

“Coerced Vaccination”: The Left’s Contempt for Bodily Autonomy during the Covid-19 Pandemic. A “Gift to the Right”?

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When did parts of the left get so contemptuous of the principle of “bodily autonomy”? Answer: Just about the time they started fetishising vaccines as the only route out of the current pandemic.

Only two years ago most people understood “bodily autonomy” to be a fundamental, unquestionable human right.

Now it is being treated as some kind of perverse libertarian luxury, as proof that the “deplorables” have been watching too much Tucker Carlson or that they have come to idealise the worst excesses of neoliberalism’s emphasis on the rights of the individual over the social good.

This is dangerous nonsense, as should be obvious if we step back and imagine what our world might look like had the principle of “bodily autonomy” not been established through centuries of struggle, just as were the right to vote and the right to health care.

Because without the principle of bodily autonomy, we might still be dragging virgins up high staircases so that they could be sacrificed to placate the sun gods. Without the principle of bodily autonomy, we might still be treating black people like animals – chattel to be used and exploited so that a white landowning class could grow rich from their enforced labours.

Without the principle of bodily autonomy, we might still have doctors experimenting on those who are “inferior” – Jews, Romanies, Communists, gays – so that “superior races” could benefit from the “research”. Without the principle of bodily autonomy, we might still have the right of men to rape their wives as one of the unwritten marital vows.

Many of these battles and others were won far more recently than most of us care to remember. I am old enough to recall listening in the car on the way to school to “serious” debates on BBC Radio 4 about whether it was justifiable for the courts to presume a husband’s right to rape his wife.

Arguments about whose bodily autonomy has primacy – a woman’s or the foetus she is carrying – are at the heart of ongoing and inflammatory abortion debates in the United States. And protection of bodily autonomy was the main reason why anyone with an ounce of moral fibre opposed the US torture regime that became normalised in the war on brown people known as the “war on terror”.

Bad faith

There is good reason why, in western societies, vaccination uptake is lowest among ethnic minorities. The clues are embedded in the three preceding paragraphs.

Powerful nation-states, run by white elites for the benefit of white elites, have been trampling on the bodily autonomy of black and brown people for centuries - sometimes because those elites were indifferent to the harm they were causing, and sometimes because they professed to be helping these "inferior" peoples, such as in the "war on terror's" promotion of neoliberal "democracy" as the grounds for invading countries whose oil we coveted.

The pretexts change but the bad faith is the same.

Based on their long histories of suffering at the hands of western, colonial states, black and brown communities have every reason to continue assuming bad faith. It is not solidarity, or protecting them, to ignore or trivialise their concerns and their alienation from state institutions. It is ugly arrogance. Contempt for their concerns will not make those concerns evaporate. It will reinforce them.

But of course, there is also something arrogant about treating the concerns of ethnic minorities as exceptional, patronising them by according them some kind of special dispensation, as though they need indulging on the principle of bodily autonomy when the rest of us are mature enough to discard it.

The fact is each generation comes to understand that the priorities of its ancestors were misplaced. Each generation has a powerful elite, or a majority whose consent has been manufactured, that luxuriate in the false certainty that bodily autonomy can be safely sacrificed for a higher principle. Half a century ago the proponents of marital rape argued for protecting tradition and patriarchal values because they were supposedly the glue holding society together. With 50 years' hindsight, we may see the current debates about vaccine mandates - and the completely unscientific corollary that the unvaccinated are unclean and plague carriers - in much the same light.

The swelling political consensus on vaccine mandates intentionally ignores the enormous spread of the virus after two years of pandemic and the consequent natural immunity of large sections of the population, irrespective of vaccination status. This same consensus obfuscates the fact that natural immunity is most likely to prove longer-lasting and more effective against any variants of Covid that continue to emerge. And the consensus distracts from the inconvenient fact that the short-lived efficacy of the current vaccines means everyone is potentially "unclean" and a plague carrier, as the new variant Omicron is underscoring only too clearly.

No solidarity

The truth is that where each of us stands on the political divide over bodily autonomy says less about how much we prioritise human rights, or the social good, or solidarity with the weak and powerless, and much more about other, far less objectively rational matters, such as:

- * how fearful we are personally about the effects of Covid on ourselves or our loved ones;

* whether we think the plutocrats that run our societies have prioritised the social good over the desire for quick, profit-making technological fixes, and the appearance of strong leadership and decisive action;

* how sure we are that science is taking precedence over the interests of pharmaceutical corporations whose profits are booming as our societies grow older and sicker, and whether we think these corporations have captured our regulatory authorities, including the World Health Organisation;

* whether we think it helpful or dangerous to scapegoat an unvaccinated minority, blaming it for straining health services or for the failure to eradicate a virus that is, in reality, never going away;

* and, especially in the left's case, how reassured we are that non-western, official "enemy" governments, such as Cuba, China, Russia and Iran, have thrown most of their eggs into the vaccine basket too - and usually as enthusiastically as western societies.

