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Discursive Contamination: Terrorism, the Body Politic, and the Virus as Trope

Viruses thrive in discourse. Hence, to investigate the trope of the virus in contemporary cultural theory and its points of interface with politicized discourses on states of terror and conceptions of the (US) body politic is inevitably to also reflect on the trope of the virus in contemporary culture at large as well as the scientific discourses which form the backdrop to all of these viral ramifications (Cf. Mayer and Weingart). Perhaps more than any other concept appropriated from the discursive realm of the life sciences by cultural theory, the concept of the virus resists total resemanticization, while proving immensely malleable and versatile in processes of interdisciplinary and interdiscursive translation. The trope, it seems, shares many of the qualities that have been ascribed to the scientific object itself: it is sly, adaptable, ever present but not always immediately detectible.

These parallels of are by no means the self-evident outcome of interdiscursive borrowing processes. The cultural career of the biological category of "hybridity," for instance, exemplifies an alternative course of appropriation. The concept of hybridity underwent a near-complete transformation in its relocation from the realm of botany to the sphere of philosophy. "'Hybrid' is a nineteenth century's word. But it has become our own again," writes Robert Young in his seminal study on the semantics of the term: "In the nineteenth century it was used to refer to a physiological phenomenon; in the twentieth century it has been reactivated to describe a cultural one" (Young 6). In fact, in view of the current usage of the term, to talk about a "reactivation" might be too weak a formulation. Given the fact that "hybridity" is increasingly employed as a generally positive category to describe cultural contact and transcultural mergings, the original connotations of the hybrid—which were much more negative, connoting less vigor than sterility—seem not so much to be reactivated, but rather cancelled out or

overwritten.[1]

It is interesting to contrast virus discourse of the last decade to these recent conceptual negotiations of hybridity. At first survey, the parallels are striking. In both cases biological concepts, which have in themselves undergone quite dramatic reconceptualizations in the course of nineteenth and twentieth century scientific debates, enter the sphere of culture. Then, both terms quickly leave the realm of high theory behind to engage in the wider field of popular culture, becoming key terms both in the analysis of popular culture as well as in mainstream, broad appeal genres like the contemporary "biothriller." In addition, both the "hybrid" and the "viral" are employed at times in strikingly similar ways: specifically, to denote processes of syncretization that foster instability and heterogeneity. In analyses and critiques of our current cultural condition, one could say that the terms have become key metaphors of border-crossing. But this is where the analogies end. Whereas the terminology of hybridity increasingly runs the risk of slipping into a naïve celebration of everything "mixed" or "uneven"—and thus losing its original biological connotations of sterility and infertility—"virus talk" does not lend itself quite as easily to romanticization. This resistance certainly has much to do with the fact that the terminology of the virus is still so fraught with immunological and microbiological patterns of thinking,[2] while cultural theory has largely stripped hybridity of both its botanical origins and of their connotations.

In this paper we want to explore the implications of the fact that the cultural and political implementations of the virus trope are necessarily replete with biological resonances by casting a closer look recent mobilizations of virus discourse and viral imagery in both philosophical and political contexts: specifically, in the debates around terrorism which

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[1] On the process of resemanticization and discursive border-crossing around the concept of "hybridity" see also Tom Holert, "Mischkalkulationen und Gesichter der Zukunft."

[2] Ton van Helvoort has written about the variegated and ruptured semantic history of the concept "virus," and argued that this concept might very well be as successful as it is precisely because it is rather vague, and thus lends itself particularly well to scientific adaptations and reformulations. The history of virology, Helvoort argues, can be written as a series of radical new beginnings, although the very discontinuity of the historical processes is often not addressed or acknowledged in classical histories of the field. See Helvoort, "Virus, Wissenschaft und Geschichte." See also Helvoort, "History of Virus Research in the 20th Century"; Hans-Jörg Rheinberger, "'Von Rous' 'filtrierbarem Agens' zum Mikrosom"; Karlheinz Lüdtke, "Theoriebildung und interdisziplinärer Diskurs"; and Angela N.H. Creager, *The Life of a Virus*.

played such a decisive role in the shaping of national consciousness after September 11th and which, in spite of the purging of terms such as "war on terror" from official Obama administration nomenclature, still exerts its force as a lasting discursive legacy of the Bush years.[3] Virus discourse tends to be called up in debates on border crossing, cultural contact, social conflict and, with particular prominence, in discussion of terrorism: in short, the concept is consistently brought to bear whenever a demarcation between notions of selfhood and otherness is at stake. Central to the discourse's deployment in the context of terrorism debates seems to be the—problematical—assumption that a "new" and "invisible" enemy has emerged who confronts the "West" relentlessly and on the sly and that this enemy differs fundamentally from earlier antagonists and aggressors.

