

The disintegration of social mind¹

A desintegração da mente social

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Abstract: Trumpism in the United States, like other populist eruptions around the world, demonstrates that fundamental values bequeathed by the Enlightenment are far less secure in the West than has been assumed. Esteem for rationality and objective knowledge and respect for individual liberty has been weakened by the dissolution of society into intransigent factions. The forsaking of core principles that have for many generations served as a common ground for Western civilization has fragmented Western society into seemingly irreconcilable camps, no longer subject to a shared communal mind. How can it happen that a society governed by a long-established shared social mind, summarily splinters into very unlike-minded camps clearly under the sway of discrepant principles? Is the disintegration of ideas and the dissolution of mind an inevitable consequence of proliferating mental content, perhaps even built-in intellectual entropy? Guided by Peirce's semiotics and philosophy of mind, and using the Trump-provoked shake-up in US social and political life as an illustrative example of a profound cultural schism, I will consider some possible structural causes of increasing sectarianism and will explore the semiotic conditions that would account for the disintegration of a social mind.

Keywords: Democratic liberalism. Enlightenment. Icon. Meme. Memetic warfare. Social mind.

Resumo: *O trumpismo nos Estados Unidos, assim como outras erupções populistas ao redor do mundo, demonstra que valores fundamentais herdados pelo Iluminismo são muito menos seguros no Ocidente do que fora presumido. Estima pela racionalidade e conhecimento objetivo e o respeito pela liberdade individual vêm sendo enfraquecidos pela dissolução da sociedade em facções intransigentes. O abandono de princípios centrais que por muitas gerações serviram como base comum para a civilização Ocidental fragmentou a sociedade Ocidental em campos aparentemente*

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- 1 Keynote address delivered at the 18th International Meeting on Pragmatism, Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo, Brazil, 5 November 2018, eight days after Jair Bolsonaro was declared the winner of the Brazilian run-off presidential election. I have made minor revisions to my address but have retained the presentation format. I am grateful to Ivo Ibri, who delivered the reply to my address, and for the lively and helpful discussion in the question period that followed. I want to thank the following colleagues and friends for their helpful critiques and suggestions: Vincent Colapietro, Bill Elleker, Charles Novogrodsky, William Schubert, and T. L. Short.

irreconciliáveis, não mais sujeitos a uma mente comunal compartilhada. Como pode suceder que uma sociedade governada por uma mente social compartilhada, e já estabelecida de longa data, sumariamente se fragmenta em campos de opinião muito diferentes, claramente sob a influência de princípios discrepantes? Seriam a desintegração de ideias e a dissolução da mente consequências inevitáveis de conteúdo mental proliferante, de entropia intelectual talvez até inerente? Guiado pela semiótica de Peirce e pela filosofia da mente, e utilizando a chacoalhada provocada por Trump na vida social e político dos EUA como exemplo ilustrativo de um cismo cultural profundo, considerarei algumas possíveis causas estruturais de um crescente sectarismo e abordarei as condições semióticas que explicariam a desintegração da mente social.

Palavras-chave: Guerra memética. Ícone. Iluminismo. Liberalismo democrático. Meme. Mente social.

What is the world coming to?

That is a question that has been asked in one way or another, in one language or another, throughout the history of human civilization as the technological underpinnings of society have changed and the social fabric has been retailored to suit new fashions. Nevertheless, when we consider the social and political strife that has spread throughout the western world in recent times, so glaringly exemplified with the election and presidency of Donald J. Trump in the United States, and with the election of leaders elsewhere whom I shall not name, we must ask again, and with some urgency: *What is the world coming to?*

To be candid, I should tell you that for the past two years I've been quite preoccupied, along with so many others, with the social and political turmoil provoked by Trump's election, and his subsequent policies and alarming actions. It occurred to me that instead of putting my worries aside to prepare my address for this occasion, it might be worthwhile to reflect on how our theoretical intelligence might help inform us about the unsettled and even perilous times we are in. I am not about to launch into a "fire and fury" recounting of the last two years of Trumpism. For my purposes, here, it is enough that Trump, along with the charismatic egoists and contrarians who have gained substantial political power bases in other western nations, have forced us to recognize that liberal democracy is not as self-sustaining as we have supposed, and that the appeal of demagogues is by no means limited to historically authoritarian states. Even more troubling, certainly for me, is that *the public will* that brought Trump to power in the United States, and *the public will* that is presenting such a powerful challenge to liberal democracy in England and across Europe, and here, too, in Brazil, is a product of strategic messaging concerned only with its effectiveness and regardless of any concern for its truthfulness.²

