

Agnotology: a new field for the study of social representations¹

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The emergence and spread of a new disease, Covid-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, has had considerable social effects. Such a movement of opinion was favoured by the initial weakness of scientific knowledge, whether it concerned the origin of the virus, its effects or its diagnosis and treatment, for which containment was the first collective protection measure, before vaccination. This kind of phenomenon has taken on such a dimension that it is relevant to refer to an emerging research trend in the social sciences: agnotology or the study of ignorance.

Keywords: ignorance, agnotology, virus, knowledge

L'émergence et la diffusion d'une nouvelle maladie, la Covid-19, provoquée par le virus SARS-CoV-2, ont produit, dès le début des années 2000, des effets sociaux considérables. Un tel mouvement d'opinion a été favorisé par la faiblesse initiale des connaissances scientifiques, qu'il s'agisse de l'origine du virus, de ses effets ou de son diagnostic et ses traitements, au titre desquels le confinement a été la première mesure de protection collective, avant la vaccination. Ce genre de phénomène a revêtu une telle dimension, qu'à son propos il s'avère pertinent de se référer à un courant de recherche émergent dans les sciences sociales : l'agnotologie ou étude de l'ignorance.

Mots-clefs : ignorance, agnotologie, virus, connaissance

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The emergence and spread of a new disease, Covid-19, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, has had considerable social effects since the early 2000s, not least of which is the echo found in the media. Both social networking sites and mass media messages reinforced fears and stirred up public opinion. This has led to the adoption of the term ‘infodemia’, coined in the early 2000s to describe the rapid spread of both accurate and inaccurate information on a given topic. This term was immediately taken up by the WHO in connection with the dissemination of information on the Covid-19 pandemic. It has been observed that, alongside the transmission of certified data, ‘false news’ has multiplied and that, within the ‘polling’ public opinion, formed from the discourse circulating in the public media space, a real ‘culture of ignorance’ has developed according to a double contradictory movement: the demand for scientific explanations and the acceptance of ‘fanciful explanations’ (Girel, 2020). At the beginning of the Covid-19 epidemic, there was a juxtaposition of real cases of apophatic message, positing its unknowable character, and cataphatic message, asserting its cognitively controllable character.

Such a movement of opinion was favoured by the initial weakness of scientific knowledge, whether it concerned the origin of the virus, its effects or its diagnosis and treatment, for which containment was the first collective protection measure, before vaccination. According to the medical and scientific leaders themselves, it was necessary to wait until the end of 2020 to be able to "deliver the word of science", and to communicate, in 2021, certified data making it possible to clarify the origin and modes of transmission of the virus, its effects and processes, and its treatments, including vaccination.

The fight against the infodemia has made it possible to denounce the political use of ‘false information’ such as that concerning the origin of the pandemic. Indeed, since the hypothesis of a zoonotic origin of the disease, i.e., transmission from an animal species to humans, i.e., from bats to humans via a wild animal, the pangolin, sold on Chinese markets, was not formally proven, the hypothesis of a laboratory accident gave rise to ‘conspiracy’ interpretations that were widely exploited politically. We know how Donald Trump played with the pandemic to instil distrust of China, by talking about a ‘Chinese virus’, inducing the suspicion of a germ war. I will come back to the use of the metaphor of war in relation to disease; for now, it is sufficient to highlight the political use that can be made of the designation of a disease. This led the WHO to issue rules for ‘politically correct’ nomenclature in 2008 to prevent 'disease names from stigmatising certain minorities'.

Another example is worth mentioning. An ‘influencer’ posting medical scaremongering on the internet claimed that after two doses of a vaccine, the soul detaches from the body, allowing political powers to turn people into robots and control them remotely. It has been said that "science is a source of answers but also of diversions" (Rozier, 2021) and the role of the media as a medium for information and fake news has been denounced in their "race to virality" (Girel, op.cit.).

Thus, the intensive dissemination on the media of messages, exchanges of experiences or points of view, information and ‘fake news’ appeared to be an essential and determining element of the public's reactions to the Covid-19 pandemic, making a real fight necessary. I will give an example that I know of: a Covid-19 workshop was set up in a French hospital as part of an ‘Emerging Infectious Diseases’ seminar, bringing together some forty researchers in medicine, public health, the humanities and social sciences, as well as journalists and politicians, in order to study the positive points and shortcomings of scientific communication and to improve its quality.

On the other hand, social networks have become involved in the fight against infodemia, with, in particular

- measures to control information on Facebook, Google, Instagram, TikTok, Twitter.
- A health alert launched on WhatsApp, by the WHO.
- the support given by the United Nations Development Programme to the ‘International Fact-Checking Network’, which brings together fact-checkers from over 45 countries.

This kind of phenomenon has taken on such a dimension that it is relevant to refer to an emerging research trend in the social sciences: agnotology or ignorance studies. This new problematic offers a fertile field for the study of social representations, and more specifically that of the role of media coverage of events and social problems in the formation of social representations. For it is legitimate to say that the interpretations circulating about the Covid-19 correspond to social representations and to consider that their contradictions and conflicts offer a fertile ground for advancing in the approach to social representations. I will briefly present some of the main points here.