Accordingly, our title—"discursive contamination"—not only refers to the fact that as a trope the virus spreads from its homegrown domain in medical discourse to fields as different as information technology, pop culture, and political theory. We argue that discursive contamination goes beyond mere crossovers from the real to the fictional and back again, although such crossovers do, of course, take place.[4] In the case of "virulence" discursive circulation is furthered by a specific condition of the trope which, more than other figures stemming from the field of the life sciences, relies upon a constant oscillation of literal and metaphorical meaning. Thus, even if we assume for the sake of our argument that microbiology serves as the source of the literal meaning of the virus (which is a problematical assumption in the first place, given the fusion of microbiology and information technology in contemporary genetics), this literal meaning is by no means located in a safe ontology beyond

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[3] This rhetorical shift has been presented less as a regulation of official language than as a change in policy expressed in transformed political terminology. As Secretary of State Hillary Clinton put it in the spring of 2009: "The administration has stopped using the phrase (war on terror), and I think that speaks for itself" (Solomon n. pag.).

[4] One such instance of direct crossover was related by Judith Miller, Stephen Engelberg, and William Broad in their *Germs: Biological Weapons and America's Secret War* (237-38): President Clinton's fascination with Richard Preston's virus thriller *The Cobra Event* (1998). He recommended the novel to his advisors and high Pentagon officials, and took its bio-terrorism scenario as an incentive to intensify military preparedness programs concerned with the dangers of bioterrorism. For an analysis of this interaction cf. Sarasin 81-119. See also Mayer "The Rhetoric of Threat."

metaphor.[5] On the other contrary, the other hand, the trope's metaphorical dimensions draw heavily on—and gain tremendous authority from—its seemingly literal origin in life science, or even, if we take the implications of literal origin further, in nature. Thus, whenever biological metaphors are applied to politics, a "naturalization" of the given circumstances results. Whether this is always a directly calculated or merely a collateral effect is perhaps another matter. Bush era debates about terrorism offer, as we will see, a case in point.

Given the propensity of virus talk to reify ideologically loaded assumptions and allegations, it is all the more important to carefully examine the semantics at work. One common gesture of distancing is the striking element is the gesture of distancing, often enacted by a typographical "denaturalization" of the highly charged terms endemic to virus discourse; by means of inverted commas, these terms are marked as constructions, as "the discourse of the other" (Derrida, "Some Statements" 74). Our remarks will make use of such gestures of critical distancing, but we ultimately propose a shift of perspective. Conceiving of society in terms of biology is, as we argue, inevitable. Given that biological models of thought are thus "ineradicable" in our thinking of social structures, we must at the very least look for ways to activate the full complexity of the biological models at hand in order to contest the all-too-simplistic or phobic dimensions of biology's social appropriation. In particular, the simplistic—and highly problematical—dichotomies of self vs. other, friend vs. foe which inform the "viral rhetorics" of many "experts on terrorism" to this day may be challenged—and potentially subverted. This is made possible not so much by turning away from immunological and microbiological concepts, but rather by taking them seriously. One way to achieve this is by considering advanced models of immunological research in analyses of the discourse's further deployments and transformation from natural science term to cultural theory catchword. First, however, we should elaborate on what it is that we precisely mean when we use the term "virus talk."

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[5] That metaphor plays a constitutive role in the fabrication of scientific facts is hardly a matter of contestation in contemporary science studies. Already in the 1930s, science historian and serologist Ludwik Fleck demonstrated the importance of "thought styles" (*Denkstile*) for the production of scientific facts. Taking the example of syphilis research, he showed how these styles become legible though widespread use of warfare images in what he calls "*Immunitätswissenschaft*" or the science of immunity. Cf. Fleck, *Genesis and Development of a Scientific Fact*.

I. Virus Talk

It is almost impossible to find a field of contemporary debate in which the virus does *not* appear. In the last hundred years, the trope of the virus and the notion of virulence have traveled from immunological treatises to computer handbooks, from philosophical reflections to postmodern literary texts, from political pamphlets about globalization and modern warfare to pseudo-sociological speculations about the transfer of ideas and cultural concepts. This conceptual migration has meanwhile gained a momentum of its own, so that by now it is hard to say who is influencing whom.