2 In discussions after the presentation of this address, it was impressed on me that in Brazil "liberal democracy" is understood by many to be virtually synonymous with "capitalist democracy," with capitalist ideology being the predominant factor. This is not my view. It is debatable to what extent liberal democracy should promote private property rights for individuals but it seems clearly to be a step too far to hold that corporate capitalism is the inexorable outgrowth of liberal democracy.

The western world is in danger of being overrun by a political juggernaut powered by beguiling memes and unmoored ideas. The predicament we find ourselves in makes it hard to avoid questioning the wisdom of embracing democratic government as the best guarantor of civilization. Our thoughts harken back to de Tocqueville's early study of democracy in America and his partiality for democracy while, at the same time, remaining fearful of "the tyranny of the majority."³ Think of the unflattering depiction of democracy by Benjamin Franklin as "two wolves and a lamb voting on what to have for lunch" or the remark attributed to Winston Churchill that democracy may well be the worst form of government "except for all the others."⁴ Maybe even more troubling for the philosophically minded among us, is that the predicament we find ourselves in raises real doubts about the prudence of advocating a commitment to truth as a fundamental goal of advanced civilization. False ideas seem to be as persuasive as true ones, maybe even more so, and truth is harder to come by.

It will already be evident that the present focus of my attention is on the state and fate of civilization in what is commonly referred to as the western world. I am aware that reference to "the west" and to "western civilization" is problematic and might seem gauche to some of you. Indeed, it is not hard to find scholars who reject the very idea of western civilization as too ambiguous or confused to be meaningful—there is, in fact, no agreed-on definitive list of western countries. Kwame Anthony Appiah relates an anecdote attributed to Mahatma Gandhi who, when asked what he thought of western civilization, replied that he thought that would be a very good idea. But Appiah's own reply to that question is that we should just give up the idea of western civilization.⁵ He argues that important values often credited to western civilization—liberty, tolerance, and rational inquiry—"are not the birthright of a single culture."⁶ Furthermore, as Appiah justly points out, all too often "western" seems like a euphemism for "white."

For the most part, I agree with these deflationary remarks about western civilization, as some of my later comments will attest. But I believe that, for better or for worse, we have all absorbed at least a sketchy framework of world history that includes some narrative of the west's remarkable and ambitious embrace some three hundred years ago of what history records as *The Enlightenment*, the Age of Reason, and the core enlightenment values that subsequently shaped modern western civilization. My concern tonight is how those values are being tested now (or to put it in the vernacular, how they are being trashed).

Admittedly, not every historian of ideas venerates the Enlightenment, which, as we know, came to a bloody end with the French Revolution. Those who identify more closely with the later romantics, believe that the Enlightenment thinkers were too dismissive of creative thought and too removed from the organic unity of the world. But even for those who believe that the age of reason was too narrowly

3 TOCQUEVILLE, 1835.

4 Churchill is said to have made this remark in a speech to the House of Commons on 11 November 1947—see CHURCHILL, 1974, p. 7566.

5 APPIAH. "There is No Such Thing as Western Civilization," *The Guardian*, 9 Nov. 2016.

6 Ibid.

focused, and that it lost sight of some fundamental core values, it stands out as a watershed in the history of civilization, a pivotal period of transformational outlook that implanted many of the social and political ideals that have served to guide the west for the last three centuries. Following in the wake of the Renaissance, the Reformation, and the Scientific Revolution, the Enlightenment bolstered the stature of ordinary individuals and promoted freedom of thought and expression. Reason and common sense were extolled as a rightful check on authority, whether of the church or state, and the key to a better, more just, world. The revolutionary transformation in attitude is starkly exhibited in Immanuel Kant's gloss on the Biblical story of Abraham's willingness to obey what he took to be God's command to sacrifice his own son, Isaac. According to Kant, Abraham's *moral sense* should have made him suspicious of such a cruel command and *his reason* should have led him to reject the purported divine voice as inauthentic.⁷ Kant's purpose was not to undermine religion but to empower human reason.⁸ For Kant, the goal of the Enlightenment was to liberate humankind from "the incapacity of using one's understanding without the direction of another"—to "Have the courage to use [one's] own reason!"⁹ That, Kant said, was the battle cry of the Enlightenment: "Dare to understand," or, as it is sometimes rendered, "Dare to know."

