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On the Scapegoating of the Unvaccinated: A Media Analysis of Political Propaganda During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

As COVID-19 vaccines were introduced to the public in 2021, nation states employed a concerted propaganda campaign to encourage vaccine uptake. At first, the propaganda claimed that the vaccines would prevent infection and end the pandemic. Once the number of COVID-19 cases grew exponentially shortly after the largest mass vaccination campaign in human history, the propaganda shifted to construct a new minority group called “the unvaccinated” whom it scapegoated for the hardships brought on since March of 2020 by state-enforced lockdowns. This essay analyzes the mediatized macropolitical discourse of late 2021 and early 2022, to show how it created an ideological climate which justified the political repression of persons identified as unvaccinated and the widespread establishment of a two-tiered segregationist society based on vaccination status.

Towards the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, the slogan “We’re all in this together” was widely repeated in the English-language media. It was used in major corporate advertising campaigns in the UK (Sobande, 2020: 1034),¹ it appeared in the storefront windows of shuttered businesses in Canada (Pelley, 2020: n.p.),² and the American Broadcasting Corporation repurposed the song of the same from the popular teen TV program *High School Musical* to produce a Disney Family Singalong, complete with a Zoom videoconferencing aesthetic, encouraging viewers to “#stayhome” (ABC 2020). The invocation of the slogan is generally intended as a gesture of solidarity implying that all members of society are – or should be – united in the effort to minimize the spread of COVID-19, and hence that everyone is equally obligated to make sacrifices in order to achieve that public health goal. In effect, “We’re all in this together” functions as one small part of a highly sophisticated ideological state apparatus to adapt populations to the public health restrictions on social life which have become ubiquitous over the last two years, such as: mass lockdowns; curfews; quarantines; testing procedures; compulsory vaccination; vaccine passports; and mandatory masking.

“We’re all in this together” advances the logic that if the population were to follow the state’s public health guidelines with enough obedience, then the pandemic will eventually end, and the restrictions will be lifted. To provide just one representative example after almost two years of escalating public health decrees, on February 3, 2022, President Joe Biden tweeted “Get vaccinated. Get boosted. Wear a mask while you’re in public. We are going to get through this together” (Biden 2022). The assumption embedded in this political rhetoric is that the reason pandemic-related restrictions continue to remain in place is that not enough

people have been vaccinated or worn their masks vigilantly enough. Such an assumption contradicts the inconvenient reality that COVID-19 cases in the United States, Canada and Europe have risen exponentially since the summer of 2021 when vaccines were rapidly administered to the majority of these populations under emergency use authorization. Nevertheless, the notion that following even the most stringent and invasive public health mandates with the utmost prudence will one day lead to their elimination is a powerful idea that entices mass compliance through promises of a better future. What is significant about the ubiquity and effectiveness of this governance strategy which promises future freedoms, if only the current repression is accepted and even zealously embraced, is that it shifts the signification of the 'We' in the 'We're all in this together.'

When the pandemic was declared an emergency in 2020, lockdowns were administered as a blanket policy towards the whole of the population, with exceptions solely for essential workers. The "We" in "We're all in this together" referred to everyone in society who was languishing at home in state-imposed lockdown – and that was indeed practically everyone. Once vaccines were introduced en masse in 2021, many countries introduced a medical apartheid system with two separate sets of restrictions based on vaccination status.³ As vaccine passports were implemented as way to enforce the system of medical apartheid, the "We" in "We're all in this together" changed in signification from denoting "everyone" to "everyone who is vaccinated." Beginning in 2021, the caste of public health officials and their media appendages orchestrated a deliberate cleavage within the 2020 ideology of common unity against the virus to birth an updated ideological vision of society as being comprised of two groups – a good, "vaccinated" majority and an evil, "unvaccinated" minority. In order for the bio-security state's attribution of binary moral qualities onto these two groups to hold purchase, it developed an elaborate affective media narrative according to which the former vaccinated group is constructed as being victimized by the latter unvaccinated group. As per this official narrative of medical power, the unvaccinated are the cause of the pandemic's prolongation, a threat to the health of others, and responsible for any continuation of draconian public health restrictions. The structure of the narrative is such that it mirrors ancient scapegoat myths and activates the tradition of primitive human sacrifice rituals, so as to channel violence towards those identified through a QR-encoded digital identification system to be "unvaccinated."

The unvaccinated are the scapegoats of the COVID-19 pandemic. René Girard has written extensively on the scapegoat function of human culture. According to Girard's theory of mimetic desire, the scapegoat is the Ur-technique of pre-Christian societies for re-establishing order in times of crisis. When social conflicts risk spinning out of control and giving rise to an outright chaos of undifferentiated violence, the identification and sacrifice of a scapegoat serves to channel violent impulses and restore peace in the community – at least temporarily, until the next human sacrifice is required (Girard, 1979: 17).⁴ In 2021–2022, this scapegoat dynamic is observable in the societal treatment of the unvaccinated, and it explains why the media has laboured so disingenuously to lend COVID-19 a mythological dimension; without it, society would not be able to justify its violence towards the unvaccinated and that violence could be redirected towards the political-medical establishment which defends the state of exception.

