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# The post-politics of plant biosecurity: The British Government's response to ash dieback in 2012

Judith Tsouvalis 

Department of Geography, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

## Correspondence

Judith Tsouvalis

Email: Judith.Tsouvalis@sheffield.ac.uk

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This paper analyses the post-political nature of the discourse of plant biosecurity in the context of the response to ash dieback in Britain. Ash dieback or Chalara is a tree disease usually fatal to ash trees. It is caused by a fungal pathogen from Asia and was first discovered in Britain in 2012 at a nursery in Buckinghamshire, England, where it had arrived in a consignment of infected tree saplings imported from the Netherlands. Global trade and the rising number of epidemics affecting plants, animals and humans worldwide are connected. Global trade accelerates the pace of disease emergence and the spread of pathogens and pests. However, to date it has remained conspicuous by its absence from discussions of plant biosecurity. This paper investigates the reasons for this. It presents findings from an analysis of the European Union's (EU) plant health regime, in place to control the circulation and spread of plant pests and diseases in the EU, to demonstrate the key role played by plant biosecurity in neoliberalism. Additionally, results from a qualitative study of the British Government's Tree Health and Plant Biosecurity Expert Taskforce convened in the wake of ash dieback are presented to illustrate how the risk-based approach to biosecurity and expert-led governance contribute to rendering the role of global trade in epidemics apolitical. The paper builds on and broadens critiques advanced by geographers and Science and Technology Studies scholars of biosecurity thinking and practice and brings them into correspondence with literatures on post-politics. It concludes that there is not only a need for the development of new approaches to biosecurity, as suggested in the geographical literature, but also for the construction of a new politics of biosecurity.

## KEYWORDS

ash dieback, biosecurity, Britain, neoliberalism, post-politics

## 1 | INTRODUCTION

... we [the British Government] need to be better prepared in understanding the risks of what pests and diseases are likely to arrive, when, where and how they might invade, how severe the impact is likely to be and what options are available for interception, eradication, mitigation or adaptation. (Defra, 2013, p. 2)

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life's own capacity for 'emergence' [...] is being used to justify a continuous state of emergency: a situation seemingly more conducive to military decisiveness than political deliberation. (Clark, 2013, p. 19)

In February 2012, plant biosecurity in Britain was breached when 600 ash saplings from the Netherlands infected with the fungal pathogen *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus* arrived at a nursery in Buckinghamshire, England. There, they were discovered during a routine check by a plant inspector from the Plant Health and Seeds Inspectorate of the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Defra) (Baral et al., 2014; Heuch, 2014). By August 2012, four further English nurseries reported infected stock: two had imported plants from the Netherlands and two from Germany (Webber & Hendry, 2012). *Hymenoscyphus fraxineus* causes the usually fatal tree disease of ash dieback or Chalara in a variety of ash species, particularly the common ash (*Fraxinus excelsior*) and the narrow-leaved ash (*Fraxinus angustifolia*), both widespread in Britain. Symptoms of the disease include leaf loss, crown dieback and bark lesions. Trees can take many years to succumb to the disease. In the course of 2012, hundreds of sites across England were identified in the wider countryside where mature trees had contracted Chalara and isolated infected trees were found in urban gardens, parks and hedgerows. This led experts to believe that Chalara is also spread through wind dispersal and the movement of diseased leaf litter (Forestry Commission, 2016). Ash is one of the British Isles' 30 major native tree species and has been described as an "iconic" tree (Boyd et al., 2013). It is considered to be of "great historical, cultural, ecological, biodiversity, economical and commercial value" (Aslop, 2014, p. 1) and makes up 5.4% of Britain's woodland cover. It is the second most planted broadleaf species in managed woodlands. Over 1,058 species are associated with the ash, including 12 birds, 55 mammals, 58 bryophytes, 68 fungi, 239 invertebrates and 548 lichens. Forty-four species of lichen, fungi and invertebrates solely depend on the ash for their survival (Mitchell et al., 2014, p. 95), many of which could become extinct if the ash population dwindles (Jönsson & Thor, 2012). Knowledge of the emergence of Chalara in Britain caused a stir, initially in form of media criticism of the Government's lax biosecurity measures, later in form of mounting public concern. The Government saw itself faced with a "national crisis" – a state of emergency – to which it responded with military decisiveness, as Clark (2013) puts it above, rather than with political deliberation. This paper explores this response and explains why trade-related aspects of plant epidemics have so far remained anathema in politics.