What is it that makes the virus such a pertinent prototype for metaphorical use and transference (including the psychoanalytical sense of the word)? And why is it so much more prominent in all kinds of contemporary political speculations on threat and border crossing than other microbes or infectious agents? Certainly, one reason for its popularity is that the virus has long been the "big invisible" among the microbes, as it is too small to be identified with the light microscope.[6] It was the development of the electronic microscope in the 1930s that led not only to the virus's identification, but also to the popularization of specific attributes which distinguish the virus from other microbes. Among the dubious qualities associated with viruses from this point on are a sense of their sly invasion, invisible presence, subversion of the host's organism, and capacity for mutation. Another important point is that in comparison with other—it is tempting to write more ordinary—microbes, the virus seems to have brains. Or at least, due to the seeming intentionality of its activities, the virus readily allows for conceptualization as an inhuman form of intelligence. This tendency is all the more pronounced since the minimal equipment of viruses, which basically consists of the genetic material and protein envelope needed to "conquer" the cell, reminds us of the ideal of high tech military equipment. Moreover, viral strategies are today described in the terminology of genetics, so that virus talk resonates with the reputation of a discipline which has established itself within the last decades as a scientific and social master discourse.[7] The metaphors of writing and information technology (de-/recoding, transcription, etc.) make viruses

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[6] Symptomatically, the category with which the ardent classifier Carl von Linné came up for viruses back in 1767 was "chaos."

[10] On this dimension of viral imagery see Lily E. Kay, *Who Wrote the Book of Life?*, especially pp. 128-92.

appear to be clever little biomachines, predisposed to representing the permeability of the human-machine interface—an attribution pushed forward by the circulation of computer viruses.

Because of this assumed sophistication of the virus, popular representations of viruses not only use military metaphors, but draw particularly on the idea of an unequal battle which has to be fought on the side of the weaker part (the tiny virus) with strategic skills, tricks, with savvy. The virus appears as an agent of subversion: as a guerrilla fighter, a pirate, sometimes as a spy, as a "secret ruler" (Winnacker, our translation)—or as a terrorist. Latency, conceived as secrecy (the notion derives from the Latin word *latens* for "the hidden"), is at the center of this imagery.

All of these implications and ascriptions triggered contemporary cultural theory's interest in the imagery of the virus and notions of virulence. The virus trope appeals especially to poststructuralist thinkers of "subversion," since it provides an interesting category of self-fashioning operating at precisely those points where established hierarchies undergo destabilization and systemic boundaries are at stake. And it is the trope's ambivalence, its polysemic oscillation between diverse evaluations and ascriptions, which seems to constitute the most important point of reference for contemporary cultural critics and philosophers. At this moment in time, the parameters of the viral are particularly appropriate for a state of the art description of social and cultural interactions. More obviously than ever before, the most diverse developments of our day—from politics to economy to culture—present themselves as too complex to be conceptually captured grasped in terms of individualized control. Moreover, the category of the viral allows for a relatively "neutral" conceptualization of the current situation: while suggesting a subversive thrust, viruses do not readily call forth sympathy, unqualified identification, or compassion. Their specific fascination seems to be based on their ambiguous status (not human, not even alive by many counts). But on the same grounds, the figure of the virus does not lend itself to simple demonization, either: Even if it figures as an evil principle in the first instance, as can be seen in various classical to recent virus thrillers from Wolfgang Petersen's *Outbreak* (1995) to Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002), it turns out to be a manipulative force, a way of functioning, an agency—confusing and variegated—rather than a uni-dimensional, stock version of the bad guy.[8] The virus is an ambivalent thing: an in-between creature subject to the

[8] On this pattern of association cf. Mayer, "The Rhetoric of Threat."

logic of mutation which lets a pathogenic effect suddenly flip over into an apathogenic one, and thus effectively undermines the binaries of healthy/ill, good/bad, and harmless/dangerous. And it is precisely this dimension of the viral trope which makes for the specific fascination of the virus as a pattern of thought in current popular culture enactments and appropriations.

II. Virulence and Terrorism

There are historical periods in which virus discourse seems to be an especially attractive tool for describing scenarios of cultural and political interaction. Certainly, the 1950s were such a time: so much so that critic Andrew Ross rightfully called immunology the "the most overdetermined of all the Cold War discourses" (Ross 47). In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, tropes of virality seem to be experiencing something like a global revival. Even if we disregard for the time being the striking fact that the visual—and physical—evidence of airplane crashes and collapsing buildings was speedily translated into the vocabulary of biology (and bioterrorism), as Philipp Sarasin has shown (Cf. Sarasin 48-59), the sheer number of more conventional metaphorical interlinkages between terrorism and virality in public statements, political analyses, propaganda pieces, and hate speech after the attacks is striking intriguing in its own right.

