



Carte blanche



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Vaccination: a public policy issue

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On Saturday 9 October 2021, at a demonstration against the health pass in Rome, far right demonstrators attacked the offices of the main Italian trade union confederation, the CGIL. Soon afterwards, they tried to occupy the Italian Parliament building, before being pushed back by the police.

This event seems to me a sign of the potential character of the Covid-sceptic movement. It is a miscellaneous camp representing a range of political views and social groups. In some European countries, many members are from the extreme right, but that does not fully explain how the movement manages to attract such a large following.

In the absence of a better term, I am calling them “Covid-sceptics” to emphasise the continuity between a series of protests throughout the pandemic. They have changed their targets over this period. At first, they disputed that the situation was serious, claiming that the disease was no worse than flu. They can no longer do that now that over five million deaths have been recorded worldwide. They have protested against each of the social constraints in turn: mask wearing, lockdown measures, the banning or restriction of certain activities, vaccination and, in the past few months, the introduction of health passes.

Governments have directly encouraged the emergence of this protest movement through their actions. They have lost credibility by denying the seriousness of the pandemic and wavering in their position on mask wearing. They have paid no heed to social inequalities and failed to make use of the grassroots knowledge that proved so vital in the AIDS crisis. That has undermined even the most worthwhile and sensible aspects of prevention policies.

Militant Covid-sceptics challenge the authoritarianism of public policies, while seeking out scientists and politicians who back their position. They often hold what are known in the United States as libertarian views. For them, individual freedom has an absolute value; they feel there is no onus on them to show solidarity. That creates an incoherent and false view of the world in which life is reduced to competing individualistic points of view with no arbitration. Such a fragmented society, where individuals claim absolute control over their own territory, encourages the emergence of angry crowds in search of leaders building up prejudices and frustrations. Although the Covid-sceptic and climate-sceptic movements only partially overlap, they show the same systematically defiant attitude to science and the media. They make use of the

same cynical disinformation. On social networks, rumours can become global in the space of a few hours.

In Bolsonaro’s Brazil and, to a large extent, in Trump’s United States, Covid-scepticism merged with government policy. That has not happened in Europe. It is a situation creating ambiguity and doubt among some members of the Left and the trade union movement.

I personally believe that health passes are helpful while vaccination is still not all that widespread. At the moment, they are used in every European Union country (apart from Sweden), albeit with very different rules. They confirm that the person has been vaccinated, has tested negative very recently or has had Covid-19 and recovered within the past six months. They are required when taking part in certain activities with a higher risk of exposure to Covid. The passes have a dual purpose: to limit infection and to help promote vaccination.

However, the use of health passes in the workplace does pose a problem. It expands the areas in which employers exercise control, yet in the meantime effective public prevention measures are rarely put in place. One possible alternative is compulsory vaccination as an occupational health measure. However, this could be difficult to implement, since infection is not only a potential risk for employees in the workplace but also, for example, freelance staff, as well as customers or service users. To prevent discrimination, I support the call by the leading Italian trade union confederations for compulsory vaccination of the general public as a public health measure. Decisions on vaccination should not place more value on the individual’s view of its advantages and disadvantages for them personally than on the vital need to protect the public and especially more vulnerable sectors of society.

However, this call only makes sense if vaccination is planned globally, and so it needs to be linked to a waiver on vaccine patents. The huge profits made in this industry are all the more shocking in that most of the research was publicly funded. We have enough production capacity now to make the vaccines available worldwide.