Ash dieback is just one of many plant diseases where international trade has played a significant role in its geographical spread. Since the early 1990s, trade-related pest and disease outbreaks in the UK have increased. Notable among them are *Phytophthora ramorum* (sudden oak death), caused by a pathogen from East Asia and fatal to a range of trees and plants; red band needle blight, imported on nursery stock in 1997 and fatal to Corsican pine; horse chestnut bleeding canker, caused by a pathogen from India imported on nursery stock and seeds in the 1990s and fatal to horse chestnut trees (Brasier, 2008, p. 797); and the oak processionary moth, imported on amenity cypress oaks grown in Italy and shipped to the UK from the Netherlands in 2004, whose larvae cause the defoliation of oak trees and skin, eye and respiratory disorders in humans and animals (Maier et al., 2003; Mindlin et al., 2012; Potter et al., 2014). The causal agent of Chalara first arrived in Poland and Latvia on infected ash saplings imported from Asia in the early 1990s (Kowalski, 2006). From there, it spread to Germany (2002), Denmark (2003), Belgium (2010) and Northern France (2012). In all these countries it has decimated the ash population. Although factors such as wind play a role in its spread (Queloz et al., 2011), the speed at which the disease has circumnavigated the globe is due to trade. Connections between global trade and growing numbers of plant, animal and human epidemics worldwide are well established (Bright, 1998; Kimball, 2006; Lederberg et al., 1992).

Microbes, animals and insects are common travel companions of, among others, plants, humans, animals, soil, logs, packaging materials, nursery stock and seed. Displaced and, in the case of plants, often literally uprooted (e.g., "plants for planting" like semi-mature trees used for "instant" landscaping; Evans, 2007; Potter, 2015; Potter et al., 2011; Potter et al., 2014), they circulate through the global trade network impacting on environments and organisms not accustomed, resistant or immune to them (Brasier, 2008, pp. 793–794, 796–797). While native, locally adapted plant and animal communities generally suffer few ill effects from the microorganisms, viruses and viroids they have co-evolved with, encounters with new ones often prove fatal. There are many synergies between trade and environmental change. While climate change exacerbates the problem of disease transmission in areas where higher or lower temperatures put stress on ecosystems, the exponential growth of trade and unsustainable modes of production have, over the past half century, put unprecedented stress on the lifeworld. Millions of trees worldwide are struggling to survive (Pautasso et al., 2015; Trumbore et al., 2015) and vast forests are currently being lost to pine beetle epidemics in the USA and Canada and to ohi'a death disease in Hawaii (Milman & Yuhas, 2016). Bright coined the notion of "pathogens of globalization" for infectious agents whose spread is linked to trade and for him, global trade has become the primary driver "of one of the most dangerous and least visible forms of environmental decline..." (1999, p. 50). Indeed, it could be said that global trade constitutes an important vector

of disease. Echoing Bright's concerns about the *invisibility* of the problem, Brasier notes that the role of trade in the perpetuation of plant disease outbreaks is one where “debate is not only seriously lacking but may also be suppressed through non-recognition or even avoidance of the issues” (Brasier, 2005, p. 54; see also Daszak et al., 2000). Shortly before high levels of media attention and public concern over Chalara catapulted plant health to the top of the British Government's agenda, he lamented that in “contrast to the level of public debate on other risk issues such as climate change, genetically modified organisms or ‘bird flu’, the question of plant biosecurity has tended to be overlooked” (Brasier, 2008, p. 805). Even Milman and Yuhas (2016) refer to the millions of trees dying across America as a “quiet crisis”. The focus of this paper is on this reticent, invisible nature of global trade and its role in plant epidemics. It uses the British Government's response to ash dieback in 2012 as an example to explore the reasons for this and draws on findings from an in-depth, qualitative study of the Tree Health and Plant Biosecurity Expert Taskforce (THPBET), set up in the wake of ash dieback, to substantiate its claims. Chief among them are that (a) biosecurity and neoliberalism are inextricably linked, to a point where it has become virtually impossible for trade as a vector of disease to be addressed politically and (b) expert-led governance helps render the role of trade in disease outbreaks in biosecurity politics apolitical. As this paper will show, (a) is connected to (b). Taskforce members considered it a futile endeavour to articulate their concerns about free trade officially, knowing full well that the political will to do anything about them was lacking. Findings presented not only confirm the need for the development of new approaches to biosecurity that can “make real interventions into biosecure politics” identified in the geographical literature (Hinchliffe et al., 2012, p. 541; see also Hinchliffe et al., 2017). They highlight the need for the construction of a *new politics* of biosecurity that can respond to life's capacity for emergence: *not* as a “state of emergency”, but as an intense entanglement of humans and non-humans who *together* compose the Anthropocene (Zalasiewicz et al., 2010).

This paper builds on studies of the discourse of biosecurity of geographers, political theorists and Science and Technology Studies (STS) scholars: its conceptual underpinnings and normative implications; its policies and practices of enactment; its connections to neoliberalism; its ontological groundings; and its suitability as a framework for addressing health and disease concerns (Bingham et al., 2008; Bingham & Hinchliffe, 2008; Clark, 2013; Collier et al., 2004; Dobson et al., 2013; Donaldson, 2008; Donaldson & Wood, 2004, 2008; Hinchliffe, 2015; Hinchliffe & Bingham, 2008; Hinchliffe et al., 2008, 2012, 2017; Lakoff & Collier, 2008; Nerlich et al., 2009; Vogel, 2008). It expands the focus of this work to the *politics* of the discourse of plant biosecurity or, to be more precise, its *post-political* effects. Politics and world-making go hand-in-glove. As Swyngedouw suggests, “if we really care deeply about the climate and other socio-environmental conditions, our theoretical gaze and political passions have to shift from a concern with the environment *per se* to a concern and passion for the construction of a different politics” (2013, p. 2). This paper confirms the importance of succeeding in this endeavour.

