

The 'Invisible Enemy': A Critical Look at the Use of Military Metaphors and Anthropomorphisation During The COVID-19 Pandemic

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In mid-March, before becoming infected with Coronavirus, Boris Johnson declared that his government must act like “any wartime government” while facing a deadly “enemy”. During Johnson’s admission to the Intensive Care Unit in early-April, Michael Gove stated that the Cabinet Office would continue to “marshal all the resources of government in the fight against this invisible enemy”. Following recovery in late-April, Johnson likened Coronavirus to an “unexpected and invisible mugger” in a pandemic nearing “the end of the first phase of this conflict”. As this timeline suggests, the use of military metaphors is by no means accidental or due to a state of Churchillian over-excitement. Rather, the timeline suggests that both the Prime Minister and his Cabinet have employed a calculated suite of combative language.

It is hardly surprising that the UK Government, or indeed many other administrations around the world, have chosen to personify the Coronavirus as an ‘invisible enemy’. Military metaphors are deeply embedded in medical discourse, a tradition which stretches back in the West to the English physician Thomas Sydenham in the 17th century [1]. Today, such metaphors are best observable in school biology lessons, where the body is encapsulated as a cellular ‘battlefield’ between ‘invasive’ pathogens and the ‘defending’ immune system, or in public declarations of war against disease. Before the ‘War on COVID-19’ came the ‘War on AIDS’ in the 1990s preceded by the ‘War on Cancer’ in the 1970s. Militaristic language is part of the toolbelt of government, used in times of crisis to drum up a nationalistic response from civil society, mobilising all in a common effort against a ‘common’ enemy.

What is surprising, however, is how pervasive military metaphors are considering the significant advancements in virology across the 20th and 21st centuries. The current “orthodox view amongst most virologists” is that viruses are “nothing but inanimate, complex organic matter” [2]. Within this orthodoxy, viruses are passive agents which lack the fundamental characteristics of living organisms. Viruses cannot capture or store energy, self-repair, and most significantly, replicate. Indeed, in the ultimate act of self-betrayal, the “metabolic machinery” of the infected cell replicates and evolves the virus particles [3]. Put simply, a virus would struggle to ‘fight’ and ‘mug’ or even to battle and survive since viruses are not living.

Running contrary to the established orthodoxy, governments continue to employ a misleading military conceptualisation of Coronavirus. In effect, Coronavirus is recast from a passive agent to an ‘invisible enemy’ or ‘mugger’. Here, the intentionality and autonomy of Coronavirus has been very deliberately fabricated, for it creates a convenient scapegoat to attribute the high death rates to. After all, it is not the government’s hesitation or lack of preparedness which has resulted in thousands of deaths, but rather the fault of a now, animated killer. Similarly, reframing essential workers (medical professionals and support staff, sanitation workers and transport workers among many, many others) as ‘frontline workers’ serves to obscure accountability and set expectations for the public. We accept that people at the ‘frontline’, such as the soldiers in WW1 who were the first to go over the top, are likely to be claimed as canon-fodder by a malicious and cruel enemy. What we do not accept, however, is essential workers to fall sick and die at their workplace as a result of government failures (such as a lack of testing and PPE).

In essence, the language of war is “consciously employed for definite political and ideological purposes”, above all to “mobilise, justify solutions and exculpate government from responsibility” [4].

In a similar vein, subverting Coronavirus from passive to active serves to diminish and obscure the very real, active conditions which converged to create such a devastating pandemic. Rather than being “unexpected” as Johnson has suggested, the spread of infectious diseases is a predictable result of globalisation, our high degree of mobility, and concentrated populations in densely populated areas. To add to this melting pot of pandemic-inducing factors, our current, poorly regulated, intensive system of animal agriculture is a major culprit in the spread of zoonoses (human infections of animal origin). Whilst the origin of Coronavirus still remains cloudy, the current leading theory being that the virus spilled over from pangolins to humans in Wuhan’s wet markets, there is overwhelming evidence that both H1N1 (swine flu) and H5N1 (avian bird flu) originated from pig and chicken factory farms [5]. To prevent future pandemics, we must find creative solutions to the pitfalls of globalisation, urbanisation and intensive animal agriculture. Anthropomorphising Coronavirus as an ‘invisible enemy’ risks obscuring the causal factors behind the pandemic and hindering constructive discussions.

To sum up, the use of war metaphors to frame the current COVID-19 pandemic is “misleading at best, and harmful at worst” [6]. Using language such as ‘invisible enemy’, ‘phase of conflict’ and ‘mugger’ to personify Coronavirus is a governmental technique of self-preservation, aimed at misattributing agency. The Coronavirus, otherwise inanimate virus particles, is made responsible for the pandemic, whilst governments, globalising processes and intensive animal agriculture is let off the hook. Further, military metaphors might prove counter-productive in the long-term, either by inducing a public feeling of battle fatigue as we await a vaccine or hindering the grieving process for families who are led to believe their loved ones failed to battle ‘hard enough’.

What this pandemic has revealed is the need for critical analysis of language in times of crisis, and the need for a new suite of metaphors to reconceptualise how we approach disease, illness and death.

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