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FÜR ETHNOLOGISCHE FORSCHUNG**

# Comparing Pandemics (Part One)

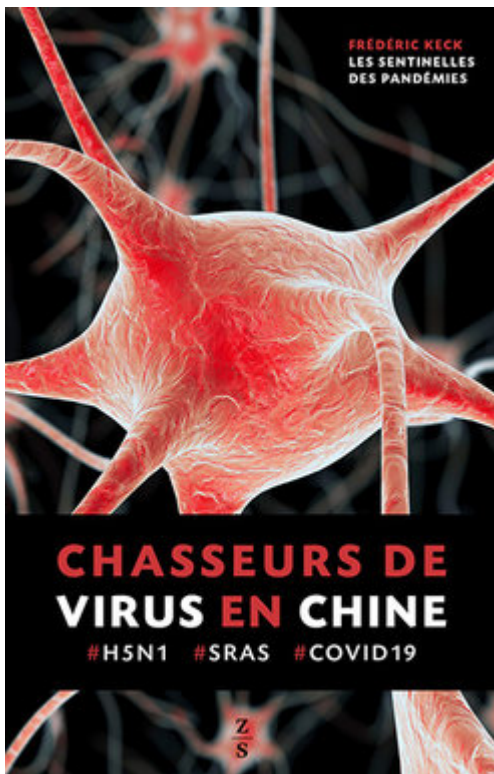
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## Learning from SARS: On *Avian reservoirs*

Published this month in French, Frédéric Keck's (2020a, 2020b) timely monograph, *Les sentinelles des pandémies/Avian reservoirs*, examines responses to the 2002-3 SARS outbreak –arguably the first pandemic of the twenty-first century—which emerged in China's Guangdong province, bordering Hong Kong, and was ultimately contained largely within East Asia.

Drawing on fieldwork conducted between 2007 and 2013 in Hong Kong, and also Singapore and Taiwan, Keck's ethnographic focus is not the SARS crisis *per se* but rather what happened next, exploring how these three territories came to invest in different methods for mitigating the risk of a future pandemic.



Frédéric Keck: *Les Sentinelles des pandémies Chasseurs de virus et observateurs d'oiseaux aux frontières de la Chine*

That states in East Asia proved ready for COVID-19 has become a commonplace of initial media commentary, often indicting governments across Europe and North America as “unprepared”, to steal the title of Andrew Lakoff’s (2017) recent history of the emergence of health preparedness as a goal of global health security.

Both Keck and Lakoff’s books grew out of the same research project on biosecurity at Berkeley, initiated in the wake of 9/11, but where Lakoff is intrigued by ways *post-hoc* concerns over unpreparedness have often become a pretext for similar patterns of intervention around the world by health authorities, government officials, and corporate actors, Keck is more curious about the differences one encounters.

Indeed, Keck’s central contention is that being prepared for a pandemic has come to mean something quite particular in East Asia. To be ready, after SARS, meant acting as if the worst were going to occur, a logic of preparedness that contrasted sharply with a logic of prevention which Keck found prevalent in Europe and North America at the time of his fieldwork, striving to be ready to stop the worst from happening.

Certainly, Keck is not the first to gloss the double blow of Avian Flu in 1997 and SARS in 2002-3 as Asia’s Twin Towers. Yet *Avian reservoirs* uniquely situates this response to SARS in a global history unfamiliar even to readers of Lakoff’s *Unprepared*; a chronicle of entanglements between science and politics, human and animal, along the East Australasian Flyway, which stretches between Japan, Korea, China, Indonesia, and Australia, and where Keck ventures many of the great upheavals of the twentieth century have been experienced, most chillingly, as pandemics.

So how exactly had residents of Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan learnt from SARS that being prepared for a pandemic means acting as if the worst were going to occur? On Keck’s interpretation, three changes were especially significant:- new kinds of watchfulness in how people related to animals, the elaboration of practices simulating disaster, and a transformation in ways of reckoning what it meant to be well stocked. In each case, the nub of Keck’s account is close analysis of a shift in how ‘professional’ scientists and state authorities engaged with each other—to monitor viruses and disease vectors, to war-game pandemic scenarios, or to stockpile vaccines and samples—but the art of Keck’s ethnography is the way he spirals out to explore the motley of different people caught up in these collaborations. From chicken farmers to market traders, amateur dramatic clubs, hobby ornithologists, Daoists devoted to releasing birds purchased in the market out into the wild, what turned this kaleidoscope of responses to SARS was a sudden twist in how people became at once aware of a potential for hunting and gathering scientific knowledge in their everyday practice and

alert to possible political implications, particularly in their diverse relationships to birds.

Writing in the 1990s on the eve of the 'science wars', Clifford Geertz (1994) foresaw that however much natural scientists resisted the initial forays of the human sciences to study scientific knowledge, so long as they stayed wedded to "outmoded self-conceptions, global stories that falsify their actual practice", they would ultimately put at risk any ability to discern real science from "various New Age irrationalisms".

"Our common enemy is #COVID19, but our enemy is also an 'infodemic' of misinformation," tweets the UN Secretary General quoting the Director General of WHO – "To overcome #coronavirus, we need to urgently promote facts & science."

"List of things that went intellectually bankrupt over the pandemic and will hardly recover," tweets Nassim Nicholas Taleb, "EPIDEMIOLOGY!" (Closely followed by WHO).

Yet if the human sciences were ever to offer an account of science as meaningful action, Geertz presaged, it would have to move beyond one tradition of hermeneutic comparison that he traced back through German letters to Dilthey, a tradition which resists any intrusion of a "natural science model" into the human sciences, keeping natural scientists "well away from matters where 'mattering' matters".

Some thirty years on, a cluey reader fossicking through the details of *Avian reservoirs* will find much of interest in exploring the stakes of this Twitter war – the Hong Kong Director of Health who guided the response to Avian Flu and SARS was Director General of WHO from 2006-2017, and the lab China built in Wuhan (with French assistance) was created to rival the Hong Kong facility central to the book.

When Keck theorises his own comparative approach to science as meaningful action, however, his leap beyond hermeneutics troubles the very notion of a human science. Coming to act as if the worst is going to occur rather than striving to stop the worst from happening involves moving, Keck contends, from a logic of pastoralism (playfully twisting Michel Foucault) to a logic of hunting (inspired by Philippe Descola), a shift which presumes the ability of humans really to take the perspective of non-humans. So far as Keck is concerned, this is what matters about his book. Rather than trying to shut down wet markets (the subject of Keck's next project), such spaces where humans can relate closely with non-humans are precisely where an alternative science can emerge, coming to discover the world through non-human eyes.

Whether Keck's self-conception of his comparative method is an entirely compelling account of how his rich ethnography actually works, readers will have to judge for themselves.

## References

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