## 2 | PLANT EPIDEMICS AS “STATES OF EMERGENCY”: THE BRITISH GOVERNMENT'S RESPONSE TO ASH DIEBACK

Soon after Chalara was discovered, apocalyptic imaginaries of a countryside devoid of ash trees and the dire socio-cultural and economic consequences this could have for Britain began to flood the pages of national newspapers and social media sites (Fellenor et al., 2017; Oates, 2017). Public concern escalated following a sustained media critique of Defra's failure to restrict ash imports and for allowing the horticultural sector to import ash trees – which are native to the UK – from the Netherlands and Germany, knowing how widespread Chalara was there (BBC, 2012; Sky News, 2012; Swinford, 2012). It was a response that took Defra by surprise, and it later commissioned a member of the THPBET to study and explain it (Pidgeon & Barnett, 2013).

Despite the fact that the Government had been warned in 2006 that “Diseases in plants and animals act as barriers to economic development and also threaten ecosystems” (Foresight, 2006, p. iv) and urged by the Independent Panel on Forestry in 2012 to “speed up delivery of the Tree Health and Plant Biosecurity Action Plan...” (IPF, 2012, p. 34), it was unprepared for the arrival of Chalara. Although Defra, the UK government department responsible for plant health, had put in place biosecurity measures like port inspections and import regulations for plant materials following the Dutch elm disease epidemic in the 1970s (Potter et al., 2011), these measures proved largely ineffective because of the UK's commitment to the principle of the free movement of goods of the European Union (EU) Single Market and the flawed EU plant health regime (see below) (Freer-Smith & Webber, 2015; Maye et al., 2012). Interestingly, it was the Horticultural Trades Association (HTA) itself that had sent a letter to the Forestry Commission in 2009 following its visit to Denmark (where about 90% of all ash trees showed signs of infection) to warn it of the dangers posed by Chalara and urging it to impose an immediate import ban on ash plants and related products (HTA, 2013). The Forestry Commission had been aware of the disease since 2008 and had discussed the appropriateness of an import ban with the European Commission Plant Health

Standing Committee (PHSC) (HLDeb, 2012). However, due to a taxonomical error made in determining the causal agent of Chalara, a ban was impossible under European law. In 2006, it was thought that ash dieback was caused by *Chalara fraxinea* (Chalara), a fungal pathogen considered new to science (Kowalski, 2006). Three years later, Chalara was declared as simply a stage (the asexual form or anamorph) in the life cycle of the cup fungus *Hymenoscyphus albidus*, known to science since 1851. *H. albidus* is a harmless ascomycete or sac fungi which lives on ash leaves and speeds up leaf decay and nutrient release from leaf litter. It is indigenous across Europe and native to the UK, and was not “recognised as a potential threat” (Brasier, 2008, p. 798). Furthermore, EU legislation only allows for import bans to be imposed on organisms not already present in the EU country requesting the ban. However, *H. albidus* was added to the European and Mediterranean Plant Protection Organisation alert list in 2007 because of the spread and severity of Chalara across Europe. It was not until 2010 that molecular studies revealed that Chalara was caused during the asexual phase of a newly identified fungus, *Hymenoscyphus pseudoalbidus* (Queloz et al., 2011). *H. pseudoalbidus* is identical to *H. albidus* in appearance and can only be distinguished from it by DNA analysis. The time it took to discover this had far-reaching consequences and in part explains the British Government's inaction over ash dieback (Freer-Smith, 2013, p. 23). When an import ban was imposed in ash and ash-related products in October 2012, the horse had bolted.

With public pressure mounting, the British Government's civil contingencies committee, which is responsible for planning how the Government responds to crises that cross departmental boundaries, convened a national emergency (COBRA) meeting on Chalara in London in November 2012. A key objective of holding this meeting was to show the public “how seriously the Government is taking the threat of this disease” (Defra Press Release, 2 November 2012b). Constituted as a threat to national security, the Government's response to Chalara was swift. It commissioned the Forestry Commission to carry out a rapid, large-scale survey to establish the extent and spread of the disease (during the National Forest Inventory of 2009–2012, only 103 diseased ash trees had been found among the 15,000 inspected, none of them sick due to Chalara; HL Deb 5 Nov. 2012 c.878), and ordered the Chief Scientific Adviser to Defra to convene an independent expert taskforce on tree health and plant biosecurity, the THPBET. Duties of this taskforce included advising the Government on threats from tree and plant pests and pathogens and making recommendations on “how to protect the UK from those threats” (Defra, 2013, p. 4). To understand why Chalara was responded to with military decisiveness rather than political deliberation, it is necessary to consider the notion of biosecurity and its history in British politics.