A preliminary remark, however: it may seem odd to speak of agnotology, the study of ignorance, in relation to social representations that are treated as forms of current, socially constituted, recognised and shared knowledge. But precisely, the theory of social representations sheds light on the processes by which the image of an object is constructed with regard to, and/or by borrowing from, science and in relation to it, knowing that, for the public,

the recognised validity of the image is based on its practical relevance and the functions it fulfils in the shared elaboration and use of social knowledge. To give just one example, I refer to Moscovici's treatment of the social elaboration of a scientific concept like the unconscious.

Moreover, the interest of the recourse to this problematic of the construction of representations is attested by numerous researches devoted to the images and representations transmitted by the social channels, be it interpersonal and intergroup exchanges or the media. In this regard, I would note that in these studies, unlike those dealing with the effects of direct social relations, more attention has been paid to the description of images given by the media than to the processes of their impact on ways of thinking. In its actuality, the Coronavirus pandemic, by the very way in which it has found an echo in scientific circles and the public, in social networks (internet, 'influencers', creators of 'fake news', mass movements), and in the media, offers the opportunity for a more detailed approach to the social and media diffusion of information, questioning and debates that have animated the scientific community, leading to the observation or creation of ignorance.

To guide this analysis, let us first consider what the study of ignorance implies according to Girel (op.cit.), who provides a complete overview. Ignorance is not limited to a pure absence of knowledge.

Three types of ignorance are generally distinguished:

- 1) That which corresponds to the fact of not having the information that we could have given the historical and contextual state of knowledge.
- 2) Ignorance where we think we know what we do not know, as in the case of error, illusion, or prejudice.
- 3) The one that results from an overabundance of information that makes it impossible to recognise irrelevant information.

Furthermore, the imputation of ignorance has a normative dimension that refers to the truth of the information and the validity of the ends pursued by the knowing subject. Finally, ignorance has a 'social framework': it can be 'relative' if we compare what the knowing subject knows with what is known in society, or 'social' and 'collective' when some or all of its members share it. Furthermore, ignorance can refer to the inability to draw conclusions, both theoretical and practical, from what is known. This phenomenon is particularly visible in the political field with the opposition between participatory and representative democracy.

The political implications of ignorance have given rise to debates about Covid-19. According to the Italian philosopher Agambem, the pandemic has been used by political power

to establish a state of exception leading to a situation of dictatorship. Implementing a form of Foucauldian ‘bio-power’ political power, in its weakness in the face of the epidemic, would have shifted responsibility to individuals while preserving scientific rationality. While some have described this position as ‘delusional’ (Flores d’Arcais, 2021), concrete cases of dictatorial intervention linked to the pandemic (through control of the press, for example) have been observed in certain countries, such as Hungary and Russia. But, as the philosopher Boucheron (2020) puts it, the effectiveness of the measures advocated to curb the Covid-19 epidemic risks leading to a consent of citizens to be ‘diminished and controlled’. For others, the pandemic seems to offer an opportunity to take stock of the state of our societies. Thus, for Žižek (2020), it would have exposed the barbarity with a human face, distilled through social and ideological ‘viruses’ such as fake news, conspiracy theories and racism, and would call for a contagion of solidarity for the survival of each and every one.

The debate on the political use of the epidemic is underpinned by the extra-medical qualification of Covid-19. In this respect, we can highlight the role of metaphors used in social discourse to designate the disease or the response to it. This is the case for the widespread use of the war metaphor in the media and public opinion or among commentators. However, as Claire Marin (2020) notes, this metaphor is inappropriate in the case of Covid-19 for the following reasons: the virus is not an enemy against which we are fighting; as the disease is inscribed in the law of life, the procedures adopted with regard to it are avoidance measures: we do not come into contact with it; we do not aim to destroy it, but to slow down its spread.

On the other hand, the war metaphor can be applied to the experience of those who are in direct contact with the risk of an epidemic, i.e. health care workers. In particular, those who work in hospitals, which are veritable battlefields where a logic of ‘war medicine’ or ‘disaster medicine’ applies, with the constraints of choosing which patients to treat first implying a logic of sacrifice. Nevertheless, for some (Brum, 2020) the pandemic and the constraints it imposes are felt to be a global experiment in warfare; and it is expected that the way it is tackled will have an effect on the future of the planet, as is the case with global warming, which is often paralleled with Covid-19.

The political and human scope of the pandemic and the impressive number of reflections, publications and works devoted to it since its appearance, and especially in 2020, make it an important object of research. This brings us to a corpus of official, scientific and journalistic texts and declarations of common sense that warrants particular attention. It is indeed rare that we can grasp, at the very moment of the emergence of a phenomenon, the production of social representations at the different levels of the reaction it causes in the social

space, taking into account their interaction. This is the task to which our group intends to devote itself and which I invite colleagues to undertake in their working context.

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