In what follows I will perform a media analysis of COVID-19 propaganda to expose the rhetorical strategies used to scapegoat the unvaccinated population. By doing so, I defy the

societal taboo of affiliation with an untouchable, subaltern social group, and defend the innocence of its members in the face of their violent sacrifice from the public sphere, a place where the unvaccinated can no longer speak.

Unvaccinated as Identity

“Unvaccinated” is a new category of social identification that has been naturalized by COVID-19 propaganda and did not exist in the popular imagination prior to the year 2021. Certainly, there would have been medical documents prior to this date which distinguish between patients who have received a particular vaccine and those who have not, but that medical distinction did not render anyone “unvaccinated” in the sense the term is widely used today – it simply meant that some people had not been injected with the vaccine in question. To be “unvaccinated” is a new ontological category which implies much more than simply not having been administered a particular vaccine. According to the totalitarian ideology of medical apartheid discussed below, to be unvaccinated is to be dangerously antagonistic to the dominant social order. When the state identifies someone as being unvaccinated, it now means that they belong to a subversive political group which warrants close surveillance and policing, and even the denial of constitutionally enshrined rights and freedoms which are granted to the rest of society’s vaccinated members.

In spite of the pressing need to write about the current persecution of those identified by the state as being unvaccinated, I am filled with hesitation to even invoke the term “unvaccinated” to refer to people who have not received the COVID-19 vaccine for fear of naturalizing a process of identification produced through non-consensual state surveillance paired to social violence. In the spirit of critical inquiry, the identity of the “unvaccinated” warrants being destabilized, and by looking at the production of the identity, a number of fault lines can be mapped.

First of all, it must be said that the term “unvaccinated” is in most cases not empirically correct: The vast majority of people who have refused the COVID-19 vaccines have received other vaccines at some point in their lives. Therefore, the “unvaccinated” are often indeed vaccinated, they are just not vaccinated against COVID-19. The state of emergency produced by media propaganda has created such a narrow focus in the spectrum of social priorities – to the point of a veritable obsession – that no other widespread disease or vaccine registers in the meaning of “pandemic” or “vaccinated.”

Secondly, best practices in academic discourse suggest that when naming groups of people, it is optimal to use the name that the group itself has chosen. In the current political climate of medical totalitarianism, the label “unvaccinated” has been non-consensually directed at people who would often otherwise prefer not to be identified in such a manner. The violence of the vaccine passport system stems from its impositional identification of people based on medical status, whether or not these people agree to participate in that apparatus of obligatory identification, and regardless of whether or not they would identify in the same way outside of such an apparatus.

Thirdly, there are many people who may in fact identify as being vaccinated, and who may have indeed received a COVID-19 vaccine, but who are deemed to be unvaccinated by the state either for not having received the mandated brand of vaccine, or for not having received the

mandated number of vaccines. Most people living in China and Russia, for instance, have been administered the vaccines which were manufactured in those jurisdictions and consider themselves to be fully vaccinated. However, since these specific brands of vaccines (Sputnik, Sinovax, etc.) are not approved by governments in the West, residents of these countries can arrive in Europe or North America and find themselves to be deemed unvaccinated despite being fully compliant in their home nations. Due to a shortage in vaccine supply relative to initial demand in Canada in 2021, many “fully vaccinated” individuals have mix-and-matched vaccine brands which are considered to be noncompliant outside of the country (Harris, 2022: n.p.). Furthermore, after the mass administration of vaccines failed to stop the spread of COVID-19 in 2021, various institutions began mandating “booster shots” which were originally only deemed necessary for the most fragile segment of the elderly. To be “unboosted” in a system of medical apartheid that requires additional booster shots for one’s vaccine passport to function, is to revert to the status of being unvaccinated, despite having been injected with two or more COVID-19 serums.

The identity of the unvaccinated has not emerged organically from the people who have refrained from being vaccinated with the COVID-19 vaccine. It has been imposed by a bio-security state which demands to know the vaccination status of all of its citizens, and which imposes a binary identity of either “vaccinated” or “unvaccinated” upon every individual which it recognizes as falling under the purview of its monopoly on violence. In light of this, if the term “unvaccinated” is ever to be used in reference to people who have not been injected with the COVID-19 vaccine, that terminology should be accompanied by an awareness that the terminology carries an impositional and pejorative tenor that negates the ability for groups of people to define themselves and choose what they want to be named. That said, contemptuous terms designed to disparage minorities and outsider groups have a long history of being appropriated to create a sense of belonging, and can transform into endearing terms of pride and defiance. It is only in this spirit of reappropriation and mutual belonging that I feel it legitimate to even speak of the unvaccinated, the scapegoated identity which forms the lynchpin of the new medical apartheid system.

A “Pandemic of the Unvaccinated”

In what follows I will now analyze the rhetorical techniques and media strategies used by the political propaganda which scapegoats the unvaccinated for hardships that governments inflicted on the populace under the guise of the COVID-19 pandemic. The foundational rhetorical technique for scapegoating the unvaccinated began in July of 2021 when CDC Director Rochelle P. Walensky declared: “There is a clear message that’s coming through: This is becoming a pandemic of the unvaccinated” (Katler, 2021: n.p.). The turn of phrase, “pandemic of the unvaccinated” has since gone on to become a widely rehearsed motto used by politicians and their media outlets.

