

Wuhan Labs, Antitrust, Unrest in France, and Catalysts – What Happens Next – 8.1.2021

James Meigs QA

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, Jim. Let's go to Q and A. This event didn't come out in isolation. We also had other scientific media-related issues as related to the pandemic. For example, should we use masks? How deadly is this? How should we change our behaviors? All of this was also discussed in the scientific community as well. Should we close schools? All this was discussed in the scientific community and in the media, and there was opposition to the Trump administration as well. We have to think about it in context. It wasn't just an isolation.

How do you think about this issue as it relates to the other issues that were discussed, both in science and media, as we were desperately trying to figure out what to do?

James Meigs:

There's this notion in the science of how institutions respond to disasters that's called elite panic. After an earthquake or all kinds of natural disasters or man-made disasters, there's often an assumption that the public's going to do the wrong thing and we need to make sure we're all organized and law enforcement and everything else to prevent panic, prevent people running around and making the problem worse. In a sense, the elites, the people who are in charge who we trust to help us, they panic and they worry more about the public's reaction than the real problem at hand. We see this again and again. We saw it with the COVID-19 panic, the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a very ingrained assumption that people would do the wrong thing. They would hoard masks, so we'll tell them, "No, no, masks don't work." It was better to lie to the public in order to protect the supply of PPE than to be honest and just explain with a little bit of nuance why it's more important for people in the hospitals to have masks right now than the general public.

That was an early example, but a lot of people who are skeptical of institutions constantly bring that up. Like, "Well, how can we trust them? They told us masks didn't work." Those errors of messaging and self-contradiction on the part of our public health authorities were a really big problem. It's continuing to this day with information that is contradictory or sometimes somewhat exaggerated. I think one of the big temptations is to try to scare people into compliance with what we hope they will do, and I think we're seeing some of that today with the delta variant, and then the media doubles down.

The media will take a statement that might be a little bit too strong from a public health official, and they will amplify it even more in ways that I think are not helpful. They're not honest, but they're also not helpful because sooner or later the public just tunes out to the point where, if they don't trust you about masks, then later they might not trust you about vaccines. We're seeing the devastating impact of that vaccine hesitancy today. Some of it is deep-seated in our culture, but some of it was encouraged. A situation that was unfortunately amplified both by the public officials and then certainly there's irresponsible politicians on both sides who tend to make this stuff worse.

Larry Bernstein:

What's weird about this example is it contrasts to the mask story you just gave. It wasn't really coming from public health officials that the Chinese lab leak theory was untrue. It was coming from Lancet, for example, or the New York Times.

James Meigs:

It came from both, actually. It came from both. We had the World Health Organization was also poo-pooing this. It was an unhealthy feedback loop that intensified the whole idea that this topic wasn't just highly unlikely, but out of bounds. The implication was the only people who would bring it up are bringing it up for a political reason, which might have been true in some cases. That's the paradox of these things. There were certainly people who, for political reasons, wanted to bad mouth China. But that in itself doesn't really tell you anything about the truth or falsehood of a certain hypothesis.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's talk about WHO for a sec. This is an organization that didn't originally include China, and then China joined the organization. The WHO sent a team to China to investigate the situation, but they were very deferential and obsequious, it seemed, as it was showing in the media in the United States. Trump was making declarations that we should potentially leave the WHO if they can't do their job properly, and then the idea in the media was, how could we be even considering leaving the WHO in the middle of a global pandemic? What have we learned about the WHO? Were they deferential to the Chinese? Did it do its job as an investigative unit? Or was it it never had a chance because the Chinese weren't going to allow it? How should we think about WHO as our leading health organization internationally?

James Meigs:

Yeah. All those questions are really important and all mixed up in a way that does not lead to an easy answer. Yes, it's really important to have an institution like the World Health Organization to share data and coordinate responses to pandemics. They've done a lot of good work over the years, but China is the 800 pound gorilla in any organization. Tedros, his full name is almost unpronounceable and makes everybody just calls him Tedros, the head of the World Health Organization, was really obsequious to China in the early days. The organization, as you said, when a team was sent to Wuhan to investigate the origin they were given very, very little access and they didn't push back very much. The Wuhan Institute took their massive database of genomic data on all these bat viruses. I should rewind a little bit for those who don't know.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology is famous as the world's top institution to study certain types of bat viruses that are found in China which have been linked to other illnesses. The idea that the pandemic caused by a virus, it looks a lot like that viruses came out of the Wuhan Institute is not much of a stretch if you're just looking for correlation. Correlation is not causation, but it doesn't mean it's something that you completely ignore.

