

# On Vaccines, Masks, and Equal Freedom

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The anarchist position on getting vaccinated is simple: reducing the spread of illness protects you and your community. Getting vaccinated reduces the pressure on hospital resources, and it helps slow the spread of the disease. This, in turn, stymies the mutation of the virus into potentially deadly new variants and helps keep those around you safe. The same logic applies to wearing masks. If, as anarchists, we strive to maximise the well-being and freedom of everyone, masks and vaccines are the only viable option in the midst of a global pandemic.

Those who argue that wearing a mask or getting vaccinated is an infringement on freedom should be reminded that our freedoms are inherently limited by the safety and well-being of others; any infringement on others' safety thus becomes its own form of coercion. This is the concept of 'equal freedom' or 'equal liberty' which is embraced across much of the political spectrum, anarchists included. In her 1932 essay 'Anarchism and American Traditions,' Voltairine de Cleyre cites the desire of the American revolutionaries to 'set the limits of the common concern at the line of where one man's liberty would encroach upon another's' and reiterates that 'equal liberty is the political ideal.'

You should not, for instance, run through a crowded room waving a baseball bat around higgledy-piggledy, because although you may have the freedom to do so in a vacuum, in practice those around you are likely to get hurt. Understanding our responsibility to others' equal freedom, we cannot condone individuals willingly becoming vectors for harm to the community. Therefore, we cannot allow those who are medically eligible but decline the vaccine to hijack the language of libertarianism for reactionary, anti-science purposes. They perniciously confuse the real coercion of having to live among infectious coworkers and neighbours with the 'coercion' of having to wear a mask or get a job. Consideration for equal freedom by preventing harm is, as Errico Malatesta says repeatedly, a matter of course for all humans: 'The concept of freedom for all, which inevitably involves the precept that one's freedom is limited by the equal freedom of others, is a human concept.'

Getting vaccinated also has nothing to do with adhering to government rules or supporting pharmaceutical companies. The interests of state and capital run orthogonal to the need for a vaccinated population. As we have seen over the course of the pandemic, the whims of the government have had little connection to science and much more to do with the further enrichment of the upper classes. As for the companies producing the vaccines and protective equipment, they have done everything in their power to restrict access to the vaccine to vast swathes of the world and procure dodgy contracts from those in power. They should not be any sort of fulcrum of decision making for anarchists.

Make no mistake: anarchists must reject any state forcing vaccinations under penalty of law (whether through fines or imprisonment). Let us return to de Cleyre for a moment, who follows up her call for equal liberty by rejecting the liberal solution to ensuring it: government. She argues that early American revolutionaries

believed ‘the closest approximation to equal liberty might be best secured by the rule of the majority’ which would inevitably end up ‘manipulated by a very small minority.’ Instead, she proposes anarchists should look toward ‘voluntary association of those interested in the management of matters of common concern, without coercion of the uninterested or the opposed.’ In other words, de Cleyre advocates for the community to address common concerns in cooperation, and for those uninterested to leave the community so as not to put others at risk. In the context of COVID-19, this means either masking and vaccinating, or isolating to ensure the safety of others — but it does not allow some to put others in jeopardy, nor does it involve the carceral dictates of the State.

State-enforced coercion is already a significant issue in Greece and Italy, with Austria poised to follow. We must conceptualise this as we do any state-mandated behaviour — that is, incidental to what we do as anarchists. Consider that virtually all states have made it illegal for individuals to murder one another. However, one would hope the reason the vast majority of people do not murder is not because it is unlawful, but rather because it is immoral and destructive to society. Similarly, anarchists should not get vaccinated because of directives from the government (enforced or otherwise), but because it is the mutually supportive, empathetic, and liberating thing to do. Nor should we automatically defy directives as though we were mere contrarians rather than principled actors; that is only the State exercising its control over us once again. In sum: when the government says wear masks, wear masks. And when it says do not wear masks, wear masks anyway.

The perils of state mandates are apparent. As any anarchist or abolitionist knows, adding to the legal remit of the racist prison industrial complex only reentrenches its power to suppress poor and working people and must be opposed on those grounds alone. Consider one Black community in Panola, Alabama, which had to fight to bring vaccines to their area; the nearest vaccine centre to Panola was more than thirty miles away. For them, a mandatory vaccine law would have been difficult if not impossible to fulfil, leaving them at the mercy of the police and courts.