### 3 | “BIOSECURITY”: A FEAR-DRIVEN CONCEPT INTEGRAL TO NEOLIBERALISM

From a philosophical standpoint, the notion of “biosecurity” forms part of a discourse suffused with anxieties about health, safety and security. Beck's (1992) risk society thesis, Foucault's (2004, 2007) notion of biopolitics and Latour's (2003) version of Beck's concept of “reflexive modernisation” have all been used to explain society's ever increasing need for greater securitisation. Empirical studies of zoonotic disease prevention confirm that the desire for *biosecurity* is grounded in a deep-seated fear of “the unpredictability and mutability of disease” (Hinchliffe et al., 2012, p. 531), a fear not unfounded given the considerable suffering and loss of life caused by epidemics. Border controls and practices of surveillance and monitoring are central to biosecurity, which requires a “massive investment in the security apparatus” (Lentzos & Rose, 2009, p. 231). In Europe and the USA, biosecurity governance takes the form of “strategies of segregation, containment, quarantine, surveillance, monitoring, inspection, and isolation which separate out and organize the circulation of matter into categories of ‘good’ and ‘bad’” (Maye et al., 2012, 151; also Ali & Keil, 2008; Barker, 2008, 2010; Braun, 2007; Enticott, 2008, 2017; Hinchliffe & Bingham, 2008; Ingram, 2005, 2009; Mather & Marshall, 2010). The term “biosecurity” first appeared in British politics in a House of Commons debate in 2001 on foot-and-mouth disease, where concerns over affairs of state and national security loomed large. Consequently, it became fixated on “border controls”, “surveillance” and the protection of the “native” from the “non-native”, “alien” and “invasive” (Donaldson, 2008, p. 1552). Yet regardless of the measures taken, epidemics in the UK and worldwide are increasing. Why? According to the Biosecurity Borderlands (2009–2013) project concerned with zoonotic disease, our understanding of how biosecurity “interfaces with other concerns in a globalising world” is vastly insufficient as a result of its focus on *risk*. We know little about how biosecurity works “within a complex landscape, where other knowledges, methods of implementation, interests, issues, definitions of life, come to influence exactly how biosecurity is defined and practised” (<http://www.biosecurity-borderlands.org/>). Most biosecurity scholars would agree that the risk-based approach to biosecurity is too narrowly conceived, making it difficult for alternative definitions and practices of biosecurity, health and disease to emerge (Hinchliffe & Bingham, 2008; Hinchliffe & Ward, 2014; Vogel, 2008); that the dominant biosecurity metaphor of “security” directs resource allocation to boundary

fortification (Nerlich et al., 2009); and that biosecurity politics contribute to the engineering of a new kind of social identity – “biosecure citizenship” (Barker, 2010). However, fear, dread and risk aversion are not the only aspects of biosecurity that need to be taken into account when considering its *political* dimensions. Equally important is the little-researched relationship between biosecurity and neoliberalism (Meyerson & Reaser, 2012; Nerlich et al., 2009; Tsouvalis, 2018) and the political effects of risk-based, expert-led governance. The former is now explored in the context of the EU plant health regime.

