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Gustave Le Bon, Rhetoric as Mass Contagion, and 19th Century Rhetoric

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Abstract: In the latest edition of *The Present State of Scholarship in the History of Rhetoric*, Lynne Lewis Gaillet (2010) laments the continuing broad absence of work on nineteenth-century Continental theory: “[Donald] Stewart predicted that the next edition of *The Present State* would include works by and about Continental European rhetoricians,” and she then notes that despite “headway made by scholars in other rhetorical periods, the nineteenth-century has not made great strides toward this goal” (p. 169). One such Continental European rhetorician, Gustave Le Bon, has indeed been largely displaced in histories of rhetoric, despite evidence that he influenced not merely the rhetoric as an intellectual discipline but the rhetorical practices of important historical figures. This article is an attempt to place Le Bon in the continuum of rhetorical history between the 19th and 20th century.

Key words: rhetoric, Le Bon, history

Abstrak: Dalam edisi terbaru *The Present State of Scholarship di History of Rhetoric*, Lynne Lewis Gaillet (2010) menyesalkan tidak adanya karya yang begitu luas pada teori Kontinental abad ke-19: “[Donald] Stewart meramalkan bahwa edisi berikutnya dari *The Present State* akan termasuk karya oleh dan tentang retorika benua Eropa, “dan dia kemudian mencatat bahwa meskipun” kemajuan yang dibuat oleh para sarjana dalam periode retorik lainnya, abad kesembilan belas belum membuat langkah besar menuju tujuan ini “(hal. 169). Salah satu retorika Eropa Kontinental, Gustave Le Bon, memang telah banyak salah meletakkan dalam sejarah retorika, meskipun ada bukti bahwa ia tidak hanya mempengaruhi retorika sebagai disiplin intelektual tetapi

praktik retorik dari tokoh-tokoh sejarah yang penting. Artikel ini adalah upaya untuk menempatkan Le Bon dalam rangkaian sejarah retorik antara abad ke-19 dan ke-20.

Kata kunci: retorik, Le Bon, sejarah

INTRODUCTION

Describing Le Bon as a rhetorician is not mere reaching by definition. The foremost scholar of Le Bon's life and work has stated that Le Bon's intent when writing his most influential work, *Psychologie des Foules*, was to instruct a hypothetical statesman how "crowds are moved by 'images, words, and formulas'" and offered "a short lesson in the art of persuasion through rhetoric" (Nye, 1975, p. 77). Le Bon himself confirmed that this was his intent, and *Psychologie* reads like a conceptual manual for mass communication at a time when the technological means to effect this was limited mostly to print and public assemblies. Further proof of *Psychologie's* intent as a rhetoric becomes clear in Le Bon's rhetorical theories in a 1917 essay, "La Persuasion," which is only available as a manuscript, but is essentially a restatement of his theories of persuasion in digest form. Although *Psychologie* has long been identified as a rhetorical treatise, it remains largely neglected by historians of rhetoric, in spite of its demonstrable role in shaping the rhetoric of the modern era until recently. In Jay Childers's article, "Fearing the Masses: Gustave Le Bon and Some Undemocratic Roots of Modern Rhetorical Studies", Childers (2014) explains that Le Bon "popularized the notion that the masses were like a psychological crowd devoid of reason and the ability to deliberate" (p. 76). Childers (2014) has provided valuable connections to Le Bon's persistence in the discipline of speech communication well into the 20th century. This article will demonstrate that his influence on continental cultural practice was even more significant, and that he represents a bridge between 19th century scientism in rhetorical theory and the re-emergence of the rhetorical tradition in the 20th century, where conventional histories have left him largely unmoored and under-historicized.

Building on the work of Childers (2014), we will explore Le Bon's rhetoric as having its roots in the prevailing medical and biological theories from Le Bon's time. These scientific theories shaped not only the rhetorical manuals and theories of the nineteenth century, but shaped totalitarian oratory and politics quite directly through Benito Mussolini and (in strong likelihood) the Third Reich, thereby affecting – however indirectly – Burke

(2006), at least in terms of his reaction to Hitler's *Mein Kampf*. This article extends the analysis of Le Bon's rhetoric by examining mass persuasion as contagion (as contagion was understood before 1896) and ultimately addresses Le Bon's significance as a figure bridging the history between 19th and 20th century rhetoric.

