



Viewpoint

Geopolitical health: A new imperative for understanding the health of the people we serve

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Abstract

Public health should step up to the issues of the planet in our back yard, according to Evelyne de Leeuw in the Journal of Global and Public and One Health earlier this year. We agree: the public health community has been slow to pick issues of geopolitics which have been preventing and worsening the health of the public for many years. *Neoliberalism* has been the central economic policy, particularly for the western post-industrial world, and much of the Global South, responsible for many of the harms to the health of people and planet that we face today. There is a 'golden thread' from neoliberalism to oligarchy, to populism, to culture wars, to performative cruelty, to autocracy, to a new age of conquest and global instability. All these geopolitical forces are impacting on health. They are damaging efforts to achieve equity in health, and tackle climate breakdown, and do more to prevent non-communicable disease epidemics, and be prepared and resilient against major disasters and new pandemics. The public health community must step up, if it is to be effective in its work to protect and improve the health of people and planet. And we need to work with an informed and empowered public to achieve that.

Keywords: Public health; global health; Geopolitics; neoliberalism; inequalities in health; oligarchy; super-rich; populism; performative cruelty; culture wars; Trump 2.0 presidency; commercial determinants of health; climate change; reproductive health



Introduction

How politicians think determines our ability to improve health. Why have we seen so little progress on policies to avert climate disaster? Why have inequalities in health, between and within countries increased? Why are more cigarettes sold world-wide now, than when the Framework Convention on Tobacco Control came in in 2005? Why did no-one believe Russia would invade Ukraine, with its consequential disasters for health in Europe? Why are we witnessing a rollback on health equity and a surge in preventable suffering?

These aren't abstract policy debates; they are daily blows to global health, a testament to a profound disconnects between our scientific understanding and the geopolitical forces actively undermining it. As a public health community, we fail to address the major geopolitical causes of ill health, that we study intently with our science, and teach of rote, from the safety of our hallowed halls. Now, with the new US administration, we are confronted not just with a need to reappraise our own understanding of how health fails to improve; we are confronted with existential threats to our custodianship of knowledge, our freedom to research, our ability to retain and manage information, and indeed our very existence as a public health profession, specialty, system and service. It is time for the public health academic community to recognise and understand more the geopolitical forces which are shaping our health, and which are rapidly outstripping our vocation to improve and protect health. Complacency is a luxury the public health academic community can no longer afford. 'Geopolitical health' requires stronger advocacy and emphasis in public health education.

Neoliberalism and libertarianism

Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism, the dominant economic philosophy of our time is characterised by free-market capitalism, deregulation, and reducing government spending to a bare minimum(1). It has had profound impacts on the global socio-political landscape. Neoliberalism has shaped modern society, almost in a sequence: stimulating the expansion of multinational corporations, the rise of the super-rich and oligarchy, libertarianism, populism, culture wars, performative cruelty, distrust and undermining of national and global institutions and laws, authoritarianism, and an increased risk of conflict both within and between countries.

Neoliberalism has set the conditions for globalisation and uncontrolled exploitation by multinational corporations, which frequently clash with public health policies(2). The study of commercial determinants of health is now revealing the health damaging practices of multinational corporations in a globalised economy, encouraged by the neoliberal policy environment(3-5).



Libertarianism

Libertarianism is this generation's neoliberalism, pushing for zero state intervention and maximising individual freedom. Libertarianism's most explicit outworking is Project 2025; authored by the Heritage Foundation, some of whom are now in the Trump 2.0 administration (6). The Heritage Foundation has grown and supported the Atlas network, a global association of libertarian think tanks and organisations, including the UK Institute of Economic Affairs, the Cato institute, and the French Institut économique Molinari. The Spanish network member, the Juan De Mariana institute, is described as the epicentre of climate obstructionism in southern Europe (7). The Heritage Foundation, and the Atlas Network it supports, receives funding from organisations such as Pfizer, Phillip Morris International, and fossil fuel interests such as Exxon Mobil and the Koch Foundation; and it has strong links to fundamentalist Christian organisations (8,9).

