Mob Morality and the Unvaxxed

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(A standalone Part 3 of a series. Part 1, Part 2)

Propaganda must facilitate the displacement of aggression by specifying the targets for hatred. – Joseph Goebbels

We would like to think that modern societies like ours have outgrown barbaric customs like human sacrifice. Sure, we still engage in scapegoating and figuratively sacrifice people on the altar of public opinion, but we don't actually kill people in hopes of placating the gods and restoring order. Or do we?

Some scholars believe we do. Following the thought of the late philosopher Rene Girard, they argue that human sacrifice is still with us today in the form of capital punishment (and incarceration – a removal from society). Girard believed that human sacrifice arose in response to what he called a "sacrificial crisis." The original sacrificial crisis – the greatest threat to early societies – was escalating cycles of violence and retribution. The solution was to redirect the vengeance away from each other and, in violent unanimity, toward a scapegoat or class of scapegoats. Once established, this pattern was memorialized in myth and ritual, applied preemptively as human sacrifice, and carried out in response to any other crisis that threatened society.

In this view, capital punishment originated in human sacrifice and it *is* human sacrifice. It performs the same function: to forestall reciprocal violence through unanimous violence. It does so by monopolizing vengeance, truncating the cycle of retaliatory violence at the first iteration. *This works whether the subject of execution or incarceration is guilty of a crime or not.* Justice is a cover story for something more primal. Theologian Brian K. Smith writes,

> The subject of a modern execution might also be carrying multivalent significations. Among other things (i.e., racial and economic metonymic potentialities), such a figure might serve as the representative of all crime, of "disorder" and social "chaos," of the "breakdown of values," etc. Apart from any utilitarian deterrent effect capital punishment might have, it is one, rather drastic, response to a social problem – illegal and illicit violence.

In other words, what we rationalize in the language of justice and deterrence is actually a blood ritual, in which a person, whether guilty or not, becomes a symbol. Ritual springs up irrepressibly around executions: the last meal, the "dead man walking" to the special execution chamber, the witnesses, the medical procedures, the presiding physician, the signed papers, the last rites, the covering of the head, the precise timetable, the final words, and the exacting attention to detail all mark off the execution as separate, special… sacred.

Something Must be Done

In a lucidly argued paper, legal scholar Roberta Harding offers several examples from the deep South during Jim Crow where judge, jury, and prosecutor well knew that the accused black man was innocent of the charge of raping a white woman. However, because the white supremacist social order was threatened by consensual interracial intercourse, they executed the accused anyway; if they failed to do so promptly he was lynched. Partly this was to set an example and terrify the black population, but partly it was because *something had to be done*.

By the same token, it mattered little that Afghan villagers or Iraqi politicians had no culpability for 9/11; nor did it matter that bombing them would have no practical effect on future terrorism (except to further inflame it). Obviously, the United States was using 9/11 as a pretext to accomplish larger geopolitical aims. Yet it worked as a pretext only because of broad public agreement that "something must be done." And, enacting the age-old pattern, we knew what to do: find some target of unifying violence that cannot effectively retaliate. I was dismayed in 2001 when, at Quaker Meeting of all places, one of the Quakers said, "Of course, a forceful response of some kind is necessary." What, I wondered, does "forceful" mean? It means bombing someone. In other words, we must find someone upon whom to visit violence. He may also have mentioned addressing the imperialist causes of terrorism, but those were not the subject of "of course." Nearly everyone instinctively took for granted the necessity of finding sacrificial victims. We were definitely going to bomb someone – the only question was whom.

The 9/11 attack exemplifies what Harding calls a triggering incident, which "resuscitates dissensions, rivalries, jealousies and quarrels within the community," leading to a sacrificial crisis. A recent such incident was the murder of George Floyd. The latent conflicts it exposed have been festering for so long that it takes little provocation for them to erupt into an active crisis. The response to Floyd's murder is a classic illustration of the calming power of violent unanimity, as Derrick Chauvin's conviction and sentencing temporarily quelled the racialized civil unrest that the killing sparked. Something was done – but only to quell the unrest, not to solve the complex, heavily ramified problem of police killings. It no more addressed the source of America's race problems than killing Osama Bin Laden made America safe from terrorism.

