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# Semiotics of Political Communication

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# Introduction: Politics as a communicative project

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BY: Gregory Paschalidis

In the past few years, there has been a noticeable surge in semiotic engagement with politics. One is tempted to associate it with Laurent Binet's international best-seller *The seventh function of language* (2017) that offers a satirical yet critically reflexive view of the 1970s linguistic turn and its luminaries. The novel's detective-cum-conspiracy story revolves around the different political sides' bloody scramble to procure a presumably secret semiotic formula for making political language irresistibly persuasive. It would be more accurate, though, to suggest that, just as Umberto Eco's *Name of the Rose* (1980) – the most successful hitherto merging of semiotic theory and fiction – was an oblique contribution to the linguistic turn's emphasis on the power of language, Binet's novel offers an equally poignant commentary on the 'magic words' of modern-day populism.

Currently, populism's language and ideology are at the epicenter of political theory and political semiotics, including many of this special issue's contributions. Regarding semiotics, this signals a return to its roots since the concern with populism marks postwar semiotics' very beginning. Populist politician Pierre Poujade's discourse is the most recurrent and extensively analyzed topic in Barthes' *Mythologies*.<sup>1</sup> In the same collection, moreover, Barthes' essay on the candidates' photo-portraits for the French legislative elections of January 1956 makes the latter the first electoral campaign to have attracted semiotic commentary.

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<sup>1</sup> Unfortunately, Hanna Arendt's selection of Barthes' essays comprising the English translation of *Mythologies* excludes those dealing specifically with Poujade's language.

Barthes' early forays into political discourse and communication had no noticeable impact. Mythologies' critical project mainly inspired an endless series of 'demystificatory' takes at popular culture artifacts – duly denounced by Barthes as a stereotypical “mythological doxa” (Barthes 1977: 166) – instead of the elaboration of fully-fledged political semiotics. Unsurprisingly, in the late 1980s, Pertti Ahonen asserted that “practically no body of literature on the semiotics of politics exists” (Ahonen 1990: 399).

Political semiotics came to age in the 1990s, this time due to its engagement with nationalism. The crucial turning point was the paradigm change in nationalism studies initiated by the work of Benedict Anderson (1983), Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger (1983), Ernst Gellner (1983), and Pierre Nora (1984-92). Following a rigorously constructivist perspective, the new paradigm entailed reconceptualizing nationhood and national identity as products of symbolic processes and artifacts, communication media, and commemoration rituals. This expansive new research horizon took on a new urgency in the post-Cold War and post-Maastricht Treaty renaissance of European nationalism. Responding to this challenge, semiotic research focused, among others, on national identities (Hedetoft 1995), stamps (Scott 1995), national hero biographies (Makolkina 1992), and national flags and hymns (Cerulo 1995).

Since the beginning of the 21st century, the political communication field is a state of comprehensive reconstruction. On the one hand, the political landscape is in flux as long-established political agents (e.g., traditional political parties, the European Union) face a legitimization crisis and are challenged by the rise of new political parties and ideologies, NGOs, and social movements. On the other hand, the dramatic decline of heritage media and the rise of the distinctly multi-voiced, interactive, and participative social media has given a new semiotic dynamic to the communication flows between the government, the political agents, and the citizenry. In the new media ecosystem, traditional gatekeeping is mostly irrelevant, polarization and 'echo chambers' endemic, and tweets and internet memes have a far greater impact than front-page titles, television interviews, or press conferences. Professional spin doctors and communication consultants operate on a par – and quite often as a pair – with massive troops of media-savvy activists and volunteers. More often than not, moreover, semiotics is politically weaponized by marketing and branding experts.

the basic premise of our invitation to investigate the changing semiotic nature of contemporary politics is Pertti Ahonen's assertion that politics is always “a communicative enterprise” and “a result of communicative actions.” (Volli 2003: 2924, 2922). and this is true not only in modern mass societies, but also “in societies where mass communication is not so important because the media are not well developed, or the majority of the people are not involved in political action” (ibid: 2924). based on Ahonen's comprehensive semiotization of politics, political communication can be seen to comprise a highly diverse range of texts and artifacts, rituals and symbolic practices,

communication media and modes through which power is legitimized or challenged, political discourse is articulated, validated and disseminated, political identities and communities are configured or transfigured, and power effects and relations are produced or resisted. This semiotizing perspective is clearly distant from the prevailing instrumentalist view of political communication as a supportive, supplementary and quite often ambivalent appendage to ‘real politics.’ Most importantly, by being consistent with Greimas’ classical determination of semiotics as a metalanguage of social sciences (Greimas 1990), that focuses on their discursive construction and communication, it unifies the political’s semiotic investigation by effectively bridging the semiotics of political discourse with that of political science, i.e., the political sign system (*faire politique*) with the scientific sign system (*faire scientifique*).

In her recent overview of the field, Giovanna Consenza (2018: 8) observes that semiotics’ analytical bias, while fostering numerous individual case studies, has so far prevented the appearance of a systematic treatment of political communication semiotics. But, perhaps there is no real need for anything like that. As she astutely adds, the basic semiotic concepts and methodologies required to analyze any text type are already available in many relevant publications.

The contributions making up this special issue on the Semiotics of Political Communication can be grouped into four distinct subject areas. The first concerns political identity building. Specifically, **Sebastian Moreno Barreneche** explores the semiotic logic governing the collective identities’ construction in the political domain. The author highlights the importance of the space of indetermination existing between antagonistic political identities in sustaining the communicative rationality of the democratic public sphere. **Johan Fornas**, on the other hand, investigates how European identity is configured through political symbols and narratives. Synthesizing findings from his previous research on this subject and combining semiotics with the critical hermeneutics of culture, the author identifies the three dominant thematic tropes around which these symbols and narratives are crystallized.

The second group of contributions addresses the question of populism. **Carlo Berti** and **Chiara Polli** focus on right-wing populist satire, as exemplified in the work of the popular Italian cartoonist Ghisberto. Through a meticulous analysis of his 2020 Populist Diary, the authors demonstrate how his powerfully visceral satirical cartoons transcode populist ideology’s essential ingredients, all the while clarifying why satirical cartoons have become the communicational form of choice for Italian populist leaders. **Ulf Hedeftoft** explores populism as a fantasy variant of nationalism, prioritizing identity, charisma, and a moral definition of the citizenry over economic rationality, national interest, and citizenry’s legal definition. Populism’s paradoxes and contradictions, he argues, not least of which is the conflict between its idyllic vision and its authoritarian reality, justify its description as a collective fantasia of despair. **Eric Landowski**, finally, outlines

a typology of political regimes based on their different interactional regimes. Based on this, he explains populism's success in terms of the uniquely intimate and sensual relationship that populist leaders establish with their followers.

The third and largest group of contributions deals with the analysis of political discourse. Most of them focus on the interplay between media and political discourse and highlight the semiotic force of political communication's non-verbal dimension. Specifically, **Mariano Fernández** and **Gastón Cingolani** conduct a comparative analysis of the media strategies employed by the former Argentinian Presidents, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner and Mauricio Macri. The authors demonstrate how these media strategies configure entirely different political scenes of representation and conflicting notions of the citizenry and political participation. **Evangelos Kourdis**, on the other hand, examines how European media, siding with European authorities' attitude, semiotically depreciated the left-wing Greek government of SYRIZA in 2015. Using a corpus of newspaper photos and cartoons, the author demonstrates the politically normative and normalizing deployment of the codes of touch, gesture, clothing, and distance. **Iván Facundo Rubinstein** and **Laura Nallely Hernández Nieto** examine four comics commissioned by Mexican state institutions to serve particular public interest campaigns. Deploying a specially designed analytical framework, the authors demonstrate how the comics' verbo-visual language functions instead as governmental propaganda. Finally, **Gabrielle Rava** examines the divergent identity narratives promoted by different parts of contemporary post-conflict yet still divided Belfast. On the one hand, the official narrative's city rebranding semiotic strategies of a postmodern memoryless non-locality; on the other, the nationalist quarter Gaeltacht's history-infused use of murals and the Irish language.

The fourth and final group of contributions deals with political oratory and rhetoric. **Bernard Lamizet** offers a systematic account of the semiotic articulation of power's discourse around four instances: the political enunciation, the discursive expression of the actor's identity, the political specificity of power's performativity, and the discourse's political unconscious. Employing this framework to analyze French President E. Macron's speech during the recent Congress of the Association of France's Mayors (November 19, 2019), the author brings forth the unique performative force of political discourse. The rhetoric of another European leader, Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen, is **Lisa Villadsen's** object of study. Employing the analytical tools of a conceptually oriented rhetorical criticism, the author examines Frederiksen's framing of corona-safe behavior guidelines evolved to culminate in the concept of 'civic-mindedness': a widely resonant merging of Danish nationalism and Social Democratic ideology. Finally, **Matteo Modena** investigates how Malthus's overpopulation concept emigrated from scientific demographic debate to public controversy and its diverse recent political uses. The author pays particular attention to the concept's political weaponization in the context of contemporary anti-immigration and eco-fascist ideology.

Historically, semiotics has been repeatedly accused of being apolitical, and perhaps for a good reason. Like many other recent studies, this special issue's contributions leave no doubt about semiotics' strengths and relevance for contemporary political communication research.

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# Mind the Gap!

## On the Discursive Construction of Collective Political Identities

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BY: Sebastian Moreno Barreneche

### ABSTRACT

This article explores, from a theoretical perspective, the dynamics underlying the discursive construction of collective identities within the political domain. Specifically, it: (1) presents a general mapping of political sphere studies carried out from a semiotic perspective; (2) attempts to bridge different paradigms within the semiotic tradition; and (3) establishes a dialogue between political theory and semiotics through the analysis of certain ideas belonging to the former whose semiotic nature has not yet been adequately examined, even if they are of a discursive nature. The article pays particular attention to the role that the ‘political gap’ – i.e., the space of indetermination between the various collective political identities that compete against each other in the ‘contest over meaning’ of politics – plays in the discursive construction of those identities. Arguing from a constructivist premise, establishing relational differences is a constitutive feature of the meaning-making, dynamic, and gaps between collective identities, a necessary precondition for their discursive emergence and the political sphere’s existence.

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## 1. Introduction

In the age of ‘digitally networked participation’ (Theocharis 2015), ‘filter bubbles’ (Pariser 2012), and growing symbolic violence online (Recuero 2015), several countries around the world have witnessed an increasing polarization in their political domains. This polarization, often characterized as distinctly ‘affective’ (Iyengar et al. 2012; Rogowski and Sutherland 2016),

could be described as the subsumption of the actions and interactions comprising the political sphere under the premise of a radical distinction between and oppositional axiologization of an imagined positive 'We' and a negative 'They.'

Affective polarization has dangerous repercussions for democratic politics. Besides transposing the political debate from a rational to an emotional dimension, it fosters uncivil, fanatical, and even extremist attitudes and behavior. A whole range of questions regarding this phenomenon's logic arises: Does political action necessarily imply an oppositional relationship between the actors involved? Is the dichotomy between 'We' and 'They' a necessary feature of the political domain? Could the political field be articulated based on agreement and consensus rather than on an adversarial and polemic logic? Could gaps between collective political identities be avoided? If so, through which strategies?

Irrespective of how we answer these questions, they refer to issues relevant to semiotics, the discipline that revolves around the study of meaning-making and signification (Hénault 2012; Landowski 2014; Fabbri 1998; Verón 1988; van Leeuwen 2005). On the one hand, due to social reality's intersubjective nature, semiotics constitutes a crucial standpoint for dealing with any type of social phenomena, most notably those grounded in interactions between social actors (both individual and collective) across different levels. On the other hand, in conducting any analysis of the social sphere, an interdisciplinary dialogue between semiotics and other research fields such as political and social theory is needed (van Leeuwen 2005; Lorusso 2010). Within the semiotic tradition, apart from Eliseo Verón, there have only recently been attempts to examine the political domain from a semiotic perspective (Landowski 2004, 2019; Cosenza 2018; Demuru and Albertini 2009). The interdisciplinary dialogue of semiotics with political and social theory (Selg and Ventsel 2020; Calil 2020; Moreno Barreneche 2020a) has reached a particularly productive point of articulation when it comes to the study of populism (Cervelli 2018; Landowski 2018; 2019; Sedda and Demuru 2018; Escudero Chauvel 2019, Moreno Barreneche 2019).

In line with these efforts, this article has three principal theoretical goals. First, it presents a general mapping of the political sphere studies carried out from a declared semiotic perspective, most notably those by Eric Landowski and Eliseo Verón. Furthermore, it aims to build bridges *within* the semiotic tradition, a field of research that unfortunately remains quite fragmented (Parra Ortiz 2020). Thirdly, it establishes a dialogue between political theory and semiotics by analyzing certain ideas belonging to the former whose semiotic nature has not been adequately examined, even if they have a clear *discursive* component. The works of Ernesto Laclau (1994, 2005) and Chantal Mouffe (1993, 2005, 2013) will be crucial in this interdisciplinary dialogue. In contrast to their exclusively theoretical elaborations, however, semiotics aims to grasp meaning-making by studying diverse objects regarded as meaning manifestations (Land-

owski 2014; Floch 1990). This empirical anchorage is what distinguishes a *semiotic approach to the political* from pure political theory: its specificity would then be given by studying meaning-making and signification within this social domain, based not on logical or theoretical deductions, but on the analysis of objects of diverse nature which are the carriers of meaning, such as speeches, advertisements, interactions, and practices, among many other articulations of the dimension of expression (Landowski 2019).

The article focuses on the dynamics of the discursive construction of collective identities within the political domain. This domain will be conceptualized as a set of semiotic practices (Fontanille 2008; Dondero 2017; Demuru 2017) by which individuals perform actions and interact with others to achieve specific goals on a discursive level; most crucially, to convince them of the value of their normative views regarding the exercise of power. Accordingly, we can conceive the political domain as a *discursive field* (Verón 1987) characterized by a “contest over meaning” (Pytlas 2016) between actors with conflicting interests. Representatives of the competing political projects attempt to ‘fix meaning’ for their views to prevail (De Cleen 2017) by employing discursive strategies to influence people’s beliefs, emotions, and actions.

According to this logic, political identities should be conceptualized and studied as *semiotic and discursive constructs* linked to collective social actors. The latter consist of “imagined communities” (Anderson 1983), usually conceived as internally consistent and forming around a specific set of political interests and claims. Since the assumed uniqueness of every identity requires establishing *relational differences* with other identities (Arfuch 2005; Eco 2012; Escudero Chauvel 2005; Laclau 1994; 2005; Mouffe 2005), semiotics has much to say about the discursive construction of collective actors and identities (Eisenstadt 1998) through the employment of semiotic resources such as names, symbols, texts, colors, music, and general imagery. Shortly put, political identities, which are differential units representing different positions along the spectrum constituted by all the possible identities – to be found in the dimension of the content –, are in the first place segmented through opposition to other identities and subsequently brought into being. That is to say, they are articulated – and constructed – through manipulation of the dimension of the expression. For semioticians, analyzing these empirically perceivable figurative manifestations unravels the underlying units of meaning constituting the multiple political identities at play.

To properly grasp the semiotic nature of collective identities, this article pays special attention to the role that the ‘political gap’: the space of indetermination between the various political identities locked in competition in the political ‘contest over meaning’ – plays in the construction of those identities and, consequently, in the articulation of the political as such. Here lies the most relevant contribution of this paper: demonstrating how social semiotics might help better understand the configuration of political identities that center around a We/They dichotomy by establishing a dialogue with

other social sciences. Given that the distinction between collective political actors is constitutive of the political field (Schmitt 1932), it is proposed that *gaps between identities are a necessary condition for the existence of the political as such*. That is to say, the nature of the political domain requires a particular dynamics of identity construction that implicates the emergence of gaps and, along with them, of practices that might be detrimental to democracy, such as affective polarization and fanaticism. Although the emergence of identity gaps is unavoidable, how these gaps are made sense in various political interactions might take different forms (Mouffe 1993, 2005, 2013). We will return to this point in the third section, following the discussion of the aims, scope, and methods of social semiotics in the next section, and the subsequent conceptualization of the political domain from a meaning-making perspective.

## 2. Aims, scope, and methods of social semiotics

Contemporary semiotics stems from two scholarly traditions: a linguistic one, based on the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, and a philosophical one, based on the work of Charles Sanders Peirce. Starting from these different theoretical projects, two major approaches to semiotic research developed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Traini 2006), their prominent representatives being Algirdas J. Greimas and Umberto Eco, respectively (Violi 2017). How can we formulate political semiotics based on these traditions? How should this field of research be apprehended and placed within the pre-existing semiotic tradition? Furthermore, what is distinctive about the semiotic approach to politics? What would be its theoretical premises, aims, and scope? Through which methods does it examine this discursive field? Given the current state of discord in semiotics, how can a researcher conceive semiotics' aims, scope, and methods?

To start with, the relatively recent consolidation of semiotics as a discipline largely explains the lack of consensus among semioticians regarding the scope of their research. As a result, the debate on semiotics' status – whether it be a discipline, theory, method, science, outlook, or perspective – is still alive, together with that concerning its descriptive or critical scope. Secondly, diverse theoretical approaches have arisen issued from philosophy (C. S. Peirce), structural linguistics (F. de Saussure, L. Hjelmslev, A. J. Greimas), functional linguistics (M. Halliday), cultural theory (J. Lotman), the production and circulation of social discourses (E. Verón), etc. As a result of semiotic paradigms' proliferation, researchers usually embed their work in any one of these without explaining the reasons for their choice.

According to Patrizia Violi (2017), the two major semiotic traditions – the 'generative' (Greimas) and the 'interpretative' (Eco) – share certain fundamental premises. Firstly, the assumption of a 'structural matrix' according to which meaning is either not

given or is pre-existent, yet emerges from sets of *relations* and *differences*. This idea was initially introduced in linguistics by Ferdinand de Saussure (1916) and further developed by Louis Hjelmslev (1943). This premise brings to the fore the centrality of relations in studying meaning-making, including in the social realm. Similarly, in a recent book where they seek to open a fruitful dialogue between semiotics, political and social theory, Peeter Selg and Andreas Ventsel (2020) identify a common relational matrix between Lotman's cultural semiotics and Laclau's political theory. For Laclau, "there is no beyond the play of differences" as "elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it" (Laclau 2005: 68-69). According to him (2005: 68), under the guise of 'discourse,' one should seek to understand "any complex system of elements in which *relations* play the constitutive role." Selg and Ventsel highlight the relevance of considering 'relational sociology' when studying the social domain from a semiotic perspective. According to this recent social theory paradigm (Dépelteau 2018; Donati 2011; Emirbayer 1997), relations are *constitutive* of social reality and its entities. That is why 'relational thinking' and social semiotics share several premises and, hence, have much in common as theoretical projects (Moreno Barreneche 2020b)

Violi (2017) suggests that the generative and interpretative semiotic traditions - alongside which one could certainly add Verón's discursive and Lotman's cultural approach - also share the premise of *anti-essentialism*. Rejecting any pre-social entities entails the *constructivist* view of social 'reality' as constructed through the multiple intersubjective negotiations of meaning in the production, circulation, and consumption of meaning (Verón 1988). As a result, within semiotics (and, more generally, constructivist social thought), the social field's nature is assumed to be *discursive*, i.e., based on relations and differences. This is an especially fruitful approach to studying political identities - particularly their construction and their inter-relations. Another point of agreement between the two semiotic traditions, according to Violi (2017), is the assumption of narrativity as an organizing principle of meaning and experience, a premise widely embraced by cognitive semiotics as well (Paolucci 2012).

In recent decades, semioticians have moved beyond their traditional focus on autonomous and closed texts (texts *strictu sensu*), on structures and systems, and broadened their research to encompass anything that *is* or *can be* meaningful (Landowski 2014; van Leeuwen 2005). This widening of scope has given place to 'social semiotics,' an approach with multiple representatives and practitioners worldwide, who agree on the basic premises presented above. The most prominent and influential researcher in this field is doubtlessly Eric Landowski, widely associated with the *sociosémiotique*. Aiming to develop an all-encompassing 'semiotics of experience,' Landowski extended Greimas' semiotic theory to the social sphere, studying a broad spectrum of objects, including the political dimension (Landowski 2004; 2019). Also, within French-speaking academia, Jean-Marie Floch (1990), Maria Giulia Dondero (2017), and Jacques Fontanille

(2008) have proposed studying practices from a semiotic perspective. The latter developed a model consisting of six dimensions for studying semiotic phenomena, departing from the strict focus on signs and texts and including, among other elements, practices, strategies, and 'forms of life' (Fontanille 2015).

