

COVID-19: Individual freedom and herd culture

COVID-19: Libertad individual y cultura de rebaño

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SUMMARY

Pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical measures recommended by health agencies to contain the COVID-19 pandemic are rejected by some citizens and political leaders and have been the subject of protests. The argument used is the defense of individual freedoms such as the right not to be vaccinated, wear a face mask, or respect quarantine. This article analyzes such actions from the perspective of negative liberty and counterposes the advantages of positive liberty, such as the self-imposition of restrictions in the interests of collective well-being. The article argues that the exercise of negative liberty in relation to vaccination produces cost and benefit asymmetries between the unvaccinated and vaccinated, with the former placing the latter at risk and transferring the cost of their decision to others, while the latter produces herd immunity, reducing the possibility of infection and providing protection and benefits to the unvaccinated. Drawing on concepts from sociology that differentiate between disease (a physiological

malfunction), illness (the subjective experience of a disease), and sickness (when a disease is recognized and accepted by society), it is argued that herd culture is created when a biological disease and illness is transformed into a social sickness. Herd culture as the exercise of positive liberty and respect for the rights of others is a necessary complement to herd immunity in a democratic society.

Keywords: COVID-19, individual freedom, democracy, herd immunity, herd culture, vaccines.

RESUMEN

Las medidas farmacéuticas y no-farmacéuticas que han tomado las autoridades sanitarias para la contención de la pandemia de COVID-19 han generado rechazo y protestas de ciudadanos y líderes políticos. El argumento que se ha utilizado es la defensa de la libertad individual como derecho a no vacunarse, usar máscara facial o guardar cuarentena. Este artículo analiza tales actuaciones desde la perspectiva de la libertad negativa y contrapone las ventajas de una libertad positiva como restricciones autoimpuestas por los individuos en favor del bienestar colectivo. El artículo sostiene que en el ejercicio de la libertad negativa hacia la vacunación produce una asimetría de costos y beneficios entre las personas vacunadas y no-vacunadas, pues quienes no reciben la vacuna ponen en riesgo y le trasladan el costo de su decisión a los demás; mientras que los que sí están vacunados con la inmunidad de rebaño ofrecen protección y beneficios a los no-vacunados. Valiéndose de los conceptos de la sociología que diferencia entre la enfermedad como estar fisiológicamente afectado; el padecimiento, como la

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vivencia subjetiva de esa enfermedad, y la dolencia como el momento en el cual es reconocida y aceptada por la sociedad, se sostiene que cuando la enfermedad biológica y padecimiento se transforma en dolencia social se crea una cultura de rebaño. La cultura del rebaño como ejercicio de la libertad positiva y de respeto de los derechos de los otros, es el complemento necesario de la inmunidad del rebaño en la sociedad democrática.

Palabras clave: COVID-19, libertad individual, democracia, inmunidad de rebaño, cultura de rebaño, vacunas.

INTRODUCTION

At the end of January 2022, a fleet of trucks left Vancouver in British Columbia western Canada on a 4 000-kilometer journey to the country's capital Ottawa (1). In route, the convoy was joined by other truck drivers protesting against COVID-19 vaccine mandates for cross-border truck drivers (2). The measure barred foreign truckers without proof of COVID-19 vaccination from entering Canada and imposed a 14-day quarantine on unvaccinated Canadians coming back from the United States (3). The protest was pompously called the "Freedom Convoy". The word freedom was painted on the trucks and along the way, protesters brandished the Canadian flag and banners saying, "Fight for Freedom", "Freedom is Essential", and "Truckers Bring our Freedom" (4).

What freedom are the Canadian truck drivers exactly referring to? Freedom not to get vaccinated, use a face mask, or have to show a vaccine certificate when crossing a national border?

