

On Washing One's Hands of it

Holmes, Semmelweis, Céline, and "Virality" as a Metaphor

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If Plato and Aristotle wrote on politics, it was as though they were laying down rules for a madhouse.

Pascal, Pensées (256), 167¹

Infodemic

The early phase of the COVID-19 crisis (2020–2021) provided a rare opportunity to test, under real-life conditions, many of the popular politological concepts that have characterized the last decade: “populism,” “fake news,” “echo chambers,” “polarization,” “conspiracy,” “post-truth,” “post-democracy,” “biases,” “bubbles,” etc.² This lexicon is, remarkably, equally established in both scientific and colloquial discourse and is hence not a *sociolect* in the narrow sense of the term, i.e., a dialect whose extensive use could be predominantly attributed to specific social actors defending specific epistemic positions or pursuing specific interests: it seems to have, if not explanatory value, at least a broadly recognized descriptive power. Critics are nevertheless quick to point out the severe deficiencies of each of these concepts. “Populism,” for instance, often entails the delegitimization of progressive movements whenever it is used to critique reactionary ones. This lexicon also appears to be broadly tautological, which raises persistent demarcation problems: certain utterances, ranging from the most disheveled speculations to Colin Powell’s 2003 speech at the United Nations, have been *simultaneously* described as “conspiracy

1 My translation from H. F. Stewart’s Cambridge University Press edition of the French original text (Pascal 2013, 93).

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theories,” “fake news,” “post-democratic,” “post-truth,” and “biased” (Rimbert 2021, 21). Additionally, as a historically determined set of epistemic tools, this lexicon seems not only to create as many political problems as it claims to solve, it also boldly attributes agency to information. Finally, these terms also elude a crucial strategic and anthropological ambiguity: Should we willingly dispense with the notion of rational, or at the very least *reasonable* social actors when we attempt to explain how misinformation “spreads” among populations? If so, would this not preemptively negate all attempts to cure the body politic of its disorders? Rhetorical questions aside, a healthy public sphere now often seems to be predicated not on the presence and agency of rational social actors, but on the absence of misinformation among epistemically passive populations.

These apparent contradictions have become entrenched in public discourse since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic. They have also marked some of the prominent attempts by supranational organizations to address the risk posed by misinformation to public health. These risks are, in fact, real and empirically supported. Since 2020, the World Health Organization has for instance drawn on the neologism “infodemic” in order to “immunize the public against misinformation” concerning the nature of and therapeutic approaches to the COVID-19 virus. It has advocated a seven-step program to “flatten the infodemic curve”: “1. Assess the source,” “2. Go beyond headlines,” “3. Identify the author,” “4. Check the date,” “5. Examine the evidence,” “6. Check [their] biases” and, if none of this helps, to “7. Turn to fact-checkers” (World Health Organization 2020). The term “infodemic” itself was coined in 2003 during a previous epidemic: The SARS “infodemic” was – and ostensibly still is – a cocktail of “a few facts, mixed with fear, speculation and rumor, amplified and relayed swiftly worldwide by modern information technologies” (Rothkopf 2003). The term suggests that information spreads like pathogens do, but also, perhaps inadvertently, that pathogens spread like information. The project of “immunizing the public against misinformation” (World Health Organization 2020) is hence a multifaceted enterprise: it implies the mutual convertibility of epistemic and medical goods, of knowledge and health. Its *explicit* locus is hence not language, but politics.

There is, in fact, a lot of truth to this metaphor: misinformation kills, and empirical studies abundantly demonstrate its enormous social cost (Lee, Sun, Yang et al. 2022; Lyu, Zheng, Luo 2022). Most prominently, unvaccinated patients are significantly more likely to either die or need long-term treatment after a COVID-19 infection (Kuodi et al. 2022; Xu et al. 2021). In what follows, however, I will argue that such public relations efforts are not only laudable and necessary, but also terminologically misguided and historically insensitive. While they conflate epidemiological and informational phenomena *metaphorically*, they cannot exclude the possibility of *literal* readings of this conflation. By way of a detour through literary history, I will

argue that individual and collective social actors should strive to ascertain the social cost of the metaphors they use when they pursue socially beneficial aims.