Let us have a closer look at one such concatenation of virus talk and politics: a speech delivered by Richard N. Haass, at the time director of policy for the Department of State and a close advisor of Colin Powell's, before the high profile think tank Council of Foreign Relations on October 15, 2001.[9] Titled "The Bush Administration's Response to September 11th—and Beyond," the paper seems to be a standard piece of post-September 11 paranoia, cloaked in exemplary virus talk. Haass writes:

> Another way of looking at the challenge [to American security in view of the September 11th attacks] is to view international terrorism as analogous to a terrible, lethal virus. Terrorism lives as part of the environment. Sometimes dormant, sometimes virulent, it is always present in some form. Like a virus, international terrorism respects no boundaries—moving from country to country, exploiting globalized commerce and communication to spread. It can

[9] After resigning from the State Department, Haass became president of the Council of Foreign Relations in July 2003: a position which he still holds.

> be particularly malevolent when it can find a supportive host. We therefore need to take appropriate prophylactic measures at home and abroad to prevent terrorism from multiplying and check it from infecting our societies and damaging our lives. We need, for instance, better border regimes and improved international counterterrorism cooperation across the board. We also need to make sure that the virus does not mutate into something even more deadly through the acquisition of nuclear, biological, or chemical weapons of mass destruction.
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> The challenge of terrorism is thus akin to fighting a virus in that we can accomplish a great deal but not eradicate the problem. (n. pag.)

At first glance, Haass's analogy seems to stay firmly within the parameters of long-standing "body politic" imagery in which the enemy of the state figures variously as a microbe or a disease imperiling public health and order. According to this logic, the infected body of the state can and must be healed by way of an expulsion of the infectious and infecting Other. This is what Haass's list of suggested "prophylactic" measures seems to indicate in its emphasis on supervision, control, and containment. But significantly enough, Haass's speech shifts gears midway. While he does try to rigorously differentiate between what is healthy (and "ours") and what is sick (and "theirs"), at some point the viral imagery he uses steers from the clear-cut binary logic which was initially established. The notion of a viral agent which was always there, if dormant for a period of time, calls to mind a much more frightening scenario than the one of the body politic about to be infected by alien pathogens. The scope of Haass's vision is broadened to suggest a world in which the very distinctions between "us" and "them," "healthy" and "sick," "inside" and "outside" have gone awry. "They" live among us, they are "educated, some at universities in the West," "some of them enjoyed [life in the suburbs] along with afternoons at the gym, rum and cokes by night, and trips to Las Vegas"—and then all of a sudden they turn against "us" and lash out.

It is on these grounds that Haass then quotes President Bush's remark that "we are now engaged in [...] a different kind of war. It's not the kind of war that we're used to in America.'" In the context of October 2001, this statement unmistakeably refers to the situation *in* the United States after the terrorist attacks.[10] In fact, Haass's invocation of a "different kind of war" is particularly interesting precisely *because* it refers to the

[10] On Haass's stance on the second Iraq war and his growing opposition to the Bush administration cf. Brian Urquhart's review of Haass's *The Opportunity*. Cf. also Haass, "Taking on Terrorism" for a slightly revised version of his idea of the viral nature of terrorism (58-59).

situation in the "homeland." The scenario of imminent threat which emanates from Haass's talk and Bush's statement is striking because it echoes with a diagnosis by—of all people—Jean Baudrillard who described the events of September 11 as bringing to the fore a new, "fantastical" enemy and an antagonism which "is everywhere and [...] in each of us" ("L'esprit du terrorisme" n. pag., our translation).