Yet, as with the idea of western civilization, what the Enlightenment represents varies markedly within historical scholarship. In a recent book, Stephen Pinker argues that the Enlightenment Project was one of history's greatest events and that human civilization was positively advanced thanks to this movement. He lists reason, science, humanism, progress, and peace as the defining ideals of the Enlightenment although typically other values are included, especially truth, individual freedom, and democratic self-governance. According to Pinker, "The story of human progress is truly heroic. [...] there is no limit to the betterments we can attain if we continue to apply knowledge to enhance human flourishing."¹⁰ This is uplifting and hopeful but according to many scholars who have devoted their careers to studying the Enlightenment, Pinker has it wrong. Some critics point out that Pinker is naively optimistic about "the fruits of the Enlightenment" for there have also been bitter

7 I was reminded by Bill Elleker of Julian Jaynes's still much debated theory of the bicameral mind (*The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1990) and that Abraham's call to sacrifice his son, Isaac, is historically set many centuries before Jayne dates the origin of self- or deliberative consciousness. The key point is that sacrifice was a common and even a revered practice in Abraham's time and that obeying the supposedly divine voices emanating from the right lobe of one's brain was how one made one's way through life. As long as the voices delivered commands consonant with the generally accepted way of life of the times the commands were followed without question. While this may excuse Abraham for his willingness to sacrifice his son, it would not exonerate him or, for that matter, the entire bicameral age, in Kant's eyes. It may also be worth noticing that Jaynes, himself, compared the order to Abraham to sacrifice his son to how "criminal psychotics might be directed today" (JAYNES, 1990, p. 304).

8 AKYOL, "Sacrifice, Obedience and Enlightenment," *The New York Times*, 21 Aug. 2018.

9 KANT, 1784. See also, POPPER, 1963, p. 238–240, and STEINBAUER, 2005.

10 PINKER, 2018, p. 452–53.

fruits. These scholars, often following Horkheimer and Adorno,¹¹ regard the Enlightenment as a failed project and a prime cause of racism, European barbarity, and colonialism.¹² Others argue, less darkly, that enlightenment knowledge has led to real progress for humanity even though “in some cases, people have turned enlightenment knowledge into destructive things.”¹³ Pinker defends his account by claiming that his purpose was not to contribute to intellectual history per se, but to show more generally that enlightenment ideals “are timeless” and that “they have never been more relevant than they are right now.”¹⁴ He says that his use of the expression “the Enlightenment” is simply as a “handy rubric” for the pivotal set of ideals that found “their most vehement and enduring expression” in the Enlightenment era.¹⁵ It is the set of ideals bequeathed from the Enlightenment, and how they have contributed to civilization’s progress, that interests Pinker. That is also my interest tonight but with a less optimistic outlook than Pinker’s.

As is well known, the values and ideals championed by the giants of the Enlightenment found fertile ground in the American Colonies in the 18th century, and they became guiding principles for the revolutionary experiment in government embodied in the United States Constitution and Bill of Rights. Having grown up in the Midwest United States with ancestors who fought in the Revolutionary War, I grew up taking it for granted that western civilization has flourished because of its embrace of enlightenment ideas and the adoption of liberal democracy as the favored form of government. Of course, that supposition can be challenged, perhaps most effectively, by arguing that the success and vitality of the west has more to do with economic dominance and the raw accumulation of power than with its embrace of social and political liberalism. Was it the appeal of human rights and egalitarianism, and the freedom of speech, that fueled the success of the west or was it all economics? To what extent free enterprise, and more specifically, unregulated capitalism, flows naturally from liberal democracy, is a matter of great debate; the belief that it does is a source of considerable opposition to the west and to liberal democracy in some quarters.

