

## Science Skepticism as a Veneer for Nationalistic Humor

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By

Recently we saw a splash of headlines about the Russian Covid-19 vaccine, as Russia became the first country to register a vaccine and governmental officials shared plans for starting mass vaccinations in October. This news was shared all over my social media, with the commentary hewing to repetitive jokes, the humor value of which was based on an implied shared consensus that obviously any vaccine coming out of Russia was poison, nefariously designed by Putin to mass-murder his own population.

What was interesting – in an unpleasant way – was that while usually my anthropology colleagues and other social scientists I know have more nuanced takes on, well, everything, in this case they engaged in the same kinds of quips. I saw a story about Duterte's interest in the Russian vaccine for the Philippines reposted with strings of crying-from-laughter emojis. Another post drew the analogy between the Russian ministry of health rolling out this vaccine and Trump's meditations on ingesting bleach.

I don't know exactly where the truth is between Russia's self-serving PR machine and the American/Western critique of the Russian COVID vaccine process, but I do know that I am seeing a lot of knee-jerk and un-reflexive takes and jokes that are fundamentally xenophobic and that turn on a narrative of automatic Western superiority in all scientific matters.

I am a Russian-speaking, Soviet-born professor of anthropology. I grew up at the tail end of the Soviet regime, in a family with dissident views and healthy skepticism of both the Soviet and post-Soviet state institutions. In my classrooms, I teach students fundamental skills in media and science literacy so that they can understand the importance of evidence-based public health, even as they learn how it can reproduce and amplify social inequalities. From that positionality, I am agnostic about the Russian vaccine, and I think agnosticism is the reasonable empirical reaction to it at the moment. Jokes that imply that it is necessarily ineffective and harmful, and that derive humor from a presumption of consensus on that, are nationalistic riffing on a zeitgeist topic.

The Soviet Union, which had a distortive PR machine exactly like Russia does today, had a cultural and political infrastructure that lent itself to supporting “grand gesture” spectacular—in the sense of “a spectacle”—scientific breakthroughs. This included claiming a victory in the Cold War “space race” by launching the Sputnik into orbit in 1957, which is the “brand” this vaccine is associating itself with. More relevantly, it also included a long history of virology research and the development of vaccines, both instruments of biotechnology and biopolitical rationality.

It was through Soviet collaboration that American virologist Albert Sabin was able to co-develop the oral attenuated polio vaccine, which was instrumental for polio eradication projects around the world because of its ease of administration. Many global experts held the oral vaccine to be superior to the “Salk vaccine” that was approved for use in the United States. Despite the fact the Sabin vaccine received blessings from the FBI, the “Red Scare” created a cultural climate of skepticism around public reception of the vaccine in the United States. (Although a commissioned WHO report validated the Soviet vaccine trials, the Russian delegation to a 1960 Polio Vaccines conference in Washington, DC was met with doubt from the American scientific community. One Russian delegate was reported as having to defend Soviet science, saying to the delegation: “people in the USSR love their children and are concerned for their well-being as much as people in the United States” (Oshinsky 2005: 254)). It was also Soviet virologists who developed the technological process for a thermostable freeze-dried vaccine, which was foundational to the global campaign for smallpox eradication and especially effective in countries with hot climates and variable or insufficient refrigeration infrastructure.

One might say – and friends, including anthropologist friends have said to me – the jokes and mockery about the vaccine are not about “Russia” per se; they are about Putin’s rule and the distrust of his authoritarian regime. (The events of this past week, with the presumed poisoning of Russian opposition leader Alexander Navalny, and the stand-off around his subsequent medical treatment serve as an example of why this distrust is reasonable). This critique of authoritarianism is certainly the “humor” node around which recent cartoons on the topic have centered. But I hear something else in that humor. I hear a presumption of charlatantry and incompetence projected onto the Russian institution of Science as fundamentally a site of misinformation, danger, and inefficacy. The “sane” reaction to the Russian Covid vaccine seems to be the same kind of appalled vehement rejection that I normally hear from American anti-vaxxers with regard to “Big Pharma.”

Meanwhile, there is a default association of “expertise” and “competence” afforded to the American “science process” despite its

long and ugly history of unethical human subject experimentation, its dubious reputation on the international import-export market in the arena of food safety (many countries have banned US beef imports, for example, for reasons ranging from synthetic hormone administration to lack of testing for Mad Cow Disease), its indiscriminate use of antibiotics based on “customer demand,” and its regular recalls of medications as potentially carcinogenic (Rantidine, a.k.a. Zantac is only the most recent example). Representatives of American Science are supposed to be impartial, yet we watched Dr. Birx thread the needle as she tried to balance deploying public health information and kissing the ring during White House Coronavirus briefings.

I want to be very clear. I am not defending or promoting the Russian vaccine. My point is not about its safety. Maybe (probably) Russia “cut corners” with the vaccine development. Maybe in some ways what “cutting corners” means is a bio-bureaucratic construct of the culture of “best practices” that is specific to the history of Western science.

The Moscow-based Gamaleya Research Institute of Epidemiology and Microbiology is a long-established leading research institute for virology and microbiology in Russia and the vaccine technology they report using is one they have already used in previous vaccine development. It is not implausible that it would be the site of a scientific breakthrough. The dearth of independent press and non-partisan oversight over state-funded biomedical projects makes it just as likely that the vaccine is ineffective or dangerous. Maybe the vaccine works great, maybe it does not. That all will be empirically substantiated in the coming months.

My point is that callous Russian vaccine humor trades on the assumption that the vaccine is self-evidently unsafe, while in fact we don’t know whether the vaccine is a dangerous PR stunt or a welcome scientific discovery. Both possibilities are within the “Overton window” of reasonable assumptions, in a way that the possibility of intravenous bleach injections as a Covid cure is not.

For now, this anthropologist’s take on mocking commentary about the “Sputnik vaccine” that seemingly capitalizes on a presumption of some self-evident consensus about science overtly (and Western/American science implicitly) is that this is garden-variety nationalist humor. Right now nationalism is an especially dangerous force and it should be called out and critiqued accordingly.

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### **Bibliography:**

Oshinsky, David M. (2005). *Polio: an American Story*. New York: Oxford University Press.

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