

Insecure Immunity: Inoculation and Anti-Vaccination in Britain, 1720-1898

Insecure Immunity traces the long historical relationship between preventative medicine and the rise of the security state in Britain. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the sociopolitical concept of immunity became naturalized by transformations in medical theory and practice, which took shape alongside the rise of the hard sciences, to insist upon the relation among healthy nations, healthy constitutions, and healthy citizens. A product of such changes was immunity's redefinition from a passive to an active condition. Immunity could be actively induced via the deliberate introduction of infectious matter into the body. The means by which bodies were exposed to disease and which bodies were exposed in the name of national health would ultimately become points of extreme political tension.

My book recalibrates the axes by which we tend to narrate the story of vaccine skepticism by deliberately suspending judgment of anti-vaccination as pseudoscience, conservatism, religious fundamentalism, or even neoliberal choice in favor of a more carefully historicized approach. What results is a radically different framework for understanding the vaccine debates: instead of a reductive binary of pro- versus anti-vaccination, *Insecure Immunity* demonstrates how both sides of the debate actually shared and mobilized a cultural imaginary of insecure bodies at risk. I argue that the history of inoculation and immunity in Britain is really the political history of the precarious relationship between the citizen's body and the state. Through a method of close-reading informed by disability studies, medical history and security studies, I show how eighteenth- and nineteenth- century literary and scientific writings about inoculation negotiated what I term *inoculation insecurity* or the constellation of political and cultural anxieties surrounding a novel procedure that promised to preserve health by deliberately infecting an individual in advance of disease. I argue that such inoculation insecurity continues to underpin the paranoid Western paradigms of national security described by theorists like Joseph Masco and Brian Massumi as preoccupied with preemption and prevention of threats *in potentia*. *Insecure Immunity* shows how preventative medicine's radicalization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries continues to animate highly politicized debates over national security and public health.

My book addresses an important gap in the study of vaccination by attending to its eighteenth-century prehistory. **The first chapter, “Securitizational Furor”: Variolation and the Plague,** reads Daniel Defoe's *A Journal of the Plague Year* (1721) in relation to a series of key events in eighteenth-century medicine and politics: English quarantine legislation, Mary Wortley Montagu's popularization of Turkish variolation among England's aristocratic circles, and The Royal Experiment of 1721, where six Newgate prisoners were experimentally variolated. I examine how Defoe's plague writings, including both the *Journal* and his treatise, *Due Preparations for the Plague* (1722), contribute to a nascent discourse of immunity by grappling with the problematics of diagnosis and prevention: *how does one know threat and avoid infection when its forms are imperceptible?* I recover the longer historical trajectory of inoculation's transformation from variolation (inoculation by smallpox) to vaccination (inoculation by cowpox) to consider how earlier experimentation with inoculation set the stage for revolutions in preventative medicine by the end of the century when vaccines would become a national practice.

Chapter Two, “Insecurity, Inoculation, and the Invention of Jenner,” turns to the vaccine culture wars of the 1790s that were waged across poems, pamphlets, essays, and plays responding to Edward Jenner’s campaigns for nationwide vaccination. I examine the rhetorical strategies of Jenner’s *An Inquiry into the Causes and Effects of the Variolae Vaccinae* (1798) and his various means of self-making in personal and governmental correspondences. The politicization of preventative medicine through the circulation and reproduction of Jennerian, as well as anti-Jennerian, propaganda reveals the vast extent to which vaccination became a battleground over what constituted personal and public security in the face of revolution and disease. This chapter includes readings of “Good Tidings; or, News from the Far,” a poem by Robert Bloomfield celebrating Jenner as an English hero, alongside *Cow-Pox Inoculation No Security Against Small-Pox Infection*, a polemical treatise against vaccination by William Rowley, and *Medical Tracts* by anti-vaccinationist, Benjamin Moseley. In these readings, I examine their shared rhetoric of insecurity surrounding children, as well as the widespread anxieties around “Cow Mania,” which vaccination detractors perpetuated as the only result of using cowpox. This fear of bestial degeneration, miscegenation, and bodily corruption, I argue, reemerges in contemporary anti-disability rhetoric made viral by Andrew Wakefield’s now retracted paper that claimed a connection between MMR vaccines and autism.