Not just any victim will do as an object of human sacrifice. Victims must be, as Harding puts it, "in, but not of, the society." That is why, during the Black Death, mobs roamed about murdering Jews for "poisoning the wells." The entire Jewish population of Basel was burned alive, a scene repeated throughout Western Europe. Yet this was not mainly the result of preexisting virulent hatred of Jews waiting for an excuse to erupt; it was that victims were needed to release social tension, and hatred, an instrument of that release, coalesced opportunistically on the Jews. They qualified as victims because of their in-but-not-of status.

"Combatting hatred" is combatting a symptom.

Scapegoats needn't be guilty, but they must be marginal, outcasts, heretics, taboo-breakers, or infidels of one kind or another. If they are too alien, they will unsuitable as transfer objects of in-group aggression. Neither can they be full members of society, lest cycles of vengeance ensue. If they are not already marginal, they must be made so. It was ritually important that Derrick Chauvin be cast as a racist and white supremacist; then his removal from society could serve symbolically as the removal of racism itself.

Just to be clear here, I am not saying Derrick Chauvin's conviction for George Floyd's murder was unjust. I am saying that justice was not the only thing carried out.

Representatives of Pollution

Aside from criminals, who today serves as the representative of Smith's "disorder," "social chaos," and "breakdown of values" that seem to be overtaking the world? For most of my life external enemies and a story-of-the-nation served to unify society: communism and the Soviet Union, Islamic terrorism, the mission to the moon, and the mythology of progress. Today the Soviet Union is long dead, terrorism has ceased to terrify, the moon is boring, and the mythology of progress is in terminal decline. Civil strife burns ever hotter, without the broad consensus necessary to transform it into unifying violence. For the right, it is Antifa, Black Lives Matter protesters, critical race theory academics, and undocumented immigrants that represent social chaos and the breakdown of values. For the left it is the Proud Boys, right wing militias, white supremacists, QAnon, the Capitol rioters, and the burgeoning new category of "domestic extremists." And finally, defying left-right categorization is a promising new scapegoat class, the heretics of our time: the anti-vaxxers. As a readily identifiable subpopulation, they are ideal candidates for scapegoating.

It matters little whether any of these pose a real threat to society. As with the subjects of criminal justice, their guilt is irrelevant to the project of restoring order through blood sacrifice (or expulsion from the community by incarceration or, in more tepid but possibly prefigurative form, through "canceling"). All that is necessary is that the dehumanized class arouse the blind indignation and rage necessary to incite a paroxysm of unifying violence. More relevant to current times, this primal mob energy can be harnessed toward fascistic political ends. Totalitarians right and left invoke it directly when they speak of purges, ethnic cleansing, racial purity, and traitors in our midst.

Sacrificial subjects carry an association of pollution or contagion; their removal thus cleanses society. I know people in the alternative health field who are considered so unclean that if I so much as mention their names in a Tweet or Facebook post, the post may be deleted. Deletion is a certainty if I link to an article or interview with them. The public's ready acceptance of such blatant censorship cannot be explained solely in terms of its believing the pretext of "controlling misinformation." Unconsciously, the public recognizes and conforms to the age-old program of investing a pariah subclass with the symbology of pollution.

This program is well underway toward the Covid-unvaxxed, who are being portrayed as walking cesspools of germs who might contaminate the Sanctified Brethren (the vaccinated). My wife perused an acupuncture Facebook page today (which one would expect to be skeptical of mainstream medicine) where someone asked, "What is the word that comes to mind to describe unvaccinated people?" The responses were things like "filth," "assholes," and "death-eaters." This is precisely the dehumanization necessary to prepare a class of people for cleansing.

The science behind this portrayal is dubious. Contrary to the association of the unvaccinated with public danger, some experts contend that it is the vaccinated that are more likely to drive mutant variants through selection pressure. Just as antibiotics result in higher mutation rates and adaptive evolution in bacteria, leading to antibiotic resistance, so may vaccines push viruses to mutate. (Hence the prospect of endless "boosters" against endless new variants.) This phenomenon has been studied for decades, as this article in my favorite math & science website, Quanta, describes. The mutated variants evade the vaccine-induced antibodies, in contrast to the robust immunity that, according to some scientists, those who have already been sick with Covid have to all variants (See this and this, more analysis here, compare to Dr. Fauci's viewpoint.)

