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INTRODUCTION

"Please, come in." Being a charlatan, or the question of trustworthy knowledge

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> "I am a charlatan, ladies and gentlemen; indeed, I am nothing else than a charlatan. But what I do, it is well done. Please, come in: it is free. I give money to the poor; only the rich have to pay. And when they do, they pay for all." (Lessona 1884, 84; translated by Irina Podgorny)

With these words from the 1860s, Guido Bennati (1827–1898), an ambulant quack from Pisa, introduced himself at his arrival at the market places in the Italian Piedmont. By calling himself a charlatan, Bennati did not disqualify his art. He called his profession by its real name, and he underscored its value: he was a self-styled practitioner in the lower regions of the medical profession who, in Italy, during the time of the Risorgimento, were still licensed to sell some kinds of external remedies and to perform external operations. They seemed to be making themselves heard everywhere. From England to Italy, from France to Spain and the Americas, markets and newspapers were filled with their advertisements and remedies.

"Charlatan," while a profession, meant something different in other linguistic contexts. Just across the border, in France, the journalist and writer Jean-Baptiste Gouriet (1774-1855) had published a compilation of the most famous charlatans that visited Paris from ancient times to the present day. In so doing, he specified that the term included the jugglers, jokers, jesters, operators, acrobats, crooks, swindlers, soothsayers, card-pullers, fortune-tellers and all the characters who have made themselves famous in the streets and public squares of Paris. Gouriet connected their stories to the history of theatre, entertainment, and illusion, but also to their use of the public space and their itinerant life (Gouriet 1819).

Traveling from one marketplace to another, dealing in exotic objects and remedies, organizing shows and exhibitions, performing miraculous healings by appealing to the curative power of words and liniments, charlatans have infested Paris and traversed Europe at least since early modern times. The category included advocates for the elegant dog, the sage donkey, and the talking horses, a conversation that – as Daniel Gethmann shows in his article below – made its way into the scientific debates of the twentieth century. In that sense, tracing the history of charlatans and talking horses can be a means of seeing and understanding the changing frontiers of science. As Nathalie Richard develops in her epilogue, the science of modern charlatans syncretizes elements of a popular culture that - far from having "no history" - is rather constituted with elements borrowed from the cutting edge of the modernity of its time.

As the classic mountebank he was, Bennati arrived in the Italian towns accompanied by a parade of exotically dressed musicians and entertainers (Fucini 1921, translated by and quoted in Gambaccini 2004, 200). Like many other European traveling doctors, Bennati appealed to "drum and trumpet" theater performances, old routines that in the nineteenth century had incorporated the "ethnographic parade," in the style of Phineas Taylor Barnum's circus, which originated in the US as traveling medicine shows: the association of a "doctor" with a Native

American tribe or group for selling remedies of ancestral origin. These shows continued until the mid-twentieth century and were portrayed in Scott Pembroke's comedy film "The Medicine Man" (1930).

Bennati, on the other hand, moved to South America, where he adapted these strategies to his new context, discovering that the public there was fond of museums, scientific travel, and exhibitions. He immediately took on the role of an Italian traveling naturalist who, accompanied by a medical commission and a traveling museum of natural history, was in charge of writing reports on the countries he visited to promote European immigration. Politicians received him with open arms; local intellectuals invited him to deliver talks about the archaeological past and to organize the display of the natural resources of the regions he visited. In that sense, he was integrated as one of the elements that constituted the new disciplines dealing with nature and antiquities.

He was not the only one: sedentary and traveling quacks in South America appealed to Inca mummies and to anthropological, geological, and botanical collections to promote certain topics, academic discussions, and values as well as to market the local medical products of a supposed Andean ancestry (Podgorny 2012, 2016, 2020). In this sense, the paper written by Elisa and Ana Sevilla refers to the power attributed to Native medicaments – the Ecuadorian *Condurango* – a remedy that made its way to the late nineteenth-century US and European pharmacies.

Bennati died in Buenos Aires in 1898 after having toured Argentina, Bolivia, and Paraguay, where he amassed a collection that – under the name "Museo científico sudamericano" – he exhibited in the towns he visited and that he finally sold to the newly established Museo de La Plata (1884), where they are currently kept. In 1927, on the centennial of his birth, the Argentine Socialist Party honored his memory for his charity toward the poor and his devotion to natural history. They canonized a charlatan of two worlds because they accepted that he was the people's doctor (Podgorny 2012, 2013).