Despite its apparent simplicity, “Pandemic of the unvaccinated” is truly a complex signification which makes meaning on at least two levels. On the denotative level, the phrase suggests that the COVID-19 disease only affects the unvaccinated and that there is no longer enough infections amongst the vaccinated portion of the population to warrant being called a pandemic. In the months following Walensky’s statement which coincided with the largest

vaccination drive in world history, that assumption was exploded by the exponential rise in new COVID-19 cases into the Christmas season of 2021, with vaccinated persons now persistently making up the majority of the new cases.⁵ As it turned out, the “experts” were completely wrong in their assertion that vaccinated people “do not carry the virus” and “don’t get sick” (CDC Director, Dr. Rochelle Walensky cited in Morris/Mukherjee, 2021: n.p.).

Given that the “expert” claims about the “pandemic of the unvaccinated” were false on the denotative level, the effectiveness of the rhetoric can only be understood when looking at its connotative, or subliminal messaging. The choice of phraseology “Pandemic of the unvaccinated” is highly sophisticated precisely because of how it operates subliminally despite its denotative falsity. If the phrase were intended solely to be interpreted on the factual level upon which it is demonstrably false, then it would have been phrased as a “Pandemic which only infects the unvaccinated,” or possibly a “Pandemic only found in the unvaccinated portion of the population.” Instead, Walensky inserts the term “unvaccinated” in the position of the sentence structure reserved for the direct object. Usually, when pandemics are discussed, it is common for the direct object in the sentence structure to be the name of a disease or a type of disease, such as in these following examples: “Pandemic of the 2019 novel coronavirus”; “Pandemic of infectious disease”; “Pandemic of mental illness.” The reason the “Pandemic of the unvaccinated” catchphrase is such a powerful piece of rhetorical propaganda for scapegoating the unvaccinated, is precisely because of how it conflates the ontological fact of “being unvaccinated” with disease itself. It is very telling that Walensky chose to circulate the phrase “Pandemic of the unvaccinated” rather than “Pandemic of COVID-19.” In her eyes, and in the scapegoat ideology of medical totalitarianism, the unvaccinated are the disease, they are the pandemic; It is the unvaccinated who are the danger which must be quarantined and eradicated.

As you can see, the “Pandemic of the unvaccinated” slogan changes the meaning of the “We” in “We’re all in this together” from meaning “everyone” to “everyone who is vaccinated.” Additionally, it changes the “this” from signifying “a coronavirus pandemic” to “a pandemic of unvaccinated persons.” Once state propaganda subliminally framed unvaccinated people as a disease by conflating their very existence with the worst symptoms of COVID-19, it opened the floodgates for the wave of persecution which followed Walensky’s fateful statement.⁶

A Dangerous Minority

Totalitarian mobilization is enabled by an affective climate of generalized fear. The imposition of rolling lockdowns exacerbated the latent violence and thirst for revenge in the general population, which the state then channeled towards the new scapegoat figure of the unvaccinated by using propaganda to stoke fear of this group of people who were represented with disdain as being a literal disease, and hence a stark danger to the rest of society. Propagandizing about unvaccinated people as being dangerous spreads fear and accomplishes three main aims of the new medical totalitarianism: It justifies the implementation of an apartheid system where the unvaccinated are stripped of their constitutionally protected rights and liberties; it creates a scapegoat target for the pent-up violent resentment of the masses; and it expands the reach of the pharmaceutical industry by creating an artificial

market for vaccination, since vaccines act as entry tickets to the public sphere and as temporary immunity from the state's most severe wave of repression which is reserved solely for the unvaccinated.

The speech of world political leaders has strained to connect the unvaccinated with the threat of danger so as to perpetuate the climate of fear which justifies a state of emergency where constitutional liberties can be indefinitely suspended. On July 29, 2021, the Prime Minister of Australia Scott Morrison, stated: "We'd have to have more restrictions on people who are unvaccinated because they're a danger to themselves and others" (ul Khaliq, 2021: n.p.). One month later, Justin Trudeau's re-election campaign for the head of the Canadian government was repeatedly disrupted by protestors demanding an end to pandemic restrictions, especially those restrictions which targeted people based on vaccination status. Trudeau responded by saying: "The folks out there shouting — the anti-vaxxers — they're wrong. They are putting at risk their own kids, and they're putting at risk our kids as well" (CBC News, 2021: n.p.). In September of that same year, President Joe Biden added to the chorus of scapegoating. He stated that unvaccinated Americans are "a 25 percent minority" who "can cause a lot of damage, and they are." (Korecki/Cadelago, 2021: n.p.).

The idea propagated by these politicians that the unvaccinated are a dangerous minority was then amplified by sensationalist headlines. A September 2021 article on Bloomberg was titled, "The Unvaccinated are a Risk to All of Us" (Brown, 2021: n.p.) and VeryWellHealth, a website which claims to feature "expert-written, medically-reviewed articles" ran an op-ed with the headline "Unvaccinated People Are Not Oppressed—They're Dangerous" (Charlton-Dailey, 2021: n.p.). The author of the latter article adopts an admonishing tone which registers her consuming sense of resentment, and attempts to stir up vengeful fervor in the reader: "As a result of their refusal," she writes, "they are now losing some of their privileges. [...] You are not oppressed. You are dangerous. It is not safe for you to be around others. It's about time that we all stand up and say we're not going to take that risk anymore" (Charlton-Dailey, 2021: n.p.).

