

Introduction

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The Pawn



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In the early morning of February 24, 2022, Wladimir Putin gave a speech announcing the reasons for his troops' illegal invasion of Ukraine. The action was necessary, he claimed, because Ukraine was committing a "genocide" against Russians and would therefore have to be "denazified". In his reply, the Ukrainian president Wolodymyr Selenskyi mixed anger with sarcasm, wondering what his Jewish grandfather would think about such a justification of this aggressive military takeover. After all, he had fought on the side of the Sovjets against Hitler's troops which were involved in a similar act of aggression as now committed by Putin's troops. Selenskyi's suggestion to meet in Israel for negotiations was a smart follow-up to this reply. It discloses the enormousness of Putin's historical construct: a visit in Yad Vashem might refresh the memory on the issues of Nazism and genocide!

A related instance of semantic subversion by linguistic reinscription is Russian foreign minister Sergej Lawrow's assertion of March 10, 2022 that weapons of ethnic biological mass destruction were developed in Pentagon-run Ukrainian secret laboratories, which filled the politically policed information channels of the Russian media (Palmer 2022; Wion 2022). In their aggressive inversion of perpetrators and victims, the rhetorical tricks and twists used by the Kremlin in legitimizing the Russian attack on Ukraine resemble the semantic practice of right-wing groups and despotic rulers and their admirers around the world.

The idea for the present volume on the rhetorical power of "subversive semantics" was conceived long before Russia's recent imperial takeover which continues to threaten peace in Europe and food security in the world. Its object are the metaphorical and narrative strategies of semantic subversion, predominantly in populist and right-wing discourses but also in anticolonial and postcolonial struggles. It is a well-known fact by now that metaphors, tropes, and narratives, rather than being innocent speech ornaments, reflect and produce social realities (Johnson/Lakoff 1980; White 1987). These social semantics are in constant flux, interacting with ideological requirements and emotionally affected belief systems. Their various elements can form semantic clusters which, after ceasing to signify, may fall apart again – perhaps to reappear in different arrangements at some later moment. While

successful stories, narratives, and images tend to migrate between historical situations, not all of them possess subversive traits, as in the particularly blatant case of the Kremlin's rhetorical contortions. Few migrating cultural stories enjoy great longevity, but some of them, as philosopher Hans Blumenberg has shown for the image of a shipwreck with spectator as a metaphor expressing various philosophical ideas, among them epistemic transgression and existential abandonment (Blumenberg 1979), can assume remarkable transhistorical potential.

It is important to understand that the migration of tropes and narratives as such is an unavoidable part of cultural signification. Exemplary historical anecdotes – say, of famous leaders crossing famous rivers or climbing famous mountains – or philosophical examples like Blumenberg's shipwreck; or literary examples adopted into political-philosophical discourse such as Fyodor Dostoyevsky's story of the diabolical grand inquisitor (Lethen 2022); can be actualized at different times and in different contexts but disappear when their explanatory power fades. Equally crucial, not all reformulation and reinterpretation in political and cultural discourses results in the subversion of concepts into their opposite meanings or aims at the production of questionable "alternative knowledge". Think, for example, of the development discourse. When US President Harry Truman pioneered the idea of development cooperation in his inaugural address of January 1949, he described development as an increase in industrial activity. This increase would then substantially raise the standards of living in underdeveloped nations (Truman 1949). Development was understood purely as an economic pathway following the experience and example of the industrialized nations of Europe and North America. The strongly normative and empirically vaguely substantiated term "underdevelopment" was also Truman's invention and by the stroke of a pen he had divided the world into two halves. "Underdevelopment" might not be in frequent use anymore, but the approach of clustering states according to their level of development still lives on in the idea of the "Global North" and the "Global South". This semantic practice has received growing criticism from within the countries expected to develop along the trodden economic path of the West (e.g. Escobar 1995). The crucial

difference is that today the semantics of development go far beyond the notion of industrial output or GDP per capita. Rather, the language of development has migrated to the anthropological realm: a frequent concept now is *human* development. The human development discourse, the closely related debate on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and “non-Western” approaches to development such as *Buen Vivir* in Ecuador and Bolivia, stress in a much more holistic way the importance of social, health-related, educational and cultural dimensions and even question the idea of development as a linear process altogether.

