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Immunity and (Anti-)Vaccination: Histories, Metaphors, Theories - A Syllabus

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The natural body meets the body politic in the act of vaccination, where a single needle penetrates both. – Eula Biss, On Immunity

In recent years, outbreaks of highly contagious diseases like measles and whooping cough have reached epidemic proportions in the US. Such a resurgence in supposedly eradicated diseases has been attributed to rising rates of vaccine refusal in states like California and Georgia. The anti-vaccination movement gained momentum in part due to a widely-circulated 1998 paper, written by Andrew Wakefield and published in *The Lancet*. Now widely discredited and retracted, this paper claimed a connection between the MMR (measles-mumps-rubella) vaccine and autism. Even despite the discovery of Wakefield's unethical distortion of experimental data and his revocation of his medical license, many, including high-profile celebrities like Jenny McCarthy and Donald Trump, have continued to be public proponents for anti-vaccination. Anti-vaccination communities exploded with the rise of the internet and social media, now home to numerous forums and groups dedicated to the circulation of anti-vaccination resources.

This cultural panic surrounding vaccination is frequently assumed to be a recent phenomenon, yet skepticism about the validity, safety, and value of inoculation bears a much longer history. In fact, the seemingly "new" discourse of anti-autism rampant in anti-vaccination communities harkens back to popular anxieties about vaccination when it was first popularized in the late eighteenth century in Britain. Edward Jenner's vaccination became a national practice and ultimately a compulsory one by the middle of the nineteenth century, but this was not universally accepted. Jenner's opponents mobilized rhetorics of "cow mania" that raised alarm about the use of cowpox potentially reducing the vaccinated to brute beasts. By mid-century, anti-vaccination organizers framed the refusal of vaccination as a citizen's right and widely deployed gothic rhetoric as a powerful scare tactic. Vaccination has always been not only a medical procedure but a set of images, ideologies, and intentions bound up with nationhood and futurity.

This syllabus draws together the work of historians and philosophers of science and medicine, literary critics, and medical professionals in a field of study Andrew Goffey has recently termed the “immunological turn.” These works reveal the extensive histories behind anti-vaccination as not a monolithic movement but a series of movements connected with other resistance movements against state medicine like anti-vivisection and other alternative health practices like veganism. Furthermore, these works critically engage with the discourses of immunology and public health to understand immunity and vaccination as concept metaphors that have wide-ranging meanings beyond science. For many of the scholars in this syllabus, scientific knowledge about the immune system and vaccination are not value-neutral; rather, it is permeated by social and cultural assumptions about selfhood, identity, and health. Rather than reducing anti-vaccination to *only* pseudoscience or conservatism, the “immunological turn” forces us to attend to the historical conditions, discourses, and political investments that animate these movements in our present.

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