Think also about how many people are afraid to get vaccinated — not because they are worried about the safety of the vaccines themselves, but because their immigration status is in question, or because they know the history of racism in medicine. For the uninsured in countries with privatised healthcare, fear of potentially ruinous debt may similarly keep them away from vaccination clinics. Does threatening these individuals with fees or even prison really help resolve the issue? Or could it, as some fear, engender ‘a substantial negative impact on voluntary compliance’ in some populations, fomenting rather than reducing anti-vaccination sentiment?

Yet as strong as our government aversion may be, it does not change the science behind how extraordinarily effective (and safe) vaccines are at reducing the

worst outcomes associated with catching SARS-CoV-2, including hospitalisation, mortality, and ‘long COVID.’ It does not alter the evidence which makes it clear that vaccination provides a stronger, longer lasting, and less risky path to protection than natural immunity. It does not change the fact that surgical (and especially N95) masks are excellent barriers against transmission.

If we accept this robust empirical data to be true, and we should, then we should understand the harm associated with not masking or vaccinating. We should encourage our friends, peers, coworkers, and neighbours to get vaccinated and use masks rather than push them away from these options. Resisting basic steps toward protecting yourself and others during the pandemic on grounds of alleged ‘anti-authoritarianism’ is nothing but an exertion of authority over those who cannot access masks or vaccines themselves. Mask and vaccine refusal is an expression of total disregard for the poor, the immunocompromised, the elderly, and the disabled. It is anti-science, and it is fundamentally anti-anarchist.

## Intellectual Property is a Scourge

When University of Oxford scientists developed their DNA-based vaccine against COVID-19, the university said they wanted the medicine to be released under ‘non-exclusive, royalty-free licences to support free of charge, at-cost’ distribution during the pandemic. It was a revelation in 2020 when Kaiser Health News reported that the Gates Foundation had been operating behind the scenes to encourage Oxford to give exclusive rights to AstraZeneca. This tracked well with Bill Gates’ general affinity for IP protection; his public opposition to the United States IP waiver placed Gates in a small camp arguing for the Global North to withhold access to inoculations from much of the developing world. With the AstraZeneca partnership, yet another promising vaccine remained safely within the constricting hands of private enterprise. With Pfizer, Moderna, and Johnson & Johnson, the question of an IP-free vaccine doesn’t appear to have been considered at all.

Those two vaccines are sold for profit. The AstraZeneca vaccine was sold at cost, but is already shifting to a for-profit model.

It is important to look at the raw consequences of these decisions. In December 2021, the People’s Vaccine Alliance reported that ‘more doses of COVID-19 vaccines have been delivered to the EU, the UK and the US in the six-week run up to Christmas than African countries have received all year.’ Researchers in South Africa, the World Health Organization’s regional base of mRNA vaccine research, were delayed dramatically in creating their own vaccines because Moderna refused to share their protocols with local scientists. The punchline is obvious: more unvaccinated people, and more death. As of March 2022, less than 12% of Africa’s population has been fully vaccinated; the figure in Europe is over 60%. Pharma-

aceutical companies, selling the world on their alleged value as uniquely capable of distributing vaccines, have dammed up the supply flow and sentenced entire regions to suffer from a preventable disease. As punishment, these corporations have received billions in profits.

We are living through a global pandemic. SARS-CoV-2 does not respect state boundaries. It spreads like wildfire, and as it spreads, it incubates in the population, leading to novel variants with varying degrees of transmissibility and virulence. The chances of this increase dramatically when vaccines and preventative measures, like mask wearing, are not observed. And in the meantime, those living in a disproportionately unvaccinated Global South die as a result of direct and indirect effects of the pandemic, including due to sanctions imposed by the United States. We saw a similar scenario play out a decade ago, as it happens, when western institutions like the World Trade Organization (WTO) refuse to provide patent exemptions for African states struggling with the AIDS pandemic. It is impossible to remove imperialism as a determinant factor in the Global South's suffering when disease breaks out.