Insecure Immunity demonstrates compulsory vaccination programs of the nineteenth century and the anti-vaccination movements form the basis of contemporary Western narratives of national health as national security. Control of this set of narratives determined which bodies were worth defending and against whom. Inoculation insecurity underpinned radically divergent visions of England’s future, speculatively imagined both by vaccination proponents aligned with the state and by anti-vaccinators skeptical of the state’s intentions. Pro-vaccination proponents cited cholera, typhus, and smallpox outbreaks as epidemic disasters that could be preventable through individual compliance with medical orders, while anti-vaccinators attacked the injustice of mandating citizens to submit to legislation like the Contagious Disease Acts and the Compulsory Vaccination Acts of 1840, 1853, and 1867. Frequently mobilized throughout the rhetoric of health insecurity was the figure of the child, imagined both as the most vulnerable to epidemic disease and to unethical abuse and violation by state medicine. **My third chapter, Sentimental Childhood and the Anti-Vaccination Movements**, considers how representations of sentimental childhood in mid-Victorian texts like Henry Mayhew’s *London Labour and the London Poor* (1851) and Charles Dickens’ *Bleak House* (1853) provided a vocabulary of health insecurity for both pro- and anti-vaccinators centered on vulnerable childhood that would develop through children’s literature like Dinah Craik’s *The Little Lame Prince and his Travelling Cloak* (1875) and be deployed in highly public anti-vaccination demonstrations like the 1885 Leicester march.

As the British state came to define national security in increasingly immunological terms by the end of the nineteenth century with the rise of germ theory and laboratory medicine, these insecure narratives proliferated on both sides of the vaccination debates in which England was simultaneously plagued with too much and too little herd immunity. I turn in the **book’s fourth chapter, “Dracula and the Limits of Immunity,”** to Stoker’s fin-de-siècle Gothic novel as an imagination of the very limits of nineteenth-century immunological thinking through the popular literary figure of the vampire also invoked in anti-vaccination propaganda like J. J. Garth Wilkinson’s handbill, “The Vaccination Vampire” (1881). The Crew of Light’s fight against

Dracula echoes immunologist Élie Metchnikoff's model of immunity as bodily defense: the crew affirms its social body by designating a vampiric antigen against which it must fight to the death. Yet despite the presumed vanquishing of Dracula in the novel's final scene, I argue that the concluding "Note" leaves open the possibility of lingering infection circulating among all the members of the Crew of Light, as well as in Jonathan and Mina's child—the very embodiment of white, middle-class, English futurity previously threatened not only by Dracula but by the corrupted "bloofer lady" who targeted vulnerable children. Dracula ultimately problematizes the promise of perfect immunity against contagion in the face of a polymorphic threat like Dracula, and instead offers a vision of the social body that must inevitably take in contagion (in the form of the infected Mina Harker) in order to inoculate itself against harm.

The book concludes with the abolition of compulsory vaccination and the rise of the "conscientious objector" in the wake of the 1898 Vaccination Act, which allowed anti-vaccinators to obtain certificates of conscientious objection to legally refuse vaccination mandates. For anti-vaccinators, this "conscience clause" was a material and symbolic victory: it liberated them from the repeated fines that disproportionately bankrupted working-class families and proved that their persistent activism produced substantial legislative change. From a pro-vaccination perspective, the conscientious objection clause produced new forms of health insecurity while effectively hollowing out the protective value of mandatory vaccination. Rather than hiding from the law, anti-vaccinators could now proudly claim their refusal as a protected right to the extent that it was no longer even worthwhile to call for the complete repeal of the vaccination acts. Yet pro-vaccinators did not entirely abandon their attempts to resist the sensationalism of anti-vaccination. Reversing the rhetorical moves used by the anti-vaccination movement, some pro-vaccinators gothicized the very consequences of an England at the mercy of conscientious objectors. These new forms of health and political insecurity produced by the conscientious objection clause became the subject of H. Rider Haggard's novel *Doctor Therne* (1898). Described by *The British Medical Journal* in an 1898 review as "a vaccination romance," Haggard's Doctor Therne invokes the same Gothic imaginary instead as pro-vaccination propaganda. **Chapter Five, "The Conscience of Doctor Therne,"** considers the didactic purpose of Haggard's "medical tale," which sought to preserve the now vulnerable population of "helpless children from whom the State has thus withdrawn its shield."