

## Wuhan Labs, Antitrust, Unrest in France, and Catalysts – What Happens Next – 8.1.2021

Welcome to What Happens Next. My name is Larry Bernstein. What Happens Next offers listeners an in-depth analysis of the most pressing issues of the day. Our experts are given just six minutes to present. And this is followed by a question and answer period for deeper engagement. This week's topics include the current unrest in France, how to persuade people to change their own minds, and the Wuhan lab leaks.

Our first speaker is Andrew Hussey, who is a professor at the University of London in Paris. Andrew is the author of the French Intifada: The Long War Between France and Its Arabs. I've asked Andrew to speak about the rise of the yellow jacket protestors as a response to the actions by the Macron government. I'm also interested in the risk of violence and civil unrest in France, the potential for a Marine Le Pen electoral victory in the next election, and the French perceptions of the success and failures of Brexit.

Our second speaker today is Jonah Berger, who is a Professor of Marketing at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Business School. I first met Jonah when I was a student of his class on the online teaching company course, How Ideas Spread. Jonah has a new book entitled The Catalyst: How to Change Anyone's Mind. Jonah believes that we try to persuade others to buy our products or believe our ideas by continually providing more information, more arguments. But this way is hard and often fails because people are resistant to change. Jonah thinks the secret sauce is a catalyst, finding out what the exact barrier is to change, and then dealing with that directly by encouraging others to change their own minds.

Our third speaker will be Jim Meigs, who is the former Editor in Chief of Popular Mechanics and runs his own podcast entitled How Do We Fix It. Jim writes in a recent article in the current Commentary Magazine, which is entitled the Lab Lead Theory Coverup, about COVID and the Wuhan labs. I hope to learn from Jim about why the media shut down any conversation about this hypothesis, and why the scientific community also decided not to investigate. I want to learn why the idea is back in the news and why there has not been any condemnation of Biden who has encouraged a full investigation.

Larry Bernstein:

Our next guest Andrew Hussey is a professor at the University of London in Paris.

Andrew Hussey:

Firstly, I want to discuss the riots by the *gilet jaunes* the Yellow Vests in France right up until the pandemic lockdown in 2020, which enforced a temporary calm on the situation. Secondly, I want to look backwards over the past few years to the immigrant riots and the Islamist attacks, which culminated in the terrible massacres at Charlie Hebdo and Bataclan in 2015.

Now these are events come from two very different parts of French society. The *gilet jaunes* are predominantly white and working class. And in the case of the Islamist attacks, the source is a

disaffected immigrant population. So I'm going to begin with a simple eyewitness account from Paris of the recent riots. I was caught up in Paris in a violent demonstration. I was trapped between the police and frontline rioters. I was battered by a hail of stones from the rioters' side and tear-gassed by the police. I retreated, coughing, spluttering, and most of all, I was stunned. What really had shocked me profoundly was the anger of the protestors. So since then, I've been asking myself, how did it happen that the forces of order in France came under such attack with such visible hatred?

In 2014, I published a book called *The French Intifada*. This book opened with very similar scenes of violence during a riot in March 2007. These rioters were mainly black or Arab kids, kids from the banlieue which are the poor suburbs which surround central Paris, and which are made up of a largely immigrant population.

The title of the book was deliberately provocative, *The French Intifada*. My French publisher actually did not dare to use this title, fearing Islamist reprisals, which tells you something about the climate of fear in Paris.

The analysis which I made in that book seemed to come true in 2015 in the most grotesque fashion with the massacres at Charlie Hebdo and the Bataclan.

Now this is the real point. Since 2015, French politics and society has veered off into a completely new direction. Instead of a terrorist insurgency within France, the so-called French Intifada, the really most important and unpredictable event was the rise of President Macron, and then the violence of opposition to this government from the *gilet jaunes*.

France is now an increasingly divided country, with class divisions hardened by geography, as well as economics.

The *gilet jaunes* come from another France, and this is disconnected France, a France which is being left behind by globalization.

The Macron government is built on an illusion. This much is clear during the recent rounds of regional elections, which were characterized, by historic rate of abstention, around 66%. This silence is the anger of the politically homeless.

I think the most important battleground in French politics, the refusal of the left and the right to face of the real challenges of class, race, and economics in modern France, whether in the banlieue or the countryside. Change will not come from the metropolitan, political shape-shifting of Macron.

Now, there's an obvious chronology in French political history, from 1789 onwards, when change is convulsive, driven by a confrontation between a complacent ruling class and an angry, disaffected subpopulations.

Right now in France, looking forward to the presidential elections in 2022, nothing can be taken for granted.

Larry Bernstein:

How strong are the democratic principles? How strong are the methods of changing power?

Andrew Hussey:

I think most historians of France would agree that the dynamics of French history has been determined by a series of dates, 1789, 1830, 1848, 1870, 1941, 1968. These are all moments where there's a convulsion, and they're either revolutions or near revolutions when power is confronted by the people.

I have never known such disarray in French politics. I've never known such anger and hate, and I've been in France for several decades, towards the French political classes.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to talk about Macron. So what's unbelievable by American political terms is where a third party would come in and not only win the presidential election, but also win the legislative election as well. How do we explain how a third party could sweep? And then almost moments later, seemingly rejected by a large portion of the population and the Yellow Jackets. How do you have both a democratic revolution in one moment and the very next moment, such anger and disgust of the new regime?

Andrew Hussey:

I think you've got straight to the heart of the issue here. Macron had no political tribe behind him. You can think of French politics, going right back to the revolution, as a tribe divided between right and left. So the democratic revolution of the centrist coming in is an invention of a new form of politics, which turns out to be an illusion.

Macron is bound to fail because of great big macroeconomic and geopolitical factors that he can't control. And when the generation that have voted him in discovers this fact, they're going to feel politically homeless, and they're going to feel betrayed. And that's why I started off the talk by talking about my shock at the anger. Because what I didn't say was that the people who were throwing stones and rioting, they weren't just young kids smashing things up. There were people my age, late 50s, who were seeing their pensions being eroded, they were seeing a future of poverty. And I think the French people feel they've been let down by Macron who's a globalized, English-speaking cosmopolitan, but has no connection to the real French people or their way of life.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to talk about Marine Le Pen next.. In her previous selection, she was anti-Euro. She was anti-European Union. What are your thoughts on the role of the Yellow Jackets and their support of Marine Le Pen. And why is Marine Le Pen shifting to a more pro-European Union?

Andrew Hussey:

I think Marine Le Pen has moved away from the position of what was called FREXIT because the failure of Brexit. The British experiment is seen to have failed, and it seems to be high risk in France. So Marine Le Pen is reflecting popular opinion.

Now, as far as the Yellow Jackets and support for Marine Le Pen, I think it's very complicated because the *gilet jaunes* are not one homogenous political group. They have no leader, they

have no spokesperson, and they don't seem to have any ideology. There are people involved in the far right, there are nationalist groups, but there are also people involved in the far left.

I'm going to be optimistic here. Most French people are not naturally fascist, they're not naturally supporters of the far right, they're not naturally supporters of Marine Le Pen. And she has failed very badly in these regional elections, not quite as bad as Macron, but they failed to win a single region. And they failed to win the region in the south, which was their base.

I believe in the soft power of the working class. If you despise them enough, they're going to push back. But it doesn't mean that they're going to put push back in terms of expressing nationalist ideologies. They're not homophobic. They're not racist, but they're represented in French culture, which presents them like that. And I think that's where a lot of the anger comes.

Larry Bernstein:

I want to go back to that riot you were in. It's shocking for an American listener because we've had race-related riots during the Black Lives Matter movement here in the United States. They lasted a couple of days. What seemed to be different was that the Yellow Jackets seemed to be going on for weeks, and that they didn't have specific demands, and that there was real anger. What is it that they want? What are they trying to accomplish? How will this play out?