Perhaps one of the most impressive and visible examples for the semantic turn in the construction of the development narrative is the *Tropenmuseum* in Amsterdam. Founded as the Colonial Museum in 1910 and following the fashion of the day, it first reflected the mindset of colonialism as the driving force behind the “development of the colonies” in the fields of administration, economic activities in general, agriculture and export crops, in particular timber and rubber extraction as well as education and health care (Legêne 1998, 4). As the result of a decades-long “heated social debate on the nature of Dutch colonialism” (Legêne 1998, 5), today’s *Tropenmuseum* is devoted to an entirely critical perspective. The museum’s permanent exhibition “Our Colonial Inheritance” presents colonialism exclusively as a history of European domination, oppression and exploitation and, even more prominently, explores the resilience of the colonized peoples as they fought against a system which was exogenously forced upon them. The term development is not mentioned once in the entire exhibition; rather, the implicit *leitmotiv* is the clear message that colonialism can only be understood as an anti-development phenomenon.

Similar observations regarding evolutionary non-subversive semantic shifts apply to the term security in a political context. Narrowly defined during the Cold War as the absence of a military threat to the physical integrity of the state, the idea of security has transformed to focus mainly at the level of the individual. In the broadest understanding of human security, the state cannot be secure if its citizens face socio-economic and environmental threats, live in fear of violent crimes, are subjected to human rights violations, or lack access to education. In both

cases, development and security, the – what may be called – constructive reshaping of semantics has resulted in a much-needed reconceptualization of both analytical concepts and more useful and effective political and policy responses to pressing challenges. Under the impact of political and social change, the formation of interpretive power has shifted.

However, as the 2020 Presidential and Congressional elections in the United States have demonstrated, even the most stable ideas and belief systems in political thought and practice, whose meanings have seemingly been taken for granted for decades, can show their subversive potential. Even before Joe Biden was officially declared the winner of the Presidential race, incumbent President Donald Trump started to craft a narrative of fraud and a stolen election. In the preceding months Trump had already pre-emptively voiced media-effective strategic concerns about the integrity of the electoral process.² When the influential, opinion-mongering Republican senator Lindsey Graham was asked why Joe Biden's election was not valid while all the Republican Congressional victories should stand, he answered: "We win because of our ideas, we lose elections because they cheat us" (quoted in Waldman 2020). Democracy is no longer the quasi-sacred highest institutional norm but becomes subjected to us v. them discourses. In other words, democracy is when we win. When the others claim to have won, it can only mean that they have cheated and thus disrespected core democratic values. Consequently, according to the favorite Republican key argument that went on for months and at least until the mid-term elections of 2022, democracy is under threat. Following this narrative, democracy is not under threat because ex-President Donald Trump and his surrogates have tried to delegitimize the legitimate result of a democratic election but because Democrats are not respecting the widely televised alternative truth claims of Mr. Trump. Dan Patrick, lieutenant governor (vice governor) of Texas, proclaimed on his official homepage after the 2020 elections: "President Trump's pursuit of voter fraud is not only essential to determine the outcome of this election, it is essential to

² For a timeline of the construction of this narrative leading up to election night see, for example, Kessler and Rizzo (2020).

maintain our democracy and restore faith in future elections.”³ This is subversive semantics at its best: anti-democratic thought and action emerges as the savior of democracy. Yet, this phenomenon is certainly not restricted to the United States. As Steven Levitsky and Daniel Ziblatt note in their bestseller *How Democracies Die*, “This is how we tend to think of democracies dying: at the hands of men with guns. [...] But there is another way to break a democracy. It is less dramatic but equally destructive. Democracies may die at the hands not of generals but of elected leaders – presidents or prime ministers who subvert the very process that brought them to power” (Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018, 3).

In a broader sense, this seems to be a particular tactic of reactionary⁴ discourses, as when white supremacist groups in the United States – here discussed by Enrico Schliekeisen – proclaim a conspiracy to effect the “genocide” of the white “race”. More particularly they evoke an onslaught on *white men* – in direct response to the Me Too, Black Lives Matter, and Idle No More movements. A similar near-future catastrophe is announced for the European context in response to the “Syrian migration crisis”. The powerful resemanticization of human migration as a “refugee crisis” was only partly the result of the rise of far-right populists and their promotion of new meanings to replace existing words. In the wake of the substantial influx of migrants and refugees to Europe in 2015 and 2016, the idea of “crisis” in the context of migration was advanced by political decision-makers across almost the entire political-ideological spectrum, and embraced by the media. As Pedro Góis and Maria Faraone explain (2019, 140), linking migration rhetorically and discursively with crisis significantly stimulated “fears associated with financial burdens, cultural and religious differences, and the need for security from terrorists.” In a narrower sense, the securitization of migration – i.e. using a rhetoric of emergency by referring to migrants as a threat and danger

3 <https://www.danpatrick.org/>, accessed November 11, 2022 (this statement is no longer online).

