THE FUTURE OF VACCINE TECHNO-POLITICS: OUTCOMES AND LESSONS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract:
This proposal follows up the new book Immunization and States: The Politics of Making Vaccines, on which the conveners collaborated. The book focuses on public sector vaccine production in different countries from the nineteenth century onward. It ends with a brief sketch of the discussions and re-considerations provoked by two years of the Covid-19 pandemic. As the first effective Covid-19 vaccines became available, intense disputes and negotiations arose over monopolies on vaccine production and access to vaccine technologies, unequal global distribution of vaccines, and seemingly widespread distrust of new vaccines. Our proposal is for an exploration of the changes in vaccine development, production, deployment, and acceptance which the pandemic has introduced. What lessons can be learned, and what lessons are being learned, from current experience with Covid-19 pandemic/vaccination? In line with these developments, we propose three linked themes, focusing on areas where change in the field of vaccines is taking place with potential effects on future vaccine techno-politics:

INSTITUTIONS
Since the first Covid-19 vaccines were approved, the issue of global vaccine shortage has become increasingly important. This raised the question whether states should re-engage in developing, producing and distributing vaccines. Only a few countries still have public institutions able to develop and produce vaccines. The global mechanism COVAX, established to ensure that poor countries had access to vaccine supply, has proven inadequate. The first theme is a critical exploration of possible roles, effects and prospects of old (public sector) and new institutions (COVAX, public private partnerships, and regional networks) in ensuring future access to vaccines.

TECHNOLOGIES

Existing Covid-19 vaccines are based on a variety of technological 'platforms', some old (e.g. inactivation), some new (notably using mRNA and DNA). The novel mRNA technology, protected by countless patents held by a few biotech and pharmaceutical companies, has become extremely profitable. Regulatory approval was fast-tracked. There have been strident demands for compulsory licensing of these and other vaccine technologies. Vaccines, it is said are, or should be, 'global public goods'. This theme focuses on the significance of intellectual property regimes (TRIPS/TRIPS plus), and processes of regulation and of vaccine technology transfer (from where to where?). How can production of effective, safe and trustworthy vaccines be extended? Can rapid regulatory approval ensure safety and efficacy?

TRUST
At the start of the pandemic politicians everywhere insisted that ‘when there’s a vaccine we’ll go back to normal’. We now know that too much trust was being placed in vaccines. At the community level, by contrast, widespread lack of trust in vaccines, especially in rich Northern countries, has become clearly visible. Conspiracy theories, fears of vaccine side-effects, populism, and the increasing power of social networks are all implicated. This theme explores socio-political aspects of technology – the ways vaccine technologies and innovations are understood in and by the public, and how links to perceived political and economic interests affect vaccine acceptance.

Taken together, these linked themes will map out the changing landscape of vaccine techno-politics.

Key words:
Vaccines, techno-politics, Covid-19