An illusory freedom

The emphasis on personal responsibility and self-reliance aligns with neoliberal principles, advocating for minimal state intervention in economic affairs. Libertarianism champions an ideal of individual freedom, from the perspective of superrich commentators; what is presented as available to all, ignores the social inequalities created and made worse by unfettered capitalism. The reduction of social safety nets and public services further marginalises vulnerable populations, widening the gap between the rich and poor (10).

Following the 2024 United States presidential election, Jeff Bezos, owner of *The Washington Post*, implemented a policy shift within its opinion pages. This shift restricted content to the purported 'pillars' of personal liberty and free markets, thereby aligning the publication's editorial stance with libertarian ideological frameworks (11). Mark Zuckerberg, owner of Meta has also expressed his support for libertarian ideology (12). This is a major drive for personal freedoms which are only enjoyed by the super-rich. These illusory notions of freedom should concern public health experts for the consequences they have for the most vulnerable people in our societies and for the health damaging impact uncontrolled commercial freedoms bring about.

The Rise of the Super-Rich and Oligarchy

Direct impoverishment of governments by the rise of the superrich and wealth offshoring

One of the most notable consequences of neoliberalism is the dramatic increase in wealth inequality. The policies associated with neoliberalism, such as tax cuts for the wealthy and corporations, privatisation of public services, and deregulation, have disproportionately benefitted the rich. The harnessing of new information technologies, by the so-called 'Sovereign Individuals' has enabled the offshoring of enormous sums of money, away from



the coffers of governments, reducing their capacity to promote health and social welfare (13,14).

A small elite variously styled the ‘super-rich’, the ‘oligarchs’, ‘the plutocrats’ has accumulated vast amounts of wealth, through which they exert significant influence over political and economic decisions. Democratic principles are eroded through the inequality in wealth and power exerted by these very few (10).

Super-rich political funding: Further undermining democracy by funding anti-democratic positions in elections

Democracy is further undermined by the ‘dark money’ invested by billionaires, into political causes such as Brexit, the Milei election in Argentina and the rejection of the Australian referendum on Aboriginal Constitutional rights (8). The Heritage Foundation reached its highest level of political influence with Project 2025 (6), and its drafting of the extraordinary outpouring of Executive Orders from the Trump Presidency in its first two months (15).

The Influence of the ‘Tech-bros’

Super-rich chief executives engaged in information technology industries, ‘the tech bros’, or the ‘broligarchy’, exert further power on the way the populace thinks, through the content promoted on their media platforms (16). Their platforms have promoted the industry of influencing and commenting beyond the reach of conventional mainstream media and enabled an unedited and unverified flow of misinformation and uncertainty. Assertive opinion has been amplified in the echo chambers of social media, creating harmful attitudes to COVID-19, vaccine disinformation, voting intentions and climate change (17). The giant media empires these few individuals own are drastically shifting public attitudes to public health measures, and even towards public health practitioners themselves.

Populism

The economic disparities brought about by neoliberalism create jealousies and fear amongst ordinary working people. Someone is to blame for why their lives are so hard, why things are not improving, and they cannot make things better for themselves and their families. The failures of social policy that people experience are permitting the rise of populism. Populist movements, characterised by their opposition to *the elite* and advocacy for the common people, have gained traction across the globe. Disillusionment with traditional political parties and institutions has led to a surge in support for populist leaders who promise to dismantle the established order (10). The rhetoric of these leaders often emphasises nationalism and protectionism, paradoxically, challenging the globalisation that neoliberalism promotes. This shift in political dynamics has resulted in increased polarisation and instability within and between nations.

Culture Wars



Populist thinking thrives on culture wars- that quality of life hasn't improved for the masses, can be blamed on immigrants, minorities, people with disabilities, or people who are different (18). Neoliberalism's emphasis on individualism and consumerism reinforces perceptions of winners and losers. Neoliberal policies that prioritise economic growth overlook social and cultural repercussions, exacerbating divisions and fostering animosity among different groups.