It is possible, however, that the way our technological, materialist world has evolved, ruled by competitive elites in nation states vying for power, means there was always likely to be a single, global conception of how to end the pandemic: through a quick-fix, magic bullet of either a vaccine or a drug. The fact that nation states - the "good" and "bad" alike - are unlikely to think outside this particular box does not mean it is the only box available, or that this box must be the one all citizens are coerced into.

Basic human rights do not apply only in the good times. They can't just be set aside in difficult times like a pandemic because those rights are a nuisance, or because some people refuse to do what we think is best for them. Those rights are fundamental to what it means to live in a free and open society. If we get rid of bodily autonomy while we deal with this virus, that principle will have to be fought for all over again - and in the context of hi-tech, surveillance states that are undoubtedly more powerful than any we have known before.

Coerced vaccination

It is wrong, however, to focus exclusively on bodily autonomy. The undermining of the right to bodily autonomy is slipping into an equally alarming undermining of the right to cognitive autonomy. In fact, these two kinds of autonomy cannot be readily disentangled. For anyone who believes people must be required to take a vaccine will soon be arguing that no one should be allowed to hear information that might make them more resistant to vaccination.

There is an essential problem about maintaining an open and honest debate during a time of pandemic, which anyone who is thinking critically about Covid and our responses to it must grapple with every time they put finger to keyboard. The discourse playing-field is far from level.

Those who demand vaccine mandates, and wish to jettison the principle of bodily autonomy as a "medical" inconvenience, can give full-throated voice to their arguments in the secure knowledge that only a few, isolated contrarians may occasionally dare to challenge them.

But when those who value the principle of bodily autonomy or who blanch at the idea of coerced vaccination wish to make their case, they must hold back. They must argue with one arm tied behind their backs - and not just because they are likely to be mobbed, particularly by the left, for trying to widen the range of arguments under consideration in

what are essentially political and ethical debates masquerading as scientific ones.

<https://twitter.com/jeremycorbyn/status/1470822969010184192>

Those questioning the manufactured consensus – a consensus that intentionally scapegoats the unvaccinated as disease carriers, a consensus that has once again upended social solidarity among the 99 per cent, a consensus that has been weaponised to shield the elites from proper scrutiny for their profiteering from the pandemic – must measure every word they say against the effect it may have on those listening.

Personal calculations

I place a high value on autonomy, of both the cognitive and physical varieties. I am against the state deciding for me what I and you are allowed to think and say, and I am against the state deciding what goes into my and your body without our consent (though I also recognise that I have little choice but to breathe polluted air, drink polluted water, and eat chemically altered food, all of which have damaged my and your immune systems and made us more susceptible to viruses like Covid).

But at the same time, unlike the vaccine mandate mob, I never forget that I am responsible for my words and that they have consequences, and potentially dangerous ones. There are a significant proportion of people who almost certainly need to be vaccinated, and probably regularly, to avoid being seriously harmed by exposure to the virus. Any responsible writer needs to weigh the effect of their words. I do not wish to be responsible for making one person who would benefit from a vaccine more hesitant to take it. I am particularly wary of playing God during a pandemic.

However, my reluctance to pontificate on a subject on which I have no expertise – vaccine safety – does not confer a licence on others to command the debate on other subjects about which they appear to know very little, such as medical and political ethics.

The fact is, however much some people would be best advised to take the vaccine, there is a recognised risk involved, even if we are not supposed to mention it. The long-term safety of the vaccines is unknown and cannot be known for several more years – and possibly for much longer, given the refusal of the drug regulators to [release vaccine data](#) for many more decades.

The vaccine technology is novel and its effects on the complex physiology of the human body and the individual vagaries of each of our immune systems will not be fully apparent for a long time. The decision to take a new type of vaccine in these circumstances is a calculation that each individual must weigh carefully for themselves, based on a body they know better than anyone else.

Pretending that there is no calculation – that everyone is the same, that the vaccines will react in the same manner on every person – is belied by the fact that the vaccines have had to be given emergency approval, and that there have been harsh disagreements even among experts about whether the calculation in favour of vaccination makes sense for everyone, [especially for children](#). That calculation is further complicated by the fact that a significant section of the population now have a natural immunity to the whole virus and not just vaccine-induced immunity to the spike protein.

