

I've grappled with my frustration with the emotionally-charged stigmatization of people who aren't vaccinated. I've made my argument for the right to choose, delicately collecting the least controversial science I could find on the matter and appealing to as many perspectives as I could along the way. I've made my plea for compassion and reason. I've done my best to make sense of the hailstorm of information that hits us with every morning news, laying it all out on the table and searching for thru-lines in the name of collective transparency – a non-scientist living in a world that screams science at every turn.

I've made it personal for myself, and I've actively appealed to the personal in those I interact with. This pandemic is personal to everyone. In our isolation and our distance, we all had our own unique experience of a global phenomenon. But I want to make a different kind of appeal now. A more active one, a more pointed one, a less personal but equally as frustration-inducing one.

I want people to put their fear aside for just long enough to look up from their neighbours' vaccine passports, or lack thereof, and question the authoritarian measures being implemented around the world. I want people to consider how we can encourage others to make informed and rational decisions about their health without the use of coercion or the establishment of stricter and stricter hierarchies.

As the writer and journalist Paul Kingsnorth insightfully put it in a recent essay and accompanying interview, we are using vaccines as a proxy for a culture war that runs much deeper than whether you got your booster shot or not. And I think that this social battle to stake a claim on what it takes to be considered a morally respectable person, a good citizen, is much scarier than the coronavirus. Most people who suffered COVID-19 symptoms recovered in about two weeks. This schism between the so

called pro and anti-vaxxers, is not a two-week long illness, and I'm scared of what it'll mutate into.

To honour the personal, the most unnerving part for me is how many incredibly intelligent, critically-thinking, progressive people in my peer group are hesitant – if not outright unwilling – to question the authoritarian nature of vaccine passports and vaccine mandates.

I still remember the first few months of the pandemic when there were whispers about the potential of a vaccine passport, and we scoffed at it. It sounded like something a few notoriously authoritarian countries might do, but not here. That's one too many toes over the Orwellian 1984 line for us. So when did we loosen our grip? At what point did we all suddenly agree that Big Pharma should decide whether we could go into restaurants or movie theatres?

The efficacy of the vaccine aside, when have we ever limited someone's movement throughout society based on the medication they've taken? Even in public schools, a parent has the option of applying for an exemption for their child based on philosophical or religious reasons. I can hear the words already: "unprecedented," "global emergency." But did we not learn from 9/11 what happens when we abandon political debate and open discussion in the name of unprecedented emergencies? And with the state of the world as it is, the fires, the floods, it's simply not sustainable for us to be relinquishing our democratic values every time we get hit with an emergency. Soon we'll be emergency-hopping from one crisis to another, and there won't be any time for the "leisurely" values we coddled and defended in the golden days of past.

An increasingly easier argument to make is, well, capital "C" Capitalism. Capitalism has thrived throughout the pandemic. The concept of

the lockdown is a myth. Nowhere in the world was there a true, full lockdown. Hundreds of thousands of workplaces stayed open and millions of workers continued to go to work. Capitalism was never going to sacrifice itself, even momentarily, for the good of the people. It needed production to continue, and it needed people to keep buying things. So it happened that certain people who worked in certain sectors were given laptops by their bosses and told to go work from the couch instead, while people in other sectors, generally lower-paying, less-secure, and often non-unionized, were given no option but to continue showing up to work in the midst of the confusion and fear of the first few months of the pandemic, without exception, without compensation, at risk, and underpaid.

The most hypocritical thing about the whole pandemic, at least here in Canada, is that it took until November 2021, almost two years in, for the federal government to take even the smallest, most baby-step of steps in the direction of implementing any real healthcare-related policies (other than changes to the medically assisted dying laws in March 2021, which, as the first “healthcare policy” discussed in parliament since the pandemic, was a slap in the face).

On November 30, Ottawa passed legislation to provide 10 paid sick days to everyone working in the federally regulated private sector. Just a few days before, British Columbia declared that starting in January, “all” workers in the province are eligible for a minimum of five days of paid sick leave. “All” means anyone covered by the Employment Standards Act, which, I’m sure you can guess, doesn’t actually mean all workers. This means that in a lot of workplaces in Canada, workers were told getting a vaccine was mandatory before they were told that if they got sick they could be compensated for staying home to recover and prevent passing anything along to coworkers.

