

The Double Face of International Governance: WHO, Pandemic Politics, and the Ontopolitics of Global Control

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Abstract

This article conceptualizes the global health governance that crystallized during the COVID-19 pandemic by treating the World Health Organization (WHO) not as a singular sovereign actor but as one normative legitimacy node within a broader governing architecture involving nation-states, financial institutions, and digital infrastructure actors. The central claim is that the apparatus assembled around the language of health security produced an ontopolitical regime that reorganized mobility, access, and public recognizability through digital verification, risk classification, and administrative restriction. To describe this regime, the article proposes the concept of the onopticon. The onopticon is a mode of power that does not merely narrow the subject's room for movement; more fundamentally, it compels the integration of biological, digital, and administrative existence into systemic networks as a condition of social viability. More importantly, the onopticon is not only the capture of access conditions but also a regime of environmental configuration: the material, digital, institutional, and ecological surroundings in which subjects move are reorganized so as to make compulsory inclusion operational. Methodologically, the article combines critical political economy with conceptual analysis in order to read pandemic governance across financial, digital, ecological, and infrastructural registers at once. While acknowledging that the One Health framework names real ecological interdependencies, the article argues that the same framework may also function as an instrument for expanding centralized intervention. Finally, the article examines Cuban medical internationalism, the India–South Africa TRIPS waiver initiative, non-proprietary vaccine production, grassroots sabotage practices, and the concentration of AI-biosecurity infrastructures in private firms as limited but significant tactical fractures within the hegemonic architecture of health and security governance.

1. Introduction: The Ontopolitical Problem of Post-Pandemic Governance

COVID-19 was not only a public-health emergency. It also functioned as a global political laboratory in which the conditions under which life could move, circulate, and become publicly legible were redefined. Lockdowns, border closures, digital health certificates, contact-tracing

applications, algorithmic risk scores, and biometric verification infrastructures together demonstrated that the pandemic produced not merely a medical episode but a deeply governmental and ontopolitical rupture.

The central thesis of this article is that pandemic governance did not simply seek to protect life. It also sought to recode, classify, and condition life through a multilayered regime that tied mobility, recognition, service access, and public functionality to digital and institutional gateways. The decisive issue, then, is not surveillance alone. It is the effective imposition of integration into specific infrastructural channels. Payment, movement, communication, identity verification, access to services, and the capacity to remain publicly recognizable increasingly became possible only under conditions of machine legibility.

The WHO must therefore be positioned carefully. This article does not treat the WHO as a sovereign center that single-handedly commanded lockdowns, passport regimes, or biometric verification. Rather, the WHO is understood as a legitimacy-producing and technically coordinating node within a wider assemblage composed of states, global financial institutions, technology companies, and platform infrastructures. The problem is not WHO omnipotence, but how the language of global health circulates across multiple centers of power and helps normalize new forms of coercive inclusion.

Within this frame, the onopticon names asymmetrical and conditional access forms in which the subject is less expelled from the system than compelled to remain within it. The primary verb of this regime is not simple restriction but imposition. The narrowing of movement, the increase of friction, and the erosion of alternatives are the visible effects of a deeper logic: the subject's vital capacities are tied to verification systems and infrastructural pathways that must be accepted in order for life to remain socially operable. This compulsory inclusion works not only through technical attachment but also through the restructuring of the material, institutional, digital, and ecological environment in which the subject moves.

2. From the Panopticon to the Onopticon: Compulsory Infrastructural Inclusion, Access Capture, and Environmental Configuration

Classical surveillance concepts remain indispensable, but they are no longer sufficient on their own. Foucault's panopticon clarifies the relation between visibility and discipline. Mathiesen's synopticon captures the media logic of the many watching the few. Yet the regime consolidated during and after the pandemic cannot be adequately grasped as a matter of visibility alone. Its core operation lies in tying the elementary capacities of life to digital and institutional infrastructures.

The onopticon proposed here designates asymmetrical and conditional modes of access in which subjects are not simply excluded, but compelled to remain inside the system under conditions they do not control. Its logic is not the total externalization of the subject but the enforced

acceptance of infrastructural dependency with respect to movement, payment, visibility, identity verification, and operational capacity. Exit does not always take the form of outright expulsion; more often it produces friction, non-recognition, delay, loss of capacity, and escalating forms of civil-economic dysfunction. Restriction is therefore not the essence of the regime but its visible effect. The essence lies in rendering integration into systemic networks a practical necessity for the continuation of everyday life.

