CHAPTER TEN

SARS and the Consequences for Globalization

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The essays in this book demonstrate that the 2002–2003 SARS outbreak can be read in a variety of ways. Economists and political scientists see it as a temporary setback in China's drive to join the global economy. As a social anthropologist who focuses on the cultural aspects of globalization, I take a different view.

The events of the winter of 2003 might best be seen as a warning shot, a wake-up call for security officials, economic planners, and policymakers—everywhere, not just in China. SARS, combined with the events following 9/11, forces us to reexamine many of the optimistic, utopian visions of globalization that emerged during the 1990s. This chapter looks at infectious diseases as a *potential* inhibiting factor in the future of globalization and international migration.

Readers will no doubt recall the euphoria of the dot.com era, when the U.S. stock market was booming and investors were assured by pundits that the digital revolution was creating a "New Economy." Twentieth-century business cycles and market crashes were consigned to the rubbish bin of history. The optimism, the naïveté, of that era encouraged a whole generation of theorists to write about the disappearance of the state, the irrelevance of borders, and the transformative power of the Internet.

During the 1990s, the pages of *Foreign Affairs*, the world's leading policy studies journal, were filled with articles on globalization, most of which challenged the received wisdom of earlier generations. Publishers could not find enough manuscripts to satisfy an international readership that would buy anything with the word "global" in its title. By mid 2004, however, the market for such products had collapsed as affluent readers began to face the boomerang effects of globalization—including the "offshore outsourcing" of high-tech, digital-savvy jobs.[1] In its March 2004 issue, *Harper's Magazine* announced "The Death of Globalization"—the tide was turning.[2]

Is globalization in fact dead? And, if so, was SARS one of the angels of death? To paraphrase Mark Twain, it would be foolhardy to celebrate the demise of globalization at the first signs of illness.[3] Views of globalism depend upon one's political perspective: Should we focus on the victims or the victors of global capitalism? Are yesterday's losers tomorrow's winners, as recent critics of the offshoring of U.S. jobs to China and India maintain?[4]

In hindsight, the utopian writings of the late 1990s seem curiously outmoded, even though they were produced only a few short years ago. One of the best examples is Richard Rosencrance's 1999 book *The Rise of the Virtual State: Wealth and Power in the Coming Century*. The title captures the revolutionary optimism of the era: according to Rosencrance, information flows will increase rapidly in the twenty-first century as the need for military intervention dissipates (or it evolves into police actions). Control over knowledge and technology will be more important than domination of land and territory. To be fair, Rosencrance argues that these are long-term projections that follow the inevitable logic of globalization and digitization.[5]

Perhaps the most radical of the dot.com theorists is Kevin Kelly, former executive editor of *Wired* magazine and guru to the 1990s digerati. In his influential book *Out of Control: The New Biology of Machines, Social Systems, and the Economic World,* Kelly spoke for the rapidly ex-

panding community of web enthusiasts.[6] He predicted that the Internet would gradually erode the power of governments to control citizens; in Kelly's view, digital technology made it possible for transstate coalitions to thrive in cyberspace.

In the 1990s, *Wired* published a steady stream of articles that envisioned a world characterized by continuous, uninhibited access to information. This, in turn, would render obsolete the many twentieth-century ideologies founded on notions of ethnicity, religion, and class. *Wired* subscribers who were veterans of the 1960s student movements could not help but notice the parallels to earlier, Marxian dreams of a classless, stateless world. In its heyday, *Wired* was the hackers' equivalent of *The Communist Manifesto*; even the language of Engels and Marx's 1848 broadside finds parallels in the "netizen" screeds published in the 1990s.[7]

Not surprisingly, many anthropologists were affected by the digital revolution and its visions of an open, free-flowing global system. One of the most interesting anthropological discourses on globalization is Arjun Appadurai's *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, published at the height of the dot.com boom.[8] Appadurai focuses on highly educated English-speaking professionals who were born in South Asia and emigrated to Europe or the United States, where they have spent their adult years. Migratory elites create what Appadurai refers to as "diasporic public spheres" that cut across state borders and link people in real-time communication networks (cell phones, email, rapid air travel). Contemporary diasporas of this type are not just transnational, they are "postnational," to use Appadurai's apt phrase—meaning that the people who operate in these spheres are oblivious to national borders and maintain multiple home bases.[9]

Another anthropological study that tracked diasporic elites is *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*, by Aihwa Ong.[10] Ong's subjects are Chinese entrepreneurs, scientists, business executives, and movers and shakers in the world of global finance. The book's title reflects the lifestyle of these elites, captured at a critical moment during

the mid-1990s economic boom. This was a period when it was relatively easy for people to hold multiple citizenships and to fly across the Pacific several times each year without worrying about immigration controls on either side.

The disaporics described by Appadurai and Ong are living examples of postmodernism—defined (for the purposes of this essay) as a lifestyle conditioned by the collapse of time and space.[11] Contemporary travelers experience this implosion in a very vivid, direct, and personal manner. In the late 1960s, for instance, a telephone call from Hong Kong to London cost approximately U.S.$10 per minute, assuming one could find a line that handled international "trunk" calls. Today, the same call can be made for pennies, and there is no shortage of competitive cell phone options. Meanwhile, air travel has become a routine experience for millions of middle- and working-class migrants. The price of a transoceanic ticket has declined severalfold since the 1960s (allowing for inflation), while incomes have increased sharply. Appadurai's and Ong's diasporics could not help but feel that state borders had become "porous," in striking contrast to the perceived experience of their parents' generation of migrants.[12]

Will post-9/11 political developments make these late-twentieth-century lifestyles seem hopelessly out of step with twenty-first century political realities? Evidence now points to an era of *hard-boundaried* states, reinforced by increasing border surveillance and visa barriers that restrict the free flow of people. Flexible or multiple citizenships may be a thing of the past. This seems especially true in the uncertain aftermath of the Iraq War and the rise of terrorism in Europe and the Middle East. Who, at this point, would dare predict what the emerging global system will look like?

