

The Wuhan “lab leak” fraud and the institutionalization of anti-science: An interview with Dr. Peter Daszak

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5 April 2026

The unprecedented political assault on scientific truth reached a dangerous new milestone on March 20, 2026, at the National Institutes of Health (NIH). In a grotesque spectacle, NIH Director Dr. Jay Bhattacharya—a physician and health economist who rose to prominence during the pandemic by attacking lockdowns and social distancing measures—handed the inaugural “Scientific Freedom” lecture to Matt Ridley, a British aristocrat, hereditary peer and former journalist whose sole scientific credential is a doctorate in pheasant mating earned four decades ago. Ridley’s presentation was a miserable display of hearsay, innuendo and recycled right-wing talking points, deliberately devoid of a single piece of credible scientific evidence.

Bhattacharya and Ridley have cynically attempted to frame themselves as embattled truth-tellers being censored by a hostile establishment. Dr. Bob Morris, a physician and epidemiologist, demolished this pretension in a recent essay titled “COVID Contrarians Get Galileo Backwards.” As Morris observes, Galileo was a world-class astronomer persecuted not by fellow scientists but by theologians who refused to look through his lens. Bhattacharya, a physician and health economist who played epidemiologist during the pandemic to promote mass infection, and Ridley, a coal baron with a history of climate change denial, are not Galileo. They are the inquisitors—backed by the power of the state and the Trump administration’s dismantling of public health. As Morris concludes: “These are not the heirs of Galileo. ... The difference is that this time, the Inquisition has the keys to the NIH.”

The scientists at the forefront of COVID-19 origins research did not let this go unanswered. Dr. Angela Rasmussen, a virologist at the Vaccine and Infectious Disease Organization at the University of Saskatchewan, alongside leading evolutionary virologist Dr. Kristian Andersen and biosecurity expert Dr. Gigi Gronvall hosted a live counter-broadcast aptly titled the “NIH Freedom From Science Lab Leak Lecture Series.” During the nearly five-hour event, the experts systematically dismantled Ridley’s presentation in real time, exposing it as “pseudoscientific garbage” designed to justify the ongoing destruction of the American biomedical research enterprise.

In a scathing essay published on her Substack, Rasmussen laid out the overwhelming, multi-disciplinary evidence for natural zoonotic origin. Spatial analyses prove that the earliest known cases in December 2019 clustered tightly around the Huanan Seafood Wholesale Market—even when explicitly excluding patients who worked or shopped there. Extensive genetic and environmental evidence places the virus precisely in the southwestern corner of the market where wildlife was sold; environmental swabs from specific stalls, including one photographed years earlier housing caged raccoon dogs, were heavily positive for SARS-CoV-2. Metagenomic sequencing of those samples revealed the mitochondrial DNA of susceptible intermediate hosts—raccoon dogs,

hoary bamboo rats and palm civets—and in many cases are simultaneously positive for viral RNA. Phylogenetic analysis identified two distinct viral lineages circulating at the market, indicating at least two separate zoonotic spillover events—a scenario that makes a coordinated laboratory origin a statistical impossibility. The virus’s features, including the widely misunderstood furin cleavage site, are entirely consistent with natural evolution. There is zero evidence that the Wuhan Institute of Virology ever possessed a progenitor virus capable of being engineered into SARS-CoV-2.

The political necessity of the lab-leak narrative requires a scapegoat. The central target has been Dr. Peter Daszak, a prominent British American zoologist and the former president of EcoHealth Alliance. For decades, Daszak warned the world of the dangers of zoonotic spillovers, conducting vital, federally funded field research on emerging infectious diseases in Southeast Asia and China. His organization’s collaborative work with scientists at the Wuhan Institute of Virology was explicitly dedicated to mapping bat coronaviruses to prevent the exact type of catastrophe that began in late 2019. Because this critical international scientific collaboration intersected with US imperialism’s geopolitical conflict with China, Daszak has been placed at the center of a fabricated controversy. Right-wing politicians falsely accused him of engineering the virus and orchestrating a cover-up. EcoHealth’s funding was cut, the organization formally debarred and Daszak fired without clear rationale or rebuttal.

To discuss the Ridley lecture, the assault on science and the implications for pandemic preparedness, the World Socialist Web Site recently spoke with Dr. Peter Daszak.