My general argument is twofold. First, the conflation of medical and informational discourses depends on a historically variable social acceptance of metasocial and metacommunicational metaphors as policy-carriers: under specific political circumstances, populations may in turn dismiss or reject the metaphorical nature of this conflation and either *literalize* or *personalize* this conflation itself. I draw on an extreme historical example to substantiate this risk: the transformation of mutually dependent discourses on viral contagion and rational public debate, beginning with Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.'s writings on puerperal fever in the 1850s up to Louis-Ferdinand Céline's twin involvement with epidemiology and antisemitic pamphleteering in the interwar period. My aim in doing so is not only to spell out a recent chapter in the history of "virality" in a *longue durée* history of metasocial and metacommunicational metaphors, but also to suggest a possible, additional discursive context for the alarming increase in scapegoating, antisemitic beliefs, and political irrationality since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic (European Commission 2021). My second argument is that these metaphors place the burden of informational responsibility upon populations while simultaneously depriving them of the means to bear this burden *rationally*: empirically speaking, misinformation does not spread like pathogens, and pathogens do not spread like misinformation; populations are hence encumbered with a conceptual apparatus that obfuscates the effective vectors and multipliers of misinformation. In what follows, I outline the progressive literalization of a medical metaphor and, in turn, some of the social consequences of this momentous shift.

Holmes

In 1855, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr., not quite a Boston Brahmin yet and mostly noted for his occasional poetry and anti-abolitionist sentiments, published *Puerperal Fever as a Private Pestilence*, the first of his two major medical pamphlets. Holmes wrote against the "stale philology of the word *contagion*" (emphasis in original; Holmes 1855, 7) and levelled a harsh accusation against the medical profession. The spread of postpartum infections among the public was a not only a "*Pestilence*" in the Latinate sense of the term (i.e. a "plague"), it was also more specifically a "*Private*" pestilence because it engaged the *moral responsibility* and *professional ethics* of every individual medical practitioner: "Whatever indulgence may be granted to those who have been the ignorant causes of so much misery," the pamphlet argued in its concluding paragraph, "the time has come when the existence of a private pestilence in the sphere of a single physician should be looked upon not as a misfortune but a crime" (Holmes 1855, 57). Holmes had, in fact, correctly identified the main vector

of contagion: doctors would not wash their hands between visits to patients, nor after dissecting corpses, and would hence expose women in childbirth to the spread of “inflammation.” These women did not merely die – they were “poisoned in some way by their medical attendants” (Holmes 1855, 15).

While smallpox had been a pathology of the Early Republic, creating antagonist reading publics, dividing the early American public sphere into warring factions, and falling upon “communities” rather than the body politic *in toto* (Gross 2020), the puerperal fever was a pathology that seemed strangely attuned to the contradictions of Jacksonian Democracy. Vexing questions kept arising in learned treatises and lecture halls: the puerperal fever was a disease that could either take quasi-epidemic proportions, or befall an individual practitioner whose daily visits would henceforth be followed by a cortege of hearses – why? It was a disease that fascinated the prudish obstetricians of New England (the “Synod of Accoucheurs,” as Holmes nicely puts it [7]), yet failed to elicit any systematic scientific investigation – how? It was, finally, a disease whose etiology could simultaneously be established with clarity and casually brushed aside by the most famous practitioners of the era – on which grounds? Here, the medical profession turned to profane sociology; doctors belonged to the affluent class, after all, and “a gentleman’s hands are clean,” as Charles D. Meigs famously concluded (Meigs 1854, 104).

Yet Holmes’s main point lies elsewhere. A gentleman’s hands not only explore abdominal cavities, but they also receive the fruits of scholarly pursuits – babies, books. Holmes warns “the Medical Students into whose hands this Essay may fall” against the undue authority of their genteel professors. Students “naturally have faith in their instructors, turning to them for truth, and taking what they may to choose to give them; babes in knowledge, not yet able to tell the breast from the bottle, pumping away for the milk of truth at all that offers, were it nothing better than a Professor’s shrivelled forefinger [sic]” (Holmes 1855, 8).