The uncanny similarities between Haass's neoconservative argumentation and the French theorist's latest update of his observations on viral power, first formulated in the 1980s, are summarized in Baudrillard's catchphrase: "Terrorism, like viruses, is everywhere" ("L'esprit du terrorisme" n. pag.). And although Baudrillard very clearly identifies the viral as a manifestation of "evil," it is no less evident that this ascription goes hand in hand with a strong fascination: a fascination that led some critics to go as far as to suspect that the philosopher sympathized with the perpetrators of the attacks of September 11 (cf., for example, Minc). Baudrillard sees viral processes at work wherever systems start to act self-destructively in response to overload. Thus, if external intervention is no longer possible because the system has already absorbed as many contradictions as it can bear, viral processes attack the system as a means of self-regulation. In accordance with the somewhat apocalyptic tone of his argument, Baudrillard does not think it likely that an inversion or "healing" can take place in the state of advanced degeneration. This, he holds, is even more so the case with regard to the fundamentally pathological system which he alternately calls "globalization," the contemporary "World order," or "the West," and which he also assumes to be founded on invisible antagonisms. As he phrases it in *The Spirit of Terrorism* (2001): "The West, in its Godlike position, becomes suicidal and declares war on itself" ("L'esprit du terrorisme" n. pag.). Again, this viral—and suicidal—force is a constitutive part of the (pathological) system, the outcome of its own structure. In this regard, Baudrillard's argument is indebted to early observations made by Umberto Eco about the operations of the Red Brigades in the 1970s: "Terrorism is not the enemy of the great systems, on the contrary, it is their natural counterweight, accepted, programmed" (116), he writes. Eco, too, opts for the rhetoric of immunology to illustrate his idea: "[Terrorism is] a biological consequence of the multinationals, just as a day of fever is the reasonable price of an

effective vaccine" (118).[11] According to this logic, to oppose the multinational corporations and their power politics you have to resort to means other than terrorism. Terrorism does not really run counter to the system, but rather strengthens it in an indirect and arguably perverse way. If we take this line of thought seriously, however, then viral forces no longer seem solely disruptive. They rather come to serve as a figure for an operative principle at the heart of the postmodern world order.

If one reviews Haass's speech in the context of these reflections, it becomes apparent that for a while, here too, the rhetoric of virality gains a momentum of its own. By the same token, Haass's talk comes amazingly close to Baudrillard's apocalyptic insight that the new conflict might indeed be irresolvable because the conflict does not so much pit system against system but suggests instead a system eroding from within: a Manichean notion which is, of course, also prominent in the thinking of the religiously fundamentalist American right. Eventually the talk itself steers away from such fearful conclusions. Haass ends by reinstating a firm dichotomy between the freedom-loving West and the despotic and hateful rest of the world which then paves the way for a final call to action. This finish is as predictable as the dichotomies used to undergird it are ubiquitous for the Bush years. But nevertheless, even this standard piece of political propaganda reveals the liability of virus talk to run out of control and to explode binary constellations of evaluation, by introducing a highly suspicious "third space" in which relations are always already mixed-up or "infected."

It doesn't take much—and it didn't take long—for these dimensions of political virus talk to take over public debates on terrorism and anti-terrorism measures. The Bush-critical media in effect turned the discursive tables on the administration. The spectre of viral terror was mobilized against the very parties who had come up with the notion in the first place. To give only one example, in January 2002 the web-based journalist Scott Loughrey published his critical reflections on US counter-terrorism policy of the preceding months. He begins with the by then standard observation that the effect of the September 11 attacks resembled "that of a lethal virus on a host cell" (n. pag.). In what follows, however, he envisions this virus working in more than one direction: "So, too, is the new authoritarianism that has arisen from the attacks. It seems like the Bush administration's domestic responses to the

[11] Eco never goes as far as Baudrillard, however, and one reason for the far less apocalyptic effect of his scenario might be that he capitalizes on the imagery of vaccination rather than totalizing the idea of (viral) infection as Baudrillard does.

attacks replicate the thinking behind the actual attacks themselves" (n. pag.).

Here, the viral logic of terrorism has indeed managed to become an integral part of the system, an alien force which intruded and then set out to rewrite the established order. Although this text, by contrast to Haass's, is critical of the measures taken by the Bush administration, the thrust of its arguments is remarkably similar. Both Loughrey and Haass call to mind Baudrillard's idea that there is no outside to the world of economic globalization: the terrorists might fight it, but they fight it from within, by its own means, and they will go down with it.[12]

III. Autoimmunity

Even if the dichotomy of "self" and "other," "friend" and "foe," can still be traced in the inverted image of an infected government (not to mention the writings of Haass) and all of the reflections thus far presented still rely heavily on the popular notion of the immune system as the body's "headquarter of defense,"[13] the very imagery of virulence in these pieces resonates with the ideas developed by Eco and Baudrillard. Both thinkers maintain that extremist political actions and fundamentalist terrorism are entangled with rather than radically opposed to the systems of globalization and commerce and, thus, totalize the ideas of contamination and infection.

