

# *The COVID-19 pandemic and the U.S. public discourse on China*

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By Charles McKelvey

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The accusations by Donald Trump that China is to blame for the Covid-19 pandemic occurs in the context of an ongoing debate about China, which Trump's protectionist policies had further stimulated. Among other dimensions in the U.S. public discussion of China, there is a right-wing discourse against U.S. corporations and neoliberalism, in which China is implicated. This tendency is illustrated by Robert E. Lighthizer, the U.S. trade representative. In a May 11 article in *The New York Times*, Lighthizer explains well how U.S. companies abandoned the nation in the name of profits. He writes that a "desire for 'efficiency' had caused many of them to move manufacturing over the past two decades to China, Vietnam and Indonesia, among other places. They did so to save on labor costs or to avoid environmental standards. . . . For business, this strategy paid off in the short term. Cheap labor meant higher profits. But for America, the effects were traumatic. The United States lost five million manufacturing jobs. That, in turn, devastated towns and contributed to the breakdown of families, an opioid epidemic and despair."

Lighthizer applauds Trump's trade policy, maintaining that it protects manufacturing jobs. He notes that there had been growing awareness of the national security need to have necessary supply chains within the national territory, and the U.S. inability to attain necessary supplies for the COVID-19 pandemic has reinforced this tendency.

Sen. Marco Rubio, Republican from Florida, in an April 20 article in *The New York Times*, also criticizes the political establishment for failing to protect the U.S. manufacturing base, although he falls short of naming neoliberal policies, and his discourse is more strongly inclined to China-bashing. He maintains that trade with China has ruined U.S. capitalism. Because of trade with China, jobs have disappeared and communities have crumbled, as business and lawmakers gave priority to short-term gains over the long-term wellbeing of the nation. The nation has lost its manufacturing base, and it no longer has the capacity to produce goods. He calls for redeveloping U.S. supply lines through a tax policy that favors domestic production.

Sen. Josh Hawley, Republican from Missouri, sees the negative consequences of neoliberalism for the USA. He sees neoliberalism as a radical vision that departs from the concept of the nation-state as the basic building block of international relations. Against neoliberalism, Hawley defends the right of nations to set their own economic policy, and he affirms the principle of international trade among equal sovereign states. Hawley maintains that the neoliberal internationalists, instead of bringing the international peace that they promised in the early 1990s, embroiled the United States in one war after another. And neoliberalism has resulted in sending America production overseas, costing U.S. jobs, "while enriching Communist China."

Hawley protests that the World Trade Organization lets some nations, like China, get away with protectionist exceptions to the rules, while others, like the USA, are prevented from protecting their economies. He does not note that Chinese leadership negotiated defense of its interests in accordance with its long-range plan for the development of the nation, whereas U.S. corporations were only interested in their profits, and not the long range good of the nation, and it is this political difference that drives WTO policies in practice.

The conservative nationalist critique provides a correct analysis of neoliberalism and the abandonment of the nation and its workers and communities by U.S. corporations. But conservative nationalists engage in demagoguery when they blame China, because it is the U.S. political establishment that is responsible. China has significant participation in U.S. trade merely because, as the second largest economy in the world, it has a high capacity to absorb the extra-territorial factories that U.S. companies wanted to create in search of cheap labor, and this trade was in a determined moment consistent with China's national plan for economic development.

The COVID-19 pandemic provides further fodder for anti-China political demagoguery. Trump's claim that the novel coronavirus originated in a laboratory in China is not supported by scientific evidence. As Kristian Andersen, Professor of Immunology and Microbiology of the Scripps Research Institute in the United States writes, scientists that have studied the mutations and the molecular structures of SARS-CoV-2 discard the possibility of the virus having been created by genetic manipulation in a laboratory.

Rachel Esplin Odell and Stephen Wertheim of the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft are opposed to a New Cold War with China, and they advocate cooperation with China in addressing planetary threats. However, they participate in spreading misinformation about China. They maintain that in blaming China for the pandemic, Trump was seizing on a grain of truth, in that "China, at a minimum, covered up evidence of the outbreak and was too slow in sharing complete information with international health authorities." But these accusations of a coverup and a delay in reporting, although widely repeated, are not true.

An article by Du Xiaojun, Vijay Prashad, and Weiyan Zhu, published in ALAI on June 4, describes the origin of the virus in China. They report that on December 26, Doctor Shang Jixian, Director of the

Department of Respiratory Medicine and Critical Care of the Chinese and Western Hospital of Integral Medicine of the province of Hubei, attended to four patients with symptoms that could not be associated with any known infirmity. She immediately reported the four cases to the Center for the Prevention and Control of Diseases of Wuhan. In the following two days, she and her team attended to another three patients with the same symptoms. On December 29, the Provincial Center of Prevention and Control of Diseases of Hubei sent experts to investigate the seven hospital patients. The following day, they informed the Center for Control of Diseases of China, and on December 31, China informed the World Health Organization. On January 1, the Center for the Control of Diseases of China called Robert Redfield, Director of the Center for the Prevention and Control of Diseases of the United States. The virus was identified on January 3. The National Health Commission of China created a group of experts of various institutions that carried out a series of experiments with samples of the virus. On January 8, they confirmed that the new coronavirus was the source of the outbreak involving the seven persons. On January 10, the Chinese government shared the genetic sequence of the new coronavirus with the World Health Organization, in order that research seeking a vaccine could begin all over the world. On January 11, the first death by the coronavirus was reported. On January 14, the Municipal Health Commission of Wuhan said that it still did not have evidence of person-to-person transmission, but it could not say with certainty that it was not possible. On January 20, Dr. Zhong Nanshan, an expert in respiratory infirmities and leader in the struggle against Covid-19, stated that, indeed, the new coronavirus could be transmitted from person to person. That day, Chinese President Xi Jinping gave instructions to the National Commission of Health and other official organisms to begin emergency measures.

It is not the case, therefore, that China covered up the pandemic or delayed in reporting it or sharing information. But there is a New Cold War with China brewing, as a demagogic response to the problems in the US economy and system of health, resulting from the irresponsible policies of the last four decades and more. As is known, truth is the first casualty in war. The scapegoating of China is convenient, and it does not end with blaming China for the loss of U.S. manufacturing jobs and for the COVID-19 pandemic. We will look at other false claims and assumptions about China in U.S. public debate in our next editorial commentary.

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