These questions lie outside the scope of my immediate considerations. I am confident, though, that the adoption of the ideals of the Enlightenment by the western world was a crucial development in a promising direction for the emergence of progressive advanced civilization, and I also believe that an enlightened civilization will inevitably gravitate to a democratic form of government. But the current upheavals in the west may be indicators that democracy can’t sustain advanced civilization indefinitely. Can liberal democracies really hope to endure toward a seemingly endless future or do the very principles and dynamics at their core inject a self-destructive danger, a germ that will eventually take hold and spawn currents of opposition and dissent which will inescapably lead to their demise? This may be what Derrida meant by his idea that democracy is governed by an autoimmune

11 HORKHEIMER and ADORNO, 1947, 2002.

12 HANLON, 2018.

13 Ibid.

14 PINKER, 2018, xvii.

15 HANLON, *ibid.*

logic, the idea that forces within democracies intent on improving or defending them will unwittingly set them on a path of destruction.¹⁶

In a moment I will narrow my focus and turn more directly to what I believe are the key factors that have led to the present crisis in the west, but first, I will lay some groundwork. It is my contention that a healthy and stable society functions within the context of a web of cultural practices and traditions that constitutes its national identity and, more broadly, its parent civilization. At these meetings three years ago I proposed that our cultural practices and traditions, and our most quintessential institutions, constitute a network of habits and routines that are reservoirs of social beliefs.¹⁷ Not only does this web of cultural practices and traditions, with their supporting institutions, constitute a national identity, it is quite literally the social mind of its culture or civilization. This social mind is the external mind shared by those individuals whose lives it conditions and whose thoughts it shapes.

I believe that this network of habits and routines, this social mind, is not merely a reservoir of social beliefs but is in fact an operational program for distributed semiosis, a program animated by the individuals whose behavior it regulates. Communities of individuals who have grouped together, whether by the accident of birth or by purposeful association, Peirce regarded as “greater persons” and he attributed collective personalities to these social groups.¹⁸ Every nation state is a greater person in this Peircean sense and in a wider sense we can also regard western civilization as a greater person but with a character somewhat less defined than with its separate nation states. For many generations, two key distinguishing characteristics of the west have been its dedication to the ideals of the Enlightenment and its commitment to liberal democracy. The growing crisis in the west is marked by a loss of faith in enlightenment ideals and by their rejection by vocal groups within the western orbit. The crisis is more profound than a loss of faith. The deep trouble the west now faces is a social pathology, a growing social disequilibrium seemingly engendered by internecine discord, even hatred, which seems to be seriously destabilizing western society and contributing to the fragmentation and disintegration of the western social mind.

That is my diagnosis. Of course, it is not only my diagnosis. In fact, at least since Brexit, it has become a widely held judgment that the west is in decline and that liberal democracy is in danger of failing. Clearly this is a problem of historic scope and gravity. Can we determine the underlying causes of this social ailment? Can we prescribe a remedy? In what follows, I will briefly consider some likely contributing factors and what, if anything, we can do to mitigate the damage. Having suffered through the social and political turmoil in the months following Trump’s election, I’ll use the goings-on in the United States to illustrate what I believe applies quite generally throughout the west.

16 See MATTHEWS, 2013.

17 This proposal was made in my address, “The Imperative for Non-Rational Belief,” presented on 9 Nov. 2015 at the 16th International Meeting on Pragmatism at the Pontifical Catholic University of São Paulo and published in *Cognitio*, 2015, p. 273–289.

18 For some development of this idea see my paper, “Social Minds and the Fixation of Belief,” in: WEST, and ANDERSON, 2016, p. 379-400.

I'm not sure how the United States looks from the outside but from the inside it seems to be fragmenting into antagonistic factions. It is now commonly said that we are on a rapid descent into tribalism. If you read President Trump's tweets, or listen to the politically biased news channels, this will be immediately evident. You might rightly point out that the United States has suffered severe factionalizing periods before, the most disruptive and terrible being the American Civil War. One can also point to the Great Depression, or the McCarthy Era, or the Civil Rights Movement and the Viet Nam war resistance (this list is not comprehensive). Each of these upheavals provoked extensive social discord and civic disunity and the societal scars from those times have never healed. Still, we as a nation, passed through those disruptive and acrimonious episodes without seriously undermining our commitment to the values embodied in our national Constitution and our Bill of Rights. I can't deny that often our commitment to the principles of liberal democracy has been lip service rather than pragmatic demonstrations of committed belief, especially where racial prejudice persists, but at least lip service indicates a grudging acknowledgement that those principles *should* prevail—that they are something we *are expected to aspire to*. We have, at least as a rule, remained respectful of our traditional motto: *E pluribus unum* (Out of many, one).¹⁹ So what is it about the societal fragmentation of these Trumpian times that presents a greater threat to liberal democracy than earlier upheavals?