The principles of Holmes’s maieutics are plain. Both the denial of valid scientific results by dominant actors in the medical field and the active dissemination of dated or fraudulent medical opinions among the wider public have tangible effects on patients. Doctors should hence acknowledge the fact that the circulation and evaluation of any scientific hypothesis about midwifery engages their ethical responsibility. In practice, however, they reject this responsibility and philologize about contagion instead. Hence, it is of vital importance – to patients, first and foremost – that public discourse be subjected to both reasoned enquiry and the critique of those official institutions that remain impervious to rationally argued hypotheses. Scientific communication in a nominally scientific but effectively genteel medical field must necessarily entail metacommunication: at the very least, professional medical readers must be reminded that their evaluation of the proposed measure – washing one’s hands – *will* have medical and ethical consequences. The assumed distinction between the public sphere on the one hand, and social history in its most

corporeal form on the other, is hence strictly artificial: “better that twenty pamphleteers should be silenced, or a many professors unseated, than that one mother's life should be taken” (Holmes 1855, 23). Henceforth, whenever contagion occurs, it *must* breed contrition.

In *Puerperal Fever as a Private Pestilence*, Holmes framed an appropriate readerly disposition: the reader, once reminded of the dysfunctionality of the medical field and of the soundness of Holmes's main argument, should approve of the proposed hygienic measure. Holmes's text was hence not a “pamphlet” in the modern, largely polemical understanding of the term: he assumed that a rational, structured investigation of contagion must carry a force of conviction to which few of his colleagues would remain impervious. He was wrong.

From Semmelweis to Céline

In 1924, Louis-Ferdinand Céline submitted his doctoral thesis to the Medical Faculty of Paris. A short, highly dramatized biographical narrative, Céline's dissertation recounts Ignaz Semmelweis's study of puerperal fever while working as an assistant in Vienna's General Hospital from 1847 onwards. Céline narrates Semmelweis's dismissal on the grounds of having advocated the practice of washing hands with chlorinated lime in order to avoid cadaveric contamination, Semmelweis's proscription from the medical profession, his subsequent nervous breakdown and eventual death in a Viennese mental asylum. Within a span of ten years, and 5800 kilometers apart, Holmes and Semmelweis had come to the same conclusions, and had done so independently from one another: puerperal fever spreads for no more sensational a reason than doctors neglecting to wash their hands.

Céline's *Semmelweis*, his first published work, is not only valuable for its literary style – it is available in paperback and is considered an integral part of Céline's literary oeuvre –, but also for its wild distortion of Semmelweis's life. “Holmess, O. W. [sic]” is duly listed in Céline's trim bibliography. Like Holmes before him, Céline begins by chastising the medical treatises published by Semmelweis's predecessors, the “symphony of words which surrounded the whole problem of infection in all its complexities. This battle of words was almost interminable. It became a play of talent to explain death by ‘thickened pus,’ ‘benign pus’ or ‘laudable pus’” (Céline 2020, 87). Yet if philology can never be medicine, if etymology can never be etiology, and if all hopes for a nominalist understanding of “contagion” and “disease” must be abandoned, the pursuit of medical knowledge and the fate of patients nevertheless remain inextricably entwined with the publication and fair assessment of research results. In Céline's narrative, Ignaz Semmelweis eventually becomes a martyr to Viennese medicine: the chief physicians and clinic directors “were not merely blind,

unfortunately. They revealed themselves at the same time loud-mouthed and lying, and above all stubborn and wicked" (Céline 2020, 134).

Incidentally, Céline's reinterpretation of the life of Semmelweis is also a comment on Holmes's pamphleteering activities on puerperal fever, which Céline repeatedly draws on in his study. In *Semmelweis*, – against all historical data – Céline progressively turns his subject into a pamphleteer. While he shows a young Semmelweis reflecting at the outset of his career upon the uselessness of "polemics" (101), his final years are spent hanging up "manifestos" in the streets of Vienna: "Fathers," Céline transcribes, "do you know what it means to call a doctor or a nurse to your pregnant wife's bedside? It means you willingly put her at deadly risks, which are so easily avoidable etc." (Céline 1999, 134).³ None of this ever occurred. In Céline's *Semmelweis*, the endemic shortcomings of medicine necessarily lead to polemical responses.