When they sent that team to the lab, the lab shut down all of their... They refuse to give access to all the data. Peter Daszak, who I mentioned earlier, he was later quoted saying, "Well, that's

not a big deal. We kind of knew what was in there. That's okay." But it's not okay. This is ridiculous in the middle of a global health crisis to shut down the database that may hold the answers. That kind of research is the thing that is what science does very well in a very distributed way. It's good to have hundreds of scientists around the world looking into that database in different ways and studying it. That's exactly what China did not allow.

The World Health Organization did a bad job of using whatever muscle it might have had. The people on the team, the investigatory team did not complain enough about really being subjected to a whitewash. That is very troubling.

On the other hand, in 2021, the World Health Organization actually finally turned a corner on this. Tedros himself said that he thought the lab leak there needed to be studied more thoroughly and that China had not been fully cooperative. He showed some spine. But we lost about a year of study. We lost about a year of research at a time when scientists all over the world were working 18 hours a day, all these different fields, scientists doing heroic work any way they could make a contribution on this pandemic. This one really key question was held off limits, so the failure of the World Health Organization and other institutions to keep that line of inquiry open, I think, we will look back and see this as a dark day. Not just for science, but for the field of public health in general.

Larry Bernstein:

I know you're not an epidemiologist, but as you've read the leading scientists who believe the Wuhan theory, what arguments do they provide that give you pause that suggest, potentially the Wuhan lab leak is real and to quote your other buddy, who said, "How I learned to love the Wuhan lab leak theory."

James Meigs:

Well, there's sort of two sets of evidence. One is circumstantial, and that would be they have not found any reservoir in the natural world for this virus. The Wuhan Institute was studying some viruses from a particular cave that looked somewhat similar to this virus. And we know that that particular cave or mine, there were actually some people who were cleaning up bat droppings got infected, years ago with a respiratory ailment. So, there's the circumstantial evidence that we haven't found a natural reservoir. We do know that Wuhan was investigating somewhat similar viruses and had those at the lab. So theory one could be that it's a natural virus, but we don't have the genome identified, but it is something that the lab was studying and a lab worker got infected or somehow the virus got out and got into the population. That seems quite plausible.

The related idea is that the lab was doing gain of function research, manipulating the virus in ways to make it more infectious. And the argument for doing that is that we can perhaps predict ways that this virus might naturally evolve that would make it more dangerous. If we make those changes ourselves and see how dangerous it is, then maybe we'll know better how to fight it. If this happens, we could make a vaccine in advance in theory. That's the rationale for the gain of function research. There's a guy at Rutgers who calls that, he says, "That's the equivalent of looking for a gas leak with a lighted match." Because these labs do not have a

great record of safety, even though the Wuhan lab was supposed to be a level four biosafety lab, which means everything is completely controlled with negative pressure and special suits.

It turns out they were doing a lot of their research at level three or level two levels of biosecurity. Level two would be more similar to what you would have at your dentist's office. So, the idea that this lab was absolutely bomb proof, there's no way anything could leak. You heard that a lot in the press in the early months of pushing back against this hypothesis. Wasn't true. The lab was not that secure. No, these labs do have a great record of security. Other epidemics have been caused by leaks from labs. So it's not a crazy, wild conspiracy theory to worry about it. And I think what we're seeing with the Wuhan lab is this whole set of circumstantial evidence is persuasive. It's far from an open and shut case.

But then there's also the genetic evidence. And this is a very arcane discussion about this particular spike protein that the virus has, that allows it to bond to human cells and get its genetic material into the cell. There's this particular genetic sequence related to that spike protein that some researchers say is extremely uncommon or unheard of in nature, but one that's commonly manipulated by people doing this gain of function research. It's a little chunk of DNA that's easy to insert and manipulate. So therefore, it's commonly done. So when some people saw that particular piece of the code, one virologist initially said, he called it a smoking gun. That was David Baltimore. He has since walked that statement back a little bit, but a lot of people saw that and said, "Wow, this really looks like an insertion, a manmade insertion in the code in order to make this virus more virulent." Others have come back and said, "No, this is possible in nature. It's not that uncommon."