Benjamin Mateus (BM): You watched the NIH lecture. What was your reaction?

Peter Daszak (PD): I wouldn’t, normally. I would avoid it like the plague. But Angela Rasmussen sent me a text asking if I wanted to join at the end as a guest on her debunking session. I didn’t see it until it had already started, so I watched the whole thing in case she called me in. In the end her podcast went overtime so she didn’t. But it was horrific and painful.

And the thing is, it lends him credibility. That’s the real damage. And to hear that man, a landed member of the House of Lords, with a mansion, grounds and a coal mine, he has exploited the working class his entire life. And we’re supposed to listen to his pronouncements on viral origins? Ridley commented that he was asked by members of Parliament about COVID origins: My response is: what gives him the authority to advise anyone on anything? His family did a favor for a Royal founder centuries ago. Just awful.

BM: Bhattacharya framed this as a “gold standard” Freedom Lecture series; an open dialogue, honest inquiry. What was it actually?

PD: It was freedom from evidence. It completely lacked the scientific process. There was no dialogue, and where was the other side? They could have invited any number of scientists who have published peer-reviewed work with actual evidence on COVID's origins to present their evidence. Instead, they chose a "foreigner" in both ideas of the term. I'm from the UK myself, but why choose a non-American hereditary peer with no real right to a seat of governmental power, whose PhD was on pheasant mating four decades ago, who has hardly published any scientific papers, let alone on virology, epidemiology or COVID origins? He is a foreigner to such studies or expertise in these fields.

There's also an element of vindictiveness to everything this administration does. Bhattacharya was rightfully criticized for his deeply flawed early analysis of the pandemic—pushing people back out into a public health emergency, claiming COVID was no worse than the flu. He's a health economist, not a virologist or epidemiologist. And what Ridley's talk provided as evidence was innuendo, hearsay, out-of-context quotes from private emails and suppositions about scientists' motives. That is not a freedom lecture. It is a travesty.

BM: The lecture directly attacked your work and the authors of the "Proximal Origin" paper, the same people targeted by the Heritage Foundation and the House subcommittee. How does the Ridley NIH lecture function in the broader campaign to codify the lab leak as official US policy?

PD: It is official US policy right now. It's on the White House website. But one thing on the White House website is just Trump making a political statement. Here's the NIH. Here's Bhattacharya, who to someone who doesn't know his background comes across as a credible scientific figure. And here he is calling this an opportunity for gold standard science and open dialogue. It gives the lab-leak narrative a legitimacy it has never earned scientifically.

What we found on the WHO investigation, and what Ridley again dismissed, is a direct biological and logistical connection between southern China and Wuhan. Not from a bat flying a thousand kilometers; that's a childish framing. A truck drives a thousand kilometers. A wildlife trade farmer ships live animals a thousand kilometers. We have the data: farms in Yunnan, Guangxi and Guangdong supplying the Wuhan market. It's totally plausible that the virus was transported with those animals. The first cases were associated with that market, not the lab. Detailed, sophisticated analysis supports that conclusion. Nothing supports the lab leak. The one—and only—piece of evidence for a lab leak is that there's a lab in Wuhan. There are also virology labs and wild-animal trade markets in many major cities throughout China. Why haven't coronaviruses emerged there, the lab leakers ask? Well, they have—remember that SARS-CoV first emerged at a wildlife market in Foshan City, Guangdong back in 2002.

BM: Ridley and Alina Chan co-authored the book *Viral*, treating the lab leak as a serious scientific hypothesis. But neither has led primary research on SARS-CoV-2. How do you characterize their work compared to the WHO SAGO assessment and the Worobey et al. studies?

PD: This goes to how hard it is to do real science. A PhD takes three to five years of work on a single line of inquiry. You gather data, run statistical tests, come to conservative conclusions—conservative because your peers will reject the paper if you over-interpret the evidence. Ridley's book completely lacks that discipline. It isn't reviewed by peers. It doesn't get rejected if it's not rigorous. It contains factual errors and conspiracy theories, many of which have been individually debunked. Yet, there's no withdrawal, no correction. When Ridley regurgitated already-refuted theories in the NIH lecture, the same absence of accountability applied which is why it is so concerning and problematic.

There was a good question from the audience at the end: What primary data have you analyzed, what experiments have you conducted, to find evidence for a lab origin? Ridley had no answer, because he's done none.