In the 70 years that separate Céline's dissertation from Holmes's and Semmelweis's work, a significant shift has hence occurred: for Céline, pamphleteering is now the only appropriate response to defective public and professional deliberation. Doctors have failed to become more conscientious; in turn, medicine – "medicine... this shit," as the opening chapter of *Death on Credit* famously puts it (Céline 2022, 3) – has remained impervious to rational argument. The study of contagion hence remains pointless as long as it dispenses with a reflection on the only appropriate vector of true knowledge among "stubborn and wicked" officials: the pamphlet. As long as women die as a result of medical negligence, there will always be *official culprits* and *officious texts*. Conversely, in a functional society, pamphleteering (and, for Céline, literature in general) are never necessary. In a dysfunctional society, literature is merely palliative; pamphleteering alone is therapeutic.

Céline

In the twenty years that followed his dissertation, the theme of contagion reappeared at every turn of Céline's professional and literary career. In 1925, he published a treatise on the use of quinine in the treatment of malaria and took up a position as secretary at the Institute for Hygiene and Epidemiology at the League of Nations, on whose behalf he visited Canada, Cuba, several African countries, as well as the Ford plants in Detroit. After his return to France, he was first employed in a working-class clinic of Clichy in 1928, then set up a private practice in suburban Meudon. Céline would remain a doctor for the remainder of his professional life: "I wanted to do something that was medical, I enjoyed it. I enjoyed it for a long time. I was a

3 My translation of the French original. This passage is missing from the current English translation (Céline 1999, 113).

doctor for 35 years. I enjoyed treating a varicocele, I enjoyed toying around with a case of measles, I thought it was very good" (my translation, Céline 1959).

In 1932, Céline published *Journey to the End of the Night* to critical acclaim. A communizing, if not an unequivocally communist novel, it was followed by *Death on the Instalment Plan* (1936), in which the same narrator, now a doctor, recounts his near-proletarian youth in Paris. In 1936, Céline visited Leningrad and, barely two months later, published the anticommunist *Mea Culpa*, the first of his four antisemitic pamphlets, in which he jointly attacked "the Jews," the French bourgeoisie (an "infection"), and the Soviet regime (again, an "infection").⁴ Here, Céline would first present the rudiments of his post-communist anthropology: "Man is, after all, 'human' just about as much as a chicken is a flyer. When a hen gets a good swift kick in the tail, [she] flops right back down to resume pecking at her own dung. That's her nature and her ambition. For the rest of us, in human society, it is exactly the same. ... For this very reason, a Revolution should only be judged twenty years after it has occurred."⁵ For the remainder of his literary and political career, Céline would renounce the very last rudiments of humanism that could, here and there, still be detected in his first two novels.

Between 1937 and 1941, Céline would go on to publish three further antisemitic pamphlets: *Trifles for a Massacre* (*Bagatelles pour un massacre*, 1937), *School for Corpses* (*L'École des cadavres*, 1938), and *A Fine Mess* (*Les Beaux draps*, 1941); all three contain explicit calls for the assassination of the entirety of Jewish population in France. A fanatical supporter of the German occupation and without any doubt the most vocal antisemite among French collaborationist writers, Céline would far exceed his own previous rhetorical violence in his short-form writing (cf. Tettamanzi 127–142). These four texts, whose brutality remains unmatched in collaborationist literature, are also, along with Émile Zola's *J'accuse...!* (1898) and Victor Hugo's *Napoléon le Petit* (1852), the most notorious pamphlets in the French literary tradition.