In his seminal essay on liberty, Isaiah Berlin (5) distinguishes between positive and negative liberty. In the Canadian truckers' protest, we encounter the pursuit of negative liberty: The freedom not to accept restrictions imposed by other people, officials, or governments. This type of liberty rebels against prohibition and rejects restrictions imposed by others. However, there is another type of liberty – positive liberty – which is exercised through choice and free will, where individuals self-impose certain limits and restrictions in order to protect themselves and others.

Necessity and liberty

Nineteenth-century German philosophy established a difference between nature and culture. Later, within the fields of anthropology and sociology, this difference took the form of a distinction between nature and society. Essentially, the argument asserts that nature is a realm of necessity, while culture, the product of human action, enables the creation of the realm of freedom, where individuals overcome the barriers and limitations imposed by their biological condition as living beings on this planet.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, little was known about the disease and how it was transmitted, and much less about how to treat it – then came shock, paralysis, and quarantine. Some resisted at work and on the streets, while the Chinese government arrested people and forced the population to stay at home (6). In northern Italy, the government-imposed quarantine and renowned philosophers such as Giorgio Agamben (7) were quick to maintain that the "invention of an epidemic" was a capitalist trick to enforce a "state of exception".

However, knowledge emerged, and science recommended hand washing, no face touching, mask-wearing, and physical distancing, and we changed. Despite the risks, it was not easy to avoid the customary friendly handshake as people underwent a process of body re-education. As a result of these first changes in population behavior, the epidemic spread slowed without pharmaceutical interventions (8) and we celebrated the new freedom of being able to go out and have safe gatherings with mask-wearing and respecting physical distancing. The terraces of bars and restaurants, previously used as smoking areas, were being used once again. Transparent acrylic screens were installed at supermarket checkouts to create a protective barrier against droplets of saliva. In banks, where entry with a *face covering* was prohibited before the pandemic, mask use became mandatory.

Scientific knowledge and the changes in behavior prompted by COVID-19 began to free us from the bonds of nature, mirroring the history of humanity: culture gave us freedom. Centuries ago, across vast territories where scarce rains made it impossible to irrigate crops all year round, ancient civilizations invented dams and

canals and were able to harvest in dry seasons in remote areas. Until relatively recently, women's menstrual cycles limited the sexual activity of couples who did not want to have children. Condoms and the contraceptive pill were then invented, and sex was liberated from human reproduction. Our human condition prevented us from flying and so the airplane was invented. Culture has given us freedom.

Herd immunity

Contrary to what the protesting Canadian truck drivers might think, vaccines have offered a window to freedom. This is how older adults saw it, who after a year locked up and scared at home, rushed to get vaccinated. Those waiting in line applauded, while those getting the vaccine took vaccination selfies, which, like trophies, they sent to their friends and grandchildren. Joy spread throughout vaccination centers. The joy of freedom, of the protection offered by the vaccine, and of being released from the bonds of nature and disease.

Based on historical experience, the expected outcome was that mass vaccination would lead to herd immunity (9). However, achieving herd immunity from COVID-19 is by no means a simple goal. It is estimated that it would require around 80 %-90 % of the population to have immunity and a percentage of the population have exercised their individual liberty and chosen not to get vaccinated (10). Moreover, the duration of protection offered by current vaccines is only up to six months after full vaccination. Recent studies of the Delta variant show that “fully vaccinated individuals with breakthrough infections have peak viral load similar to unvaccinated cases and can efficiently transmit infection in household settings, including to fully vaccinated contacts” (11).

With mathematical forecasting models showing that “the vaccine alone is insufficient to contain the outbreak” (12), cultural changes – both at the individual level and across society as a whole – are required in order to make protection sustainable. Therefore, while achieving herd immunity is imperative, it is also important to develop a “herd culture” that leads society to protect itself.

Herd culture

Sociology and anthropology distinguish between three different concepts of health and disease: being biologically sick, which includes not being aware that you have a disease because you are asymptomatic; feeling sick and being able to recognize illness; and being considered sick, when the aforementioned situations can be recognized and interpreted as a sickness by other people, such as the patient's family, medical staff, or head of personnel at work (13).