The itineraries of Guido Bennati are invoked here to introduce the different topics that this special issue of *Science in Context* offers. The term "charlatan" is generally connected with exclusion from scientific knowledge production, which has made it difficult to ask what charlatans really do. This topical issue of *Science in Context* analyzes forms of production of charlatanry ("savoir charlatan"), first as part of the process that Nathalie Richard in her final comments calls "scientific acculturation"; second in terms of innovation and circulation of knowledge as proposed by Guillemain; and finally as the history of the problem of truth, a question present in the papers by Vermeir, de Ceglia and Leporiere, and Nieto-Galán.

Charlatans have a distinct ability to work in the gaps between the understandable and the mysterious, between an order of knowledge and the unclassified, between speculative facts and speculative fiction. Today, the charlatan is still connected with questions about truth, and in this sense with the history of knowledge and ignorance. Far from being a problem from the past, these current years have confronted us with the difficulties of falsehood, in particular with regard to the treatments that emerged for fighting the novel COVID-19. As in Bennati's case, local and cheap remedies were proposed as panaceas by doctors, veterinarians, journalists and politicians, and either presented as weapons against the powerful pharmaceutical corporations or discarded as mere charlatanism.

Charlatans, as Bennati's life clearly shows, were able not only to discover what local people liked but also to speak their "own language" in order to fulfill their expectations and calm their fears. They were sharp observers of local traditions and established habits, and they reacted quickly to what was new for attracting audiences and customers. One can say that charlatans combined very ancient products with the most innovative media. Thus, if paper and telescopes were used in the charlatan's performances of early modern times, nineteenth-century charlatans adopted opera, traveling natural history museums, ethnography, and electricity. Does this mean that charlatans did not change? Of course not: the papers collected here display historic specificities and their historical character.

From the perspective of advertising and the study of cultural and commercial history, several points stand out in the practices and discourse of charlatans. As itinerant agents and brokers, they crossed cultural divides accompanied by things – remedies, therapies, objects – and their sets of fabulous stories. As Mongol-empire historian the late Prof. Allsen has argued, cross cultural advertising provides good evidence that merchants often possessed a repertoire of potentially useful tales and myths that could be invoked to market a new product "brought" from abroad and therefore to boost sales, an instance of an old tale being attached to a new product (2019, 111-112). The merchants conveying these commodities had a vested interest in mystifying and exoticizing their wares and the lands in which these originated. Well-travelled individuals assumed to have special knowledge of distant places and extraordinary objects, messengers from faraway places, they were able to present themselves as experts that could authenticate the special properties attributed to foreign products. Paraphrasing Allsen, charlatans, as purveyors of foreign wares and lore, collaborated in the creation of images and knowledge of distant and local lands and people, a process involving multiple actors and geographies. The cross-cultural marketing strategies of charlatans depended on a body of myths and tales that were widely diffused: things came and were sold with a story from the past or from distant places. Charlatans – as one kind of merchant – with their museums, collections, or ethnographic parades became story-tellers. The pomade that Bennati sold in Europe as "Balm of the Army" became his famous "Inca unguent" in South America, a concoction said to be discovered during a high-altitude archaeological excavation.

Charlatans can be conceived as traders in remedies, inventions, and promises, but also in the skills associated with the administration of those novelties. Skilled operators, dexterous manipulators of artifacts, words, and people, late nineteenth-century charlatans helped in the propagation of, for instance, archaeological collections and photographs. Thus Bennati staged his medical performances in his private museum where archaeological and anthropological collections were displayed and used, not only as part of his healing practices but also in his speeches on Andean archaeology. Thus the mummy displayed in Bennati's museum was not only a remedy/healing medium but was also evidence of the complexities of the pre-Hispanic past. Did these collections from the cabinet of a charlatan, once acquired by the Museo de La Plata, lose these entangled meanings? Or, on the contrary, were they taken to the interior of a scientific institute par excellence (Podgorny 2015)?