This "fact checked" article exposes the totalitarian impulse behind medical apartheid in its attempt to translate fundamental rights and freedoms enshrined in the constitutions of liberal democracies into "privileges" that are only earned based on compliance with public health mandates. It reinforces the ideology of medical totalitarianism's dictatorship of the vulnerable, namely, that fundamental rights and freedoms are in fact alienable, mere incentives for behaving in a way that is pleasing to the public health authorities. The op-ed then goes on to adopt the classic propagandistic strategy of speaking in terms of "us" and "them," and demanding that the unvaccinated be indefinitely quarantined from the rest of society for being a "risk." The spiteful and paranoid tone of this propaganda would be laughable if it didn't reflect the reigning ideology of really existing medical totalitarianism and the strategies of repression its regimes have mobilized against the unvaccinated minority who now face some of the most egregious human rights abuses in the Western world since the abolition of racial segregation and the closure of the boarding and residential school systems mandated upon the Indigenous peoples of the United States and Canada.

Slandorous Accusations

The rhetorical strategy of this political propaganda was ultimately based on the false assumption that vaccinated people are not capable of spreading COVID-19, an idea which was quickly disproven by the massive wave of new Omicron variant infections in the vaccinated population in December 2021. In the face of its medical justification having crumbled, the apartheid system has attempted to reinforce its legitimacy through other means so as to expand the purview of vaccine passports over everyday life. As a result, a wave of massive protests have spread across the globe calling for an end to lockdowns and vaccine passports.⁷ Politicians have responded by incorporating slanderous accusations into their propaganda which aims to grossly mischaracterize not only the protestors but all unvaccinated people.

The propaganda of mischaracterization escalated in 2021 when various high-profile politicians and the media outlets which amplified their voices began to construct the unvaccinated population and its sympathizers as “anti-vax.” This colloquial shorthand term carries increasingly pejorative connotations over and above those of disease and danger. Based on an analysis of its appearance in the mainstream media over the course of 2021, to be “anti-vax” carries a number of unpalatable connotations, such as an irrational commitment to advancing far-fetched conspiracy theories, a refusal to engage with scientific facts, a susceptibility to fake news and disinformation, and a penchant for religious or political extremism (Ling, 2022: n.p.). Politicians have sought to capitalize on the negative characteristics associated with the “anti-vax” identity by deploying it as a broad catch-all label that encompasses anyone who questions the state of emergency or the legitimacy of vaccine passports and lockdowns, in addition to the segment of the population which does not feel compelled to inject themselves with the COVID-19 vaccine, for whatever reason that may be.

The most blatant example of a politician using the “anti-vax” terminology to attack people who oppose stringent public health mandates comes from Michael Gunner, the Chief Minister of Australia’s Northern Territory. The remote Northern Territory is home to a grim quarantine camp where vaccinated visitors to the territory must undergo a mandatory two-week isolation at their own cost of \$2500 AUD (unvaccinated visitors are not outright banned from entering). At a press conference on November 22, 2021, Gunner railed against anyone who criticized his vaccine mandate, stating: “If you are anti-mandate, you are absolutely anti-vax. I don't care what your personal vaccination status is. If you support, champion, give a green light, give comfort to [or] support anybody who argues against the vaccine, you are an anti-vaxxer, absolutely” (Gibson/Perera, 2021: n.p.).⁸

Michael Gunner’s willingness to label his political adversaries and vaccinated Australians concerned about the erosion of their freedoms under vaccine and quarantine mandates as “anti-vax” demonstrates the loaded degree of shame attached to the term. It is thus not a coincidence that the identification of various political movements opposed to medical totalitarianism from 2020–2022 have been derided as “anti-vax” in political propaganda which seeks to uphold the status quo.

The reaction of the reigning political regime to the protests against vaccine mandates in Ottawa, Canada illustrates the extent to which medical authoritarians are willing to make slanderous accusations designed to mischaracterize anyone who opposes the public health restrictions. In January of 2022, the federal government of Canada implemented a vaccine

mandate for all commercial truck drivers who cross the US-Canada border.



Figure 1: Howard Springs Quarantine Facility in Darwin. Photo by Glenn Campbell.

As a result, anywhere from 10–20% of truck drivers faced imminent job loss.⁹ A Freedom Convoy of freight trucks departed from locations all across the country and descended upon Ottawa where they have occupied the downtown core in front of the Parliament buildings, leading to a prolonged standoff with the state. The ruling political parties and mainstream media outlets responded with a smear campaign to mischaracterize the Freedom Convoy and its allies as not only “anti-vax” but also as racists, vandals, and thieves who go so far as to steal food from the homeless. When the Freedom Convoy converged on Ottawa on January 29th, 2022 the Prime Minister of Canada Justin Trudeau went into isolation after claiming to test positive for COVID-19, and then released a series of tweets denouncing the protest from his secret location. On January 31, 2022, he tweeted:

“I know this pandemic is frustrating. It’s frustrating that, after two years, we’re not done fighting COVID-19. But over the past few days, Canadians have been shocked – and, frankly, disgusted – by the behaviour displayed by some people protesting in our nation’s capital. I want to be very clear: We’re not intimidated by those who hurl abuse at small business workers and steal food from the homeless. We won’t give in to those who fly racist flags. And we won’t cave to those who engage in vandalism, or dishonour the memory of our veterans.” (Trudeau, 2022a: n.p.)