But stuffing everyone into a one-size-fits-all solution is exactly what bureaucratic,

technocratic states are there to do. It is what they know best. To the state, you are I and just a figure on a pandemic spread-sheet. To think otherwise is childish delusion. Those who refuse to think of themselves as simply a spread-sheet digit – those who insist on their right to bodily and cognitive autonomy – should not be treated as narcissists for doing so or as a threat to public health, especially when the immunity provided by the vaccines is so short-lived, the vaccines themselves are [highly leaky](#), and there is little understanding yet of the differences, or even potential conflicts, between natural and vaccine-induced immunity.

Perpetual emergency

Nonetheless, parts of the left are acting as if none of this is true, or even debatable. Instead they are proudly joining the mob, leading the self-righteous clamour to assert control not only over the bodies of others but over their minds too.

This left angrily rejects all debate as a threat to the official “medical” consensus. They insist on conformity of opinion and then claim it as science, in denial of the fact that science is by its nature disputatious and evolves constantly. They cheer on censorship – by profit-driven social media corporations – even when it is recognised experts who are being silenced.

Their subtext is that any contrary opinion is a threat to the social order, and will fuel vaccine hesitancy. The demand is that we all become worshippers at the altars of Pfizer, Moderna and AstraZeneca, at the risk otherwise of being denounced as heretics, as “anti-vaxxers”. No middle ground can be allowed in this era of perpetual emergency.

This is not just disturbing ethically. It is disastrous politically. The state is already massively powerful against each of us as individuals. We have collective power only in so far as we show solidarity with each other. If the left conspires with the state against those who are weak, against black and brown communities whose main experiences of state institutions have been abusive, against the “deplorables”, we divide ourselves and make the weakest parts of our society even weaker.

Former Labour leader Jeremy Corbyn understood this when he was one of the few on the left to publicly resist the recent move by the UK government to legislate vaccine mandates. He rightly argued that the correct path is persuasion, not coercion.

But this kind of mix of reason and compassion is being drowned out on parts of the left. They justify violations of bodily and cognitive autonomy on the grounds that we are living in exceptional times, during a pandemic. They complacently argue that such violations will be temporary, required only until the virus is eradicated – even though the virus is now endemic and with us for good. They silently assent to the corporate media being given even greater censorship powers as the price we must pay to deal with vaccine hesitancy, on the assumption that we can reclaim the right to dissent later.

But these losses, in circumstances in which our rights and freedoms are already under unprecedented assault, will not be easily restored. Once social media can erase you or me from the public square for stating real-world facts that are politically and commercially inconvenient – such as [Twitter’s ban](#) on anyone pointing out that the vaccinated can spread the virus too – there will be no going back.

Political instincts

There is a further reason, however, why the left is being deeply foolish in turning on the unvaccinated and treating the principles of bodily and cognitive autonomy with such contempt. Because this approach sends a message to black and brown communities, and to the “deplorables”, that the left is elitist, that its talk of solidarity is hollow, and that it is only the right, not the left, that is willing to fight to protect the most intimate freedoms we enjoy – over our bodies and minds.

Every time the left shouts down those who are hesitant about taking a Covid vaccine; every time it echoes the authoritarianism of those who demand mandates, chiefly for low-paid workers; every time it refuses to engage with – or even allow – counter-arguments, it abandons the political battlefield to the right.

Through its behaviour, the shrill left confirms the right’s claims that the political instincts of the left are Stalinist, that the left will always back the might of an all-powerful state against the concerns of ordinary people, that the left sees only the faceless masses, who need to be herded towards bureaucratically convenient solutions, rather than individuals who need to be listened to as they grapple with their own particular dilemmas and beliefs.

The fact is that you can favour vaccines, you can be vaccinated yourself, you can even desire that everyone regularly takes a Covid vaccine, and still think that bodily and cognitive autonomy are vitally important principles – principles to be valued even more than vaccines. You can be a cheerleader for vaccination and still march against vaccine mandates.

Some on the left behave as if these are entirely incompatible positions, or as if they are proof of hypocrisy and bad faith. But what this kind of left is really exposing is their own inability to think in politically complex ways, their own difficulty remembering that principles are more important than quick-fixes, however frightening the circumstances, and that the debates about how we organise our societies are inherently political, much more so than technocratic or “medical”.

The right understands that there is a political calculus in handling the pandemic that cannot be discarded except at a grave political cost. Part of the left has a much weaker grasp of this point. Its censoriousness, its arrogance, its hectoring tone – all given cover by claims to be following a “science” that keeps changing – are predictably alienating those the left claims to represent

The left needs to start insisting again on the critical importance of bodily and cognitive autonomy – and to stop shooting itself in the foot.

This essay first appeared on Jonathan Cook’s blog: <https://www.jonathan-cook.net/blog/>

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His books include “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jonathan-cook.net.

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