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Babette Babich
Fordham University, babich@fordham.edu

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Pseudo-Science and 'Fake' News: 'Inventing' Epidemics and the Police State

Babette Babich

Pseudo-Science and Its Shadows

The term 'pseudo-science' is embroiled in the politically fraught rhetoric of science and science discounting, presupposing a tradition of science and science theory scandals (Babich, 2003, 2015, 2021). Philosophically, a critical orientation may be attempted, but it is daunting, beginning from the traditional question of demarcation, as this also has complexities of its own as a kind of science signaling, flagging what 'science,' so defined,¹ is worth hearing and what 'science'

¹ See Prelli (1989) but see too the contributions to Babich (ed.) (2017b).

B. Babich (✉)

Fordham University, New York City, NY, USA

e-mail: babich@fordham.edu

University of Winchester, Winchester, UK

to discount.² The discounting in question can be near-oblivion, to recall just one example of the genetics of algae, witnessed by the scientific fortunes of Franz Moewus (1908–1959). Moewus was so very effectively jettisoned from the literature in his own field and the history of science that even the literature on his jettisoning is limited to one author (Sapp, 1990).³ In the era of the current coronavirus health crisis, usually designated as ‘Covid-19,’ the most telling linguistic move might be the reference to ‘the science.’ By using the definite article, it is implied not only that there is a ‘received view’ in science, just as Thomas Kuhn would tell us, but more crucially that science is a singular, monolithic affair.

As for distinguishing between science ‘good’ and science ‘bad,’ distinctions of this sort are made all the time in university science by scholars vetting applications submitted by scientists for research support as well as by editors and reviewers of scientific journals. In addition, the designation of ‘pseudo-science’ can be retroactively deployed. Thus, we speak of phrenology and race ‘science’ of by-gone years, we discount science, formerly long standing, on intelligence and genetics, and more recently, articles with respected research outcomes can be retracted, sometimes owing to fraud but also for political and other reasons.⁴

As the current pandemic crisis dramatizes, what is wanted is a monolithic, ‘finished’ and certain science: an absolute, unchanging affair, quite like conventional religions. This same desire for the absolute clashes with scientific progress and ongoing research and exploration. Science changes. Indeed: even the issued health recommendations of the World Health Organization, increasingly the source for governmentally mandated health restrictions, undergo changes.

² This is a social affair, but it is current and often the stakes are only known to the participants; one such of these concerns the mechanism of the cell as such. See, from the side of the ignored cytologist, Gilbert Ling (2007a and 2007b). For discussion of cold fusion, AIDS, homeopathy, etc., see Babich (2015). Per contra see the contributions to Pigliucci and Boudry (2013). For science resistance and suppression, see Campanario (1993, 2009), Nissani (1995).

³ See for a discussion, Schwarz (2001).

⁴ There is a related mediatic question, inasmuch as the internet—always a minefield of virtual pitfalls—has become (invisibly) yet more labile: posts are removed/‘shadowed’ by social media firms, websites and PDFs vanish (see Blackman, 2019) along with YouTube videos. There will in future be a need for a shadow media archaeology.

The notion of 'fake' news may be extended to social media posts deemed unreliable. Increasingly this is a matter not only of flagging but blocked access. If 'the internet' seems to offer a diversity of sources, this diversity is increasingly illusory. Thus, propaganda storms as designed by Google (and whoever pays) ensures that content is headlined by various social media platforms such as Facebook, or Twitter or Instagram, or even random blogs, such that 'fake' news is pretty much all there is.⁵ But even before the internet, mainstream news—*London Times* style, *Le Monde* style, *Die Welt* style—was always what the *New York Times* blazoned on its masthead: only the news deemed 'fit to print.'⁶

Today's news gatekeepers impose a seemingly volatile variant on Max Weber's iron cage, thus YouTube videos vanish, and Facebook and Twitter silently muzzle (shadow ban) users. Freelance human and AI 'Fact checkers' tracking and blocking internet activity on social media, often without liability, and typically unaccredited, invisible, seemingly Wikipedia style (see on Wikipedia, Bateman, 2016; Farda-Sarbas & Müller-Birn, 2019, and, on 'fact checking' the fact-checkers, Leetaru, 2016), have taken on such tasks of ensuring conformity, by which is meant 'what is fit' to view/download.

Lockdown

The psychological effects of isolation and loneliness are well known.⁷ 'Lockdown,' deployed at intervals as is now the political tactic, announced in advance and duly, if unpredictably carried out, thus maximizing its social effects, has become the 'new normal,' be it tacitly

⁵ The term has its own baggage: see Tandoc et al. (2018) and Tsfati et al. (2020).

⁶ Thus mainstream media reported a student's protest of Mark Crispin Miller on masks (Holt & Pasquarella, 2020).

⁷ Thus, Kirsten Weir turns to neurobiology, citing a textbook study to explain that 'the sustained stress of extreme isolation leads to a loss of hippocampal plasticity, a decrease in the formation of new neurons, and the eventual failure in hippocampal function. On the other hand, the amygdala increases its activity in response to isolation. This area mediates fear and anxiety, symptoms enhanced in prisoners in solitary confinement' Weir (2012, p. 54). Weir cites Haney (2006): 'Deprived of normal human interaction, many segregated prisoners reportedly suffer from mental health problems including anxiety, panic, insomnia, paranoia, aggression and depression.' Cf. more generally Horwitz (1990) and Haney (1993).

induced by ‘mask mandates’ or via curfew and ‘quarantine,’ an explicit and extended legal restriction to the home—derives from its application as a disciplinary measure in correctional institutions or prisons. It includes the features of solitary confinement, along with prohibitions against social contact, recently extended to specify eye contact, requiring that one keep one’s distance when approaching others, along with limiting the amount of time one is permitted to be outside the home, limited to a specific distance around the home, also as specified in the case of a criminal sentence of house arrest.

