

## Looking Under the Hood - The Instrumentation of a Pandemic

*Observed associations between COVID denial, anti-vaxxers, and fascism*

By Hari Kumar 28 November 2020.

### Introduction

Over the pandemic year, a repeated pattern was seen. People joining aggressive, right wing demonstrations whose slogans include 'COVID is a myth', 'vaccinations kill', and that there is a 'swamp' of power and corruption against 'the people'. Marx tells us that the validity of observations, is only proved by the test of practice.<sup>1</sup>

Here repetitive observations (often called reproducibility) become a key 'proof' of an undeniable association. The repetitive associations between anti-vaxxers and the far right forms a distinct pattern. What binds these groups? This is an international phenomenon. But here I give some thoughts particularly citing examples from the USA and Germany.

The essential backdrop identified by 'socialists' of all brands, is the ever more rising obvious class antagonisms. It was untenable that the ruled majority would forever allow themselves to be exploited uncomplainingly. But in the post-austerity, post neo-liberal 'consensus' a new high plateau of exploitation has been reached. A mere 1% of the metropolitan countries owns over 95-97%<sup>2</sup> of the country's wealth, bringing a harsher, more overt class war. This politicises whole layers of society excluded from the supposed 'grave train' and benefits of capitalist society. They develop intense alienation against any authority.

Rana Foroohar, an editor at the *Financial Times*, puts it this way:

"Anyone with a pulse knows that in the US today the system is rigged in favour of the wealthy and powerful. One particularly illuminating paper published this month by the Institute for New Economic Thinking quantifies the problem. Building on a persuasive 2014 data set, it shows that when opinion shifts among the wealthiest top 10 per cent of the US population, changes in policy become far more likely.

... Look no further than the way in which Uber, Instacart, Lyft and other digital groups this month got their way with Californian labour law. Together they spent \$200m to push through Proposition 22, a ballot initiative that exempts many gig workers from benefits. These companies may well now take their efforts to other US states."<sup>3</sup>

We examine the association between the anti-science deniers and fascism, by identifying its separate parts. We start at the simplest and most naïve level to end at the most sinister and conscious. At the outset, we flag an intent to foment a deliberate chaos and sense of crisis.

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<sup>1</sup> Karl Marx, *Theses on Feuerbach*; Volume 4; 5; p.4; Moscow 1976;

<sup>2</sup> Obviously in this context, one of exploiter percent overwhelmingly dwarfing the exploited percent, and including the means of production – the exact figure is irrelevant.

<sup>3</sup> Rana Foroohar, 'Corporate America's deal with the Devil'; *Financial Times*, Nov. 23, 2020

### **Three Volatile Components mix**

1. The least conscious political agents are the anti-vaxxers and anti-science lobbyists. Often they are pretty naïve. But at their leadership some articulate an ideology seeing the medical profession manipulating and controlling the truth. What is this 'truth?' It is claimed that vaccinations kill, and that modern science is dangerous. Prestigious journals like the Lancet were hoodwinked by fraudulent researchers into publishing bogus claims linking autism and vaccinations. Those have fueled this camp. Their 'research' in fact was funded by lawyers angling to claim fiscal damages in a case of autism. This was a failure of the medical journals and peer review process, to unmask frank fraud but also a conflict of interest. This was only revealed by a curious lay journalist. Although the fraudster Andrew Wakefield was finally exposed, it took 12 years to scientifically retract the paper – as a fraud.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile measles exploded out of control, and this remains a renewed risk in many countries from where it was previously a rarity. In the UK: "Cases of measles rose from 56 in 1998 to nearly 1,400 in 2008. In 2006, a 13-year-old boy became the first person in more than a decade to die of the disease in Britain."<sup>5</sup> The responsible charlatan – Andrew Wakefield – was formerly a doctor but is now forbidden to practice. However, he has a thriving career as a TV based promoter of the anti-vaxx movement in the USA.