Andrew Hussey:

It started off as a peaceful protest about hiking gas prices in the countryside, which Macron had imposed. It was a grassroots movement with people wearing the yellow jackets at roundabouts. Why they were complaining was because there's no transport infrastructure in the countryside. There's very few buses. The great trains, the TGV, they connect the great cities, but if you were trying to get from Paris to a small town in the rural north, then it's very difficult. They are literally physically disconnected from France.

I think the peaceful protests started off as a kind of, "We've had enough. This is actually affecting our lives."

It turned into a weekly spectacle. If you live in Paris, as I do, and I have done for a long time, you get used to demonstrations. Often they do end in violence, and often towards the end of the evening, kids will come in start smashing stuff up, setting fire to cars, and so on.

What was interesting about the Gilets Jaunes was it seemed to be both spontaneous and driven by emotion. In other words, it wasn't just the sort of casual, "We're just going to fight the police." They were like staged battles. I have to say, as well, that I'm speaking from the left, but I'm not necessarily an enemy of the police. The police were actually sort of caught in the middle between the realpolitik of the government and the Gilets Jaunes.

You could see, the Gilets Jaunes shouting at the police, "Why aren't you on our side?" Because the police have been underpaid. They're often the targets of attacks in the Banlieues.

Larry Bernstein:

We had an author, Paul Embery, he wrote a book called *Despised: Why the Modern Left Loathes the Working Class*.

Paul mentions that a very similar sort of phenomenon exists in the UK, that there was an enormous number of working class communities who've always been Labour, and at the last major election, they voted Conservative. Labour has gone globalist, cosmopolitan, opposed to Brexit. All the expressions you described about the French elite, he also describes as the English elite. And the British working class, the very people that you know and grew up with in Liverpool have switched parties, and I'm wondering how you think about the same phenomena that exists in the UK? How does it compare and contrast with what you're seeing in France?

Andrew Hussey:

I think the phenomenon in the UK of formerly traditional Labour communities voting Conservative is very paralleled in France. I think the one thing that they do have in common is that they feel despised by a left which seems to promote minorities over majorities.

Labour keeps failing in Britain, because it no longer represents the family that it originally gave birth to. And it's true. My dad voted Conservative in the last election, he's an old style, working class guy from Liverpool. But why is he interested in the LGBT rights or transphobia rights or whatever, he's not interested at all. It doesn't mean that he's homophobic or racist or anything like that, it means that these are not things which interest him.

Larry Bernstein:

I hear from my French-Jewish friends that it is unlivable for a Jewish person to live in France today?

Andrew Hussey:

I don't know whether it's unlivable, but it's very, very difficult and very frightening to be a Jew in France these days. I say this because I have a small, very close group of Jewish friends, some of whom have family who went to the camps and family who survived the occupation.

There's deep wounds that have never really healed. One is the extent to which the French, for a long time, denied any active participation in what happened during the Second World War.

The Jews are seen as a target by two very specific groups in France at the moment. This is a very taboo subject, but it's true. One group that hates the Jews and blames the Jews is the Muslim population of France. Not all of them, of course, but, to a large extent, and certainly the extreme Islamist population, blames the Jews for the Israel-Palestine conflict.

Then what they do is they map that template of the Israel-Palestine conflict onto the way they feel in France. You'll see kids walking around the Banlieues with t-shirts identifying themselves with Gaza, and things like that. That they see ... The French are like the Israelis, and it's occupied territory, that the Jews control everything.

Then you've got a very separate population which thinks the same thing, but it's coming from a completely different angle. This is the extreme form of Catholicism and right-wing nationalism.

I attended an anti-gay-marriage demonstration organized by Catholics. The graffiti at the end baffled me. As the demonstration broke up, there were two slogans, one of which said, "Death to homos," and the other one said, "Death to Jews." What was the connection between the two? The only connection I could make was that Jews represents modernity. They represent culture, civilized values. These are the things that reactionary Catholics reject, and they see same-sex marriage as part of that modernity.

It's strange how the mainly white, far-right Catholic groups speak the same language as the angry Jihadis of the banlieue. Once again, the Jews are the victims, are the people blamed for everything that goes wrong in France.

A Jewish friend of mine born in Tunisia, came to France when Tunisia became independent. He said, "When I was a young man, France was a paradise for Jews. Now it's turning into an inferno."

Larry Bernstein:

I get that. Switching back to the Muslim population, I was first introduced to you by your book, The French Intifada. It described sort of a cancer growing just outside of suburban Paris, where there were these two communities that were not only not getting along, but were, it seemed, potentially getting ready for war.

Yes, the Yellow Jackets have taken the news, yes, Macron has changed the political dynamics slightly. Is the problem still festering?

Andrew Hussey:

Yeah. I think it's going to be an enormous problem in the years ahead. Since 2015, the year of the Charlie Hebdo massacre, I think that there's been a very hard-headed military and intelligence operations which have muted a lot of Islamist activity.

It's been reduced more to a problem of criminality, which it isn't. It's an ideological problem. But the disaffection which makes jihadi, and this is why I was interested in the French Intifada, hasn't gone away.

I'm going to be very honest about my opinions here, I think it's important that the Banlieues are improved physically and economically, and transport is improved, and unemployment is improved. But that is not the whole answer. Throughout The French Intifada, this is very taboo, and I've got into a lot of trouble for saying this, is that this is not just about politics, it's about psychoanalysis.

I say this because, if you follow the pattern of the young Jihadi: young guy, smokes dope, hangs out, acts like a gangster. It's girls, drugs, showing off, et cetera. Minor criminality. Maybe gets locked up, and then starts to question who he is, what he is, where his identity is.

I did a lot of work in French prisons. I could see that French prisons were the engine room of radicalism in France. Because what happens is that this prototype guy meets somebody who's a self-proclaimed Imam, who says, "This is what the problem is. The problem is that you're not French, that you don't belong here. You belong in the Muslim civilization. You have the possibility to actually become a soldier for God."

I don't like to be an apocalyptic doomsayer, but I think this is a reality. If there is an answer, I don't know what it is.

Larry Bernstein:

We don't spend a lot of time in the United States thinking about the French civil war in Algeria. Algeria was a part of France. It was a state. And there was a multi-million population of French civilians. They were living a French life. When the Algerians voted overwhelmingly among its Muslim population for an independent Algeria, the French moved from Algeria back to the mainland, but they also brought with them a substantial number of Muslim Algerians who had helped fight for France.

And it's that very population that has been unable to assimilate, how does France deal with that?

Andrew Hussey:

The population you're referring to are called Harkis that's the Arabic term, which describes the people who fought for France. After the end of the Algerian war in 1962, a lot of these people were abandoned and left in Algeria.

And the few that managed to get to France, they found that Mother France didn't really care for them. They were given bad shantytown housing, and they were caught between two worlds, an Algeria, which was independent and proud, and becoming even more Muslim, and a country they fought for, but which didn't recognize or honor the sacrifices that they'd made.

But that belongs to the 1960s and '70s. And the real challenge which are now the fourth and fifth generations of that population, who wonder how they've ended up in this situation.

And I think that the Algerian war has never, ever gone away in the psyche of either the French people or the Muslim, the French Muslim population of France.

I interviewed the footballer Zidane several years ago, who is of Algerian origin. France played Algeria football, soccer, in 2001. And there was a riot, the pitch was invaded, and the match was abandoned. And he said it was the worst moment of his life. Zidane had won the world cup for France, it was regarded as the great symbol of unity. But what the fans were chanting at that match, and which left Zidane in tears, was the phrase Zidane was a traitor who was working for the French. And there's a long-standing myth in the Banlieue that Zidane comes from a family of the Harkis. And when I asked him about this, he didn't want to talk about it.

Larry Bernstein:

That's an incredible story. One of the aspects that I think shocked me was the army coup attempt against De Gaulle during the Algerian civil war, when De Gaulle was unwilling to continue to push for continued French ownership of Algeria. The French army, the air force and the paratroopers attempted a coup, and for a G7 country to have attempted a coup, as recently as the early 1960s, is really a shock.