I'm not qualified to answer the question, but I think it's fascinating that it took so long for the question to be asked because the genetic sequence of the virus was released in January, 2020 by a very brave Chinese researcher who thought it was important for the world to get their hands on it. The fact that he released that sequence was why we were able to create these vaccines so quickly. So that's a positive thing. But the negative part is that this important question, which is above my pay grade to be able to answer, but I think, nothing could be more crucial, got kind of put on the back burner for roughly a year, not entirely because there were people who were looking into it, but it was pretty much absent from the pages of major-

Larry Bernstein:

Let me try a different line of questioning. And that is the role of the mainstream media versus alternative media. And you've kind of described a number of journalists outside of the mainstream media who really challenged this question and did not come from internal. And it reminds me a little bit of the autobiography by Seymour Hersh, the former New York Times, and then independent investigative journalist. In his book Reporter, and when I met him in person, what he emphasizes that real difficult, challenging investigative journalism is rarely done by the mainstream media and has to be done on the outside. And he did his work on various aspects of the Vietnam war and various massacres that occurred there.

So should we be surprised that it took, it seems almost random, a former New York Times guy working independently writing for Medium which I've never even heard of, Vanity Fair, which is an unlikely source for material like this. But going forward, should we expect blogs and

podcasts and independent sleuths and investigative journalism to be done not by mainstream media, but be done on the outside and maybe we should just embrace it and say, this is the way investigative journalism will work going forward.

James Meigs:

Yeah. And I think that's a very dangerous assumption. I have to say, it's easy to say that really long term, in-depth investigative work typically happens outside of mainstream institutions, but Hersh is, long after the New York Times, Hersh's work was published for decades in the New Yorker. And they could afford to pay him... If he worked on a story for a year, they would pay that. They would pay for him to do that. Unless you're independently wealthy, nobody can work for a year on a story and travel around the world and publish it on their blog.

There's probably a whole different episode could be done about the rise of Medium and Substack and the ways that they are creating revenue streams. For a small number of really interesting, provocative journalists, many of whom challenge the mainstream views on a lot of issues, that's a great story and it's exciting what's happening there. But I don't think there's a substitute for the kind of old school reporting team, whether Wall Street Journal, New York Times, or what have you, spending the weeks and months on a story and being backed up by the resources of a journalistic organization, backed up by... I've been involved in a number of cases where you needed to make sure you had the legal team to support you. Because people start threatening to sue you. Like when I covered entertainment, we covered cases of sexual harassment and sexual abuse in entertainment companies. And boy, you don't want to go down that road without a legal team that's really ready to fight for you.

Well, an independent writer just isn't going to have that. So, I'm kind of heartbroken at the way that our leading journalistic institutions have pulled back from the mission of sort of fearlessly chasing the truth. And all too often, they're interest in a story depends on making sure that it helps the right side. And I'm not saying that they think that they're not telling the truth or they think they're hiding things. I don't think they think that. But they perceive the lab leak story as something that would help Trump politically, and that to them was a bigger problem than whether or not it was true.

Larry Bernstein:

Just to follow that up, when Biden turned against that idea and said, "I'm going to have a full scale investigation," was he attacked or challenged by any-

James Meigs:

No, nothing like that. A lot of people said, "Well, now we can finally look into it." We couldn't look into it before. Trump just made everything so toxic that there was no way we could look at it before. There were journalists who literally went on Twitter and said that. But here's the paradox part. Trump did mess everything up. You know what I mean? Trump brought so much chaos into every discussion that all kinds of institutions that might have functioned better, wound up trying to anticipate what he was going to say or pushed back or not wanting to get involved and the people who partly hold Trump responsible for some of this, they're not

entirely wrong, but I think scientists and journalists should be made of tougher stuff. They shouldn't avoid a story just because Trump mentioned it.