A candid consideration of the social forces provoking the current civic crisis in the United States might look initially at Trump's *America First* agenda. According to Robert Kagan, the three main pillars of the America First ideology are isolationism, protectionism, and the restriction of immigration.²⁰ Although reasons can be given in support of each position, they are typically adopted as much because of underlying attitudes, even unconscious motivational stances, as they are because of rational decision-making. All too frequently, the motivating forces at work involve intolerance or racism and sometimes a straightforward obsessive yearning for national purity. But these isolationist and xenophobic precepts are not new—the America First approach, by one name or another, has been around for a long time and has been gaining strength since the end of the Cold War.²¹ So why has this populist movement become so powerfully disruptive now? Something is fueling the flames like never before.

Were I to ask what is fueling the flames of civic discord and why they are spreading so quickly, I imagine that many would answer that advanced communications technologies and social forums are likely suspects. Others might suggest that propaganda is the culprit—the deliberate use of cleverly crafted messages designed to inflame the passions of targeted audiences. And some might suggest that the problem, at least in part, is the acutely competitive twenty-four hour news-cycle infrastructure that has conditioned large segments of the public to expect entertaining and all-to-often partisan programming rather than fact-based

19 I say “traditional motto” because “E pluribus unum” was not codified by law and was only the de facto motto until 1956 when “In God We Trust” was adopted as the official (and arguably unconstitutional) motto of the United States (heralding the rise of the Christian right as a political faction to be reckoned with).

20 KAGAN, 2018.

21 Ibid.

unbiased reporting. These are good suggestions and I agree that they are fueling the flames of discord. But there is another culprit lurking at the base of the crisis in the west, something even more corrupting of liberal democracy. This beguiling menace is the perverse interpretation of respect for the individual to mean that what I believe to be true and what I believe to be right cannot be legitimately challenged by argument or by inquiry—nor by purported conflicting facts. Your truth may be your truth but my truth cannot be challenged and will not be swayed by your truth. This pernicious doctrine amounts to the rejection of two of the most fundamental enlightenment values: rationality and truth. This loss of respect for reason and truth seems to me to lie at the root of the civic crisis in the United States and in the west generally. I believe this is the deep-rooted malignancy that is attacking the social mind and rending the social fabric of the western liberal democracies.

The idea of truth began to take on a new meaning with the advent of the scientific revolution. Up to that time, truth was a prize to be attained by reason, or from trusted authorities either directly or indirectly, or it was thought to be obtainable through revelation or as a gift of faith. But with the rise of experimental science, a new conception of truth emerged: the idea of truth as an expression of fact—something that can be tested in experience. Sir Francis Bacon pioneered the use of observation of the material world, rather than discourse and debate alone, to disclose and advance truth, and he introduced the method of inductive logic to replace the sophisticated logic of pure deductive reason.²² Science rapidly evolved into a largely secular institution intent on the objective study of the world around us by applying appropriate scientific methodology to carefully executed observations, in light of relevant natural laws. It seemed that truth was now, more than ever, within grasp and that humanity stood at the fountainhead of what promised to be an explosion of knowledge. This harvest of knowledge would inevitably impel progress in all areas of human life, social and economic. This was the optimistic outlook at the start of the Enlightenment.

But even though the thinkers of the enlightenment period shared this optimistic outlook, they were not of one mind where the question of the relative usefulness of truth and falsehood were concerned. The disagreement centered on differing views of human nature. The liberals believed in the capacity of ordinary people to discern right from wrong and to incline toward the good and the true. With adequate education, false doctrines could be overcome and ultimately truth would prevail. The conservatives, on the other hand, “attributed errors and prejudice to the frailties inherent in human nature, or in the human mind.”²³ They agreed with Fontenelle, who declared that nature wants men to be happy and not to think.²⁴ And they believed, as Plato had, that given the reality of the capacities of ordinary people, some prejudices, errors, and superstitions could be socially useful, perhaps even necessary.²⁵ It was the liberals’ regard for truth and reason, and their view of

22 See the article on “Scientific Revolution” in *Wikipedia* (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scientific_Revolution).