The point of these restrictions is, as we are repeatedly informed, for our own good: social isolation is meant to limit the spread of the novel virus, Covid-19. News reports are contrary, at times suggesting this has not worked, at times implying that the virus, apparently more infectious and certainly far less lethal than initially modeled, has already ‘silently’ spread to more individuals (‘asymptotically’)⁸ than expected.

Since the spring and summer of 2020 and ongoing into 2021, assessments of Covid-19 ‘infections’ are reports not of illnesses or deaths and not of hospitalization, but simply tested ‘cases.’ ‘Cases’ of Covid-19 are defined as corresponding to positive test results, using a PCR test disputed on a number of levels (Engelbrecht & Demeter, 2020), but mandated by institutions for their employees, especially in the case of universities and schools, to permit access for teachers and students and increasingly more generally and by law. Yet ‘cases’ ascertained in this fashion do not correspond to illness as such. The imaginary prospect of contagion is similarly invisible.

Recent governmental medical recommendations, ranging from ‘lock-down,’ mandatory masks, even social distancing, arguably run counter to standard or received understanding (including long-standing debates, this being a research subject after all)⁹ regarding both infectious diseases *and* immunology quite as public health officers, medical doctors, and

⁸ Sample (2020) cites studies between April and June 2020.

⁹ Cf., with regard to a past ‘pandemic,’ Kolata (2007), Tomes (2000), and Rudolph (2004) and for military application, Eickhoff (1996), and, with a historical review, Lederberg (2000) and Koopman (2004) as well as Johnson (2016) and Roberge et al. (2010). On a certain ‘mediocrity,’ about which Fleck himself would also complain at the end of his life, see Klein (1985).

clinical researchers protested from the start. But Sucharit Bhakdi, Wolfgang Wodarg, Luc Montaigner, and other names, such as Didier Raoult, would promptly be vilified as 'conspiracy theorists,' drawing them into the above maw of exclusion. Thus despite the many differences between them, all of them would be branded as 'Covid Denialists,' to match other sundry denialists, to such an extent that no level or degree of scientific expertise could stand against mandated regulations.¹⁰

As the October 2020 WHO 'reversal' might seem to underline: quite apart from the obvious damage to individuals on an economic level, day to day—how can a public lockdown be undertaken for the sake of good health?¹¹ How can health authorities claim that avoiding contact with other human beings, i.e., staying indoors and 'social distancing,' that avoiding fresh air and sunlight is beneficial for health? Nevertheless this is asserted.

To be sure: the psychological 'point' of requiring that one wear a mask—indeed the imperative slogan, 'wear a mask,' often spiced with vulgarity, plastered on street signs, and public transport, and all over social media—functions to remind the public that they themselves are themselves the cause of viral infection and thus a danger to others. To wear a mask works to flag yourself—and others—that it is *you*—and, concomitantly, that is those others—who are the problem. Anthrophobia follows.

Contagion

It is notable that the narrative of infection and contamination (and containment) is as dated (and that also means as debated inasmuch as there is no consensus that is not also a consequence of pharmaceutical politics) as it is. Thus, much is made of previous pandemics dating back to the era of Victorian medicine, literally a nineteenth century paradigm.

¹⁰ For a report on current protests by physicians and medical professionals, and in addition to other global medical alliances, often associated with political protests this past August and September in Berlin and London, see 'The Great Barrington Declaration' (see Andrews, 2020).

¹¹ As of October 2020 the WHO reversed its recommendations, suggesting that governmental lockdown restrictions are not advised. Reversals and flipflops continue. See Richardson (2020) but see also for immediate spin: Lee (2020).

But there is also a twentieth century history of retrospective reflection and writing from the scientific and medical vantage of 1935, Ludwik Fleck, a medical serologist and immunologist, argued that the problem with virtuous flags and picturesque imaginings of contagion is that these obscure a scientific understanding of disease propagation:

As an example of such grossly popular science, consider an illustration representing the hygienic fact of droplet infection. A man emaciated to a skeleton and with greyish purple face is sitting on a chair and coughing. With one hand he is supporting himself wearily on the arm of the chair, with the other he presses his aching chest. The evil bacilli in the shape of little devils are flying from his open mouth An unsuspecting rosy-cheeked child is standing next to him. One devil bacillus is very, very close to the child's mouth The devil has been represented bodily in this illustration half symbolically and half as a matter of belief. But he also haunts the scientific speciality to its very depths, in the conceptions of immunological theory with its images of bacterial attack and defense. (Fleck, 1978, p. 116)

Medical authorities, recently seeking to make the authoritarian case for compliance (difficult enough as guidelines continue to shift) cite Fleck's use of the then-textbook science but manage to overlook Fleck's context and not less the point of his example (Jacob, 2020; cf. Brorson, 2006; Rietmann, 2018). Fleck challenged this image, *as if* a singular, malignant disease 'agency,' corresponded to an absolute etiology of disease, and *as if* medical science had not advanced since the last decades of the 19th and the first decades of the 20th century.¹² Today, beginning from February and March of 2020, research publications themselves have become part of the problem of fake news—flooding the internet, faking results even in leading journals, for the sake of political impact. The tactic is an old one: to combat rumors, secret societies of by-gone ages would publish counter accounts,¹³ sometimes regarded, a bit unkindly, under

¹² As in the case of Flügge (1896, 1897) and, drawing on Flügge, Wells (1934). See Fleck's (1986) 'The Problem of Epistemology,' as well as Belt and Gremmen (1990), Brorson (2006) and Mayer and Weingart (2004). See also Carter (2003).

