

# The dark side of calling for responsibility

by Antoine-Frédéric Bernhard,\* Switzerland

*Get vaccinated? An act of "responsibility"! Just like lowering your thermostat to 19 degrees, no longer flying or lowering your meat consumption. This rhetoric of calling for responsibility, omnipresent today, has a dark side.*

Liberalism has always run on the twosome freedom-responsibility. We remember the cult line popularized by *Marvel Studios' Spiderman* films: "With great power comes great responsibility." Freedom is certainly a great power: that of doing "what you want". If we enjoy it indiscriminately, it can become harmful. Hence the importance of responsibility, conceived as a freely agreed limitation in certain circumstances of our own freedom. Thus, responsibility presupposes freedom. Without freedom there is no responsibility. You cannot delete one without deleting the other.

The daily use of the term "irresponsibility" in the media set to designate a whole range of behaviours shows the great symbolic significance of such notion in our minds. To be called irresponsible is extremely unpleasant and infamous. Political communication specialists have understood it well. So much so that the appeal to responsibility and the mock trials for irresponsibility are among the most prized elements of language of the governing classes at the present time.

## Covid, energy, climate ...

The Covid crisis is an archetype in this matter. Despite sometimes cacophonous and contradictory policy measures, the call for responsibility, echoed from one end to the other of the government communication chain during the crisis. The Swiss example is no exception. On March 20, 2020, when semi-confinement came into force, Health Minister Alain Berset called upon the responsibility of the Swiss people. In February 2022, at the time of the progressive removal of all restriction measures, his successor to the

presidency of the Swiss Confederation, Ignazio Cassis, came up with this philosophical and literary surge: "The light is indeed there on the horizon [...] yet more freedom also mean more responsibility."

In February 2022, Russia decided to attack Ukraine. Europe chose to do without Russian gas. To anticipate the risks of energy shortages during the winter of 2022–2023, partly due to economic sanctions, a new version of the call for responsibility emerged: it had become "irresponsible" to consider heating your house over 19 or leaving too many light bulbs on. For the same reasons, Federal Councillor Simonetta Sommaruga thought it appropriate to recommend showers for two!

The same tune was used for drinking water in France during 2023. As a recent example, on May 28 the Parisian newspaper headlined the following remarks made by the French minister for Ecological Transition: "Swimming pools: Is it really irresponsible to have one?" More generally, it is the whole climate and ecological issue that is being treated today through the prism of irresponsibility. Opposing environmentalists on any point of their program is to be threatened for irresponsibility!

## The end of responsibility

Calling for responsibility is not absurd, far from it. Allowing individuals the freedom to assume the consequences of their choices is the opposite of infantilization as it protects society from authoritarian government tendencies. Yet, the rhetoric of responsibility as it is put into place today is most often used to accompany or justify the implementation of rather authoritarian policies that infringe upon fundamental freedoms. We no longer say "Be responsible", but rather "Be responsible, otherwise we will have no choice but to force you into responsibility". This is the new version of the Thatcherite TINA (*There Is No Alternative*). In short, the call for responsibility has mutated into a particularly offensive form of political correctness, meant to discredit a priori certain opinions or certain acts.

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Authoritarian measures and responsibility are totally incompatible. The former restrict or even prevent the exercise of freedom, a sine qua non of the latter. Today, the responsibility in fact often consists in forcibly conforming to the political will of the moment. When we are told that tomorrow, *out of responsibility*, we may have to accept the tracing of our "carbon footprint" the result of which may restrict some of our freedoms, such as that of flying, bad faith is obvious! It is not a question of responsibility, but of restricting freedom.

It is not forbidden to dream of such a society. What is dishonest, on the other hand, is to prepare for its advent by a growing mobilization of the call for responsibility, which masks the true nature of a society of mass surveillance. When each behaviour is regulated and possibly calls for a reward or, on the contrary, a retaliatory measure, the State turns into a kind of parent who does not treat citizens as responsible individuals, but as children to be educated.

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On June 5, the Director General of the *World Health Organization* (WHO), *Tedros Adhanom*

*Ghebreyesus*, announced the launch of a global vaccine passport project based on *European Union* (EU) Covid passport technology used during the pandemic. An article by *TF1info* clarifies the idea underlying this program: "to draw upon the experience of the EU, which developed a European health pass during the pandemic, so that a similar tool can this time spread to the rest of the world".

Note that as soon as the vaccine passport systems were put in place against Covid-19, many voices raised against the risk of generalizing this tool to other diseases and other contexts. Such voices were opportunely disqualified, accused of conspiracy. Should we conclude from this that conspiracism is the voice of reason? Certainly not!

On the other hand, the fight against conspiracy, or anti-conspiracy, reveals here its dark side: that of another form of political correctness which, in the name of defending the truth, leads in fact to discredit a priori certain positions and undermine the foundations of an informed debate.

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