
Vaccine Imperialism: Oh the Humanity

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Thanks to an unprecedented effort and some **super-cool science**, a number of COVID vaccines have been developed, offering the possibility of an end to the pandemic. What is clear to all is that there are many countries that lack the means and the clout to secure vaccine supplies for their people. The countries that do have these advantages have made **strong pledges** to ensure that such barriers do not stand in the way of a truly global distribution of vaccines, using the language of humanism, fairness and equity. It is on the face of it curious therefore, that when some States do take steps towards this, they are criticised for acting out of self-interest. Let us consider the matter more closely.

There is an agreement that Covid and the distribution of the vaccines are not just a humanitarian problem but a problem for humanity. When politicians invoke humanity (which has been at threat at various times from climate change and weapons of mass destruction amongst others), they are not referring to real people, with varying interests, experiences and needs, but to an abstract concept. As such, humanity does not have a common interest, a void eagerly filled by those who speak in its name.¹ That is, the term is not deployed as an empty platitude. When the leader of a nation asserts that action needs to be taken in the interests of humanity, they are casting their national interests as universal. When Trump made his 'America First' **foreign policy speech**, he was sure to note that this inward turn was the moral thing to do in the name of this abstraction: "The world is most peaceful and most prosperous when America is strongest. America will continue and continue forever to play the role of peacemaker. We will always help save lives and indeed humanity itself, but to play the role, we must make America strong again."

When countries such as Russia and China act in accord with the humanitarian plea to ensure vaccines reach poorer countries, and in contrast to the "**vaccine nationalism**" of States such as the US, they are accused of having **ulterior motives**, of engaging in "**vaccine diplomacy**", i.e. of exploiting the desperation of poorer countries for their own selfish ends. As the Americans say, no shit Sherlock. The standpoint of *all* States in this arena is their national interest, whether this is expressed through prioritising a supply of vaccine for their own population, or by appeals to humanity and the common good. As a driving force, this can explain (a) why States seek to secure vaccines for their own populations, (b) why they want people in other countries to be vaccinated, and (c) why they would want to play an active part in this.

The might of a successful capitalist state is based on its population as economic actors, creating the wealth that the State **has made itself reliant on**. Therefore the State cares about the overall health of its citizens – a significant portion of them unable to work is a serious threat to its position.² Thus all States have an interest in protecting their people from transmissible diseases, which means under

¹ Bertolt Brecht criticised the invocation of humanity through the character Kalle in the play *Talk of Refugees*: "I always objected against the mission, instinctively so to speak. It sounds flattering, but the flatterers I always distrust, don't you? [...] They imagine an ideal state and we ought to establish it. We are the operators, they remain the leaders, eh? We shall save humanity, but who is that?" (Bertolt Brecht, *Flüchtlingsgespräche*. Frankfurt a. M. 2000, pp. 61f., our translation)

² Vaccination drives for rather old people, i.e. people no longer in work, is not a counter argument to this point. See **Love of the State in the Time of Covid**.

pandemic conditions, taking steps to secure an adequate supply of vaccines. Inoculation of the population needs to be both **comprehensive** and timely. Speed is not just an epidemiological concern – in effect, a race is on at the moment for countries to be **back to their usual productive activity** before their competitor nations, to **push ahead** in the global competition. When your competitors are incapacitated, this provides an opportunity to capture market share. There are also secondary benefits to vaccinating their population swiftly, as a showcase for pharmaceutical and medical industries and expertise, to bolster national pride or to somehow turn this into a **case for Brexit**. Despite the logic of this focus, there is always however an awareness that the national interest will ultimately be undermined if a large number of people beyond the country's borders remain unvaccinated.

Capitalist states of note continuously criticise themselves for their reach ending at their borders, their ambition extends beyond that which can be achieved on their territory and with its people. Thus, any State considering the impact of the pandemic on its people takes into account what is happening in the rest of the world. Even if they manage to inoculate their entire population, the ongoing spread of the coronavirus in the rest of the world increases the chances of a mutation that is vaccine resistant, and a threat to their people and therefore the national economy. In addition, they have an interest in the rest of the world as a means of enrichment for their national companies. While on the one hand any State wants to be doing better than their competitors, on the other they are aware that they need competitors with sufficient economic activity to purchase exports, supply necessary imports, or allow the expansion of their companies into other territories. Clearly therefore, all States want there to be a global distribution of vaccines – the question arises as to who should be providing them.