An alternative attempt to develop a 'social semiotics' we find in Robert Hodge and Günther Kress (1988: viii), for whom "meaning is produced and reproduced under specific social conditions, through specific material forms and agencies." This account was embraced and further developed by Theo van Leeuwen (2005), who established a fruitful dialogue with scholars working in critical discourse analysis. Additionally, with one foot in Latin America and the other in France, Eliseo Verón (1988) formulated a theory of social semiotics based on the study of social discourses. He is doubtlessly one of the pioneers of the semiotic analysis of the political field. Finally, special reference is also due to Juri Lotman (1990; 2009), who studied cultural phenomena from an innovative semiotic perspective and whose work has been extremely influential in many academic circles.

In summary, we can define social semiotics as the discipline, method, perspective, science, theory, or outlook interested in understanding the production of signification and meaning within the inter-discursive and inter-subjective networks that constitute the social realm (Verón 1989). In other words, it aims at grasping 'meaning in action,' i.e., how semiosis takes place *dynamically* in the many interactions, situations, practices, and other signifying processes that take place within the social domain, many of which are open and expansive in time (Landowski 2004, 2014; Lorusso 2010). This conception of semiotic research departs from the self-imposed restriction to texts with a high degree of closure and autonomy, as social semiotics seeks "to account for how sense emerges from daily life and lived experience with its many dimensions" (Landowski 2014: 10).

Semioticians seem to agree on two general premises regarding which methodology to employ in studying 'meaning in action.' On the one hand, the distinction between the dimensions of expression and content, derived from Hjelmslev's elaboration of Saussure's distinction between the 'signifier' and the 'signified' (Courtés 2007). Semiosis – semiotics' object of study (Verón 1988; Lorusso 2010) – refers to the arbitrary and culturally variable link between units belonging to these two dimensions. Namely, how any given content is expressed through articulating perceivable semiotic resources and vice-versa, how any given articulation on the expression dimension leads to the postulation of a unit of meaning in the content dimension (as in the case of political identities). Semiotics' inescapable empirical anchorage entails, therefore, the premise that to grasp meaning – especially 'meaning in action' – is only possible when looking at empirically perceivable 'semiotic objects,' broadly called 'texts' (Landowski 2014). Once identified and delimited by the researcher, these 'semiotic objects,' varying from speeches, having a clear beginning and end to open-ended situations, can be analyzed through the methodological distinction between expression and content.

### 3. The political as a social and discursive construction

Eric Landowski (2019: 8) argues that the political field is constituted by multiple processes of construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of '*rapports de sens*' between social actors. These relations are dynamic, given that they are open and change over time. If social semiotics is interested in grasping signification and meaning within the social realm, then the political seems to be a suitable study object. Therefore, semioticians must *construct* the political as a semiotic object (Landowski 2019). Yet, one must ask: What is specific of politics as a social field? What are the interactions and practices that characterize this domain? To answer these questions, there is a need for a dialogue with political theory. To start with, the signifier of 'politics' is problematic. It condenses and encompasses disparate actions and practices (Van Deth 2014), such as running for office, demonstrating or protesting, participating in party rallies, handling a country's external relations, or posting political content on social media (Theocharis 2015). Nevertheless, when speaking of 'politics' as a distinct social sphere, something is assumed to be *equivalent* in all of these actions.

Selg and Ventsel (2020) argue that the political comprises three main dimensions: power, governance, and democracy. This seems an appropriately analytical characterization of the field, which, from a semiotic perspective, can be conceived as an ensemble of practices and interactions aimed at conducting the everyday life of a group that is extended in time and takes place across multiple levels. This group can be a nation-state, a local community, or even a supra-national entity such as the European Union. As Walzer (1983: 62) argues, all of these are "ongoing associations of men and women with some special commitment to one another and some special sense of their common life." In the context of representative democracies, the principle of popular sovereignty (i.e., the will of the *demos*) remains the ground for the legitimate exercise of power in the form of governance. As a result, candidates and parties try to attract voters with their normative projects. From a semiotic perspective, politics can be conceived as the social field characterized by having power relations as its focal point (Landowski 2019).

In identifying the political as a social field, Chantal Mouffe (2005) distinguishes between accounts that perceive political activity as consensus-oriented and those highlighting its inescapable antagonistic character. Criticizing the former's naiveté, Mouffe argues that conflict and disagreement inhere within the political's core, an idea she borrows from Carl Schmitt. For Schmitt (1932), what distinguishes the political from other social domains is the opposition between 'friend' [*Freund*] and 'enemy' [*Feind*].<sup>1</sup> This results from different – and usually conflicting – alternatives of conducting the *demos*' common destiny.

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<sup>1</sup> Schmitt (1932: 17) specifies that the word '*Feind*' ('enemy' or 'foe,' in English) is closer in meaning to the Latin word *hostis* than it is to *inimicus*.

Mouffe establishes a distinction between the categories of ‘politics’ and ‘the political,’ with the former used to refer to the multiple practices that characterize politics as a social activity, while the latter encompasses an ontological conception of the political domain as “the very way in which society is instituted” (Mouffe 2005: 8-9). From a semiotic perspective, Landowski (2004, 2019) established a similar distinction between the categories of ‘*la politique*’ and ‘*le politique*,’ which translate as *politics* and *the political*, respectively. According to Landowski (2019: 7), the majority of the studies that have been conducted on the political field have dealt with specific discursive manifestations, such as the speeches of government officials, political campaigns, and other forms of *political communication* that pertain to the domain of *politics*. However, what matters for social semiotics is *the political*, i.e., the dynamics of meaning-making based on the interactional grammars enabling these communicational activities. Hence, a semiotic approach to the political is concerned with grasping the deep structures that articulate this field, such as Schmitt’s friend/enemy dichotomy. According to Landowski (2019: 7), this task should lead to developing a model of the general syntax of power relations, capable of explaining in a systematic manner “the broad diversity of political regimes experienced or conceived across space and time.”

If power and power relations define the political as a distinct social field, the ‘contest over meaning’ taking place in it is a *discursive manifestation of a contest over power*. In the latter context, both individual and collective political actors produce meaning-effects to influence other actors’ will and actions in a way that aligns them with theirs. In a simple yes/no referendum, like those that Swiss citizens regularly face, political actors attempt to influence public opinion by deploying discursive devices to convince citizens to vote in line with their normative views. In other words, the goal of political action is to make others *know, feel, believe, and do* specific things. This demonstrates how within representative democracies, politics becomes an activity based on a *manipulative* regime of interaction, grounded on a principle of *intentionality* (Landowski 2019). Numerous aspects of this domain interest semiotics, such as the words and rhetorical games employed by political actors in public speeches, alongside the politicians’ personas, styles, and body language in public appearances, the interactional dynamic in parliamentary debates, the traditions that emerge surrounding specific political events and actors, etc.

Another research field for semiotics is the study of the actors that constitute and reproduce the political realm. Who are the actors or subjects involved in this contest over meaning and power relations? One of the political’s defining features is that interactions take the form of a confrontation between *political identities* articulated discursively, following a set of dynamics of a semiotic nature. These identities take the form of political parties, yet they also represent broader political ideologies, such as socialism and liberalism, or specific claims, such as feminism or environmentalism. Eliseo Verón (1989: 140), one of the pioneers in the semiotic study of the political domain, be-

lieved that “the democratic political system is one of the fields for the *management of social identities*.” Aligning with Schmitt’s and Mouffe’s proposal, he argued that the political takes the form of a ‘struggle between enunciators’ that makes political enunciation inherently *polemic* and “inseparable from the construction of an *adversary*” (Verón 1987: 16). From a semiotic perspective, this mechanism constitutes the foundation for the ‘contest over meaning’ that takes place on the political level and is characterized by the ‘discursive games’ played by the political actors.

Following the premises shared by the various semiotic traditions, the political domain is conceived as a space comprising specific types of enunciation, meaningful action, and interaction. This implicates a constructivist understanding of the political, according to which its ‘reality’ is not something given but constructed through multiple and heterogeneous instances of meaning negotiation between actors and grounded in specific beliefs and institutionalized codes regarding the conduct of power relations. As Verón (1988: 126) argues, meaning-making is the basis for the material organization of society, its institutions, and its social relations. The political is not an exception to this general principle.

The starting point of a semiotic study of political identities would be to identify the multiple collective actors (or the claims) that structure the public debate within a given political sphere. The most obvious material for this type of work would be to study how political parties and other actors (trade unions, guerrilla movements, etc.) represent themselves. This involves the study of programs, manifestos, propaganda, and other semiotic devices. These articulations, taking place in the expression dimension, enable us to identify the structures underlying the specific political identities’ content dimension. In Spain’s case, for example, following years of dominance of the Socialist Party (PSOE) and the Popular Party (PP) in the political landscape, there has been a recent emergence of new parties like Podemos, Ciudadanos, and Vox. For the electorate to find them identifiable, these parties had to construct their own identities using specific resources, including discursive strategies towards the traditional parties to justify their coming into being. As mentioned above, other political claims might also give rise to the emergence of collective identities even if they do not ultimately crystallize in political *parties*: feminism, the ‘Fridays for Future’ and ‘Black Lives Matter’ movements, the ‘Madres de Plaza de Mayo’ in Argentina, associations of local rural producers, amongst many others, also constitute cases of imagined groups united by specific normative views and shared political goals. Political identities are everywhere, whether in a structured and institutionalized manner or not.

#### 4. The discursive construction of political identities and the necessity of the gap

The previous section demonstrated why the political field is a good fit for social semiotics. In this final section, it is argued that the ‘gap’ between collective identities is an unavoidable feature of the constitution of the political. Before focusing on the gap, however, something must be said regarding the identities linked to the collective actors involved in the political ‘contest over meaning.’ This argument will be structured in three steps: (1) the polemic dynamics inherent to the political domain give place to a necessary emergence of identities that are *collective* and based on the equivalence of claims; (2) given that these identities transcend the individual dimension, they need to be constructed *discursively* (i.e., through the employment of semiotic resources that characterize and differentiate them from other collective identities); and (3) this discursive construction takes place by establishing a distinction from other collective identities. In conclusion, the gap seems to be unavoidable in the construction of the political.

If the political is a ‘contest over meaning’ in which political actors – such as candidates, parties, movements, and so on – struggle on a discursive level to make their normative views prevail, one could agree with Schmitt, Mouffe, and Verón that the political field has an inevitably adversative and polemic character. However, for the ‘political pluriverse,’ as Schmitt (1932: 41) calls it, to be manageable and understandable, it must comprise a reduced number of voices with their respective claims and demands. Schmitt (1932: 14) highlighted the importance of group formation in the constitution of the political because, in his view, the distinction between friend and enemy reflects the degree of the feasibility of a potential association (or not) with others. To ensure the manageability of the political sphere, individual demands must somehow be grouped, giving place to *clusters* of demands. This is how collective identities emerge: as Laclau argues (2005: ix), “the unity of the group is [...] the result of an articulation of demands.”

Although this claim does not imply that every social group is political, according to Schmitt (1932: 25), “every religious, moral, economic, ethnic or other opposition transforms itself into a political one when it is strong enough as to effectively group individuals in friends and enemies.” In this sense, how a specific topic or demand becomes a political issue is of utmost interest for a semiotic account due to every political process’s evident dynamic character and publicity. As Glynos and Howarth (2007: 115) argue, political practices have “a distinctively public import.”

Studying populism, Laclau (2005) argued that to transcend the individual or local dimension, demands must be structured around *equivalences* with other claims that are somewhat similar. This gives place to the emergence of a ‘chain of equivalences’ between collective actors and identities (i.e., units of meaning that transcend and en-

compass the individuals who identify with them). Tags and categories like 'left-wing' and 'right-wing,' 'socialist' and 'liberal,' 'pro-globalization' and 'anti-globalization,' 'conservative' and 'progressive,' 'monarchist' and 'republican,' 'Republican' and 'Democrat,' 'feminist,' 'ecologist,' and 'animalist,' among others, fulfill this essential function of grouping political claims. As Verón (1989: 141) argues, political discourse is grounded in a "theory of articulation of differences", particularly in the recognition of these differences by the actors involved in the game. For Verón (1987: 17), this leads to the discursive construction in the sphere of political enunciation of collective actors, which according to him, are at least two in number: one positive, being based on a relation of identification that gives place to an "inclusive Us" – the '*prodestinatarío*' ['pro-addressee'] – and one negative, based on a relation of alterity and exclusion – the '*contradestinatarío*' ['counter-addressee']. These collective identities are traceable in the act of political enunciation. This mechanism occurs by drawing imaginary boundaries between various units structured around a sort of 'semiotic core,' consisting of a set of key beliefs, values, and principles.

A combination of concepts from Hjelmslev's structural linguistics and Lotman's cultural semiotics might help to understand this idea better. Based on de Saussure's work, Hjelmslev (1943) argued that a unit's meaning is always grounded in its relations with other units considered distinct from it. Following up on Hjelmslev, Umberto Eco (1976) argues that we must perceive meaning as a differential unit within a broader network. It is the product of a culturally grounded segmentation. This principle also applies to collective identities: What distinguishes one collective identity from another? Where are the boundaries of a given collective identity set? Who belongs to a collective identity and who does not?

These questions regarding the identities' *content* can be answered with Lotman's concept of the 'semiosphere.' He envisions a semiosphere as a bounded space with a core, within which meaning is made possible and circulates. What gives collective identities a differential value and, at the same time, *identity* is a set of elements identified as part of the core, together with those boundaries established imaginarily on a perceived distance regarding the core's components. Even if these boundaries are not clearly defined, elements – in this case, beliefs and normative views – are placed within the semiosphere, forming a hierarchy according to how close they are to the core. Thus, the boundaries will delimit the in-group from the out-group, making the latter foreign and, hence, a 'They' (Eisenstadt 1998; Tajfel 1982). In terms of Lotman's semiotics, these boundaries leave a space of *untranslatability* between the 'We' and 'They' semiospheres. In this essentially semiotic process, a gap is already visible.

The idea of setting boundaries between collective actors is also identified by Laclau (2005: 77) in his general account on the formation of collective identities. He argues that "the constitution of an internal frontier dividing society into two camps" is a necessary

structural dimension for the emergence of populism, a phenomenon involving the discursive creation of a vague and unclearly delimited collective identity referred to as ‘the people,’ as opposed to the similarly collective identity of the ‘no-people,’ which might be projected onto an internal other, such as the elites or the ruling class, or an external one, such as the immigrants. In this sense, Laclau (2005: 67) considers populism as “the royal road to understanding something about the ontological constitution of the political as such.” Collective identities – and among them political identities – are, then, discursive constructs emerging from the segmentation of the continuum of all the possible identities based on the establishment of an imaginary, contingent, and historically grounded boundary between ‘We’ and ‘They.’ This procedure implies *a segmentation of the social* by rendering individual and collective claims to be somehow equivalent.

After the boundaries of a political identity have been established around the core, the delimitation of a collective and inclusive ‘We’ is only possible based on an opposition to a ‘They’ resulting from specific interactions (Eisenstadt 1998; Wendt 1992). Based on the processes of *generalization* and *homogenization*, the particular traits contained in the semiotic core of that identity are extended and imagined as being shared by *every* member. That is how the equivalences of the predicates of “being a socialist” or “being a feminist” with such and such traits, habits, and practices emerge. In this sense, these collective identities might even be conceived as ‘forms of life’ (Fontanille 2015). The ‘They’ necessary for the ‘We’ constitution is also postulated as a heterogeneous group whose existence is grounded in the general *logical* category of the ‘Non-We,’ in which everyone not identified as a member of the ‘We’ is placed. Hence, there is a process of ‘inventing the enemy,’ as Eco (2012: 2) argued, “having an enemy is important not only to define our identity but also to provide us with an obstacle against which to measure our system of values.”

Once delimited, for these identities to become actors in the narrative plot (Paolucci 2012) of the political, they must somehow be expressed through articulating the expression dimension; they must be constructed discursively in the process of *actorialization* so that other social actors can perceive and recognize them. With this aim, names, logos, flags, songs, manifests, adverts, colors, practices, traditions, and numerous other ‘semiotic resources’ (van Leeuwen 2005), ‘discursive devices’ (Laclau 2005) or ‘modes of sign production’ (Eco 1976) are employed to bring into being the political collective identity that has been segmented and delimited as a *distinct* identity. Individuals can identify with the latter by recognizing the equivalence and/or coincidence of their political interests, values, preferences, and demands. Given that this construction involves articulating differences, exactly *how* identity becomes perceivable comprises a highly crucial aspect of its very existence. One could certainly imagine the challenges of brainstorming and devising the name of a new political group: Where does it come from? What are its connotations? How does it relate to local political history? Let alone

the creation of its graphic and visual identity. The constructivist aspect of this process is evident.

It seems logical and necessary then that for collective identities to exist as differential units, distinct from one another, there is a need for the presence of an Other (even if in imaginary terms), whose whole (discursive) being is articulated around a semiotic core different from that of the 'We.' As Schmitt (1932) points out, it is on this Otherness [*Anderssei*] that the conflict with the Other [*der Andere, der Fremde*] is grounded. In the political domain, given that the Other is typically a collective actor, semiotic mechanisms must be activated to construct those identities to be recognizable by both the 'pro-addressees' and the 'counter-addressees,' as identified by Verón. Therefore, the gap, i.e., this indetermination space, in which the political identities' boundaries might overlap and clash, seems to be unavoidable. By working as a sort of 'river' that divides a geographical region into two differentiated sides (the 'here' and 'there'), the gap makes identification with one or the other side ('We' and 'They') not only meaningful but also possible. Were there not a river, then this identification would not be possible, as there would be no material markers that could convey the distinction between sub-sections of that geographical region. Therefore, the gap seems to be a necessary condition for the emergence and the discursive construction of collective identities in the political domain, and with them, of the domain itself.

## 5. Concluding remarks

This article argues that the emergence of collective identities reflects the constructed and inter-subjective nature of the political field, one of the many discursive fields that constitute the social realm. Given that every identity is necessarily defined in relational terms and can only exist as a distinct unit of meaning by establishing differences with other identities, the We/They logic appears inevitable. This seems to be especially true for a domain whose defining feature, according to Schmitt (1932), is the opposition between the imagined groups of friends and enemies. Consequently, several dynamics will emerge that reflect a polemic and an adversative form. The gap can be conceived as a necessary yet unclearly delimited space of indetermination, in which a collective identity ends and the other begins. As mentioned previously, this seems to be an essential condition for the possibility of collective identities to exist within the social realm as meaningful categories. Therefore, semiotics can offer a broad conceptual and theoretical toolbox to understand better how these identities emerge and are invested with meaning so that individuals can identify with them. This article aimed to contribute to this direction; hence, it should be treated as a theoretical starting point for substantial productive empirical work.

Besides the descriptive and analytical aspects of researching political identities, a key question for a semiotic approach to the political is normative. It concerns how to manage this necessary gap to avoid the emergence of affective polarization, extremism, fanaticism, and incivility. In open and democratic societies, it seems relevant to maintain the interactions and exchanges between political actors based on a rational dimension rather than on a passionate one, even if affect and emotions are constitutive of every identity (Tajfel 1982) and, more generally, of the public sphere (Peñamarín 2020). In acknowledging that affect plays a crucial role in the political, Mouffe (2005) distinguished between ‘agonism’ and ‘antagonism’ as the two possible forms of relationship between ‘We’ and ‘They.’ The former is based on the Other’s conception as a legitimate adversary, disagreeing with whom takes the form of dialogue. The latter involves the Other’s conception as an enemy that must be eliminated. The dangerous effects of this gap fall within the latter’s domain.