Both celebrated and opposed by physicians, scientists, and philosophers - the rich and the poor, women and men - charlatans circulated and traded knowledge and artefacts, penetrating the most diverse cultural spheres. Far from being confined to certain countries or regions, they were everywhere, repeating almost the same strategies, words, and performances. The repetition of fictitious stories down the centuries and across different continents raises the question of assessing the persistence of tradition in such different contexts. Tradition seems to persist amid change and space: a typical charlatan from the last decades of nineteenth-century Latin America is – except for the use of the automobile – barely distinguishable from his American counterpart of 1920. This special issue of *Science in Context* ponders this apparent age-old persona.

There is a wealth of literature on the classic Italian charlatans, the American confidence men, and English quacks, and the survival of the character and the strategies they used over the centuries and continents (see for instance Asmussen and Rößler 2013). The present special issue, with studies about different continents and periods, defines the charlatans as agents of circulation of precarious knowledge forms in Europe and the Americas that have to be understood in their specificity and context. The papers, in that sense, analyze the tension between their role in the circulation of knowledge and their presentations of the unknown and the extraordinary. A consideration of these precarious knowledge forms has long been out of question because of the pejorative connotation of the term "charlatan" in scientific debates.

The crucial questions of this approach are: Is it possible to use charlatans and quacks – these paradigmatic non-scientific characters – to contribute to the history of science? What kind of

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relationship is possible between the charlatan (or charlatanism) and the history of science/medicine? If charlatans are the "infamous characters" of a knowledge society, what historical strategies have been used to identify them as charlatans, and, on the other hand, which are the historical strategies that the charlatans used to define and transmit their expertise, and which scientific practices and cultural techniques were adopted and circulated in the sphere that can be called "charlatan knowledge"? Which were the specific practices of the charlatan that were excluded from or included in learned communities? What is therefore the relationship of the charlatans, their expertise and practices, their skills and tacit knowledge, in historical context to the history of science? In what specific ways would this perspective increase our understanding of "science in context" and "public science"? These are the questions this special issue wants to pose, and which we publish for the purpose of fostering further discussion.

Far from being "ignorant" – an argument used by licensed medical doctors to ban charlatans from the practice of medicine – charlatans from the second half of the nineteenth century were well aware of the legal requirements and news of the profession. They read newspapers and medical journals, and had libraries, which accompanied them on their itineraries. They also used the daily press to prove either that their practice followed the law or that what university physicians did differed little from what they did themselves. Bennati, for instance, had made a name pulling teeth, cutting veins, binding wounds, straightening backbones and crooked legs, and healing without pain. He knew how to do things quickly, in an age where anesthesia was nonexistent and the poor scarcely had access to the health care provided by academic physicians. He did not work alone: both in Europe and later in South America, he hired university-trained physicians and a secretary, who kept records of the illnesses treated on their itineraries.

Bennati and Martin Colandre, an old licensed French physician, paraded through various towns in the North of France in 1865. They were condemned and sued in Lille for dealing in secret remedies, a case widely publicized in European medical journals as the best way to eradicate charlatanism. However, those trials can be seen also as schools for charlatans, or in other words, the trials showed how truth was put into question. Charlatans used the proceedings to constitute their identity according to what Siegert (2006) has called the performativity of the judicial process.

It is clear from Bennati's trial that the charlatan was acquainted with the French law that in 1803 reorganized the practice of medicine to exclude anyone from practicing without having graduated as doctor. The accused – Bennati – posed the question: "How do I make sure I'm in order? There was only one way, and that way was indicated, both by custom and by law, however imperfect the law might be" (Anonymous 1865, 16).[1] Bennati nevertheless worked in association with a doctor certified in medicine who "was convinced of the superiority and usefulness of Bennati's therapeutic methods, and who agreed to apply them under his supervision, under his control, under his responsibility" (Anonymous 1865, 26). This association between charlatans, *officiers de santé* (health officers) and doctors was indeed common practice in France (Garnier 1881, 269-272; on "health officers" in France, see Heller 1978 and Crosland 2004). These graduates gave their name and signed the prescriptions; they received, according to the testimonies in a trial for the practice of animal magnetism, about ten percent of the charlatan's annual revenues (Procès Morel 1865).

