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Social consequences of biochemical terrorism

 Tony Judge

Adapted extracts from an e-mail to the Institute.

Biochemical terrorism in all probability will be the next major disruptor of society. This has been endlessly discussed in terms of 'weapons of mass destruction', but I have seen almost no discussion of its disruptive effect on the smallest scales.

What will be the likely responses to small-scale biochemical terrorism, once it begins? I suggest the following possibilities – bearing in mind how the very real threats of poisoning were handled in European Middle Age societies, in Arab cultures and in Far Eastern cultures.

World's Best Ideas, *Institute for Social Inventions, London, 1998, 300pp, ISBN 0 948826 48 7*

- In the Middle Ages, food tasting was often a requirement for any person of importance – implying a new form of bodyguard? Louis Farakhan's bodyguards brought in his personal bottle of Evian water at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago (1995), replacing that offered to participants.

- People will quickly switch to wearing gloves under almost all circumstances – even to open a letter (somewhat as gloves are now used to handle sandwiches at counters – for the opposite reason). But there will be a felt need to wear body coverings – a 'fashionable' equivalent to what troops wear. The Japanese proclivity for face-masks when suffering a cold, will become required. It will become dangerous to be encountered in public with what appears to be a cold – recalling attitudes towards lepers.

- It is possible that just as populations have been weaned away from public water supplies to bottled drinking water (of often lower quality) by dubious marketing, so a major opportunity will be seen in providing bottled air – already available as 'boosters' in some locations. Scare-mongering – notably by security firms – will therefore be to the financial advantage of distributors of these and related products and services.

'Right of movement will be severely restricted. Searches will become much more invasive'

- Government response will tend to be extreme and reactive, with room for little subtlety. It is probable that right of movement will be severely restricted. Searches will become much more invasive – especially the invasive body search.

- Groups will tend to either set up biologically secure environments (building on current security systems) or migrate to isolated locations where they have greater control over their living and working environments. This will reinforce the tendency towards walled suburbs, but will require that these de-link from the surrounding systems in the case of water or gas supplies.

- Corporations will offer foodstuffs "guaranteed free of contaminants", raising issues already seen in the case of the marketing of organic foodstuffs.

- Pharmaceutical corporations will be in their element as controlling resources and skills to respond to such threats. A significant opportunity will be open to the most dubious, namely distribution of counter-actants – to biochemical agents they may themselves arrange discretely to release! Who will be able to prove otherwise?

- There will be a massive move away from unmediated face-to-face contact and therefore almost total reliance on electronic communications. As AIDS has demonstrated with respect to safe-sex intercourse, 'safe-communication' intercourse will be seen to require some protective interface – whether gloves, a plastic veil, a glass wall, or electronic distance. It is questionable whether cafes, pubs, discos and public eating places will survive except as high risk

experiences for the daring – like unsafe-sex.

- Mass meetings of any kind will tend to be prohibited or require special permission and expensive protection. Major events, like the Olympics, will tend to be television only. This will have severe consequences for the economics of the conference and exhibition industries. It will ensure the cessation of political rallies and conventions.

- Tourism will tend to become a high risk experience, as Egypt has recently demonstrated. There will be tendency to offer guaranteed 'safe experiences' in contained environments – perhaps to the advantage of some isolated tourist locations. Airplanes and buses will be specially adapted and subject to a level of security beyond that currently practised on El Al. Note that the threat of AIDS is already severely increasing the risk of events in some locations and continents – especially given the dubious guarantees concerning infection via mosquito ('dirty syringes?').

- Some will seek to take advantage of biochemical technology to 'deal with' unwelcome people in their environment. Noisy neighbours? Bullies? Unwelcome groups? Intransigent decision-makers? The Middle Age traditions will be revived.

- One of the positive effects will be on certain forms of mugging and rape. Use of Middle Age poison rings as a protection against rape will emerge. Of course, these will also be used by muggers and rapists as a new form of intimidation.

- There will be a major increase in intimidation, whether of decision-makers in government, of corporations or groups able to offer ransom moneys or of individuals. This will be exploited by organised crime but also by political and corporate dirty-tricks departments.

- The niceties of sustainability and human rights will tend to be de-prioritised.

Anthony Judge, Union of International Associations, Rue Washington 40, 1050 Brussels, Belgium (tel 32 2 640 18089; fax 32 2 649 3269; e-mail: iuia@pophost.eunet.be).

DeVaretti Music Centre in Bosnia