We would like to develop this thought further in the light of our introductory remarks on the nature of virus discourse. If indeed the association of infection as a master trope seems to be an "ineradicable" feature of the contemporary political imagination, we should perhaps not aim at eliminating the discourse of the viral from politics A more viable alternative would be to try to epitomize some (already inherent) implications of the imagery of virulence and the viral that might shed critical light on many of the established dichotomies of this discursive field. The concept of auto-immunity as introduced by Jacques Derrida into the debates around terrorism and contemporary threat might serve as a point of departure for such a revisionary use of virus discourse.

Even though Derrida was by dint of the very premises of his philosophical project deeply skeptical of reductive analogies, he

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[12] On the ramifications of this logic in contemporary popular fiction—most notably the virus thriller—see Mayer, "The Rhetoric of Threat."

[13] See Donna Haraway, "The Biopolitics of Postmodern Bodies" and Ilana Löwy, "The Immunological Construction of the Self."

proposed a systematic identification of deconstruction as a viral strategy, as a way of exposing a text's invisibilized contradictions from within and by its own conceptual means ("The Spatial Arts" 12, 32).[14] The tropes of virology address all the aspects of invisibility and latency which deconstruction refers to with the classical formula of the "always already" (*toujours déjà*) and, thus, indicate the constitutive presence of the technological in the natural, the public in the private, the alien in the self, the copy in the original. Thus, the virus is introduced for its ability to transcend binary oppositions such as, most prominently, self/other for the sake of a third notion which complicates these dichotomies. In this regard, the virus inherits aspects of the "pharmakon," as both medicine and poison, which Derrida explored earlier in "Plato's Pharmacy" (1972). Derrida's notion of the viral anticipates the notion of autoimmunity which he developed in his late writings as a key concept to describe such seemingly diverse phenomena as contemporary religion and 'body politics,' that is a thinking of political collectivity with reference to biological categories which since 2001 has come to include what Derrida conceives as the "so called war" against "so called terrorism."[15]

In medical discourse, autoimmunity refers to the phenomenon that "the immune system attacks what is regarded by the outside observer as 'self'" (Tauber, "The Biological Notion of Self" n. pag.).[16] So if both the virus and autoimmunity destabilize the distinction between self and non-self (just think about HIV as a virus species turning the immune system's own cells into foreign bodies), the notion of autoimmunity—more so than the notion of the virus—puts into question simplistic constructions of an exterior enemy. This is why we think that Derrida's trope might constitute a point of departure for a possible reconceptualization—always already hidden, as it were— in virus discourse: autoimmunity shifts the focus from the "exterior enemy" to the disposition of the

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[14] See also Derrida, "Rhétorique de la drogue. Entretien dirigé par J.-M. Hervieu." For a detailed comment, see Weingart, *Ansteckende Wörter* (85-92).

[16] Although Derrida did not systematically work out the juridical or biomedical implications of the notion, he seems to distinguish more or less implicitly between two levels of autoimmunity. On the one hand, he argues that autoimmunity is the protection against a self's own self-protection (so basically against its own immune system); on the other hand, he refers to autoimmunity in a wider sense as a protection of the self against parts of itself. Some etymological remarks can be found in his text "Faith and Knowledge"; see also Samir Haddah, "Derrida and Democracy at Risk" for an analysis of Derrida's use of the term.

organism itself, including the "body politic." In *Voyous* (2003), published in English as *Rogues* (2005), Derrida's take on the events of September 11 and on the ensuing prominence of the term "rogue state," he first sets out to address the system of democracy itself and then turns to the rogue states or rogue subjects alluded to in the title via a detour. Derrida discusses what he describes as democracy's own form of autoimmunity. In order to protect its "self," that is to remain a democracy, democracy at times actually goes as far as to "attack" its "self" by overriding some of its own basic features or conditions. An example of this would be the discontinuation of democratic elections when they seem likely to bring about a non-democratic government, as in Algeria in 1992 (53ff).