To what extent is the army if they do see disorder, if the rioting in the streets gets out of control, do you think there is a potential for a coup in France?

Andrew Hussey:

I've just written about this with a story that's been pretty much overlooked in the Anglo American world, which was published in April, which was a letter from generals, mainly retired generals, from the French army, but then backed up by a petition by several thousand serving soldiers, who said that they were prepared to step in and a civil war was brewing.

This is a very small minority group of people, but it has to be taken seriously. 70% of people in a poll agreed with the complaints that the generals were making, that the banlieue were out of control, that the French army were out there in Mali or wherever they were, in the Sahara fighting radical Islam, dying at the hands of Islamists, while the French government were making concessions towards them.

So if you're living in Bordeaux or Nice or Paris, it might seem ridiculous, the idea of a coup. But it's not so far away, the near coup that you described in 1961 happened in what is now a G7 country that France really did stand on the brink of a civil war.

The United States and France, as far as I'm aware, are the only two countries which are built on an idea, the pursuit of happiness, and in France: liberte, egalite, fraternite. And the role of the army in France is to be an agent of the Republic. The role of the police, the gendarmerie is to defend the Republic. And when they see, the killing, the execution, the beheading of priests or teachers, such as the case in November with the teacher, Samuel Paty, it's the idea of the Republic is like a secular religion. And the role of the army, the role of the police is to defend the values of this secular religion.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned French perceptions of Brexit.

And you mentioned that the belief in France is that Brexit has not been effective, hasn't worked. First of all, why do they believe that? Second, the vaccine has been successfully distributed in the UK, and it's been a bit delayed in France and the rest of the European Union. And that failure could be indicative of the problems of a supranational government dealing with a crisis versus a nation state.

Andrew Hussey:

There was a small group of French people, mainly on the right, who thought that maybe Britain had done the right thing and that this was going to work. what they've seen from the French side of the channel is not the success but rather a shambles.

France has been very vaccine skeptical, because in 2008, a new diabetes drug came out and killed quite a lot of people. So people are anxious about the dangers of new drugs.

I can't think of a single person that I know from different social strata or from different political camps who thinks Brexit's been a success.

Larry Bernstein:

I'd like to end each session on a note of optimism.

Andrew Hussey:

I'm a believer in the working class in France. I think the abstentionism in the recent elections shows a very healthy sort of suspicion of the political classes at the moment. In the long term, it's always been the French working classes that have been the backbone of the nation. And I say that because I come from a Liverpool working class background, and I kind of have firsthand knowledge of how actually true that is.

And that's what is driving me to write the book at the moment, it's called France, The Invisible Nation. And I'm optimistic that the long history of the working class in France will outlive the short term history of 21st century globalization.

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Andrew Hussey:

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Macron is bound to fail because of great big macroeconomic and geopolitical factors that he can't control. And when the generation that have voted him in discovers this fact, they're going to feel politically homeless, and they're going to feel betrayed. And that's why I started off the talk by talking about my shock at the anger. Because what I didn't say was that the people who were throwing stones and rioting, they weren't just young kids smashing things up. There were people my age, late 50s, who were seeing their pensions being eroded, they were seeing a

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I say this because, if you follow the pattern of the young Jihadi: young guy, smokes dope, hangs out, acts like a gangster. It's girls, drugs, showing off, et cetera. Minor criminality. Maybe gets locked up, and then starts to question who he is, what he is, where his identity is.

I did a lot of work in French prisons. I could see that French prisons were the engine room of radicalism in France. Because what happens is that this prototype guy meets somebody who's a self-proclaimed Imam, who says, "This is what the problem is. The problem is that you're not French, that you don't belong here. You belong in the Muslim civilization. You have the possibility to actually become a soldier for God."

I don't like to be an apocalyptic doomsayer, but I think this is a reality. If there is an answer, I don't know what it is.

Larry Bernstein:

We don't spend a lot of time in the United States thinking about the French civil war in Algeria. Algeria was a part of France. It was a state. And there was a multi-million population of French civilians. They were living a French life. When the Algerians voted overwhelmingly among its Muslim population for an independent Algeria, the French moved from Algeria back to the mainland, but they also brought with them a substantial number of Muslim Algerians who had helped fight for France.

And it's that very population that has been unable to assimilate, how does France deal with that?

Andrew Hussey:

The population you're referring to are called Harkis that's the Arabic term, which describes the people who fought for France. After the end of the Algerian war in 1962, a lot of these people were abandoned and left in Algeria.

And the few that managed to get to France, they found that Mother France didn't really care for them. They were given bad shantytown housing, and they were caught between two worlds, an Algeria, which was independent and proud, and becoming even more Muslim, and a country they fought for, but which didn't recognize or honor the sacrifices that they'd made.

But that belongs to the 1960s and '70s. And the real challenge which are now the fourth and fifth generations of that population, who wonder how they've ended up in this situation.

And I think that the Algerian war has never, ever gone away in the psyche of either the French people or the Muslim, the French Muslim population of France.

I interviewed the footballer Zidane several years ago, who is of Algerian origin. France played Algeria football, soccer, in 2001. And there was a riot, the pitch was invaded, and the match was abandoned. And he said it was the worst moment of his life. Zidane had won the world cup for France, it was regarded as the great symbol of unity. But what the fans were chanting at that match, and which left Zidane in tears, was the phrase Zidane was a traitor who was working for the French. And there's a long-standing myth in the Banlieue that Zidane comes from a family of the Harkis. And when I asked him about this, he didn't want to talk about it.

Larry Bernstein:

That's an incredible story. One of the aspects that I think shocked me was the army coup attempt against De Gaulle during the Algerian civil war, when De Gaulle was unwilling to continue to push for continued French ownership of Algeria. The French army, the air force and the paratroopers attempted a coup, and for a G7 country to have attempted a coup, as recently as the early 1960s, is really a shock.

To what extent is the army if they do see disorder, if the rioting in the streets gets out of control, do you think there is a potential for a coup in France?

Andrew Hussey:

I've just written about this with a story that's been pretty much overlooked in the Anglo American world, which was published in April, which was a letter from generals, mainly retired generals, from the French army, but then backed up by a petition by several thousand serving soldiers, who said that they were prepared to step in and a civil war was brewing.

This is a very small minority group of people, but it has to be taken seriously. 70% of people in a poll agreed with the complaints that the generals were making, that the banlieue were out of control, that the French army were out there in Mali or wherever they were, in the Sahara fighting radical Islam, dying at the hands of Islamists, while the French government were making concessions towards them.

So if you're living in Bordeaux or Nice or Paris, it might seem ridiculous, the idea of a coup. But it's not so far away, the near coup that you described in 1961 happened in what is now a G7 country that France really did stand on the brink of a civil war.

The United States and France, as far as I'm aware, are the only two countries which are built on an idea, the pursuit of happiness, and in France: liberte, egalite, fraternite. And the role of the army in France is to be an agent of the Republic. The role of the police, the gendarmerie is to defend the Republic. And when they see, the killing, the execution, the beheading of priests or teachers, such as the case in November with the teacher, Samuel Paty, it's the idea of the Republic is like a secular religion. And the role of the army, the role of the police is to defend the values of this secular religion.

Larry Bernstein:

You mentioned French perceptions of Brexit.

And you mentioned that the belief in France is that Brexit has not been effective, hasn't worked. First of all, why do they believe that? Second, the vaccine has been successfully distributed in the UK, and it's been a bit delayed in France and the rest of the European Union. And that failure could be indicative of the problems of a supranational government dealing with a crisis versus a nation state.

Andrew Hussey:

There was a small group of French people, mainly on the right, who thought that maybe Britain had done the right thing and that this was going to work. But I think what they've seen from the French side of the channel is not the success but rather a shambles.

France has been very vaccine skeptical, because in 2008, a new diabetes drug came out and killed quite a lot of people. So people are anxious about the dangers of new drugs.

I can't think of a single person that I know from different social strata or from different political camps who thinks Brexit's been a success.

Larry Bernstein:

I'd like to end each session on a note of optimism.