¹³ Graw (2004). Thus Jacob (2020) deploys a deflationary rhetoric under the heading of the 'Elsevier Public Health Emergency Collection, but see too, earlier and by contrast Eyer' (2010).

the rubric of 'Jesuitism,' which has thus a certain counter-reformation legacy.¹⁴

To follow 'the science,' as we scholars would surely prefer, we require a certain foundation to begin with: all facts, like dogs, neatly chained up, quite as Nietzsche wrote toward the end of the nineteenth century. Nietzsche's metaphor is a 'subterranean' one, notably *physiological*: the body in all its recalcitrance is to be subordinated to the spiritually minded force of enlightenment or reason, no 'enemy barking or shaggy spite; no gnawing worm of wounded ambition; modest and submissive inner organs, busy as windmills but distant' (Nietzsche, 1980, p. 352; cf. Weiss, 2003 on Fleck). Once upon a time, our knowledge of the body, as of infectious diseases, might have been of this subterranean and hardly less hermetic variety. But today, we imagine ourselves enlightened, beyond such ideological constraints (Latour, 1992; Lewontin, 1991, and for an overview of 'contrasting' theories of life, including a section on models, Cornish-Bowden & Cárdenas, 2020).

It seems—and this must be a concern for (at least some) students of social studies of science/technology—that Coronavirus 2020 has ushered in a return to an ideal that had, to modify Latour's language but in keeping with his spirit, 'never been' modern, quite as Feyerabend (1993) argued, but which also always contained an implicit threat: science by dictate (cf. Babich, 2020b; Bauer, 2012; Latour, 1993). And today, in place of due diligence and individual medical guidance, the threat of fines and imprisonment.

But is this right? And what is 'the science'? Better yet, perhaps, we might ask *whose* science are we to follow? Thus Fleck's (1978), already cited *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, an intriguing whodunnit of the history of disease, venereal as it happens, the pox, i.e., syphilis, explores the development, very elusive in the case of it, of a test to determine whether one has or does not have a syphilitic infection. Along the way, Fleck also details the complexities of infection (and "pseudo-disease") (Fleck, 1986, p. 41) as it can turn out that not all,

¹⁴ See Walsham (2009).

or better said only a small percentage of positively infected individuals develop the disease in its most debilitating, tertiary manifestation. As Fleck reminds us: a contagious agent is only *part* of the story when it comes to the immune system and hence to the public health matter of the spread of disease, thus the need to ‘invent’ and thence to ‘establish’ a scientific fact, including both the identification of the disease entity itself and a test for it.

Being academics, scientists claim glory for themselves whenever they can, and at the low and middle, and highest levels, this can easily degenerate into denigrating others. This is the working dynamic of the inner circle of scientific cartels, and it is one of the risks of peer review. It also means that it is easy to find folk to ‘mob’—academic ‘mobbing’ is a technical term after all—again to name Bakhdi or Wodarg and in addition Stefan Lanka or Judy Mikovits or even the Nobel prizewinning Montagnier, one need hardly mention the names associated with an older viral crisis, HIV, even as these names recur, including Peter Duesberg and others (see Duesberg et al., 2003, and on mobbing Duffy & Sperry, 2012; on mockery and ‘models,’ Babich, 2017b; Leydesdorff, 2006; Pilkey & Pilkey-Jarvis, 2007, and, with a study of Duesberg, Bialy, 1998, 2004; cf. Babich, 2015). In letters more broadly, the mobbing was almost instantaneous after Giorgio Agamben (2020b) had published nothing more threatening, on the face of it, than ‘questions’ as of Easter Monday, 13 April 2020. In reaction to this, Agamben’s peers immediately spoke out against him, with next to no exceptions, save gingerly, months later and only for some (on the challenge of reading Agamben’s questions, see Babich, 2020b).

Science is bedeviled by its reigning paradigms as Kuhn put it (1962), led by its convictions or *prejudices* as Nietzsche supposed: an array of *idee fixe*, which, this is no pedagogical accident, also happens to be the name of the little dog carried about by the great figure in Asterix, Obelix.¹⁵ And for all their restrictions, just such ‘fixed ideas’ tend to remain in handbooks and journals and thus garner grants, get recognition, drive

¹⁵ See Babich (2015) for discussion and references. See also with specific reference to the current crisis, Gapova (2020).

laboratories (Latour & Woolgar, 1979; Pilkey & Pilkey-Jarvis, 2007; for other references: Babich, 2018a and 2017b; Resnik & Smith, 2020).