The so-called ‘mediatization of politics’ (Verón 1998; Mazzoleni and Schulz 1999; Esser and Strömbäck 2014) induced the strengthening and mainstreaming of the antagonistic mode; consequently, it has led to increased polarization, over-simplification of social reality, and the Other’s assessment in moral rather than political terms (Cosenza 2018; Mouffe 2005; Moreno Barreneche 2020c). In recognizing a political Other as a distinct and competing collective identity, there is a tendency to engage in its immediate *axiologization* in negative terms, turning it into an enemy instead of an Other with whom the social space might be shared, despite disagreements on issues that are constitutive of those identities. More importantly, the Other is frequently neglected as an interlocutor with whom the ‘We’ could enter into dialogue to achieve some sort of consensus on a broad array of issues. Even if collective identities require constitutive differences to come into being, this does not necessarily exclude the possibility of achieving consensus. This begs a series of questions: What strategies, then, should we employ to avoid an immediate axiologization of the Other? Which discursive mechanisms should be avoided and which fostered? How has the mediatization of politics contributed to the normalization of antagonistic practices? Questions like these once again bring to the fore the centrality of social semiotics as a discipline that, besides its descriptive aims anchored in the empirical examination of social practices and situations, has an underlying transformative scope that is intrinsically political (Landowski 2019).

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# Framing right-wing populist satire: The case-study of Ghisberto's cartoons in Italy

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## ABSTRACT

Over the last few years, right-wing populism has increased its popularity and political weight, successfully merging with Euro-scepticism, nationalism, xenophobia, religious symbolism, and aggressive forms of conservatism (e.g., anti-feminism, homophobia, and, in general, patriarchal politics). Several studies have focused on the communication strategies of contemporary populism, examining the latter's use of traditional and new media. So far, however, little attention has been paid to the role and language of right-wing populist satire. Our study draws on the ideational approach to populism to explore how right-wing populism is expressed in satirical cartoons. This approach perceives populism as a thin-centered ideology, based on a Manichean division between 'good people' and 'evil elites,' which regularly combines with other ideological components (e.g., nationalism, Euroscepticism, xenophobia). Our analysis focuses on the Italian cartoonist Ghisberto, known for his provocative and frequently controversial work. We examine a sample of Ghisberto's vignettes using multimodal analysis tools and Greimas's notion of isotopy. The aim is to investigate how right-wing populist satire constructs its different targets (the EU, left-wingers, migrants, NGOs, women, etc.) and how populist ideology exploits cartoons' communicative resources and power.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the last few years, the popularity of populist parties and movements has been steadily increasing, especially in Europe and the USA, as highlighted by the election of Donald Trump in 2016, the Brexit referendum in 2016, and the growing share of votes obtained by populist parties in the European Parliament elections of 2014 and 2019 (Treib 2014; Ruzza 2019). Populism is not necessarily associated with right-wing ideologies. However, Marine Le Pen's recent success in France, Nigel Farage and Boris Johnson in the UK, Matteo Salvini in Italy, and Viktor Orbán in Hungary shows that right-wing populist parties are gaining momentum and their ideas succeed to mobilize voters. As a result, right-wing populism has drawn scholarly attention in several research fields, generating a wide array of theoretical and empirical studies investigating different aspects of this particular political phenomenon.

Populism has been studied as a political ideology (e.g., Mudde 2004; Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017), a discursive practice (e.g., Wodak 2015), and a communication style (e.g., Jagers and Walgrave 2007; Mazzoleni and Bracciale 2018). Most studies on populism focus on political actors (e.g., parties, movements, and political leaders), their ideological/discursive production, and their audience. However, with few exceptions (Wodak 2015; Grdešić 2017), there is little research about right-wing populist cartoons, despite their growing number and importance, often boosted through social media channels (Leon 2017).

Our study aims to address this gap by exploring the relationship between right-wing populism and satirical vignettes. Specifically, we investigate the case of the Italian cartoonist Ghisberto, who recently stepped into the limelight for his controversial cartoons, which adopt an overtly right-wing populist perspective. Our analysis attempts to disentangle satire's role in right-wing populism, its main features and differences with mainstream political communication, and its political and social implications.

## 2. Right-wing populism: Ideological elements, communication style, and the potential role of satire

Though the concept of populism is still contentious, scholars agree that at its core lies an opposition between the (good) people and the (evil) elites, with populists siding with the former and claiming to represent them in their struggle against the latter. The ideational approach concurs with this standard premise and defines populism as "a thin-centered ideology that considers society ultimately separated into two homogeneous and antagonistic camps, 'the pure people' versus 'the corrupt elite'" (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017; see also Mudde 2004). This minimal definition highlights the centrality

of the people/elite opposition and the attendant perception of these two groups as homogeneous. In the first place, then, populism is anti-pluralist.

According to the ideational approach, populism tends to attach itself to thicker ideologies such as nationalism, conservatism, or socialism. In this respect, Wodak (2015) thoroughly conceptualized the main ideological elements of right-wing populism. First, she described the 'politics of exclusion' as a tool used by right-wing populists to attack and marginalize migrants (e.g., Béland 2020; Lutz 2019), LGBT+ groups (e.g., Mayer et al. 2014), and minorities in general (e.g., Giorgi 2020). The exclusion and subsequent scapegoating of minorities often take the form of antisemitism, present in several far-right populist groups (Wodak 2015). Currently, a politics of exclusion is promoted by several right-wing populist parties and movements across Europe, which espouse racism and discriminatory policies.

A second ideological element of right-wing populism is the 'politics of nationalism' (Wodak 2015), which in Europe intertwines with euroscepticism (Michailidou 2015; De Wilde et al. 2014). The Brexit referendum is an excellent example of how populist nationalists (in particular, Nigel Farage's United Kingdom Independence Party) tend to portray European institutions and leaders as members of a corrupt elite undermining the people's national sovereignty (see Ruzza and Pejovic 2019)

Thirdly, right-wing populism combines with the 'politics of patriarchy' (Wodak 2015) by adopting conservative and intolerant positions towards civil rights, Islamic religion (e.g., Muslim headscarves), LGBT+ rights, and abortion.

Finally, right-wing populism often relies on charismatic leaders ('politics of charisma,' Wodak 2015) claiming to fight the elites in the name of the people they allegedly represent (Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017). Populist political communication is thus characterized by a high degree of personalization (Krämer 2014, 2017), with its leaders stylizing themselves as the 'man of the street' and the 'champion of the people' (Bracciale and Martella 2017).

On a discursive level, these ideological elements are frequently re-combined and re-elaborated to construct a more or less coherent populist message. Research in populist communication shows that populist styles vary according to the ideological elements they prioritize. Investigating the political communication of Belgian populist parties, Jagers and Walgrave (2007) identified four different populist styles, distinguished by the level of their anti-establishment position and the degree of exclusivity/inclusivity in their rhetoric: populism can be empty (when it just claims to represent the people); exclusive (low levels of anti-elitism, but a strong focus on excluding out-groups); anti-elitist (strong anti-elitism and inclusive politics towards minorities, as in some left-wing populist groups in Europe – e.g., Diem25 in Greece); or complete (strong anti-elitism, exclusive politics). Other researchers focused on the role

of emotions (Cossarini and Vallespin 2019) in populist communication. In particular, populists often deploy negative emotions such as fear (Wodak 2015), anger, and resentment (Wahl-Jorgensen 2018) to strengthen their message.

Finally, several scholars stress the affinity between populist communication style(s) and social media (Gerbaudo 2018). Social media facilitate the spread of populist ideology in a fragmentary way via short messages consonant with their tendency for oversimplification (Engesser et al. 2017). Moreover, they exploit social media's potential for speed and virality (Jacobs and Spierings 2019) to directly reach their audiences, bypassing traditional gatekeepers (Engesser et al. 2017).

Although most populist political communication strategies have been thoroughly analyzed, we cannot say the same for populist satire, especially in political cartoons. The academic study of political cartoons has only recently gained momentum in the wake of the growing body of research in comics studies' interdisciplinary field. Given their interlinked history and their standard formal features (i.e., the interplay between words and images used to communicate), drawing techniques, and methods of representation (Chen et al. 2017), political cartoons have found their niche in several recent publications on comics (e.g., Heer and Worcester 2009; Bramlett 2012; Smith and Duncan 2012; Howard and Jackson 2013; Chute and Jagoda 2014).

Political cartoons have also been investigated from the viewpoint of satire theory. Milner Davis and Foyle (2017) suggest that satire is "essentially humor with a critical purpose" (see also Condren 2012). It may be more or less partisan, left- or right-wing but ultimately always having as its target "the failings of those who claim to lead the nation and make decisions on its behalf, in the best interests of 'the people'" (Milner Davis and Foyle 2017: 4). Cartoons represent an ideal medium for satire because of their brevity and the powerful impact that a single, vivid image has to tackle contentious issues and convey their needle-sharp social commentary. By walking the threshold between artistic expression and opinion, we do not expect satirical cartoons to be reports of social events and situations. Hence, they are free from the burden of objectivity. This offers them considerable freedom of expression (Connors 1998) and the possibility to be openly political, or even provocative and controversial (Abraham 2009; Abraham and Appiah 2006). Constrained to condense visual and verbal elements into a single frame, cartoons turn otherwise complex issues into direct and easily legible messages and, hence, they are widely accessible and comprehensible (Giglio 2002; Abraham 2009; Tsakona 2009). Like populism, they tend to oversimplify, and their communicative style enjoys a wide outreach. Chen's (2013) research on the efficacy of political humor in the public sphere highlights how political cartoons, produced through the new media, foster mobilization and social change by drawing people's attention to official bodies' negligence. Political cartoons have the power to "either draw people together or push them apart" (Lewis et al. 2008: 12). Tsakona and Popa (2011) emphasize how cartoons

can promote social bonding within a community and be harmful and offensive towards the target of their social criticism. For instance, the 2005 Danish cartoon controversy over Muhammad's representation proved that vignettes could trigger great contention and conflict (Müller and Özcan 2007; Olesen 2007).

Cartoons frame social and political issues by personalizing them, providing them with concrete forms and brief – yet powerful and eye-catching – narratives (Greenberg 2002; Morrison and Isaac 2012). Given satire's moral vocation to clearly “demarcate vice from virtue” (Griffin 1994: 36), cartoons can function as “moral mirrors” (Koelble and Robins 2007: 319) particularly effective in pinning blame and responsibility (Greenberg 2000). These characteristics make satirical vignettes a powerful device in the hands of populist rhetoric. They can reinforce binary oppositions, give a tangible form to the people's foes (e.g., by personalizing vague notions as the elites, lobbies, media power, etc.) and spread these messages in a vivid, easy-to-grasp form.

The advent of the internet and instant communication noticeably shape-shifted the production and distribution of political cartoons (Colgan 2003; Niles 2005; Danjoux 2007; Lewis 2012). Leon (2017) highlights how cartoonists are now able to distribute their vignettes instantly and widely. By self-publishing their works online, they can also circumvent editorial processes, disseminating cartoons that may otherwise be judged too offensive for publication and vetoed by newspaper editors. This is particularly true for right-wing populist satire, often targeting out-groups with racist and discriminatory slurs. Right-wing populist satire has significantly benefited from social media and the internet in general, where content is rarely ever subject to gatekeeping. For instance, Wagner and Schwarzenegger (2020) focus on the prominent role of memes in spreading populist messages and how right-wing populist satire uses them to elicit strong reactions in its audience, potentially reinforcing far-right positions (Schwarzenegger and Wagner 2018).

These considerations can be extended to the satirical vignettes created by Ghisberto, an Italian cartoonist living in Cuba. After a brief stint as a cartoonist in 1993, in 2016, Ghisberto started sharing his openly right-wing populist political cartoons on his website,<sup>1</sup> Facebook,<sup>2</sup> and Twitter<sup>3</sup> accounts. Right-wing satire with conservative positions is anything but a new phenomenon in Italy. Suffice it to mention far-right cartoonist Alfio Krancic, working for *Il Giornale* since 1994, and former Five Star Movement (a populist party) satirist Mario Impronta (known as Marione). Ghisberto's peculiarity is that he uses social media to spread his satirical works independently. Social media gave Ghisberto freedom from any commitment to parties or media outlets (and their code of conduct) as well as a platform through which his controversial and unfiltered

<sup>1</sup> Ghisberto's website: <http://ghisberto.altervista.org/>

<sup>2</sup> Ghisberto's Facebook account: <https://bit.ly/2MXWVmR>

<sup>3</sup> Ghisberto's Twitter account: <https://twitter.com/ghisberto1>

cartoons enjoy high exposure and diffusion. Ghisberto acts as the satirical voice of right-wing populism, with cartoons infused with nationalism, euroscepticism, conservatism, and fraught with racist and sexist slurs. His graphic social commentary's only burden is the frequent banning of his cartoons and suspensions of his Facebook page due to violations of the platform's norms.

Given the potential of this under-researched field of inquiry, the present study aims to explore how right-wing populism and its ideological elements combine with the satire of political cartoons, starting from Ghisberto's work. The study has two main research questions:

- a. What are the thematic, stylistic, and symbolic features of right-wing populist satire, and how do they relay right-wing populist ideologies?
- b. What are the similarities and differences between right-wing populist political communication and satire, and what are the potential advantages/disadvantages of the latter?

### 3. Methodology

Given Ghisberto's prolific amount of cartoon production, we chose to narrow our analysis scope to his *Calendario Populista 2020* (2020 Populist Calendar),<sup>4</sup> which included 12 cartoons and was uploaded on the author's website and social media accounts in December 2019. The calendar serves as an anthology of what Ghisberto considers his best cartoons for each month of 2019. Hence, we can consider it as representative of the author's core thematic and stylistic features. Our research investigates how Ghisberto's cartoons reflect or differ from right-wing populist communication and its basic ideological premises. The analysis attends to the core attribute of populism (people-elite dichotomy, Mudde and Kaltwasser 2017) and the ideological attachments typical of right-wing populism (Wodak 2015): i) politics of exclusion; ii) politics of nationalism; iii) politics of patriarchy, and iv) politics of charisma. Starting from this framework, our study relies on Kress and Van Leeuwen's visual grammar and Greimas's notion of isotopy to disentangle how Ghisberto constructs his satirical cartoons and highlight their dominant thematic and stylistic patterns.

From a semiotic viewpoint, cartoons are syncretic texts (Greimas and Courtés 1979) as they integrate visual and verbal elements. Therefore, they need to be investigated by reading images as well as words. In recent years, Kress and Van Leeuwen's (2001, 2006[1996]) multimodal approach is gaining momentum, particularly in Halliday-based social semiotics (e.g., Kress 2001, 2003; Van Leeuwen and Jewitt 2001; Jewitt and Kress 2003; O'Halloran 2004; Van Leeuwen 2005; Machin 2007; Jewitt 2013[2009]). Multimodal

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<sup>4</sup> The calendar is available at the link: <https://bit.ly/3rYHE3X>

discourse involves the interaction of multiple semiotic resources, encompassing all available meaning systems, from verbal language to images, gestures, gaze, posture, and others (Jewitt 2013[2009]). Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006[1996]) elaborated their visual grammar on the premise that a multimodal text's visual component, though connected to words, is independently organized and structured. Verbal and visual languages both partake in the construction of meaning through their specific forms.

Research on media as comics and cartoons has significantly benefited from the increasing interest in visual communication and multimodality (e.g., Tsakona 2009), marking a shift from investigations on language and grammar to graphics-oriented inquiries in the so-called *ninth art*. The peculiarity of comics and cartoons is that their signification processes entail word-image relationships. Pioneering semiotic investigations in the comic medium (e.g., Eco 1964; Barbieri 1991; Floch 1997; Fresnault-Deruelle 1972; Peeters 1991; Groensteen 1999, 2011) have all highlighted the emergence of sense through both images and words. In this respect, isotopic analysis's potential as a tool for the integrated study of such hybrid texts is still mostly unexplored. The notion of isotopy (Greimas 1966a, 1966b) concerns the semes' recurrence, making a text's semantic cohesion and homogeneity possible. Though initially conceived about verbal texts, isotopic analysis can be extended to multimodal texts like cartoons, where visual items participate in the meaning-making process. Isotopic analysis focuses on semic elements and how they cohere to constitute the deep semantic structure of texts (Van Dijk 1972). Greimas distinguished between nuclear semes, which are invariable, permanent, specific, and context-independent, and classemes, which are variable, contextual, and generic. Isotopic analysis does not focus only on single terms but on the whole of the discourse, on its figures (actors, time, space) and their thematization, establishing a hierarchy between the totality of isotopies structuring a text (Bertrand 2000). Typically, texts contain multiple isotopies, while polysemic terms may participate in different isotopies and thus operate as shifters (*embrayeurs*). By focusing on relations of signification among verbal and graphic elements, isotopic analysis can provide a coherent interpretation of such texts as cartoons, whose syncretic nature demands a multiple-level reading. In this respect, isotopies act as gravitational centers (Binelli 2013) or maps, guiding the hermeneutic process into the core of Ghisberto's cartoons. Greimas's isotopic analysis, like Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar, highlights the interaction between the cartoons' visual and verbal dimension,<sup>5</sup> for it is "the simultaneity of the visual and the verbal languages [that] generates the diegesis" (Celotti 2008: 34). Finally, our analysis also draws upon Greimas's (1984) reflection on figurative and plastic semiotics to look for correspondences between the plastic level and the isotopic categories examined.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>5</sup> See Polli (2019a, 2019b) for further examples of the combined application of Greimas's isotopies and Kress and Van Leeuwen's multimodal approach.

<sup>6</sup> See also Calabrese (1999).

## 4. Sample analysis

### 4.1. The People vs. the Elite

The oversimplified, Manichean view of the world divided between the ‘good people’ and the ‘evil elites,’ which, as we have argued, is typical of populist political rhetoric, is at the core of Ghisberto’s perspective. To incorporate this ideological element in his cartoons, Ghisberto employs framing, i.e., multimodality theory’s most crucial compositional resource (Kress and Van Leeuwen 2006[1996]; Van Leeuwen 2005). Framing devices (e.g., dividing lines, represented elements, empty space, colors) are semiotic resources that serve to demarcate visual elements within an image. The presence of framing signifies differentiation, whereas its absence indicates connection and group identity.

Ten out of the corpus’s twelve cartoons show a sharp demarcation between two entirely different and, as a rule, opposed entities utilizing physical elements that parcel out the picture. Whether walls (January, March, April, July, August, November), a gate (May), a screen (October), or even a flag (February), such physical partitions play a crucial role in the meaning-making process as they mark out two contrasting realities and worldviews. The wall is the framing partition most frequently employed by Ghisberto to split the cartoon in two and, in so doing, signify the Manichean division between the ‘good people’ and the ‘evil elites.’ In general, the wall has a powerful symbolism in contemporary populist rhetoric and political agenda, as demonstrated by Viktor Orbán’s border barrier, built in 2015, to stop migrants from entering Hungary or Trump’s wall between Mexico and the USA.

A clear example of Ghisberto’s use of walls is the March cartoon, where the polarization between two opposed realities is underlined by the title ‘Universi paralleli’ (‘Parallel universes’). A wall cuts the image in two, with the world of radical chic (i.e., the left-leaning elites) appropriately located on the left side and the people, on the right side. The wall’s figure entails the classeme ‘division’ and ‘exclusion.’ The demarcation is further stressed on a chromatic level by using bright, vibrant, and saturated colors on the left. At the same time, the gray tone dominates the right side.

The universe on the left shows a peaceful scene in which people live in villas with a pool, green grassland, and flowers, while in the background, other people are sunbathing and sailboats cut through the sea. Each of the three villas in the foreground displays a flag: the EU-flag, the rainbow peace flag, and the Communist flag (with the hammer symbolizing the working class replaced by a fork, representing the hunger of the greedy elites). One of them has a journal with the sign ‘Soros’ in the mailbox, while in another, a red (the color symbolically associated with left-wingers) t-shirt is drying in the sun. These are the elites’ recurring affiliations, according to Ghisberto. Security guards guard the gated community while the representatives of the elites entertain

themselves. These figurative elements reiterate the classemes 'peacefulness,' 'safety,' and above all 'wealth.' The same classemes recur visually in the scene at the center of the left-universe. Here, we observe a group engaged in friendly conversation and composed of representatives of the Church (the Pope), the judiciary<sup>7</sup> (a judge with a testicle-hat and a penis-nose), the media (animalized versions of the journalists Lilli Gruber and Enrico Mentana, portrayed as a snake and a piglet, respectively), the sea-rescue NGOs (epitomized by Lifeline member Sören Moje) and the State (a man with a red tick on a golden leash and another with a tuxedo and a Rolex).

On a verbal level, the group's conversation concerns, on the one hand, people's ignorance and racism. The politicians characterize people as 'ignorant and racist' (Popolo di ignoranti rasisti) and 'illiterate and boorish' (Analfabeti e zoticoni). On the other, immigration: the activist states, 'I'll write a song to raise awareness' (Scriverò una canzone per sensibilizzare), while the Pope adds that 'Even Jesus was a migrant' (Anche Gesù era un mikrante).