Céline's polemical writings have been barred from publication in France since 1945 and have lost none of their obscenity.⁶ In all of Céline's pamphlets, and most explicitly in *School for Corpses*, Pasteur is made to assist Semmelweis in the quest for an "aseptic" body politic. I quote with discomfort from this chaotically organized, 130-page text:

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- 4 I am correcting the English translation, which translates "infection" as "scourge" (Céline 2020, 24).
 - 5 I am making slight corrections to the faulty English translation of the last sentence (Céline 2020, 46).
 - 6 According to Céline's wishes, his widow has been opposed to the republication of his pamphlets since 1945. The texts themselves are neither censored, nor illegal.

Does a surgeon make a distinction between good germs and bad ones? ... Everything about a germ is mysterious, like everything about a Jew. ... You can't afford to let in a single dangerous germ, or a single dangerous Jew onto the operating table. No one knows what will happen, before all this, how would you deal with a germ or a Jew which was seemingly harmless? All of Pasteur's opponents weren't completely stupid, or in bad faith. A few of them made very honest efforts in incorporating new pasteurization techniques into their surgery. They didn't think they needed to sterilize their instruments more before operating. They thought they'd sterilized them perfectly, all in good faith, they'd heated them for a good few minutes, like a boiled egg, for two or three minutes, ten minutes maximum. The results were devastating. "Mr. Pasteur is a charlatan!" His aseptic technique is a farce. ... (Céline 2012, 486)⁷

The equation of germs and "Jews" had, of course, been a staple of nationalist rhetoric in Europe since the 1890s, a prominent trope in the history of French anti-Judaism and antisemitism (Golsan 2010, 136), and a key rhetorical device of National Socialism, beginning with Adolf Hitler's programmatic writings of the mid-1920s (David 2012, 12). Yet Céline's polemical writings amend this grim tradition by returning to an argument first developed in *Semmelweis* and by implicating the "philological" dispositions of his colleagues:

It took Pasteur ten years to explain the difference between 3-minute sterilizations and 20-minute sterilizations to the most intelligent race on Earth. ... For these eminent Latinist brains, the word "sterilization" was enough. They'd got this before! They knew about this! It's just boiling, right? ... As long as you have the word: "boiling"? We boiled them well enough? That's the most important bit! Pasteur was condemned by the Latinist, verbose French Academy of Medicine, the moment the word was uttered, he was fucked. They repeated everything, all forty academicians. That was it. If it didn't work, too bad! The Latins, the Latinists only have faith in words, that's it, it's not them that use words, it's the words that use them. They believe in words, that's it. They think that the world is a word, Jew is a word, sterilization is a word, that everything falls into place with words, with one word, with one proper word, with a happy word. They come up with happy, verbose solutions, they don't know any other solutions. (Céline 2012, 487–488)

The "purification" of the body politic advocated by Céline implies the "purification" not of language itself, but of its social uses. Dominant actors in the medical field take philological liberties with technical nouns: they subject medical language to a profane interpretation and equate "sterilization" (a precise technical process) with

7 All excerpts from Céline's *School for Corpses* are derived from an amateur translation by Szandor Kuragin posted online. I correct the translation whenever needed using Régis Tettamanzi's edition of Céline's pamphlets. <https://schoolforcorpses.wordpress.com/>.

“boiling” (its colloquial *near*-equivalent). Academicians negate, in other words, the distinction between a technical and a non-technical use of language. Yet Céline’s insists that his linguistic critique also applies to the social composition of the medical profession itself. Medical doctors and Academicians hence systematically deny both textual and “racial” differences and thereby pursue “systematic bastardisation” (Céline 2012, 365). Their readers, the “impassioned readers of the great, optimistic Jewish press,” consequently succumb as much to the homology of technical and profane language, as to the adequation of Frenchmen and Jews: “Homology! Paris the ghetto! Kosher meat for free!” (365). They are bad readers; hence, they will make bad murderers – and vice versa. In fact, for Céline as much as for the German occupation forces and the French collaborators, non-verbose “solutions” must necessarily be non-verbal ones.