23 CROCKER, 1953, p. 583.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.*, p. 580.

human nature, that prevailed. Of course, prejudice and error are obstacles to finding out the truth, and can be used by agents of oppression and exploitation, but they are not inherent in human nature and they can be conquered by education and good government. This is the creed at the heart of liberal democracy. It was this faith that so fervently inspired Thomas Jefferson and his fellow colonists as they worked out the principles for the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights. And it is the faith that the United States, today, seems to be renouncing (and it is seemingly also a dying faith in Brazil and throughout the west).

Consider the present state of the American mind in the United States with respect to truth. (I fear that this is an apt characterization of today's western mind more generally.) According to many pundits, we have entered a post-truth era, and some say we may be entering a new age, the age of unreason.²⁶ We are almost daily inundated with agitated ascriptions of fake news and the boastful promotion of alternative facts. Stephen Colbert, in his comedic persona as a conservative pundit, coined the word "truthiness" for "the belief or assertion that a particular statement is true" based on intuition or perception "without regard to evidence, logic, intellectual examination, or facts."²⁷ According to Colbert, the seemingly growing multitude that embraces truthiness rather than old-fashioned truth is convinced that truth comes from the gut and that everyone has a right to their separate truths.²⁸ Toward the end of August, while I was working on this paper, Rudy Giuliani, one of President Trump's attorneys, made an appearance on "Meet the Press," and told the show's host, Chuck Todd, that Trump should not submit to questioning by Robert Mueller because he might be led into a perjury trap. But not because Trump would lie, Giuliani said, but because "Truth isn't truth" any more. Nowadays, he told Todd, facts are in the eye of the beholder. Trump and his promoters have tapped into a base of support for which truth is as fluid and subjective (from the gut) as Colbert and Giuliani have indicated. And although the Trump base does not constitute a majority of U. S. citizens, it is certainly a large minority, dividing American society into irreconcilably antagonistic camps.

How could it happen that a society governed by a long-established shared set of principles, a common social mind, summarily splinters into very unlike-minded camps? We now know that the populist support for Trump's *America First* agenda has been motivated and invigorated by deliberate propaganda offensives and the strategic dissemination of misinformation. Peter Hacker states bluntly that starting with Brexit and the 2016 U. S. presidential election "blatant lies were advanced by politicians and journalists. Lies, also known as 'alternative facts', became legitimate political currency [...]. All that mattered was obtaining the votes."²⁹ But underneath these developments one cannot fail to see that there are powerful anti-liberal forces at work, forces that embrace the opinion of Fontenelle that ordinary people—the masses—are only concerned with what Peirce called "matters of vital importance."

26 PINSKY, 2018.

27 "Truthiness," *Wikipedia* (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truthiness>).

28 Colbert Report, 17 Oct 2005, see *Language Log* (<http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/language-log/archives/002586.html>).

29 HACKER, 2017.

These powerful anti-liberal forces regard human nature as frail and flawed and they believe that prejudice, falsehood, superstition, and outright hate, can be exploited for political and social designs. They appear to be right. By his intensive campaign to exploit class hostility and to elevate racial, economic, and religious fears of susceptible Americans, Trump has provided a powerful demonstration that the anti-liberal forces just might be able to succeed in taking down the western democracies. Trump and the self-proclaimed populists in the west, whether intentionally or not, are playing into the hands of Vladimir Putin, whose mission at least since 2005 has been to reestablish Russian power and to weaken the west.³⁰ More specifically, Putin's aim seems to be to stop, and hopefully reverse, the global spread of liberal democracy and to provide a non-democratic alternative.³¹

Of course, the sophisticated use of propaganda is not new. Wide scale propaganda operations emerged with the rise of mass media and have been used extensively since the First World War.³² But with the advent of the internet and social media, the power of propaganda to influence social consciousness and to impact civic action increased substantially—almost exponentially. And what has given so much power to the internet and social media is a creature of semiotics, the meme.