As anarchists, we can decry the industry from top to bottom: profiteering off of lifesaving drugs, restricting access to medicine based on wealth and geography, and maintaining secret knowledge about recipes that could enable mass production of key medications. The anarchist Vyvian Raoul lays it out succinctly: 'If you own the patent to the cure, you're automatically invested against prevention.' Profit-based amorality is typical of capitalism more broadly. In the harsh light of healthcare, its grotesque, unfeeling mode becomes even uglier, and deadlier.

This critique of intellectual property is not unique to anarchists. Historian David Noble, in his 1977 book *American By Design*, astutely observes that the 'inventor, the original focus of the patent system, tended increasingly to "abandon" his patent in exchange for corporate security; he either sold or licensed his patent rights to industrial corporations or assigned them to the company of which he became an employee, bartering his genius for a salary.' We can see in the case of AstraZeneca that Noble prefigured our exact situation. Noble also quotes lawyer Edwin J. Prindle, who observed in 1906 that 'patents are the only legal form of absolute monopoly.' Indeed: and this monopolistic stranglehold on medicine has had dire consequences in this pandemic, and will continue to do so as long as it is permitted and encouraged.

Do not forget that nation states have also failed utterly to alleviate any of these problems. The US refused to engage with the problem of intellectual property on essential medication for many crucial months. Once it relented, Germany got in the way. These are not companies holding up supply; these are countries, although you would be forgiven for confusing the two. And yet for all their bluster about public health crises and human rights, they did not see fit to permit the development and distribution of vaccines in countries that desperately need it.

Anarchists are often asked how they will coordinate mass production over vast global distances, but how well have our illustrious nation states and corporations fared? Look no further than their COVAX program for an indicative metric of the intense ineptitude, or perhaps callous disinterest, in truly vaccinating the global populace. Hundreds of millions of vaccines remain undelivered despite the promises of wealthy nations. Domestically, COVID program funding is rapidly disappearing even as the military enjoys another boost to its massive budget. We know that publicly funded researchers have the capacity to scale up to meet international need, as Vanessa A. Bee demonstrates in her article about manufacturing the Ebola vaccine. So what is the hold up?

The real culprits are greed and an intense feeling of national self-preservation: pre-purchase agreements enrich the companies producing the vaccines while ensuring domestic distribution takes priority over the rest of the world. Shallow, jingoistic geopolitical scheming also plays a role, as does racist condescension, as Adam Johnson points out. Meanwhile, as discussed, the Global South is forced to wait on the good will and coordination of these countries to donate their vaccines because the North will not allow the South to produce the vaccines themselves. This only reinforces the authority powerful countries have over those with fewer resources — all the while weakening them economically and increasing their dependence.

## Bright Lights

But it isn't all bleak.

The Free The Vaccine and People's Vaccine movements have challenged the status quo since the pandemic began. These organisations have taken pains to call out major universities and companies for their commitment to entrench intellectual property rather than share it with the world. They have helped to build a vocal resistance in the spirit of Jonas Salk, who, when asked about patenting his polio vaccine, famously declared, 'There is no patent. Could you patent the sun?'

We already have examples of researchers living out these ideals. South African scientists were tasked with reverse engineering the Moderna vaccine, and it appears they may have already done it. This breakthrough could unlock massive potential for African vaccination efforts. This is a direct repudiation of the North demanding it maintain a monopoly on life-saving medicine. Meanwhile, an attempt to follow through on the goals of the Oxford scientists seems to be bearing fruit in Texas. Baylor College of Medicine scientists have developed a new vaccine called Corbevax they are committed to releasing patent-free.

As anarchists, we must challenge all power structures as they exist. This means breaking through corporate and national hegemony to fight against IP law for universal access to medicine. It means, as some doctors have nobly attempted, refusing

to adhere to nonsensical, self-defeating rules about throwing out usable vaccines. It means following the scientific data to logical conclusions, including that vaccines and masks are safe, effective, and two of our best tools in slowing the virus and protecting our fellow human beings. And it means engaging in mutual aid to help our local and broader communities to make and distribute masks and food to those who need it.

We can't turn to capital or the state for answers because their only goal, proven time and again, is self-enrichment and expanded power. The truth is that we protect ourselves — so let's get those jabs.

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