One day later, the Prime Minister of Canada continued to outlandishly misrepresent the Freedom Convoy as a collective bound together by the shared desire to commit hate crimes against an assortment of minority groups in Canadian society. He tweeted: “Today in the House, Members of Parliament unanimously condemned the antisemitism, Islamophobia, anti-Black racism, homophobia, and transphobia that we’ve seen on display in Ottawa over the past number of days. Together, let’s keep working to make Canada more inclusive” (Trudeau, 2022: n.p.).¹⁰



Figure 2: ☒ Protesters gathered in front of the Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada for the Freedom Convoy protest. Photo by Ashley Fraser.

The hate crime narrative established by the Prime Minister then set the tone for the majority of news stories in the mainstream media over the coming days, with a few noteworthy exceptions which chose to emphasize the diversity, conviviality and charity of the thousands of people in attendance.¹¹ The concerted propaganda campaign to construct a morally reprehensible scapegoat who deserves to suffer at the hands of socially sanctioned violence is having a clear impact: A recent survey found that 27% of Canadians support jailing the unvaccinated (Karadeglija, 2022: n.p.), and on February 4, 2022 a pro-vaccine passport extremist attacked a group of protestors at a parallel Freedom Convoy protest in Winnipeg, Canada, striking 4 people with his SUV in a hit-and-run (CBC News, 2022).

Unpatriotic Non-Citizens

In addition to these concerted attempts to frame social movements against the state of emergency as “anti-vax” and to brand protests in defence of constitutional rights like employment and mobility as somehow intolerant of minorities, political propaganda since 2021 has also invoked longstanding ideologies of nationalism in order to further entice compliance with medical power. On December 21, 2021, Joe Biden stated: “All these people who have not been vaccinated, you have an obligation to yourselves, to your families, and quite frankly, I know I will get criticized for this, to your country. Get vaccinated now. ... I

honest to God believe it is your patriotic duty” (Reuters, 2021: n.p.). The power of Biden’s appeal to patriotism lies in its transformation of a medical operation, whose cost-benefit analysis is highly dependent on unique personal health circumstances, into a blanket obligation to the state. Regardless of whether or not this announcement of Americans’ new patriotic duty actually led to more vaccinations, it was certainly rhetorically effective at scapegoating unvaccinated Americans since they were now recognized as subversive elements who threaten the nation. To be unvaccinated in Biden’s America is to be unpatriotic, and worthy of shame and derision.

President of France Emmanuel Macron raised the intensity of Biden’s nationalistic interpretation of vaccination to downplay the rule of law in constitutional democracies. “To be a citizen is to have rights and duties, and duties come first,” he stated, implying that the human rights and basic liberties of unvaccinated peoples could be legitimately denied if this segment of the population fails to fulfill its patriotic duty to undergo his prescribed vaccine injection regimen. He then went on to describe the unvaccinated as “irresponsible” and declared that they are “no longer citizens” before describing his plan to make their lives as uncomfortable as possible under a vaccine passport system (France 24 a, 2022: n.p.).

Macron and Biden’s rhetoric exemplifies how, despite claims to being couched in science, COVID-19 propaganda resorts to blind nationalism to inculcate mass acceptance of public health laws which target the unvaccinated. It is no coincidence that these leaders purchase support for segregationist policies by relying on a nationalist ideology of duty to nation; recent history has now demonstrated that lockdowns and vaccine passports have failed to stop the spread of COVID-19 (Bendavid et al. 2021; Herby et al. 2022). The unique sets of restrictions which France, the USA, and many other countries have placed solely on the unvaccinated shows a vindictive willingness to punish the elements of society which refuse to be interpellated into national ideologies of sacrifice for the state, and attempts to divert critical attention away from how the upstanding “fully vaccinated” (and “boosted”) citizens are not immune from either being infected by COVID-19 or from spreading the disease, despite what official messaging from public health “experts” had previously suggested. In light of how common it is for vaccinated individuals to spread COVID-19, the case for barring unvaccinated persons from public life has shown itself to be based on a sadistic desire to discipline and punish those who dare to disobey the government’s authority to literally penetrate the social body at will, and inject belief in the bio-security state’s transcendent ability to offer salvation in the face of danger.

Re-education of the “Misinformed”

After all of the wild accusations made against the unvaccinated there is one final propagandistic technique which stands out for being much less deliberately inflammatory, but equally pernicious, that being the notion that the unvaccinated are “uneducated” and “misinformed.” One of medical totalitarianism’s prime mobilization strategies is to project a veneer of liberal enlightenment so that the behaviours it mandates upon the populace appear to be actions that any sound rational mind would have come to accept on its own accord. The way that the caste of public health authorities speak about convincing the “vaccine hesitant” to take the vaccine epitomizes this case in point. Total vaccination for utilitarian ends is

presented as the only informed and logical choice, which the government has already made in advance, and anyone who prefers to approach the question of vaccination from a different mode of thought – whether that mode be ethical, speculative, pragmatic, embodied, cultural, theological or historical – and thus comes to a different decision about how to live out their existential singularity, is categorized as misinformed.¹² According to the logic of medical authoritarianism, to be informed is to reach the same conclusion as the state, based on the same epistemological criteria. Those who dare to think about health through anything other than the “evidence-based” utilitarian paradigm sanctioned by the pharmaceutical industry are relegated to apartheid’s second class of non-citizens.