Among social media enthusiasts, memes are often taken to be funny pictures, usually accompanied by witty text, that proliferate rapidly across the web. There are sites to help you create your own memes of this sort³³ so you can join the network of “culture creators.”³⁴ But the memes I have in mind were first explicitly identified and named by Richard Dawkins in 1976.³⁵ He used “meme” as the name for cultural units of information that can spread from one mind to another rather like viruses. Memes carry “cultural ideas, symbols or practices, which can be transmitted from one mind to another through writing, speech, gestures, rituals or other imitable phenomena.”³⁶ Because memes are able to self-replicate and can mutate and respond to selective pressures, they are regarded as the cultural analogs of genes.³⁷ Early memeticists, or meme theorists, who were inclined to think epidemiologically, had no good account of how parasitic memes could leap from mind to mind to spread their cultural infections. But in 2002, Robert Aunger suggested that the answer could be found in Peirce's theory of signs: memes are information-carrying icons and it is the icon that transfers across minds.³⁸

Aunger's realization that memes could be understood as Peircean signs brought memetics within the purview of well-developed semiotic theory. This is a

30 “Propaganda Research,” *ISSUU*, May 22, 2014.

31 GRODSKY, 2018.

32 The sophisticated use of propaganda more or less coincided with the sophisticated use of advertising (or public relations). See, for example, the Wikipedia article on Edward Bernays; also see BERNAYS, 1928.

33 BURGETT, 2018.

34 OLSEN, 2018.

35 DAWKINS, 1976.

36 GORDON, 2002, p. 196.

37 Ibid.

38 AUNGER, 2002, p. 233.

new field of research for semioticians, and a lot is still unsettled, but I know that the Peircean semiotic specialists and students here in São Paulo and elsewhere in Brazil have taken it up.³⁹ I agree that semiotics should provide the theoretical basis for memetics and I believe that considering the meme concept in the context of the semiosis of social minds may be especially instructive.

I will conclude my thoughts this evening by considering the vulnerability of social minds to memes—that is where I'm heading. Three years ago at the 16th International Meeting on Pragmatism, I expressed a view of the social mind that was overall quite positive. I saw it as the anchor of civilization and as necessary for the possibility of normative as well as intellectual progress.⁴⁰ Now, as we face the crisis for western civilization that I have been belaboring, I have a much less sanguine view of social mind. The problem is that the social institutions that preserve the intelligence and many of the time-honored aims and purposes of a civilization, that give it a distinctive teleological drift, exert their influence largely through traditions and customs and other cultural practices that are more like a set of stored programs than a living mind. This external social mind comes alive with the living individuals whose active mental lives express its deep programming. But a living social mind is limited by the character and semiotic capacity of the individuals who give it life.

The trouble with animated social minds is that the operative semiosis is mostly at the level of feelings and emotions and responsive actions. Over many generations, a surviving civilization will accumulate logical interpretants programmed into its institutions and traditions which serve as reservoirs of the deep intelligence of that civilization. However, if the individuals who animate that social mind fail to respect those long-established traditions and practices, the social mind can be corrupted (infected with alternative facts), disturbing its harmony and unity and initiating a drift toward disintegration.

It is my contention that the active mental life of social minds consists of sign processes involving predominately emotional and energetic interpretants—what we might think of as the earlier stages of semiosis, or at least the mostly non-intellectual stages. This is the level of communal thought that can be most influenced by cleverly designed memes and instruments of propaganda which can lead to the substitution of destructive prejudices in place of the guiding ideals of civic tradition. Because of the basic iconic nature of memes, they function at the emotional level and can arouse impulses and generate actions, including the irrational commitment to slogans and dogmas, that tend to, and may have been designed to, fragment society into irreconcilable camps no longer unified within the compass of a shared social mind.

Two questions emerge at this point: are memes really being used deliberately and effectively to weaken liberal democracy and, if so, can liberal democracy be saved? I'll close by responding briefly to each of these questions. The short answer to the first question is yes. Frankly, I think we have all read enough *real news* about this issue over the last two years to be pretty confident that it is happening. But one

39 Three Brazilian semioticians come first to mind, Lucia Santaella, Priscila Monteiro Borges, and Vinicius Romanini, but this is a list from personal acquaintance and I know that the semiotics of memes, as well as the semiotics of propaganda, has a growing base of scholarship in Brazil.

40 See footnote n. 16, above.

point about memes that I haven't yet mentioned is relevant, a point Daniel Dennett likes to stress: "Memes, like viruses, are symbionts dependent on the reproductive machinery of their hosts, which they exploit for their own ends."⁴¹ Clearly, the success of meme warfare since Brexit has been enabled and empowered by the internet and social media technology which obviously provides reproductive machinery aplenty.