We've done that work, published it after years of effort, had it publicly scrutinized, and those papers stand. All the lab-leak proponents can do is dig through prior drafts of our papers looking for moments of self-doubt. They did this with the "Proximal Origin" paper. They pushed for retraction. It hasn't been retracted and never will be because it stands on evidence.

BM: Ridley and Chan treat the 2018 DEFUSE proposal and the controversy over the furin cleavage site as the central forensic evidence of engineering. Can you speak to the WHO SAGO report that dealt seriously with this topic?

PD: DEFUSE was one of probably over a hundred grant proposals I've written in 25 years. Scientists write grant proposals to get funding. Most are rejected—a typical success rate is 5 to 10 percent. DEFUSE was a response to a DARPA request asking us to use ecological and epidemiological methods combined with genetic tools to reduce the risk of future pandemics. We focused on bat coronaviruses because by 2018 they were a clear and present danger.

We proposed that if a SARS-related coronavirus emerged with a furin cleavage site, it might transmit more efficiently. To test that, we would look for bat CoVs with elements of a furin cleavage site in their spike protein and test (by genetic manipulation) if they are likely able to rapidly evolve to infect human cells. We also proposed to look for bat-CoVs 15 percent or more distinct from SARS-CoV, so that we could help better design vaccines and therapies that are able to prevent emergence of a wide range of CoVs. It turned out to be exactly the right scientific question because the virus that emerged was a SARS-related bat coronavirus, 20 percent different from SARS, had a furin cleavage site. But we didn't do the work because DARPA rejected the proposal. The WHO SAGO team's first point about DEFUSE was precisely that: it was not funded; the work was never done.

The claim that China weaponized our rejected proposal rests on the idea that the technology of genetically manipulating a furin cleavage site (FCS) was a novel secret, but it wasn't. Insertion of an FCS into SARS-CoV had been published in western scientific journals years earlier. It was not a revolutionary idea China didn't know about. And picking a virus 20 percent different from anything in the lab, without \$14 million in funding, to engineer a pandemic pathogen is a preposterous hypothesis. Meanwhile, 14 million people working in wildlife farms and markets, breeding, butchering and shipping live mammals known to carry coronaviruses, there you have everything necessary for a pandemic already operating, every day, at scale.

BM: There's a specific problem with how scientific caution gets weaponized publicly, though. When scientists say they "can't rule out" a lab origin, the public hears a 50-50 proposition.

PD: And it's even worse than that. Media outlets now routinely find one or two scientists, usually not from the relevant field, usually without primary research on the question, and present their dissent as equivalent to the scientific consensus. I'll repeat myself again; the evidence for the lab leak is innuendo, supposition about motives and out-of-context quotes from private emails purposefully amplified to arouse reaction and fears.

A scientist can't say with 100 percent certainty that something is impossible because you can never prove a negative. What you can say is that a lab leak origin for COVID should be treated like any other hypothesis that is extremely unlikely and probably unprovable—it should not be a basis for policy. Let's not forget that a hypothesis that the virus came from outer space is also published in a scientific journal, but also technically unprovable and not a basis for policy. What we did on the WHO investigation was exactly what an airplane crash investigator does at an accident scene: assess the evidence for each hypothesis and rank its plausibility. The lab leak was extremely unlikely then, it has been all along, and it likely always will be. The emergence from the wildlife market is the essential conclusion and every piece of new evidence that

has been gathered since that investigation supports that very concrete conclusion.

BM: To what extent is the Ridley NIH lecture designed to create an official-looking institutional record that think tanks and congressional committees can cite to justify defunding programs like EcoHealth and CREID?

PD: That's exactly what makes it dangerous. The Trump White House posting that COVID originated in a lab—anyone with knowledge of how science works reads that as a political statement. But NIH lectures are different. It carries the institutional weight of the world's leading medical research agency. Ridley was given that platform not to persuade scientists—the science community knows his record—but to manufacture a citation, a seemingly credible reference point that can be laundered through think tank reports and congressional subcommittees into something resembling scientific consensus.

We are now closing the labs and organizations that existed to prevent the next pandemic. Emerging infectious diseases are rising exponentially. We estimate a median of 66,000 people in South and Southeast Asia are infected by bat coronaviruses every year, and that number is increasing above a straight line. Every single program that John Cohen described in his recent book on new approaches to pandemic prevention has been shut down by Bhattacharya. The next pandemic will emerge from another wildlife farm, market, or shipping port soon; that's a statistical projection from published data. And what are we doing about it? We're defunding scientists.