LE BON, CONTAGION THEORY AND THE HISTORICAL TRAJECTORY OF 19TH CENTURY RHETORIC

The theory of persuasion as social contagion was never fully articulated by most 19th century intercontinental rhetorics, and indeed, at first blush one might regard Le Bon, his theories, and influence as a sort of freakish anomaly. On closer examination, Le Bon should be studied because precisely because he fits within certain trends in the development of 19th century rhetoric, and serves as an explanation for 20th century rhetorical theories and practices which have not been fully historicized—or characterized as existing “outside” conventional rhetorical history. His omission is likely owing to Nan Johnson's most salient critique of 19th century rhetoric as it was previously historicized, which, she explains, conflated 19th century rhetoric with writing instruction (1991, p. 13). As Walzer and Beard aptly summarize, such histories “fallaciously assumed that a history of how writing was taught constituted a history of rhetoric as a discipline” (2009, p. 18). In Le Bon, we find a rhetoric theoretically and practically tailored to civic discourse, (though not, as Childers points out, *democratic* civic discourse).

Ferreira-Buckley (1996) has observed that 19th century rhetoric exhibited emerging trends such as scientism and phrenology, of which Le Bon was a leading advocate. In fact, Le Bon invented the “pocket cephalometer” (with which he used to measure the skulls of unsuspecting persons). In many transcontinental rhetoric written prior to Le Bon, rhetoric was described as a “science” with many notable examples in widespread circulation in classrooms. Johnson's thesis (1991) that 19th century rhetoric was essentially synthetic, and one essential component was its “epistemological approaches to rhetoric as a ‘science’ closely related to the study of the ‘mental faculties’” is demonstrated in these rhetoric (p. 14). Explaining the more basic components of the “New Rhetoric” of the 19th century, Johnson (1991) explains that “the study of rhetoric” was viewed as “a science” capable of revealing the “basic principles of nature” (p. 67). We see in Le Bon an extension of these approaches but deriving mass psychology and epidemiology, such as it was in 1896.

Hill (1877) in *The Science of Rhetoric* defined rhetoric as “the science of the laws of effective discourse” (p. 37) which was loosely based around field psychology. Bascom (1866) in *Philosophy of Rhetoric* described rhetoric as a “mental and moral science” (p. 15). As a very first principle, Hart (1882) explains in *Manual of Composition and Rhetoric* that “Rhetoric is the science which treats all discourse” (p. 17). True to the tendency in rhetorical theory of his day, Le Bon promises at the outset of his work to examine the “problem” of crowds in a “purely scientific manner”, and explains that his theories, which may go against the grain of prevailing crowd theories, should nevertheless be accepted as more wholesomely scientific than the alternative (v). Hauntingly, he states “A man of science bent on verifying a phenomenon is not called upon to concern himself with the interests his verifications may hurt” (vi).

Le Bon finally bridges the gap between rhetoric and science when he offers a cue, as to the rhetorical intent of his work: “The art of those who govern, as is the case with the art of advocates, consists above all in the science of employing words” (p. 105). In the writings of Le Bon, 19th century scientism (specifically medical science relating to contagion) became writ large as a central means of persuasion in his overall schema. Le Bon’s rhetorical theories, grounded in physiological processes, are not more novel than Alexander Bain’s (1867). Bain’s theories, too, emerged from “forging the link between physiology and psychology” which synthesized an “analytic structure” for his rhetoric. Le Bon’s rhetoric extrapolates his conclusions from the emerging science of both mass psychology and cellular physiological processes, and thus fits in this continuum of scientific thinking.

A final reason Le Bon should be a subject of inquiry for historians of rhetoric is that his rhetoric functions as a widely influential bridge between the scientism of the 19th and 20th centuries, while also explaining a great deal about rhetorical practice in the public sphere not accounted for in other early rhetorician’s work like Burke and Richards.

As Connors (1991) critique of the dearth of scholarship in 19th century rhetoric pointed out, many years ago, conventional rhetorical histories left off with “Campbell, Blair and Whately” and picked up again in the “1920s, with I.A. Richards and Kenneth Burke” (p. 50). Le Bon’s theory, grounded in both the social and biological science of his day – such as it was – creates a much more clearer and influential continuum that was not scholarly, but civic, and often had terrifying consequences.

LE BON AND THE TOTALITARIAN STATE

For those unfamiliar with Le Bon in the context of his historical milieu, a fundamental factual introduction might be useful. *Psychologie* was an overt rhetorical manual with not only broad influence but a demonstrable influence on the modern period's rhetorical praxis. Not only is his rhetorical theory a natural extension of scientific psychological principles found throughout the 19th century, but Le Bon was a vital link between 19th century rhetoric and scientific public discourse in the decades after *Psychologie's* publication in 1896. His treatise functioned as a means for emerging totalitarian states to form rhetorical policy, mainly through speechifying, display, and ultimately propaganda. Though a physician by training, Le Bon (1841-1931) had a long career and wrote over twenty books, and his most notable success and influence came with his rhetorical treatise which synthesized and repurposed French crowd psychology to persuasive. Le Bon's theories in *Psychologie* were printed hundreds of thousands of times and translated into seventeen languages.