Ivan Illich, in a prescient analysis (1995), described 'medical nemesis' as the practice of an institution more dedicated to domination, especially dedicated to the control of death, than to health as such (Babich, 2018a; Conrad, 2007 as well as with respect to seeming immunity from ethics and consequently liability, Skrabanek, 1990). Compounding questions of ethics and political domination, the cartel system of peer review seems to mirror the clumping support of only certain research trends. Thus, when it comes to support for research science, funds are devoted, exclusively, to whatever single answer (yet another way to parse 'the' science) happens to be received/privileged. Peer review ensures this: this is the buddy system (among other studies, see, including gender issues, Larivière et al., 2013; Resnik & Smith, 2020). This same 'buddy system' is one of the reasons Michael Moore's *Planet of the Humans* (2020), directed by Jeff Gibbs and released for free Earth Day 2020, is neither fake news nor false in its claims but inconvenient for those who wish to imagine that one can simply shift one's investment portfolio, and marry an old energy industry to a 'green' new energy industry.

Still, if you as a research scholar 'dare to know,' as Kant wrote, but especially if you 'think outside the box,' your work will languish unfunded and ultimately 'unreceived' by either academia or industry. Seeking, as Nietzsche argued, as Heidegger argued, as I argue, a science that is truth unchanging, we install a 'science' to 'believe' in or to 'follow,' in place of religion, a repository of truth unchanging. Denigrating theories we dislike, classifying scientific approaches that shake our prejudices as 'pseudo-science' is a long-standing tactic: it is how one writes scripture, and it is a recipe for dogma.

Inventing ‘Pseudo-Science’: On Science and Its Discontents

What is at stake concerns what Kuhn silently borrowed from Fleck, the same Polish physician already mentioned, a blood pathologist, who invented his own paradigm for the immune system, what he called ‘leukergy’ (cf. Grzybowski, 2007), an immunological theory focused on white blood cells, leukocytes. In an age of coronavirus—Covid-19—historical discussions of the immune system are increasingly important as is the fraught reference to ‘terrain’ (Ayoade, 2017; Barnes, 1995; in addition to Latour, 1993; Carter, 2003; Mendelsohn, 2012).

Above, I quoted from Fleck’s 1986 study of syphilis, a complex disease entity in its historical context. But *what* disease are we talking about, *where* does it come from (apparently every historical and geographic locus has been proffered as a candidate for the ‘French pox, the carnal scourge’ as it has been called),¹⁶ and *who* had it: did Shakespeare have it? Did Nietzsche have it, and in any case, to what *kind* of disease does it refer? Qua disease, syphilis morphs from one manifestation to another in the body, first presenting as a skin disease to progress to a disease of the blood to proceed, after decades of ‘incubation,’ to colonize the brain and the meninges, and including polyarthritis.

The Lvov-born Fleck, a Jew, used both science and art to fight the Nazis (as only a serologist could do) by means of a vaccine Fleck and Weigl had prepared to be inert, not that the Nazi officers who ordered them to do so could ever have known what was in it. Fleck is the unnamed second scientist in Arthur Allen’s, *The Fantastic Laboratory of Dr. Weigl: How Two Brave Scientists Battled Typhus and Sabotaged the Nazis* (2015).¹⁷ A component, just one, of the long-standing debates on vaccination, lurks in this and (numerous) other details.¹⁸

¹⁶ Thus John J. Ross remarks, in the vein many other authors also follow, that ‘Syphilis has been called “the most disowned infection in history.” The French called it the Neapolitan disease, and the English, Germans, and Italians called it the French disease. The Russians blamed it on the Poles; the Poles blamed the Germans; the Dutch, the Belgians, and the Portuguese blamed the Spanish; in India and Japan, the Portuguese were blamed’ Ross (2005, p. 400).

¹⁷ See, too, Rietmann (2018).

¹⁸ See Babich (2003, 2015) as well as Offit (2005a, 2005b) and Moir (2020).

Our prejudices, Nietzsche reminds us, as Heidegger subsequently reminds us, get in the way of our thinking. Thus Karl Mannheim, influential for Fleck, distinguished between 'total ideology' and what he named 'particular ideology' (cf. Coombs, 1966), where total ideology patently bears on the psychology of global crises that is the concern of this volume overall. Yet as academics, we tend to be suspicious of words like 'ideology.' Thus, the late evolutionary biologist, Richard Lewontin, would be roundly attacked for having written *Biology as Ideology* (1991). It did not help Lewontin that he held the Louis Agassiz chair in Zoology at Harvard, no amount of scientific authority can help in this as Lewontin, perhaps, should have known. When one exposes certain ideologies, those who stand to profit from those ideologies will strike back. Lewontin, a mathematician by formation, wanted to look at the numbers and not less the role of public health measures in terms of clean water and clean air as well as overall improvements in the standard of living along with increased income for a given population. Others argued that the fall of infectious disease could be ascribed to the sole efficacy of modern medical interventions, like vaccines or like drugs of one sort or another. This is certainly the way the World Health Organization intervenes in poor communities in Asia and Africa: no food, unless it mandates imposing GMO crops for sale to farmers; no programs to bring clean water to people, just—and only—vaccination for all.¹⁹

These names, Fleck, and Kuhn, and Lewontin, are stock names, and although their questions remain unresolved, Facebook and Twitter fact-checkers are sure one can simply google the facts and there they will be, ready to hand for the advantage of the CDC, the WHO, the government in what seems to be nearly every country in the world, with the possible exception of Sweden. For many, this will be a push to remain on lockdown rather than to strengthen one's immune system via contact with others, with the world, with the earth itself.