Andrew Hussey:

I'm a believer in the working class in France. I think the abstentionism in the recent elections shows a very healthy sort of suspicion of the political classes at the moment. In the long term, it's always been the French working classes that have been the backbone of the nation. And I say that because I come from a Liverpool working class background, and I kind of have firsthand knowledge of how actually true that is.

And that's what is driving me to write the book at the moment, it's called France, The Invisible Nation. And I'm optimistic that the long history of the working class in France will outlive the short term history of 21st century globalization.

Larry Bernstein:

Our next speaker is Jonah Berger. He is professor of marketing at the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton Business School. He has just written a book called Catalyst. Jonah, please go ahead.

Jonah Berger:

Thanks. All of us have something very much in common, regardless of where we live and what industry we're in and what role we have in our organizations. We all have something that we want to change. So folks in marketing and sales want to change a customer or a client's mind. Employees want to change the boss's mind and leaders want to transform organizations. Startups want to change industries, and non-profits want to change the world.

But change is really hard. Often we push and we pressure and cajole and do a lot of work and nothing happens. And so the very simple question I'm going to ask today is, could there be a better way? Could there be a better way to change minds and drive action? Not by pushing, but

by doing something else. And so that's exactly what I talk about. The Catalyst is my recent New York Times and Wall Street Journal bestseller. It's really exploring the science of change and more importantly, what we can do to change others' minds and drive action.

And as I mentioned, when we have something we want to change, we tend to take a particular approach. And that is some version of pushing. I've interviewed thousands of folks from a variety of industries, and again and again, when asked to write down something they want to change and something they think about doing to change it, they come up with some version of pushing. We provide more information, more facts, more figures, more reasons. We send people one more PowerPoint deck, make one more phone call, send one more email. We think if we just push people a little more, they'll come around. And it's clear why we think pushing works.

In the physical world, if we want to move something, pushing is actually a great way to get it to go. If I have a chair, for example, that's sitting in the middle of a room and I want to move that chair, well, pushing it's a great way to get it to go. I'll push on the chair, and the chair slides across the floor. But when we apply that same intuition to people, we run into a little snag, which is not only that people aren't chairs, but when you push people, people don't just go, they push back. They think about all the reasons why they don't want to do what we're suggesting. They're digging their heels and they actually become less likely to do what we want, rather than more. Not only do they resist, but they push back. And in fact, the more we push, the more they push back.

And so if pushing doesn't work, what does? Well, there's a nice analogy to be made to a very different discipline, and that is chemistry. And in chemistry, change is very hard. It takes eons for carbon to be squeezed into diamonds or a plant matter to turn into oil. And so chemists in the lab often add temperature and pressure to try to make change faster and easier. They squeeze things together. They heat them up to create chemical change.

But it turns out there's a special set of substances that chemists often use that make change happen faster and easier, but do it in a slightly different way. They actually require less energy, not more. Rather than heating things up or requiring more energy to squeeze them together, they make the same amount of change with less energy, not more. Now, that might seem impossible. How can we make change happen with less energy? Change always requires energy. But what these substances do is they identify the barriers to change and they mitigate them. As you can probably guess, these substances are called catalysts.

And the same idea applies to the social world. Rather than trying to say, "Okay, well, what could I do to get someone to change?" Great catalyst, great change agents often ask a subtly, but importantly different question. Why hasn't that person changed already? What's stopping them. What are the barriers or obstacles that are getting in the way of change? And how by mitigating them, can I make change more likely?

A good analogy, good way to think about it, imagine you're parked on a car. You're parked on a hill, you get in the car, you stick your key in the ignition, you turn the key and you step your foot on the gas. If the car doesn't go, we often think, wow, I must need more gas. If I just step on the gas, the car will move. And we often use that same idea applying to people. People don't move, we think we just need more gas. If I just push on them harder, they'll change.

Well, we can step on the gas all we want. If the parking brake is engaged, car's not going to go anywhere. And so before we can get change to happen, we got to depress that parking brake. And so this is the real insight behind the book and behind that quick conversation we're going to have today. How can we be better at finding the parking brakes? We have barrier blindness. We're so aware of the change we want to have happen, but we don't really understand what the barriers are. We don't often know what the obstacles are, because we're so focused on what we want, we don't think about the people or the organizations we're trying to change. And so we got to get better at finding the barriers.

In writing this book, I've talked to amazing sets of people. I've talked to top selling sales professionals and transformational leaders. I've talked to best performing consultants. I've talked to people who change their boss's mind in most difficult situations. But I've also talked to some unusual folks. I've talked to hostage negotiators. I've talked to substance abuse counselors, and I've talked to parenting experts. People have to create change in much more difficult situations than most of us do in our daily lives.

And again and again, the same five barriers came up. And so in the Catalyst, I put them in a framework called the REDUCE Framework, that stands for reactants, endowment, distance, uncertainty, and corroborating evidence. Put those five things together, and they spell a word, and that word is reduce, which is exactly what great catalysts do. They don't push harder. They don't add more pressure. They don't provide more facts, more figures, more reasons, they identify the obstacles and they mitigate them. They figure out what the barriers are and they figure out how to get them out of the way.

I don't know if we'll talk about all five of the barriers during the question and answer period. We probably won't have time for all of them, but feel free to check out more information in the book or on my website. Lots of free resources there. But again, the goal here is really simple. How can we change the way we think about change? And by doing that, make us more able to change anything?

Larry Bernstein:

Jonah, thank you so much for that. In your book, you give the example of the hostage negotiator, where you try to persuade someone to come up with their hands up, even though that means they're going to get arrested and not get the objectives they want. What did you learn from the hostage negotiator, someone who doesn't even know the person, probably in his worst possible state of his life? How do you change that person's mind to do what he doesn't want to do?

Jonah Berger:

Yeah. It was really interesting talking to hostage negotiators. I agree with much of what you said, but I don't agree with all of that. Actually, what the great negotiators do is they learn as much as possible about the person they're trying to change. Novice negotiators, they try to start with influence. They bang in there and they go, "Hey, come out with your hands up." Do this, or else. They start with influence. But that doesn't work. All it does is encourages people to

hold up, to get more scared, to become more aggressive and do all the things that they don't want them to do.

And so what accomplished, successful, seasoned negotiators do is they start with something very different. I talked to one guy, and he was Greg Becky. And he always starts by saying, "Hey, tell me more about you." "Hey, I'm Greg. Are you doing okay? Are you doing okay? Do you have everything you need?" Starts by saying, let me build a bridge. Let me find out who this person is. Let me find out what this person needs and show them that I care about them. Starting by building social connections saying, "Hey, I'm Greg, are you okay?" Then using that to build a relationship.

Don't start by asking what you want to have happen, because then it seems like it's all about you. Start with them. Start with them and start with understanding. Start by showing that you care. Start by asking questions to understand why they're there and what the problem is. And only once we've gotten to that point, only once we understand them, can we move around so that we get them to do what we want them to do in the first place.

He tells this great story where he's talking to a guy who wants to commit suicide. And this is a little bit of a dark story, but it has a positive ending, so apologies. He talked to someone who's thinking about committing suicide. And the guy wants to commit suicide, he typically lost his job, and he has no way to provide for his family. And he thinks the only way to provide for his family is if he killed himself, the insurance company will pay for that.

Now, what most of us would want to do in this situation, we come in and say, "Hey, look, by the way, the insurance company's not going to pay out if you kill yourself. You should just skip that right away." But if somebody is thinking about killing themselves, that's not going to solve their problem. They're highly emotionally volatile, and they could do anything at any moment. And so he doesn't do that. He starts by starting conversation. "Hey, I'm Greg. Are you okay?" Great. Okay. And start having a conversation.

Start saying, "Why are you here? Tell me about you. What do you care about?" And the guy says, "Oh look, I'm worried about providing for my family." And Greg says, "Oh, you sound like you care a lot about your family." "Yeah, I do. I've got two great boys. I want them to be wonderful young men." And Greg says, "Oh, tell me about your boys." And so the guy starts talking about his boys, and how he takes them fishing and how we teach them to be polite and how he wants them to grow up and all those wonderful, wonderful things.

