

JEAN-YVES DURAND AND MANUELA IVONE CUNHA

‘To all the anti-vaxxers out there...’:  
ethnography of the public contro-  
versy about vaccination in the time of  
COVID-19

In February 2020, at the start of extensive fieldwork on the state of the public controversy about vaccination in Portugal, France and California – and some 12 years after a previous research – travel became impossible. Pro-vaccination conferences and anti-vaccination protests were tentatively postponed, then cancelled.

Participant observation and face-to-face interaction now have to be temporarily substituted by systematic internet attentiveness and remote interviews. But while the epidemic hampers most social activities, it only reduces the number of arenas in which controversies can develop. Part of the energy that sustains them is reinvested in other means of intervention, namely online presence. Ethnographers have to mirror this migration with their techniques, while experiencing in their own lives the same changes and, to a variable extent, uncertainties affecting the people they accompany. With COVID-19, armchair anthropology reaches a whole new degree of participation and shared concerns.

As practically everybody is involved in the same digital flux, individual variation is limited to the extent to which one chooses to replicate and disseminate the wartime and epidemiological metaphors that bolster the current public discourse. At the start of the pandemic, the most obvious increase in vaccination-related statements expressed pro-vaccination stances, ranging from pledges for proactive public policies (with a few apparent turnabouts, such as President Trump’s) to sceptical debunking in a more or less condescending tone, and to unreserved irony. A *Los Angeles Times* editorial asked ‘With coronavirus, will anti-vaxxers listen now?’ After this surge came a clear decrease in triumphalist posts such as ‘To all the anti-vaxxers out there: HOW DO YOU LIKE THE DEMO VERSION OF A WORLD WITHOUT VACCINES SO FAR?’ Vaccination-doubters have regained their usual online pre-eminence. The pandemic might indeed steer the more flexible among them towards acceptance, but anxiety also gives more appeal and effectiveness to fringe ideas: in the UK, the theory linking COVID-19 to 5G roll-out swiftly resulted in harassment of telecom technicians and arson.

Studies of public techno-scientific controversies have shown, besides the negotiated constructedness of scientific production, that what vaccination advocates label as ‘refusal’ or ‘resistance’ are multifaceted opinions and attitudes. Their diverse

motivations and expressions cannot all be reduced to ignorance, irrationality, irresponsibility. These views also indicate diverging conceptions of public engagement with science, participatory policies and citizens' autonomy in a variety of political and cultural matters. In order to grasp the evolutions COVID-19 might bring about in the vaccination issue – a stalled debate for over 200 years – and help mediate between apparently irreconcilable positions, social sciences must widen their gaze on 'vaccine hesitancy' beyond a narrow focus on scientific dissent and health-related concerns.

Was it because he had lost his brother to plague that John Donne wrote 'No man is an Iland, intire of itselfe; every man is a peece of the Continent, a part of the maine'? We face a real-time opportunity to show how there can be nothing insular to human-kind and human existence.

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