Ghisberto's cartoons reverse the remarks directed at the people: on the one hand, the elite are shown to be the real illiterates as they talk with mangled words (this recurs in July and October as well), switching the letters 's' and 'z' ('rasisti,' 'sensibilizzare') and replacing 'k' with 'g' (e.g., 'mikrante'). On the other hand, a black waiter serves the elites a drink called 'Cretino' ('idiot'), a wordplay on the bitter aperitif Crodino, advertised by a gorilla in Italy. While remarking on the elite's hypocrisy towards African refugees, Ghisberto manages to add a slur ('cretino') and a racist association between a black man and a primate. We will tackle Ghisberto's representation of migrants more extensively in the next section. For the moment, it is noteworthy that the black people living in the radical chic universe are either servants or engaging in sexually-connoted activities. A muscular black man embraces a white woman while drinking naked by the pool to the Italian partisan song *Bella Ciao*. Next to another pool, with the road sign 'Parioli,' a shapely black woman wearing a bikini poses for an old man with a lecherous facial expression. Parioli is an upper-class area of Rome, associated with wealth, snobism, and a glamorous lifestyle. The sign, the woman's pose, and the old man's expression, the nakedness of the other couple all share the classeme 'sex,' which is reiterated in Ghisberto's themes of immigration, womanhood, and the lustful nature of the elites.

This isotopy persists in the other universe as well, where we have graphic representations of sexual intercourse between black men and white women (on the road and at the window of a building, above a rainbow). These sex scenes are negatively connoted as part of a dystopic overview of urban decay, where the dominant classemes

<sup>7</sup> The association of the Italian judiciary with the left can be mainly attributed to populist politician Silvio Berlusconi, who famously defined judges as 'red robes' (see Vaccari 2015).

are 'violence,' 'poverty,' 'disgust,' and 'degeneration.' The buildings are crumbling, and the roads are full of excrements, urine, rubbish, and needles, the air contaminated by smoke and fires.

The classeme 'violence' is reiterated by the blood oozing both from a corpse lying on the street, photographed by forensic police – all the while the presumed murderer escapes holding a knife – and from a wounded woman escaping her assailant. Besides, through a window, we see a Muslim man hitting a woman, another Muslim guarding the area with a rifle, and an Isis flag waving at the window. Another classeme present is 'addiction,' evoked by such figures as the needle, pot-smoking, and a black man screaming for 'Bamba' (Italian slang for cocaine). Few white peoples escape the mayhem. Among them, a family is forced to sleep in the car (with the Italian flag on the top of it), and an old lady is looking out of the window of the 'Isis' crumbling building: they share the classeme 'poverty.'

As part of the populist search for a scapegoat, Ghisberto includes a crying judge that looks like a crocodile, visualizing the familiar saying for a hypocritical show of grief 'weeping crocodile tears.' On a wall, the poster 'Vota PD' ('Vote Democratic Party') is dirtied with excrements, a sign that those responsible for such degeneration are the left-wing elites who are enjoying their life beyond the wall.

The wall and the other barriers used by Ghisberto also share the classeme 'deception'. In February, with a cartoon dedicated to the National Memorial Day of the Exiles and Foibe, Ghisberto turns this commemoration into an opportunity to attack elite intellectuals. The picture is divided into two parts by using a Communist flag as a framing device. At the top, a school-kid asks about the missing pages in his unsurprisingly red history book, while a man in red jacket answers: "Cosa vuoi insinuare?" ("What are you hinting at?"). The implication is that the left-wing intellectual elite deliberately omitted Communist crimes from their historical accounts, thus deceiving future generations. The truth lies under their feet, as a pile of skulls and bones is hidden by the red flag. The cartoon shares the classemes 'death,' conveyed by the skeletons, and 'deception,' conveyed by the framing device, by the red book, and by the adult's evasive response to the kid's question. From a chromatic point of view, the massive use of the color red, with a very high degree of brightness and saturation, contrasts with the dullness of the colors white, gray, and black dominating the cartoon's bottom. The chromatic opposition reinforces, on a plastic level, the contrast highlighted on a figurative level.

Deception and power imbalance between the naïve people and the deceiving elites are also thematized in the April cartoon. Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006[1996]) speak of classification processes in an image when the persons represented are divided into Superordinate and Subordinate according to either an overt or covert taxonomy. In Ghisberto's cartoon, a Superordinate-Subordinate taxonomy symbolizes the power im-

balance between the elites and the left-wing voters celebrating Italy's Liberation Day (April 25). The taxonomy is overtly expressed by another multimodal compositional device: salience. Salience is evaluated based on the complex interaction between visual clues, which establishes a hierarchy of importance among the elements, with some drawing more attention to themselves than others. The relative size of the persons represented (i.e., their 'visual weight') is a major factor in determining their relative significance. Ghisberto depicts the elite as giants, looking down at small-sized ordinary people. In the multimodal analysis, perspective also informs about power-relations. The fact that the people are looked at from a high angle indicates that the elite has power over them. The voters are visualized cooped in a cage for rodents, with a hamster wheel and a drinking trough full of golden coins. Left-wing voters thus are metaphorically associated with hamsters enclosed in a cage, unaware of their Subordinate condition. On an eidetic level, the cage's rectangle, combined with the surrounding circle formed by the elite-members' bodies, reinforces the idea of elites' conspiring to deceive the people.

One of the elite-members is depicted as a pig in a tuxedo, dehumanizing the elites being another device frequently used by Ghisberto. In the March cartoon, we saw how media representative Enrico Mentana and Lilli Gruber were animalized as a pig and a snake, respectively. Besides, Ghisberto frequently represents left-wingers as small red ticks: in Italian, 'zecca rossa' (red tick) is a far-right slur for leftists. Journalists are dehumanized in the October cartoon. They appear as grotesque, monster-like creatures coming out of a television screen to feed a viewer with a rainbow mush that seems to turn his brains into pulp. The monstrous female creature that feeds him uses a golden spoon and wears a golden Rolex on her wrist, characterizing the journalistic elite with the *classeme* 'wealth.' The cartoon is titled 'La Setta – La tua pappa quotidiana.' The wordplay between La7 (a TV channel pronounced 'la sette' and usually disliked by the far-right) and 'la setta' ('the cult') indicates that Ghisberto presents the journalists as a cult that manipulates the audience by serving them 'la tua pappa quotidiana' ('your daily mush'). As the viewer submits to the cult's brain-controlling power, he goes so far as to apologize: 'Quanto faccio schifo! Scusatemi!!' ('I suck so much! I'm sorry!!').

The people's gullibility is also thematized in the November cartoon. The latter adopts a comic strip form to offer a short narrative. Here, the ruling elite is represented as a tax collector with a golden hook (eliciting the *classeme* 'wealth' and 'deception,' and connoting the State as legitimized piracy) extorting money (in the form of unfair taxes) from a poor citizen, whose patched coat, hunchbacked posture, pale skin tone, and thin figure share the *classeme* 'poverty.'

To sum up, in most of Ghisberto's cartoons, the wall (and barriers in general) is the figurative element that reiterates these *classemes*, creating the dominant isotopies of division and exclusion, standing at the core of populist rhetoric. At the polar ends of

this Manichean dichotomy stand the elite, linked to the isotopies of wealth and deception, and the people, associated with poverty and gullibility. The isotopies of violence, death, degeneration, disgust, sex, and addiction are reinforced by many figures that recur in all of Ghisberto's cartoons. As the next sections will detail, Ghisberto connects EU-institutions and immigration issues with media and left-wing positions. His dichotomous worldview is amplified by adding further enemies to the elites' nebulous category and how they oppress the people.

#### 4.2. Politics of exclusion

In Ghisberto's cartoons, the politics of exclusion of minorities takes the form of racist representations of black people (usually immigrants) and Muslims. In the March cartoon, we have seen that black people are represented either as servants and drug dealers or as sexual predators. The same 'sex,' specifically, is reiterated either in scenes where black men engage in sexual intercourse with left-wing women, or a black woman poses for a lascivious white elderly man. The connection between sex and migrants is recurring in Ghisberto's cartoons even through small (visual and verbal) details, often marginal to the main events depicted in the vignettes. In many cases, there is an additional connection to 'wealth' (a *classeme* present in such figures as headphones, smartphones, golden jewelry), implying that migrants are not truly poor and needy. At the top of the January cartoon, we see a black penis statue with a smirking face, a pair of large headphones, and a golden pedestal inscribed 'Trattato di Dublino.' Next to this, a red tick waving a rainbow flag bearing the sign 'Culi aperti!' ('Open asses!'), aiming to mock Dublin's EU Treaty and the pro-migrant 'Porti aperti' ('Open ports') policy slogan. In the June cartoon, the Altare della Patria's Rome monument is replaced by a sea-rescue ship, displaying two people's silhouette having oral sex. Simultaneously, at the end of a conga of Italian Armed Forces, a caricatured refugee's body is added - though only his hand, abdomen, and smartphone are visible. In the August cartoon, another oral sex intercourse between a black man and a left-wing woman is included in a crowded scene that, once again separated by a wall, outlines the differences between Communist and Fascist beach resorts.

Only the June and December cartoons have no physical barrier dividing the picture. They both deal with inclusion, or, more precisely, the exaggerated and deliberately provocative interpretation of left-wing ideas of inclusion and the socio-political degeneration they entail. In the June cartoon, the title announces the core theme, where the inscription 'Festa della Repubblica' (Republic Day, held on June 2) is replaced with 'Festa dell'Inclusione' (Inclusion Day). Significantly, the line crossing out the 'original' title is in red. In the December cartoon, we find the reinterpretation of the conventional Christmas nativity scene. Center-right politician Angelino Alfano appears as the donkey, left-wing politician Laura Boldrini as the ox, and a grown-up African boy with a

pacifier, a smartphone, a red cap, a golden necklace, and a visible erection takes the place of infant Jesus. On the right bottom corner of the image, below a Christmas tree with a phallic shape (ejaculating) decorated with testicles, another black man is shown in the act of having sex with a white woman. He is pulling her hair, his penis penetrating her from behind and exiting from her mouth while she screams: 'METICCIAMIIII' (literally, 'make me mongrel'). The word is a neologism, as the noun 'meticcio' has no verbal equivalent in Italian. It is used for animals, especially for dog crossbreeds. It, therefore, composes the *classeme* 'animality.' As detailed in Section 4.4, Ghisberto is dehumanizing left-wing women, blaming them for supporting migration in order to have interracial intercourse. Moreover, we do not see the man's face, but only his genitals and hands holding the woman. He is the embodiment of Ghisberto's stereotypical conception of the black men as a sexual predator, coming to Italy to steal and submit Italian women – a fact that, in his view, only leftists would tolerate, being stigmatized as degenerate.

Dehumanizing political opponents and reiterating the *semes* 'sex' and 'wealth' are common ingredients of Ghisberto's satire. Certain other figurative elements also contribute to the nativity scene: a fire extinguisher replaces the Christmas star with the sign 'ACAB,' the well-known acronym for the political slogan 'All Coppers Are Bastards' associated with anti-racism protests; the hut is decorated with a Communist flag (with the hammer replaced by a fork), a rainbow flag, and two girls heads decapitated and hung upside-down. Therefore, 'violence' is another *classeme* associated with the cartoon figures, which, moreover, recurs in the representation of Muslims, appearing in the background. As in the March cartoon, three Muslim men, smiling sardonically, are pushing a kind of a Trojan horse, in the shape of a veiled woman holding the peace flag and the sign 'multiculturalismo' ('multiculturalism'). Multiculturalism, then, is nothing but a trap set to conquer Europe. Such a reading is consistent with the isotopy of deception highlighted previously. Furthermore, to emphasize the violent nature of the men, a dismembered woman and a body covered with the flag of Europe lie on the ground. A stream of blood flows out of the corpse's chest, as he/she pronounces the words: "Love Eurabia."

Going back to the representation of refugees, on the left bottom side of the image, a sea-rescue ship is docking on land, with a crew member wearing a Santa hat with the sign "SOROS." Several figures reinforce the isotopies of wealth (the euros falling from his pockets and the anchor's golden chain) and sex (an ejaculating penis replaces the man's nose). The crew member is holding a black baby, whose mother lies naked on the floor and bled out after the delivery. Even in this case, we cannot see the woman's face. She is just a body. The baby cries: "WIIIFIII," fueling the stereotypical representation of refugees arriving in Italy with expensive smartphones to use WI-FI connections. The scene is exceptionally graphic and willingly provocative. It also presents a box with

the writing PD (Democratic Party), which is associated with the tragic death of anonymous migrants at sea.

Representations of sea-rescue vessels full of refugees are frequently included in Ghisberto's cartoons, even as marginal elements to the main events occurring in the vignettes (e.g., a small ship on the top of the page in the people's parallel universe in the March cartoon and on the left corner on the bottom in the August cartoon). In July's cartoon, Ghisberto represents migration as a war between Italy (whose representatives are barricaded inside a fortress on the beach) and NGOs attacking from the sea. Sea-rescue ships become figures reiterating the classemes 'war' and 'violence' as they use cannons and slings charged with red ticks and refugees with pointy helmets to attack Italy. The classeme 'addiction' also recurs as a red tick on a raft is ready to attack with a giant joint, screaming: 'Bambaaa.' In Ghisberto's cartoons, this seme pertains to both migrants (e.g., the March cartoon), represented as drug dealers, and left-wing voters, represented as irrational and drug-addled (e.g., March, June, August, and December cartoons).

The ships attacking Italy fly Democratic Party, German, Dutch, French, EU, and peace flags. Two vessels are led by the German Sea-Watch 3 captain Carola Rackete<sup>8</sup> and what seems to be her caricatured male version. The latter's hand is replaced by a golden hook, which connotes him as a pirate, i.e., an outlaw (on right-wing populism's criminalization of sea-rescue NGOs, see also Berti 2020).

In Ghisberto's cartoons, immigration and the EU are intimately connected, as exemplified in the September cartoon titled 'Migranti: il piano UE' ('Migrants: the EU plan'). It is one of the few cartoons that do not include refugees, though it represents Ghisberto's perspective on the impact that European immigration policies have on Italy. A wall separates Italy from the neighboring countries (France, Switzerland, and Austria), represented through their armies and flags. A circular line connecting the troops on an eidetic level reinforces a sense of oppression and emphasizes Italy's siege state.

In this respect, the scene is characterized by the reiteration of the classemes 'war' and 'violence' through the figures of angry-looking soldiers, rifles, cannons, as well as by the submissive posture of Paolo Gentiloni (former Italian Prime Minister and European Commissioner for Economy in 2020). Gentiloni is depicted as poor, hunchbacked, with an eye-patch, beaten by a mouse, holding the Italian flag in his right hand and a matchstick in the left. Italy is characterized, then, by the classemes 'poverty', 'submission,' and 'weakness.' The classemes 'degeneration' (reinforced by the figures of rubbish bins, excrements, empty bottles, broken statues, cockroaches, ruins, needles, a crinkly Italian flag on the ground) and 'death' (bones and a skull) are also present. Finally, a parade of red ticks with a rainbow flag is championing French President Em-

<sup>8</sup> <https://bit.ly/2MZwOMi>

manuel Macron. In open contrast with the visual level, Gentiloni's words seem to praise the EU-agreement, even though the consequences are misery and a nation locked in by an insurmountable wall, symbolizing once again separation and exclusion. Ghisberto's interpretation of the politics of exclusion is clear: the inclusion of refugees means condemning Italy to destruction and poverty, a sacrifice paid by the people while the Italian elites gladly surrender to the EU-institutions, the nation's enemies.

### 4.3. Politics of nationalism

As is common among European right-wing populists, Ghisberto's nationalism incorporates a vital element of euroscepticism. The January cartoon represents the EU as a funfair managed by a dehumanized European elite, portrayed as pigs wearing blue tuxedos. One of them stands at the fair gate, beneath a neon sign with 'EUROPA' written in rainbow colors. The pig at the entrance tries to allure ordinary people to join the fair. To describe Europe, he uses the word 'merdaviglioso,' where he adds the letter 'd' to the positive adjective 'meraviglioso' ('marvelous'), to create a wordplay with 'merda' ('shit'). Such a provocative association between excrements and the EU also anticipates that what stands behind the circus wall is not as marvelous as it may seem.

Beyond the funfair walls, European citizens scream in pain as they undergo several tortures. The wall is the symbol of EU-deception as it prevents people from seeing the pigs' violence and sadism, helped by a group of red ticks. Each torture device is associated with a concept linked to EU-policies: a whip representing sanctions, a cage representing the 3% deficit/GDP limit (a reference to the so-called 'fiscal pact'), and other tortures symbolizing austerity, infractions, restrictions, and the spread (a financial concept that refers to the difference in interest rates between public bonds of different countries). The torture device symbolizing the spread is a spinning machine, driven by a pig representing the financial markets ('finanza'), with a skull positioned on its top, that wears a Rastafarian hat with Germany's colors. The skull, symbolizing German power's catastrophic impact on Europe, also recalls the embattled German captain of NGO vessel Sea-Watch 3 Carola Rackete, reinforcing the association between NGOs and EU elites and suggesting that the latter deliberately 'torture' Italian citizens with their economic measures and pro-migration policies. Even in this case, the skull is linked to the *classeme* 'death', which is added to that of 'violence' (already highlighted in the July and September cartoons), conveyed by the torture devices, the blood and body parts, and, verbally by the people's screams.

The same *classemes* recur in the May cartoon, which shows a gate recalling Auschwitz concentration camp entrance. The inscription 'Euroschwitz' establishes a direct equivalence between the EU and the Nazi regime. Holding each other's hand, a twirl of stars on a blue background (recalling the EU flag) creates a circle surrounding and

isolating a pile of children's dead bodies in striped pajamas, saliently positioned at the center of the page. Two captions are prominently placed at the top and bottom parts of the cartoon. The one at the top reports the news of the supposed slaughter of children caused by EU-imposed austerity in Greece, which – according to the cartoon – was censored to avoid fuelling anti-European sentiment. The term 'strage' ('slaughter') shares the classemes 'death' and 'violence.' On the other hand, 'notizia censurata' ('censored news') reiterates the classeme 'deception,' typical of the powerful elites, namely the media and the EU, which manipulate information to conceal their crimes and avoid people's rebellion. On the left corner, a drunk Jean-Claude Juncker (former President of the European Commission) and German Chancellor Angela Merkel are making a toast to resolving the Greek crisis. Their dialogue suggests that 'Operation Greece' was successful but that the 'patient' had died, i.e., Greece's austerity measures aimed to save the European elites and perhaps the financial institutions at the Greek's expense. The classeme 'death' is reiterated in the dead children's figures and the grave of the 'dead' news (an implicit attack on journalists).

Another symbolic reference to the deceitful nature of the EU can be found in the December cartoon. The Italian pro-European politician Emma Bonino appears here as the Biblical serpent holding the forbidden fruit: a blue-colored apple bearing the EU flag motif. The connotation is that Bonino is a deceiving politician, tempting people with the EU's false promises and causing their fall. Humankind is represented by a bleeding body, which, while lying on the ground and covered with the EU flag, exclaims victoriously: "Love Eurabia."

#### 4.4. Politics of patriarchy

Ghisberto's overtly racist cartoons also reflect a conservative, reactionary stance, with their vivid misogynist, sexist, and patriarchal representations of womanhood. The August cartoon provides a fitting example: a wall, reiterating the classeme 'division,' separates Communist (on the left) and Fascist (on the right) beach resorts. The former is chaotic, dirty, and shabby. Figures like garbage, excrements, urine, used condoms, needles, empty bottles, rats, vomit, broken beach umbrellas and beds, shower stalls with the sign 'fuori uso' ('out of order'), and an open-air toilette reiterate the classemes 'chaos,' 'dirt,' and 'degeneration.' In contrast, the fascist resort is characterized by 'order' and 'cleanness.' There is no rubbish, the sunbeds are well-kept, orderly aligned, and of the same gray color. The watchful lifeguards are Benito Mussolini look-alikes. A sign outside the shower stalls reads 'x cagacazzi' ('for ball-busters'), while another shows a screaming red tick, implying that the showers are gas chambers to kill political opponents.