Performative cruelty

The inevitable extension of neoliberalism's culture war is performative cruelty. The competitive nature of neoliberalism encourages a winner-takes-all mentality, where empathy and compassion are sacrificed for personal gain. Losers are allowed to be punished. Performative cruelty progresses from rhetorical to actual dehumanisation and abuse. Performative cruelty is shown by many western nations: for example, in Australia's detention of asylum seekers on the isolated Manus Island of Papua New Guinea (19), the now cancelled UK Rwanda asylum plan (20) or Tunisia's treatment of migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees (21). It is shown globally in the criminalisation of poverty and homelessness (22). These acts legitimise and facilitate acts of violence and policies which are contradictory to public health's goal of social justice and equity, as well as working against the social determinants of health.

Authoritarianism

Performative cruelty strengthens the position of authoritarian leaders. Authoritarian leaders often exploit the discontent and fear of the populace, promising stability and security in exchange for greater control. The erosion of civil liberties and the suppression of dissent are hallmarks of authoritarian regimes, posing a significant threat to democratic governance and human rights.

Although not perfect, our modern democracies have some of the best health outcomes (23). Autocratic nations have a direct negative impact on health (24), and with autocracies on the rise and the global majority (25), we must take our stand to maintain political values which align with population health. Autocratic nations are also more prone to violence, increasing the risk of conflicts.

Risk of Conflict Within and Between Countries

It has been a convention that globalisation creates the conditions for peace because multinational corporations require freedoms to operate globally and require peaceful environments in which to operate, the so-called 'liberal peace' (26,27,28). This has been challenged by concepts of 'violent neoliberalism' (28) and 'authoritarian neoliberalism' (29) 'Military neoliberalism' describes the privatisation of military actions unconstrained by the rules of war (30,31), supporting ruling interests, as in Columbia (32), or supporting multinational company interests as in Mozambique (33). Neoliberal policies create grotesque



inequalities, give rise to populism, ideas of supremacy, and legitimise discrimination and aggression against minorities and different social classes within countries, and between countries (10,27,28). The prioritisation of economic growth and profit comes at the expense of environmental sustainability and social equity, exacerbating conflicts over land, water, and other vital resources. Military action secures access to resources and markets, enforces neoliberal reforms, protects elite interests, business and political, and justifies ideological positions which enable increased military spending and the erosion of civil liberties. The pervasive influence of military-industrial interests creates a market for endless war (31,34).

European Union countries are committing to increasing military budgets (35), and to build security across seven areas identified in the *Security, Europe* programme of the Polish 2025 EU Presidency. The programme covers military, economic/business, digital/disinformation, energy, agriculture, border and health security (36). It is reminiscent of the 1994 United Nations Development Programme which described security as being more than military-including economic, social, health and environmental security (37). War is a man made public health problem and is preventable (38). As public health professionals, we need to study and teach peace building and prevention of conflict (39).

Industrialised disinformation

The information revolution and the social media platforms that have grown up underpin the growth of neoliberal policies (10). The public health community has been slow to appreciate the negative impact of the misuse of new information technology and social media. Climate change, with its myriad consequences for public health, is a large part of this disinformation war (7,8,17). ‘Anti-vaxx’ is another major challenge to public health (40). Disinformation has seeped into every facet of life; it isolates people from public life into subcultures, where they can be detached and distrusting of medical information, and safety communication. As we progress through this second information revolution, we must as public health experts take advantage of the tools of AI, digitalisation, and social media, but also be wary of its use in disinformation, for the benefit or detriment of public health and public health education (41).

Post January 20th, 2025.

Trump distanced himself from the Heritage Foundation Project 2025 throughout his Presidential campaign. However, his presidency has already left the Paris climate agreement, is working on withdrawing the United States from the WHO, UNRWA, and UNHRC, and has removed federal dollars from abortion healthcare, all of which were done as executive orders and are advocated under the Project 2025 manifesto (15, 42). This has huge implications for global health, especially his withdrawal of funding and involvement in health agencies. In 2022-23 the United States contributed \$1.28 billion USD, which was 16% of the organisation’s total revenue (43). This withdrawal has also inspired Argentina to leave the organisation in February 2025 (44). A YouGov US survey showed 60% of Americans had favourable opinions of the WHO, with only 18% strongly supporting withdrawal from WHO,



demonstrating the separation between policy and the interests of the people (45). Stronger and more unified public health organisations and more passionate individuals could rally against anti-public health policies like this.