The worldview that the unvaccinated are simply “misinformed” and that better education on the merits of vaccination would change their perspective is widespread and it finds expression across the public health literature. For example, one recent paper in the *American Journal of Infection Control* comes to the conclusion that

COVID-19 vaccine hesitancy is a public health threat. Our findings suggests that low education levels are a major contributor to vaccine hesitancy and ultimately vaccination levels. Since education levels are not easily modifiable, our results suggest that policymakers would be best served by closing knowledge gaps to overcome negative perceptions of the vaccine through tailored interventions (Khairat et al., 2022: n.p.).

These authors claim that “low levels of education” are responsible for suboptimal vaccination rates because data suggests that people without a high school diploma are less likely to be vaccinated than the rest of the population. The premise of the paper’s conclusion is that unvaccinated people are either misinformed or uninformed, and that since this group of people cannot simply attain a bachelor’s degree overnight and thus enter into a more highly vaccinated demographic, they would be best “served” by having the government “close” their “knowledge gaps.” What this paper ignores is that of all groups of people classified by highest level of education achieved, PhD holders are least likely to be vaccinated against COVID-19 and “are the least likely to change their minds about it.”¹³ In other words, the most educated segment of society is least likely to be influenced by state propaganda.

A similar “public health experts know best” attitude guides Jonathan M. Berman’s book *Anti-vaxxers: How to Challenge a Misinformed Movement*. As the title states very clearly, the book is a how-to guide for “informing” the “misinformed anti-vaxxers.” However, in the book’s introduction, Bergman advocates for what he calls a “community-based strategy” over and above an “information-deficit strategy.” He describes the “community-based strategy” as follows and explains why he values its methodology so highly: “Community-based strategies, which I believe to be most effective,” he writes,

are strategies based on showing those with doubts that others in their community are vaccinating their children; that their peers in their mosque, synagogue, church, or temple who are also good parents have vaccinated their children; and that vaccination is an expectation of any good parent. Community-based strategies have been used in the wake of measles outbreaks exacerbated by anti-vaccine activism and resulted in significant increases in vaccine uptake. These strategies take into consideration the self-identity and values of those who are being targeted by anti-vaccine rhetoric (Berman, 2020: xvi).

Berman prefers “community-based” to “information-deficit” approaches which make “factual information about vaccination available to the public” because the latter requires “those with questions to seek out such resources in the first place and then to know which of them are trustworthy” (Berman, 2020: xv)

The Anti-vaxxers book is astounding for the way that it lays bare with such simplicity the way that political propaganda depends on social mimesis to be effective. Propaganda does not merely alter the thought and behaviour of those who encounter it, in that encounter – it garners its power from creating the ideological conditions for social mimesis to take place. Berman’s “community-based strategy” for promoting vaccination consists essentially in harnessing the mimetic and conformist tendency in social groups. His strategy requires only: 1) That people who are unvaccinated are made aware that others who belong to their religious group, and who are designated as “good” by that group, have been vaccinated; and 2) That they are presented with an authoritative moral classification system whereby being vaccinated is required to be “good.” What Berman’s “community-based” model prescribes is nothing more or less than the blind mimesis of others, so as to be rewarded with positive social standing and avoid being contemptuously identified as “misinformed” or “anti-vaxx.” In other words, the “way to challenge a misinformed movement” is through groupthink.

When vaccine mandaters invoke the lexicon of the “uneducated” and the “misinformed” to speak of vaccine noncompliant individuals, they are effectively sanctioning a very narrow range of acceptable ethics, research methodologies and epistemological orientations. Medical totalitarianism is driven by the unrelenting impulse to totally inform the population. This will to inform expresses a utilitarian ethics, disavows the blind spots of its evidence base, and negates the long history of iatrogenic disease and medical industry malfeasance.¹⁴ According to its totalizing logic, any other way of living ethically, of coming to knowledge, and of making the Western medicine’s history of violence palpable in the present moment is at best misinformed and in need of re-education, and at worst an outright menace to be disciplined and punished – irrespective of constitutional rights and freedoms.

Strategies of Medical Apartheid

This essay has demonstrated how unvaccinated people and others who are critical of a culture of police-enforced lockdowns and vaccine passports have been scapegoated and stigmatized. Heads of government have strategically used mainstream media to propagate an inflammatory lexicon for describing the diverse peoples who are subjected to the state-imposed “unvaccinated” identity. The unvaccinated face a motley collection of absurdly conjoined accusations, and have been pejoratively designated as everything from a dangerous disease, to racist and misogynist, to unpatriotic thieves who steal from the homeless and vandalize war monuments.

