

Polarization Is a Wound of the Collective Body

Semmelweis's theory did not simply challenge the prevailing medical theories about the causes of childbed fever; it challenged a deeply held identity structure of the medical establishment. While there were several theories about childbed fever—it was a unique disease like smallpox, it was the result of a miasma, it was the result of an imbalance in the four humors of the body—what was common among these disparate theories was a simple but ultimately lethal assumption: Whatever was causing childbed fever, it was not the doctors who were at fault. They were committed healers doing everything they could for their patients. They grieved with each mother's death. Something mysterious, beyond human comprehension and responsibility, must be at work. To accept Semmelweis's theory would require long-practicing obstetricians to acknowledge that, however unwittingly, they had been the instrument of their patients' deaths.

We are back in Helm, without the humor: The doctors saw themselves as committed professionals, as caring healers; it was unfathomable to them that they could be the cause of their patients' deaths. Therefore, anyone who would suggest such a thing must be (fill in the blank): deluded, misguided, naïve, dangerous, treacherous, evil. Semmelweis was called all of these things and more.

The doctors who rejected Semmelweis's theory, and ultimately moved to expel him from the medical school, had other reasons as well. Even before Semmelweis's discovery, the medical school was polarized between older and younger faculty members. Vienna in the 1840s was the political and cultural center of the Hapsburg Empire. Conflicts festered throughout the empire and Europe, presaging the multiple (and mostly failed) revolutions that erupted across Europe in 1848. The Austrian government controlled most of the empire's institutions, including the University of Vienna and its medical school. Many of the older professors owed their positions to their allegiance to government

disease causation, which were often resisted if not ridiculed by their older colleagues.

Polarization is a form of group wound that, left untreated, can infect the entire collective body. As each side seeks to inflict harm on the other, members are often unaware that the resulting wounds are weakening the entire body, not just “the other.” When Semmelweis articulated a new theory of disease causation that appeared to prove the medical establishment wrong, other younger faculty members rejoiced. This was not just about mothers dying needlessly; this was about academic freedom and a new world order. Time to attack.

And who was one of the chief leaders of the old guard who came under attack? Johann Klein, professor of obstetrics and Semmelweis’s supervisor. It was in the midst of this and the broader cultural turmoil of 1848 that Semmelweis’s appointment came up for renewal. Instead of Semmelweis, Klein chose a new candidate for the position, who, like Klein, rejected Semmelweis’s theory and methods.

Unable to accept that they could be instruments of their patients’ dying, critical and perhaps fearful of what the younger faculty members intended, and committed to maintain both their positions and their reputations, Klein and his peers had many conscious and unconscious reasons for rejecting Semmelweis and his proposals. In medical conferences, journals, and the popular press, they challenged his methods, the accuracy of his data, and his lack of a theoretical framework to explain his results. The call from many in the medical establishment was to banish Semmelweis and his ideas from the community.