While Le Bon has been mostly uncontextualized in discussions of nineteenth-century continental rhetoricians, he has not been entirely ignored. Robert A. Nye (1975), the leading scholar of Le Bon's work, attaches two causes to his neglect: Le Bon and the French academy had a mutual antipathy to one another during his lifetime, and the academy steadfastly refused to study his works. This was likely exacerbated posthumously, due to his rather direct connection to fascism in the early twentieth century and an ambient cultural stigma in France toward Vichy sympathizers, real or ideological. But just as in American scholarship, Le Bon has had academic attention from scholars such as Marpeau (2000), largely in the context of cultural and biographical studies¹ Before Childers, only Nye, himself a historian, traced Le Bon's influence in nations such as Turkey, Rumania, Japan, and most notably, many nations of Western Europe (Nye, 1975, pp. 165-167). One of the early adaptors of Le Bon's theories, and possibly the most notorious, was none other than Benito Mussolini, with whom Le Bon became friends with later in life.

In an interview with Pierre Chanlaine, Mussolini claimed, "much that Le Bon wrote in his *Psychologie des Foules* had been useful to him in addressing crowds. Speaking directly and forcefully to the crowd itself, and establishing a rapport based on foreknowledge of the composition of the group were

¹ See generally Gustave Le Bon. *Parcours d'un intellectuel 1841-1931*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2000.

important elements which Mussolini claimed to have found in Le Bon's book" (Nye, 1975, p. 178). Chanlaine further reported that "Mussolini related to him his satisfaction with Le Bon's principle of 'affirmation'... He laughed with satisfaction as he told of how he could vigorously state a principle to the crowd, then ask them 'isn't that so?' to which they would reply '*si Duce, si Duce*'" (Chanlaine as cited in Nye, 1975, p. 179). Perhaps even more noteworthy is the argument – only speculative – originally posited by Stein (1955), that a translation of Le Bon's book was formative to Hitler (1939, p. 179). Other scholars, without drawing a direct connection to Le Bon, have noted the influence of *massenpsychologie* on the oratorical practices of the Third Reich (see generally Bosaijman; Iezzi, 1959). While recognizing that the assertion would be difficult to prove, Nye (1975) points out that Hitler's statements on the nature of his oratory in relation to his audience share haunting conceptual ground with the theories of Le Bon. Surprisingly, however, it was not only fascist states that found LeBon's work useful. In 1914, Theodore Roosevelt asked specifically to meet Le Bon during a visit to Paris (Barrows, 1981, p. 179).

There is a long history of rhetorical analyses of fascist rhetoric, going back at least as far as Kenneth Burke's 1941 essay "The Rhetoric of Hitler's 'Battle'" in which he analyzed *Mein Kampf* in order to "discover what kind of 'medicine' this medicine-man has concocted, that we may know, with greater accuracy, exactly what to guard against, if we are to forestall the concocting of a similar medicine in America" (2006, p. 149). Indeed, Nazi rhetoric led many to question and study the ethical problems inherent in rhetoric. There have been numerous analyses of totalitarian rhetoric analyzing its internal strategies. This approach continued with Corbett's "Rhetoric of the Closed Fist" (1969). Katz (1992), too, has noted an ethical rhetorical problem evidenced in Nazi memos, where he claims that through an "ethic of expediency, rhetoric was made to serve the holocaust" (p. 257).

Yet the era of fascism was certainly not the first time rhetoricians noticed the propensity of rhetoric to be used for unethical ends. Indeed, long before Hitler, Mussolini, and other twentieth-century fascists, Cicero (2001) noted this dangerous aspect of rhetoric: "Eloquence is one of the supreme virtues; and the stronger this faculty is, the more necessary it is for it to be combined with integrity and supreme wisdom, and if we bestow fluency of speech on persons devoid of those virtues, we shall not have made orators of them, but shall have put weapons into the hands of madmen" (p. 55). The possibility of rhetoric's ill-use has led some as far as to claim rhetoric entirely vacuous and useless in an age of scientific inquiry, but Le Bon, himself a physician, used

scientific ideas as a key component of his theory of rhetoric and *contagion*. This concept is the least explained of his rhetorical theory, and the bulk of this article investigates the connections between rhetoric and contagion. Le Bon's theory of persuasion is a clear expression of scientism in 19th century rhetoric and was consistent with others in his day. We will return to Le Bon's future influence later, but first this article shows how Le Bon's scientism shaped his rhetorical theory in the 19th century.