It is not my purpose here, however, to present a scientific case. My point is that those in the scientific and medical community who dissent from the demonization of the unvaxxed contend not only with opposing scientific views, but with ancient, powerful psycho-social forces. They can debate the science all they want, but they are up against something much bigger. Rwandan scientists could just as well debated the precepts of Hutu Power for all the good that would have done. Perhaps the Nazi example is more apposite here, since the Nazis did invoke science in their extermination campaigns. Then as now, science was a cloak for something more primal. The hurricane of sacrificial violence easily swept aside the minority of German scientists who contested the science of eugenics, and it wasn't because the dissidents were wrong.

We face a similar situation today. If the mainstream view on Covid vaccines is wrong, it will not be overthrown by science alone. The pro-vaccine camp has a powerful nonscientific ally in the collective id, expressed through various mechanisms of ostracism, shaming, and other social and economic pressure. It takes courage to defy a mob. Doctors and scientists who express anti-vaccine views risk losing funding, jobs, and licenses, just as ordinary citizens face censorship on social media. Even a non-polemic essay like this one will likely be censored, especially if I stain it with the pollution of the heretics by linking blacklisted websites or articles by the disinformation dozen anti-vaxxers. Here, let's try it for fun. Greenmedinfo! Chldren's Health Defense! Mercola.com! Ah. That felt a little like shouting swear words in public. You'd better not follow these links, lest you be tainted by their pollution (and your browsing history mark you as an infidel).

To prepare someone for removal as the repository of all that is evil, it helps to heap upon them every imaginable calumny. Thus we hear in mainstream publications that anti-vaxxers not only are killing people, but are raging narcissists, white supremacists, vile, spreaders of Russian disinformation, and tantamount to domestic terrorists. These accusations are amplified by cherry-picking a few examples, choosing hysterical-looking photos of anti-vaxxers, and showcasing their most dubious arguments. If the authorities follow the playbook developed to counter other domestic "threats," we can also expect agents-provocateurs, entrapment schemes, government agents voicing violent positions to discredit the movement, and so forth – techniques developed in the infiltration of the civil rights, environmental, and anti-globalism movements.

Concerned friends have advised me to "distance myself" from members of the Disinformation Dozen whom I know, as if they carry some kind of contagion. Well, in a sense they do – the contagion of disrepute. It reminds me of Soviet times when mere association with a dissident could land one in the Gulag with them. It also reminds me of my school days, when it was social suicide to be friendly with the weird kid, whose weirdness would rub off one oneself. In grade school, this contagion was known as "cooties." (In my early teens *I* was the weird kid, and only very brave teenagers would be friendly to me while anyone was watching.) Clearly, the basic social dynamic pervades society at many levels. A deeply ingrained gut instinct recognizes the danger of membership in a pariah subclass. To defend the pariahs or to fail to show sufficient enthusiasm in attacking them marks one with suspicion; the result is self-censorship and discretion, contributing all the more to the illusion of unanimity.

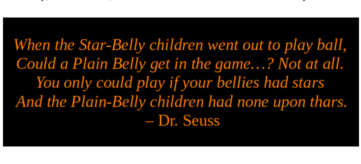
Hijacking Morality

The same kind of positive reinforcement cycle is what generates a mob. All it takes is a few loud people to incite it by declaring someone or something a target. A portion of the crowd goes along enthusiastically. The rest keep silent and conform in outward behavior even as they are troubled within; to each, it looks like he or she is the only one who disagrees. Writ large to the totalitarian state, the support of a majority of the population is unnecessary. The appearance of support will suffice.

The mechanisms that generate the illusion of unanimity operate within science, medicine, and journalism as well as among the general public. Some conform enthusiastically to the orthodoxy; others complain in whispers to sympathetic colleagues. Those who voice dissent publicly become radioactive. The consequences of their apostasy (excommunication from funding, ridicule in the media, shunning by colleagues who must "distance themselves," etc.) serve to silence other potential dissidents, who prudently keep their views to themselves.

Notice that here I have not yet said what I personally think about vaccine safety, efficacy, or necessity (be patient); nonetheless, what I have said is enough for anyone to distance themselves from me to keep safe. If I'm not an anti-vaxxer myself, I certainly have their cooties.

Someone on an online forum that I co-host related an incident. His children had a play date scheduled at their friend's house. A parent called him to ask if his family had been vaccinated. Politely, he said no, and his children were immediately disinvited.



While this parent doubtless believed he was being scientific in canceling the invitation, I doubt science was really the reason. Even the most Covid-orthodox person understands that the non-symptomatic children of non-symptomatic parents pose negligible risk of infection; furthermore, since vaccine believers presumably trust that the vaccine provides protection, rationally speaking they have little to fear from the unvaccinated. The risk is vanishingly small, but the moral indignation is huge.