Writing in 2022, it is hard to imagine influential politicians being granted the licence to systematically make such disparaging accusations toward any other identifiable group of people, especially one as inherently heterogeneous as the unvaccinated. In a moment of extreme political and social crisis, “the unvaccinated” have been made the scapegoats for all of the suffering that people have endured under two years of lockdowns and mask mandates. Ostensibly “moderate” politicians have fuelled a thirst for vengeance amongst a global population which has been economically impoverished, socially isolated, and robbed of meaningful human experiences. As a result of how effective the propaganda discussed above has been in scapegoating the unvaccinated, this persecuted group of second-class citizens has now been subjected to an international system of medical apartheid which includes the

following infringements of the principles of equality and basic human dignity:

- 1) Punitive Taxes and Fines. In Austria and Greece, special taxes and fines have been created solely for the unvaccinated portion of the population to punish them for their noncompliance with vaccine mandates (Fenton 2022).¹⁵
- 2) Loss of Employment. In many countries, including Italy, France, Canada and Australia, employees have been dismissed from their jobs for being unvaccinated. Other unvaccinated workers have been rendered unemployable due to their medical status (Walt/Warner 2021).
- 3) Denial of Mobility. In Italy and the Philippines, the unvaccinated have been banned from public transportation. In Canada, unvaccinated persons cannot board a domestic flight or an international flight, nor can they board a train or cross the US border – effectively trapping them in a hostile country with no way to leave (Reuters 2022).
- 4) Denial of Education. In countries around the world, including the USA, institutions of higher learning have enacted vaccine mandates which prohibit unvaccinated students from receiving an education. Unvaccinated students have had their course registrations blocked, even for online courses. Primary schools and elementary schools have also introduced vaccine mandates, effectively banning unvaccinated children from public education and responsiblizing their parents for home school solutions (Burt 2022; Symon 2021).
- 5) Loss of Child Custody. In Quebec and New Brunswick, Canada, fathers have been denied custody of their children in a court of law due to being unvaccinated (Poitrat 2022).
- 6) Quarantine Camps. Unvaccinated persons have been subjected to forced quarantine and quarantine requirements which are longer and more arduous than their vaccinated counterparts (France24 b).
- 7) Badges of Shame. Unvaccinated persons are routinely mandated by the institutions in which they are allowed to participate to wear special apparel and observe separate social distancing measures which single them out from their vaccinated counterparts (Sandman 2021).
- 8) Ostracization from Family. During holiday periods, governments have issued decrees banning unvaccinated persons from participating in family gatherings (Holliday 2021).
- 9) Denial of Fitness and Leisure Activities. Throughout the world, unvaccinated persons have been denied access to fitness facilities and organized group sporting activities which are essential for the maintenance of basic physical health, especially in cold climates. Unvaccinated persons have also been denied entry to restaurants and cafes, retail stores, and venues devoted to cinema, fine arts and performing arts (Vinicky, 2021: n.p.).

The rapid expansion of a far-reaching medical apartheid system now constitutes a humanitarian crisis of historical proportions. What makes this crisis so particularly alarming is the degree to which it is taking place in constitutional democracies which have a codified commitment human rights and freedoms. Liberal nation states have used the COVID-19 pandemic as a pretext for the declaration of a state of emergency and the wholesale adoption

of totalitarian politics. Democratic countries are now rife with a spirit of fanatical public health collectivism epitomized by mass obedience with a medical apartheid system and the fabrication of a scapegoat at whom social violence is unilaterally directed. It is especially troublesome that academics who work on social justice issues have so grossly abnegated their ethical responsibility to include this scapegoated group of untouchables under their umbrella of concern, in spite of the unvaccinated currently being explicitly persecuted worse than any other identifiable minority group in the Western world. The unvaccinated are the scapegoat, and if their enduring sacrifice at the hands of the vaccinated mob of minions mobilized by the repressive state apparatus is to be reversed, critical intervention is immediately required by humanitarian aid groups, social theorists, civil liberties associations, associations for freedom of the press, and politically influential persons. The situation could easily be diffused: Nation states could follow the lead of Japan, which has explicitly denounced any discrimination of the unvaccinated (Chung, 2021), or of Denmark which has announced that COVID-19 does not pose a threat to society, and has repealed all public health restrictions (Thompson, 2022). However, a change of this sort would lead to the statist class which has invested so much political capital into the ideology of medical totalitarianism sacrificing its own power – and that is what makes such a simple solution so implausible. The target of social violence could be redirected towards those who have fomented it the most.