Crucially, for Céline, these Academicians are also Jews: “Doctors Kalmanovitch, Oppman, Rougès, Lecain, Bli, etc. (all Jews), the main people behind all of it” (Céline 2012, 508).⁸ The distinction between discourse and disease is now abolished and will remain so until 1945. At the intersection of verbose communication and viral contagion, at this critical point of indistinction, Céline erects a figure that personalizes the mutual convertibility of epistemic and medical threats – “the Jew.” He is, for Céline and his hundreds of thousands of readers, both the *vector* by which misinformation spreads among the body politic and the *content* of contagion itself, i.e., he is simultaneously disease, disinformation, homology, and “bastardization”: “We will all become Jewified, unrecognizable, even by our origins, we will be homogenized, infected by the Jews” (Céline 2012, 456). Pamphleteering, by mere reversal, becomes the vector of discursive and corporeal health.

From the Operating Table to the Public Sphere

The case of Céline is admittedly the most extreme of examples. The salient facts of Céline’s pamphletary work – its antisemitism, its repetitiousness, its explicit calls for the assassination of approximately 320,000 Jewish men, women, and children – have not only attracted universal condemnation, but they have also come to function as historical signposts in much of the recent memorial work in France. Let us then approach the problem from another angle and focus on current discussions of “virality” as an object of both public health and public discourse.

In recent years, calls to regulate information and truth claims in the public sphere have increased in frequency and vehemence. Opponents to the legal

8 Or again: “trade union members, doctors, dentists; pharmacists never mention their origins due to shame, no doubt. They’ve all suppressed their origins. Dentists, doctors and surgeons weren’t born anywhere” (Céline 2012, 455).

containment of “fake news” have pointed out the antidemocratic nature of these proposed regulations. They have often done so in bad faith. The problem, according to these somewhat minoritarian voices, is not that the legal prosecution of “lies” or “misinformation” would be tantamount to censorship (it would not: in fact, the current legislation in most Western countries already allows for many of the containment measures present in most projected laws against “fake news” and misinformation). The problem is rather that the social construction of “truth” or “information” is often *itself* the object of public contestation. According to these positions, curtailing this specific discursive agency would, in effect, amount to a significant breach of democratic sovereignty. On the opposite side, supporters of such regulatory measures rightly point out that the COVID-19 pandemic has made it plain that the social cost of misinformation *can* be measured in human lives.

Among the several models that attempt to explain the spread of misinformation among the public, “virality” has achieved a particular status as what Hans Blumenberg once described as an “absolute metaphor,” i.e., one that has become autonomous from the contents it originally sought to illustrate (Blumenberg 2010, 4). “Virality,” like “the naked truth,” “the book of nature” or “the body politic,” obscures the very concepts it draws on and conceals the empirical incompatibility of informational and viral propagation; as such, an absolute metaphor is not only a figure of speech, but also, alas, a disfigurement of thought. Other entries in the current political lexicon share a similar linguistic fate. The inherently metaphorical concepts of “biases” and “echo chambers,” for instance, are routinely used both to describe the properties of technological infrastructure (for instance the segmentation of internet publics through search algorithms and the emergence of fragmentary communities of information) *and* to describe the ideological dispositions of populations in liberal, democratic societies (for instance when an utterance is criticized or excluded from the public sphere on account of its “bias”). The double valence of these concepts is significant in itself. Because “biases” and “echo chambers” simultaneously refer to apperceptive dispositions and to the technological infrastructure through which these apperceptive dispositions are made public, critical engagement with these terms tends to conflate ideology and technology, when in fact a conceptualization of this overlap itself (of *ideological* “biases” and *technological* “echo chambers,” for instance) is needed. Absolute metaphors hence pose a threat to the epistemological and deliberative standards of liberal democracies whenever they thoroughly obscure the semantic realms they originally sought to bring together *rhetorically*.

Meanwhile, it is difficult to shield calls to “immunize the public against misinformation” from the risk of literal readings. After all, “virality” has become one of the structuring metaphors – and, in equal measure, structuring literalisms – of modern public health management and information theory alike. It has crowded out older figurative motifs – “to spread like wildfire,” “to disseminate,” “to become common currency” – and seems to have brought a near-hegemonic Foucauldian tra-

dition in the humanities to turn its coat, give in to analogical reasoning, and actively conflate blatant political irrationality with mental illness: political opponents, both reactionary and progressive, now belong to the “lunatic fringe” (whether this profane diagnosis is accurate or not is entirely beside the point; I am drawing attention the power of metaphors to essentially *nullify* dominant intellectual traditions and to overturn even the most dogmatic readings of “biopower,” “discipline,” “dispositifs” and other critical potboilers).