LE PSYCHOLOGIE DES FOULES AND THE CONTAGION OF IDEAS

Le Bon was trained as a physician and attempted to enter the academe by studying race theory, anthropology, and phrenology. He was so convinced of the racial superiority of Europeans that much of his work operated on the assumption that the various races of humanity were arranged hierarchically, with Europeans being at the top (see generally *Les Lois Psychologiques de l'Évolution des Peuples*). As a physical scientist, he believed in the existence of the aether, "black light" and mesmerism as an instrument of social control. His racism, elitism, nationalism, and pseudo-scientific beliefs put him squarely in line with many components of fascist ideology. His exclusion from social scientific circles in his own historical milieu only served as further impetus for the development of his political thought—a thought marked by antipathy for democratic institutions and processes. His belief in the organization of audiences as a subhuman organism with cellular integrity is central to a contextual analysis of his rhetorical theory. Le Bon's training as a physician was formative to his theory of social contagion, a theory which had rhetorical dimensions; the three principal means of persuasion cited by Le Bon was "affirmation, repetition, and contagion" (p. 117). Although contagion is perhaps the least-discussed element of these means of mass persuasion in *Psychologie*, it is safe to assume that a physician's understanding of contagion in 1896 would be significantly at variance from our own, but also significant for the further examination of Le Bon's theories.

Le Bon's stated intent in composing *Psychologie* was not merely to write a popularizing rhetoric but to clinically offer this advice to control and manipulate the social "sickness" of crowd behavior with medical theories of control which operated by contagion. It should be said that Le Bon expressed genuine antipathy for rhetoric in an academic sense or in the sense of public oratory. No less, Le Bon's work is noted for the rhetorical utility of his theories and instructions for an orator who might utilize them. For example, he wrote,

“To know the art of impressing the imagination of crowds is to know at the same time the art of governing them” (92). Le Bon, separating himself from the rhetorical tradition in both its educational tradition and its civic tradition, drew on the scientism of the nineteenth-century sociological and anthropological currents of human “science” in his day. Le Bon sets forth both rhetorical precepts, a description of an ideal orator, and strategies to appeal to audiences (which he terms crowds) based on assumptions about their non-rationality: “The laws of logic have no action on a crowd. To bring home conviction to crowds it is necessary first of all understand the sentiments by which they are animated, to pretend to share these sentiments, then to endeavor to modify them...” (pp. 112-113). In Le Bon’s rhetorical schema, the goal of the ideal orator is to manipulate words and concepts, which is based in a theory of language that presumes a non-rational relationship between the signifier and signified, and accordingly theorizes the ideal means of non-rational persuasion through image, symbol, analogy, association, and repetition which has as its final component *contagion* to form, or more precisely control, the illness of mass psychological bodies. Contagion is perhaps the least defined of these components, and so we must turn to theories of contagion in the medical ideas of his day.

Le Bon’s rhetorical treatise had its conceptual foundation in the language of French mesmerism, racial theory, and, most significantly, the thought of “L’Ecole de Paris”, whose main interests have been defined as broadly embracing “mental activity” concretely manifested, “the life of and the transformation of mental images, the *relationship of emotion to organic rhythms*,” (Nye, 1975, p. 65). In sum, Le Bon was synthesizing a rhetorical theory based on early scientific ideas of non-rational behavior as exemplified in *biological, involuntary processes*, and collective psychology. To know the title of his restatement is enough to drive home the point: *Psychologie*’s purpose was to present a rhetoric aimed at social control based on the premise of biological automatism, and the agent of infecting and curing biological automata was contagion. This could be described based on contemporary theories of contagion in vogue in his time, which led him to conceive of persuasion as a form of pathogenic psychological warfare.

RHETORIC AS PATHOGENIC PSYCHOLOGICAL CONTROL

Le Psychologie des Foules, then, was highly influenced by Le Bon’s disgust for the general public and democratic institutions. In the mid-twentieth

century, Hannah Arendt (2007) explained, “if the few are the wisest, then they are according to Plato those who cannot persuade the multitude and must rule over unwilling subjects through violence” (p. 943). Le Bon presented his theories first by investigating the “general characteristics” of crowds and then with chapters on the remote and immediate factors of the opinions and beliefs of crowds and the limitations of crowds. Then, finally, with Chapter 9, Le Bon presents “The Leaders of Crowds and Their Means of Persuasion.” In this chapter, which we will focus on, he identifies the qualities of successful leaders and their use for affirmation, repetition, and most importantly *contagion* as the biological weapon of ideological infections that are the primary means of rhetors. It is this latter concept that is our focus, but we must first explicate Le Bon’s understanding of the crowd as organic body.