The police state of which I speak is not merely the overeager punitive enforcement, leading to substantial fines and a certain amount of ill-disguised *Schadenfreude*, as citizens are urged to spy on and covertly

¹⁹ See Vandana Shiva (1989, 2000, 2011). For journalistic 'spin' reducing Shiva's research to 'activism,' see Specter (2014).

report on one another, as academics already outdo one another in social shaming. And violations of current Covid-measures also lead to incarceration in some cases. But even without police measures, we ourselves have become our own police, our own jailers. We, ourselves, the whistleblower on our neighbor, chiding him or her for failing to wear a mask or for walking too close to others in the open air in a park, on the street, or while shopping for food at the supermarket.

Here, to develop these reflections to go where they should go, namely to what we owe the living, both the healthy and the sick, the young and the old, elsewhere, I have already added Camus and Sophocles, and Milton in my reflections on what we owe the dead (Babich, 2020b; cf. Agamben, 2020b, cf. Agamben, 2020a). But it must be noted that it is one of the corporal works of mercy to visit the sick, even those who are ill who are strangers to us, regarding what we owe ourselves and those around us, family, colleagues, and strangers, as we are ourselves reciprocally, all of us, strangers one to another.

Necropolitics in an Injectable

Achille Mbembe's necropolitics explicates Carl Schmitt, with a twist yielding the power syndrome that currently dominates our lives, as Agamben also writes about this, here to cite Mbembe's words, in order to "dictate who may live and who must die" (Mbembe, 2003, 11). To speak of necropolitics 'in an injectable,' given the current corona crisis, is no metaphor and will not be limited to Africa or India.

But how has such necropolitics has come to dominate across the globe? Elsewhere, drawing on marketing psychology and propaganda techniques over the past former century (Ellul, 1973), I foreground the micro-thing that is 'feedback' in a digital era (Babich, 2016). Having input anything, all we need is a confirmation, click, or swipe. In the mid-1950s, the critical theorist, Günther Anders (1902–1992), son of the psychologist William Stern (1871–1938), analyzed this in terms of 'homeworking': we dedicate ourselves to radio, cinema, television, cable TV, our iPads, identifying references on demand, follow sports teams, politics, Twitter, what have you. It is the same, ontologically speaking,

to do the same via any device, cellphone, laptop, television, or YouTube. Given a connection with a screen, we *are*, visually-cum-haptically, *online*.

Our concern with online events, our fear-of-missing-out, as analyzed by psychologists, sociologists, political theorists, excuses both presence *and* absence: the feedback loops offer the simulacrum that is the illusion of 'talk of our own name.' As the Stoics already wrote some two thousand years ago, the itch for recognition is a destructive addiction, but today's social media has addicted all of us: Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, it hardly matters. We are all 'celebrities' (Seymour, 2019), we are all 'royals,' as I argue (Babich, 2020a). In the same way, websites collect enough cookies to seem to know us, tracked AI style, individually, personally. It works for commercial links to Amazon, offering options for recently browsed or items casually mentioned and digitally 'overheard' in conversation. The efficacy seems universal quite along with the neural research to prove it.²⁰ Having set ourselves up to follow life online and to amass 'followers' online, we are poised for a pandemic brought to us in the 'sheltering in place' comfort of our own homes.

Today, we are willy-nilly, first in the stasis and now in the ongoing aftermath of Lockdown, equalized spectators: captivated by programs advertising the newest news along with the newest, latest gadget. So, we buy massively online, enriching internet purveyors in the process. Assuming our invisibility, behind our screens, focused on them as we are, we also manage to overlook what we 'technically' know to be a given. We are oblivious to ubiquitous surveillance.

As Ernst Schraube reminds us in an important essay titled with a phrase borrowed from Anders, 'Torturing Things Until They Confess,' we continue to have no idea *who* Anders was, an obscurity consequent upon Anders' own, as Schraube emphasizes, 'extensive critique of technology' (2005, p. 77). In the current crisis, however, Anders' critique is essential. Similarly, Jean Baudrillard's reflections are key as the current crisis is adumbrated by media transmission, including social media, i.e., the internet. Thus one 'participates' in academic symposia in 2020 as in

²⁰ See complete with images of brain activation maps, as well as further references to the literature, Carmody and Lewis (2006). See too, Wu (2016) and Zuboff (2019).

2021, although in-person meetings were banned, virtually, *synchronously* and then, archived on YouTube, *asynchronously*, as ‘instruction’ (one needs these scare quotes) continues, precariously uncertain, with masks mandated, on every level, preschool and primary school to university.

The ‘screen being’ of and for this mode of human interaction needs to be studied, although and of course, as I have argued: Illich and Anders were already there, along with other more mainline thinkers (see for further references Babich, 2016, 2018b).

The new tracking technology is part of our cell-phones, beyond that, it is inhaled ‘in smart dust’ (Haggerty, 2013, xxv) or injected as a dye to track vaccination and so on (Donnelley et al., 2018; Trafton, 2019). ‘People as sensors,’ by design, as the Australian sociologists M.G. Michael and Katrina Michael write (2013b, xxiv).

‘Cancel culture’ is a concomitant of screen being and its blinders: we see what we click, reinforced as a feed (echoing Adorno’s language of the ‘culinary,’ Anders’ ‘noodled’ or force-fed geese). Thus the whole of former life has been summarily ‘canceled,’²¹ on an academic level this includes conferences as well as commencement celebrations and standard school terms, ‘ghosting’ face to face. The name is new, but the social phenomenon is an old one: common practice on small town streets or in corporate or university hallways, the trick of not seeing folk as one passes them by. Ghosting is mobbing by negation or silence, as it is studied in sociology and psychology.²² But this is also done physically by means of our masks, blocking and obscuring one’s own face, one’s own proprioception/perceptive acuity, along with that of the other.

