



# Introduction

## Bodies of Fear in a World of Threat

They wanted the Germs; they got 'em.

—Darby Crash

The use of the symbolic abstraction of fear as an exchangeable sign has always been a helpful means to justify and manifest the most perverse needs of authority invested in the expansion of militarized orders and the erasure of individual autonomy. But in the United States after the 9/11 attacks, fear reigns supreme as a fundamental unit of exchange across the entire political, economic, and military spectrum. The sign of fear filtered through the sign matrix of threat, now more than ever, not only serves the authoritarian forces of order, but the engines of profit as well. Signs such as these move at astonishing speeds through cultural and political barriers. Even the slowest bureaucracy responds to their appearance with surprising vigor, while the fastest corporate vector can use them to fuel ideological and material engines that move production and distribution at maximum velocity. Once

these general signs become particularized within the narratives of body invasion and organic meltdown, opportunities for the rapid appropriation of power increase exponentially. New funds for research and the centers that house it, contracts for materials such as vaccines and symptom-arresting pharmaceuticals, security contracts, and so much more flood the marketplace to such an extent that almost every apparatus of production and service has an interest in keeping the spectacles of fear and threat in play. Whether an actual threat exists or not is irrelevant to this network of exchange. The threat of future crisis and the solution of preemptive action marches forward, gaining momentum as it goes, until it becomes a system in which so many institutions are so deeply invested that it can no longer be critically appraised. This system becomes a naturalized transparent given—a necessary fact to which all must submit lest they lose the riches that have been gained.

This is not to say that the problems and impossibilities within the system are unknown; for the most part they are, but they are not categorized as contradictions. Instead, they are presented as nonrepresentative tendencies that should be ignored. For example, one social expression of fear in a population, mass panic, has yet to be seen within the public sphere. While terrorist attacks have caused severe emotional trauma both on individual and public levels in the United States, the situation could hardly be framed as mass panic. Neither 9/11, the anthrax scare, nor the August 2003 New England blackout (at the time feared to be a terrorist action) typically has caused such behavior. In spite of (largely artificial) crises, public order has remained intact. However, those apparatuses (government, media, military, etc.) with a tremendous interest in maintaining an environment of fear encouraged the public to believe that the nonrepresentative panic buying of plastic sheets and duct tape promoted by these

very institutions was proof of a grand disorder that would occur without proper vigilance and preparedness. As individuals, we suffer this contradiction between the real and the hyperreal, between spectacle and active living, in the form of a culture of waste that is grounded in the highly profitable production of the useless at the expense of the practical (better education, healthcare for all, fair wages, etc.).

Even from a military perspective, the case of germ warfare and bioterrorism is representative of the economy of uselessness. A systematic interest in this economy has oscillated between little and tremendous following the use of chemical weapons during World War I. Yet from the beginning, a constant disagreement has existed within the military as to how effective biological weapons might be. The first position taken by the United States military was that such weapons were a waste of resources. This view was best expressed by Major Leon Fox of the United States Army Medical Corps in an article written in 1932 for military surgeons entitled “Bacterial Warfare: The Use of Biological Agents in Warfare.” In this article, Fox laid the foundation for what still stand as the primary arguments against the usefulness of such weapons, including the boomerang effect, bacterial sustainability, and the belief that biological weapons would not be as effective as many existing alternatives. Even at that early date, he had a degree of understanding about the production of the spectacle of fear in regard to this particular subject:

*Bacterial warfare is one of the recent scareheads that we are being served by the pseudo-scientists who contribute to the flaming pages of the Sunday annexes syndicated over the nation's press....I consider that it is highly questionable if biological agents are suitable for warfare.*

This position has never disappeared from United States military calculations, even during periods when germ warfare was being intensely investigated during the Cold War, after the discovery of transgenics, during the Reagan military buildup, or even today after the anthrax scare. The debate has been ongoing, yet what has sustained military efforts in this area has less to do with strategic or tactical planning and more to do with the politics of nonrational fears exchanged throughout the culture. For example, during the Cold War, research was spurred by intelligence regarding the grand scale of Soviet research and its application to weapons. This knowledge created a fear of a biological weapons gap. During this period the doctrine of preparedness (i.e., avert a future crisis by a preemptive solution) was introduced and has been in place ever since. Currently, the anthrax scare has convinced the Bush administration that even a small-scale attack could be very disruptive. The Bush administration's reaction is particularly unnerving due to the broad scope of the funding and the nature of the programs that have followed. They extend far beyond the military proper and affect public health policy.