They talk about their kids for a number of minutes and they talk about some other things. At a certain point in the conversation, Greg goes, "Wow! If you kill yourself today, your kids will lose the best friend they've ever had." And then he pauses for just a moment. But he has done really cleverly, he said, look, I asked all these questions. I know all these things about the person I'm trying to change, but rather than saying, hey, don't kill yourself. Because if I tell you what to do, they push back. That's the idea of reactants.

Instead, he asked questions to find out, well, what does that person care about? And then show that person how the best way to reach what they want is to do what he wanted to do in the first place. And so that's why questions are so powerful. We've got to start with understanding. Start by understanding the person we're trying to change, and only then can we reach the desired outcome.

Larry Bernstein:

We had a book club a couple of years ago with another Wharton professor, Stuart Diamond, who is in your negotiation department at Wharton. In his book, *Getting More*, he also emphasizes the importance of when you're in negotiation with a third party, to try to understand as much as possible. One of my favorite quotes he gave was in a negotiation, the other side called him an asshole. And he said, "Tell me more. Tell me why I'm an asshole."

So he could just continue to better understand the nature of what was causing that sort of riff. When you do want to change someone's mind, more broadly from not killing themselves, for example, but maybe to encourage them to buy a product, you may not have a chance to ask them about their product. In your mind, what you have to do is more surveys to better appreciate the nature of the consumer experience? How do you find out more when you don't know the person across you're trying to persuade?

Jonah Berger:

Yeah. I mean, there's lots of different ways. *Reactants* is all about the idea of, too often we push people. And what do people do when they're pushed? They push back. Too often we assume if we just tell people what to do, they'll do it. But if we tell people what to do, they're not going to be likely to do it. They're often going to say no. I talk a lot about that chapter, about how we allow for agency. How do we give people back some sense of freedom and control, whether through choices or other ways, so that they feel like they're a participant in the process. I'm happy to go through one or two of the barriers, it's useful, but there are lots of different strategies for collecting information.

Larry Bernstein:

In the book, you discuss politics a little bit as well, and how to persuade a population to go on with your ideas. One example you gave was for Brexit, where you said that the winning campaign was, let's go back to where we were before ... I forgot what the exact title was. How effective do you think political persuasion is, is by using the method that you've just discussed? Using the catalyst?

Jonah Berger:

What's amazing is that how challenging change in politics is? We think nobody changes their mind in politics. We think the world's extremely divisive at the moment and nobody changes. But I talked to a number of people in the book who did change. Who did change sides and talk a lot about their stories and how other people were able to get them to change. I tell the story and dig into the science behind deep canvassing, for example, which was able to get strongly conservative voters to support transgender rights. What they didn't do is come in and say, hey, you should support transgender rights. Let me tell you why you should support transgender rights.

Instead they use a technique which bridges the gap and finds points in common and uses that to get people to change. We think that information will solve the problem. We think, oh, look, let me just expose people to information on the other side. I talk a lot about a study that was

done a couple of years ago by Duke sociologist who tried exactly that. He said, great, information works. We'll give people information from the other side. We'll give Republicans information about Democrats, and Democrats information about Republicans. They had people on Twitter, for example, follow boxes that posted information from the other side.

The notion is that information works right. Oh, the reason for political polarization is just lack of information. If you just reach across the aisle and talk to other people on the other side, that would create change. It didn't work. In fact, it backfired. Giving people information about what the other side thought, made them more polarized, not less. And so it's not just about giving people information, it's about giving people information in the right way.

In the distance chapter, for example, talk a lot about asking for less and then asking for more. People are too far from where we are at the moment. So far, they're even unwilling to listen to the possibility of changing. We really need to start with them and where they are, put information or ideas that are near where they are already, and move them a little bit in one way, and then a little bit further.

Product designers often call the stepping stones. Particularly when trying to make big change, they don't just roll out a new version of product, it's completely different. Instead what they often do, is they roll out micro versions of the product that are moving in the right direction. Maybe it's not as advanced as the whole new product is, but it gets people to adopt a newer technology, and newer technology, and newer technology, and suddenly they look and they've crossed the river.

If you say, "Hey, across this big wide river, it's going to be great on the other side." People say, "No, I'm fine where I am. I'm going to get wet." But if there's stepping stones along the way, it's easy for them to jump from one thing to the next and eventually make that big change. We've got to chunk the change in something. It's going to take big change, break it down into smaller, more manageable chunks, and then people be more likely to move.

Larry Bernstein:

Sometimes what you're describing is we're trying to persuade someone to do something that they don't want to do, but what happens if you want to help them do something that they do want to do? I'll give you an example. Many people want to diet and lose five or 10 pounds. They know that eating too much is the cause, but they're somehow unable to change their patterns of behavior. How can someone help someone do what they want to do? How do they help them change the behaviors that they know are problematic?

Jonah Berger:

I think the key question is to figure out, well, what's the barrier getting in the way? That's the first question. Too often, we jump to the solution without knowing what the problem is. When you go to a doctor's office, the doctors doesn't start by saying, let me put a cast right away. The doctor starts with saying, "Oh, well, tell me about the problem." It's only once they understand the problem, do they prescribe a solution?

So I would say the same thing. In terms of people that are trying to lose weight, well, what's the issue? Is it that they don't remember to eat healthier? They don't remember to exercise? That

they don't want to eat healthier? That they don't want to exercise? Or is it something else? And depending on what the barrier is, there may be different solutions that may be more or less effective.

And so really have to start by understanding the problem before we can prescribe the solution. I think too often, if you want something very quick, you want the quick and easy thing, I do so many interviews where someone says, oh, well, there are five barriers, tell me the most important one. Like, well, there are five barriers for a reason. All of them are important. If we're weeding the backyard, the fastest way to weed the yard is to rip off the top of the weed and move on. But then a week later, it's going to grow back.

And so to really change things, we've got to find that root. We've got to figure out the underlying reason for a problem or the underlying barrier getting in the way. And only once we understand that, can we really create change more effectively.

Larry Bernstein:

Why is your work in the marketing department of all places? Why isn't it in psychology? Why isn't it negotiation? How come your work ended up in a marketing department?

Jonah Berger:

I publish both in marketing and management and psychology. I publish papers in all those disciplines. At the core of what we're talking about is influence, which is certainly at the core of marketing topic. But the same ideas that help marketers sell products and ideas, are what help people change their bosses or colleagues' mind. Are what help parents change their kids' behavior.

I think one key insight that marketing really has that's been lost in some other disciplines is a focus on the customer. I teach the core at the Wharton school. All of our MBAs come in, they take a marketing class to start, and I head the core program for us. One key principle of that program is start with customers, start with understanding. Don't start with the product or service you have. Don't be product-focused, be customer-focused. Who is your customer? What do they need? Understand them.

We often think about marketing is selling people things. Marketing is not about selling people things. Marketing is about understanding people's needs and meeting those needs. Good marketing isn't about selling what you can make. Isn't just saying, okay, I've got this thing, how do I sell it? Good marketing is really about making what you can sell. Starting by saying, what is that need? Let me discover. Let me use research to understand that need through customer insight and other ways, then let me design products or services that meet those needs, and then let me communicate the value that I've created and capture the value at the end of that chain. It would be much more effective if we understand the customer rather than just starting with that.

Larry Bernstein:

As a minor business is this podcast, and most of the people that listen to this call are friends of mine, but there's also friends of friends. How important are peer effects in success of marketing a product?

My first book, Contagious, is all about peer effects. All about word of mouth. Netflix really changed my life, and that book is how, in some sense, got to this new book, The Catalyst. Before that book, I was a teacher and a researcher and that was it. Contagious is my first book. It's now out in over half a million copies and over 35 languages around the world. I got to work with a lot of companies and organizations. Everything from large Fortune 500, like the Googles and Nikes and Apples of the world, to small startups, for-profits, nonprofits.