Deleuze's diagnosis of the society of control marks an important threshold here. In control societies, power modulates circulation through codes, passwords, and continuous variation. Yet the onopticon is not merely an intensified form of modulation. The difference is not one of degree but of object. In control society, circulation is governed; in the onopticon, the vital preconditions of circulation are captured. Payment capacity, identity verification, communicative legibility, mobility, and legal-operational functionality cease to be mere checkpoints and become infrastructural gatekeeping mechanisms. The decisive shift is from modulation of flows to capture of access conditions.

What distinguishes the onopticon from purely visibility-centered models is thus not that more data are being collected. It is that classification, prediction, and institutional judgment become attached to the material gateways of life. Surveillance matters not simply because it produces information, but because it becomes capable of organizing passage, recognition, and exclusion. The defining feature of the onopticon is therefore not observational expansion as such, but the binding of legibility to access.

At the same time, the onopticon is not merely an access regime. It is also a regime of environmental configuration. "Environment" here means more than physical space. It includes the institutional, digital, sensory, and behavioral settings within which subjects move. Compulsory inclusion operates not only through direct commands but also through the restructuring of the world in which action becomes possible. The regime often functions not by explicit prohibition but by pre-structuring the probable horizon of action, eroding alternatives, and making compliance the line of least resistance.

In this article, the onopticon is defined through three structural dynamics. First, pre-modeling: the regime does not simply record behavior after the fact, but structures the likely horizon of action in advance, making compliance the path of least resistance. Second, closure of alternatives through infrastructural dependency: prohibitions are often indirect, as analog pathways erode, digital verification becomes mandatory, and public or private services are routed through singular gateways. Third, the conversion of vulnerabilities into operational inputs: biological impulses, sensory tendencies, ethical aspirations, anxieties, and psychological predispositions are rendered calculable and administratively usable.

The concept should not, however, be stretched indefinitely. Not every digital system, database, or algorithmic application is onoptic. A field approaches an onoptic logic only when at least four

conditions converge: exit imposes serious civil or economic loss; functional alternatives have been systematically weakened; classification produces not only knowledge but real access effects; and those effects alter the subject's capacity to conduct life.

Nor should the onopticon be imagined as equally dense or complete everywhere. Its strongest manifestations appear where state capacity, digital penetration, and formal-economic integration are high. In contexts marked by informality, cash circulation, fragmented state capacity, and robust analog escape routes, onoptic rationality often operates in weaker, more fragmented, or discontinuous ways. Yet informality is not always an escape from the onopticon. In many parts of the Global South, state incapacity may itself facilitate more predatory forms of inclusion through biometric identification, digital micro-credit, targeted welfare, and debt-producing platforms. The onopticon is therefore also experienced unevenly across class positions: infrastructural legibility becomes mandatory for lower and middle strata, while privacy-enhancing tools and alternative channels remain relatively more accessible to privileged groups.

3. Institutional Algebra: Health, Finance, and Legitimacy Networks

Pandemic governance was not a mere accumulation of technical measures. Its material basis was shaped by global health financing, public-private partnerships, patent regimes, and digital infrastructure investments. The concept of institutional algebra is used here to designate the way in which the conditions for sustaining life, accessing circulation, obtaining public recognition, and benefiting from services are reorganized through apparently neutral but politically and economically loaded protocols.

Within this architecture, the WHO's role is not directly coercive but normative and coordinative. Its own financing disclosures show that the organization depends on a combination of assessed contributions from member states and a large volume of voluntary contributions, many of them programmatically earmarked. Pandemic measures were implemented by states, but the WHO played a decisive role in shaping the normative language through which certain measures could be classified as scientific, coordinated, and appropriate to global health security.

The case of COVAX makes this tension especially clear. COVAX was launched in the language of vaccine equity and global solidarity. Yet by October 2021, according to a WHO press conference, high-income and upper-middle-income countries had used roughly 75 percent of all vaccine doses while low-income countries had received less than 0.5 percent. Analyses in *The Lancet* and the *BMJ* likewise showed that despite its egalitarian rhetoric, COVAX remained structurally dependent on dose-sharing decisions by rich states and on an intact patent-market architecture. The significance of this failure is not that the WHO became an all-powerful domination center, but that it functioned as a legitimating node within a wider structure it did not control.