From this perspective, democracy is a radically historical process of negotiation which structurally needs to limit itself in order to keep going, to "stay alive," so to speak. It does so by deferring to a non-negotiable sovereignty in moments of crisis. Democracy's autoimmunity is the expression of this deference and is as such unavoidable, precisely because there is no essence, or "self," of democracy. Rather, democracy's self is constructed in its defense und thus turns out to be precarious, contradictory, and inconsistent.Thus, autoimmunity presents itself not as an accident of democracy, but as an integral element of the system. By extension, Derrida claims that the figure of the "rogue" is in fact not limited to the states thus classified by the US administration. The rogue becomes, indeed, a viral entity, since it is no longer associated exclusively with undemocratic forces (and thus the system's "other"), but also affects (or infects) the anti-terrorist counter-measures of democratic states. The figure points to the subversion of democratic principles under the pretense of democratic action. In doing so, it brings the inherent paradox of democracy to the fore: its fundamental "rogueness." It thereby comes as no surprise when Derrida concludes that the epoch of the rogue state is over because either there are no rogue states any longer or nothing but rogue states: some of which can be found in the UN Security Council (*Voyous* 145ff).

Still, even if autoimmunity is assigned a place in the (empty) heart of democracy, this fact does not imply a total pathologization of democracy. Rather, we would like to read Derrida's argument and his untangling of dialectical snarls as a means of escaping clear-cut identifications of what is "healthy" and what is "sick" with regard to body politics. Derrida insists on the fact that it is precisely the body politic's autoimmunity which discloses a future vision of "perfectibility," since it allows for self-criticism and change. On the other hand, this does

not keep him from diagnosing "a series of linked examples of an auto-immune pervertibility of democracy," as observed in the historical context of September 11.[17] Thus, if he repeatedly refers to the scenario of "autoimmunitarian terror" as "worse than the cold war" ("Autoimmunity" 91) he indicates that a transformation is at work: from an immunity precariously predicated on a balance of terror to a *monstrous* state of autoimmunity in which the stabilized dialectics of the former states collapse into an uncontrollable dynamics in which good and evil constantly switch roles. Counter-terror is, in other words, perceived as terror and thus provokes (counter-)counter-terror and so on.

As should have become clear by now, the notion of autoimmunity allows for a different perspective on the construction of terrorism as a viral threat. It has the advantage of drawing attention not only to the self-made quality of terror, which Baudrillard also pointed out, albeit in far different rhetorical register, but also to the fundamental impossibility of avoiding the dynamics of extremism, radicality, and fundamentalist dissent in political systems which consider themselves democracies. Following this line of thought, we would thus like to reconsider the social debates around terrorism from a slightly different angle, by introducing a shift of perspective brought about by the idea of autoimmunity in the Derridean sense. In contrast to the conventional imagery of infection and immunity, as commonly mobilized in the rhetoric of the healthy "body politic" attacked by sickening "outside invaders," the logic of autoimmunity starts from the idea of an exchangeability, similarity, or even equality of all factors involved. And this happens to be the course that immunological discourse has recently also started to take: After all, the immune system works by means of a continuous negotiation and differentiation between what is an integral part of the system and what counts as an invader. The terms and conditions of these distinctions are far from stable or unchanging. In fact, they are subject to permanent revisions and re-arrangements. The processes of distinction are thus by no means based on containment or exclusion only, but engage multiple interactions, negotiations, and conflicts, thereby provoking new arrangements and positionings. "Defense" mechanisms against certain agents are only one possible outcome among others, and even these reactions allow for a clear-cut

[17] Both the fact that the attacks have been described as partly self-created (with regard to the "training" of troops against the Soviet Union in Afghanistan) and the war against the "axis of evil" and enemies of liberty are interpreted by Derrida along these lines (cf. "Autoimmunity" 91-96).

differentiation along the lines of "self" or "other" only in retrospect, if at all, because the processes involved are too minute and too intricate to be captured in terms of such dichotomous distinctions while they are taking place.

In other words, to take immunology seriously is to question rather than to solidify the distinction between "good" and "evil," "us" and "them." While conventional virus talk insists on the idea of the immune system as "fortification," we would instead like to endorse both the notions of "autoimmunity" and "tolerance" as integral parts of the very discourse of immunity. This is an idea that Alfred I. Tauber has developed with regard to the history of immunology since the 1950s. Within this disciplinary paradigm, both tolerance and autoimmunity have figured as massive challenges to the conception of the immune system as firmly based on preset notions about what constitutes the self and non-self. Tauber describes tolerance and autoimmunity as two sides of the same coin: "By the 1990s, immunologists increasingly appreciated that an immune self, representing a fortress from which attacking lymphocytes might sally forth to destroy invaders, offered a naïve depiction of what was, in fact, a dynamic equilibrium in which 'attacked' and 'tolerated' were not easily predicated" ("The Biological Notion of Self" n. pag.).[18] Along these lines, the immune system does not identify certain "intruders" as such but rather confers a co-equal status on them. This becomes the point of departure for a chain of interactions that do not rely on any pre-formulated self/non-self-distinction. Already in the 1970s, the Nobel Prize winner Niels K. Jerne complicated the assumption that the immune system was essentially an agency for the discrimination of self and non-self, favoring instead a concept based on recognition. In an intriguing move, he offered a model of interaction in which it is of no importance which part figures as "recognized" and "recognizer"—and in which the dichotomies of self and non-self and inside and outside consequently lose their distinctive qualities.[19] From this perspective, the immune system figures as a network, as an internally regulated, highly dynamic and highly communicative disposition. Drawing on theoretical as well as empirical data collected by immunologists since the mid-twentieth century, Tauber further elaborates on this view to demonstrate that neither tolerance nor