I learned a lot about marketing. I learned a lot about influence. And what I realized is that similar to what I said at the beginning, everyone basically has something that they want to change. And so I realized, hey, pushing wasn't working. And so that's what led me on this journey to really understand these other drivers of behavior. Peer effects are very important. Contagious talks a lot about what drives word of mouth and how peer effects work. I'm certainly a big believer in this.

Larry Bernstein:

Jonah, thank you so much for your time.

Jonah Berger:

No problem. Thanks so much for having me.

Larry Bernstein:

Take care.

Larry Bernstein:

All right, let's begin today's session. I'd like to welcome our next guest, Jim Meigs. He is a former Editor in Chief at Popular Mechanics and is a scientific journalist by training. He is currently at Commentary Magazine and excitingly, I think, he is a podcaster like myself, and his podcast is entitled How Do We Fix It? Jim is going to talk to us today about the Wuhan lab leaks. Jim, go ahead.

James Meigs:

Thanks, great to be here. I think that understanding the origin of the COVID-19 pandemic is one of the most important public health questions, certainly of our lifetime. And unfortunately the way the global health establishment, many leading scientists, the news media, and government agencies in the U S approached this question was very problematic, and actually disturbing to some degree.

So I want to go back to the very early days of the pandemic and just make sure people have the right perspective, because we tend to edit our memories of how these things went down.

So in January and February, the idea that the COVID-19 might have leaked from one of the labs in Wuhan, China, was not considered a really bizarre or extreme idea. It was floated, actually, in China. A number of scientists thought this is something we should look at. A leading virologist named Christian Anderson actually emailed Anthony Fauci saying, looking at the genome of the virus, saying some of the features potentially look engineered. Which would refer back to the idea that in some types of virus research, there's some manipulation of the genome for various reasons. And it may not, it's not necessarily to make it into a bio weapon or something like that. It's a legitimate aspect, or controversial, but generally accepted aspect of research to do this kind of manipulation.

Well, if this virus really came out of a lab and had been manipulated, that was a real bombshell. Almost overnight people started pushing back against that idea, including the virologist who'd sent that email to Anthony Fauci. Peter Daszak, the head of a group called the EcoHealth Alliance, which is a group that distributes a government grant money through its organization to scientists around the world, a leading figure in this world, he organized a letter to be published in the Lancet, the British medical journal with 27 top public health experts and virologists. And they didn't just say that they thought that that lab leak theory was unlikely, that an origin in the natural world was more likely, but they said it was a conspiracy theory to suggest that COVID-19 does not have a natural origin.

A lot of scientists looked at that and said, "Well, that's not a very scientific statement. Really, we don't have the evidence to know one way or the other." But nonetheless, that was the version of this theory that took hold among a lot of scientists, and then even more strongly among the news media.

In late January, Senator Tom Cotton gave a talk in which he mentioned the possibility of a lab leak, it's something that should be looked into. And that almost immediately caused this kind of antibody response in the media and in our political circles to condemn the idea of even looking into the lab leak, as if it was some kind of crazy, out there, Trumpy and conspiracy theory. The Washington Post called and said he was quote, "Fanning the empires of, excuse me, fanning the embers of a conspiracy theory that has already been debunked by experts." And Slate called it "Good old fashioned racism was what explained this thinking."

Very premature to say that this thing had been debunked. It had been questioned, there had been pushback from some scientists, but it certainly not been debunked. There was also some similar reaction from world health organizations, especially the WHO which, in the early days of the pandemic was, again and again, seemed dangerously deferential to the accounts of this, that China wanted to promote. It described the spread of these ideas as quote, "An info-demic."

So it was widely assumed that this was all a reaction to Trump. But actually if you go back and you look at Trump's statements regarding China in January and February, they were actually quite positive. Again and again, he said, well, I just got off the phone with Xi, they're doing a great job. They're working hard on this. It was only later that the Trump administration really began to politicize and go overboard on lot of these statements, as it did on so many different issues.

We later learned that Peter Daszak, who had organized the letter to the Lancet, that because he's involved in distributing all these grants, he had a long history of funneling grant money to the Wuhan Institute of Virology. Nothing wrong with that, but it certainly put him in a compromised position, in terms of conflict of interest, to be poo-pooing the idea that the virus might've come from that from that institute.

What we see in the reaction to the reaction is a more positive story, where some independent scientists began to explore this outside of the mainstream channels of their fields, typically. Some reporters start kept working on this, and plugging away. And typically not, this wasn't the New York Times or the Washington Post, typically. It was, Vanity Fair, did a really impressive big story. You wouldn't think of a mostly entertainment magazine doing it, but they did an excellent story by a writer named Katherine Eban. Novelist Nicholson Baker looked into it in New York magazine.

And I think, most telling, in early 2021, Nicholas Wade, former New York Times Science writer, who'd been kind of pushed out for being sort of a crusty, not necessarily politically correct, force on the paper, he published a long, self published a long piece on Medium. A couple of weeks later Donald G. McNeil, another, the New York Times former top reporter on COVID, who had also been pushed out sort of for political reasons, wrote a piece called, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Lab Leaks Theory, again, self published.

So the key point here is that there was, for well-intended political reasons perhaps, but political nonetheless, there was a really premature effort to prevent the discussion. To stigmatize the discussion of what should have been something that was certainly within the realm of things that we would want to explore as possible sources of the COVID-19 pandemic.

And the fact that it took the mostly outsiders and people working slightly out of the mainstream, tells us that we have a culture, in science, in the media, in politics, that is not as open as it should be. And is too quick to try to close doors on information that might be perceived as helping the wrong side, or providing ammunition to the wrong side. And you still see people defending this reluctance to address the lab leak theory in that way. So my basic takeaway from this is we need to really fight for diversity and an open dialogue in our media, in the scientific establishment, certainly in our global institutions. Over the last few months, we've seen this discussion open back up, the Biden administration has demanded a more thorough investigation and more cooperation from China, which will not be forthcoming, but at least they are acknowledging that this is an important issue to look at.

Now, you'll notice I haven't answered the question, "Did the virus come from the Wuhan Lab?" I'm afraid we may never know. I am not a virologist myself, so I can't say, "Oh, it's 70% likely or 80% likely," but certainly, in the months since this has come out, evidence in favor of a natural origin has not materialized. Whereas, provocative findings that suggest the strong possibility of a lab leak origin keep coming out. None of this is proof, but it certainly shows a direction that we should be investigating.

James Meigs:

Hey, it's my pleasure.

Larry Bernstein:

Thanks, Jim. Let's go to Q and A. This event didn't come out in isolation. We also had other scientific media-related issues as related to the pandemic. For example, should we use masks? How deadly is this? How should we change our behaviors? All of this was also discussed in the scientific community as well. Should we close schools? All this was discussed in the scientific community and in the media, and there was opposition to the Trump administration as well. We have to think about it in context. It wasn't just an isolation.

How do you think about this issue as it relates to the other issues that were discussed, both in science and media, as we were desperately trying to figure out what to do?

James Meigs:

There's this notion in the science of how institutions respond to disasters that's called elite panic. After an earthquake or all kinds of natural disasters or man-made disasters, there's often an assumption that the public's going to do the wrong thing and we need to make sure we're all organized and law enforcement and everything else to prevent panic, prevent people running around and making the problem worse. In a sense, the elites, the people who are in charge who we trust to help us, they panic and they worry more about the public's reaction than the real problem at hand. We see this again and again. We saw it with the COVID-19 panic, the COVID-19 pandemic. There was a very ingrained assumption that people would do the wrong thing. They would hoard masks, so we'll tell them, "No, no, masks don't work." It was better to lie to the public in order to protect the supply of PPE than to be honest and just explain with a little bit of nuance why it's more important for people in the hospitals to have masks right now than the general public.

