent to which panics are compounded reactions: that is to say, multiple panics are intertwined, each coproducing the other. The influenza epidemic did not provoke panic in India, despite the high mortality figures (over 12 million), because agents of the colonial state did not panic in their response.⁵⁸

52. Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.

53. Roitman, *Anti-Crisis*, 5.

54. *Ibid.*, 13.

55. Lee Clarke, *Worst Cases: Terror and Catastrophe in the Popular Imagination* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006).

56. See, for example, Elias Canetti, *Crowds and Power* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1984 [1960]); Le Bon, *The Crowd*.

57. See, for example, E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (London: Penguin, 2002 [1963]); works by George Rudé, including, *The Crowd in History: A Study of Popular Disturbances in France and England, 1730–1848* (New York: New York University Press, 1981); George Rudé and Eric Hobsbawm, *Captain Swing: A Social History of the Great English Agricultural Uprising of 1830* (New York: Pantheon, 1968). For a contemporary interpretation of Canetti’s notion of a “universal fear” that drives the human psyche and its impulse to come together into crowds, see Lesley Brill, “Terrorism, Crowds and Power, and the Dogs of War,” *Anthropological Quarterly*, vol. 76, no. 1 (2003): 87–94.

58. On statistics, postmodernity, and panic, see Kathleen Woodward, “Statistical Panic,” *differences: A*

Conversely, in the case of the plague, the institutional panic triggered by agents of the colonial state resulted in draconian public health interventions that sparked another species of panic amongst native communities.

Those defined by the authorities as “panicked” bodies invariably interpreted the implementation of quarantines and other coercive state measures as a cover for more sinister designs. Thus, on the one hand, the “panic” of an indigenous population functioned as a “tool” against empire and a way of contesting imperial knowledge. On the other hand, this very panic fueled an institutional overreaction driven by elements within the state who responded in a “moral panic,” which, as Stanley Cohen has noted, may be defined as a situation in which “[a] condition, episode, person or group of persons emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests.”⁵⁹ Panicked interventions by an elite to prevent the spread of popular panic often produce other (and different) forms of panic.

From this perspective, it may be more useful to think of compounded “panics” than of “panic” as a singular reaction to a specific event. Arguably, the advent of modern technologies helped to shift panic from the plane of the oral (the whispered rumor) to a panic that operated across different levels of communication simultaneously with unprecedented speed: panic became visual, legible, and telecommunicated. Conversely, the inability to visualize threats triggered panic, as Kirsten Osther notes in her reading of *Panic in the Streets*, a 1950 movie about a potential epidemic of pneumonic plague in New Orleans. There, the authorities panic in the face of the quandary about “how to conduct a search for contagious individuals whose symptoms will be internal and, therefore, invisible until it is too late.”⁶⁰ Furthermore, as several contributors to this volume argue, panic has often been prompted, not by disease threats per se, but by the social, political, and economic forces that these threats exposed and sometimes unleashed. Grappling with histories of panic may consequently help to shed light on competing understandings of the world: on often-obscured but formative tensions, struggles, and conflicts within a given society, as well as on processes of social control and claims-making in relation to perceived risk and public safety.

Panic-Crisis as Disease

Historically, panic has long been associated with infectious disease. The panic sparked by the spread of cholera in India from 1817 is a case in point, and particularly the way in which native suspicions of the British gave rise to conspiracy theories about the

Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies, vol. 11, no. 2 (1999): 177–203.

59. Stanley Cohen, *Folk Devils and Moral Panics: The Creation of Mods and the Rockers* (London: MacGibbon and Kee, 1972), 9.

60. Kirsten Osther, *Cinematic Prophylaxis: Globalization and Contagion in the Discourse of World Health* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 20.

origins of the epidemic, creating a critical context for the 1857 Uprising (discussed in Chapter 4). As Arnold has observed, Indians “saw a connection between cholera and conquest,” and attributed the disease to the British.⁶¹ Native suspicions created a breeding ground for subsequent rumors and panics.⁶²

If the prospect of epidemic disease could instigate panic, panic itself has often been conceived as a virulent infection. In her epilogue to this collection, Bashford notes the connection between communication and contagion inscribed in the very terminology used to designate the communicability of disease. The essential feature of “rumor,” Das observes,

is that it is conceived to *spread*. Thus while images of contagion and infection are used to represent rumor in elite discourse, this is not simply a matter of noncomprehension, on the part of elites, of subaltern forms of communication: it also speaks to the transformation of language, namely, that instead of a medium of communication, language becomes communicable, infectious, causing things to happen almost as if they had happened in nature.⁶³