Am I begging the question by using the expression "meme warfare"? No, I'm not. Note first, as Deidre Olsen recently pointed out in *Salon*, "Memes can and are used to simplify complex political and social commentary into easily digestible tidbits" and the "ability of memes to communicate ideology is boundless."⁴² Next, let me read some passages from an article in a newspaper that was slipped under my hotel door in October 2007 when I was in New Orleans attending a meeting of the Semiotic Society of America. The title of the article is: "Media hubs in Iraq mark new battlefield." The article began: "The U.S. military says it has captured at least six al-Qaeda media centers in Iraq and arrested 20 suspected propaganda leaders [...]. The seizures [...] underscore the importance al-Qaeda has placed on media, primarily the internet." The article went on to report that Ayman al-Zawahri, Osama bin Laden's deputy, affirmed that the battle for the hearts and minds of followers was "taking place in the battlefield of the media."⁴³

By 2015, the focus of this kind of warfare had shifted explicitly to memes. In the *Official Journal of [...] NATO Strategic Communications*, in an article entitled "It's Time to Embrace Memetic Warfare," Jeff Giese writes: "Memetic warfare [...] is competition over narrative, ideas, and social control in a social-media battlefield. [...] The online battlefield of perception will only grow in importance in both warfare and diplomacy." He went on to say that "even for those of us who live on social media, it is sometimes difficult to appreciate how quickly information can spread, the profundity of its global scope, and the significance of its impact on perceptions, narratives, and social movements. Once one starts viewing the Internet through meme-colored glasses, you see memetic warfare everywhere—in political campaigns, in contested narratives about news events, in the thoughtless memes shared by Facebook friends, and in videos on YouTube. [...] Hashtags, one might say, are operational coordinates of memetic warfare."⁴⁴

Finally, I'll point out that in October 2018 the U.S. Justice Department announced the indictment of seven Russian military spies on cyber hacking charges. The *Washington Post* reported that "The indictment further exposes Moscow's ongoing, widespread campaign to discredit western democracy and international institutions through disinformation and other measures. The aim, officials said, is to muddy or alter perceptions of the truth."⁴⁵ So, yes, memes have been weaponized to undermine liberal democracy, and the readiness of so many in the west to reject the liberal ideals of their civic traditions and to dissociate themselves from large factions of their fellow citizens suggest that this attack on the west is succeeding.

41 DENNETT, 2017, p. 284.

42 OLSEN, *Ibid.*

43 "U.S. pulls plug on 6 al-Qaeda outlets," *USA Today* (Hotel Edition), 5–7 Oct. 2007.

44 GIESEA, 2015.

45 NAKASHIMA, BIRNBAUM, and BOOTH, 2018.

In conclusion I'll give a very brief answer to the question: Can liberal democracy be saved? I have already expressed the views of a number of great thinkers who have serious reservations about the viability of democracy for the long run. Plato's belief that ordinary people cannot be trusted to govern themselves well has been widely held throughout history and is a view still held by those who advocate resort to some form of *the noble lie*. And as Kant pointed out long ago, enlightenment for "the public" can only be achieved, if at all, slowly because charismatic leaders always manage to implant pernicious prejudices that will guide the "unthinking multitude"⁴⁶—a foreshadowing of de Tocqueville's fear that democracy would fall prey to "the tyranny of the majority." Now with our advanced communications technologies, pernicious prejudices and false ideas can be spread explosively or targeted strategically to remarkable and poisonous effect. It is far from certain that democracy can be saved, let alone liberal democracy, and whether democracy even should be saved depends on whether a respect and commitment to truth and reason can be redeemed and whether we can find a better way to promote objective learning across society at large. That is certainly my hope. But truth does not come easily and the difference between a false idea and a true one is not apparent on their faces nor by the emotional appeal of one or the other. And now, when democracies are under attack, both from external and internal forces wielding the semiotic power of memes, if there is a chance for the survival and resurgence of liberal democracy, it will depend on philosophers and semiotic warriors who remain committed to democracy and enlightenment ideals as the best hope for humankind and who understand that the control and management of semiosis is now the greatest threat—but maybe also the paramount tactical resource for spreading enlightened democratic values. In the battle to rehabilitate truth and save enlightened democracy, we must welcome the power of ideas, the power of signs, and use them strategically and forcefully.

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46 KANT, *ibid.*

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