That was an early example, but a lot of people who are skeptical of institutions constantly bring that up. Like, "Well, how can we trust them? They told us masks didn't work." Those errors of messaging and self-contradiction on the part of our public health authorities were a really big problem. It's continuing to this day with information that is contradictory or sometimes somewhat exaggerated. I think one of the big temptations is to try to scare people into compliance with what we hope they will do, and I think we're seeing some of that today with the delta variant, and then the media doubles down.

The media will take a statement that might be a little bit too strong from a public health official, and they will amplify it even more in ways that I think are not helpful. They're not honest, but they're also not helpful because sooner or later the public just tunes out to the point where, if they don't trust you about masks, then later they might not trust you about vaccines. We're seeing the devastating impact of that vaccine hesitancy today. Some of it is deep-seated in our culture, but some of it was encouraged. A situation that was unfortunately amplified both by the public officials and then certainly there's irresponsible politicians on both sides who tend to make this stuff worse.

Larry Bernstein:

What's weird about this example is it contrasts to the mask story you just gave. It wasn't really coming from public health officials that the Chinese lab leak theory was untrue. It was coming from Lancet, for example, or the New York Times.

James Meigs:

It came from both, actually. It came from both. We had the World Health Organization was also poo-pooing this. It was an unhealthy feedback loop that intensified the whole idea that this topic wasn't just highly unlikely, but out of bounds. The implication was the only people who would bring it up are bringing it up for a political reason, which might have been true in some cases. That's the paradox of these things. There were certainly people who, for political reasons, wanted to bad mouth China. But that in itself doesn't really tell you anything about the truth or falsehood of a certain hypothesis.

Larry Bernstein:

Let's talk about WHO for a sec. This is an organization that didn't originally include China, and then China joined the organization. The WHO sent a team to China to investigate the situation, but they were very deferential and obsequious, it seemed, as it was showing in the media in the United States. Trump was making declarations that we should potentially leave the WHO if they can't do their job properly, and then the idea in the media was, how could we be even considering leaving the WHO in the middle of a global pandemic? What have we learned about the WHO? Were they deferential to the Chinese? Did it do its job as an investigative unit? Or was it it never had a chance because the Chinese weren't going to allow it? How should we think about WHO as our leading health organization internationally?

James Meigs:

Yeah. All those questions are really important and all mixed up in a way that does not lead to an easy answer. Yes, it's really important to have an institution like the World Health Organization to share data and coordinate responses to pandemics. They've done a lot of good work over the years, but China is the 800 pound gorilla in any organization. Tedros, his full name is almost unpronounceable and makes everybody just calls him Tedros, the head of the World Health Organization, was really obsequious to China in the early days. The organization, as you said, when a team was sent to Wuhan to investigate the origin they were given very, very little access and they didn't push back very much. The Wuhan Institute took their massive database of genomic data on all these bat viruses. I should rewind a little bit for those who don't know.

The Wuhan Institute of Virology is famous as the world's top institution to study certain types of bat viruses that are found in China which have been linked to other illnesses. The idea that the pandemic caused by a virus, it looks a lot like that viruses came out of the Wuhan Institute is not much of a stretch if you're just looking for correlation. Correlation is not causation, but it doesn't mean it's something that you completely ignore.

When they sent that team to the lab, the lab shut down all of their... They refuse to give access to all the data. Peter Daszak, who I mentioned earlier, he was later quoted saying, "Well, that's

not a big deal. We kind of knew what was in there. That's okay." But it's not okay. This is ridiculous in the middle of a global health crisis to shut down the database that may hold the answers. That kind of research is the thing that is what science does very well in a very distributed way. It's good to have hundreds of scientists around the world looking into that database in different ways and studying it. That's exactly what China did not allow.

The World Health Organization did a bad job of using whatever muscle it might have had. The people on the team, the investigatory team did not complain enough about really being subjected to a whitewash. That is very troubling.

On the other hand, in 2021, the World Health Organization actually finally turned a corner on this. Tedros himself said that he thought the lab leak there needed to be studied more thoroughly and that China had not been fully cooperative. He showed some spine. But we lost about a year of study. We lost about a year of research at a time when scientists all over the world were working 18 hours a day, all these different fields, scientists doing heroic work any way they could make a contribution on this pandemic. This one really key question was held off limits, so the failure of the World Health Organization and other institutions to keep that line of inquiry open, I think, we will look back and see this as a dark day. Not just for science, but for the field of public health in general.

Larry Bernstein:

I know you're not an epidemiologist, but as you've read the leading scientists who believe the Wuhan theory, what arguments do they provide that give you pause that give you pause that suggest, potentially the Wuhan lab leak is real and to quote your other buddy, who said, "How I learned to love the Wuhan lab leak theory."

James Meigs:

Well, there's sort of two sets of evidence. One is circumstantial, and that would be they have not found any reservoir in the natural world for this virus. The Wuhan Institute was studying some viruses from a particular cave that looked somewhat similar to this virus. And we know that that particular cave or mine, there were actually some people who were cleaning up bat droppings got infected, years ago with a respiratory ailment. So, there's the circumstantial evidence that we haven't found a natural reservoir. We do know that Wuhan was investigating somewhat similar viruses and had those at the lab. So theory one could be that it's a natural virus, but we don't have the genome identified, but it is something that the lab was studying and a lab worker got infected or somehow the virus got out and got into the population. That seems quite plausible.

The related idea is that the lab was doing gain of function research, manipulating the virus in ways to make it more infectious. And the argument for doing that is that we can perhaps predict ways that this virus might naturally evolve that would make it more dangerous. If we make those changes ourselves and see how dangerous it is, then maybe we'll know better how to fight it. If this happens, we could make a vaccine in advance in theory. That's the rationale for the gain of function research. There's a guy at Rutgers who calls that, he says, "That's the equivalent of looking for a gas leak with a lighted match." Because these labs do not have a

great record of safety, even though the Wuhan lab was supposed to be a level four biosafety lab, which means everything is completely controlled with negative pressure and special suits.

It turns out they were doing a lot of their research at level three or level two levels of biosecurity. Level two would be more similar to what you would have at your dentist's office. So, the idea that this lab was absolutely bomb proof, there's no way anything could leak. You heard that a lot in the press in the early months of pushing back against this hypothesis. Wasn't true. The lab was not that secure. No, these labs do have a great record of security. Other epidemics have been caused by leaks from labs. So it's not a crazy, wild conspiracy theory to worry about it. And I think what we're seeing with the Wuhan lab is this whole set of circumstantial evidence is persuasive. It's far from an open and shut case.

But then there's also the genetic evidence. And this is a very arcane discussion about this particular spike protein that the virus has, that allows it to bond to human cells and get its genetic material into the cell. There's this particular genetic sequence related to that spike protein that some researchers say is extremely uncommon or unheard of in nature, but one that's commonly manipulated by people doing this gain of function research. It's a little chunk of DNA that's easy to insert and manipulate. So therefore, it's commonly done. So when some people saw that particular piece of the code, one virologist initially said, he called it a smoking gun. That was David Baltimore. He has since walked that statement back a little bit, but a lot of people saw that and said, "Wow, this really looks like an insertion, a manmade insertion in the code in order to make this virus more virulent." Others have come back and said, "No, this is possible in nature. It's not that uncommon."

I'm not qualified to answer the question, but I think it's fascinating that it took so long for the question to be asked because the genetic sequence of the virus was released in January, 2020 by a very brave Chinese researcher who thought it was important for the world to get their hands on it. The fact that he released that sequence was why we were able to create these vaccines so quickly. So that's a positive thing. But the negative part is that this important question, which is above my pay grade to be able to answer, but I think, nothing could be more crucial, got kind of put on the back burner for roughly a year, not entirely because there were people who were looking into it, but it was pretty much absent from the pages of major-

Larry Bernstein:

Let me try a different line of questioning. And that is the role of the mainstream media versus alternative media. And you've kind of described a number of journalists outside of the mainstream media who really challenged this question and did not come from internal. And it reminds me a little bit of the autobiography by Seymour Hersh, the former New York Times, and then independent investigative journalist. In his book Reporter, and when I met him in person, what he emphasizes that real difficult, challenging investigative journalism is rarely done by the mainstream media and has to be done on the outside. And he did his work on various aspects of the Vietnam war and various massacres that occurred there.