Although communicable diseases affect our bodies, they occur in a society that identifies, symbolizes, and names them, determining their origin and consequences and assigning them a place in society and treatment (14). This process takes place using available knowledge at the time, which may rest on a scientific foundation based on currently available evidence or not. As long as people believe that these representations of reality are true, it does not really matter whether they are science-based, since they will be lived as true and affect their behavior.

The three concepts mentioned above correspond to three dimensions: biological, subjective, and intersubjective. To differentiate these dimensions, sociology and anthropology have used the following terms: disease, illness, and sickness (15). Disease refers to the biological dimension, while illness comprises the subjective experience and individual interpretations of the disease and suffering. Sickness is situated in the social field, referring to how a disease and illness a person has is recognized and assigned a place in society, justifying ways of interacting with that person: whether the individual should be allowed to miss work, admitted to hospital, or confined to a leper colony, for example, which happened over the centuries (Figure 1).

COVID-19 mirrors these concepts and dimensions. At first, it was an unknown disease, but as the symptoms spread and suffering and death followed it soon became an illness. Thereafter society recognized COVID-19 as sickness and there was fear, exclusion, and anger. Patients were stigmatized and, in some cities, their houses were marked with paint to signal that they were a threat. However, there was also compassion and solidarity: COVID-19 had become a sickness.

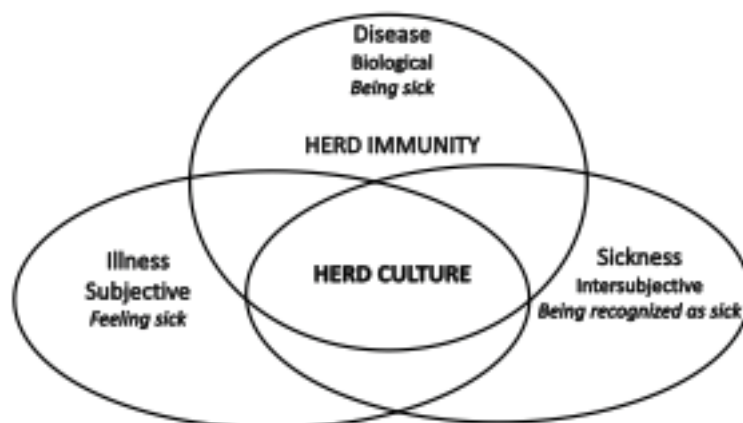


Figure 1. The dimensions of herd culture. Author's elaboration.

This process of social management of the disease has often been described negatively, as in the case of stigmatization. However, it may also be a protective factor (16). We need to understand the disease and build a culture that allows people to defend themselves by turning knowledge into habits, routines, and technologies. It is at this point that a herd culture is built, permitting people to protect themselves through the exercise of positive liberty. This process is one of communication, enabling the internalization of actions without the need for external control. People brush their teeth, wear seat belts, boil drinking water, and cook pork thoroughly because it is part of their culture. External forces, religion, or health authorities are no longer needed to make them comply.

Individual liberty and the liberty of others

Canadian truck drivers are not alone. Other truckers in France and Netherlands followed their example and marched through the center of Brussels. The opposition to vaccines and control measures has spread across many segments of society, not only among workers but also among world-renowned athletes (17) and members of parliament, who have launched campaigns against expert doctors (18). Even country leaders have opposed these measures, some of whom

paradoxically, consider vaccines to be more dangerous than firearms since they are opposed to the former yet promote allowing people to carry guns. The argument is the same, with the president of Brazil claiming that “freedom comes first” (19) and vaccines should only be mandatory for dogs (20).