Many if not most people get the vaccine in an altruistic civic spirit, not because they personally fear getting Covid, but because they believe they are contributing to herd immunity and protecting others. By extension, those who refuse the vaccine are shirking their civic duty; hence the epithets "filth" and "assholes." They become the identifiable representatives of social decay, ready for surgical removal from the body politic like cancer cells all conveniently located in the same tumor.

Social stability depends on people rewarding altruism and deterring antisocial behavior. These rewards and deterrents are encoded into morals and then into norms and taboos. Performing the rituals and avoiding the taboos of the tribe, and shaming and punishing those who do not, one rests serenely in the knowledge of being a good person. As an added benefit, one distinguishes oneself as part of the moral majority, a full member of society, and not part of the sacrificial minority. Our fear of nonconformity is born of ancient experience so deeply ingrained it has become an instinct. It is hard to distinguish it from morality.

The fear operating in the ostracism of the unvaxxed is mostly not fear of disease, though disease may be its proxy. The main fear, old as humanity, is of a social contagion. It is fear of association with the outcasts, coded as moral indignation.

In any society some people are especially zealous in enforcing group norms, values, rituals, and taboos. They may be controlling types, or they may simply care about the common good. They serve an important function the norms and rituals are aligned with social and ecological health. But when corrupt forces hijack the norms through propaganda and the control of information, these good folks can become instruments of totalitarian control.

Those doing the scapegoating may honestly, even fervently, believe the narrative of "the unvaccinated endanger others." Again, while I find the evidence to the contrary persuasive, I won't try to build a case for it beyond the hints I've offered already. As the saying goes, you can't reason someone out of a position they didn't reason themselves into to begin with. Furthermore, most of the citations I would use would come from blacklisted sources, which, owing to their heresy, are unacceptable to those who trust official sources of information. If you trust the official sources, why, then you trust their exclusion of the heretical information. When official sources exclude all dissent, then all dissent becomes *a priori* invalid to those who trust them.

Consequently, much of the dissent migrates to dodgy right-wing websites without the resources to check facts and scrutinize sources. One would think, for example, that a highly credentialed scientist like Dr. Peter McCullough, a professor of medicine, author of hundreds of peer-reviewed articles, and president of the Cardio-Renal Society of America, would be able to find a hearing outside the right-wing media ecosystem. But no. He's been sidelined to places like the right wing Catholic John-Henry Westen show. I wish I could fine a link to this persuasive interview somewhere else, especially because there is actually nothing right-wing about McCullough's views.

Tragically, the sites that host people like McCullough are quite often home to anti-immigrant and anti-LGBTQ articles that use the same tactics leveled at anti-vaxxers, tap into the same template of dehumanization and scapegoating, and lend themselves to the same fascistic ends.

Moving the Masses

For these reasons, I won't try too hard to substantiate my belief that – and I may as well say it explicitly as a gesture of goodwill to the censors, who will thus have an easier time deciding what to do with this article – the Covid vaccines are much more dangerous, less effective, and less necessary than we are told. They also seem not as dangerous, at least in the short term, as some fear. People are not dropping dead in the streets or turning into zombies; most of my vaccinated friends seem to be just fine. So it is hard to know. The science on the issue is so clouded by financial incentives and systemic bias that it is impossible to rely on it to light a way through the murk. The system of research and public health suppresses generic medicines and nutritional therapies that have been demonstrated to greatly reduce Covid symptoms and mortality, leaving vaccines as the only choice. It also fails to adequately investigate numerous plausible mechanisms for serious long-term harm. Of course, plausible does not mean certain: at this point no one knows, or indeed can know, what the long-term effects will be. My point, however, is not that the anti-vaxxers are right and being unjustly persecuted. It is that their persecution enacts a pattern that has little to do with whether they are right or wrong, innocent or guilty. The unreliability of the science underscores that point, and suggests that we take a hard look at the deadly social impulses that the science cloaks.

To say that official sources exclude *all* dissent overstates the case. In fact, peer-reviewed publications and highly credentialed medical doctors and scientists concur with much of what I've said. Admittedly, they are in the minority. But if they were right, we would not easily know it. The mechanisms for controlling *mis*information work equally well to control *true* information that contradicts official sources.