This critique does not erase WHO technical achievements. The organization played an important role in genomic surveillance, variant tracking, and the adaptation of existing respiratory surveillance systems to COVID-19. The point is rather that technical coordination cannot be separated from the wider legitimacy networks within which it operates.

4. Pandemic Certificates and Health-Code Systems: The Materialization of the Onoptic Mechanism

The most visible manifestations of the onopticon emerged in digital health certificates and health-code systems. The EU Digital COVID Certificate established a legal framework for the issuance, verification, and acceptance of vaccination, test, and recovery certificates. Its significance lies not in abolishing mobility outright, but in reconnecting mobility to verified biological status.

Health-code systems in China operated in a denser manner, through risk scoring, color classification, and real-time spatial management of movement. Studies of Alipay- and WeChat-based codes show that health status, contact information, and risk categories were integrated in ways that regulated movement capacity, access to services, and entry into public space. In both cases, digital readability became not only information but a practical access effect.

These examples should not be read as proof of a permanent and final form of control. On the contrary, the rapid partial rollback of some such systems raises an important question: if they were so powerful, why did they not fully persist? The answer offered here is that the onopticon does not need to operate at maximum intensity at all times. At certain moments, the biopolitical desire for verification comes into conflict with capitalism's demand for frictionless circulation. When verification regimes become too costly, too slow, or too disruptive of accumulation, they may be partially withdrawn. But withdrawal is not the same as disappearance. The onopticon is therefore better understood as a capacity that intensifies in certain crises and then recedes into technical and institutional residues.

This is why pandemic certificate regimes should be read not simply as temporary emergency measures but as concentrated forms of institutional algebra. Movement was not only limited; it was made conditional on verified integration. The binary between prohibition and permission was replaced by a regime in which machine-readable status became the precondition for participation in public circulation. The subject was not completely expelled, but neither was inclusion voluntary. Inclusion was imposed as the infrastructural condition of viable mobility.

5. One Health, Ecological Governance, and the Multiplication of the Object of Intervention

One of the most striking expansions of post-pandemic health governance has been the movement from the human body as the sole object of health toward a broader field including animal life,

plants, food chains, water, energy, climate, and ecological circulations. According to the WHO's official definition, One Health is an integrated approach that recognizes the close interdependence of human, animal, and ecosystem health. The One Health Joint Plan of Action further institutionalizes this approach through frameworks of capacity-building, coordination, tools, partnerships, and long-term investment.

The material relations named here are real. Zoonotic disease, habitat destruction, antimicrobial resistance, food insecurity, and climate change are genuinely interconnected. The critique advanced in this article is therefore not directed against ecological interdependence as such, but against the political and governmental form under which it is operationalized. The issue is not whether ecological wholeness exists, but whether it is institutionalized through plural, locally grounded coordination or through standardized data regimes and top-down risk management.

A real paradox arises here. The instrumentalization of ecological governance is rightly open to critique, yet the total absence of ecological coordination may itself intensify the material conditions that generate future pandemics through industrial agriculture, habitat destruction, and zoonotic spillover. The issue, then, is not ecological regulation as such, but the institutional and political form under which interdependence is acknowledged. Commons-based, locally informed, plural ecological coordination is not the same thing as centralized, data-intensive, technocratic intervention. The argument of this article is directed not against the necessity of the first, but against the silent normalization of the second.

At this point, the notion of environmental configuration acquires a second meaning. The onopticon tends not only to configure the subject's immediate environment of action but also to reorganize ecological environment as a governable surface. This is why the One Health debate is not only about the extension of health into new domains. It is also about the institutional logic under which "environment" itself is defined. When environment is reorganized through data-intensive protocols, risk maps, and centralized monitoring infrastructures, the onopticon begins to function ecologically as well. In that case, compulsory inclusion appears not only through digital legibility of bodies, but through the top-down definition of legitimate ecological circulation, acceptable use, and authorized forms of life.

6. Fluctuating Visibility, Dormant Infrastructures, and Captured Public Capacity

It is insufficient to think the onopticon only through the most visible moments of pandemic certification. The regime may be constrained by its own contradictions, loosened by profit imperatives, undermined by infrastructural weakness, or reactivated in moments of crisis. Yet such fluctuations do not mean that the structure disappears. The onopticon deepens and expands even as its visibility rises and falls. Its historical movement is therefore not a straight line of continuous hardening, but an accumulative logic that moves through intensifications, withdrawals, and reactivations. The onopticon should thus be understood less as a regime that

merely narrows options from time to time than as a regime that re-imposes integration when conditions are favorable and holds that logic in reserve when they are not.