Le Bon begins *Le Psychologie* by explaining that he is not simply referring to a mass of people when he uses the word crowd but “a provisional being formed of heterogeneous elements, which for a moment are combined, *exactly as the cells which constitute a living body form by their reunion a new being which displays characteristics very different from those possessed by each of the cells singly*” (p. 30). This bears careful contextual understanding as not a mere metaphorical utterance but a comprehension of cellular theory as Le Bon, the physician, understood it. L. Wolpert’s study of cell theory before 1895 explains that vegetable cellular theory had been limitedly observed and understood since Robert Hooke’s study in 1665 (Wolpert, 1995, p. 265). Cellular theory however went through various phases until approximately 1833 when such theories began to connect the animal and cellular theories of tissue and cohesion, with various arguments that they were connected fibrously or in a ‘globular’ manner (p.229). But in any case, the history reveals that well into the time of Le Bon’s clinical training in the mid-nineteenth century, however it was styled, there was a belief in a kind of “vital force” or unifying energy that was responsible for cellular action and cohesion (p. 229). It was in 1889 that the cutting edge of cellular study still believed cellular material was “protoplasmic” but had still not accounted for individual cells possessing membranes that *separated and differentiated them from one another* (p. 230). It had still not been established until a year before the appearance *Le Psychologie*.

In terms of Le Bon’s rhetorical theory of pathogenesis and the cellular nature of rhetorical subjects, it must be understood that he regarded an audience as a mass of undifferentiated tissue, much like a protoplasmic mass of cells in one organism. If such a mass had no delineation or cellular wall between one and the other, then a pathogen could suddenly and with astonishing rapidity infect the organism entirely not merely by transfer

between distinct units but through the aether itself; indeed, Le Bon believed that the mere presence of a pathogenic persuasion could change the minds and actions of mass audiences. The cellular audience is heterogenous, as he explains, regardless of functional differences, and can be collectively controlled by virtue of its collective presence. As a physician, the undifferentiated tissues of the body of the crowd should be treated like cells, without differentiating and separating structures, indeed, the paradox of the part and the whole that derived from the 19th century medical theory of organic unity, from which he derives one of his earliest rhetorical “laws”.

More commonly referred to today as “mob mentality,” Le Bon’s crowd, further, does not require that all members of the crowd be in a single place together: “Thousands of isolated individuals may acquire at certain moments ... the characteristics of a psychological crowd” (p. 3). He further explains that crowds have an organic *mental unity*, centrally characterized by “impulsiveness, irritability, incapacity to reason, the absence of judgment and of the critical spirit, the exaggeration of the sentiments”, in sum, susceptibility to illness and infection (p. 17). When multiple people gather together, Le Bon explains, they become a “single being” and are subject to “*the law of the mental unity of crowds*” (p. 2). Le Bon was attempting to articulate a theory of persuasion based on medical research in vogue since the 1880s, in which scientists were attempting to argue against the “mechanistic” explanation of biological processes on prior centuries. Edmund Montgomery, who has been called a “Pioneer of Organicism,” argued in 1880 to further the logical foundations of organic unity, and probably influenced Le Bon’s rhetorical conceptions of cellular unity. As Philips (1970) explains, “In his article ‘The Unity of the Organic Individual,’ published in 1882, [Montgomery] mentioned his studies on cells and stated that he had come to the conclusion that the fundamental entity is not the individual cell, but the organism as a whole” (p. 426). Thus, to Le Bon, the objects or bodies to be persuaded are aggregate cells with whole functions, and not a set of individuals.

Because organicism, though logically flawed, was high science in the years preceding *Psychologie*, Le Bon’s theories of rhetoric and the scientism associated with them stemmed not from a mere contempt for assemblies of people acting in concert but from what he perceived as the bleeding edges of the science of life. Montgomery summarized that “The organism is prior to its tissues, the tissues prior to their supposed elements. The centralised organism is not, as universally assumed, a multiple of ultimate units, but is, on the contrary, itself one single individuality” (p. 326). The idea that audiences (“crowds”) functioned as an organic unit, an idea that implicates biological

systems theory, finds a conceptual corollary in 19th century medical science which posits that “processes occurring in living things could be understood only when the features of the whole organism were considered. The organism was a functioning unit, and it was this unit which determined the characteristics of the constituent parts, not vice-versa. The piecemeal examination of the parts, they were suggesting, would not lead to an understanding of the whole” (Philips, 1970, p. 427). Thus, Le Bon’s examination of the rhetoric which affected crowds as an organic whole, and not their constituent parts, was a logical step in his attempt to create a synthetic theory of mass persuasion.

Thus, to Le Bon, the mental unity of mass audiences is such that when an individual becomes a member of a crowd: “the mere fact that he forms part” of a biological organization that when isolated, “he may be a cultivated individual; in a crowd, he is a barbarian—that is, a *creature acting by instinct*” (p. 13). The biological “law” in Le Bon’s rhetorical theory is not mere metaphor but had very real intellectual antecedents, as it took little time and few logical steps for thinkers such as Haldane (1883) to extend biological and cellular organicism to social groupings: “When we have reached a standpoint from which we refuse to separate the individual organism from its surroundings and from its relation to other individuals, we see how the species may itself be looked upon as a compound organism” (p. 58).