The Trump 2.0 administration: post neoliberalism?

The Trump 2.0 administration has already advanced the neoliberal agenda, and exceeded or deviated from it, in several directions:

Trade tariffs: Previously applied purely in the context of economic trade wars, are now being applied to gain a political advantage. Tariffs are being employed to force other countries to change policies or grant better access for U.S. goods. This includes pushing for regulatory changes or concessions on issues beyond trade, such as security, drug trafficking or immigration. Tariffs are thus part of a broader strategy to assert U.S dominance and influence global trade dynamics (46).

Transactional approach to foreign aid: For the global health community, it is particularly concerning that tariffs are being used as a transactional tool in determining where and if humanitarian aid will be delivered, making aid conditional on the political policies of the host nation (47).

Territorial claims: Advancing territorial claims on Greenland, Canada, and Panama is legitimising territorial claims of other nations and breaking down the established international rules-based order, respecting territorial boundaries – prompting revival of the term ‘mercantilism’. Conquest for economic gain is again acceptable; military action is made legitimate for Russia, Israel, and other nations (48).

Technofeudalism and religious fundamentalism: Techno feudalism describes the advancement of the technologically superior and the enslavement of the rest (49). This has been accompanied by the rise of Christian fundamentalism (50). Religious fundamentalism encourages the assertion of male dominance, the suppression of women’s rights and enforces male autocracies (51). These policies challenge gains made by women in society and assault the rights of sexual minorities (52). In health services, catastrophic damage is being caused to sexual and reproductive health services; mothers and newborn infants are dying (53).

Disdain for expertise and professionalism and dismantling of scientific research and structures: Neoliberal policies weaken professions by promoting market competition, corporate governance, managerial control, and elite alignment, thereby challenging professional autonomy, collective occupational control, and the cultural status of experts (54,55). In the UK, neoliberal ideas undermine the NHS (56) and seeks to scrap laws that prevent unqualified non-medics from filling gaps in the medical workforce (57). Under the radar, the Nazi doctrine of Race science is being rebranded for a new audience, in the guise



of human biodiversity research (HBD). It seeks to prove the genetic physical, mental, intellectual inferiority of non-white races; and it is seeking to gain acceptance and legitimacy through far-right political parties and think tanks, funded by anonymous, dubious wealth (58). Trump's administration is destroying scientific, knowledge, structures, institutions and governance on a reckless and unprecedented scale (59).

Autocracy: These policies collectively lead towards an autocratic state (60). Other commentators describe the current administration as Patrimonial. The state is treated as the personal property of the ruler. Officials are selected based on personal loyalty. Public resources are distributed like household spoils. The law is not a set of impersonal, constitutional rules—it is whatever serves the will of the leader (61).

Secession of the super-rich: 'supremacist survivalism'; 'the end-time fascism': The super-rich are increasingly abdicating public responsibilities and walking away from the obligations of citizenship, especially taxes and burdensome regulation. They are retreating beyond gated communities to gated artificial islands in the ocean, whilst dismantling the tools of civilised governance and leaving the rest of the people disposed and enslaved, and ultimately our societies to collapse, they are "carving up the world into hyper-capitalist, democracy-free havens under the sole control of the supremely wealthy, protected by private mercenaries, serviced by AI robots and financed by cryptocurrencies." As Klein and Taylor go on to say, 'The most powerful people in the world are preparing for the end of the world, an end they themselves are frenetically accelerating' (62).

