

## PREFACE TO EBOOK EDITION

*The Third Pandemic* was first published in 1996 as a work of speculative fiction on the threat posed by a major pandemic. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, many aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic align with those described in the book.

Regardless of the infectious agent involved, two principal factors contribute to the severity and longevity of any disease outbreak in the modern world. The first is a long incubation period with no symptoms detected, which significantly expands opportunities to pass the germ onto others. The second is the mode of transmission, which determines how easy it is to spread the infection through airborne droplets, contaminated surfaces, etc.

Both COVID-19 and “Agent 57a” in my book present a worst-case scenario for each of these factors. They have very long incubation periods and can be transmitted relatively easily. When combined with modern air travel, they can circle the globe and proliferate with astonishing speed.

The major difference between the real Coronavirus and my fictional germ is the fatality rate. COVID-19 deaths hover somewhere between one and two percent of those infected. I pegged Agent 57a at over fifty percent. Sound fantastic? Not when you consider that the Black Death (ca. 1333-51) killed over half the people alive at the time. After successive waves of this plague, the population of England 100 years later was only 15% of what it was before the disease first hit.

When a pandemic reaches a certain fatality rate – regardless of how it starts or spreads – the results are truly catastrophic. No civilization, either then or now, is prepared for such a biological calamity. Healthcare systems collapse utterly, and even the disposal of the dead becomes close to impossible. (Imagine nine million bodies piling up in New York City in the space of a few months.) A complete breakdown of civil order is bound to follow, especially in our modern urban environment.

It has become painfully obvious that nature is relentless in devising new and novel infectious agents to assault humanity. *The Third Pandemic* describes in detail how such a germ might come into being, and how humanity would lend a helping hand through pollution, overpopulation, poverty and other factors. The Ebola virus provides a good example. It seems to have crossed over from animals into humans long ago in highly isolated jungle villages but had no opportunity to spread beyond them. Modern modes of travel combined with mass migrations have changed all that.

Finally, the biggest question of all. Has the human race, in its present configuration of nearly eight billion people, exceeded the carrying capacity of Planet Earth? If so, nature herself will continue to hunt for ways to prune us back until she devises a pathogenic insult that gets the job done. The good news is that if we face this grim prognosis head on, we might just find a way out before it's too late.

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