Ghisberto's position regarding women's role is evident by looking at the resort clients' different representations. Fascist women are stereotypical images either of

beautiful, shapely girls sunbathing or of tidy ladies. In this respect, womanhood is connected to either 'attractiveness' or 'tidiness.' In contrast, women on the left side are represented as overweight or with sagging breasts, defecating on the sea, or performing fellatio to a migrant. A woman with sagging breasts looks out of a hut window that bears the sign 'Vendesi bambini' ('Babies for sale'). Therefore, womanhood is either connected with the *classeme* 'sex' or with that of 'disgust.'

The portrayal of women engaging in sexual intercourse appears in the March and June cartoons, and the graphic representation of a woman being penetrated from end to end in the December cartoon. In the latter, two left-wing women appear decorating a phallic Christmas tree with testicles. Their portrayal includes nose and ear piercings, dyed hair, unshaven legs and beard, naked and sagging breasts, drooling open mouths resembling the jaws of a ravenous animal, and eyes wide open – elements which reiterate the *classeme* 'animality'. From Ghisberto's reactionary viewpoint, just as left-wingers' minds are in a haze of drugs, their sexuality is seen as feral. Such a misogynist and dysfunctional conception of sexuality ultimately becomes a defining feature of specific social categories (left-wing women and black people).

In several small drawings decorating the calendar, Ghisberto insists on the association between women, sex, and immigration: for instance, in the July cartoon, he adds a sex doll exclaiming: 'Porti aperti come i nostri culi' ('Open ports just like our asses'); in the September cartoon, a full-figured woman offers herself to (sexually) satisfy all migrants in Italy ('soddisfare tutti i migranti in Italia'), relating their supposedly violent behavior to sexual frustration.

In Ghisberto's overtly sexist rhetoric, left-wing women are always dehumanized, objectified, and blamed for supposedly having interracial intercourse. The underlying political implication is that their pro-migrant stance is motivated by sexual rather than moral and humanitarian reasons.

#### 4.5. Politics of charisma

Ghisberto's cartoons do not endorse a specific populist leader to fight the elites and defend the people's rights. In this regard, they differ markedly from the frequent focus of populist political communication on charismatic leaders (Mudde & Kaltwasser 2017; Wodak 2015). A partial exception can be detected in the July cartoon, where the Italian shores' only defender from the NGOs is the Brothers of Italy's (a nationalist party) leader Giorgia Meloni. She appears skewering red ticks with a sword. Simultaneously, government functionaries, the judiciary, and the Church take refuge in the fortress or help the invaders. For example, a judge with a testicle-hat and tentacles under the gown opens the door to the ticks, encouraged by the Pope. Inside the fortress, League's leader Matteo Salvini defends himself from a tick who accuses him of being a fascist and calls

for Elisabetta Trenta (Minister of Defense during the Five Star Movement and League's joint government in 2018-19). However, the sea captain beside him does not know who she is, and M5S's leader Luigi di Maio seems equally confused, implying that Italy's defense is drifting. While right-wing populist leaders are represented in a relatively positive light in this cartoon, they certainly do not occupy a charismatic position as 'champions of the people.'

The absence of a leader focus in Ghisberto's populist rhetoric may be due to the cartoons' nature. Refractory to any form of power and authority, satire is more suitable for questioning leaders than for 'creating' or endorsing them. Therefore, Ghisberto's cartoons cannot be considered a form of propaganda in favor of a specific populist politician but rather an endorsement of populist ideology in general.

## 5. Discussion and Conclusions

In the previous section, we analyzed Ghisberto's right-wing populist satire and identified its characteristic isotopies. We found that this particular form of communication makes extensive use of symbolic elements, such as walls, to represent the elites/people dichotomy (the *classemes* 'division' and 'exclusion' are especially diffuse in the sample, and the images' plastic components regularly reinforce divisions and contrasts). We also demonstrated that right-wing populist satire effectively reproduces the main features of right-wing populism (as identified by the ideational approach). In the multimodal space of a cartoon, Ghisberto mixes short verbal elements with detailed and impactful images. In so doing, he manages not only to summarize the core of populist rhetoric, namely, the Manichean division between the good people and the evil elites, but also to merge it with a range of far-right ideological elements like racism (politics of exclusion), euroscepticism (politics of nationalism), and sexism (politics of patriarchy).

Another substantial difference between populist political communication and populist satire is the latter's capacity to bend and, sometimes, even eliminate the boundaries of what can be said and represented. Ghisberto's cartoons often include explicit insults and offensive representations of individuals. These can be directed at the elites (e.g., animalized journalists and EU-bureaucrats, judges with testicle-shaped heads) and ordinary people and minorities (e.g., left-wingers represented as ticks or drug addicts, sexually-objectified women). However, satire is generally taken to act on behalf of ordinary people and minority groups, not against them. Evidently, the aggressive style of right-wing populist communication modifies the targets of political cartoons.

The presence of the *claseme* 'animality' indicates that the dehumanization of individuals is a device that Ghisberto systematically uses against the 'enemies': they are frequently turned into animals like crocodiles, pigs, ticks, snakes. In some cases, the enemies are caricatured as sex-related body parts, e.g., the judiciary members have testicle-shaped heads, the sea-rescue vessel has a penis-shaped nose. Discrimination is also explicit and widely used: political opponents (left-wingers) are either dehumanized or depicted as disgraceful and perverted (as indicated by the *semes* 'disgust', 'addiction', 'degeneration'); migrants are seen as scroungers; women are often naked, caught in the act of having sex in public (the *seme* 'sex' is widely present, with a negative connotation), or objectified, as in the July image of a pro-migrant left-winger represented as a sex doll. The black woman who dies during childbirth, in the December cartoon, is even denied an identity.

Ghisberto's cartoons also incorporate the *semes* 'violence' and 'death': physical and sexual violence, murder, and torture are attributed to the various enemies of the people, such as Muslims in the December cartoon with the Nativity scene; sea-rescue NGOs in the July cartoon, the European Union in the January cartoon. The May cartoon is pervaded by a general atmosphere of violence and death, implying that the EU resembles the Nazis and their death camps. Violence, however, is not only used negatively. By winking at the use of gas chambers to eliminate political opponents (symbolized as a red tick), the August cartoon explicitly celebrates fascist extermination policies.

While populist politicians can only push their communication so far without serious consequences, Ghisberto's satire – though not uncontested – benefits from satire's high degree of freedom, treading at the limits of tolerance. At the time we are writing (August 2020), his Facebook page is open and has over 80,000 followers, suggesting relatively high popularity. At the same time, Ghisberto sells some of his original cartoons through his website and Amazon. He is proving particularly skillful in exploiting the freedom of expression granted to satire to push right-wing populism as far as possible. In his cartoons, polarization, the distinctive mark of populist style, reaches an extreme degree of intensity. In his markedly divided world, no nuances or ambiguity are admitted: all left-wingers are ticks, all migrants are scroungers, all European leaders, technocrats, and bureaucrats are evil 'moneybags' (the *seme* 'wealth' has a negative connotation and is often associated with 'animality' and 'violence').

Satirical cartoons' potential to establish binary oppositions and represent them with uncompromised vividness and pungency is much greater than mainstream political communication. The fact that satire is allowed to stretch the boundaries of what can be said without serious consequences did not go unnoticed among political actors. In Italy, right-wing populist politician Matteo Salvini started using irony and humor to attack his opponents by generating social media content that often resembles satirical vi-

gnettes.<sup>9</sup> Although not (yet) pushing the boundaries of political communication as far as Ghisberto's cartoons do, the use of satire by Salvini other populist politicians, such as Giorgia Meloni, enables them to voice their polarizing and extremist messages and ridicule their opponents.

If populist political communication is moving (as it seems) towards the broader use of satire-like content, it is all the more important to understand the role satire plays in populism – especially right-wing populism. Employing satire in political communication, supported by social media's systematic use, may contribute to a radical change of the political communication environment. Our study demonstrated that satirical cartoons can express the core values of right-wing populism by exploiting multimodal communication features with a forcefulness and a license not customarily permitted in politics. To give depth to our analysis, we focused on a single case-study from Italy, a country where right-wing populism is currently quite strong. However, further research should widen the scope of analysis to other cases and, perhaps, investigate the potential of satire to normalize extreme positions in right-wing populist communication. In this respect, the study of political satire and its role in populism represents a field of inquiry with considerable potential, integrating political science, communication studies, linguistics, and semiotics.

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<sup>9</sup> An example can found at the following link: <https://bit.ly/3amgIow> (Accessed on 30 August 2020).

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# Individuals and Crowds.

## Presidential Leadership and Political Scenes of Representation in Media and Networks in Argentina (2008-2019)

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BY: Mariano Fernández and Gasón Cingolani

### ABSTRACT

This article offers a comparative analysis of the construction of political scenes of representation by two former Argentine presidents, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2008-2015) and Mauricio Macri (2015-2019), based on televised speeches and social media postings. As there is no political representation without staging, and any staging needs a material surface for its deployment, the comparative reconstruction of scenes of representation is required for understanding the impact of socio-technological transformations in the political field. Our analysis assumes that the political dramaturgy of representation entails: (a) that the leader must show a way of connecting with his constituents; (b) therefore, the leader must configure a preferred political subject (i.e., a predominant form of figurative citizenry); and (c) that this configuration constitutes a possible portion of the entire population that can be represented. According to our analysis, each leader is associated with a different type of representation scene. While one leader configures her scenes with large-scale crowds and via national television broadcasts, the other configures his encounters with individuals via social media. This engenders two opposing conceptions of citizenry, connectable to two different classes of Interpretants: a political-ideological Interpretant and an unpolitical and para-ideological one.

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## 1. Introduction

This article shall present a comparative semiotic analysis of two media strategies of political representation in Argentina. In employing a semiotic approach, we focus not on the institutional arrangements that ensure the functioning of the representative political system, but on the scenes of representation arranged by the last two presidents, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner (2008-2015, from now on, CFK) and Mauricio Macri (2015-2019, from now on, MM), instead. Paraphrasing Schmitt (2008), our study object is political representation considered as a ‘symbolic figuration’ and not as a ‘mandate.’ Unlike Schmitt, however, we do not think of representation as the figuration of a Being. In democratic systems, executive leaders must image the political bond that unites them with the represented. What needs to be represented is a type of relationship and not a singular entity. Thus, our analysis focuses on three different figurations: of the representative, of the represented, and of the type of bond forged between these two in the representation scenes.

What we call ‘scenes of representation’ is the analytical modeling of elements that belong to the contemporary media landscape, either as communication items or as products of political marketing: televised government events, social media postings, campaign ads, civic ceremonies. Since discursive figurations are objects inserted in the media communication flows, their analysis must focus on the political discourse mediatization conditions. Given these conditions, a semiotic of the political must also be a semiotic of politics’ mediatization (Verón 1995).

With mediatization, we mean any message production or reception process involving media devices that decontextualize the spatial, temporal, and inter-subjective dimensions of established or novel cultural processes (Verón 2014; Cingolani 2014). Being both historical and analytical, this definition allows us to consider each historical and cultural context’s specifics. Each period and culture is distinct, but different mediatization processes have operated since writing systems’ appearance (Goody 1977). By *mediatization of politics*, then, we consider ways of producing politics on a scale that has been made possible by using the media. Mediatization’s definition follows Veron’s contributions (2013, 2014) but is also compatible with other contemporary conceptualizations, as well; like that of Krotz (2014), Couldry and Hepp (2013), Krotz and Hepp (2013), and Hepp (2020).<sup>1</sup>

Although based on a national case-study, the analysis proposed here goes beyond mere regionalism and allows us to tie together a series of problems affecting political discourse and political communication on a global scale. Firstly, the two presidential

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<sup>1</sup> Thus defined, the concept of mediatization does not refer to a variation in the gradient of ‘mediations’ but to the political discourses’ production conditions. We use the term ‘mediation’ to refer to institutional arrangements, regardless of whether they are mediatized.

terms (2008-2019) correspond to the emergence and consolidation of Internet-based digital platforms (mainly Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram) as preferred scenes for political communication. In Argentina, this shift is replicated in the communication strategies of each president. As the leader of a political space that was part of Latin America's 'left turn' (Levitsky and Roberts 2011), CFK was a predominantly television figure. In contrast, MM, as the political reference of the regional right that emerged as a reaction to the so-called 'Latin American populism' (Lupu 2016), chose social media as his primary public communication tool. Secondly, this correspondence, easily attributable to an epochal change in politics mediatization, took the form of an ideological dispute (Waisbord 2013; Kitzberger 2016), often framed in terms of populist versus democratic communication (Gallo 2019). Comparative analysis is a type of research that helps us understand how an ideological difference manifests simultaneously at the political discourse level and media communication. Thirdly, Argentina is not alien to the processes of "desacralization and relativization of the electoral function" that Rosanvallon (2008: 25) identifies as characteristic of contemporary democratic systems. One of these processes' effects is the difficulty of embodying figures of the social generality. Since Argentina has a presidential system, national elections shape political life, and consequently, the presidential figure is the significant center of the public sphere. The study of presidential representation scenes is, as a result, the privileged way to understand the dominant political imaginaries and conceptions of the citizenry.

In the following section, we explain the semiotic status of political representation as staging, not only as a theoretical principle but also as a constitutive empirical dimension of contemporary politics. Next, we proceed to outline the theoretical-methodological approach that informs the analysis presented in the subsequent sections. We conclude with a synthesis of our findings and a reflection on the debates we intend to contribute.

## 2. Political Representation as a Semiotic Phenomenon

Besides philosophical and sociological approaches, political representation is also perceived as a semiotic phenomenon. In the first place, it is so in an ontological sense, as Schmitt (2008: 243) stated: "Representation is not a normative event, a process, and a procedure. It is, rather, something existential. To represent means to make an invisible being visible and present through a publicly present one." This is also the case from the perspective of political theory, as Lefort rightly stated: "In a democracy, the concept of representation must also retain some of the meaning given to it by common language." That is, representation should not be understood only as a system in which representatives exercise political authority instead of citizens, but in the sense that "it

guarantees visibility to society.” In effect, to represent implicates “the creation of a political scene” (Lefort 2012: 21). Finally, the semiotic character of representation is also evident in its discursive dimension. As Saward suggests, there is “an indispensable aesthetic moment in political representation because the represented is never just given, unambiguous, transparent” (2006: 310). A representative has to be creative, has to “shape, and in one sense create that which is to be represented” (2006: 310).

This condition of *staging* political representation has also been identified with the category of ‘political spectacle’ (Edelman 1988) or with the notion of ‘video-politics,’ which implies a “radical transformation in our way of being politicians” (Sartori 1998). Both these views propose that contemporary news media and especially television had a drastic impact on the relations between rulers and citizens, effectively altering the *arché* of politics. With regards to its essential functions, however, we can say that political representation adapts to the changing communication media (Debray 1995: 66). The electronic media in the second half of the 20th century and the Internet at the turn of the millennium have transformed how State and government produce political spectacles rather than the fundamental semiotic ontology of political representation (Veron 1989a: 82). The State - and, by logical implication, the body of rulers as well - has always been spectacular (Debray 1995: 60; Balandier 1994: 25). On a macro-scale, “there is no State without spectacle”; instead, “it is the spectacle that makes the State” (Debray 1995: 62). And on a micro-scale (based on the everyday experience of citizens in their relationship with the political system), television produced “a re-appropriation of the most archaic level of meaning.” Thus, the political began to signify the immediate territory, to play out in the micro-exchange, forcing the “decoding of the signifying body” (Verón 1989a: 82). Social media have further intensified this phenomenon. The ecology of platforms (van Dijk 2013; Fernández 2018) has brought about vital innovations in political mediatization and media discourse circulation (Van Aelst et al. 2017; Bennett and Pfetsch 2018). However, from the interface’s point of view (the point where production and reception get interconnected), social media, just like mass media, are immense showcases for political scenes of representation.

Either way, nobody could deny that the scenes in which political leaders display their representative status have become part of our daily media consumption and a vital segment of political communication strategies. This plethoric new political imaginary demands to rethink the future of our societies, and in particular what Manin, a quarter of a century ago, described as ‘audience democracy.’ For Manin, this notion identified the consolidation of a new form of representative democracy, a metamorphosis of the so-called ‘party democracy’ (Manin 1995: 185-186). The figure of the ‘audience’ was not a pejorative expression of the supposedly passive behavior of the electorate but a metaphor used to describe the new operating conditions of political representation. These conditions include the following two crucial factors: First, a shift

in “the personal nature of the representative relationship,” particularly evident in countries where the head of the executive branch is directly elected and national elections shape political life. Secondly, Manin noted that “voting behavior varies according to the terms of the electoral choice: Voters seem to respond (to each election’s particular terms), rather than just express (their social or cultural identities). [...] Today, the reactive dimension of voting predominates” (Manin 1995: 192).

Beyond the macro-social factors of these transformations, Manin offered two complementary principles of analysis that are still applicable. Firstly, “the channels of political communication affect the nature of the representative relationship” (Manin 1995: 193). Secondly, as exogenous demand does not exist in politics, the analogy between electoral choice and the market-place is problematic. Thus, argues Manin, the metaphor of stage and audience is a more satisfactory, even if imperfect, to represent this reality (1995: 193).

Although many things have changed in the last quarter of a century, Manin’s analysis remains valid. On the one hand, we are undergoing a structural change in politics’ mediatization conditions, with the center of gravity shifting from television to digital platforms. On the other hand, despite disrupting the political system’s institutional mediations, these changes reaffirm both the metaphorical and empirical significance of the ‘stage’ figure as a central component of democratic representation. For this reason, we believe that the present article converges towards Manin’s analysis from the 1990s. In the end, we propose the study of those scenarios in which the political representation is configured, not as ‘metaphors’ but rather as material objects in which governors unfold, in front of the citizenry, their representative status in the public space.

### 3. Methodology

Our analysis will mostly focus on the audiovisual language of the representation scenes rather than their linguistic dimension. The representative-represented bond’s figuration articulates the audiovisual with the linguistic (we will refer to speech fragments when necessary). Other essential political discourse operations (like the triple destination), based on language, will not be discussed here.

Our research corpus comprises two sets with different characteristics. On the one hand, we studied a series of 30 televised events held by CFK between 2008 and 2015. These events’ character is diverse, including national celebrations, official announcements, collective mobilizations in support of the Government, and party conferences. In all cases, televising was mostly conducted through the National Radio and the TV Broadcasting Network —called Cadena Nacional. In Argentina, it is a presidential prerogative that enables the interruption of the leading radio and television network broad-

casting to put live government speeches on the air. This practice was highly effective for reaching the general population in the era of few media; currently, the media offer is so abundant that the effect of this interruption is not as pragmatic as it is political. To simplify our exposition, we have selected photos of these acts to illustrate the distinctive features of CFK's performance scenes.

On the other hand, we have studied 60 posts on Instagram and Twitter made by MM between 2015 and 2019. The selection was made manually, through screenshots. Although most of these posts consist of a photograph accompanied by a short text, the corpus also included some videos taken from the official YouTube channel managed by the Presidential Residence (Casa Rosada).

At first glance, the composition of both sets of data appears to hinder their comparison. However, the unity of semiotic analysis cannot come from the properties of the analyzed texts themselves, since these always manifest a multiplicity of restriction systems (Verón 2004 [1975]: 72). The comparison can only stand based on criteria outside discourse, set in two levels: a) in relation to text selection criteria; b) in relation to the reading purpose (Verón 2004 [1975]: 72).

Regarding the first point, it is noteworthy that both presidents used various forms of political communication. Though reluctant to interact with the media and the journalists, CFK gave some interviews and used her Twitter and Facebook accounts. For his part, despite having focused his political communication mainly on social media (especially Facebook and Instagram), MM also held televised events and gave interviews and press conferences. However, our corpus' composition reflects their main media preferences, a criterion based on practical knowledge of the matter and analyses carried out by other scholars (Annunziata et al. 2018; Cingolani 2012; Gindin 2019; Montero 2018; Slimovich 2017).

The heterogeneity of the two sets of the corpus is one of our analysis objects. We wish to compare two predominantly audiovisual representation scenes. Mass media exposure of presidential discourse (as in CFK's case), involving a mostly photographic strategy that induces a lateral circulation; and social media-based everyday communicative spaces that operate independently from media agendas (as in MM's case).

