



## *Pandemic urbanism: Infectious diseases on a planet of cities*, by S. Harris Ali, Creighton Connolly, and Roger Keil

*Hoboken, NJ, Policy Press, 2023*

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## BOOK REVIEW

***Pandemic urbanism: Infectious diseases on a planet of cities***, by S. Harris Ali, Creighton Connolly, and Roger Keil, Hoboken, NJ, Policy Press, 2023

Cities have dealt with pandemics over the past several centuries, but some cities decided that pandemics are no longer a danger due to vast medical progress in the late 20th century. However, recent outbreaks, epidemics, and pandemics have shown persistent public health challenges. Examples include the Ebola outbreaks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and Uganda (1995–2014) and West Africa (2013–2016); the bird flu epidemic in Hong Kong (1997); the fast-moving Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) epidemic, primarily in Asia (2002–2004); the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS) outbreaks in the Middle East (2012), South Korea (2015), and Saudi Arabia (2018); the slow-moving Ebola virus epidemic in West Africa (2014/2015); the Zika virus epidemic in the Americas (2015/2016); and the global COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2023).

Indeed, Microsoft co-founder Bill Gates delivered a TED talk in 2015 predicting that a highly infectious virus, not a war, would kill more than 10 million people in the next few decades (Guzman, 2021). On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared that the outbreak of the SARS-CoV-2 virus, which has claimed the lives of more than 7 million people as of late June 2023, is a pandemic (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.; World Health Organization, n.d.). While the number of deaths and hospitalizations are currently trending downward, they may increase again when (not if) the new Omicron variant or other variants appear.

*Pandemic Urbanism: Infectious Diseases on a Planet of Cities*, authored by S. Harris Ali, Creighton Connolly, and Roger Keil, shows that public health challenges (triggered by emerging infectious diseases) need to be added to the many past and present pressing urban challenges, among them the environment, infrastructure, violent crime, housing, and community building and transparency (Politico, 2023). The authors argue that “the notion of environment should be expanded to include the social environment, most notably the socio-political dimensions of cities as discussed in relation to governance, socio-demographic influences, and infrastructure” (p. 15).

The book has eight chapters. In the introduction (“Introduction: Emerging Infectious Disease and the ‘Urban’ Condition”), the authors provide background for the relationship between urbanism and (emerging) infectious diseases, political ecology (which focuses on power relations and environmental change), and political ecologies of disease, as well as an outline of the book.

In Chapter 2 (“Landscape Political Ecologies of Disease: Tracing Patterns of Extended Urbanization”), the authors discuss the concepts of landscape political ecology (LPE, which focuses on power relations and environmental change across space) and urban political pathology (UPP, which focuses on diseases across space) in connection with urbanization and infectious disease. They describe three different social impacts on the mechanisms of microbial traffic: first, sociodemographic influences; second, infrastructure development; and third, urban governance and politics. Ali et al. also argue that extended urbanization (i.e., suburbanization, post-suburbanization, and peri-urbanization) has increased the vulnerability of places and urbanized areas will remain a hotspot for infectious diseases in the future. The authors conclude that employing the political ecology framework, including LPE and UPP, will be useful in identifying the political-economic and biopolitical factors that influence the spread of viruses and call for an interdisciplinary approach to identify the risks to public health.

Chapter 3 (“SARS and the Global City”) is about the SARS-CoV virus and the SARS epidemic, which primarily raged in developed countries in the Global North. The fast spread and the high infection rates of the virus were enabled by live animal market traders and food handlers, the high degree of urbanization that created many spatial connections between cities (facilitated by flights) and within cities (facilitated by public transportation), and abundant human connections (facilitated but not replaced

by technology). Here, Ali et al. focus on the Amoy Garden apartment complex in Hong Kong, with its 19 33-story-high apartment towers that housed about 15,000 residents total, which experienced a SARS outbreak of 321 cases in March 2003, triggered by the interaction of the plumbing and ventilation systems. The authors also discuss Toronto, which has a high proportion of visible minorities and immigrants, with newcomers settling disproportionately at the urban periphery, including Scarborough and North York, where the SARS-CoV virus hit especially hard. The authors also discuss the WHO-issued travel bans and advisories that resulted in tensions between the governments of affected states and the WHO. They conclude that the SARS pandemic was a precursor to the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of its infrastructural connectivity in a highly networked world.

In Chapter 4 (“Ebola and African Urbanization”), the authors discuss the Ebola epidemic, which debilitates victims quickly but spreads slowly across space. This epidemic disproportionately affected developing countries in the Global South and spread from informal settlements in rural areas in Guinea, Liberia, and Sierra Leone to informal settlements in global metropolises in West Africa. The authors conclude that past colonial policies and planning led to unstable municipal governance and a dearth of basic services (such as water and sewer systems, electricity, or health care), partly facilitating the spread of the Ebola virus.

Chapter 5 (“COVID-19 and Extended Urbanization”) reflects on the regional SARS and Ebola outbreaks in the context of global urbanization patterns and then discusses how the global COVID-19 pandemic developed in the now interconnected, (sub)urbanized world, focusing on Toronto and its periphery. The COVID-19 pandemic magnified social polarization, differentiating between essential workers, who had to be present and thus were exposed to the virus (such as doctors and nurses, as well as grocery store and drugstore clerks), and nonessential workers, who did not have to be present and thus were able to isolate themselves from other humans (Anacker, 2022; Maginn & Anacker, 2022). The authors point out that urban public health governance was unevenly implemented across Toronto and groups, resulting in infection rates that were higher among visible minorities, indigenous people, households with more than five members, and households with essential, lower-income workers living in crowded high rises in (outer) suburban neighborhoods with busy public transit.

Chapter 6 (“Health Governance on a Planet of Cities”) revisits UPP and the local, regional, state, national, and supranational governance of infectious diseases, which needs to be improved in the near future, especially at the periphery, as zoonotic viral transfer from animals to humans who raise, slaughter, and prepare animals for human consumption will be the “new normal.” Chapter 7 (“Urban Planning and Infectious Disease Revisited”) is about the impact of urban planning on city life and its social and technical infrastructure during the COVID-19 pandemic. The authors call for local governance in developing innovative, healthy, equitable, resilient, sustainable, and participatory methods. Finally, Chapter 8 (“The City after the Plague”) is about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the global, urban society, and here Ali et al. present ideas about researching relationships between extended urbanization and infectious diseases.

The authors are multidisciplinary, hailing from sociology (Ali), urban studies/geography (Connolly), and political science/environmental and urban studies (Keil). This timely, trailblazing book will appeal to readers in urban studies, regional science, urban planning, geography, sociology, and public policy, among other disciplines and fields. In the urban, global age, the way that cities are connected means that the next outbreak or even a pandemic is only a few years away. The time to prepare for this is now.

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