What explains the appeal of this grouping? Undoubtedly the medical hierarchy was very slow to strip that bogus researcher of claims to the truth. In addition, a mantle of authority was assumed by the upper echelons of the medical professions, wrapping it in protection from criticism. This was resented. In addition, undoubtedly the failure to reveal the causes of autism to date, inflames a smaller but very vocal section who legitimately claim to be a vulnerable section. The real problem is one of insufficient targeted funding for research at root causes. But this does not carry such an appealing thrust for action. The angered aggrieved persons become so alienated they tend to drift into the second and third groups below.

2. The COVID denialists. There are several groups within this category. A small ultra-left-wing contingent continues to make absurd claims that death rates from COVID are no greater than that from influenza, and who laud mistaken attempts such as in Sweden to 'raise herd immunity'. I have replied to these myths very early during the pandemic<sup>6</sup>, and for now I leave further response to these left wing deniers to one side. For they are dwarfed by much larger right wing elements. But both the left and right wings in this grouping use the fallacious arguments of infringement of personal rights and freedoms. The appropriate response seems to me to be along the lines of 'Is it my freedom to kill you and should society condone that?' This fits in well with USA mythology of 'independence' and the Second Amendment so-called – to enable gun carriage etc.

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<sup>4</sup> Surprisingly, a very good summary can be found at Wikipedia: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lancet\\_MMR\\_autism\\_fraud](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lancet_MMR_autism_fraud)  
<sup>5</sup> Alex Hannaford, 'Andrew Wakefield: Autism Inc'; *Guardian* 6 Apr 2013; at:

<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2013/apr/06/what-happened-man-mmr-panic>

<sup>6</sup> How should Marxists view the COVID19 Pandemic of 2019-2020?; *Marxist-Leninist Currents Today*; March 17, 2020; <http://ml-today.com/2020/03/17/how-should-marxists-view-the-covid-19-pandemic-of-2019-2020/>

But this camp also includes elements of the petit bourgeoisie who are (or were) self-employed and previously had a measure of some independence. In the absence of an effective vaccine, the old tried and true anti-pandemic measures of isolation, distancing, avoiding congregating, and masks were the only effective protections. But this naturally stopped as intended - foot-traffic - and hit small business owners and shop-keepers. Especially where the capitalist state does not adequately support those suffering in the pandemic accentuated recession, this social class will turn into an 'anti-state' extreme individualist mentality.

3. The final major component is of course the open or near open fascists. This certainly applies to the AFD in Germany and in the USA the most aggressive Trump elements including the 'Proud Boys' etc. But all these actively ferment chaos – just as the Nazis did in their prelude to power in Kristallnacht. In chaos lies a chance for them to create a leadership. A direct fomenting of chaos was seen in the attempt to intimidate the USA Michigan legislature by armed militia, and the attempts to storm the Reichstag. Most recently in Germany there was the provocation by AFD members of parliament who invited aggressive thugs into the Reichstag.

### ***How to combat this volatile toxic coalition***

What is offered here is only a very rudimentary set of suggestions which need considerable amplification by the progressive and anti-fascist movement. However:

1. To undercut the anti-scientific attacks a much more concerted and well mounted educational effort is needed. In the USA this is particularly urgent. In Germany it is also needed, despite the excellent podcasts of the Charite based Dr. Drosten. That series only targets the largely already medically savvy section of the population. Much broader efforts are needed. But ultimately only by improving social services, housing education and benefits will the anger that drives this anti-science lobby be assuaged. Such measures primarily assist the working class, but also would assist the small shopkeepers and business (petit-bourgeoisie). This is becoming increasingly difficult for capitalist societies to do while retaining their profit basis. Some are better able to do this than others (see 3 below).
2. To address COVID deniers, the same educational effort is needed. Here however aspects the vaccine issue are more urgent. Ultimately vaccine research, preparation and funding would be much better done by states and public funding, There is considerable scientific and profit based distortion from private companies in this sphere. This is especially seen in the Astra-Zeneca vaccine effort of the UK, where bad science <sup>7</sup> is coupled with nationalistic bluster. <sup>8</sup> This type of 'spinning' of the news further reduces trust:

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<sup>7</sup> Rebecca Robbins and Benjamin Mueller; 'After Admitting Mistake, AstraZeneca Faces Difficult Questions About Its Vaccine'; *New York Times*; Nov. 25, 2020

<sup>8</sup> Benjamin Mueller, 'Britain Set to Leap Ahead in Approving Vaccines'; *New York Times*; Nov 27, 2020.