In fact, we know that Bhattacharya has repeatedly used the false suggestion that COVID came from an NIH-funded lab leak to justify attacks on the infectious disease research that is funded through Dr. Fauci's former division NIAID.

[In a note added after this interview, this was made even more concrete by the recent White House announcement of a slashed NIH budget. Their justification was filled with political comments about DEI, but prominently included that "Additional egregious examples of wasteful and radical NIH IC spending that would be eliminated through reforms include: NIAID funneling millions of dollars to EcoHealth Alliance, which funded WIV, the likely source of the COVID pandemic." See link here https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/budget_fy2027.pdf (p. 28 of the pdf online, p.22 on their page numbering.)]

BM: Your organization specifically, mapping bat coronaviruses, tracking the wildlife trade, building international research collaborations, was designed to prevent exactly this. What's left?

PD: We've formed a new organization, Nature Health Global. We're still publishing from the EcoHealth Alliance data we collected. Last year we published an important paper describing several hundred new coronavirus sequences, and the risk they represent to livestock farming and human health. We have another paper submitted describing a new SARS-CoV-2-like virus from Thailand that provides real public health value from research that NIH defunded. We're doing that in our own time, without adequate funding, because that's what scientists do.

But the broader picture is deeply alarming. The PREDICT project from USAID was world-leading. If we'd had 10 PREDICT projects, we'd be moving toward a planet substantially safer by being forewarned and prepared for pandemics. It's gone. Before the pandemic, Chinese scientists were publishing their data in NIH GenBank. They preferred the US system because it was the world gold standard. They also published their studies in US and European journals for the impact. Now they're publishing in Chinese databases and Chinese journals, and we have no scientists on the ground in China working on wildlife markets, bat coronaviruses or pneumonia outbreaks. All of that is gone. And it puts us at risk in a world where pandemic frequency is accelerating.

BM: Let me ask about something that rarely gets discussed: the

structural dependence of science on private capital. As head of a nonprofit, you had to maintain a board of wealthy members, go to lunch with donors, navigate relationships with people whose interests had nothing to do with pandemic prevention. What does that reality tell us about how science works and who it works for?

PD: As CEO of a nonprofit, you have a board, and many board members come from the private sector. For many, their involvement is genuinely aimed at doing good for the public and the planet. But sometimes you go to lunch with people who are just awful, people with money who want to tell you what to do with science, who see research as an asset to be deployed. We saw this in the Epstein files, with evidence that he had repeatedly met with networks of scientists. Unfortunately, wealthy people manipulating a scientific agenda for their own personal goals is part of the reality of how research gets funded in this system. It creates dependencies that have nothing to do with scientific merit.

But scientific funding through government agencies involves a far more open process, with proposals, independent review, goals, reports and publications. It also helps demonstrate that the lab leak obsession with the DEFUSE proposal is so erroneous. We couldn't pursue the DEFUSE line of research without funding. You can't characterize a series of bat coronaviruses 20 percent different from SARS without the \$14 million budget ahead of time. Meanwhile Ridley faces no such constraints. He's independently wealthy, writing nonsensical books and giving lectures at NIH is just a hobby for him. A book full of innuendo doesn't need peer review or a funding agency. That asymmetry is part of the problem. Look at who is making money from this MAHA movement, writing books, promoting supplements instead of vaccines, gaining fame through podcasts. Science is a discipline that promotes truth and rejection of false hypotheses: you are supposed to be criticized, you are supposed to be wrong sometimes, you are supposed to update when the evidence demands it. These people operate with none of those constraints.

BM: You said that if doing good means irritating powerful political operatives to the point of attack, you are still doing good. Do you believe the scientific community is being forced to confront that science and politics cannot be separated?

PD: Scientists who work in areas that become political targets understand it viscerally. I would never have imagined, as a graduate student, getting into this kind of political fight over my work. You're not trained for it. And when it happens, it is devastating; your livelihood, your mortgage, your career can be demolished. But underneath all that there's a reason we become scientists, or medical doctors, or public health workers. We want to do good. If doing good means irritating powerful people to the point of attack, then you are still doing good. That must sustain you.