It sounds like a potential case of the 'free rider problem' economists like to cite – why should one country step up to help supply vaccines if they could just hang back and wait for other States to act? However, this problem does not arise because whilst there is a general interest in vaccines being made widely available around the world, nations with the capacity to do so have an interest in it being by their hands. This is precisely the 'soft power'³ or 'vaccine diplomacy' that is given as a reason for countries such as China, Russia, and India choosing to help supply poorer countries around the world. By having something to offer, they seek to improve their access and influence. That these States enter into such arrangements for their own ends is true, but what the accusers fail to point out is that the same national interest is what lies behind every other State's response to the pandemic – in fact behind any engagement they have internationally, whether arranging trade deals, taking military action or providing humanitarian aid. This is not an obscure Marxist theorem – e.g. a 2015 Treasury policy paper on foreign aid was titled *UK aid: tackling global challenges in the national interest*.

³ Even as unsullied a figure as the Archbishop of Canterbury understands how soft power works, stating in an article for the *Financial Times*, sticking to previously agreed foreign aid commitments "... would demonstrate our leadership to the world, show we are genuinely global Britain, deepen our international interests and increase our soft power." Although one cannot serve both God and money (Matthew 6:24) apparently for this Man of God it is an easy thing to serve God whilst prostrating himself before the nation ... whilst also helping the poor: "[T]he commitment was not just a matter of national pride. It was one of national interest. Foreign aid provides the stability needed for trade and economic development and opens the way for a global Britain post-Brexit. It demonstrates that we are a reliable partner and friend, not seeking to conquer but to work alongside those in need."

Our purpose here is not to point out **hypocrisy**, but instead to tease out the commonality that lies behind these claims of States to act as – as China puts it – a ‘**friend of humanity**’, the shared struggle within international economic competition. This has played out in differing forms. The EU and the UK threw their financial weight behind COVAX, a global initiative to ensure that poorer nations have access to vaccines. The UK is the largest single donor, a fact Boris Johnson noted, with his usual modest diffidence, at the **UN General Assembly**. Supporting a joint effort in itself does not mean altruism, bankrolling the thing buys influence on who gets the vaccine when. The EU has been hedging its bets by **considering skirting COVAX to directly supply vaccines to poor countries** – and at the same time **restricting vaccine exports to a range of nations**, including the UK, US, Canada, and Australia.

The US under Trump treated its vaccine policy under its general umbrella of America First, pulling away from the WHO, and refusing to join COVAX. Instead the focus was on ensuring that sufficient vaccine doses were being purchased and distributed for the American people. This approach did not go down well with many political commentators, who felt that the US was abrogating its traditional **leadership position**. One of Biden’s earliest actions was to reverse course and join COVAX, although this leaves the country playing catch-up against its rivals in the multilateral effort, and in practice the US approach to securing vaccine supplies for its own population hasn’t **substantially changed**.

Like the US, Russia decided not to join COVAX. But this did not prevent it from seeking to exert influence on the wider world: it entered **bilateral arrangements to supply countries** such as Venezuela and Nepal with its Sputnik V vaccine. China too initially spurned COVAX in favour of a number of bilateral deals, building on and extending its silk road trade framework, but realised that it had been presented with a great opportunity to **distribute its own vaccines, get access to foreign vaccines and to bolster its international influence by joining the multilateral initiative**.

Whether described by their rivals as vaccine nationalism – too little sharing – or vaccine diplomacy – oversharing –, these foreign policy approaches to Covid are all determined by the same thing – the competition between nations to use each other for their own gain aka imperialism. The result is that for a large number of people in countries that are losers in this global struggle, whether they receive necessary medical help is dependent on whether a powerful State feels that providing the resources to do so is in its own interests. ‘Soft power’ like hard power has its casualties. Of course, for the populations of these powerful States medical care, too, is contingent on the interest their State takes in them. However, as it stands these States consider their human resources a key weapon in their competition. Oh the humanity.