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Covid scepticism

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Echoing activism in some other European countries, some protests were recently held in Malta against the Covid-19 vaccine and related policies. The most recent one, held on 24 July, had around 250 participants (according to MaltaToday) and was characterised by slogans such as ‘no vaccine, no vaccine’.

From what I have read and observed, it seems to me that this protest movement is guided by three basic claims. The first claim is that governments are hiding behind the guise of protecting people’s health to be repressive; the second, that decisions on matters related to Covid-19 should be taken by the individual, and not by the state, (the state in turn, promotes a herd mentality); and third, that various claims made by the health authorities are questionable.

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In this article I will not discuss the third claim. I leave that to respective scientific experts and authorities in the field, whom I happen to trust. Nor will I question the movement's right to protest. With all its warts and faults, Malta is in the final instance a democratic society where protest is a basic right.

What I will do in this article is give a sociological interpretation of the first two claims made by those protesting, who, incidentally, are stating that they are not 'anti-vaxxers'. Let's call them by the name of their main organisation, the Human Health Alliance (HHA).

I feel that the HHA is basically missing a basic point, namely how the freedom of one person can be compatible with the freedoms of others. Here, a popular perspective is that the individual should be free to pursue their self-interest without state or societal intervention.

Yet others argue that in a social setting, some form of moral, social, or legal regulation is required, and that this is to be carried out by the state. Some believe that the value of security is the prime motivator for such regulation, whilst others believe that equality should be the guiding light. Of course, one value does not exclude the other. Besides, there are various degrees as to how the state can intervene, depending on the type of political system in question. In Malta, for example, Covid-19 vaccination is being given for free by the state, everyone is encouraged to take it without being forced to do so, and Prime Minister Abela has not ruled out further policies to help protect the common good. There is general political and social consensus on this approach.

The common good: a term which is used extensively in policy making, but which is also subjected to different interpretations. Without complicating the matter further, I believe that a functional use of the term is that it is enhanced when one's freedom is compatible with the freedom of others. Hence, freedom is not an absolute, but rather a relational concept, linking mutually-dependent persons living in social settings.

Here, the state can promote the common good and freedom through a democratic social setting that protects and enhances political, civil, and social rights. This is not to say that society suddenly becomes 'perfect' or free from any contradiction or antagonism. But structures such as the welfare state, elections, parliament, the judiciary, civil society, the pluralistic media, the health system, and the educational system can help us navigate through opportunities, risks, contradictions, and inequalities.

open IHA seems to be confusing the common good with some form of submission to the state. Although t'

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again, in a democratic setting there are various checks and balances to help scrutinise power.

I also see other problems in the HHA's perspective. One has to do with the ambiguity of freedom despite its treasured value. Our lives require that we make continuous choices, which can lead to anxiety and uncertainty, not to mention unintended outcomes. In the context of Delta variants and other Covid mischief, is it ok to celebrate one's free choice of not vaccinating oneself when it in turn - albeit unintentionally - endangers the lives of vulnerable people?

Hence, wouldn't it be better to ask how, in a Covid-context, one can reconcile one's freedom with that of other people? This needn't result in some form of authoritarian system with thought police dictating our personal outlooks. Instead, it could be pursued through the democratic welfare system I mentioned above. It could help equip us with the ability to assess risks and opportunities and provide the resources and investment to tackle our common anxieties. Let me give some examples: In the first case, I believe we need more educational investment to help people distinguish between evidence-based knowledge and fake news. In the second instance, the state can be a major actor at the different stages of vaccination, including purchase and distribution. Malta happens to be a world leader in the latter.

The irony is that those in Malta who refuse to take the Covid-19 vaccine might be safer than their counterparts in some other countries, precisely because of Malta's policy-making in the field of vaccination and because the huge majority of people from different social, political, and cultural backgrounds chose to value the common good, in what to me looks like a classic case of communitarianism, where we are reconciling rights and responsibilities in our lived experiences.

Herd mentality? I would prefer to call it the reflexive quest for herd immunity.

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