In philosophy, the mechanism drives the analytic-continental divide and accounts for validation, most obvious when withheld. We listen to certain experts and we dismiss others as doing ‘bad’ work or defending pseudo-science or, worse yet, whatever some of us dub ‘conspiracy.’

The sense in which we have to do with what underlies the interface, qua invisible, we simply take for granted, this passes beneath notice, like Nietzsche’s intestinal windmills. In the same way, we are hacked

²¹ See, for recent mainstream media discussions, Bromwich (2018) and McDermott (2018). See too Kinos-Goodin (2018).

²² See further Duffy and Sperry (2012), as well as Prevost and Hunt (2018).

without our knowledge, most digital viruses lurk as bacteria (et al.) in our bodies live: happily co-existing, nicely named 'cookies' sending back the data they track, without our leave but much more crucially: beneath our notice. And philosophically we can ask the Leibnizian question: is this a difference that makes any difference? Why should we care? Many of these cookies are embedded in legal ways, certainly we agree to them, an irrecusable part of the software 'packages' we ourselves install.²³

The notion of viral contamination is a mongrel between the living and the dead, between computer and medical science (with a certain amount of built-in cold war and sci-fi metaphoric: Mayer, 2004; cf. Alekseeva et al., 2013; Wassenaar & Blaser, 2002). We long ago persuaded ourselves of the importance of 'vaccination,' following a heroic narrative and a monocausal account contra the complex evidence of public health studies and the attenuation of disease morbidity (Douglas et al., 2020; Latour, 2000). When Lewontin reminded his readers of this history in *Biology as Ideology*, he experienced almost instant blowback. We 'believe' in vaccination—side-effects be damned. The metaphor follows the current computer model (Conrad, 2007; Illich, 1995; Leydesdorff, 2006), the ideal of 'virus protection:' always-on security that is also, of course, always-on tracking in our digital devices. If this can be injected into our bodies, so much the better, so some scholars argue. But the scale has changed in the interim, from microchips to nanochips and softer still as so-called quantum dots, 'delivered,' I am quoting *MIT News* from December 2019, 'along with a vaccine.'²⁴ The technology to do this is, of course, already several years old.

In today's age of what I above called 'screen being,' the ontological transformation is complete: we do not see the screen because, intent on whatever we seek, whatever we imagine ourselves to be doing, we see through the screen: we see past it. Screen cleaners and special microfiber wipes for screens are increasingly unnecessary not because today's screens no longer smudge but because we no longer notice the smudges: we disattend in the same way that a person afflicted with

²³ See for example, Berry's 'Softwarization of Society' in Berry (2014, pp. 53–87) but also Hall (2016) as well as Stingl (2015).

²⁴ See, again, Trafton (2019, cf. Donnelly et al., 2018).

‘floaters’ in the sclera (these are caused by a number of things, including viral infections but also Lyme disease as well as syphilis and tuberculosis, as well as a range of fungal infections, molds, and larger parasites) accommodates, and no longer sees the floaters that are, of course, still there (Williamson & Haynes, 2018).²⁵ If being-on-line increasingly encompasses the entirety of a person’s affective life, including porn, including masturbatory habits that have become mainstream but also including romance, dating apps, gambling apps, via little swipe screens, and the habits of the same, sub- or unconsciously adumbrated by what we *do not see*.

Baudrillard sought to map this for us in his own work on media and its digitalization, reminding us that media largely works as the *illusion* of communication (see Babich, 2018b). To this same extent, our *response* to so-called ‘Fake News’ (this is the click-factor) is itself a manufactured artifact of our unshakable belief that, given sufficient filters, blocking/censoring dangerous input, we can see the truth (Tandoc et al., 2018). Our responses to media, radio, television, film, internet feeds, are controlled, and again, we insist that this is not so (Bateman, 2016; Gapova, 2020).

Greg Milner (2016),²⁶ explores the ubiquitous presence of tracking technology, including a fair measure of global imperialism.²⁷ Now, GPS is nothing innocuous (Oxley, 2017). But, ‘distracted by distraction from distraction,’²⁸ we do not remember details from day to day, not to mention invoking past experience, which is how weather manipulation, chemtrails, an obvious thing, widely denied by mainstream media and the like, proceed in plain sight. And to the extent that use and familiarity breed complacency if not contempt, we tend to regard reports of

²⁵ Intriguingly there is little that can be done medically to cure this, so that we ‘live’ with it. Cf. Nussenblatt (2010) and Perez and Caspi (2015).

²⁶ Although earlier, see if only for reflections on the whereness of ‘whereness,’ Robin Mannings (2008), here 19f. See too, more conventionally, Michael P. Lynch (2015) and see too Lynch (2016).

²⁷ See here, to start, Frith (2015) as well as, because just such ‘data’—your sex life online—is what is and *can be* studied, Albury et al. (2017). See Babich (2019).

²⁸ Here I find Kurt Vonnegut’s ‘Harrison Bergeron’ disquieting and perfectly apt.

such dangers as hype, quite in the same way as we imagine that all wireless technologies are harmless, from microwaves to 5G.²⁹ If it doesn't kill us immediately, such that we fall over or 'vaporize,' as in a video game, we must be fine, healthwise, with it.