So should we be surprised that it took, it seems almost random, a former New York Times guy working independently writing for Medium which I've never even heard of, Vanity Fair, which is an unlikely source for material like this. But going forward, should we expect blogs and

podcasts and independent sleuths and investigative journalism to be done not by mainstream media, but be done on the outside and maybe we should just embrace it and say, this is the way investigative journalism will work going forward.

James Meigs:

Yeah. And I think that's a very dangerous assumption. I have to say, it's easy to say that really long term, in-depth investigative work typically happens outside of mainstream institutions, but Hersh is, long after the New York Times, Hersh's work was published for decades in the New Yorker. And they could afford to pay him... If he worked on a story for a year, they would pay that. They would pay for him to do that. Unless you're independently wealthy, nobody can work for a year on a story and travel around the world and publish it on their blog.

There's probably a whole different episode could be done about the rise of Medium and Substack and the ways that they are creating revenue streams. For a small number of really interesting, provocative journalists, many of whom challenge the mainstream views on a lot of issues, that's a great story and it's exciting what's happening there. But I don't think there's a substitute for the kind of old school reporting team, whether Wall Street Journal, New York Times, or what have you, spending the weeks and months on a story and being backed up by the resources of a journalistic organization, backed up by... I've been involved in a number of cases where you needed to make sure you had the legal team to support you. Because people start threatening to sue you. Like when I covered entertainment, we covered cases of sexual harassment and sexual abuse in entertainment companies. And boy, you don't want to go down that road without a legal team that's really ready to fight for you.

Well, an independent writer just isn't going to have that. So, I'm kind of heartbroken at the way that our leading journalistic institutions have pulled back from the mission of sort of fearlessly chasing the truth. And all too often, they're interest in a story depends on making sure that it helps the right side. And I'm not saying that they think that they're not telling the truth or they think they're hiding things. I don't think they think that. But they perceive the lab leak story as something that would help Trump politically, and that to them was a bigger problem than whether or not it was true.

Larry Bernstein:

Just to follow that up, when Biden turned against that idea and said, "I'm going to have a full scale investigation," was he attacked or challenged by any-

James Meigs:

No, nothing like that. A lot of people said, "Well, now we can finally look into it." We couldn't look into it before. Trump just made everything so toxic that there was no way we could look at it before. There were journalists who literally went on Twitter and said that. But here's the paradox part. Trump did mess everything up. You know what I mean? Trump brought so much chaos into every discussion that all kinds of institutions that might have functioned better, wound up trying to anticipate what he was going to say or pushed back or not wanting to get involved and the people who partly hold Trump responsible for some of this, they're not

entirely wrong, but I think scientists and journalists should be made of tougher stuff. They shouldn't avoid a story just because Trump mentioned it.

Larry Bernstein:

In some ways this is not just a domestic event. This is an international event and we have global institutions. We have global media institutions, global and investigative journalists, we've got global health organizations. We've got global medical and scientific communities. All right, if the United States dropped the ball specifically on this one issue, and with operation Warp Speed, we were able to get all these vaccines out. So we did some things right, some things wrong as institutions. Why do you think the international institutions failed us as well?

James Meigs:

it's similar, it wasn't all Trump. There is a generalized fear of right wing populism among elite institutions. So, you might've seen some of that, not just here, but around the world. Let's not give the isolationists, the xenophobes any ammunition. I think there might've been some of that. But when it comes to the World Health Organization, you see the enormous power of China and a certain shamelessness. When that team from the World Health Organization went to Wuhan, China threw out a theory, well, maybe it didn't come from the wet market. We don't think it came from the wet market. We think it came in on some shipments of frozen fish from somewhere.

Larry Bernstein:

Vietnam or something.

James Meigs:

Yeah. And so the World Health Organization people dutifully had to include this absurd idea that the virus might've come in on frozen. They didn't endorse it. But the very fact that they included this theory with no evidence was kind of a symbol of their willingness to kowtow. And then later China said, well, no, no, maybe it came from, there was some kind of athletic competition involving athletes involved various militaries around the world, and some US military athletes had been in Wuhan I think in September or October of that year. So no, they must have brought it. It must've come from the US.

Just this kind of shameless finger-pointing, conspiracy kind of thinking from the highest levels of the Chinese government, and there's a brazenness in their actions, and they know that people overseas might not believe that, but they also know that in their domestic politics, this might be all people here. They'll have no reason not to believe the theories that the Chinese government puts forward, because they have such control over the media with a way that China clamped down on its domestic media covering any of these issues was staggered. I mean, they had hundreds of censors working daily to make sure that the wrong, what they would consider the wrong information about COVID did not reach or get shared in Chinese social media.

So the power of China is another story that we're going to have to grapple with. It's going to be the story of the next 50 years is what to do about this superpower that is really operated outside of the norms of modern democracies.

Larry Bernstein:

Jim, we end each session with a note of optimism. What are you optimistic about as it relates to the scientific community and the media?

James Meigs:

Yeah. So first of all, it sounds like I'm blaming scientists for the situation. I think there was an effort by a small group of scientists to suppress this discussion. The good news is there were a lot of other scientists who kept pushing. There was a particularly impressive woman named Alina Chan, she's a post-doc at the Harvard MIT Broad Institute. She doesn't even have a job yet, and yet she did this long series, she published papers and wrote long, fascinating articles and now a book all about the lab leak theory. Very, very brave, very independent. She wasn't the only one.

So even on this topic, there were a lot of people doing great work. And as you see, ultimately, we lost a year, but we ultimately got to where we need to be in terms of looking objectively at the question, we probably won't get an answer, but at least we're looking at it. My optimism comes from everything else to happen. I mean, in every field, I've done a lot of work on ventilation, air quality, whether or not the virus is aerosol. You had so many scientists from other fields dropping what they were doing, focusing on this, getting together, writing papers, doing things that really had an impact on public health, had an impact on our understanding, and then the crowning jewel in that, of course, is this really miraculous effort to get these vaccines out in maybe half the time that most experts thought it would take. And the efficacy of these vaccines is just so stunning. That's a really, really impressive story.

An impressive story about not just science, but a really smart collaboration between private industry, and the resources of the federal government, the public private partnership. We get so much criticism of big pharma, but these guys did something really miraculous. And the government did something that only governments can do, which is bring on the resources and the planning and the logistics to make sure we got, not to just have the vaccines invented, but manufactured in huge quantities. I'd like to see the US government continue to invest heavily in this. We should be sending these vaccines everywhere around the world, as fast as we can. If it costs us \$80 billion to vaccinate the world, that's a fantastic investment that we should be, we're doing it, but we should be doing it even more aggressively. So I'm optimistic that we have resources, we have smart people, and we will be better prepared next time one of these things hit. So, it's a guarded optimism, but it is optimism.

Larry Bernstein:

Jim, thank you so much for your time.

Larry Bernstein:

That ends today's session, but I want to take a minute to plug next week's show. Our next session will be Sunday, August 8. Our first speaker is Robin Greenwood, who is a professor at finance at the Harvard Business School. Robin will discuss his latest research on financial markets.

Our second speaker will be Bruce Tuckman, who is a professor at the NYU Stern School of Business. Bruce was recently the chief economist at the CFTC, which is the Commodity Futures Trading Commission. Bruce will speak about what he learned in government and the challenges persuading a bureaucracy to implement your ideas.

Our final speaker is Gary Gallagher, who is the John Nau professor in the history of the American Civil War at the University of Virginia. I met Professor Gallagher when I took his online teaching company course on the Civil War. The topic of Gary's discussion will be how to teach the Civil War in schools today.

I would like to thank today's speakers for their insights. I would also like to thank our listeners for their time and for engaging with these complex issues. Please stay tuned for next Sunday to find out what happens next. Goodbye, and you can disconnect now.