Concerning the second point (the reading purpose), we have built our work upon a definition of the notion of the *scene of representation* that facilitates the operational reduction of the multiplicity of its constituent elements (Rivière 1989: 157). The notion of the scene is neither an allegory nor a metaphor but a material configuration whose semiotic composition is necessarily heterogeneous and irreducible to linguistic materiality. In this sense, a political representation scene comprises of:

- i. a semiotic spatial-temporal configuration, composed of an assembly of topographies, bodies, and objects in which a strategy of making sense is deployed, including its mediatization;

- ii. in this scene, an individual – an expression, itself, of a force or a set of social and political forces – is constructed as a representative,
- iii. from the staging of a bond with other individuals or groups, either present or evoked, with whom he or she maintains a leadership relationship;
- iv. therefore, he or she must configure a preferred political subject (i.e., a predominant form of figurative citizenry); and
- v. that configuration constitutes a possible portion of the whole representable population;
- vi. consequently, the recurrence or stabilization of that configuration results in an Interpretant as a conception of the citizenry.

Three aspects of this definition require further clarification. Firstly, to classify and describe the variations of representation scenes, we have used the concept of ‘regime of visibility’ proposed by Landowski (1985). This concept allows us to analyze the actants’ modalization based on the intersection of individual/collective and public/private conceptual pairs. The latter, according to Landowski, follows “a common principle, relative to the admission or exclusion of a witness instance (‘them’),” modifying the nature in the actants’ figuration. At the level of private individuality, ‘I’ is ‘I’ [*je*] in relation to a ‘you’ [*vous*]. But gathered in the same space, ‘we’ [*nous*] is defined in relation to ‘they,’ which is not necessarily an adversary, an identity border. Thus, a ‘we’ can be outlined as a ‘public collective’ (for example, in the celebration of a civic ceremony) and a ‘we’ configuring a ‘private collective’ (for example, party meetings broadcast on television).

Secondly, any staging of a representation of collectives requires a figuration of these represented collectives.<sup>2</sup> As an operation of meaning, Traversa defines figuration (1997: 251) as “the modes of semiotization of an identifiable entity,” and then as “a result: a construction and, as such, the effect of intersecting operations: more precisely, chains of operations, which are situated at different levels of text organization.” The analysis of figuration enables us to identify the representational operation of the collective figure staged and understand an essential part of the staging strategy.

The third aspect derives precisely from the place that the ‘witness instance’ occupies in defining the scenes of representation when these are mediatized (whether they are televised or posted on social media). There are two juxtaposed issues here. On

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<sup>2</sup> The notion of figuration does not strictly refer to the theatrical metaphor of staging but the condition of the semiotic construction of a representation. Thus conceived, figuration is a way of construction resulting from a set of operations. Theoretical perspectives as disparate as those of Parret (1993), Latour (2005: 53-62), and Hepp (2020) have applied this notion, taken from Greimasian semiotics, to the sociology of networks or media theory. Despite their differences, all focus on its non-representational, constructivist character. We adopt Traversa’s definition because it systematizes a methodology of rhetorical and operational analysis for this construction from a semiotic perspective.

the one hand, every scene of representation is, by definition, public (Schmitt 2008: 242). Therefore, it addresses an audience, that is, a heterogeneous collective. Clearly, it does not address the whole population indiscriminately. On the contrary, it “proposes a modeling of social identities” (Veron 1989b: 139). A reception study could reveal the socio-demographic or sociological composition of this collective. But for semiotic analysis, these scenes are defined by their condition of signs; that is to say, they are there for an Interpretant (Peirce 1998). Taken as a “collectivization operator” (Genard 2017: 3), the Interpretant’s notion offers an appropriate analytical solution to reconstruct which strategy the representation scenes are configuring in their recurrence and regularity.

In pluralistic democracies, every political discourse, finally, by engaging in a field of struggle and competition, is inserted in a “triple destination device” (Veron 1987, García Negroni 1988). It addresses, at the same time, supporters, opponents, and the undecided or independent. No political discourse produces a single effect. Therefore, our notion of Interpretant refers to a production strategy that entails a specific way of interpreting this triple destination. Of course, this does not mean that reception can be pre-determined or that there is only one way of interpreting a discourse. Its ‘correct’ interpretation implies political adherence. An Interpreter comprises the set of systematizable regularities and variations of a discursive strategy sustained over time.

## 4. Scenes of Presidential Political Representation: Figures of Leadership and Figuration of Citizenry

### 4.1. CFK: From the Ceremonial Mobilization to the Partisan Ceremony. The Ritual Meeting with the Crowd

CFK served as president for two consecutive terms (2007-2011 and 2011-2015). Upon winning her first election, she already was a political figure of public importance and had a long career as a parliamentarian, but she was not strictly speaking a *leader*. The role of a reference authority of a political force was occupied, at the time, by her husband and former president, Néstor Kirchner. By contrast, when her second term ended, CFK was (and still is) the most important political figure in recent history in Argentina.

Throughout her eight years of government, CFK produced four major performance scenes, summarized below (Table 1). We should consider each modality as a sort of general type, which includes potential variations. As explained in the methodological section, to simplify the operational description, we have used the concept of ‘visibility regimes.’ Each scene of representation is inserted into a different regime of visibility, and each regime expresses a variation in the figuration of the representative relationship.



To draw up this classification, we shall follow the analysis proposed by Dayan and Katz in their classic study on media events (1992). Events staged expressly for an audience, which, as Landowski notes, necessarily transforms their nature as semiotic objects. Dayan and Katz (based on Lang and Lang) developed a typology that distinguishes events according to their function as ‘unifiers’ or ‘polemics’ (1992: 42-43 and 127-128). What emerges is a combined classification producing four types of events,<sup>3</sup> which we have adapted to our study object. We have already noted that CFK’s staged scenes were televised events. This implies that there is a common denominator beyond the internal variations between each scene type. Each of them offers the image of an encounter of a representative with their constituents and appears to the media audience, absent as a direct interlocutor but present as a bystander.

#### a. Esoteric Monologue

This regime of visibility is characteristic of events such as the inauguration of public works, presentation of bills, launching of state programs. The figure of the *national leader* is staged here in a way that places it above sectoral interests. In the first place, this status is marked by a scenography privileging the visibility of patriotic symbols (flags, portraits of national heroes). It is further amplified by the presence of popularly elected political representatives (governors, mayors, legislators) and federal cabinet ministers standing next to or behind CFK but always sharing the stage with her. In front of her, on the other hand, the audience is composed of sectoral representatives (union leaders,

<sup>3</sup> Ceremony (unifying/audience as a witness); Spectacle (unifying/audience is required); Esoteric Debate (controversy/audience as a witness); Adversary Proceeding (controversy/audience is needed) (Dayan and Katz 1992: 243n).

leaders of social organizations, human rights organizations, businessmen, bankers, sometimes prominent cultural figures). From the logic of the topographical distribution of places (further forward, further back) and from how CFK herself directs her gaze (she never looks at the camera), it can be said that a sort of closed circuit is formed. This produces two effects. Firstly, the president does not address the television audience directly. Thus, as a generic target, the citizenry is relegated to the witness's role in a dialogue that does not include them directly. Secondly, the composition of the audience does not follow an ecumenical criterion. Those who are present are sympathizers of the Government; their presence indicates endorsement. Since the camera usually captures the viewers' faces using individual shots, it is not difficult for a viewer with an average lateral knowledge (Barthes 1980) of national political life to notice this ideological composition.

#### b. Exoteric Ceremony

This scene of representation is characteristic of civic festivities. The ceremonial feature derives from their commemorative function (e.g., the independence revolution). Civic festivities are what Abélès (1989) calls 'rites of consensus,' events that mark the community's symbolic continuity. As such, they are events organized by the State. The President is present in his/her capacity as head of the executive, as a supra-partisan figure. On the other hand, the exoteric feature stems from the fact that these are scenes that unfold in some urban space, open to public participation. The predominance of national



flags shows that those present identify themselves as citizens of the national community and not as political rights subjects. This condition of individuals melted into a collective festivity gathered in the celebration of shared history is also reinforced by the CFK herself when giving speeches. For example, at the celebration of the independence revolution in Plaza de Mayo square on May 25, 2014, CFK told the crowd:

Do you Argentines realize that we gathered here today to celebrate May 25, the national day, and the nation's recovery for all Argentines? It seems silly, but it is not foolish; it is a reaffirmation of belonging and cultural identity.

### c. Charismatic Ceremonial Mobilization

This scene is a variation between the 'exoteric ceremonies' and the regime of visibility that we call 'partisan ceremony' (see next section). This type of scene became increasingly common in the last years of CFK's second presidency due to the establishment of her leadership. From the perspective of the visibility regime's composition, there is almost no variation from the ceremonies we have already described but in the representation bond's figuration. That is because, in charismatic ceremonial mobilizations, the meeting of the collective is explained not only as a celebration of the community (as in the rites of consensus) but also as a meeting of a militant crowd with its leader. Even if the general framework continues to be that of civic festivities, what occurs is an overlap between the Homeland celebration as an entity transcending any particularism and the self-celebration of a political collective's uniqueness. This tension expresses itself at a



semiotic level. Unlike what happens in exoteric ceremonies, the crowd is a marked collective, whose features facilitate the “operation of symbolic reading” (Schaeffer 1990: 34): carrying party flags and banners of various government-related social organizations, singing songs vindicating the figure of CFK. In short, a group gathered in a square to celebrate the Homeland and listen to its leader. In the mix between generic multitudes (‘the Argentines’) and militant collectives, the figure of CFK appears no longer as a national leader but as one of a plebiscitary type, reinforced and updated by this cross-party meeting.

#### d. Partisan Ceremony

This is the regime of visibility that defined the uniqueness of political representation in CFK and against which, as we shall see, MM’s political representation was built. The function of the partisan ceremonies is the revitalization of a political collective of identification, a clearly defined ‘we.’ In this sense, it is an instance of the exaltation of what Landowski calls “private collective” (1985: 4). Considered from the logic of political representation, however, in these scenes leadership is put into action and reproduced as the capacity to lead a partisan political force. No matter their scale, history, and electoral weight, all organized political groups need this type of self-celebrating event. What makes a difference in the case of CFK is that these scenes became televised political liturgies.

As liturgies (Rivière 1989), they were not an electoral tool, but dramatic incarnations of leadership and political identity. They were regular and ritualized practices with a stable morphology (Rivière 1989: 180). They could only be sustained over time because the existence of the collective participating as the protagonist transcends the moments of celebration. In the case of CFK, her political leadership cannot be understood outside the political movement that supported her, known as ‘Kirchnerism’ (Retamozo and Trujillo 2019). This denomination was, in principle, a way of designating the followers of former president Néstor Kirchner in the 2003-2007 period of government, but, with time, it became a political identity that not only described a center-left tendency within Peronism but also took from it its movementist character (Pérez and Natalucci 2014). Made up of non-partisan political actors (such as social organizations) and non-Peronist political parties, it was also characterized by a return to a deep-rooted tradition in Argentina: regular collective mobilization as a sign of support for its political leader.

Unlike ceremonial mobilizations, whose occurrence follows the civic calendar, partisan ceremonies have their temporal inscription, according to each political force’s founding dates and milestones. Also, in this case, they were usually used as a tactical resource, such as demonstrations of strength and support for CFK in times of political



crisis. In turn, while ceremonial mobilizations are framed by state rituals' institutional rules, partisan ceremonies are para-institutional acts, carried out in closed places, or at least restricted with respect to urban topography (usually football stadiums).

These scenes involve a dialogue, whose structure is not, however, symmetrical. On the one hand, there is a crowd mobilized to listen to CFK. This listening is not passive; the collective gathering plays an acting role (Greimas 1966; Barthes, 1966): the multitude jumps, sings, underlines some passages of the speech with ovations or applause. The audiovisual discourse (which is, as it should be noted, under the control of the governing party itself rather than private television stations), synchronized and attuned to the dramatic fluctuations of the presidential talk, reinforces the dynamics of the scene. On the other hand, the scene has a center, which is the body of CFK. Not surprisingly, the shot that best expresses this dynamic is the low-angle panoramic shot from the speaker's back.

Thus, the relationship between CFK and these multitudes is an identity structured by a mutually complementary relationship (Bateson 1972; Veron 1995), bonding the leader with her followers. It is precisely within this bond that the figure of each one of them is defined, a bond which has been reinforced by the CFK herself: "My dear fellows: as president, but mainly as a militant, I would like to thank all of you for this true celebration of joy, happiness, and nationality" (27/04/2012).

However, it is not enough to point out that the collective gathered there is a collective of identification (Veron 1987). Throughout her two terms, CFK pursued a close political alliance with the youngest segments of organized militancy. This alliance be-

came especially evident in her second government's composition, provoking an internal dispute with other Peronist party's sectors (Rocca Rivarola 2017). The president often emphasized this alliance in her speeches: "I feel that you are the true guardians of this legacy, and you are not going to allow a step back in all that we have achieved" (27/04/2013).

Some of these meetings were identified with a specific name, 'The Militant Courtyards.' That is how the meetings held between CFK and the Kirchnerist youth were called. These events usually took place after televised public events (often framed within the visibility regime understood as an esoteric monologue). Once the event was over, the crowd entered the Government House's interior courtyards, where the meeting with CFK took place, this time under the regime of the partisan ceremony (see image below).



The broadcast of these events merits two observations. On the one hand, their stature as political liturgies overlaps with their importance as media events included in the flow of newsworthy items making up the media agenda. On the other hand, being televised introduces a crucial element in the reconstruction of their Interpretant. As it happens in ceremonial mobilizations, media audiences act as a 'witness instance': not as guests but as necessary participants for that event in which they get involved as spectators.

As we have seen in ceremonial mobilizations, another tension emerges here as well. Rivière (1989: 123) explains that every ritual has a triangular structure. Its constitutive elements are the organizers, the actors, and the spectators. But when the liturgy is broadcasted, this tripartite structure undergoes a significant change, especially the place of the spectator, which is doubled: this liturgy becomes a spectacle that can be consumed live potentially by the whole of society (even by those who may not share the beliefs that mobilize this ceremony). But what kind of spectacle is offered to the television audience? If an Object's semiotic status is defined by the Sign/Interpretant relationship, in this case, the composition of the scene invites an identification not with a figure or a collective but with the type of bond established. So what kind of bond is configured in these scenes? It is a bond based on a presupposed and shared belief, a type of belief that allows any identification collective to be sustained over time. In one of these liturgies, CFK said: "Those who are on television and want to listen to the President should turn off the television because they are only going to listen to a Peronist militant" (14/09/2010). Perfect tension between the Interpretant presupposed by the presidential institution—the citizen as an individual endowed with rights and responsibilities and the collective that CFK built as a privileged recipient of her speeches: the militant as a subject engaged in a political project.

Table 1.

REGIME OF VISIBILITY	TYPE OF EVENT	FIGURATION OF THE REPRESENTED	FIGURATION OF THE REPRESENTATIVE
<b>Esoteric Monologue</b>	Protocolar Work Opening Announcement	Citizens (as formal status defined by the National Constitution)	National Leader (complementary)
<b>Exoteric Ceremony</b>	Commemorative Inserted in the media agenda	Citizens (as a belonging embodied in values, affects and traditions)	National Leader (complementary, charismatic)
<b>Charismatic Ceremonial Mobilization</b>	Citizenry mobilization supporting the President	Citizens (as an active political practice) + supporters	Plebiscitary Leader (complementary, charismatic)
<b>Partisan Ceremony</b>	Partisan Mobilization	Supporters (defined by ideological belonging)	Party Leader

#### 4.2. Mauricio Macri's Scenes of Representation: From the Rite of the Personal Meeting and the Minimalist Anti-ceremony to the Anti-partisan Ceremony

An outsider to Argentine political parties tradition, MM won the presidency in 2015 as the Cambiemos right-wing liberal alliance candidate. Trained as a businessman, he served for eight years as mayor of the country's wealthiest district, the City of Buenos Aires, leading a neighborhood party. Since his election campaign, he has produced a mediatised direct contact strategy with citizens by making door-to-door visits (a practice known as 'doorbelling'). Photo and short video postings on social media complemented this strategy. Similarly, he used this strategy when meeting entrepreneurs, traders, etc. The figuration of representation was not only different from CFK's but directly opposed to it. While CFK relied on state-owned television, MM opted for a robust presence on social media platforms (Slimovich 2020). He maintained this strategy for most of his government's term until nearly the end of 2019.

##### a. The Rite of the Personal Meeting

The figuration of the face-to-face encounter was MM's founding matrix. It entails the portrayal of a meeting with a neighbor or some citizens in an ordinary, everyday locale: at the front door, a cafe, or a corner store. In all these scenes, it is MM who goes in search of the citizen. Photographic records of these meetings were not produced according to the pose's regime but rather as situational snapshots, as if the protagonists of the encounter were not observed but inadvertently captured (Barthes 1980; Verón 1994). The shots are taken at eye level, producing a homology with the 'human' scale of the situation and favoring a naturalistic interpretation of the scene: those houses, those sidewalks, those cafes have local details, they show what is not prepared to be captured.

Also, these scenes do not contain any conflict, and they are not narrative. In general, individuals are smiling calmly, conversational gestures reflecting an informal, non-functional type of exchange. On occasion, the relationship appears modalized by an attitude of listening, indulgence, or redemption (a hand on the shoulder, a hug) on the part of MM towards the neighbors, or with an 'interiority' gaze, that is, not focused on something external and visible, nor oriented towards some specific action but projecting an attitude of mutual attention.

These characteristics are present both in photographs and videos. In the videos, this naturalism is reinforced by their often vertical orientation (portrait mode), shaky camera technique, and poor sound quality, aiming to give the impression of a spontaneous shoot made with a smartphone. The dialogues (*voice in*) are typically not audible. When we can discern some fragmentary sounds, they consist of phatic or emotive signals (Jakobson 1963) like greetings or salutations, without reference to some specific

issue or state of affairs. The represented relationship with the citizenry is (audio)visually diegetized, encapsulated in a situation where the spectator's vision (and hearing) is entirely external to that of the persons involved. In campaign spots, besides, looking at the camera is avoided. These static and silent scenes entirely resist a visual-only medi- atization, even with a single still image, as they comprise situations without before or after. They are encounters that do not occupy time and place on the social agenda and could have happened at any time, anywhere, and with anyone.



The organization of individuals' subtractive attributes in MM's strategies has an evident semiotic relevance. This operation aims to configure the opposition between militants and citizens, the latter incarnated as an unmarked figure, as the zero degree of the non-ideological (Barthes 2002). This dichotomy is enshrined in Cambiemos' contention (echoing the neoliberal discourse) that party militancy goes against citizens' liberal aspirations, patriotism is an obstacle to individual fulfillment (Souroujon 2019), and politics is a defrauding practice that involves only costs and no benefits.

Contrary to what happens with CFK acts (in which individuals are involved explicitly as participants in a collective body), individuals serve as the support of the representative-represented bond. The analysis must take into account the fact that these are two completely different figurations of individuality. In MM meetings, some neighbors are called by their first name ('Johana,' 'Lucas,' 'Alicia and Marcelo'), and a geographical reference is given ('Jujuy,' 'La Matanza'). Of course, an individual body is

visible, with a face and a specific location (the front door or a house yard, a repair store, a corner store, a cafe). Despite the existential uniqueness, these elements are *recognizable* by the general public but not *identifiable*.

The distinction between recognition and identification in the interpretation of an iconic-indexical text such as a photograph, as proposed by Schaeffer (1990: 67-80), can be very useful in this case. Photographic image recipients can *recognize* a type of entity (a man, a house, a boulevard). Still, they cannot *identify* its uniqueness (Uncle Robert, my grandmother's house, the park where we used to play). Very close to MM, men, women, even children can be seen smiling or even hugging him. Their identification, however, is not provided by the image (except the scarce case of knowing these people beforehand) but by the accompanying caption: 'Juan from Quilmes.' That would be enough to go from absolute iconic-indexical indeterminacy to relative indeterminacy (Schaeffer 1990: 80), based on recognizing that these people can exist and the caption allowing *identification* is presumed true. But even so, it does not reach the full saturation of the identification. Therefore, each figurative person becomes a representative of a *type* (social, geographical): they constitute a generic character.