4 We are using this term to refer to rhetorics that react to mainstream rhetorics, usually by subverting their meanings into their opposite.

in order to justify extraordinary political measures such as new exclusionary immigration legislation – is a much older phenomenon and has been discussed in academia since the early 1990s (e.g. Waever et al. 1993; Huysmans 2000; Ibrahim 2005).

It does not take any deep analysis to discover the entirely different meaning associated with the term migration in the case of, say, the Mayflower Pilgrims who arrived on the coast of today's Massachusetts in 1620 to establish Plymouth Colony. This migration event is deeply enshrined in the DNA of the United States and a foundation stone of the national myth (Whittock 2020), which is quite literally represented by Plymouth Rock, the powerful symbol or even “fetish” of the new beginnings (Paul 2014, 149, 161). The granite boulder, inscribed with the number 1620, can still be visited at its supposedly original position on the shore of Plymouth Harbor, Massachusetts. The information board next to the Rock describes it as a “solid, steadfast and everlasting [...] icon for the birth of a nation.” “What if we applied modern immigration arguments to the Pilgrims?”, asks Matthew Rowley (2021, 4–5) and continues: “If governments had a right to reject immigrants – regardless of claims to be experiencing hardship or persecution (consider Hungary’s closed response to the ‘Migrant Crisis’) – then surely the Pilgrims had no right to presume they were welcome on Native American land.” As interesting and stimulating as it may be from an academic point of view to highlight the inconsistencies in the perception of migration in different historical contexts, there can be little doubt that the ship of resemanticization in the political and public spheres is in no danger of suffering shipwreck: today’s most powerful connotation with migration is fear.

Narratives of world conspiracy and deep states, analyzed in this volume by Michael Butter, effectively allied themselves with other stories of fear, e.g. during the 2020–2023 pandemic. Covid’s narrative existed long before the pandemic itself entered the scene: it is anticipated in numerous novels, films, and online blogs. Like the above-mentioned stories of population replacement, the pandemic conspiracy narrative is a story intended to generate fear; it is building on existing, mostly diffuse fears of the future, as well as a pervasive suspicion toward social, political, and intellectual elites. Presently, the extinction narrative seems to

be particularly *en vogue*, with “extinction” acting as battlefield between reactionary racist groups on the one hand and environmentalist groups on the other (like Extinction Rebellion and Last Generation). What seems to unite them, in spite of occupying radically opposite ends of the political spectrum, is an anthropocentric perspective largely undisturbed by considerations of non-human lifeforms. Thus, reactionary back-to-the-land groups are more interested in claiming ethnically “clean” territories and returning to patriarchal rural structures than in establishing environments friendly for other than human species (see Daniela Gottschlich’s essay in this volume).

The rising awareness of environmental deterioration and emerging discussions about the temporality of the Anthropocene have produced a rearticulation of colonial relations as well. In her critique of popular histories of the deep past, Gesa Mackenthun discusses the rhetorical twists displayed in quasi-scientific portrayals of the pre-Columbian past: in these recent texts, original inhabitants are represented as both savages causing a mass-slaughter of big animals during the Pleistocene era and as disastrous agriculturalists contributing to early phases of global warming. Anthropocene discourse tends to abolish the distinctions between environmentally extractive colonizing societies and Indigenous societies sharing the catastrophic consequences of colonialism with the other-than-human world. In some cases, it thus lends support to exculpatory narratives of the colonial past as promoted by the new Right (see Aram Ziai’s contribution in this volume).

Various essays in this book (Gottschlich, Schlickeisen, Ziai) are dedicated to analyzing the subversive migrations of tropes and narratives in texts by German and transatlantic rightwing groups, whose conservatism consists in their desire to reinstall a society from an idealized past – a time of happiness and prosperity and traditional social hierarchies. Their explicit valuation of heteronormative gender structures, racial purity and an ethnopluralistic order between human groups is combined with latent and manifest variations of aggressiveness, including terrorism, an extractive economy to bolster cherished comforts, and an antihumanistic anthropology celebrating blood relations but rejecting the values of a common humanity. Some German rightwing

parochialists present themselves as the true ecologists keeping both nature and the “people’s” genes clean from foreign infiltration and pollution. The “people” evoked by such rhetoric differs somewhat from the “people”/“el pueblo” evoked by decolonial groups in the Global South, as Hans-Jürgen Puhle shows in this volume. This concept, together with related terms such as “Heimat” or a rootedness to emotionally important locations, can be seen as an ideological battleground between oppositional discourses, one of which dreams of reviving an imaginary halcyon past while the other emphasizes the importance of reducing carbon emissions and of practicing more organic forms of agriculture. Sometimes the real audiences of both groups overlap.