FROM ORGANIC UNITS TO PATHOGENS

Having explained the foundation of rhetorical contagion theory, the next logical piece of Le Bon’s puzzle as to the means of the transmission of ideas is contagion theory itself. The precise meaning of this term as Le Bon the physician might have understood it while writing *Psychologie* in 1894-1895 bears theoretical historical analysis. Rudolph Virchow, an early pathologist in Europe, preceded Pasteur and laid the groundwork for the theory of contagion as Le Bon would have come to understand it. In 1858 he published a famous text, “Cellular Pathology,” which according to Santer “contained the theoretical basis for his disease theory” (p. 239). Virchow used microscopic research “to establish the principle that all tissues in the body were composed of cells. He promulgated the axiom that ‘every cell comes from another cell: from it [the cell] emanate all the activities of life both in health and sickness’” (p. 239). Building on cellular theory, Louis Pasteur, “fundamentally opposed a *living agent* theory of disease and fermentation” (p. 246). The alternative theory

was that microbes were somehow spontaneously generated, but around 1859 Pasteur showed microbial life itself could exist in air and this discovery gave rise to his most influential lecture, in which he extended the idea of contagious causation to larger social issues of his day – much like Le Bon later did. Pasteur underscored the importance of his research by explaining it as a building block to solving the questions of his day—confronting the nineteenth century theological imagination, which might explain “The unity or multiplicity of human races; the creation of man several thousand years or several thousand centuries ago; the fixity of the species or the slow and progressive transformation of one species into another” (Geison, 1995, pp. 110-111)

Pasteur’s lecture was generally aimed at combating the theory known as “spontaneous generation” of microbial life which was still under some debate through the work of Cohn in LeBon’s lifetime. If Cohn’s work was accepted for purposes of Le Bon’s rhetorical theory, it would theorize that audiences form their opinions spontaneously and without the intervention of a living agent. Huxley (1886) dispelled this idea in the field of biology with his influential essay, “On the Physical Basis or the Matter of Life.” The ideas contained in this seminal essay were a powerful argument against a theory of spontaneous generation. He argued for the interconnectedness of all living creatures, arguing that “a unity of power . . . a unity of form, and a unity of substantial composition; does pervade the whole living world” (p. 451). This unity gives life to the protoplasmic theory of cellular cohesion (still in vogue in the time of Le Bon) which Le Bon extended to the notions of cellular groups of people.

A further relevant scientific theory could further explain Le Bon’s understanding of contagion as a rhetorical principle. In the *British Medical Journal*, Simon (1879) offered a theory of contagion in “An Essay on Contagion: Its Nature and Mode of Action”. He opened the essay by asking the crucial question: What is the nature of the contagious matter? On this date, if this question had been put to Pasteur, or other later and more influential microbial theorists, they would have designated the cause as a living agent. But to Simon, “disease was not simply a catalytic process leading to breakdown of organic matter”; it was instead a *constructive* process (Santer, 2015, p. 269). We must remember that rhetorical action, too, is a constructive process conducted by living agents. By the late 1870s, it was generally conceded and expanded by the work of Robert Koch that infection was not merely causal but *necessary to contagious action* (p. 270). To Le Bon, social action and the rhetoric that it was predicated upon must therefore bear similitude. Without more exhaustive scientific history, it might suffice to say that after the

experiments of Cohn and by the time of the composition of *Psychologie*, the living agent theory had been conceded at least in part as one cause of contagion.

This of course brings us to a more central question: what is the role of the living agent of persuasion (the vector of pathogenic ideas) in Le Bon's scientific schema of persuasion? Le Bon's argument relating the process of contagion and therefore the process of persuasion would seem to stem from a false analogy, namely that humans, socially, are analogous to cellular complexes in social groupings. But historically, his assertions as to the results possible through his pathogenic rhetorical theory *proved to be entirely possible*. Emerging totalitarian states were so convinced of the viability Le Bon's theory of the bio-psychological control through infection and subsequent contagion that, as Le Bon had asserted was possible, they adopted it in practice to persuade audiences to kill millions of other people: "Making part of a crowd, he is conscious of the power given to him by number, and it is sufficient to suggest to him ideas of murder ... for him to yield immediately to temptation" (p. 15). Le Bon cites historical examples where such suggestions render casualties in the millions (p. 111).