This brings us to SARS.

The reemergence of open, porous borders seems even more unlikely given the developments of winter 2003. It can be argued that the SARS

outbreak—and, by implication, the prospect of similar epidemics in the future—presents a more serious challenge to the openness of the global system than the September 2001 terrorism attacks on New York and Washington. Americans watched live CNN images of U.S. border controls hardening after 9/11; even remote crossings on the Canadian border seized up for a time as automobiles and trucks were rigorously inspected. At U.S. airports, the immigration queues for noncitizens slowed to a "snail's pace" (to quote one British colleague). Visas for young men from Muslim-majority countries were effectively frozen, and hundreds of Chinese students arrived late for graduate school during the fall semester of 2002.

As painful as were the tragic events of September 11, 2001, the subsequent border-disrupting effects were selective, temporary, and partial. The response to international terrorism produced nothing like the complete and utterly indiscriminate shutdown associated with SARS. There was no selective profiling of suspected SARS carriers. The winter 2003 embargo on travel to and from epidemic hot spots lasted for weeks in some cases.

The full chronology of the SARS episode is covered in the Introduction to this book. The epidemic appears to have "gone global" on or around February 28, 2003, when an outbreak of flulike symptoms was reported in Hanoi. Severe acute respiratory syndrome, or SARS, as it later became known, was linked to a business traveler who arrived in Vietnam from Guangdong province in southern China.[13]

The World Health Organization (WHO) headquarters in Geneva issued a global health alert on March 12 in response to the spread of SARS to Hong Kong and Toronto (see chapter 2). Prior to this notification, the most recent WHO global alert was announced in 1994, following an outbreak of plague in India.[14]

A few examples taken from media reports of the time will illustrate the threat that SARS presented to the global system:

1. On March 18, 2003, a doctor who had treated SARS patients in Singapore flew to New York. After his brief visit, he boarded a return flight to Singapore from JFK Airport; the Boeing 747 had 400 people aboard, representing fifteen countries. All 400 were quarantined in Frankfurt, an intermediate stop. There was no evidence of SARS among them.[15]

2. Passengers aboard Air China's March 15, 2003, Flight 112 from Hong Kong to Beijing were not so fortunate. A 72-year-old man with SARS was on that flight and infected at least 21 people—who spread the disease north to Inner Mongolia and south to Thailand.[16]

3. The majority of Taiwan's SARS cases can be traced to a single patient who was misdiagnosed at an early stage in the epidemic.[17]

4. At the height of the SARS scare, the occupancy rate of Hong Kong's major hotels fell to 5 percent, and it was rumored that, on some nights in April 2003, two of the territory's grandest hotels did not have a single guest.[18]

5. During the outbreak in Singapore, an internationally known bank segregated employees into three groups. The first group worked in the central office in Singapore's central banking district, the second moved to a remote site some miles away, and the third worked from home. Senior managers made it a practice *not* to meet together in the same room at the same time. Most significantly, visits to clients abroad ceased entirely, given that each trip required a 10-day quarantine at the entry port. Elaborate crisis preparations the bank had installed in the aftermath of 9/11 did not work as well as expected—disease had trumped terrorism. The executive director of the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore put it this way: SARS is "like a neutron bomb. It affects people, not equipment."[19]

What can we conclude from these events? First, as the Singapore case illustrates, SARS threatened to kill a very large number of people; it did not affect technology or communications. The epidemic disrupted the

flow of people across borders—and it was precisely the diasporic elites studied by Appadurai and Ong who were hit hardest.

SARS also tells us something important about the future of global security. Jeanne Guillemin, a specialist on bioterrorism, notes that biological warfare "by humans against humans has been rare and historically inconsequential."[20] Rather, it is "natural" biological events, brought about by the vagaries of human-animal-microbial interactions that represent the true threat to international mobility. In the end, as noted by several authors in this volume, SARS was a minor incident compared to more lethal biological events, such as the "Spanish Flu" of 1918. Historical evidence now suggests that upwards of 100 million people died during that epidemic; 20 million may have died in India alone.[21]

The cauldron for the production of global flu epidemics is the same microregion where SARS first appeared—the Pearl River Delta of Guangdong province, adjoining Hong Kong. This is an ecozone where pigs, ducks, chickens, and miscellaneous other livestock (including the now notorious civet cat) live cheek-by-jowl with farmers—in one of the planet's most densely populated regions.[22] It is here also that avian flu is currently brewing (as these words are being written in early 2005). Avian flu has already made the species jump from chickens to humans in Vietnam, south China, and the Netherlands.[23] Recent WHO and CDC warnings about the possible consequences of this jump sound ominously like what the SARS outbreak might have become under different circumstances. Homo sapiens was lucky in 2003.

Globalization is a process that is replete with ironies. One of those ironies hides behind the SARS crisis: a premodern agricultural system—based on pigs, ducks, chickens, and centuries-old technology—could well turn out to be the greatest threat to the postmodern global system.