Geopolitical risks to health

The Institute for Economics and Peace describes the state of what we can call 'geopolitical health' (63). It suggests geopolitical risk levels are currently higher than during the Cold War and are approaching those seen after 9/11, indicating increased global tensions. Military spending is at record levels, reaching \$2.43 trillion in 2023. Global trade has plateaued in the last decade at around 60% of global GDP. The United Nations effectiveness has declined; UN Security Council resolutions decreased significantly since their peak in the 1990s, with a notable increase in vetoes, highlighting growing divisions among major powers. Nuclear Disarmament has stalled; efforts to reduce global nuclear stockpiles have stagnated, with some states even increasing their arsenals, raising concerns over renewed proliferation and security risks. New global competitors are emerging; the number of countries with significant influence in more than five other nations has almost tripled, rising from 13 at the end of the Cold War to 34 in 2024. In addition to China and India, countries like Türkiye, United Arab Emirates, Vietnam, South Africa, Brazil and Indonesia are all growing in influence (63).

Implications for schools of public health

Public health academics and experts, have a duty and responsibility to advocate for public health, globally, expressing values of solidarity, equality and fairness, and pursuing One



Health and planetary health principles (64). This means advocating to promote policies which influence the wider determinants of health, economic, social, environmental, and political (65). We must remain true to principles of public health equity and a code of conduct (66). We cannot ‘fight fire with fire’, by resorting to the abuses of the disinformation era (41). Many have not publicly advocated previously for fear of reprisal, that somehow health is apolitical, unbiased, and not subject to geopolitical underpinnings of policy. However, history constantly demonstrates that health is inextricably linked to what happens in politics at home, and abroad. There is more for us to lose in credibility by being quiet, than advocating for policies to advance health. One does not have to advocate for a particular political party or ideology to advocate for health, but we must be conscious that advocating for health is broader than commonly recognised by the health service community.

No single group of professionals, scientists, experts, can command all the knowledge or experience needed to advocate for improved global health for people and planet. We need to build partnerships with political scientists, international lawyers, theologians, economists and ecologists to be more effective in global health advocacy (67). There are a wide range of international political science databases which can add to public health perspectives on economy, health and environmental security. Some of these are shown in appendix 1.

Schools of public health should develop a model curriculum for geopolitical health. Some ideas for this curriculum are set out in appendix 2. Our public health curriculae must reflect the critical thinking, the analysis, and ability to recognise these geopolitical issues, to create a new generation of public health experts that are better prepared for this changing world, and steer us into a healthier world for all, (68,69,70). We must understand and work better with community organisations, the assets and resources which should be central to the health of the public (71). We must also strengthen our training in partnership development and leadership. Most fundamentally, we must recommit to the principles of public health ethics and values: if we are not using science for the purpose of saving lives, reducing disability, improving and protecting health, then why should the public see us worthy of our salaries, and guardians of their safety and health (64,65,66).

Conclusion

In conclusion, neoliberalism has had far-reaching consequences that extend beyond economic policies. The reign of neoliberalism has not just reshaped economies; it has fundamentally rewired our health, birthing a cascade of interconnected crises; the rise of the super-rich and oligarchy, libertarianism, populism, culture wars, performative cruelty, societal breakdown, authoritarianism, and the risk of conflict within and between countries. Some question indeed, if we are already in the ‘third World War’. Neoliberalism has taken an even darker and more dangerous turn most recently with the Trump 2.0 administration (48,49,50,59 61). Addressing these challenges requires a re-evaluation of the principles driving neoliberalism and a commitment to fostering social equity, democratic governance, and collective well-



being. It also requires a re-evaluation of failures in the public health policy agenda, and how we have failed to understand major shifts in geopolitical relationships.

The public health community's silence or naivety on geopolitical realities is no longer tenable. The lack of attention to geopolitical health in the teaching of public health contributes greatly to why there is not more progress on reducing inequalities, addressing climate change, preventing violent conflicts, and reducing the sale or consumption of harmful products. Prevention is public health's most affordable way to address these issues, and geopolitical health advocacy is one area of prevention we must develop, in future generations of public health professionals.

The complex web of geopolitical factors demands proactive public health professionals and educators. We must move beyond awareness and become vocal advocates for policies which prioritise geopolitical health for all. The question is no longer *if* geopolitics impacts health, but how profoundly we will let it. Will we remain bystanders to these seismic shifts, or will we forge a public health that is truly fit for purpose in this turbulent new age?