The onopticon should also not be imagined as a single smooth global network. Digital sovereignty is increasingly fragmented. Across the United States, China, Europe, and other regional blocs, data, platform, and infrastructure regimes sometimes interoperate but often function as fragmented, competing, and geopolitically antagonistic formations. The onopticon is therefore better understood not as one universal machine but as a shared logic reproduced across multiple digital-sovereignty blocs that at times imitate one another and at times undermine one another.

The visible rollback of pandemic certificate systems suggests not that the onoptic logic collapsed, but that it often migrated into other infrastructural layers. A 2026 Economist leader argued that a small handful of private figures—Dario, Demis, Elon, Mark, and Sam—had come to exercise extraordinary command over the most powerful emerging AI systems, and that laissez-faire tolerance toward such concentration had become politically untenable. What matters here is not only the danger of AI in the abstract, but the growing dependence of public regulation and state capacity on private technical centers. The “captured” side of the onopticon becomes visible precisely here: not only the citizen’s access conditions, but the state’s own predictive, coordinative, and decision-making capacities are increasingly held within private technical nodes.

This tendency is especially visible in the domains of borders, migration, and biosecurity. Euronews’ 2026 profile of Palantir described a continuum stretching from everyday surveillance to ICE-linked migrant tracking, deportation processes, and battlefield analytics. Reuters reported in February 2026 that Palantir had won a major contract connected to software for identifying undocumented immigrants, while press coverage and protests described the company’s role in the fusion of border security and data analytics. To preserve the specific core of the onopticon, the emphasis here should not fall on military destruction as such, but on the convergence of health, borders, migration, verification, and data management within the same private analytical backbones.

In this context, the role of 5G technology in the construction of the regime cannot be read simply as an increase in data-transfer speed or as a deterministic hardware advance. ITU materials define 5G through enhanced mobile broadband, ultra-reliable low-latency communication, and massive machine-type communication. 3GPP and GSMA documents further underline that 5G network slicing allows the creation of logically distinct networks tailored to different security, latency, and service requirements. 5G should therefore be understood as a critical infrastructural layer that helps bind dormant infrastructures and dispersed analytic nodes into a denser, more synchronous, and more continuously operating ontopolitical network. Border-verification gateways, health codes, and AI-enabled biosecurity backbones become more operational as real-time data processing and simultaneous circulation monitoring capacities increase. 5G thus

matters not merely because flows accelerate, but because it furnishes a material basis for reorganizing the subject's environment as a networked space that can be continuously tracked, modulated, and, when required, closed to access. The rapid operationalization of dormant infrastructures in moments of crisis becomes possible precisely because such connective architectures are already embedded in the environment in advance.

For this reason, the onopticon is better understood as a governing capacity that intensifies in crises and then retreats into technical and institutional residues. The rollback of pandemic certificates does not signify the disappearance of verification logic; it means that such logic is sometimes put into standby mode and sometimes deepened within less visible biosecurity and border-management infrastructures. This is why the concept of dormant infrastructure is useful: the onopticon need not always be active, provided that reactivatable technical, legal, and institutional capacities are preserved.

At the same time, these infrastructures do not “sleep” for free. Data centers, model training, and analytic backbones are material systems dependent on electricity, water, chips, and critical mineral chains. The IEA's 2026 assessment estimates global data-center electricity consumption at roughly 485 TWh in 2025, potentially rising to around 950 TWh by 2030, with AI-driven data centers growing especially fast. The same assessment warns that trade conflict, grid bottlenecks, and infrastructure delays can materially constrain this expansion. The onopticon is therefore subject not only to political will, but to thermodynamic and ecological limits. Even infrastructures placed in reserve remain vulnerable to decay, obsolescence, and supply-chain fragility.

7. Tactical Fractures: Limited Successes, Normative Ruptures, and Bottom-Up Sabotage

A critique of pandemic governance becomes genuinely productive only when it can point to alternative political possibilities. Otherwise critique devolves into a totalizing pessimism that describes the structure but cannot imagine how it might be disrupted. For this reason, tactical fractures within the hegemonic health architecture matter.

