
When Al Qaeda hijacked four aeroplanes on 11th September 2001 and crashed them into the twin towers in New York, the Pentagon in Washington DC, and Pennsylvania, the world changed. The United States had suffered through international terrorism on a scale that was unimaginable. The war on terror began in earnest almost immediately in the aftermath of these devastating events. And concern about the threat due to chemical and biological weapons is intimately connected. Specifically, the subsequent distribution of anthrax through the US postal system served to heighten public, professional, and political anxiety regarding bio-terrorist threats. In the wake of terror reflects on the shifting perceptions of security in the United States in the wake of these recent events.

This book, which is comprised of 12 chapters, considers bioethical issues related to the use of terror, and examines the legal and administrative public health frameworks given the potential for future bio-terrorist attacks. The book is split into five sections: public health, resource allocation, health care workers, industry obligations, and research and genetics.

In the foreword, Ford Rowan writes of his conviction that ‘the key to effective risk communication is to identify the values that are perceived by the public to be at risk.’ In a sense there is a discourse on the nature of American values, and how these might change when public health is maliciously threatened, which runs through most chapters in this book. The public health section, made up of four chapters, is especially illuminating. Paul Lombardo has produced a fascinating introductory essay highlighting the waxing and waning nature of the influence of human rights and the tradition of civil libertarianism on political thinking, and the dependency of these notions on the perceptions of external threats.

The three subsequent chapters are perhaps the most interesting. From different perspectives they examine the Model State Emergency Health Powers Act, an act that includes measures such as testing, treatment, vaccination, and isolation or the ‘control of persons’. This Act has been controversial and has generated much ire, neatly summed up by George Annas, who argues that ‘the more we undermine human rights and democracy, the less reason we will have to fight for our survival, and the less we will deserve to survive.’ As Ron Bayer and James Colgrave point out, ‘the Act was a stark expression of the view that grave threats to public health might necessitate abrogation of privacy rights, imposition of medical interventions, and deprivation of freedom itself’. The drafting of the Model Act went through many stages, and as a consequence became less wide-ranging and more focused. Whilst those who drafted the Act were haunted by the specter of a catastrophic threat to the public health, and although the impetus for the proposed legislation was the prospect of bio-terrorism, concern extended much more broadly. Earlier drafts of the Act suggested that its powers might apply, for example, not only to bio-terrorist threats but also to ‘emergent and resurgent infectious diseases’ and ‘epidemic and pandemic threats’. Although the Act has not been incorporated into many states’ laws, its development and framing serve as a useful guide to the complex nature of introducing novel legislation post-9/11. Moreover, there are lessons to be drawn across Europe if one of the concerns that prompted the drafting of the Act is realised, and which it was hoped the Act might remedy: that without coordinated public health systems that effectively support disease detection, reporting, responses, and training, differences might hamper efficient responses to bio-terrorist threats.

Richard Coker, London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine, London, UK
e-mail: richard.coker@lshtm.ac.uk

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Given the dearth of comparative European research on the sociology of health and illness, a volume promising this in the context of an exploration of social constructivism generates optimistic expectations. This edited collection, based on papers from a European Sociological Association conference with some specially commissioned contributions, perhaps inevitably disappoints. Few of the authors either contribute to analysing the social construction of health and illness or explicitly engage with a social constructivist agenda. Despite some routine citations of Foucault, most chapters report traditional interpretive research, covering topics as diverse as people’s accounts of their depression, rumours about patients’ use of the Internet, health seeking behaviour of Chinese people in Britain, and general lay understandings of health. Neither is there any significant comparative element here: papers largely focus on data solely from Finland, the UK, or Ireland, and make little attempt to situate this within a comparative framework. The one comparative paper, on survey data from Helsinki and Moscow (from Hannele Palosuo), examines the problems of measuring self-related health in survey instruments. Like most other chapters, this is an interesting enough read in itself, and it does provide a nice summary of the methodological challenges of cross-cultural quantitative work (a useful chapter for those teaching methods courses), but it is hardly a contribution to the debate on social constructivism. Other useful chapters include a summary of results from a survey of voluntary organisations in the UK on their relationship to the policy process (from Judith Allsop and colleagues) and a report from Elineanne Risika on the importance of visualisation in the work of pathologists. Some chapters might well have been better served by being worked up as peer-reviewed journal articles, in that they feel like first drafts, with thinly analysed rather descriptive data. The rationale for the ‘social construction’ headline was presumably to provide some common ground to which the authors could orient themselves, but few have. A stronger introduction might have pulled this disparate group of papers together as a coherent collection. However, the (very short) introduction does not adequately frame the contributions in this way, merely summarising their topic area, rather than explicating the ways in which the authors’ arguments fit within a constructivist framework. This introduction, being thin on both the history of social