Tethered to our machines, we need plugs wherever we go (should we ever travel again), as we are the nursemaids of our devices: keeping our devices fully charged is added to the tasks of the everyday, to keep them handier than the Heideggerian 'ready to hand' at all times, we worry about the same devices.³⁰ Technology to this extent is more than an extension of our senses, as argued beginning in the nineteenth century. Much rather, technology extends our desires, crystallizing them: we know what it can bring us, and we are prepared to submit to its exigencies, solicitously attuned to our phones, attentive to the invisible Jinn's of WiFi/WLAN and cell phone towers, 4G, 5G—whatever, we do not care.

Postphenomenology and Conspiracy, or: Vaccination and National Security

The same rhetoric that can devalue a scientist or expert judgment can be used to counter claims (naming them 'conspiracy'), a counter-strategy sometimes deployed to confirm those same claims as casual facts.

If Mari Lilleslåtten writing online in *Science Norway* can remind us that 'The coronavirus pandemic strengthens state authority,' (2020) one of the things that should be underscored is that there is less debate on this theme than there is about wondering when mass vaccination will be ready. But as Latour, who writes about this at length two decades ago, in a book on vaccination, his subtly argued, *The Pasteurization of France*, where Latour not unlike Lewontin, points to the complex thing that it is to 'bring' vaccination to the country as it were, but not less to the showmanship required. It was not facts per se but it was good media

²⁹ See, representatively for references, Maregu (2016) as well as Sharma and Kumar (2010).

³⁰ Thus marketers/social psychologists study the separation anxiety that follows should we forget them at home or lose them. See Rosenberger (2014), and, invoking 'Gelassenheit,' Babich (2017b).

representation that made Pasteur a success. As Latour writes, ‘politics is made not with politics but with something else. Here was a new source of power with which to conquer the state’ (Latour, 2000, 56). The rest is propaganda. Thus, Latour describes Pettenkoffer’s casual quaffing of a beaker of cholera bacilli as drama subtending the vastly more efficacious improvements (this is ‘terrain’) to public health (clean water and the like). Latour has been making his points for a long time, Lewontin likewise, and so too Fleck on typhus, likewise in the Berkeley virologist Peter Duesberg’s arguments on AIDS and HIV causality (Babich, 2015 and see Babich, 2021, forthcoming).

Surveillance, as argued in *Überveillance*, (Michael & Michael, 2013a), has to be obvious, or it is pointless. To this end, in a digital age, people themselves are their own monitors: i.e., and again, ‘people as sensors.’³¹ If Kevin Haggerty’s reassuring conviction, circa 2006, that ‘there will be no 3 a.m. knock on the door by storm troopers’ (2013, xix) may seem naïve today, given a few YouTube videos showing what appear to be precisely such incursions, his larger claim seems correct: such tracking will be ‘couched in the unassailable language of progress and social betterment,’ (ibid.), i.e., we will be doing this, or the government will be doing it to us, for our health. The effect is pure Foucault: discipline and punish.

Thus if smart tagging can be effected, as one can count off the ways ‘omnipresent electronic surveillance might be implanted in the body,’ including ‘smart swallowable pills, nanotechnology patches, ... even smart dust’ (Michael & Michael, 2013a, xxiv) such means of delivery are already in the air, in the works, already deployed.

How to Write a Narrative for a Pandemic

So how does one ‘Invent an Epidemic?’ How does one go about inventing a pandemic?

³¹ Michael and Michael (2013a, xxiv). The same collection (fairly) includes Katherine Albrecht’s 2010 ‘Microchip Induced Tumors in Laboratory Rodents and Dogs’ (Albrecht, 2013).

My title mentions fake news, the sort of thing the Warwick sociologist Steve Fuller (2020) thinks through very carefully with respect to counseling DARPA (Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) on, as it were, how to do it, quite with respect to constructing a narrative. Narratives are important things. For Hollywood and Cannes oriented movie makers and YouTube product influencers, you need a story board, a story line, important for the mystery novelist as Umberto Eco knew and as Leo Tolstoy also understood this on a grand scale, Latour has recourse to this, citing Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, but not less Arthur Conan Doyle and his wonderfully pedantic invention, Sherlock contra a specific and often bumbling Doctor, who played straight man to his boy or sexagenarian genius (Basil Rathbone or Benedict Cumberbatch, it is the same): one must line up one's ducks well and truly to ensure that the even more bumbling Scotland Yard or that greatest of bumlbers, the reader of detective novels, will draw the right conclusions. Most recently, J.K. Rowling did this for us in her *Harry Potter*, wherein we learned to hate a careful and rigorous teacher, Severus Snape for being a careful and rigorous teacher. We like teachers who are buddies, teachers who make us learn, not so much. Thus for students, moving classes online can seem a dream come true. Here the point concerns narrative: by telling her tale as she told it, Rowling was able to ensure that her child wizard fantasy novels (and later the film series based on her books) would sell and continue to sell. *Game of Thrones*, *Harry Potter*, *Sherlock Holmes* video and filmic distractions that have ruled our minds for so long that a professor with a specialization in philosophy of science, critical epistemology, aesthetics, that would be me, includes such references in her teaching and research. We are soaking in the media that makes the 'invention' of an epidemic possible, and by saying this, I am not talking content, king for the media makers, precisely because it is 'content' that allows them to do what they need to do, namely, to sell their product or advance the cause of global pandemic, while keeping the world audience, this is a very huge move, otherwise distracted and yet fully focused.