In his history of crisis, Koselleck draws attention to the term’s medical associations, which overlie its earlier judicial meanings. From the time of the Greek physician Galen under the Roman Empire, crisis came to refer to an illness’s “observable condition and to the judgment (*judicium*) about the course of the illness” when it could be decided whether the patient would live or die.⁶⁴ Pathological analogies are similarly invoked to describe panic. Bagehot, as we have seen, likened panic to a neural affliction and called it “a species of neuralgia.” Le Bon, in his account of modern crowd psychology, characteristically observed:

Ideas, sentiments, emotions, and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes . . . In the case of men collected in a crowd all emotions are very rapidly contagious, which explains the suddenness of panics. Brain disorders, like madness, are themselves contagious.⁶⁵

Emotions spread like infective microorganisms. The analogy of panic with contagion is progressively literalized so that panic, as a form of contagious connectivity, comes to be equated not only with social disorder but also with madness. Panic-as-disease belongs, in this sense, to a class of newly identified psychopathologies (along with neurasthenia, hysteria, and agoraphobia), which were construed as the degenerative,

61. David Arnold, *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-Century India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993), 171.

62. Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857*, 61.

63. Das, *Life and Words*, 119.

64. Reinhart Koselleck, trans. Michaela W. Richter, “Crisis,” *Journal of the History of Ideas*, vol. 67, no. 2 (2006): 357–400 (360).

65. Le Bon, *The Crowd*, 128.

“warping” effects of modernity.⁶⁶ These disorders were associated with the enervating and disorientating influences of technology, flows of information, and capital.⁶⁷

This elision between “real” infection and metaphoric infection is a key focus of *Empires of Panic*, since many of the contributors explore the tensions between panic as a “normal” and “extraordinary” condition. As Blum notes, panic is often construed “as a normal social phenomenon,” even though it is applied to explain “extraordinary departures from routine.”⁶⁸ Its identification as a form of “hysteria,” or as a “contagious” or “toxic” phenomenon that spreads in a process akin to communicable disease, frames panic as a specific kind of pseudobiological aberration or distortion of the typical.⁶⁹

The Chapters

The first six chapters of the book explore imperial and colonial panics from the beginning of the nineteenth century to the twentieth century. Chapters 7 and 8 are concerned with postcolonial panics and how a prehistory of panics has been reconfigured in the light of “new” threats and technological innovations. A key theme, here, is the extent to which contemporary panics, which center on global interconnectedness, overlap with a postcolonial cartography. In different ways, each of the chapters investigates panic in relation to crisis, anxiety, communication, as well as the interrelationship between partial knowledge and panic.

Alan Lester opens the book with an overview of different kinds of panic produced in different colonial settings of the British Empire. In particular, his interest in “Empire and the Place of Panic” (Chapter 1) is in panics affecting settler societies and how the panicked reactions of frontier communities to tales of isolated indigenous attacks often called forth more organized, violent, and “blanket” responses from colonial states or militia-type bodies of settlers. The chapter also considers white “moral panics,” where isolated instances of interracial sex—and especially rumors of the black rape of white women—spurred hugely disproportionate state and civil responses. Although these panics are less overtly to do with disease, Lester’s examples suggest how colonial panics were often both the triggers for and product of crises. Or, expressed somewhat differently, how one panic produced another in a

66. On the psychopathologies of modern urban space, see Vidler, *Warped Space*, 24–50.

67. George Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Blackwell City Reader*, ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010 [2007]), 103–10.

68. Blum, “Panic and Fear,” 674.

69. Elaine Showalter notes how fears of alien abduction, chronic fatigue syndrome, Gulf War syndrome, and the resurgence of repressed memories in psychotherapy are instances of “hysterical syndromes.” She identifies “rumor panics” as a key feature of these contemporary “epidemics” that are spread by “stories” and “narratives” diffused through popular culture; see *Hystories: Hysterical Epidemics and Modern Media* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997).

self-perpetuating and reinforcing coproductive looping effect. The chapter concludes by considering the interplay between scales of panic—from micro-level instantiations to the transnational and global—arguing that the study of panic may help to reframe ongoing debates in imperial and global history about the extent and importance of transnational interactions in shaping colonial and imperial identities.