Yet it would be misleading to single out organizational discourse as the sole, or even main vector by which “virality” has gained credence in recent years. In fact, internet culture has long developed its own profane theory of cultural transmission which reproduces a similar conflation of pathology and discursivity. The concept of the “meme,” which loosely derives from evolutionary biology, is an eminent case in point. It extrapolates from evolutionary genetics to argue that culture be best understood as a series of units of cultural transmission which actively cannibalize users in order to compete with other cultural units. In this particularly crude theory of culture, information itself is endowed with agency: a snippet from a movie, an image, but also Homer’s *Odyssey*, eating with a fork, not wearing a hat in a church, or a way of cooking pasta are “memes” precisely because they gained supremacy over other units of culture. The eerie terminology at play in this subfield – “cultural parasites” (Dennett 2007, 81), “mind viruses” (Aunger 2007, 602) – emphasize both that cultural units, not people, are agential and that “virality” remains the covert paradigm operating in “meme” theory. Here, populations (“users”) are but passive carriers of culture: their agency in selecting, evaluating, sharing or not sharing cultural units is, at best, treated as an epiphenomenon in scholarly accounts of “viral” phenomena (Nahon and Hemsley 2013, 60). Internet “virality” and “meme” theory, as analytic concepts, hence merely duplicate the very conflation of medical and informational “contagion” they sought to escape in the first place. Both hence fall short of the humblest demands for critical reflexivity.

One fact, however, is well established: in the overwhelming majority of instances, information does not “go viral” – whatever the validity of this metaphor. In fact, the chances of information “going viral,” i.e., of being shared with very high intensity beyond its original communicational setting, are infinitesimal. If information did spread across the public sphere with a frequency anywhere resembling that of pathogens, “viral” discourse would be endemic and crowd out all other possible types of information and communication. Conversely, if pathogens behaved like information, the risk of contagion events and epidemics ever occurring would be negligible.

Recent epidemics and pandemics clearly show this is not the case. We are hence faced with an interesting contradiction. On the one hand, political irrationality, scapegoating, and disinformation are on the rise. On the other, prevalent absolute metaphors give a poor account of informational and pathogenic propagation and si-

multaneously present specific, historically identified political risks. In other words, Semmelweis and Holmes were right, Céline's pamphletary conflations were not, COVID-19 and disinformation kill, vaccination is effective in preventing contagion, *and* information does not spread like pathogens. It would hence seem to be of vital importance to escape the deadlock of figurative language and to return, instead, to actionable and more carefully rational accounts of how populations communicate or miscommunicate on the threats they face.

Key Points

Let me simplify my argument somewhat and outline five key points. The first is that the very need for any kind of institutional storytelling involving a metaphorical "discursive contagion" or "infodemic" is doubtful. What knowledge or kind of knowledge is secured by equating the spread of pathogens and the spread of information *about* these pathogens, no matter if this information is correct or incorrect? The need for such a narrative superposition (of disease and discourse *about* disease) is nevertheless supported by a large portion of the public and by supranational institutions, both having devoted significant resources – labor, attention, and capital – to the narrativization of what, until recently, was taken to be an unavoidable, if regrettable consequence of an open public sphere. I would argue that the social risks derived from this rhetorical conflation outweighs its purported benefits.