Cuban medical internationalism is one such fracture. It would be analytically mistaken to present it as a pure or flawless emancipatory model. Cuba's health diplomacy is entangled with strong state organization, labor discipline, and national economic interest. Yet PAHO/WHO records also show that the Henry Reeve International Medical Brigade received a major public-health award in 2017. Cuba is therefore not a morally innocent counter-world, but a contradictory and instructive counter-possibility.

Similarly, the TRIPS waiver initiative advanced by India and South Africa at the WTO constituted an important fracture in the global health order. WTO records show that the proposal sought a temporary waiver of certain TRIPS obligations related to the prevention, containment,

and treatment of COVID-19. Its effects should not be exaggerated. The initiative did not break the intellectual-property regime in practice. Instead, it made visible the resilience of the patent order and the depth of capital's resistance. What mattered, therefore, was less immediate institutional transformation than the opening of legitimacy to dispute.

Examples approaching non-proprietary vaccine production broaden this line of argument. CORBEVAX suggests that high-tech biomedical production is not absolutely condemned to closed patent regimes. Yet caution remains necessary here as well: such cases are not success stories that dissolve the entire regime, but limited counter-possibilities that contest its aura of inevitability.

Tactical fractures do not arise only in interstate negotiations, international law, or alternative institutional models. Grassroots practices such as bypassing digital gateways, forged certificate markets, forms of algorithmic non-compliance, preservation of analog routes, and everyday sabotage of verification systems also deserve attention. These cracks show that imposed verification and inclusion regimes are never perfectly closed. At the same time, they do not abolish the logic of imposition; they merely interrupt, delay, or deform it in local ways. Nor should they be romanticized. Fake-certificate networks, digital bypass practices, and algorithmic evasions are often rapidly commodified through black-market capitalism, while also functioning as feedback for the system's own updates, patches, and strengthening. Micro-sabotage is therefore not an automatically liberatory resistance, but a contradictory practice that can both open breaches and be reabsorbed by the system.

8. Conclusion: Ontopolitical Critique Against Legitimacy Networks

Post-pandemic global health governance is neither merely the continuation of classical disciplinary society nor simply the technical extension of digital tools. It is a more complex formation in which state securitization, the normative language of international institutions, the data infrastructures of technology firms, patent regimes, and ecological crisis discourse are articulated in ways that render life governable under new conditions.

This article has repositioned the WHO not as the absolute author of that structure, but as an important node of legitimacy, coordination, and norm production within it. The problem is therefore not a single global conspiracy center, but a multi-actor architecture of ontopolitical governance.

The distinctive feature of this architecture is not simply that it observes the subject, but that it binds the material preconditions of life to infrastructures of verification and classification, thereby imposing integration as an effective necessity. The concept of the onopticon names this compound logic. Movement, payment, identity verification, communication, and public recognizability become tied to infrastructural gateways that appear technical yet have unmistakably political effects. Yet the onopticon is not reducible to this alone. It is also the name

for a regime in which power configures the environment itself. Material, institutional, digital, and ecological surroundings are reorganized; alternatives are eroded; compliance is installed as the path of least resistance; compulsory inclusion appears through this re-environmentalization of life. Restriction is thus the visible effect of the regime, whereas imposition is its constitutive logic.

Still, the onopticon is not an absolute regime operating at full density at all times. It is constrained by internal contradictions, loosened by the demand for frictionless accumulation, fragmented by infrastructural weakness and informality, and reactivated in crisis. Yet precisely through this fluctuating visibility it continues to deepen and expand. When the concentration of AI power identified by *The Economist* is read together with the fusion of biosecurity, migration, and border management visible in the Palantir case, it becomes clear that the onopticon no longer resides only in health gateways. It is increasingly rooted in a broader background in which public capacity is operated through private analytic backbones. The captured side of the regime is visible precisely here: not only the subject's access conditions, but the state's own coordinating and decision-making capacities are being held within private technical centers.

What is needed, therefore, is not reform alone. What is needed is a deeper interrogation of the legitimacy regimes, property forms, expertise monopolies, and infrastructural gatekeeping through which health and life are presently organized. Ontopolitical critique begins at the point where one demonstrates that bodies, environments, and social commons need not be treated as objects to be managed, enclosed, and rendered legible under externally imposed conditions. Real sabotage emerges where the logic that ties social viability to specific infrastructures is broken and where alternative common forms of circulation become thinkable and practicable.

Notes

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