The scientific method will outlast this. Publication of a peer-reviewed paper is a public act, and it makes evidence available to everyone on the planet. What I take comfort from is this: these papers stand. The lab-leak proponents have had six years with the support of congressional subcommittees, NIH platforms and billions of dollars in institutional backing. They have not produced a single peer-reviewed, independently validated piece of evidence. Not one. Meanwhile the evidence for natural spillover grows with every new study. I hope this is a temporary rupture. The scientific method and the ability to do hard field work will survive this. What we need is a public that understands what is at stake and is willing to fight for it.

Epilogue

The interview above was recorded in late March 2026, two weeks after

the Ridley NIH lecture. The observations that follow are my own—Benjamin Mateus.

Peter Daszak is one of the most consequential scientists in contemporary epidemiology, a man who spent decades building the international infrastructure for pandemic surveillance and who has watched it systematically dismantled by the very forces he warned against. His account of the Ridley lecture, of the DEFUSE proposal, of what has been lost in surveillance capacity, is indispensable testimony.

What Daszak provides, almost without realizing it, is a materialist account of how science functions under capitalism, not as the autonomous pursuit of truth by enlightened individuals, but as an activity structurally dependent on state funding, private donors, institutional relationships and political tolerance. He describes going to lunch with “people who are sometimes just awful” because a nonprofit cannot survive without them. He describes a \$14 million grant proposal as the precondition for research that could have characterized the very type of virus that caused the pandemic. He describes watching Chinese scientific collaboration built over decades, producing data that flowed to US databases because the Americans had the gold standard, collapse in months as the political relationship deteriorated.

This is not what the liberalism-of-expertise worldview expects science to look like. In that worldview, science is insulated from power by the peer-review process, the self-correcting nature of the method, and the professional integrity of researchers. What Daszak describes is something quite different: a system where the integrity of individual scientists can be fully intact while the institutional conditions allowing them to work are subject to political determination from above.

That is why his conclusion, that this is a “temporary rupture” to be reversed by removing the Trump administration, falls short of what his own testimony requires. The COVID pandemic did not begin with Trump. The normalization of mass death, the subordination of public health to economic imperatives, the transformation of science into a political sport, these have been built across multiple administrations, parties and decades. Bhattacharya and Ridley are symptoms of a structural crisis, not its cause.

The Ridley NIH lecture is not primarily an act of scientific fraud, though it is that. It is an act of class politics: the deployment of institutional authorities to protect the ruling class from accountability for the pandemic’s catastrophic management, and to dismantle the public health infrastructure that costs capital money while serving the working class. The same logic that brings Ridley to the NIH podium brings Robert F. Kennedy Jr. to HHS and CDC, Andrew Wakefield’s ghost to ACIP and mass death to communities that can no longer afford protection from preventable disease.

When I noted to Daszak that the *World Socialist Web Site* is not merely a publication with a perspective but an organization with a political analysis and a historical commitment, he was candid: he finds our reporting correct and widely read among scientists and says so privately. His one reservation was our name—he suggested we might reach more people without the word “socialist” in it.

This response is itself revealing, not as a criticism of Daszak, but as an expression of the ideological conditions under which his generation of scientists was formed. The postwar McCarthyite purge of left-wing thought from American scientific and intellectual life was so thorough that the analytical framework best equipped to explain what is happening—the Marxist understanding of science as a social product, public health as a conquest of class struggle, the capitalist state as the organized power of the ruling class—was made systematically unavailable to the very people who needed it most. What remained was a liberalism of expertise: science as social good, institutions as guarantors of progress, politics as a distortion to be managed rather than a force to be engaged.

That liberalism, as Stanley Plotkin’s despair and Daszak’s “temporary rupture” both demonstrate, is not equipped for this moment. Not because

scientists are wrong about science; they are right. Not because their commitment to public health is less than genuine; it is. But because understanding why this is happening, and identifying the social forces capable of reversing it requires a political framework that their education and training denied them.

Public health infrastructure was not given to the working class by enlightened elites. It was won through organized struggle, under specific historical conditions, and it is being dismantled now because those conditions have changed. Peter Daszak, despite everything, believes truth will win out. So do we. The difference is that we believe truth requires organized political force to prevail and that force will not be found in an election cycle but in the working class coming to understand what is being taken from it, and by whom, and why.



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