

Call for papers – Workshop

Immunity and Resistance:
(re)valuing vaccines and antibiotics in the
shifting terrains of global health

15-16 December 2025, University of Vienna, Austria

Conveners:

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Keynotes: Claas Kirchhelle (INSERM) & Janina Kehr (University of Vienna)

This call invites critical contributions from the social sciences and humanities to a workshop themed ‘immunity and resistance’. This theme intends to bring into view recent shifts and future trajectories of global/planetary health, taking vaccines and antibiotics – and their precarious roles in contemporary politics, societies and economies – as an empirical lens and conceptual starting point for discussions.

The 20th century witnessed extraordinary progress in the field of global health, particularly in the control and mitigation of infectious diseases. Much of this success is attributable to two cornerstone technologies of biomedicine: vaccines and antibiotics. These innovations significantly reduced global morbidity and mortality and came to represent the promise of transformative medical advances. These advances, however, have encountered serious setbacks on several fronts due to the complex interplay of biological, environmental, socio-political, and political-economic developments.

First, on the *microbial* front, societies face not only a growing threat from emerging infectious diseases and zoonoses – most recently exemplified by the COVID-19 pandemic – but also the relentless spread of antimicrobial resistance (AMR) and consequently, drug resistant infections. AMR complicates the treatment of diseases once considered ‘conquered’ by modern drugs, thereby jeopardizing routine medical procedures and undermining the collective sense of safety encapsulated in modern antibiotic drugs (Landecker, 2016).

Second, on the *socio-political* side, both vaccine hesitancy and inequity of access have presented major obstacles to realizing population immunity through vaccination. Vaccines help prevent infections caused by drug-resistant pathogens, such as *Streptococcus pneumoniae*, thereby intrinsically reducing the overall need for antimicrobial treatments. Despite this critical role, however, the value of vaccines in the fight against AMR is not adequately reflected in national policy responses, nor in mainstream public discourse (Charani et al., 2023; Jones et al., 2025). Beyond this,

policy responses to the wealth of misinformation and regarding vaccination have so far failed to regain the public's trust in vaccines.

Finally, *political-economic* factors have shaped biomedical research and development (R&D) in both vaccine development and antimicrobial treatments (Alas Portillo et al., 2024; Doganova & Rabearisoa, 2024). The over-reliance on profit-driven R&D has meant that industry actors have set research and investment priorities that often inadequately match critical public health needs. This is especially evident in the antibiotics R&D sector, where industry-led innovation has stalled in recent decades (World Health Organization, 2024), and in the decline of publicly funded vaccine production initiatives (World Health Organization, 2022). Recent politically motivated attacks on biomedical research infrastructure, along with reduced investment in international cooperation, have compounded these policy challenges, which now appear resistant to resolution due to a high degree of scientific and political uncertainty, and significance of the values at stake.

Overall, these intricate challenges around immunity and resistance offer an intriguing empirical window through which to study the multi-layered shifts in global health, as well as the crises facing it today, requiring scholars and practitioners to (re)value the role of vaccines and antibiotics in contemporary (planetary) health governance. This requires conceptualizing vaccines and antibiotics as embedded in the shifting microbial, sociopolitical and political-economic terrains of global/planetary health.

Workshop focus and aims

This workshop invites critical and interdisciplinary contributions that engage with this critical juncture in public health through the twin themes of immunity and resistance. We welcome contributions that interrogate the shifting roles of vaccines and antibiotics within the landscape of global health and AMR, especially in relation to the following questions:

- How do immunity and resistance – understood as biological and social phenomena – reshape our understanding of global and planetary health in the context of vaccines and antibiotics?
- What political, social, economic and epistemic factors have shaped – and continue to shape – the use of vaccines and antibiotics in the governance, perception, and implementation of public health strategies across diverse contexts? How do different actors assign value to these technologies and with what implications for governance?
- In what ways do contemporary challenges in antibiotic and vaccine research, development, deployment, and distribution reflect broader shifts in public health paradigms, and how might they inform future responses to microbial threats?

Duration: 2 days (15 and 16 December 2025)

Location: Vienna, Austria

Participants: Circa 10-15 scholars

All meals (including a dinner on 15th December) will be covered by organizers, but regretfully we are unable to support travel or accommodation.

We encourage submissions from across the social sciences, humanities, and critical public health—including anthropology, sociology, history of science and medicine, science and technology studies (STS), political science, and global health studies.

Please submit your **abstract (max 300 words)** by September 12, 2025 to: immunity-resistance.politikwissenschaft@univie.ac.at

If selected, participants will submit a **short discussion paper** (ca. 3000 words) which will be due mid-November 2025.

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