For historical reasons and genuine anti-democratic sentiment, Le Bon believed that morbidity and destruction as a result of crowd action were inevitable and that the rhetor's role should be similar to that of a physician: to control and curtail the process of disease. Le Bon presents contagion as a part of the organic model of crowd persuasion he outlined earlier in the book claiming, "ideas, sentiments, emotions, and beliefs possess in crowds a contagious power as intense as that of microbes" (p. 12). He spends the most time discussing contagion, yet despite this lengthy discussion it is unclear how contagion works. Rather, Le Bon implies that this is a natural phenomenon resulting from the very psychology of a crowd. "Contagion is a phenomenon of which it is easy to establish the presence, but that it is not easy to explain. It must be classed among those phenomena of a hypnotic order" (p. 10). Le Bon goes on to say that repetitive suggestions are such that "every sentiment and act is contagious, and contagious to such a degree that an individual readily sacrifices his personal interest to the collective interest" (p. 10). Despite this lack of explanation, it is clear that through repetition and affirmation a rhetor can prompt an idea or belief to become contagious. Le Bon, rather than suggesting a "cure" for a contagion, offers an instruction in the introduction of these contagions to treat the body of the audience. To Le Bon, the contagion is immediate and based in the brain and spinal cord of the audience, and uniform in spite of individual temperaments (pp. 18-22). The very presence of

a crowd limits the individual's logical faculties so that when prompted with affirmation and repetition the idea presented by the leader (whether logical or not) will become contagious. Further, Le Bon argues that it is contagion that allows members of the crowd to accept ideas that are contrary to their own best interest. Contagions begin with special human-produced "illusions" which can even induce hallucinatory states, as "Brain disorders, like madness, are themselves contagious. The frequency of madness among doctors who are specialists for the mad is notorious" (p. 128). The orator inducing madness in crowds contagiously can thus himself become mad.

LEADERS OF CROWDS: THE VECTOR OF CONTAGION

These crowds, so suggestible and instinctual, need something (rhetoric) and someone (a rhetorician) to move them to action. Le Bon explains, "Notwithstanding all of its progress, philosophy has been unable as yet to offer the masses any ideal that can charm them; but, as they must have their illusions at all cost, they turn instinctively, as the insect seeks the light, *to the rhetoricians who accord them what they want*" (p. 109). Perhaps surprisingly, Le Bon does not find leaders and rhetoricians to be men of great intellect, but rather men of action, "especially recruited from the ranks of those morbidly nervous, excitable, half-deranged persons who are bordering on madness. However absurd may be the idea they uphold or the goal they pursue, their convictions are so strong that all reasoning is lost upon them" (p. 119). Despite recognizing the leader's importance—"a crowd is a servile flock incapable of ever doing without a master" (p. 118)—, he claims these rhetorical leaders are just as irrational as the crowd: "hypnotized [sic] by the idea, whose apostle he has since become. It has taken possession of him to such a degree that everything outside it vanishes, and that every contrary opinion appears to him an error or a superstition" (p. 118). Clearly, both Mussolini and Hitler fit this description, so entranced by their beliefs as to lead their countries with the misplaced idea that they could conquer the world.

While Le Bon sees faith as an essential characteristic of a leader, these leaders cannot have great power unless "they acquire in time that mysterious force known as prestige" (p. 132). He further explains that:

Prestige in reality is a sort of domination exercised on our mind by an individual, a work, or an idea. This domination entirely paralyses our critical faculty, and fills our soul with astonishment and respect. The sentiment provoked is inexplicable, like all sentiments, but it would appear to be of the

same kind as the fascination to which a magnetized [sic] person is subjected. Prestige is the mainspring of all authority (p. 133).

Le Bon further explains that acquired prestige can result from fortune, position, titles, or even uniforms while personal prestige, possessed by the great leaders of crowds, seems to result from a person's ability to fascinate those around him or her. Le Bon goes as far as to claim that those with this personal prestige can "ill-treat men as you will, massacre them by millions, be the cause of invasion upon invasion, all is permitted you if you possess prestige in a sufficient degree and the talent necessary to uphold it" (pp. 140-141). Le Bon further argues that prestige "constitutes the fundamental element of persuasion" (p. 144). Rather than a physician whose function, traditionally is to heal, the rhetorical physician of Le Bon could himself be the agent of mass destruction using a kind of rhetorical epidemiology calculated to divide and destroy by contagion, or to quarantine ideological illness by inoculation with a different kind of contagion. Social control is effected by biological weapon of thought and division.

Having illustrated the affective dimensions of Le Bon's theories and their foundation in 19th century biology, we now turn to the enduring scientific metaphor of contagion as persuasion in a brief illustration of how it was manifested in civic rhetorical discourse in the 20th century.