Everything is channeled by way of the internet. What used once upon a time to be radio programming, Hollywood film programming, television programming (think Anders, think Williams, think Baudrillard), print media, standardized textbooks, now, thanks to Covid, the university

itself, its best (and worst) teachers, without debate on university senate floors, having, at no cost at all to their universities or to the government, put their courses online, in many cases *asynchronously*, meaning that it is now canned and packaged, calculable and reusable, rebrandable, quite as they were told to do so, in just this fashion—YouTube and Blackboard and Zoom, Moodle and Panopto must be breaking from the weight of all this content, except they are not (the claim that storage space is a thing in a virtual realm is a way to charge you more fees for more nowhere amounts of the same virtual drive), this is Langdon Winner's dark EduSham™ (1989), in his parody prediction of yesteryear or go and read Kittler, or Berry et al., and so on.

When one gets one's information from a single source or medium (I am talking about the screen) one is 'primed,' as the Yale psychologist John Bargh contends (1999, 2006), as I quote him in *The Hallelujah Effect* (2016). Lisa Blackman (2019) points out that 'haunting' effects include fellow psychologists and see Adam Curtis' *Century of the Self* (2005) on Bernays, *Crystallization of Public Opinion* (1923). But priming is only one part of a multi-stage process (Rodríguez, 2019), a process that works better if you are on 'Lockdown,' forbidden by decree to leave your home except for essential things. Certainly, Lockdown, as I began by noting, follows the model of solitary confinement, prison psychology and this works just as well if the incarceration is self-imposed, where the jailed are their own jailers, and, just as in the case of jail, prepare their own meals but, improving on the logistics of a jail, prisoners who also obtain their own provisions, paying for their jail (rent) and for their own food and everything else related to their upkeep in the process. In this concentrated setting, the narrative, which was, as it seems, already prepared, unfolds.

Covid-19, an astonishingly virulent and not less astonishingly vague or multifarious disease flagged as a foreign invasion (how often is the language of the foreigner, the outsider, the other, the exotic locale, key to the mythology of infectious invasion?), a microscopic terror communicated, first, according to the WHO, not as airborne but on surfaces: hence the images of hazmat teams spraying streets with bleach (although a certain politician's references to bleach were received with great hilarity, see for an overview of some longstanding, Rutala & Weber, 1997), which

has in the interim been extended to the oddly absurd and cruel to nature, that is littoral and seabird life, spraying of a Spanish beach, a deliberate spill of chemicals into nature for reasons not of gency but panic fear.

The properties of this disease from Wuhan, where the US government participates in the administration of several laboratories set up to bypass a number of US restrictions (since lifted) on research then binding in the US regarding gain-of-function bioweapons but also GMO, experimenting with stem cells, with fetal tissue, with transhuman embryos, experiments not a problem in Wuhan and elsewhere, including the development as Paul Virilio (2003) wrote about animal-human mosaics (up to 80% human-pig chimeras, 90% -mouse) for the sake of DARPA funded medical research, for the sake, variously, of transplants, including vaccine development, where bioweapons are just the tip of the iceberg as such things are good for all sort of things.

In his *The Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*, Fleck reminds us of the general theory of disease, permeating a certain view of disease etiology whereby it is assumed that a disease is 'caused' by one disease entity. What one asks, when one hears of the death of a colleague, a neighbor, a distant family member, a friend, did they die of? This is also how statistics are made today; one simply writes 'Covid-19' on a death certificate. The narrative for that was already prepared in exceptional emergency measures already passed into law, eliminating the need for two physicians, with a third physician as check, cut to one and eliminating any need to diagnose or even to examine the body. A perfect storm.

All these deaths and there are always all these deaths on any fine day, but now these can be ascribed to Covid-19, attesting to a pandemic and the need for health measures of whatever kind. Using the example of syphilis, as Fleck points out, the 'scientific fact' invented and developed as such in his case study, using typhus as parallel, the presence of the pathogen does not mean that one has the disease and may not even mean that one is a carrier of the disease because the disease in question is a matter not of the presence of a disease entity, do you have it or do you not, but of your immune system in general. No matter how often this might be repeated—it is standard immunology and standard public

health—we do not believe it. We are in search of a magic bullet because, like Fleck's little devils, we see diseases as malicious agents.

With reference to Peter Duesberg among other so-called AIDS denialists, I have argued (Babich, 2015) that science faces a considerable challenge when it or government imposes the playbook of the inquisition, decrying research as pseudo-science. The same holds, just to cite a recent article in *Le Monde*, for any scientist who fails to toe the party line (Monod, 2020). Where this is the case, to be a virologist or immunologist, emergency room physician or hospital head, will not help you unless you repeat the official, government-sanctioned view.

It is a piece of generic or casual mobbing to dismiss the science done by such scientists as 'pseudo-science,' as if it were not science at all. Hence what is at stake is just what Kuhn called the 'received view.' And what is interesting from this point of view is that there is no way to oppose the received view, this is the point of his *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, not that Kuhn himself was happy about this conclusion as it followed from his argument, as a received view only ceases to be received when its proponents, with all their institutional power, fade from power and influence, in most cases, quite as Max Planck observed, only when they die.

And often not even then. The promise, and it is tenuous, of the scientists who recommend that we continue to do science, to the extent that they can be heard, is that we might still continue to 'do' science, virology, epidemiology, immunology (Latour, 2000; Lewontin, 1991, and see for a recent overview, via 'material hermeneutics' and what our portable laboratories tell us, in as much as testing kits count as such 'portable laboratories,' to use Heelan's and Rheinberger's language, Babich (2020). Philosophy of science, especially the hermeneutic, phenomenological kind, is part of that research promise.

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