Panic, of course, is defined by its opposite: non-panic. In Chapter 2, “Slow Burn in China: Factories, Fear, and Fire in Canton,” John Carroll argues that considering instances of near panic, missed panic, or panic *manqué*, may illuminate the conditions needed to produce panic. Carroll is concerned with Western preoccupations about fire in pre-Opium War Canton: worries that extended to anxieties—perhaps even to periodic fear—but failed to ignite into full-blown mass panic of the variety examined by other contributors in the volume. Fire has a long history of conceptual intertwinement with panic, as it does with disease.⁷⁰ Conflagration, disease, and panic were certainly conflated in Hong Kong in 1894, when the panic triggered by bubonic plague “spread like wild fire.” As Fairchild and Johns note in Chapter 7, Dr. Israel Weinstein, commissioner for the New York City Department of Health, warned in a radio broadcast of 1947 that smallpox could spread like wildfire through the population. In the mid-twentieth century analogies of “fire, flood and red fever” were central to the post-Second World War Truman Doctrine, where US insecurity was emphasized and the spread of world communism imagined as a metaphoric convergence of infectious disease and raging fire.⁷¹ A major theme in Chapter 2 (as well as in Chapter 5) is the way in which localized crises served to heighten cultural and racial differences. In the context of quasi-colonial Canton, fires raised questions about the nature of Chinese state and society, the use of public and private spaces, and the compatibility of East and West.

Crises are not always unmitigated catastrophes: they may also offer opportunities, serving as alibis for political ends, and providing a rationale for state and private interventions. As Priscilla Wald has noted, the “panic” provoked by popular representations of disasters may serve expedient public health ends. In the early 1990s, the molecular biologist Joshua Lederberg welcomed the melodramatic portrayal of pandemic crises in fiction. “Even at their most sensational,” Wald remarks, “fiction and film provided a way to educate the public about the threat and the science of these deadly infections.”⁷² The “controlled” panic produced by such fictional

70. For example, Gregory of Tours described the spread of plague in Marseille as being “like a wheat field set on fire, the entire town was suddenly ablaze with pestilence”; see Lester K. Little, “Introduction: Life and Afterlife of the First Plague Pandemic,” in *Plague and the End of Antiquity*, ed. Lester K. Little (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 3–32 (11).

71. Robert L. Ivie, “Fire, Flood, and Red Fever: Motivating Metaphors of Global Emergency in the Truman Doctrine Speech,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly*, vol. 29, no. 3 (1999): 570–91.

72. Priscilla Wald, *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008), 31.

representations could function as a way of forestalling “real” panic, prompting the viewing public to change their outlook and behavior.

In Chapter 3, “Epidemic Opportunities: Panic, Quarantines, and the 1851 International Sanitary Conference,” João Rangel de Almeida takes up this theme to explore the political exploitation of infectious disease “shocks.” More specifically, his focus is on the opportunities furnished by cholera epidemics and the panics they incited. The chapter argues that European delegates to the 1851 International Sanitary Conference in Paris used the cholera crisis as a way of negotiating new ways of conducting diplomacy and settling scientific controversies while putting in place a modern program of international epidemic governance. Rangel de Almeida suggests, here, that institutional responses developed to deal with a particular crisis—that of cholera—legitimated Western “health” interventions in the non-Western world, creating a broader context for diplomatic relations and foreign interventions that reverberates in the present.

An issue explored by a number of contributors to the book is the compounded nature of panic touched upon earlier: in effect, the plurality of panics that are subsumed within a single “panic.” In Chapter 5, “Health Panics, Migration, and Ecological Exchange in the Aftermath of the 1857 Uprising: India, New Zealand, and Australia,” James Beattie considers the ways in which two panics overlapped to an extent that they became inseparable. While the Uprising of 1857 in India fuelled a panic about the murderous intentions of the indigenous population, it also triggered a health panic as the British worried about the pathological effects of the land and its climate on their constitution. Beattie tracks unexpected and surprisingly overlooked connections between Australia, New Zealand, and India. The chapter demonstrates how fears of India’s tropical climate after the events of 1857 precipitated a flurry of Australasian proposals for the health migration of British troops and officials from India to the Antipodes. The chapter also shows how such fears led to the introduction of Australian trees into India for perceived health benefits, as well as the development of hill stations in Australasia.

Beattie invites us to rethink panic as an environmental predicament. India was invariably viewed by the British as a country prone to panic. Historical accounts tended to emphasize how native “mobs” were “seized by panic,” with panic understood as a condition with dangerous contagious properties. According to these quasi-miasmatic and racial theories, panic emerged from an unhealthy Oriental environment. Panic was construed as an Indian condition attributable to the enervating effects of tropical climes and to mass urban living. At the same time, colonials revealed their own panicked responses to the Indian environment after 1857.

The severity of a crisis and the magnitude of the panicked reactions it triggers are not always commensurate. This is an insight developed by Arnold in Chapter 5, “Disease, Rumor, and Panic in India’s Plague and Influenza Epidemics, 1896–1919.”

