Hubris of a scientific giant

by Theodore Dalrymple

> *“I have nothing to declare except my genius.”* — Attributed to Oscar Wilde at the New York Customs, 1882

Wilde’s quip, though without its lightness of tone, might have served as the title of Professor Didier Raoult’s autobiography. A man eminent in his field of microbiology, he shot to fame and media attention at the beginning of the Covid-19 epidemic when he vigorously promoted the combination of hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin as both preventive and life-saving. He soon attracted a cult-like following, not least among whom numbered Donald Trump. Raoult became infatuated with his own infallibility.

He was certainly made for gurudom. A man of large presence and personality, to put it mildly, his appearance was not at all what might have been expected of a medical scientist. On the contrary, he looked as if he had stepped out of the pages of *Asterix*. Raoult has given more than one explanation for this choice of appearance: a proud Marseillais, he once wrote

that he adopted it to irritate his snooty Parisian peers and competitors, but in his autobiography also claims that it was purely at the behest of his wife.

His autobiography reads like *The Surprising Adventures of Baron Munchausen* – except that many of his boasts are true. There can be no doubt of his standing as a microbiological and clinical scientist. He (and his team) not only discovered the largest known virus, hundreds of times larger than any other, but 150 species of similar viruses. He is a world expert on Rickettsial diseases such as typhus; when there was an outbreak of that disease in Burundi, it was to Raoult that the country naturally turned.

He has had a whole genus of bacteria names after him; he has established the effective treatment of two previously untreatable diseases, Q fever and Whipple's disease. A man of wide interests, he established by means of DNA testing of the teeth of people interred in burial pits in Marseilles in 1720 that they did indeed die of plague, an epidemic that killed a third of the population of Provence.

These achievements are incomparably more than those of most researchers and they constitute by themselves a brilliant career. But in addition, he was a formidable organiser, persuading the French government generously to fund the largest, most up-to-date facility for infectious diseases in the country, if not in Europe.

Hubris is followed by nemesis, however, and boastfulness provokes enmity, even (or perhaps especially) when its contentions are justified or partly justified. It was his claim to have found a simple, cheap and effective cure to Covid-19 that made him a media star and turned his head.

For months, hardly a day went by without his appearance on television or in the newspapers, and he attracted large numbers of followers on social media. He was transformed from

an eminent professor hardly known to the public into something approaching a medical messiah, the touch of the hem of whose garment became both preventive and curative.

What surprised me was the evident scientific worthlessness of his initial papers on the use of hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin, upon which he based his pharmacological pronouncements and recommendations. A scientist of his age and distinction should surely have been able to see this for himself and must have been blinded by some mad excess of ambition, as if he wanted to end his career in a blaze of glory and win the Nobel Prize.

At best, his work was an incitement to further research which, however, he denied was necessary, so certain was he of the truth of what he said. This was why it was unethical, in his view, to conduct double-blind trials of his proposed treatment, for to do so would have been to condemn some people unnecessarily to death. But in a disease with a high incidence and a low mortality, such as Covid-19, no other method could produce the requisite evidence.

The fact that many of his pronouncements about the course of the epidemic turned out to be dramatically wrong did not in the least dent the faith that people had in him. They came from all over the country and waited for hours outside his hospital as if waiting to be sprinkled with holy water.

Whether or not Professor Raoult intended to become a guru there was plenty of material for him to use. For it does not follow that if someone is in error, those who disagree with him must be in the right.

Take the criticism that his initial studies on hydroxychloroquine and azithromycin were not controlled: Raoult was able, with entire justification, to point out that a study of remdesivir, an enormously expensive antiviral drug, reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine*, was also

uncontrolled. The study was successful in one respect: remdesivir's manufacturing company managed to sell a billion Euros' worth of the drug to the European Union the week before a paper was published suggesting that the drug was ineffective (it has since been shown to be of some worth, if not to the extent of its initial promotion).

At best, though, Raoult's argument was that of *tu quoque*, which is an implicit admission of guilt. From the rhetorical point of view, though, it successfully muddied the waters, which were then fouled altogether when Raoult alleged that his opponents were in receipt of pharmaceutical company payments; and the last thing that these companies wanted was the discovery that a cheap generic drug, free of patent restrictions, was effective in a disease that affected millions.

On the contrary, they wanted to sell their expensive new drugs; hence Raoult was able to insinuate that demurral from his view was corruptly motivated. This was a message that a population already deeply mistrustful of moneyed interests – was not Emmanuel Macron, after all, the President of *the rich*? – was all too ready to believe.

Moreover, Raoult was able to point out that the authorities were often dishonest or incompetent. When no face masks were available, the government said that they were ineffective; as soon as they became available, the government made them obligatory.

On the question of mass immunisation, Raoult was also reasonable. He accepted that, given the situation, it was justified to use untried vaccines in those who were most at danger from the disease, but this was only a minority of the population. The heavy-handed campaign was therefore unjustified, or at least highly questionable. This turned Raoult into that person beloved of all intellectuals, a *dissident*.

But dishonesty was not the prerogative only of the authorities: Raoult was no stranger to it himself. His use of data was so selective that it suggests a desired conclusion in search of evidence rather than a conclusion that arose from evidence.

In his autobiography, for example, he seeks to suggest that richer countries achieved worse results than poorer countries and refers to the high rate of Covid deaths in affluent Chile as evidence of the failure of the western approach to the epidemic, while not mentioning that the death rate in neighbouring – and poorer – Peru was four times higher.

Likewise, he cites the relatively low death rates in Nigeria without mentioning the difference in the age structure of the population (there are many fewer old people in Nigeria, precisely the age group that was most at risk of dying), or of the problems of ascertainment of cases in a country like Nigeria. These caveats must have been obvious to him, yet he chose to omit them.

For all that, it is possible to have some sympathy for Didier Raoult, perhaps because he has been transformed so quickly from great man decorated by successive presidents of his country to a whipping boy accused of everything of which a researcher can be accused, from unethical experimentation to falsification of results to maltreatment of staff. Far from being awarded the Nobel Prize to crown his career, he is now beaten with every stick that comes to hand. It is an unattractive spectacle.

He presents a psychological problem. He has gone far out on a scientific limb, at the same time as trumpeting his own brilliance with a brashness so great that it transcends itself and is amusing rather than off-putting (he claims to have an IQ of 180). He is clearly not straightforwardly a fraud: he resembles Linus Pauling, who twice won the Nobel Prize, and then became deranged on the subject of Vitamin C.

As to the boastfulness, the nearest parallel I can think of is that of A. L. Rowse, the historian, literary scholar, memoirist and poet, a man of real distinction who became querulously boastful, apparently believing that the denigration of others by comparison with himself added to his stature. Professor Raoult seems to be of that ilk.

He is immune to criticism, as gurus often are. Whenever anything critical about him appears in the French press, the online commentary is overwhelmingly favourable to, or even adulatory of, him: he has his cult to keep him warm. Although now a professor emeritus, he represents for many French citizens opposition to the deeply mistrusted establishment.

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