#### 4 | GOVERNING “PATHOGENS OF GLOBALIZATION”: BIOSECURITY, THE EU PLANT HEALTH REGIME AND NEOLIBERAL TRADE OBJECTIVES

In 2009, the European Commission (EC) evaluated its plant health regime because of the steep rise in plant epidemics witnessed in the EU. The regulatory framework of this regime is based on Council Directive 2000/29/EC, adopted in 1977, which establishes protective measures against the introduction and spread of organisms harmful to plants and plant products into and within the EU. In principle, the directive is meant to guard against all pests and diseases, but in practice it only targets the most dangerous ones. Its general principles are anchored in provisions laid down in the International Plant Protection Convention (IPPC) of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) and the World Trade Organization's Sanitary and Phytosanitary (WTO SPS) measures. Additional legislation in the form of control directives and emergency measures support it. They include banning organisms from entering the EU and quarantining suspect plant materials, plant inspections at production sites, plant producer registers and plant passports. The overarching objective of the EU plant health regime, reviewed in detail by Manzella and Vapnek, is to foster free trade: in “essence, *Biosecurity* balances enthusiasm for international trade with the need to protect against risks” (2007, p. vii; emphasis in the original). The EC considers it as “indispensable for protecting the health, economy and competitiveness of the EU plant production sector as well as for maintaining the Union's open trade policy” (EC, 2013). It considers it as “unique in that it is an open regime: movements of plants and plant products into and within the Union are allowed” (European Commission, 2013, p. 1). The 2009–2010 evaluation, however, found this “unique regime” to be wholly inadequate and advised that it be modernised through “more focus on prevention, better risk targeting (prioritization) and more solidarity” (EC Roadmap 10/2012). In 2013 the EC warned that “[T]he existing regulatory framework is [...] unable to stop the increased influx of dangerous new pests caused by the globalization of trade” and predicted that “high volumes of imports from other continents ... imply a high probability of future outbreaks of foreign pests” (European Commission, 2013, p. 1). Only a modernised regime, it concluded, could “effectively address the plant health impacts of globalization [and] mitigate the plant health impacts of climate change” (2013, p. 1). It proposed replacing directive 2000/29/EC with an act in the form of a Regulation that would base pest control on established risk assessment criteria and make provisions for: prioritising pests in order of consequence, monitoring high-risk trade coming from third countries, implementing improved surveillance measures and eradicating pest outbreaks early. In December 2015, the European Parliament agreed on the new Regulation, which now has to be approved at a second reading before it can be adopted. The position statement of the Council's first reading of the Regulation is worth quoting here: “Plant health is threatened by species injurious to plants and plant products which now present a greater risk of being introduced into the Union territory owing to globalisation of trade and climate change. In order to fight that threat, it is necessary to adopt measures concerning the determination of the phytosanitary risks posed by those pests and the reduction of those risks to an acceptable level” (Council of the EU, 2016). What is meant by “acceptable level” remains unspecified. A policy briefing note published in 2016 further confirms the role plant biosecurity plays in the achievement of neoliberal trade objectives: “the EU's phytosanitary (plant health) regime (PHR) is essential for protecting the health, economy and competitiveness of the EU's plant production sector. [...], without the protection afforded by plant health rules, EU agriculture, horticulture and forestry would suffer severe economic damage” (McEldowney, 2016, p. 2). The conviction that undesired life forms can be “prevented” from entering the EU holds steadfast in spite of all the evidence to the contrary. It is a misguided belief that rests on what Žižek calls the “all-pervasive predominance of ‘instrumental Reason’” and its ever increasing “bureaucratization and instrumentalization of our life-world” (1999, p. 221). As this brief review shows, plant biosecurity is integral to neoliberalism, a discourse characterised by Harvey as hegemonic because of its “pervasive effects on ways of thought and political-economic practices to the point where it has become incorporated into the commonsense way we interpret, live in, and understand the world” (2007, p. 23). Indeed, the British Government found it easier to support molecular-level and genomics-related interventions in the lifeworld aimed at creating disease-resistant ash varieties than to address the negative impacts of global trade on plant and planetary health (Clark, 2014; Solars et al., 2017; Vidal, 2015).

## 5 | THE TREE HEALTH AND PLANT BIOSECURITY EXPERT TASKFORCE (THPBET)

### 5.1 | Methodological notes

The study of the THPBET entailed nine in-depth, semi-structured interviews with members of the taskforce, which had 14 members. Five of the nine taskforce members consulted were natural scientists and four were social scientists, two of them economists. In total, the taskforce was composed of ten natural scientists and four social scientists. Eight of the nine taskforce members interviewed held professorships at the time of interview and the ninth, like the other eight, was educated to PhD level (all 14 taskforce members were educated to PhD level and 11 of them held professorships). The five taskforce members not included in this study were unavailable for interview. Seven interviews were also carried out with civil servants who supplied the taskforce with policy-relevant information and technical advice through the Official Advisory Group (OAG). Membership of the OAG was drawn from Defra and the Defra network organisations, and the same holds true for most members of the THPBET. The focus in this paper is on the empirical material gathered from the expert interviews with taskforce members. Particular attention was paid to data on how the taskforce worked and how its participants viewed the risk-based approach to plant biosecurity. The qualitative research methodology adopted allowed for structured discussions to be held around specific themes and for comparisons to be made while leaving room for a broader exploration of thoughts and feelings that varied depending on people's life histories and specific understandings, memories and experiences (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Silverman, 2005). The interview schedule covered a broad range of topics including, relevant to this paper, questions about relations between science, politics, policy-making and the public; how the taskforce worked; the recommendations it made; and how it addressed and resolved conflicts and disagreements. Interview data was coded and analysed following principles of qualitative research methodology. Interviewees' names are withheld here; instead the reference numbers they were allocated when transcripts were anonymised are used. Additional relevant information was collected from secondary data sources, including government reports, NGO reports, legal documents, newspaper articles, blog posts, TV programmes and the academic literature.

### 5.2 | The role of the THPBET in depoliticising ash dieback

The THPBET was entirely composed of "Chief Scientific Advisors and eminent Government and academic experts" (HoCL, 2012, p. 1), most of whom, as mentioned above, were connected to Defra or Defra network organisations. The remit of the taskforce was to comment and advise on Defra's scientific evidence and approach to Chalara and on "current threats from pests and pathogens" and how to address them (Defra, 2012a, p. 7). The Terms of Reference for the taskforce were determined before it was convened and their framing is indicative of the risk-based approach to biosecurity adopted: phrases like "assessment of risk status", "appropriate risk assessment tools", "rapid evidence assessment", "risk mitigation framework", "contingency planning" and "emergency response arrangements" abound. Deadlines for the publication of the two reports the taskforce had to write were also determined here: the interim reports had to be produced by the end of November 2012 (two weeks after the THPBET's first meeting!), the final one by spring 2013 (Defra, 2012a).