I think it’s worth considering the explanation for this as: the heads of business didn’t want to give people paid sick leave during a pandemic because they didn’t want to give their workers any reason to leave the assembly line to take care of themselves, thus slowing down production. And once vaccines were widely available, mandating them was a way of avoiding anyone being able to use getting sick as an “excuse” to get off the assembly line. Not to mention that a lot of the guys calling the shots also have investments in the pharmaceutical companies doling out the vaccines – more money for the company, more money for the investors.

There is no reasonable explanation as to why paid sick days weren’t implemented immediately. Coronavirus had a heyday in workplaces, where people couldn’t afford to call in sick and so came in for their 10-hour shifts serving at McDonald’s or putting car parts together. Mandating vaccines for your employees is just another way to avoid real pro-worker policies.

Back to the personal, there’s something intoxicating about both the culture of the vaccinated and the culture of those speaking out against it. There is another very apt point that Kingsnorth brings up in his interview with Freddie Sayers. He talks about how at the beginning of the pandemic there was this beautiful and engaging feeling of a universal experience, a togetherness, an active sense of solidarity against the threat of illness and pain of isolation. It connected us all for the first time in a long time. For a lot of people it was the first time in their lives that they were experiencing something this globally unifying.

But then the vaccines came along and a standard was set for qualifying. Now there was a requirement to being part of this global experience of recovery, of “normalcy.” People

were told that if they wanted the pandemic to be over, they'd need to get the vaccine, which paved the way for the enemy to take the shape of anyone who decided against getting it. There was no other common narrative available to us, and this was the easiest way out. Get one shot, get another shot three weeks later. We barely understand how this pandemic came to be and what it really means, so of course the vaccine, in all its glorious simplicity, would present itself as a beacon of hope amidst all the confusion. Unfortunately, it also presented itself as the perfect vessel for promoting authoritarianism on a global, national, community, and interpersonal level.

Global authoritarianism is expressed through the shambly array of travel bans and the scattered availability of vaccines outside of the global north. It's expressed on a national level through a campaign to lower coronavirus case numbers that hinges entirely on individual people making personal medical decisions rather than governments and institutions taking responsibility for a crumbling and underfunded healthcare system, an absolutely garbage long-term care system, a weak attempt at workers' rights, and a virtually non-existent community-based health education program. And here's where it gets especially depressing. Authoritarianism is showing its teeth on a community and interpersonal level through the stigmatization and segregation of people based on their medical decisions, barring certain people from certain activities and facilities because "if they aren't with us, they're against us." And why this sentiment? How has it permeated so deeply?

I think that in both the political left and the political right, there is an urge to influence, and in turn be influenced by, an increasingly hard-edged dogma. Because it offers a sense of belonging. If anyone can belong to anything at anytime, then the authority of belonging to the right group and the right time diminishes. In a world where there

is increasingly little stability, the authority of belonging to a particular group offers security and comfort.

But it's a slippery slope; your membership, your loyalty even, must be consistently and publicly reaffirmed. Your indentifying with a particular group is also established by condemning those who do not commit to the same values as you and your group.

Not only is this division making it harder and harder to have genuine debates and open conversations, but it's distracting from what could lead us to our potential recovery, or if not recovery, at least a more enlightened understanding of health, healthcare, and ground-level science. This is an amazing opportunity for us to evaluate the weaknesses in our healthcare system and the weaknesses in our relationship with the professional science community.

A global pandemic is a time when people are scrambling for facts, insight, the latest study, the most peer-reviewed chunk of numbers. It's also the perfect time to analyze how scientific information is shared with the world at large – the manner in which it is "translated" for the everyday person to understand. It's the perfect time to demand absolute transparency and responsibility, while also understanding that scientists are not gods and they won't always have the information we want them to have. The "vaccine problem" is not our problem, we have simply been riled up into being puppets in someone else's war, and it's time for us to hold back on scrutinizing our neighbours' choices and focus more on scrutinizing the decisions of those up on the hill.

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