Almost two centuries ago in his essay “On Liberty”, John Stuart Mills maintained that authority should not interfere when a person’s conduct affects only himself. However, liberty should have limits, that is when it causes harm to others. Mills wrote: “The maxims are, first, that the individual is not accountable to society for his actions, insofar as these concern the interests of no person but himself. Secondly, for such actions as are prejudicial to the interests of others, the individual is accountable and may be subjected either to social or to legal punishment, if society is of opinion that the one or the other is requisite for its protection” (21).

This is the path that public health interventions have taken to tackle smoking: smoking is not banned but people are banned from smoking in public spaces. Similarly, people can drink as much as they want but are banned from drinking and driving. Society can punish people for drinking and driving and the justification is that this protects others. A similar conflict between individual liberty and the liberty of others occurs

when someone refuses to wear a facemask in an enclosed public space, such as a room or elevator, posing a threat to others.

Seen from another perspective, we can analyze this situation as a conflict between individual benefit or pleasure and collective costs. This is what Hardin (22) called the “tragedy of the commons”, referring to the contradiction between individual and collective interests when using common resources, whereby individuals produce private benefits at a cost to society. The decision not to wear a mask in an enclosed public space produces a benefit or pleasure for the person not wearing the mask but poses a threat to others – who risk getting sick – and may generate a cost to society in the form of medical treatment and working days lost, as public health is part of the common good.

Herd culture and democracy

A suggestive study investigating COVID-19 mortality across various countries using Hofstede’s cultural dimension model to compare individualistic and collectivistic societies concluded that mortality was higher in individualistic societies (23). The coercive pandemic control measures imposed by China illustrate that the cultural aspect of collectivism may come into play. However, in Chinese society, individuals also have fewer rights and governments implement repressive policies that would be unacceptable in western democracies. In the case of Israel, which is the mid-range of the countries studied and shares both individualistic and collectivistic tendencies and values, the findings show a higher level of protection and cooperation associated with a collective willingness to sacrifice for the common good.

This is also the answer that philosophy has to offer: self-imposed restrictions based on moral and altruistic grounds in the interests of collective well-being. This is how democracy works, through the exercise of positive liberty. Democracy is self-restraint in the exercise of power, admitting the transience and alternation of leadership, a societal system for life where underlying rules aim to resolve conflict without the use of violence (24).

Herd culture is an expression of democracy as it overcomes external restrictions by replacing them with knowledge, habits, awareness, and education, and reducing or doing away with external mandatory measures. That is what has happened in countries that, despite making vaccination compulsory for children and then revoking the rule, have vaccinated a very high percentage of their population.

People cannot and should not be forced to get vaccinated; however, it is plausible to impose restrictions on access to public spaces for unvaccinated people in order to protect others. That is why in some countries vaccination is not mandatory but, to protect others, vaccination is required to attend school. Social interventions are required to preserve the liberty of others, as restrictions are not imposed on individual and private lives, but rather on social lives and on the spaces where social interaction occurs.

Herd culture enables society to address the cost and benefit asymmetries between those who refuse to get vaccinated and the vaccinated. Through the behavior of the unvaccinated or those who do not wear a mask in enclosed spaces, the cost of the potential disease is transferred to others – the vaccinated majority – because you can still contract the disease even if you are vaccinated. On the contrary, with herd immunity the benefits enjoyed by the vaccinated are transferred to the unvaccinated (25), creating a paradox: the unvaccinated transfer costs to the vaccinated, while the vaccinated transfer benefits to the unvaccinated.

What type of behavior could therefore lead us to a better society? Individual freedom must be protected, provided there is collective responsibility and respect for others. The old liberal principle remains intact both in times of pandemic and endemic diseases. Herd culture helps to foster a moral sense of responsibility towards others.

Liberty is health, overcoming the state of necessity, and protecting against disease; it is the possibility of realizing human potential by being healthy. In herd culture, the collective conscience induces a sense of right and wrong among members of society and leads them to care for themselves and others. It is the exercise of positive liberty and democracy.

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