While the epidemic of bubonic plague resulted in an estimated 8.5 million deaths and 10 million by 1921, the influenza pandemic of 1918–19 caused a further 12 million deaths in India in the space of only a few months. But, where plague provoked a major “panic” that affected both the colonial regime and the Indian population, sparking rumor, riots, repression, and mass migration from urban centers, the greater and more abrupt mortality of the influenza episode passed without any apparent crisis. Clearly, the scale of mortality alone does not explain the onset of a deep sense of crisis in 1896–97 and its relative absence in 1918–19. So why, Arnold enquires, was the influenza epidemic the “dog that did not bark”? In addressing this question, the chapter looks at the contrasting epidemiology of the diseases and their cultural construction, the very different governmental and public health responses to them, the timing of the epidemics in relation to internal political and economic developments, and the international situation surrounding them.

In Chapter 6, “Panic Encabled: Epidemics and the Telegraphic World,” Robert Peckham considers how telegraphy shaped responses to and influenced the management of epidemics in the 1890s, a period that saw the institutionalization of laboratory science, the development of an epidemiologically based public health, as well as the “unification” of the globe by cable. Although the transformative roles of new technologies (such as steam-powered ships, railways, and the telegraph) are often cited in relation to transnational mobility and the proliferating networks that characterized empire, to date there has been little study made of the telegraph as a tool in the surveillance of infectious disease, and to its role in “empire’s reterritorializing power.”⁷³ Focusing on outbreaks of influenza in the metropole and the bubonic plague in the crown colony of Hong Kong, Peckham investigates the uses made of the telegraph as a means of collecting and disseminating information about infectious disease, as well as the impact of condensed “telegraphic speech” on official discourse. The focus is on the agency of language; on its role in the shaping of panic events. As Das has observed in the context of panic-rumors, a characteristic in such situations is “the perlocutionary force of words, their capacity to do something by saying something, through which words come to be transformed from being a medium of communication to becoming bearers of force.”⁷⁴

Peckham argues, first, that the telegraph functioned as a means of “pinpointing” epidemics, not only tracking them as definable events in space and time, but also fixing them in an apparently objective and technological language; second, that by suggesting connections between disparate data, the telegraph served to amplify anxieties. As Peckham puts it, telegraphic technology tended to exacerbate panics in the very process of containing them.

73. See Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton, *Empires and the Reach of the Global, 1870–1945* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2014), 65.

74. Das, *Life and Words*, 119.

Chapters 7 and 8 extend the scope of the book into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to explore the afterlife of nineteenth-century epidemic panics in the contemporary world. Fairchild and Johns undertake a theoretical and empirical consideration of mass infectious disease panics in the United States. They argue that contemporary concerns about panic rehearse earlier experiences of panic. Adapting the notion of the “social drama” developed by the cultural anthropologist Victor Turner, they propose the “panic drama” as a means of elucidating the “script” that underlies late nineteenth and twentieth-century panic responses. Through the lenses of yellow fever, influenza, smallpox, swine flu, and biowarfare (later called bioterrorism), they show how panic has been bound “into the very construction of epidemics.” Their purpose is to trace how the “panic drama” has been modified over more than a century, with dramatic components reconfigured—as well as examining the shifting role that institutions and authority have played in this process—while the basic panic narrative has been maintained.

The persistent but specific adaptations of the panic narrative are also the focus of Chapter 8, which examines the iconography of infectious threats from the mid-1930s to the H1N1 pandemic of 2009. Outbreaks of novel infectious diseases, Nicholas King argues, are highly visceral, despite the fact that many of their constitutive elements are imperceptible: pathogens are invisible to the naked eye, vectors are vanishingly small or incomprehensibly diffuse, and many symptoms are invisible to all but trained specialists. The chapter considers the processes and technologies by which these invisible elements are rendered visible, emphasizing the ways in which the visual field has been privileged in the panic narrative. As King reminds us, graphic forms of representation such as maps and statistical graphs (including William Farr’s cholera chart reproduced on the cover of this book) have been vital in shaping public responses to epidemics. Through analyses of films, photography, and news media, King identifies a repertoire of images and associations—what he calls an “iconography” of new infectious threats—that has been reworked to represent disease outbreaks over the past 80 years, with consequences for the evolving nature of “panic” itself. King shows how a discourse of “newness,” shaped in part by the visual language of consumer culture, connects “novel” pathogenic threats to a “new” global interconnectedness, obscuring continuities. In so doing, King intimates connections between the ubiquity of fear-inducing images in the media, the consumption of fear-mitigating products, and the novelty of emerging diseases.⁷⁵ The chapter concludes with a reflection on the relationship between this iconography of disease emergence “and Western, particularly American, ambivalence towards modernity and the apparent dissolution of imperial orders in the face of globalization.”