In 2012, Defra was well accustomed to dealing with animal disease outbreaks, for which it had a "standard protocol" in place:

You bring people in and you have what they call a 'battle rhythm'. So you establish a set of meetings that happen very regularly, you brief senior people, it all sort of quickly kicks off into a very structured approach. (R6, 2014)

Not so for plant epidemics – for these, no contingency plan was in place. When the crisis hit, Defra's Chief Scientific Adviser had only just taken up his post. According to interviews, Defra's first priority was to establish an evidence base for the disease in order to formulate a response. Its second, longer term objective was to put structures in place to deal with future tree and plant health threats following standard procedures like the ones in place for animal epidemics. In this way, the THPBET came to play a key role in the bureaucratisation and institutionalisation of tree and plant biosecurity in Britain. Convening the taskforce quickly was seen as an important step in taking pressure off the Government: "we needed to do something visible quickly, [...] something that involved national experts [...]" (R6). Within days of the COBRA meeting, the taskforce was in place. It was deliberately kept small and most of its members were proposed by Defra. Participants needed to be available for meetings immediately and committed to working to a tight schedule. Apart from several two-day meetings, telephone conferences and e-mail exchanges took place and participants formed expert groups that worked on

specific issues. They had to review and comment on a vast number of documents and there was “a lot of circulation of bits of draft, recommendations and elaborations and those were edited and then re-edited and so on, round and round” (R5). Senior plant health officials were actively involved in meetings and the Chief Scientific Adviser, the chairman of the taskforce, the Secretary of State and the Minister Lord De Mauley met on a regular basis to discuss the progress made.

Tight deadlines, pre-defined Terms of Reference and taskforces composed of experts with prior links to the government departments they have to advise are hallmarks of technocratic, risk-based approaches to problem-solving such as that adopted in the wake of Chalara. They are approaches much criticised in recent years for their post-political effects. The notion of “post-politics” was coined by Žižek in the late 1990s to characterise the “degeneration of *the political*” caused by the demise of different global ideological visions and their replacement with collaborations of “enlightened technocrats [...] and liberal multiculturalists” (1999, p. 199). Such collaborations, as critical political theorists and urban geographers have shown, are characterized by consensual policy-making “in which the stakeholders [...] are known in advance and where disruption or dissent is reduced to debates over the institutional modalities of governing, the accountancy calculus of risk, and the technologies of expert administration or management” (Swyngedouw, 2011, p. 240). The literature on post-politics and post-democracy is rich and varied (Badiou, 2006; Crouch, 2000, 2004; Dean, 2009; Diken, 2009; Marquand, 2004; Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1994, 2007, 2009; Swyngedouw, 2005, 2010, 2011; Wilson & Swyngedouw, 2014) and contributors to it tend to agree that underpinning the trends observed are organisational structures and governance arrangements associated with capitalism, neoliberalism and the market economy. Some consider post-politics to be a symptom of Modernity (Diken & Bagge Laustsen, 2004). Concerns expressed echo those of scholars critical of the risk-based approach to biosecurity and the expert-led, science-based governance of matters of public concern (Duckett et al., 2015; Latour, 1998, 2003, 2004, 2005, 2007, 2010; Wynne, 2007). The Government's approach to plant biosecurity in 2012 confirms that these concerns are not unfounded. Below, the combined effects of pre-framing and the imposition of tight deadlines on the work of the THPBET are explored, drawing on in-depth interviews. This shows that they impacted negatively both on the degree of stakeholder and public participation in the process of addressing plant biosecurity, and on the degree to which disagreement and conflict could surface during taskforce meetings.

Concerning the framing of the problem, interviewees observed that the taskforce did not provide a public forum for addressing matters of public concern; no public meetings on plant biosecurity or public dialogue had taken place. Instead,

...each one [of the meetings convened] had a very specific agenda that was marginally directed towards arriving at a useful set of recommendations that could be justified on the basis of the scientific background ... (R8)

The first two-day meeting of the taskforce took place in November 2012. Based on that, an Interim Report containing eight recommendations was produced (Defra, 2012a). Referees for the report were selected on the basis of their ability “to constructively contribute to the objectives of the taskforce”, and a broad range of stakeholders were invited during a later phase to comment on the recommendations (R6). This “later phase” was described by an interviewee as “an attempt – prior to submission of these recommendations – to basically get input from various UK stakeholder groups to essentially test the recommendations against what might be possible” (R8). The “Interim Report came out first and then they [the taskforce] used that to refine what they thought their recommendations should be and they talked to stakeholders [...], refining what their recommendations should be” (R6). In other words, stakeholders were only able to “refine” conclusions already drawn by taskforce members and formulated as ‘recommendations’ in the Interim Report. When asked how the taskforce accommodated different views, it appears there was little room for that:

We were trying to make our recommendations based on science. So we weren't really trying to make them fit with the views of stakeholders at all. [...] there was much less stakeholder input into the expert report because it was not meant to be an exercise which drew its information from stakeholders. It was meant to be an exercise that drew its information from [...] the best understandings of science, both natural science and social science. (R9)

Comparable to risk-based policy making for managing livestock disease (Duckett et al., 2015), plant biosecurity policy making is based on a positivist epistemology and informed by scientific and technical risk assessment by scientists and experts. This has important political repercussions because “scientific knowledge not only informs policy processes with relevant validated knowledge, but also frames the recognized meaning of the public issues. [...] [I]t presumptively plays a political role of defining what the salient questions are which need such information, and thus also what is to be ignored as

a concern” (Wynne, 2007, p. 2). In other words, it fosters a post-politics of biosecurity that disempowers and renders matters of public concern *apolitical*. As the analysis above has shown, the public and other stakeholders played no role in framing the problem of ash dieback and what it epitomised for them. Nor did they have a say in deciding who could or should address a problem of such magnitude and how. Many stakeholders were apparently unhappy about this:

Conservation organizations in particular were quite critical that it [the taskforce] was set up without any sort of conversation with them about membership. ... They would have [also] liked to have had an opportunity to have suggested how the Terms of Reference [were] framed [...]. Instead, they were ... invited [to] sit on the Stakeholder Advisory Panel [...] *after* the Terms of Reference and membership had been made. (R11)

Timing, bureaucratic procedures and scientific and technical expertise played a key role in how tree and plant health biosecurity came to be understood, approached and framed in the wake of Chalara. They influenced how the THPBET was set up and run, the issues it was able to address and the recommendations it made. Alternative takes on biosecurity, such as the pathways approach, were ignored, and several interviewees lamented the fact that meetings were kept to about an hour rather than being “two to three hours [long] at least”, which would have “enabled a deeper engagement and the development of conversations” (R15). The restriction of meeting times was a powerful mechanism for keeping conflict at bay. After all, as one respondent explained, “there is a risk [...] that if views were polarized they could be very polarized by the end of three hours” (R15). Unsurprisingly, most interviewees reiterated the view that there had been little disagreement between taskforce members during meetings. Probing deeper into this, however, it appears that not all respondents were convinced that the most important issues had been addressed or the tricky ones resolved: “There had been things that had not been included in the reports”, one said, and “other recommendations could have been made” (R11). For this respondent, general agreement was at least in “part to do with the way the discussions were framed” and “there was certainly the impression that controversial issues were avoided”.

The recommendations made confirm this. At the national scale, the taskforce recommended the development of a prioritised UK Plant Health Risk Register; the appointment of a Chief Plant Health Officer responsible for the UK Plant Health Risk Register and the provision of strategic and tactical leadership for managing risks; the development and implementation of procedures for preparedness and contingency planning to predict, monitor and control the spread of pests and pathogens; and the revision, simplification and strengthening of governance arrangements and legislation. At the international scale, it recommended the better use of epidemiological intelligence from the EU and other regions and the improvement of EU regulations for tree health and plant biosecurity. Additionally, it identified a general need for strengthening biosecurity to reduce risks at the border and in the UK, and for improving capabilities and communications through the development of a modern, user-friendly information system for tree health and plant biosecurity. Key skills shortages were also highlighted as a problem (Defra, 2012a, p. 5).

Taskforce members were well aware of the limitations of their recommendations. One interviewee said they were “quite technical and cathedral and as a result less controversial” and explained that it was easy to reach agreement on the need for the appointment of a new Chief Plant Health Officer or the creation of a Risk Register (R11). Another described them as “bureaucratic type recommendations” (R2). Taskforce members had apparently been concerned that the Risk Register would turn out to be a purely technical exercise and worried about who would assemble and be allowed to contribute to it (R11). The risk-based approach to biosecurity was also criticised during meetings, with some participants suggesting that a “pathways approach” be adopted. Such a “paradigm change”, however, would have proved too controversial with the nursery trade because it would have opened up space “for the critical consideration of the role of trade and the single market in bioinvasions, the pre-movement of plants, consumer behaviour, and the biosecurity implications of the work of professionals like landscape architects” (R11). Unfortunately, debating these issues was beyond the remit of the THPBET. Trade and its role in plant disease outbreaks remained unaddressed, although, as one interviewee observed, “we [the taskforce members] were all of the view that it would be much better if the UK could impose trade restrictions for plant health reasons” (R4).