Larry Bernstein:

In some ways this is not just a domestic event. This is an international event and we have global institutions. We have global media institutions, global and investigative journalists, we've got global health organizations. We've got global medical and scientific communities. All right, if the United States dropped the ball specifically on this one issue, and with operation Warp Speed, we were able to get all these vaccines out. So we did some things right, some things wrong as institutions. Why do you think the international institutions failed us as well?

James Meigs:

it's similar, it wasn't all Trump. There is a generalized fear of right wing populism among elite institutions. So, you might've seen some of that, not just here, but around the world. Let's not give the isolationists, the xenophobes any ammunition. I think there might've been some of that. But when it comes to the World Health Organization, you see the enormous power of China and a certain shamelessness. When that team from the World Health Organization went to Wuhan, China threw out a theory, well, maybe it didn't come from the wet market. We don't think it came from the wet market. We think it came in on some shipments of frozen fish from somewhere.

Larry Bernstein:

Vietnam or something.

James Meigs:

Yeah. And so the World Health Organization people dutifully had to include this absurd idea that the virus might've come in on frozen. They didn't endorse it. But the very fact that they included this theory with no evidence was kind of a symbol of their willingness to kowtow. And then later China said, well, no, no, maybe it came from, there was some kind of athletic competition involving athletes involved various militaries around the world, and some US military athletes had been in Wuhan I think in September or October of that year. So no, they must have brought it. It must've come from the US.

Just this kind of shameless finger-pointing, conspiracy kind of thinking from the highest levels of the Chinese government, and there's a brazenness in their actions, and they know that people overseas might not believe that, but they also know that in their domestic politics, this might be all people here. They'll have no reason not to believe the theories that the Chinese government puts forward, because they have such control over the media with a way that China clamped down on its domestic media covering any of these issues was staggering. I mean, they had hundreds of censors working daily to make sure that the wrong, what they would consider the wrong information about COVID did not reach or get shared in Chinese social media.

So the power of China is another story that we're going to have to grapple with. It's going to be the story of the next 50 years is what to do about this superpower that is really operated outside of the norms of modern democracies.

Larry Bernstein:

Jim, we end each session with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about as it relates to the scientific community and the media?

James Meigs:

Yeah. So first of all, it sounds like I'm blaming scientists for the situation. I think there was an effort by a small group of scientists to suppress this discussion. The good news is there were a lot of other scientists who kept pushing. There was a particularly impressive woman named Alina Chan, she's a post-doc at the Harvard MIT Broad Institute. She doesn't even have a job yet, and yet she did this long series, she published papers and wrote long, fascinating articles and now a book all about the lab leak theory. Very, very brave, very independent. She wasn't the only one.

So even on this topic, there were a lot of people doing great work. And as you see, ultimately, we lost a year, but we ultimately got to where we need to be in terms of looking objectively at the question, we probably won't get an answer, but at least we're looking at it. My optimism comes from everything else to happen. I mean, in every field, I've done a lot of work on ventilation, air quality, whether or not the virus is aerosol. You had so many scientists from other fields dropping what they were doing, focusing on this, getting together, writing papers, doing things that really had an impact on public health, had an impact on our understanding, and then the crowning jewel in that, of course, is this really miraculous effort to get these vaccines out in maybe half the time that most experts thought it would take. And the efficacy of these vaccines is just so stunning. That's a really, really impressive story.

An impressive story about not just science, but a really smart collaboration between private industry, and the resources of the federal government, the public private partnership. We get so much criticism of big pharma, but these guys did something really miraculous. And the government did something that only governments can do, which is bring on the resources and the planning and the logistics to make sure we got, not to just have the vaccines invented, but manufactured in huge quantities. I'd like to see the US government continue to invest heavily in this. We should be sending these vaccines everywhere around the world, as fast as we can. If it costs us \$80 billion to vaccinate the world, that's a fantastic investment that we should be, we're doing it, but we should be doing it even more aggressively. So I'm optimistic that we have resources, we have smart people, and we will be better prepared next time one of these things hit. So, it's a guarded optimism, but it is optimism.

Larry Bernstein:

Jim, thank you so much for your time.

James Meigs:

Hey, it's my pleasure.