Charlatans were acquainted with the discourses and state of current medicine and used that information to speak for them. They wrote booklets summarizing the latest discoveries in medicine in contrast to their own methods. But, no less important, as the trial from 1865 shows, Bennati was aware of the multiple medical scandals happening in the Parisian hospitals where the distinguished professors had welcomed two charlatans touring in France: in particular, he referred to two events associated with Professor Alfred-Armand-Louis-Marie Velpeau

[1]"Comment se mettre en règle? Il n'y avait qu'un moyen, et ce moyen était indiqué, aussi bien par les usages que par la loi, tout imparfaite que celle-ci pût être."

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(1795-1867), the French anatomist and surgeon, who invited Jan Vriès and Mr. Louvrier to the hospitals of Paris.

Vriès presented himself as a native of Surinam. In 1859 he made his debut in London in the capacity of a religious reformer, where he tried to attract public attention by distributing placards announcing a crusade against popery, and to collect funds for the erection of a temple for a new sect of his own creation. Still later, he offered his services to the London cancer hospital, where he was eventually declared to be a swindler. In 1854, he went to Paris with his new invention "to substitute the use of electro-magnetism for that of steam," and a commission was appointed to examine the nature of his alleged new discovery (Anonymous 1860, 75). His next move was to go to prison for debt, where he spent seven months and met M. Tennesse, whom he engaged to act as an adjutant in his future campaign. He emerged from prison christened Dr. Noir, and his secretary, Tennesse, filled the newspapers with lucubration about his master's wonderful cures. He addressed letters to the president of the *Académie de Médecine,* and to Dr. Conneau, the Emperor's physician, representing himself as an "M. D. of the University of Leyden, who had spent the greater part of his life in the Tropics, and there made properties of plants his special study, and found the *quinquina* of cancer, and remedies for all diseases that had been considered incurable" (Anonymous 1860, 76).

In 1856, Dr. Noir resumed his old trade as religious reformer. But this time it was the burden of a new revelation from heaven, with the commission to build a marble temple at the Champs Elysées as a monument of the kingdom of reconciliation between the whole human race, with Vriès himself acting as the apostle and treasurer of the new scheme. Public dinners at the Hôtel de Louvre and other exhibitions attracted public attention, and in 1859 Alfred Velpeau admitted him into the Charité, and gave him seventeen patients to try his skill upon. After three months' trial, seven of the patients died "and the rest are on the point of death; and the analysis of his drugs proved that he had no secret remedy whatever. Many substances are inert, others poisonous" (Anonymous 1860, 76). Vriès was dismissed, but Velpeau, said Bennati, continued as professor. The judgment passed upon Vriès was very mild: fifteen months' imprisonment and 500 francs fine (Fauvel 1859; Anomymous 1859; Anonymous 1860).

But Bennati still contended that he was the equal of certified physicians. If professors of medicine admitted into their practice an operation or treatment, where all the elements of scientific reasoning were broken down, and made to yield before the force of brute mechanical power and poison – ligaments ruptured, tendons or muscles rent from their adhesions, muscles torn, arteries or nerves torn asunder, people killed – why could not he, Bennati, be associate to a physician for doing much less harm? With this question, Bennati unveiled that he was not the only one that navigated in the realm of the unknown, where physicians and charlatans alike accepted producing the illusion of a cure.

In "The Language of Quackery in England, 1660-1800," British historian Roy Porter remarked that it is no accident that Apollo is god of both poetry and medicine, for the captivating power of song to move and soothe has always been seen to resemble the healing power of word in sickness. Language has ever been crucial to the profession and practice of medicine. Yet the healing of the word has often seemed an ambiguous gift, especially since the seventeenth-century Scientific Revolution embraced a philosophical nominalism, which preached radical distrust of language. Empirical epistemology denounced as a pernicious confusion that traditional marriage of words and things, names and power. Reality and its verbal signs had to be systematically distinguished, otherwise trust and humanity would fall victims alike to the idols of the marketplace, tribe, cave and theatre. In such a climate, the proliferation of quacks in the following centuries was bound to evoke scandal, for quacks depended heavily upon language, for winning customers in the first place, for curing them, and as Bennati said, for being admitted into the medical and learned circles.

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