However, the purpose of plant biosecurity in the EU is to foster neoliberal trade objectives, and taskforce members saw that “the question of the overarching legislation is quite difficult because [it consists of] a mixture of the EU and the WTO, and there isn't a lot of political will to change it” (R4). They should have recommended, the respondent continued, that “if you really want to tackle this you need to ban import on plants, which would be politically not useful at all”. Consequently, taskforce members “found it more difficult to see impossibilities in the human world than in the natural world, and where you see impossibilities affects how you make recommendations” (R4). As put by another interviewee, “you can make as many recommendations as you like, but the science can't sort those issues out” (R14). “Those issues”, however, urgently

need sorting out and plant biosecurity as it currently stands cannot achieve this. Taskforce members were under no illusion that ‘the kinds of precaution that we have, given the scale of trade, are probably inadequate to prevent future incursions. The volume is enormous’ (R4). International certification schemes, he went on, merely create “a fantasy world” and, one could say, a false sense of *biosecurity*.

## 6 | CONCLUSION

This paper has investigated the post-political effects of the risk-based approach to plant biosecurity adopted by the British Government in the wake of ash dieback, focusing on the THPBET and the EU's plant health regime. Analysis of the latter revealed the inextricable link between plant biosecurity and neoliberalism, which partly explains why the role of global trade in plant epidemics has largely remained anathema in politics. Additionally, the case study of the THPBET showed the key role played by risk-orientated, expert-led governance in the depoliticisation of matters of public concern like ash dieback. Although taskforce members were conscious of the limitations imposed on them by pre-determined Terms of Reference, tight deadlines and the risk-based approach adopted, they were unable to constitute what they recognised as one of the key drivers of plant health decline – global trade – as a problem in need of discussion and debate. Similarly, they were aware of the limitations of their technical, bureaucratic-type recommendations. They tried to make the best of a bad situation, knowing that the political will to change things was lacking.

The “will” to change “things” might be absent, but “things” are changing in ways that for humans increasingly cause states of emergency. Be it floods, droughts, species extinctions or epidemics affecting plants, animals and humans, unsustainable modes of production, consumption and climate alterations will change “things” in ways that will force us to change how “things” are done. To achieve this, new forms of politics need to be constructed, including new biosecurity politics. There are pointers as to how this might be achieved. Latour (1998) has made a particularly convincing case for decentring politics from its anthropocentric roots (how his views compare with those of critics of post-politics is explored in Tsouvalis, 2015). He understands politics as ‘the intuition that associations [of humans and non-humans] are not enough, that they should also be composed in order to design one common world’ (Latour, 2007, p. 259). “Designing a common world” means that humans *and* non-humans collectively create a world worth living in, a world where humans are members of a rich and complex lifeworld where even “things” like geological strata can emerge “as provocations for political issue formation” (Clark, 2016, p. 211). Such a perspective necessitates the construction of a politics that acknowledges that “power or agency overflows the category of deliberating human subjects [...]. While bodies, ecologies and assemblages have been shown to be objects upon which power operates, so too have they been presented as sites of resistance: as vital reservoirs of ‘freedom’ to act or become otherwise” (Clark & Yusoff, 2017, p. 13). Becoming “otherwise” in the context of trade-related epidemics means becoming ill and dying – a stark reminder of the high stakes of world-making and “othering”. Acting politically following this line of thinking means that health and disease are no longer “conceived of as separate spaces, with well-defined objects and properties (pathogens and immune responses)” (Hinchliffe et al., 2012, p. 528). It means developing biosecurity approaches that take the “entangled interplay of environments, hosts, pathogens and humans” seriously (2013, p. 538). Examples of experiments with collective world-making as advocated by Latour, in which government representatives were involved, exist (Tsouvalis & Waterton, 2012; Tsouvalis et al., 2012; Waterton & Tsouvalis, 2015), and insights into how non-humans and material entities come to matter in human affairs, including politics, have been provided by geographers and STS scholars (Bennett, 2004; Braun, 2007; Castree & Braun, 2001; Cole & Frost, 2010; Gerber, 1997; Harman, 2009; Hinchliffe et al., 2017; Latour, 2004; Marres, 2012; Tsouvalis, 2000; Whatmore, 2002). They point the way to what is required to meet the challenges lying ahead. For governments to do politics *with* things means to change the way they operate. Government priorities are largely determined by neoliberal trade objectives and their associated concerns. Scientists and experts involved in government advisory roles, as the study of the THPBET has shown, find it impossible to challenge them. Inevitably they play a significant role in depoliticising matters of public concern that call for novel, daring and creative approaches. To achieve any success in tackling the complex and interconnected problems humanity is now faced with demands a radical break with profit maximisation as the ultimate goal of most of our endeavours. The challenge is no less than to search for ways of composing a common world *with* other lifeworlds where humans *have* a future. The findings presented in this paper of the limitations of expert-led, risk-based governance and its role in downplaying the role of trade in perpetuating plant epidemics substantiate this conclusion.

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## ORCID

Judith Tsouvalis  <http://orcid.org/0000-0001-6399-3394>

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