The social attributes of CFK followers are not random or undifferentiated, but, ultimately, they also generate types. In contrast, however, to MM's neighbors, CFK followers are marked: they manifest their adherence and participation in the political movement with their body (individual and collective). In MM's strategy, individuals are also identifiable by social segment, but: a) they are stripped of attributes of militancy, b) instead of being mobilized, they are visited or approached by MM, and c) they do not configure a collective entity, just a generalization: 'Juan from Quilmes' is someone-like-others who are not figurative but (and therefore) represented. However, following the semiotic imperative of analyzing the image in its pragmatic logic (Schaeffer 1990), that is, considering the relationship between the Interpretant and the Representamen, these images require not an individualizing but a stereotypical identification: an individual is 'similar' to so many others, he/she belongs to the 'common citizen' type (Annunziata 2013), which for *Macrism* is defined, first and foremost, by not being a militant. This bundle of attributes figures profiles, not singularities. Moreover, this profiling is organized mainly by subtraction: what they do not have, what they do not do, what they are only as a potentiality.

### **b. Minimalist Anti-ceremony**

In inauguration parties, public events, ceremonies, or protocol announcements, the mediatized staging of a government can take three forms: show, direct appealing, or intermediation (Cingolani and Fernández 2019). The differentiating features are based above all on two articulated operations: the presence of an audience on the scene –the

speaker's body recipient (to whom the speaker directs his/her gaze)–, or its absence, corresponding to a look at the camera (Landowski 1985).

Throughout his political career, MM has avoided speaking to crowds. While in office as mayor of the City of Buenos Aires but also later, during his presidential term, he was increasingly adding audiovisual broadcasts of public events (inauguration parties, ceremonies, speeches) set in a minimalist rhetoric, with short and not very solemn speeches, stripped of large stages and crowds, and in locales not been traditionally used for political events. The events were held in front of small groups and avoided the prominence of these groups. The field of view cut by the cameras was located at eye level between the speaker and the audience, leaving the latter out of the visual and sound field or incorporated only as a *counter field*. The contrast with CFK and the Argentine political tradition is quite strong: once the complementarity is deactivated, it offers a relationship of representation without differences of scale, a flat figuration of contact, and the least possible resemblance to what might seem (usually) political. The bodies then appeared on the same level, even symmetrically (Bateson 1972; Verón 1995). The operation consisted of showing closeness and even reversibility. For example, while MM gave his speech, he was often accompanied by people who were not public officials or an audience in itself. If the event was related to some public work or factory, he was escorted by workers wearing helmets or uniforms. Also, if the act pertained to public transport, MM could be found standing next to a few passengers on a bus; if it took place in a school, he would appear seated at a desk like a pupil among children. And whenever possible, his body assumed some of the attributes of the citizens in their situational roles.

As in the ritual personal visit strategy, individuals figure as decorations of the situation, acting as *extras*, as *figurant* (Didi-Huberman 2014). In visual arts history, the *figurant* could be represented schematically: a silhouette, a vaguely shaped figure, suggesting a soldier, a monk, a longshoreman, etc. As a result of the iconic-indexical nature of the photographic or videographic images, the *figurant* was redefined. If the portrait produces identification by qualitative features (physiognomic, emotional, emblematic) and certifies the existence of the portrayed (Todorov 2004), the *extras* are only identifiable as a stereotyped form: he or she is *a worker*, *a teacher*, *a neighbor*.

But there is a second quality that produces the figurant –a quality that does not depend on the figuration's material condition: the lack of actantiality in the story (Greimas 1966; Barthes 1966). As a result of this lack, those who appear as neighbors in MM's social media images (Cicowiez 2019), as citizens in the personal encounter strategy, and as a worker, a passenger, or a student in the minimalist anti-ceremonies, become figurants as well. In a way, this deprives the character of a place in History, such as the 'little man,' Ricoeur's *le prochain* ([1954] 1967). If the People are a collective, an actant in its History, it is not surprising to find it missing in MM's strategies (Mazzuchino 2017). The category *neighbor* or *citizen* does not point to an individual or a group: it constructs a *type*.

To understand this operation, we can turn to Peirce (1906), who formulated the difference between individual and type, and their possible interactions. In classifying signs according to their Representamen, he argues that the singular sign (Sinsign) can refer to an individual or collection of individuals while the conventional sign (Legisign, 'a law that is a sign') is that which can represent a type. Due to the hierarchies principle, the Legisign needs 'replicas' or tokens (Sinsigns) to work, but not vice versa. The neighbor or citizen as a type is a generalization, even if a singular event or entity represents it. Since a full identification of the individual cannot be produced (Schaeffer 1990: 67-80), it is not because of its singularity that it creates meaning. The only thing that remains is its *recognition*, that is to say, its generic interpretation. The individual figure is, consequently, predominant in both the personal encounter and the minimalist anti-ceremony strategies. However, due to its ritual character, individuals' figuration in both strategies always and necessarily refers to a type. And especially of an unmarked kind, such as a *zero degree* of the plural figure, valid as a citizen or neighbor (personal meeting rite) or as a worker or entrepreneur (minimalist anti-ceremony) without partisan or 'interested' marks.



### c. Non-partisan & Non-governmental Mobilization (Anti-partisan Ceremony)

In the last stage of MM's presidency, a change in strategy is noticeable in his reelection campaign (in 2019): the adoption of mass actions and, in general, of more traditional forms of political mobilization in Argentina. The '# 24A' (August 24), the 'March of the Million' (October 19), and the 'Farewell' (December 7) were actions exhibiting several of the qualities that MM had till then avoided, disqualified and in opposition to which he had forged his political and media

identity. What stands out in these acts is the figuration of those represented as a crowd. To differentiate themselves, MM insisted on avoiding partisan symbols and using only national emblems. This third strategy is clearly opposed to the previous ones in three aspects: the figuration of a collective body (the crowd appears), the mobilizing nature (it is the individuals who go to meet MM and not the other way around), and the figuration of individuality as the support for the expression of claims and demands; they



are bodies with a voice. This implies a shift in the Interpretant of the representation relationship. But the adoption of symbols and slogans identified with the Nation (Argentine flags) and the Republic (banners with demands for the independence of institutions, text fragments from the National Constitution) constitutes a synthesis between the rejection of party adherence and the electoral agenda of a party while in office.

Table 2.<sup>4</sup>

REGIME OF VISIBILITY	TYPE OF EVENT	FIGURATION OF THE REPRESENTED	FIGURATION OF THE REPRESENTATIVE
<b>The Rite of the Personal Meeting</b>	Out of the agenda event, quasi-private	Non-mobilized citizens: individuals-type (neighbours)	Proximity Leader (symmetrizing, anti-charismatic)
<b>Minimalist Anti-ceremony</b>	Public governance milestone, ceremonial celebration, quasi-public	Sub-mobilized citizens: individuals-type (workers, city inhabitants)	Proximity Leader (symmetrizing government agent)
<b>Non-partisan &amp; Non-governmental Mobilization (Anti-partisan Ceremony)</b>	Anti-partisan mobilization	Mobilized citizens: Non- auto-identified as partisans supporters Collectives	Plebiscitary Leader (un-political, para-ideological)

## 5. Summary and Conclusions

We can summarise our findings from the comparative analysis of the CFK and MM representation scenes as follows:

- i. The series of CFK scenes we analyzed typically concerns a leader's encounter with collective bodies that vary according to the political conjuncture. Regularities and

<sup>4</sup> In the representation scenes classification, we have retaken CFK's types of events and created categories based on their contrast.

variations reveal themselves spatially (uses of public space) and temporally (inserted in an agenda of general impact), in the context of a mediatization approach based on live television broadcasting. The MM series of scenes, on the other hand, typically involves the leader meeting individuals or small groups. However, the latter are recognizable by the citizenry mainly as types, with no significant territorial specificity, since the identity of locations is too general. Simultaneously, they have little temporal specificity since meetings are no part of the official agenda, do not involve organized collectivities or communities but few individuals, or take place laterally through social media. These MM strategies demonstrate a multi-local and focal mediatization plan, based on circulation in social media rather than in broadcasting media.

- ii. CFK alternately takes on the role of national leader, party leader, or plebiscitary leader, while MM stands solely as a citizen leader.
- iii. While CFK always projects a complementary bond with the collective body, MM seeks to project a symmetrical, horizontal bond with it.
- iv. The groups called upon to be represented by CFK vary between citizens constituted by law, citizens as members of a Nation, militants, and the People/plebs; on the other hand, MM invokes non-mobilized citizens (neighbors) and under-mobilized citizens (work, trading, city dwellers). In the last year of his government, his strategy appealed to groups interested in general public affairs but had no appeal to party organizations.
- v. Considered globally –including their variations– both strategies seem not only to differ in content (which we do not explore here) but also in how they stage representation. The portioning of collectives by CFK entails their participation in the collective mobilization, the leader’s legitimacy founded on that participation. For its part, MM’s strategy focuses on individuality, the leader’s legitimacy founded on his targetted attention to citizens.
- vi. The two strategies for the configuration of scenes of political representation entail conflicting Interpretants about the citizenry; namely, they suggest conflicting models of participation in *res publica* and taking an interest in community matters. The fundamental Interpretant of CFK’s political representation scenes is a conception of the citizenry that shall be referred to as political-ideological. With this label, we delineate a way of conceiving the citizen as a political subject with an ideologically framed understanding of the political order, assembling the world’s singular events in an ordered and coherent narrative. It is a maximalist conception of citizenry, whose prototypical figure is the militant. On the contrary, the Interpretant of MM’s political representation scenes is a ‘depoliticized’ conception of citizenry (Barthes 2002: 104-105) that can be called *unpolitical* and *para-ideological*.

According to Rosanvallon (2008: 22), *unpolitical* describes a failure to develop a 'comprehensive understanding of problems associated with the organization of a shared world.' It is a minimalist and aggregative conception of citizenry, whereby the citizen is an individual who interprets the political-social world from the perspective of his/her private sphere or his/her immediate life environment, without inscribing that vision within a global framework (in this sense it is *para-ideological*).

In this sense, the Interpretant's semiotic notion becomes highly relevant; it lends itself to be set apart from both the *collective of representation* and the *destination*. The *Interpretant* here embodies the staging strategy as a whole, encompassing the various types of groups configured in each particular staging.

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# Symbols and narratives of Europe: Three tropes

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BY: Johan Fornas

## ABSTRACT

Throughout history, attempts have been made to identify Europe as a geographical, political, social, and cultural entity. Recent efforts to establish key symbols and narratives of Europe have focused on a set of central signifying elements, even if there is a wide and contradictory range of ways to define, structure, and interpret them. An introductory remark on the current debate on the need for renewed European self-reflection paves the way for some conceptual clarifications of my approach to concepts like culture, meaning, identity and mediation. A methodological reflection accompanies this on how to use semiotic tools in cultural studies based on critical hermeneutics. The concept of culture used here is based on the signifying practice of mediating meaning-making, linking imagination to communication in a triangular dynamic between texts, subjects, and contexts. Examples are given from two research projects on a broad and diverse range of European symbols and narratives, illustrating such interpretive research results. European identifications are crystallized and spun around three dominant tropes: supreme universality, resurrection from division, and communicative mobility. Their intricate tensions and interrelations attest to how deeply Europe remains a highly contested and dynamic meaning cluster.

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## 1. Introduction

Throughout history, many attempts have been made to identify Europe as a geographical, political, economic, social, and cultural entity. Institutional co-operation requires cultural legitimization through some shared identification of what Europe and European-ness means and should mean. Two recent research projects on European symbols (Fornäs 2012) and narratives (Fornäs 2017a) indicate that current efforts to identify Europe have focused on a set of signifying elements, even if there is a broad and contradictory range of ways to define, structure, and interpret them.<sup>1</sup>

I will first discuss concepts like culture, meaning, identity and mediation, and then briefly suggest methodological considerations on integrating semiotic tools into cultural studies based on critical hermeneutics. In the next section, I will present and exemplify my interpretations of a diverse range of European symbols and narratives. This leads to a summary of three dominant tropes for European identity, as constructed and contested through different modes of mediated meaning-making investigated in these two projects. Together, these tropes form the interlaced triple-core around which European identifications are today crystallized and spun. Their intricate tensions and interrelations attest to how deeply Europe remains a contested and hence dynamic meaning cluster.

## 2. A cultural perspective

I approach issues of identity from a combined media and cultural perspective. For me, *culture* is about meaning-making signifying practice, based on triangular interactions between subjects, texts, and contexts, and involving multiple mediations in two key dimensions: a “vertical” process of imagination (making meaning by associating present material things with absent virtual representations) and a “horizontal” process of communication (sharing meaning across distances in time or space) (Fornäs 1995 and 2017b).

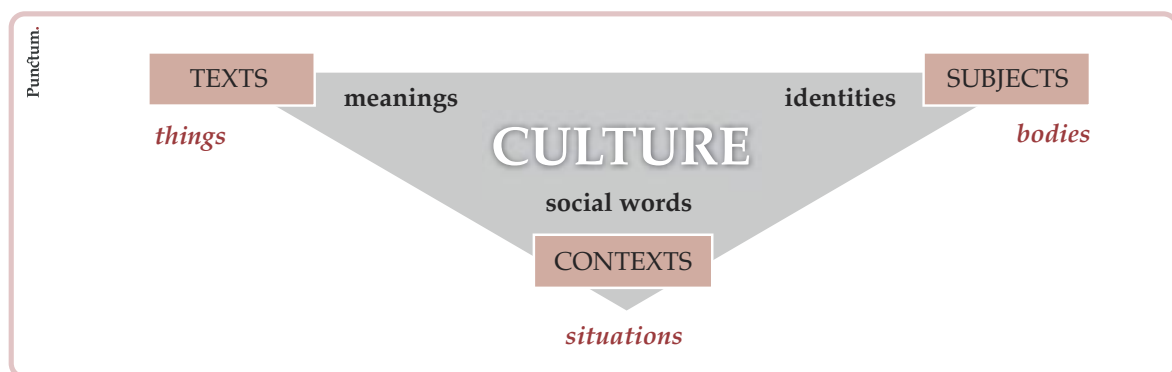


Figure 1. Modelling the translation process through space

<sup>1</sup> This text was presented as an invited keynote at the XII International Conference of Semiotics “Signs of Europe” in Thessaloniki, Greece, 2 November 2019.

In the *critical hermeneutic* tradition, Paul Ricoeur stressed how culture always implies and requires mediation. Hermeneutics is a theory reflecting upon what people do when they interpret something. I am doing what I see as *cultural studies*, in the double sense of making interpretations of phenomena perceived as meaningful texts and at the same time studying how people make meanings. As the semiosphere (Lotman 2005, 1990) of communicative processes involving interlinked signs forms culture's defining feature and the inescapable fate of human existence, we cannot escape meaning-making. All human knowledge production makes use of such interpretive practices, which hermeneutics is designed to reflect upon.

From this perspective, meaning-making interpretation does not exclude analytical or structural explanations but integrates them as necessary moments in a dialectical spiral movement between phases of understanding and explanation, synthesis and analysis, guessing and validation, listening and suspicion, proximity and distancing, reconstruction and disclosure, appropriation and critique. Ricoeur saw structural analysis as providing necessary detours for reaching a more in-depth and better understanding. I similarly see semiotics, discourse analysis, and media archaeology as equally essential tools for that same purpose. Hermeneutics is thus not competing with such other lines of thought, but rather a framework of reflection on meaning-making, allowing for integrating different strategies for qualifying interpretations. Critical hermeneutics does not exclude but, on the contrary, relies on combinations with structural and material approaches and explanations, with the ultimate goal to reach a richer understanding.

Semiotics and other analytical instruments thus do not replace interpretation but are used to understand texts better: "to explain is to bring out the structure, that is, the internal relations of dependence that constitute the statics of the text; to interpret is to follow the path of thought opened up by the text, to place oneself en route toward the *orient* of the text" (Ricoeur 1971/2008: 117). Interpretation is a processual "dialectic of explanation and understanding" (Ricoeur 1976: 71 and 74), in which explanation through structural analysis serves as necessary "mediation between two stages of understanding" (Ricoeur 1976: 75); "between a naïve interpretation and a critical one, between a surface interpretation and a depth interpretation," so that explanation and understanding are located "at two different stages of a unique hermeneutical arc" (Ricoeur 1976: 87).

Hence, by focusing on mediations and interactional crossroads rather than on closed essences, the critical hermeneutics of culture as signifying practice is a dialectical theory of communicative detours. It may well make use of semiotics to uncover the internal relations of a text, but never forgets to "reconstruct the set of operations through which a work arises from the opaque depths of living, acting, and suffering, to be given by an author to readers who receive it and thereby change their own actions [...] seek-

ing to reconstruct the whole arc of operations by which practical experience is turned into works, authors, and readers” (Ricoeur 1981: 17 and 18).

### 3. Identity, symbols, and narratives

How to approach the cultural identity of Europe? What can it mean to be European, as expressed in symbols and narratives? There is no one fixed meaning to any identity. Europe has much more than just one single meaning. Stuart Hall emphasized that identities are always multiple, fragmented, dynamic, and contested, acquiring new meanings through the ongoing conflicts of interpretation. In this perspective, Europe is immersed in a dynamic cloud of meanings that evolves through communicative struggles between various European institutions ‘from above’ and critical movements and citizens ‘from below’; between voices understanding themselves as being European ‘inside’ Europe and those non-European ones, coming from the ‘outside’ or moving in some peripheral borderland. Interpretations reconstructing layers of meaning in European key symbols and narratives should make it possible to understand how Europe is identified from various directions.

There is now a suspicion that the European political and economic infrastructures lack a sufficiently strong cultural dimension required to make the joint institutions legitimate among citizens. Europe must be made meaningful, to motivate transnational cooperation. For this purpose, several symbols were introduced. Here is a typical formulation of the belief that political symbols can legitimize the European Union and help people identify with it, forming a mutually binding cultural and political community. Political symbols are supposed to help make the European Union more legitimate and construct a political identity that may unite and motivate all Europeans.

Every social group and every organised political society acquires the symbols (or signs) it needs to identify, distinguish and represent itself. [...] A symbol, therefore, acts as a means of identification, as a sign of recognition between people or among the members of a social group. [...] They crystallise national identity by making it tangible [...]. The use of symbols, therefore, has a unifying and federating power. [...] Every political symbol is a tangible sign of identity codifying the shared values that the symbol represents [...]. As in the case of nations, political symbols serve an identifying function for the European Union as well. Political symbols [...] may therefore contribute, by creating emotive images and rites, even subliminally, towards making the European Union more legitimate in the eyes of its citizens and help them to identify with the plan for a common destiny. In other words, they help to construct a political identity, so that a set of values that identify us as belonging to the same community are felt to be binding. (Gialdino 2011/2016: 2f)

Key symbols are generally acknowledged as condensed and essential signifiers of identity for a group, institution, nation, or other social entity. Stuart Hall (1997: 3) placed “the *symbolic* domain at the very heart of social life.” Ricoeur (1994: 130) concurs with structuralism and semiotics in arguing that “symbolism is not an effect of society but society an effect of symbolism.” “Social reality is fundamentally symbolic,” he argues (Ricoeur 1981: 219), and “there is no self-understanding that is not *mediated* by signs, symbols, and texts” (Ricoeur 2008: 15).

Reading Europe’s meaning(s) requires a mapping of materialities and form-relations and the use(r)s and contexts where these symbols circulate and combine to produce meaning. Historical production and reception contexts also need to be considered since meaning clusters are only provisionally interpreted during their material production and continuously evolve through their reception history (Gadamer’s *Wirkungsgeschichte*). Intertextual comparisons are yet a crucial detour that helps determine what each symbol might mean, and – in this case – what the different symbols of Europe may tell us about how Europe is currently being identified. Combining such aspects and dimensions makes it possible to stepwise reconstruct the meanings of symbols, moving in hermeneutic spiral movements between various techniques of explanation towards an always denser and richer understanding.

While symbols of Europe may just offer a momentary glimpse into what European-ness may mean, narratives of Europe tell a dynamic story of transformation over time, from past over present to future. Narratives form a genre of symbols with an explicit temporal organization, spun around a series of events with beginning, development, and conclusion. They can be spun around any symbol, but some symbols invite a more obvious temporal interpretation than others, making them narratives. Analyzing and interpreting narratives involves a set of operations. First, defining the set-up: who are the main actors, what is the context of the events that define Europe, and which role does Europe play in this history? Second, mapping the process itself, the sequence of events and actions shaping history as a story. Third, evaluating the narrative mode: its means of construction, its textual genre, and its general attitude towards Europe, in this case. Fourth and final, one may uncover what the narrative signifies: how the story depicts the core meaning (or set of meanings) of Europe.

When narratives trigger collective identification, they may exert considerable influence. But there are many bids on defining or identifying Europe as a collective agency and global actor. Which are its key traits and values? Several different formulations and variants exist, from leading European institutions and various movements, individual thinkers, writers, artists, and media voices. Apparently, they share several elements and aspects while contradicting each other in other respects.

