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IS VACCINE HOARDING A TYPE OF VIOLENCE?

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In our piece we argued that Covid-19 exposed the structural injustice in our society. More specifically we argued that the pandemic has hit disadvantaged people harder, and that a disproportionate number of its victims have a distinctive race, gender, and social class profile. Here we now want to emphasize a disturbing development of the global efforts to deal with the pandemic: the maldistribution of vaccines between rich and poor countries.

We all know that Covid-19 pandemic is a global phenomenon. Another global phenomenon, perhaps less well-known, is the hoarding of vaccines by the richest nations. The UK is on course to stockpile up to 210m spare coronavirus vaccines by the end of the year.[1] These are 'spare' in the sense that they are not needed. Since global production of vaccine has a limited capacity, if a nation claims more vaccines than it needs, it stands to reason that another nation is not going to have enough vaccines. Of course the UK is not the only nation hoarding vaccines; most rich nations are guilty of this unscrupulous accumulation.

As if this was not bad enough, what is even worse is that many of those spare vaccines are going wasted. Millions of them. In the United States, since March 1st, at least 15.1 million doses of Covid-19 vaccines have been thrown away. It is the same story in all rich, developed countries, big or small. This recent development in the fight against Covid-19 raises the question whether hoarding vaccines constitutes an act of violence.

There are two ways to perform an act of violence: via a direct action, or via an omission.[2] Everyone agrees that a slap in the face is an act of violence, but so is neglect, since withholding something needed can be as harmful as a direct act of aggression. Oxford philosopher Philippa

Foot once suggested that there is blame in "allowing people in Third World countries to starve to death as would be for killing them by sending poisoned food".[3]

While we are not sending poisoned food to Africa, by hoarding vaccines we are allowing people in poorer nations to die. As of mid-September, fewer than 4% of people in Africa have been fully immunised. South Africa's president Cyril Ramaphosa recently condemned the full extent of global vaccines-injustice: "It is an indictment on humanity that more than 82% of the world's vaccine doses have been acquired by wealthy countries, while less than 1% has gone to low-income countries".[4]

It is tempting for people in Europe and the USA to argue that rich nations are not doing anything wrong, that Covid-19 has created a Hobbesian state of nature, and nations must look after their own. Furthermore, rich nations are merely acquiring vaccines in an open market, and to question their legitimate claim on these vaccines is paramount to questioning the legitimacy of private property.

This attempt at disclaiming responsibility does not stand up to scrutiny. The best philosophical justification of private property, in the state of nature, is found in a treatise by 17th century philosopher John Locke, the paladin of liberalism and emergent early modern capitalism. Locke formulated what is still today the most influential justification of private property, but with a proviso, which includes the requirement that in accumulating private property nothing should go wasted: "As much as any one can make use of to any advantage of life *before it spoils*".[5] Of course Locke justified his proviso on the basis that "nothing was made by God for man to spoil or destroy", and someone could argue that the manufacturing of vaccines is not an act of God, but that would be disingenuous nit-picking.

Since vaccine hoarding is not done with the *intention* of killing off people in poorer nations, one could be tempted to wave aside claims of violence as unsubstantiated absurdity. But the

uncomfortable truth is that the rich nations hoarding vaccines tend to be 'white', unlike many of the poorer nations desperate for vaccines. The racial divide between those who have vaccines and those who don't cannot be denied. Vaccine inequality ought to be examined through the lenses of postcolonial theory. Furthermore, while there may not be a deliberate intention to kill, it was predictable that many people in poorer nations would die as a result of the rich nation's needless propensity to accumulate, the preventable death of many being a foreseeable side-effect of hoarding by the few. One life in Europe or the USA seems to count more than multiple lives in Africa, Asia and South America.

Hoarding vaccines is an act of possessive nationalism, and irresponsible deprivation. Vaccine distribution being a zero-sum game, when nations with an already very high percentage of vaccinations among its citizens secure even more vaccines, more than they need, they are withholding these vaccines from countries that desperately need them. Once again, this pandemic has exposed the grotesque extent of structural injustice in every aspect of modern capitalism.

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[1] https://www.theguardian.com/society/2021/aug/09/uk-set-to-hoard-up-to-210m-doses-of-covid-vaccine-research-suggests

[2] On this distinction, see V.Bufacchi, *Violence and Social Justice*, Palgrave 2007.

[3] Philippa Foot, "The Problem of Abortion and the Doctrine of Double Effect", in P.Foot, *Virtues and Vices and Other Essays*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp.26-27.

[4] https://apnews.com/article/climate-change-united-nations-general-assembly-united-nations-africa-science--11425d2449903ba448a96b2b0f106a70

[5] John Locke, *The Second Treatise of Government*, Ch.V, edited by P.Laslett, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, p.332.