“They have damaged confidence in their entire development program” Geoffrey Porges, an analyst at SVB Leerink Investment Bank, told the *New York Times*. The head of the Tübingen Institute for Tropical Medicine, Peter Kremsner, who is involved in a study by the German vaccine developer Curevac, finds even clearer words: “What we now read from the newspapers sounds miserable,” he says”.<sup>9</sup>

State funding also applies in a major way to both the German innovative vaccine pioneered by the two scientists at BioNTech but coupled to Pfizer for production, and to Moderna (USA). Both utilise approaches that were originally developed for anti-cancer therapies but could be re-routed for COVID.<sup>10</sup> That original work in both had not been funded by private industry. In fact, the German scientist duo had been funded by the German government and developed much needed knowledge from that. The same is true of the USA based Moderna which was funded previously by NIH and then by Trump’s pompously worded ‘Warp speed’ program.

3. The message that a unified societal approach versus an individualistic approach is better to protect the public health is loud and clear. In comparing the USA and Germany – both are capitalist countries. But there seems little doubt that the German system functions far better because its public health care system is enabled to take a societal perspective. As the Boston Globe says:

“Germany’s health care system is world class and well-funded. Germany is less politically polarized, which lets it respond to crises more quickly and effectively. It mandated a strict early lockdown, and it invested heavily in testing and tracing. The 16 German states also acted more or less in concert. But more fundamentally, looking at Germany shows us that the kind of COVID culture clash that continues in the United States - between individual rights and collective well-being - is actually a false choice. And basic protections for workers and citizens, in place long before the pandemic, shielded the country from the more serious outcomes experienced elsewhere. Germany offers an alternative model, a picture of what might have been possible if the United States had reacted quickly and coherently to the threat.”<sup>11</sup>

This likely reflects the overall superior position of German capital at the moment, as compared to the USA. This entails then a more insightful approach of its capitalist class (by providing relatively cheap social benefits to the working class it improves productivity and more effectively prevents revolution). Finally even though the German working class has suffered severe weakening over the last decades it is still more unionized and more willing to organise.

4. Undoubtedly for the working class to ensure a socialist agenda, the intimidation of the openly fascist group cannot be accepted. If it comes to a choice, how can

<sup>9</sup> Edda Grbar, ‘Pharmakonzern reagiert auf heftige Kritik AstraZeneca kündigt „zusätzliche Studie“ zu Corona-Impfstoff an’; *Der Tagesspiegel*, 26.11.2020,

<sup>10</sup> Joe Miller, ‘Inside the hunt for a vaccine’; *Financial Times* (Europe), 11/14/2020.

<sup>11</sup> AnnaLisa Quinn, ‘Germany has lessons about containing the damage of COVID-19. It’s not too late for us to start listening’; *Boston Globe*; Nov 27, 2020. At: <https://www.msn.com/en-us/news/us/germany-has-lessons-about-containing-the-damage-of-covid-19-it-e2-80-99s-not-too-late-for-us-to-start-listening/ar-BB1bp4A5>

the working class choose not to defend bourgeois democracy over fascism? Only if reformist agendas are not fulfilled, and if a socialist alternative party is not built. Even then, the reality of either the 70-million pro-Trump voters in the USA, of whom some unclear proportion are likely supportive of fascism. Hence the urgency of a truly anti-fascist broad united front. In Germany this is even more of a priority than it is in the USA.

*In both countries a unitary Marxist-Leninist party is not yet formed. This is needed.*

5. Nonetheless, capitalist societies are finding it ever more difficult to reconcile the buying off of the working class with reforms while maintaining the enormous profits of the capitalist class. The ultimate choice will become a real socialism (not mere social-democratic reforms) - versus capitalism. In my opinion the working class and the petit bourgeoisie are not well placed to face that decision right now. **This, I believe, is an urgent organizational task for all progressives.**