Chapters 7 and 8 indicate the central role of the United States and its politics in the production of global disease panics; they further point to continuities between a

75. On “the saturation of social space by fear,” see Massumi, “Preface,” ix.

contemporary, postcolonial (United States-led) world and the ways in which colonial spaces and histories continue to shape the viral imaginaries of the present. Finally, in the epilogue, Bashford reflects on these underlying continuities but also considers the pitfalls of excessively “presentist” approaches to panic, recapitulating the book’s major themes with a backward glance and a projection into the future of pandemic panics to come.

Thinking in Time

Empires of Panic explores panic both as a social condition and as the particular instantiation of a crisis condition; it is concerned with panic as a sustained “slow-burning,” an immanent structural phenomenon, and as a singular, explosive event; with chronic “panics” and acute “panics”—and the in-betweenness of panics that are neither wholly one nor the other. The book seeks to open up critical debate on what panics are, how they have been understood, and the ways they have been managed and deployed in a global world produced by empire. But the question remains: how useful is “panic” in elucidating collective reactions to disasters?⁷⁶ Today, it is often claimed that we are living in a “risk society.” Certainly, contemporary life is characterized by a sense of perceived uncertainty in which current catastrophes are compared and contrasted with former catastrophes: the financial crisis of 2008 and the H1N1 swine flu pandemic of 2009, for example, with the 1929 stock market crash and the 1918 flu pandemic, respectively; or the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster with the 1986 Chernobyl disaster. What are the bases for such analogies? What can past panics tell us about the contemporary world, about today’s panics?⁷⁷

As Sheldon Ungar has argued, social anxieties are increasingly being articulated in relation to nuclear, medical, environmental, and chemical threats.⁷⁸ Yet, as the contributors to *Empires of Panic* also suggest, contemporary panics continue to draw on the assumptions of an imperial order and on inherited sites of anxiety centered on race, class, and difference, to reveal the often-obscured postcolonial cartographies of a deeply unequal and racialized world. As several contributors argue in this collection, racial difference and cultural distance have a capacity to amplify and generalize

76. Dirk Helbing, Illés Farkas, and Tamas Vicsek, “Simulating Dynamical Features of Escape Panic,” *Nature*, vol. 407, no. 6803 (September 28, 2000): 487–90.

77. As Clarke has argued, the emphasis in thinking about and planning for disaster tends to focus on probability and risk, rather than on possibility; see *Worst Cases*.

78. Ungar focuses on the “scares” precipitated by the nuclear arms race, emerging diseases such as Ebola and avian flu, and global climate change. He suggests that these novel sites of anxiety call for a rethinking of “moral panic” research agendas; see Sheldon Ungar, “Global Bird Flu Communication,” *Science Communication*, vol. 29, no. 4 (2008): 472–97 (472); “Moral Panic Versus the Risk Society: The Implications of the Changing Sites of Social Anxiety,” *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 52, no. 2 (2001): 271–91. For a critique of Ungar, see Sean P. Hier, “Risk and Panic in Late Modernity: Implications of the Converging Sites of Social Anxiety,” *British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 54, no. 1 (2003): 3–20.

preexisting anxieties to produce different species of panic—a suggestion made by C. A. Bayly in his account of the evolution of British intelligence gathering in colonial India, and the misinterpretation of this intelligence by authorities with consequences for their panicked response to the Uprising of 1857.⁷⁹ It might be further argued that today globalized financial and pandemic panics, and the panics induced by global networks of terrorism, continue to feed on fears that reverberate from earlier (broadly speaking colonial) times about the dangers and capriciousness of other races and cultures. Panic, in other words, is always produced from a repertoire of former fears: about oceans that might cause tsunamis, diseases that might one day become pandemics, and wars that could escalate into holocausts.

Panicked conditions may serve as a justification for ratifying sweeping political reforms and acceding to radical state interventions. A case in point being the Model State Emergency Health Powers Act (MSEHPA) that followed the Al Qaeda attacks on Washington and New York in September 11, 2001. Understanding how panics have been produced and understood in history, as well as the uses to which they have been put, may help to foster a more critical engagement with the present.⁸⁰ As recent events have also shown, panic and anxiety can serve to highlight the need for longer-term social action and act as catalysts for new modes of enquiry into emerging diseases or banking practices. In this sense, panic may have its uses beyond the controlling calculations of the state.

79. C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

80. Richard E. Neustadt and Ernest R. May, *Thinking in Time: The Uses of History for Decision-Makers* (New York: Free Press, 1986).

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