Annex I

Indicators for Geopolitical Health

Although geopolitical health cannot be measured per se, it can be monitored through multiple indicators which can advise ‘sickness’ in the state of geopolitics. Understanding of geopolitical health can be reflected in current political knowledge, and with the application of political databases and indicators we can better understand, predict and prevent the ill effects of geopolitics on health. Below is a table listing some important geopolitical health indicators, and the latest report detailing the state of the indicator for countries or regions.

Indicator	Latest report	Link
Democracy	2024	https://www.eiu.com/n/campaigns/democracy-index-2024/
Peace	2024	https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/
Political Corruption	2024	https://www.transparency.org/en/cpi/2024
International Organised Crime	2023	https://ocindex.net/
Fragile state	2024	https://fragilestatesindex.org/global-data/



Annex II

A curriculum for geopolitical health?

Neoliberalism
Libertarianism
Commercial determinants of health
Role of multinational corporations
The 'Sovereign Individuals':
The super-rich
Oligarchy
Plutocracy
Kleptocracy
Role of organised crime
Corruption
Democracy, human rights and health
Fragile states
Populism
Culture Wars
Health and societal responses to minorities
Sexual and reproductive health policies
Geopolitics and advocacy
Performative cruelty
Societal breakdown
Authoritarianism
Human biodiversity, race science and Social Darwinism
Understanding of religious faith drivers and religious fundamentalism
Trust, Grievance and Hostile Activism
Trends in uses and abuses of digital technologies, applications of technology and artificial intelligence:
Surveillance capitalism
Surveillance society
Techno feudalism
Trade agreements, international and health implications
Related areas within the ASPHER core curriculum programme (69: www.ccp.aspher.org):
Especially chapters:
Chapter 7 Determinants of health
Chapter 11 Ethics
Chapter 12 Law
Chapter 13 Economy
Chapter 22 Peace and Conflict
Chapter 23 Criminal justice
Chapter 24 Health in vulnerable populations
Chapter 25 Diversity and intersectionality
Chapter 27 Global public health
Chapter 30 Infodemiology
Chapter 34 Public Health communication
Chapter 35 Public Health negotiation
Chapter 38 Leadership and management



Table - Ideological formats listed in the text

Neoliberalism
Libertarianism
Neoliberal 'Pillars' of personal liberty and free markets,
'Sovereign Individuals'
Offshoring wealth
The 'super-rich'
Oligarchy
Plutocracy
'Dark money'
'Tech-bros' / 'Broligarchy'
Social media influencing and commentating
Echo chambers of social media
Populism
Disillusionment with traditional political parties and institutions
Nationalism
Protectionism
Culture wars
Individualism
Consumerism
Performative cruelty
Dehumanisation
Criminalisation of poverty and homelessness
Authoritarianism
Erosion of civil liberties
Suppression of dissent
'Liberal peace'
'Authoritarian neoliberalism'
'Military neoliberalism'
<i>Security, Europe</i> EUB Polish Presidency programme
United Nations Development Programme 1994 : Security as
peace building and prevention of conflict
Industrialised disinformation
The information revolution
new information technology and social media
Project 2025
The Trump 2.0 administration
Trade tariffs
Transactional approach to foreign aid
Territorial claims
Techno-feudalism
Religious fundamentalism
Dismantling scientific research and structures:
Autocracy:



Secession of the super-rich: ‘supremacist survivalism’
Geopolitical risks to health
‘Geopolitical health’
Implications for schools of public health
Policies which influence the wider determinants of health, economic, social, environmental, and political
Public health equity
A public health code of conduct
Advocacy for health
International political science databases
Curriculum for geopolitical health
Asset based community development
Partnership development
Public Health leadership.
Public health ethics and values:
Global trade
United Nations effectiveness
New global competitors
Implications for schools of public health
Policies which influence the wider determinants of health, economic, social, environmental, and political (65).
Public health equity and a code of conduct
Advocacy for health
International political science databases
Curriculum for geopolitical health
Asset based community development
Public health Partnership development
Public Health leadership.
Public health ethics and values:



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