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[18] See also Tauber, *The Immune Self*.

[19] As a consequence, the notion of the "self" itself gains a metaphorical status in this approach. See Tauber, "The Biological Notion of Self." Tauber actually calls Jerne's approach the "deconstruction" of the immune system: "Indeed, for Jerne, if one 'needed' a self, it was the immune system itself" (n. pag.).

autoimmunity are exemptions from the "normal" functioning of the immune system. Contrary to long-standing immunological assumptions, he argues that tolerance should not be seen as immunity's mysterious "silence," while autoimmunity must not be understood as its inversion or counterforce. Rather, both conditions are the results of a specific interaction that is distinctive, but not structurally different from the general functioning of immunity.[20]

In this wider framework, the distinction between *auto*immunity and immunity proper can be suspended, since what is usually conceived of as "auto" ("self") should rather be seen as a series of relative and unstable arrangements. Derrida was very much aware of this fact. At this point we see his diagnosis of democracy's autoimmunity converging with recent paradigms in immunology or, to adopt a phrase from science historian Ludwikg Fleck, "thought styles" (*Denkstile*) in scientific research. Although Derrida might not have been aware of these discussions, the models themselves are sometimes inspired by poststructuralism; the connex between philosophical, cultural studies discussions and immunology operates in this case via a different circuit of conceptual borrowing. What emerges is a conception of the immune system as progressive rather than preset structure in which the production of a state of tolerance is based on the same mechanisms as its defense reactions. Such a model does not *per se* negate the idea of conflict. Nevertheless, it envisions a much more complex interaction of forces, based on recognition, reactivity, and contextualization—and thus attests to a complexity belied by traditional and trivial virus imagery. Intriguingly, the idea of such an integrated system seems to be already at work in the discourse on terrorism as viral threat. But as it is most authors writing on

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[20] Another important aspect Tauber stresses with regard to ecological approaches in immunology is contextualisation (see *The Immune Self*). More recently, the Italian philosopher Roberto Esposito has taken up this argument in a study that explores the role of immunity as the central modern principle to organize "life." As becomes particularly clear with acquired immunity, including vaccination, the idea of immunity implies that including evil (on a small scale) may serve to exclude it in the long run. As his study is strongly inspired by deconstruction, he prefers to push forward the inner contradictions of these logics rather than offering a way out. Nevertheless, looking for an alternative way of thinking about *immunity* with regard to *community*, Esposito seems to invest his hopes in contemporary immunological approaches which defy the image of an excluding border to the outside in favor of the perspective that immunity is an ongoing process of self-definition, implying a constant production of self *and* other in which the self is "always already" (as Derrida might have it) constituted with regard to its alterity (cf. Esposito 231).

the subject matter—whether politicians, journalists, or writers of popular fiction—strive to stay uncontaminated by the metaphors they use and to keep the barriers between "us" and "them," "self" and "other," "friend" and "foe" intact against all odds; Haass's turn away from potential paradoxes and back to a more stable dichotomy at the close of his talk is symptomatic in this regard. The alternative we have tried to sketch here hints at some hidden "immunological" dimensions in political discourse, which—when brought to the fore—might result in a profound reconceptualization of the very idea of self and other in the political sphere. It remains to be seen whether the changes in immunological thought can indeed affect our political debates, given the climate of fear that, although arguably less pressing than at the beginning of the decade and much less aggressively fostered under the current than the previous US-American administrations, nevertheless continues to shape our present historical moment. At any rate, our observations might be used within the field of cultural theory to discourage propagators of simplistic equations between biological and social systems of thought since they demonstrate that, if taken seriously, biological metaphors complicate rather than simplify the representation of social matters.

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