My second point is that, for all practical concerns, at least some of the measures proposed by these supranational health organizations in order to contain misinformation remain valid, if in a much narrower sense than originally proposed. Assessing the sources, going beyond headlines, checking the date, examining the evidence: this is all very sound advice. This leaves out two important subproblems, however. The first is that these measures are inadequate to identify misinformation with sufficient reliability and, conversely, may miscategorize factual statements as fraudulent ones. A few paradigmatic examples immediately come to mind. Chelsea Manning's 2010 release of classified information through the WikiLeaks platform, for example, would fail to meet all seven criteria and pass the seven-steps test, even though the status of the leak as valid "information" has been thoroughly ascertained since (Maxwell 2019). Yet the source, publication date, and supporting evidence of the documents could not be assessed by the general public, the author of the leak was anonymous, biases could merely be postulated, etc. The second subproblem derives from the first: the cases in which these steps would be able to reliably identify misinformation are also precisely the cases where they would be either superfluous, or unable to reach their target users. In fact, blatant misinformation is usually suspicious for other reasons: it often negates basic empirical observation (Kumkar

2022). Conversely, the negation of basic empirical observation by users is unlikely to be corrected by “fact checkers” and an examination of “biases.”

My third point is that the “infodemic” metaphor remains helpful, provided we turn it on its head: populations may be “immunized” against misinformation *even though* misinformation does not spread like a virus. In social psychology, for instance, “inoculation theory” has empirically demonstrated that resistance to influence and persuasion can be induced by exposing populations to “weakened” versions of discursive threats (for instance political misinformation or marketing campaigns): “Preemptive exposure to weakened challenging content motivates a process or processes of resistance to future exposure to stronger challenging content” (Compton, 4295). The analogical reasoning that motivates inoculation theory is glaring, yet it does not entail the kind of social costs “virality” does. Empirical studies seem to corroborate one essential observation: populations and individuals, once alerted to the dangers and sensuous seductions of “challenging content,” may in turn treat “stronger challenging content” with “boosted attitude certainty” and without “dampen[ed] reactance” (Compton, 4297).

My fourth point is that this kind of mechanical, reactive handling of “challenging content” nevertheless sits uneasily with the main tenets of a robust democratic culture. The point is hence both constative and normative: this is not really what we need, this is not really what we should want. In fact, enabling good “reactance” to challenging texts and statements was once the goal of higher education. Enabling citizens to deal rationally, critically, and collaboratively with complex material remains an essential competence in democratic societies. Yet these are not only competences: they are also historically constituted “values” or social norms that can be explicitly defended as such. Facilitating access to the tools that make goods such as “truth” and “information” available to all would amount to explicitly postulating the value of these goods in themselves. We should therefore abandon formalist descriptions of a “good public sphere” and “public rationality” and uphold these goods for what they are: historically constituted, unequally distributed, but also more equally distributable values that are dependent on historically constituted, unequally distributed, but also more equally distributable *competences*. The erosion of higher education curricula, along with the sweeping technological transformation of the past decade (Rothkopf’s “modern information technologies” discussed in the first section of this essay), have arguably played a significant role in the erosion of public discourse itself. Yet if universities are the central purveyors of epistemic tools in Western democracies, the place of the humanities in higher education is wholly paradoxical: they are under tremendous pressure to make essential tools available to the population while being deprived of the material means to do so *in full recognition of their political import*. I wish to suggest that a radical reconsideration of the role and value of such competences would make the further legal regulation of truth claims in the public sphere less urgent.

Finally, as a general rule of thumb, and by way of conclusion, metasocial and metacommunicational metaphors should be avoided whenever their efficiency depends on their public perception *as metaphors*. The social acceptance of metasocial metaphors (i.e., the social tolerance for figurative statements that pertain to society itself) is historically and situationally variable; this variability itself should be subjected to a careful risk assessment, especially – and this should go without saying – when previous iterations have led to the identification and scapegoating of minorities. The responses to Céline’s activity as a pamphleteer between 1937 and 1941, for instance, convey a general impression of the wide variety of possible public perceptions in a given historical situation. Some, like future Nobel Prize winner André Gide, insisted on the metaphorical and comedic nature of Céline’s “Jew”: in fact, for Gide, the “semitic question” had not even been touched upon in *School for Corpses* (Gide 1999, 302). Others telephoned the publisher of the pamphlets to express their outrage at Céline’s literal calls for the assassination of approximately 320,000 men, women, and children. A few more straightforward opponents openly challenged Céline in bars and restaurants: “Hey Céline, my name is Cohen. Fuck you!” (Alliot 2021, 401, my transl.).



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