LE BON BETWEEN 19TH AND 20TH CENTURY RHETORIC

As previously mentioned, the connection between Le Bon and the totalitarian oratory of figures like Mussolini have been so thoroughly established that they do not bear further examination. But an intriguing connection remains to be fully established between Le Bon and the Third Reich, and in turn Kenneth Burke's reaction to the rhetoric of the Third Reich. We offer the following analysis not as scholars of critical texts written by figures such as Hitler to show this direct connection, but to show how Le Bon's theories of contagion and persuasion pervaded continental totalitarian discourse. It is possible a direct influence to Hitler's rhetoric may never be conclusively established, but the following is offered as evidence that Le Bon's ideas, perhaps through Italian fascism, were in general circulation and provided many of the rhetorical strategies in at least one foundational totalitarian document, namely *Mein Kampf*. We will not rehash the common knowledge of its pivotal influence and formative place in the ideology of the Third Reich but instead look only to the elements of persuasion and contagion

that echo the theories of Le Bon. At the center of Hitler's strategy for offering his political philosophy lies a metaphor of illness and cure, implicating contagion, a nuance which was not lost on Burke. Hitler's metaphorical discursive language regarding the "Jewish question" and likening groups of ethnic minorities to parasites has been the subject of previous arguments (Perry, 1983). But fascist rhetoric and its foundational documents are shot through with the state being "sick" and totalitarianism as "the cure." This was not lost on Burke.

Throughout Hitler's discourse on his prospective political plans for Germany in *Mein Kampf*, there is a recurring argumentative metaphor for the problem, and proposed solution, couched in the term *krantheit* (disease). He explains that the only hope for Germany is a diagnosis of its disease: "just as bodily ailments can be cured only when their origin has been diagnosed, so also political disease can be treated only when it has been diagnosed" (p. 181). The loss of the war was a kind of good fortune, he concludes and that the "disease would have become chronic; whereas, in the acute form of the disaster, it at least showed itself clearly to the eyes of a considerable number of observers.", likening the collapse of Germany to a death by plague, instead of a slow death by tuberculosis (p. 185). He argues that the disease must be arrested in its course: "the longer the germs of disease remain in the national body and the longer they are allowed to become an integral part of that body" (p. 186). Hitler blamed the free press for the spread of the rhetorical contagion, "this poison was allowed to enter the national bloodstream and infect public life without the Government taking any effectual measures to master the course of the disease" (p. 194). A similar indictment was offered in the creative arena: "Everywhere we find the presence of those germs which ... bring about the ruin of our culture" and "In almost all the various fields of German art and culture those morbid phenomena may be observed" (p. 204). These examples illustrate Hitler's belief in ideological contagion transmitted through rhetoric and public communication, or that the popular beliefs of the masses are spread like a contagion. The central failure of state rhetorical policies as a failure during wartime is summarized in Hitler's brief reflection on the nature of propaganda and the nature of crowds: "The receptive powers of the masses are very restricted, and their understanding is feeble... effective propaganda must be confined to a few bare essentials and those must be expressed as far as possible in stereotyped formulas. These slogans should be persistently repeated" (p. 148). The masses were "a vacillating crowd of human children" (p. 149). Le Bon's theories in the context of morbidity, contagion, and the nature of communication are far too many throughout the work to number here.

Burke's reaction to the mobilization of these scientific metaphors is telling. Burke (2016) initially describes Hitler's text as "nauseating" and likens Hitler to a "medicine man" (p. 191). "Hitler found a panacea, a "cure for what ails you," a "snakeoil," that made such sinister unifying within his own nation possible" (p. 192). He describes the "'medicinal' appeal of the Jew as scapegoat" as a proposed "'medicine' for the Aryan people" (pp. 195-196). Hitler's anti-Semitism, explains Burke, is not merely a medicine for Germany but for Hitler himself (p. 199). Germany's parliamentary problems are a "symptom" of an illness in the nation, and Hitler's racism is the "medicine" (p. 201).

In conclusion, he observes Hitler's rhetorical strategy to have a major component of "endless repetition," noting one strategy expressly advocated by Le Bon, while his whole critique is thematically constructed around the repetitive metaphor of sickness and cure in *Mein Kampf*. Though well beyond the scope of this article, it would be worthwhile to investigate just how familiar Burke was with Le Bon.

What is clear, in any case, is that the scientific rhetoric of Hitler and his tropes of repetition, held together throughout with the idea of contagion and cure, are hauntingly reminiscent of the theories of Le Bon, and serve as merely a narrow proof of Le Bon's historical influence between the 19th and 20th century. It is more than plausible that without Le Bon's rhetorical theory, this interchange would never have been written.

This analysis is offered to show that Le Bon's scientific, 19th century rhetorical theory was a vital bridge between the rhetoric, for good or ill, that would shape modern discourse in the early 20th century (and arguably persists to this day). Perhaps Le Bon's neglect until recent times is partly political, but also partly due to the fact that he is nearly unbearable to scrutinize from our historically-advised positions of privilege some 120 years after the publication of *Psychologie*.

If we measure the importance of a given rhetoric based on its historical influence, dissemination, and social effects – that is, factors quite apart from how tidily it fits into our pseudo-narrative of a rarefied "rhetorical tradition" – a very different picture of rhetorical history emerges. If we seek to know what rhetoric is in our time and how it is being deployed either for or against us, we might be well-served to look to the past with more clinical scrutiny.

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