Unfortunately, the precedent that has been set is to refuse to acknowledge this deep, long-lived contradiction of opinion over the utility of germ warfare, and this refusal is precisely what is occurring now. Nor is the artificial manufacture of fear being assessed in any way. And why would it be when there is so much profit to be made? Is it not better to go along with the situation? The public receives *ad nauseum* constant calls for preparedness as if biological attack on a massive scale is possible, as if casualty-free preparedness is possible, as if no real preparations are already in place, and as if biowarfare/bioterrorism is a major (if not the greatest) threat to public

health. Apocalypse awaits us all. For example, in their book *Germ*s, Judith Miller et al. conclude:

*If we as nation believe that the germ threat is exaggerated, we are spending too much money on it. But if the danger is real, as we [the authors] conclude it is, then the investment is too haphazard and diffuse. We remain woefully unprepared for a calamity that could make the anthrax mailings seem tame.*

The authors have made a very crafty statement. While acknowledging that other positions exist, and by seemingly taking a critical, albeit weak stand (the money isn't being spent right), in the end, they acquiesce to the apocalyptic narrative that is the foundation for what they believe to be wrong. This narrative of fear and threat is precisely the reason why the money is being misused. Threat requires action to circumvent it—not considered action, just action—for no institution that cares for the public interest can afford to be perceived as doing nothing. Of course within the context of self-interest, this narrative is also necessary to get to the top of the *New York Times* bestseller list. A call for calm is not going to be a catalyst for sales.

At other times, the agitprop surrounding germ warfare is strictly self-serving, as in this press release from the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center:

*Bioterrorism is the greatest national security threat of the 21st Century. Bioweapons attacks could cause death and suffering on a catastrophic scale, wreak enormous economic and social disruption, and even threaten core democratic processes. Adequate response does not depend on our military strength*

*but on medical and public health systems and availability of effective drugs and vaccines....*

*In a move that will establish the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center and the University of Pittsburgh as the international leader in the critical, high profile, and rapidly expanding field of bioterrorism preparedness, research and response, the creation of the Center for Biosecurity of the University of Pittsburgh Medical Center was announced today.*

The cynicism of such a document is nearly unspeakable. One could not ask for a greater exaggeration of a problem that has yet to exist, or a more vague implication of a means to preemptively solve it. This text is clearly guided by unrestricted self-interest masquerading as public concern.

The government is just as pleased to exploit the potential threat of germ warfare. In 1997, United States Secretary of Defense William Cohen made a dramatic appeal by appearing on television holding up a five-pound bag of sugar and declaring that this amount of anthrax sprayed from an airplane would result in the death of 50% of the population of Washington D.C. Not only is this fear mongering irresponsible since it greatly exaggerates a highly unlikely scenario, but the information itself is incorrect. The World Health Organization estimated that it would take 50 kilograms to cause a 20% casualty rate in a population of 500,000.

Even scientists are willing to get on board the fear-and-threat gravy train, and they will make up impossible scenarios if they have to. Consider this apocalyptic scenario from Richard Wise

of the Department of Microbiology at the City Hospital in Birmingham, United Kingdom:

*Picture the following. Over the period of about one week, increasing numbers of patients report to their general practitioners and emergency departments with fever, malaise, and myalgia, and other symptoms in keeping with viral respiratory tract infection. Increasing numbers of patients become septicaemic and then deaths start to occur. By the time the diagnosis of anthrax is made, each patient will have been in contact with many family members as well as with colleagues and people in the hospital. The initial exposure of, say several hundred people, has now spread to many tens of thousands. Panic would ensue and hospitals would be overwhelmed....*

A very frightening scenario indeed. The one problem, of course, is that there is no evidence that anthrax can be passed from one human to another human. If several hundred people were infected that is all that would be infected. And the above quote was published in the very prestigious medical journal *The Lancet* in May 1998!

It is within this environment of fear mongering, military expansion, and corrupt economic exchange that Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) felt compelled to write a critical counternarrative. In the following pages, we will attempt to sketch an outline of why bioterrorism is a failed military strategy; why it is all but useless to terrorists; how preparedness efforts have been detrimental to public health policy; what institutions benefit from biofear; and how and why this problem will not be controlled by the “diplomatic community.” We certainly realize the difficulties of the task we are undertaking. Knowledge of this subject is



completely fragmented. There are as many narratives as there are players in the directing of the biological industries. Given the amount of money presently on the table, no biological or political experts can be trusted, since all suffer from a conflict of interest, and therefore must be skeptically approached. Even in matters of quantity, the situation is very imprecise. For example, how can we know how much public money is being spent on biowarfare research? Black ops aside, many of the areas under this discipline are poorly defined. Bureaucrats and beancounters can play very fast and loose with what is or isn't biowarfare research. Consequently, all we can say is that the Bush administration's biowarfare initiatives are costing taxpayers billions of dollars. How many billions is nearly impossible to determine with any reliability. Hence, we are left with few alternatives to describe what is occurring. There are stacks of primary documents and a handful of historical narratives, but in the end we can only count on our material experience in everyday life to judge whether the real or the hyperreal reigns supreme in this situation.

CAE's opinion is a simple one. We believe that biowarfare "preparedness" is a euphemism for biowartech development and the militarization of the public sphere. Preparedness, as it now stands, is a madness that continues because it gets votes for politicians, audiences for media venues, profits for corporations, and funds for militarized knowledge production. If there is any real threat to our bodies and health, it is not coming from weaponized germs, but from the institutions that benefit from this weaponization.

---

Note: In our discussion of public health in this book, we will not address the interrelated topic of the HIV/AIDS pandemic in any detail. Not because we do not see a connection or fail to value its significance within this discourse, but because we

believe that there is adequate literature on the subject by authors far more qualified to represent the situation than ourselves.

In addition, we are only addressing germ warfare proper. We are not including chemical or toxic weapons (even if derived from a germ) in this analysis.