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- 1 “‘We’re all in this together’ is a statement that has repeatedly circulated amid consumer culture and brand responses to the COVID-19 (coronavirus) global pandemic. In the context of the United Kingdom, this alleged commitment to shared responsibility and collective endeavour is apparent in many forms of branding, including the marketing of supermarket giants Asda, Lidl, Marks & Spencer (M&S) and Tesco.” Sobande, “We’re All in This Together,” 1034.
 - 2 “The posters are in the windows of shuttered shops, held up by painters’ tape on restaurant doors or clinging to the front glass at convenience stores.” Pelley, ‘We’re all in this together’, n.p.
 - 3 “Apartheid” is the Afrikaans word for “separateness” and is commonly used to name the system of institutionalized segregation in South Africa from 1948 to the early 1990s. The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court defines apartheid as “inhumane acts ... committed in the context of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime” (5-6). The vaccine passport system is clearly not a form of racial domination, even though it does disproportionately affect Black and Indigenous peoples since they have lower vaccination rates than other racial groups. Medical apartheid is an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one medical group over another. From 2021 onwards, medical apartheid exists as the domination of the “vaccinated,” or vaccine-compliant over the “unvaccinated” or vaccine non-compliant. The last section of this paper presents in detail how this institutionalized domination has been implemented across employment, education and other areas of social life.
 - 4 “As in the case of drugs, consumers of sacrifice tend to increase the doses when the effect becomes more difficult to achieve.” Girard, “Mimesis and Violence,” 17.
 - 5 An early instance of “breakthrough” cases was discovered in Barnstable County, Massachusetts in July 2021 before going on to make up the majority of new cases worldwide. Brown, “Outbreak,” 1051. Health agencies such as the CDC and NHS present new case data as an “infection rate” in the “per 1000 people” format, so as to occlude how the majority of new cases are in “fully vaccinated” individuals. One institution which has been more transparent in its presentation of the

“breakthrough” case data is the Minnesota Department of Health. Its data is representative of global trends and can be viewed on its website.

- ⁶ The representation of a minority group as a disease is a classic trope in political propaganda. For a couple of historical examples see: “Public Health Under the Third Reich” and Finley and Koyama’s “Plague, Politics, and Pogroms.”
- ⁷ The Wikipedia page “Protests over responses to the COVID-19 pandemic” catalogues the major protests in one place and evokes the global scope of the protests which is often occluded by looking at local media sources which tend to cover one protest at a time.
- ⁸ Gunner even criticized an Aboriginal colleague, federal senator Malarndirri McCarthy as being a “disgrace” and an “anti-vaxxer” because she criticized the mandatory vaccination policy despite being vaccinated herself and actively encouraging her constituents to get vaccinated on social media. He stated: “Senator McCarthy’s position on mandatory vaccination is a disgrace, and presents a risk to the Territory’s most vulnerable. Failure to support mandatory vaccination is a failure of leadership and puts our most vulnerable at-risk – and no-one is more vulnerable than our remote Territorians. If you support anti-vaxxers, if you give them comfort, if you give them a green light, if you advocate for their right to choose over the safety of our vulnerable Territorians, then you are an anti-vaxxer.” Houlbrook-Walk, “Chief Minister Michael Gunner,” n.p.
- ⁹ The Canadian Trucking Alliance claims that truckers have similar vaccination rates as in the rest of the country. Canadian Trucking Alliance. “Canadian Trucking Alliance Statement to Those Engaged in Road/Border Protests,” n.p.
- ¹⁰ These comments were made just a few weeks after Trudeau stated on Quebec television, “There are people who are staunchly opposed to vaccination. They don’t believe in science, they’re often misogynists, also often racists. It’s a small group that takes up space, and we have to make a choice in terms of leaders, in terms of the country. Do we tolerate these people?” The statement was made in French, and I have translated the comments myself. Warmington, “Opposition shockingly silent on PM’s hatred of unvaccinated Canadians,” n.p.
- ¹¹ Both of these journalistic reports account for the ethnic diversity of the Freedom Convoy: Subramanya, “Freedom Convoy dismantles stereotypes” n.p. Rondón, “How the Mainstream Media Launched a Smear Campaign Against Canada’s ‘Convoy of Freedom,’” n.p.
- ¹² Even medical professionals and academics who have highly sophisticated perspectives on the pandemic have been categorized as “misinformed.” For instance, the accusation has been levelled at the founding signatories of the Great Barrington Declaration, Martin Kulldorff, Sunetra Gupta, Jay Bhattacharya. On this point see Bob Ward’s “Organisers of anti-lockdown declaration” and David Gorski’s “The ‘spiritual child of the Great Barrington Declaration’ promotes antivaccine misinformation.”
- ¹³ “[The study] finds that the association between hesitancy and education level follows a U-shaped curve with the highest hesitancy among those least and most educated. People with a master’s degree had the least hesitancy, and the highest hesitancy was among those holding a Ph.D. What’s more, the paper found that in the first five months of 2021, the largest decrease in hesitancy was among the least educated — those with a high school education or less. Meanwhile, hesitancy held constant in the most educated group; by May, those with Ph.Ds were the most hesitant group. So not only are the most educated people most sceptical of taking the Covid vaccine, they are also the least likely the change their minds about it.” UnHerd. “The most vaccine-hesitant group of all? PhDs,” n.p.

- ¹⁴ An entire encyclopedia could be written just on the list of iatrogenic illnesses which have been caused throughout the history of medicine. Recent scandals include Purdue Pharmaceuticals lying about the addictiveness of Oxycontin, Johnson and Johnson's cancer-causing baby powder, the Swine flu's vaccine causing narcolepsy in UK children, the 3-1 vaccine causing brain damage in Irish children, and Merck's Vioxx causing over 100,000 heart attacks (many of which were fatal).
- ¹⁵ In the following footnotes, I provide just one representative example per type of infringement on the unvaccinated. In most cases, the phenomenon can also be observed in jurisdictions other than the one referenced.

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