The subversive use of mythical stories and concepts is thus particularly intense in reactionary discourses whose anti-humanist matrix, due to its lack of an idea of human agency and initiative, obstructs the unfolding of creative thinking. However, anticolonial and decolonial groups are also prone to tactical uses of established mythical narratives – such as abolitionist and black civil rights groups powerfully appropriating the biblical story of Exodus, or Indigenous groups adopting the language of nationhood in their struggles for political and territorial sovereignty and self-determination (as Susanne Lachenicht shows in this volume). These cases of creative adaptation on the part of disenfranchised groups must be categorically distinguished from the uncreative, at best carnivalesque practice of reactionary discourses discussed above. The reactionary resemanticization of reform-oriented ideas and narratives – such as a right-wing group’s public display of Rosa Luxemburg’s remark that “Freedom is always the freedom of the dissenter” – are embedded in a general ideological framework dismissing diversity, manufacturing suspicion of scientific knowledge, and capitalizing on fears of the future. Reformist narratives, conversely, may creatively tap into traditional knowledges (see the use of Traditional Ecological Knowledge in many environment-related contexts) but they do so in order to promote practices and narratives of hope (Solnit 2016).

Conscious of the function of language in the production of social power, *Subversive Semantics* explores the phenomenon of linguistic resemanticization – of filling old rhetorical wine into new bottles,

thereby frequently inverting the original meaning. It should not remain unmentioned that semantic play, pastiche, and subversiveness are quintessentially literary pursuits, practiced with great aesthetic appeal by modernist and postmodernist writers. Ironical repetition of speech acts can affirm an existing master trope or narrative but can also consist of using dominant tropes and narratives for parodic or paradoxical purposes, aiming at irritating readers by subverting the grounds of their intellectual coordinates. Representatives of subaltern social groups have abundantly used humor and travesty, “slipping the yoke by changing the joke” in Ralph Ellison’s famous pun (Ellison 1958), performing literary acts of postcolonial parody, and ironically “signifying” on classic texts of the dominant culture (Gates 1988). Rightwing and authoritarian groups, which are notoriously less capable of wit and creativity, frequently just invert the original wording, as George Orwell imagines his dictatorship to do in its invention of Newspeak in *Nineteen Eighty-four* (1948). While the subversiveness of the first group (of witty “signifying”) invites the unleashing of further creative activity, that of the latter group aims at producing confusion. Appealing to the constitutionally guaranteed freedoms of speech and cultural diversity, such actors actually seek to erode the liberal democratic order on which these rights rest in order to replace it with an authoritarian, racist, and patriarchal regime. Speaking of themselves as the victims of pogroms and genocide, they prepare the intellectual ground for the persecution of everybody not assenting to their crude world picture. Their rhetoric of causing confusion resembles that of the “merchants of doubt” analyzed by Naomi Oreskes and Erik Conway (2010), working in favor of capitalist corporations by inventing scientific “proof” of the healthiness of nicotine and agrochemicals or the falsity of scientific evidence for climate change and species extinction.

Several questions are pivotal to the individual contributions: How precisely do the analyzed rhetorical maneuvers assume hermeneutic power; to what extent do they serve to establish new and powerful belief systems beyond rational and democratic control? Why is it that societies priding themselves in technological and rational excellence as well as broad and deep knowledge may fall victim to an expanding communicative cultivation of ignorance coupled with a general hostility

toward life? And what exactly drives the observed semantic shifts? What is it that makes these subversions (and perversions) so powerful? Is it an aesthetic fascination with postmodern travesty and pastiche? Or is it that an in-built textual technique links such narratives (of victimization, conspiracy, ecological destruction) to an ancient psychological pattern which we may term as *Angstlust* (pleasurable fear)? Is it modernity's "fascination of the abomination", as Joseph Conrad famously writes in his ambivalent parody of empire, *Heart of Darkness* (Conrad 1902/1985, 31)? How are the shifting expressions of indignation, which Christine Unrau analyzes in her essay, linked to economic and communicative globalization? This volume is the place to document semantic subversions, not to psychologize them. We invite our readers to consider our empirical assemblage and find their own answers.

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