The foregoing analysis is not meant to invalidate other explanations for Covid conformity: the influence of Big Pharma on research, the media, and government; reigning medical paradigms that see health as a matter of winning a war on germs; a general social climate of fear, obsession with safety, the phobia and denial of death; and, perhaps most importantly, the long disempowerment of individuals to manage their own health.

Nor is the foregoing analysis incompatible with the theory that Covid and the vaccination agenda is a totalitarian conspiracy to surveil, track, inject, and control every human being on earth. There can be little doubt that some kind of totalitarian program is well underway, but I have long believed it an emergent phenomenon agglomerating synchronicities to fulfill the hidden myth and ideology of Separation, and not a premeditated plot among human conspirators. Now I believe both are true; the latter subsidiary to the former, its avatar, its symptom, its expression. While not the deepest explanation for humanity's current travail, conspiracies and the secret machinations of power do operate, and I've come to accept that some things about our current historical moment are best explained in those terms.

Whether the totalitarian program is premeditated or opportunistic, deliberate or emergent, the question remains: How does a small elite move the great mass of humanity? They do it by aggravating and exploiting deep psycho-social patterns such as the Girardian. Fascists have always done that. We normally attribute pogroms and genocide to racist ideology, the classic example being antisemitic fascism. From the Girardian perspective it is more the other way around. The ideology is secondary: a creation and a tool of impending violent unanimity. It creates its necessary conditions. The same might be said of slavery. It was not that Europeans thought Africans were inferior and so thus enslaved them. It was that thinking them inferior was required *in order* to enslave them.

On an individual level too, who among us has not operated from unconscious shadow motivations, creating elaborate enabling justifications and *post facto* rationalizations of actions that harm others?

Why is fascism so commonly associated with genocide, when as a political philosophy it is about unity, nationalism, and the merger of corporate and state power? It is because it needs a unifying force powerful enough to sweep aside all resistance. The *us* of fascism requires a *them*. The civic-minded moral majority participates willingly, assured that it is for the greater good. Something must be done. The doubters go along too, for their own safety. No wonder today's authoritarian institutions know, as if instinctively, to whip up hysteria toward the newly minted class of deplorables, the anti-vaxxers and unvaccinated.

Fascism taps into, exploits, and institutionalizes a deeper instinct. The practice of creating dehumanized classes of people and then murdering them is older than history. It emerges again and again under all political systems. Our own is not exempt. The campaign against the unvaccinated, garbed in the white lab coat of Science, munitioned with biased data, and waving the pennant of altruism, channels a brutal, ancient impulse.

Does that mean that the unvaccinated will be rounded up in concentration camps and their leaders ritually murdered? No. they will be segregated from society in other ways. More importantly, the energies invoked by the scapegoating, dehumanizing, pollution-associating campaign can be applied to gain public acceptance of coercive policies, particularly policies that fit the narrative of removing pollution. Currently, a vaccine passport is required to visit certain countries. Imagine needing one to go shopping, drive a car, or exit your home. It would be easily enforceable anywhere that has implemented the "internet of things," in which everything from automobiles to door locks is under central control. The flimsiest pretext will suffice once the ancient template of sacrificial victim, the repository of pollution, has been established.

Rene Girard was, from what I've read of his work, something of a fundamentalist. I do not agree with him that *all* desire beyond mere appetite is mimetic or that *all* ritual originates in sacrificial violence, powerful though these lenses are. By the same token, I don't want to reduce our current acceleration toward techno-totalitarianism and a biosecurity state by just one psycho-social explanation, however deep. Yet it is important to recognize the Girardian pattern, so we know what we are dealing with, so that we can creatively expand our resistance beyond futile debate over the issues – and most importantly, so we can identify its operation within ourselves. Any movement that leverages contempt in its rhetoric fits the Girardian impulse. Elements of scapegoating such as dehumanization, rumor-mongering, stereotyping, punishment-as-justice, and mob mentality are alive within dissident communities as they are in the mainstream. Any who ride those powers to victory will create a new tyranny no better than the previous.

There is another way and a better future. I will describe it in Part 4 of this essay although the reader already knows what it is, by feel if not in words. This future reaches into the present and the past to show itself any time that vengeance gives way to forgiveness, enmity to reconciliation, blame to compassion, judgment to understanding, punishment to justice, rivalry to synergy, and suspicion to laughter. Transcendence is in the human being.

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