In a European Cultural Foundation seminar report from 2010, Jaap Leerssen formulated a key narrative for Europe in the following terms: “European societies are ne-

gotiating the catastrophic events of their past on the basis of the notion of reconciliation. And perhaps this is a European master-narrative: the idea that all European nations have a history of bloody, deep fundamental divisions that, at some point, were overcome." At the same time, the European Cultural Foundation (ECF) started looking for "new narratives for Europe," arguing that "Europe has a story to tell": "Many people, especially young people, do not see the need for Europe between the local and the global. Europe as a project for peace and shared welfare, which was the vision after WWII, does not "work" anymore. Even the magic of 1989 is forgotten." A renewal seemed necessary since the old motivations for co-operation, based on the World War traumas, did not suffice anymore. There were two reasons for that, one temporal and one spatial. On the one hand, outside the Balkan area, younger generations of Europeans no longer had personal experience of war. On the other hand, the new member states in ex-communist Eastern Europe must also be fully integrated into the joint project.

In this direction, many efforts tend to focus on high ideals, for example, when Tzvetan Todorov in *The New World Disorder: Reflections of a European* (2003) listed rationality, justice, democracy, individual freedom, secularism, and tolerance as Europe's leading political values. Ideals indeed contribute to defining identities, but I think it is a dangerous temptation to forget the annoying gap between identity and ideal and imagine that Europe simply equals all its great dreams. It is essential to be equally aware of all the less flattering aspects of what Europe actually is and has been: to acknowledge its defining ambivalences and inner contradictions. A more critical and reflective approach would shed a more nuanced light on the complexities involved in identifying Europe.

Following-up on the ECF initiative, the European Commission in 2013 set up a Cultural Committee, whose distinguished cultural celebrities in 2014 published a report on a "new narrative for Europe." It identified the core values of peace, freedom, democracy, and the rule of law, again in a rather celebratory manner. The committee further suggested that a new narrative for Europe should focus on renaissance and cosmopolitanism as two leading cultural ideals. These imply a narrative that first acknowledges past achievements in need of resurrection and renovation ("a societal paradigm shift"), and second regards the open, communicative urban space as an ideal for the whole of Europe ("Europe as one great mega-city interconnected by means of transportation and communication"). I will return to these ideas later.

European identity has repeatedly been claimed and rejected, cherished and contested – not least, since the formation of European institutions such as the Council of Europe and the geographically more limited but politically more powerful European Union. While some politicians and citizens are skeptical against symbol policies and prefer to concentrate on what they see as more down-to-earth, everyday practices, others find the European project's cultural aspects crucial and underrated.

## 4. Two studies

I have in two books closely studied first symbols and then narratives of Europe. Intellect Press has made both books available in print as well as by open access. First, in *Signifying Europe* (2012) and some articles, I investigated a large number of Europe's symbols, starting with those chosen by official European institutions, and then comparing them with alternative versions proposed by other organizations, artists, or individual citizens, as well as with the symbols used by other national or international bodies.

Many different such symbols have turned up over the years, including saints and myths, animals, and plants. The Council of Europe has formally adopted some of them. In the 2004 draft treaty establishing a constitution for Europe, five official symbols were defined. They were then expelled from the final 2007 Treaty of Lisbon, but continue to be used and respected by the EU member states.

1. The *European Flag* is blue with twelve yellow stars forming a perfect circle. The design with stars on blue has an intricate European history to which I will return later.
2. The *European Anthem* derives from the final movement of Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. The tune has stylistic and ideological roots in the French revolution, associated with egalitarian enlightenment, determination, and popular togetherness.
3. The *Europe Day* is 9 May, celebrating the 1950 Schumann Declaration that paved the way for the Coal and Steel Union and then the EU, expressing a determination for peace and welfare after dark times of mutual strife and destruction. The problem is that the Council of Europe instead celebrates its foundation on 5 May.
4. The *European Motto* wants Europeans to be "united in diversity," not striving to be similar but accepting internal differences and transforming them from obstacles into positive resources.
5. Finally, the *Euro Currency* is designed to integrate the whole of Europe into a shared space where the banknote windows, doors, and bridges celebrate communication. Simultaneously, the money story from low to high values forms a narrative from Roman antiquity to high modernity. In contrast, the national back sides of the coins again allow for diversity as an asset.

I have analyzed and interpreted all of these in my book, comparing their material and formal elements, users, contexts, and histories of production and reception with similar symbols; for instance, flags for the United States, China, or the African Union, designs proposed by older pan-European organizations, or satirical artworks manipulating the star circle into something else, to highlight hidden deficits in the European project critically.

My interdisciplinary research project "Narratives of Europe" then resulted in a second book, *Europe Faces Europe: Narratives from Its Eastern Half* (2017), where East European narratives of Europe were mapped and compared, as they circulate in our selected

discourse fields: phenomenological philosophy (Carl Cederberg), postcolonial geopolitics (Stefan Jonsson), news journalism (Roman Horbyk), Occupy movements (Anne Kaun) and visual art (Katarina MacLeod). My study focused on televised popular music in Eurovision Song Contest (ESC).

## 5. Three tropes

I will try to synthesize these different studies by describing three main *tropes* found more or less in all of them. There is no single symbol, narrative, or meaning that all agree upon, but one may discern three different tropes that together form a dominant formula for characterizing European identity. All of them are polysemic, open to multiple interpretations. Yet, they together frame a symbolic space that situates discourses of Europe, which is thus, in my opinion, neither a homogenous, fixed, and closed entity, nor a totally elusive, empty sign.

I will present some of the many structural complexities, connections, and contradictions within and between these core tropes while at the same time offering specific and sometimes striking illustrations. The three tropes are centered around Europe's master narrative of resurrection, which I mentioned before. This has three *phases*: a past golden age, a recent or current experience of internal division and self-inflicted suffering, and a future of reconciliation and renewal through communicative co-operation. These also resonate with three of the general *narrative dimensions*: set-up, process, and meaning.

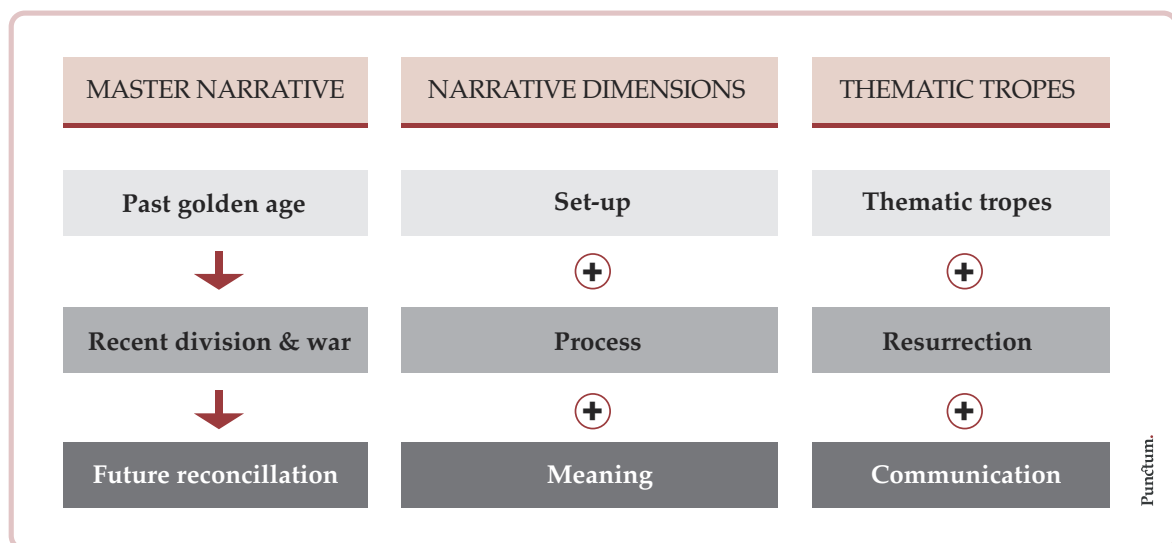


Figure 2. European narratives and thematic tropes

### 5.1. Supreme universality

The first trope alludes to a *supreme universality*. Many symbols and narratives share an idea that Europe is somehow *chosen* for a particularly important mission and challenge, in some way *elevated* above the other continents. This idea refers to Europe's past achievements in classical Greek and Roman antiquity, Renaissance and Enlightenment modernity, and capitalist industrialization. There is a long heritage of religious, philosophical, and historical thinking of Europe as the cradle of Western civilization, establishing democracy, philosophy, science, and the arts, based on enlightened reason and universal human rights. The theme of nobility or elevation is already found in the myth of Princess Europa, whose abduction by Zeus disguised as a white bull transformed her into a unique founder of a new dynasty of half-divine men. In a similar spirit, Schiller's and Beethoven's anthem describes people intoxicated by Promethean fire, rising to walk in heaven with the gods. An equal pride is found in Eurovision's celebration of Europe's rich cultural heritage.

Paradoxically, Europe's grandeur is founded on a supreme capacity for *universality*. It appears from its mythical origin to be chosen for the grand mission of global service: elevated to egalitarian universality, which it must share with the rest of the world in a spirit of equality and solidarity. In various disguises, such universalism is inherent in remarkably much of European thinking. From a critical perspective, this serves to underpin a Eurocentric narrative of the West as taking the global lead with its privileged mode of modernity, legitimizing horrible atrocities of crusades and colonialism throughout history. On the other hand, Europe is often associated with human rights discourses, not least in Eurovision. Its anthem, written by DJ Avicii and former ABBA members Benny Andersson and Björn Ulvaeus in 2013, welcomes "a new Enlightenment" with the words: "We are humans born free and equal / On this one earth lies our future / Reason, and conscience may they rule the world one day."

By referring back to past achievements, this trope can be said to concern the set-up of Europe's narrative, even though the fulfillment of Europe's inherited potentials may still lie in the future. The combination of specificity and universalism is a notoriously tricky one. The ambition to defend universality always risks attracting the accusation of blind imperialist Eurocentrism. An illustration of these tensions was adopting the Ode to Joy theme as the European anthem without Schiller's words. The lack of lyrics mirrors two problematic borderlines for European identification. One argument was that German (or indeed any specific language) was not appropriate since it would not be pan-European but prioritize one nation. If this argument expressed the need to raise the European above the national level, another drew a line between the European and the global, instead. Specifically, the objection was that Schiller's lyrics were too universal, as the phrase "all human beings are becoming brothers" should rather just speak for Europeans. The result was an anthem without words, which is not particu-

larly well suited for communal singing. The “united in diversity” motto likewise serves to negotiate between the European and the national. There is a risky balance between uniqueness and universality, but their combination seems to be a typical European trait in all my material.

A splendid example of this trope is, of course, the European flag with its perfect star circle, signifying nations that rise together into the sky to guide others. The design may hark back to the saints’ halo, the United States’ early Betsy Ross flag (1777–1795), or the star flag used by the Central Commission for Navigation on the Rhine, the oldest still working transnational European organization, funded in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century.

The stars needed to be equal among each other, none bigger or smaller, and all at the same distance from the center. In contrast, the People’s Republic of China has one central star signifying the leading role of the Communist Party. But one disadvantage is that the European flag does not indicate any diversity at all. One solution has been the gay movement’s insertion of multicolored stars. The EU itself tested another, commissioning the architect and designer Rem Koolhaas to design the barcode (adopted in 2004), adding all EU’s national flag colors beside each other, in a striking image of the motto “united in diversity,” but then instead missing the element of elevation. In several cases, there is thus a tension or polarity between stressing equality or elevation, unity or diversity – and an urge to balance them in some way, symbolically as well as in political practice.

Another issue with the flag concerns the circular form. It has been accused of presenting an extreme abstraction that may be universal but empty and sterile. Some have even mocked it for resembling a zero, hence disclosing how empty the European project is and how little Europeans share in common. On the other hand, one may associate it with the circular cosmology and the urban agora of Greek Antiquity. Jean-Pierre Vernant (*Myth and Thought among the Greeks*, 1965) has pointed out how classical Greek thinkers like Anaximander adopted a circular model of the world in homology with the main city square where all houses were equidistant from the center. The agora – just like the star circle – might then be understood as an open and shared public space for dynamic dialogues between nations or citizens, which is missing in the Chinese case.

The uses of this symbol confirm this interpretation. For instance, I was once at a conference in Istanbul where they had placed the Turkish crescent inside the European star circle as a temporary actor on the open arena. It may not be officially allowed to do so, but I think that is precisely the kind of symbolic use the star circle allows for – one of its main affordances. Is Europe primarily unified or diverse, egalitarian or elitist, empty or open? These are indeed open questions.

## 2. Resurrecting from division

If the first trope points back towards Europe's birth as an elevation to universality, the second and most important concerns the narrative process itself. It is described in terms of a *resurrection* from internal and self-inflicted past or present *division* and perceiving reunification as a new beginning after centuries of destruction. There is now a chance for renewal, rebirth, or a renaissance, based on mutual reconciliation, redemption, and reunification.

I here choose the term 'resurrection' despite its religious subtext. I think that 'renewal,' 'rebirth' and 'renaissance' are in a sense too naïve and smooth terms, as this is not just a refreshing new birth into an innocent childhood. Europe must, on the contrary, remember and answer for its past agonies. Resurrection means to 'rise again' – calling for standing up on one's own feet rather than crawling around and asking to be cared for like a new-born baby.

Even more typical and specific for Europe than the idea of a golden age is this link to radical and self-inflicted war and destruction. This trope is at the core of both the established master narrative of Europe and the European Commission's new narrative. Europe and Europeans have experienced profound misery, which nourished an awareness of *precariousness*: a vulnerability that motivates a desire for peaceful coexistence and cooperation. This trope appears in the Christian Passion story, Beethoven's Ode to Joy, and the Schuman Declaration.

This experience of loss and pain fuels the dreams of peace so often repeated in Eurovision songs. Singing about suffering is almost only done in songs from East European countries, describing themselves as having grown strong and tough due to such hardships. Without the European downfall into deepest agony, there would not be the profound sense of resurrection that is central to the millenarian narrative. Here are some examples of ESC lyrics of this kind. "We gave tears, and we also gave blood/ May we all have peace in the years to come" (Romania 1996). "We survived the reds and two world wars/ Get up, and dance to our Eastern European kinda funk" (Lithuania 2010). "Differences may not be wrong/ They enrich things that we know/ Different faiths, different views/ All we can do is to turn them in key" (Hungary 2012). "The ice will melt again, and the leafless tree will blossom/ Every end is just a new beginning/ The curtain opens again" (Estonia 2013)

One single pessimistic exception was Iceland's 2019 song Hate Will Prevail declaring that "Life is meaningless/ Hate will prevail/ Europe will crumble." However, this did not come from eastern Europe, and the European master narrative was ultimately rescued: the performing group, Hatari, insisted that this was just a dystopia in case love and peace would not win the game, which they hoped and worked for.

The value of resurrection is linked to the previous one of elevated nobility. Wars may destroy the ancient cultural heritage, but they also breed science and technology. Moreover, they indirectly foster culture and reason through the experience of loss that may make Europeans sensitive to others' suffering and one's ethical responsibility. On the other hand, the dialectics of Enlightenment nourish destructive forces but also an intense longing for overcoming them.

The topic of diversity relates to this trope as well. European reunification can never erase its internal differences but only affirm its immanent hybrid diversity. There are slightly different versions of this trope, besides the varying balance between unity and difference. Some symbols and narratives first depict the long-gone golden era, while others take it for granted and start with disastrous misery. Some celebrate resurrection as already achieved when others consider it to remain a key task for the future. There is also a crucial tension between either focusing on the need for peace after self-made internal divisions or freedom from external oppression, which is a pervasive competing theme in Eastern Europe. The latter position may well be reasonable, considering the 20th-century history of these post-communist states. Still, it is in danger of falling back to narratives of revenge, when the "we" tends to regard itself as the innocent victim of external evils, and therefore lacking true responsibility for the necessary reconciliation and renaissance.

### 3. Communicative mobility

A third key value may be derived from looking closer at the third phase of the master narrative: its core meaning. The process of unification is a desire for change, and this temporal change often also entails a spatial shift or reconfiguration: a sense of displacement, dislocation, and *mobility*. These are ideals, calling for responsible action in the future. Still, they are also deep-seated parts of European experience and identity, as communication has always been a central topic and goal for this continent. This kind of mobility has to do with *communication*, which is indeed a central value in most European co-operation parts.

In the myth, Europa is abducted from the Middle East to Crete, and her displacement may symbolize how migrations have repeatedly crisscrossed Europe. In Eurovision, artists travel to the host city to meet each other, and their bodies explore new moves on stage, stirring the public's emotions. Broadcasters transmit their tunes to a dispersed European (and tendentially global) audience. Many songs also describe such moves across physical and social space.

Beethoven's Ninth is likewise full of movements, vertically between earth and heaven, horizontally between east and west. Remember that the second ideal for the 'new narrative' suggested by the European Commission was cosmopolitanism, based precisely on communication, mobility, and hybridity.

There are certainly cases where equality and community develop into homogeneity or even uniformity. One example is the Fortress Europe defended by comic hero Captain Euro fighting against the nomadic D.Vider. However, most voices emphasize that peaceful unification must accommodate difference, making dialogue both necessary and creative, expressed by the motto “united in diversity.”

Communication with others is a critical value that is repeatedly signified by lots of these symbols and narratives, striving to transform antagonistic divides into a desire for polyphonic togetherness in diversity. For instance, banknote designs of states and empires mostly feature buildings and rulers of power. This is, for example, true of Chinese or US banknotes. In contrast, the euro banknotes are full of windows, doors, and bridges. They symbolize the stable infrastructures of communication underpinning the soft power of Europe, as a core goal of the EU is, in fact, to secure mobility in several dimensions.

Many of the national coins reverse side also celebrate transnational movements and connections. For instance, this is true of the Greek ships and the national heroes who once sought European support for their independence struggle. Just as the flag recalls the classical Greek agora, the currency name “euro” and its sign based on the epsilon letter honors European civilization’s Greek roots. However, in the “money-story” told by the banknote designs, history instead begins in Rome around the time of the birth of Christ, perhaps because a beginning in Athens four centuries earlier would remind too much of its inherent decentring and pagan hybridity. Greece’s euro coin raises the intricate question of whether Greeks or other Europeans identify with Europa as the abduction victim or with Zeus as a virile god and bull. I prefer to acknowledge the sense of migrant displacement lying at the heart of European identity from the very beginning until today.

This last trope is the closest I come to imagine a pivotal meaning to identify what Europe may become. Europe seems filled with a sense of restless and ambivalent dissatisfaction, fueling a constant dynamism of expansion, for good or for worse. No wonder it was the cradle of capitalism, which is now in a prolonged crisis building up to what Rosa Luxemburg saw as an unavoidable choice between barbarism and a post-capitalist social order. The trope of communication interacts with the other two: the unique mobility of capitalism accumulates riches; wealthy empires invest in communications, and Europe’s noble universalism is based on trust in dialogical communication. On the other hand, migrations lead to conflict and wars produce refugees, so there is also a negative dialectic of mobility and precariousness.

A series of critical thinkers have formulated values and tasks for Europe in the spirit of the three tropes I discovered. Tzvetan Todorov (1982/1992: 109) argued that “European civilization [...] is ‘allocentric’ rather than egocentric [...]. The center is elsewhere, which opens up the possibility for the Other to become, someday, central.” To

Rémi Brague (2002), Europe is fundamentally an “eccentric culture” of “secondarity,” with a sense of self-defining dislocation, deriving its self-image from the outside. Jacques Derrida (1991) argued for acknowledging difference and alterity for “a Europe still to become.” To Zygmunt Bauman (2004: 2 and 7) “Europe is not something you discover; Europe is a mission – something to be made, created, built as an unfinished adventure, defined by its lack of fixed identity and yearning for transgression”; adding that the “European life is conducted in the constant presence and in the company of the others and the different, and the European way of life is a continuous negotiation [...] a *transgressive* civilization [...] *allergic to borders* – indeed to all *fixity* and *finitude*.” Paul Ricoeur (1992/1995: 3) proposed a “post-national state combining identity and alterity in a translation ethos of hospitality, mediating between different cultures.” Finally, Étienne Balibar (2004: 235) called for Europe as “the interpreter of the world, translating languages and cultures in all directions.”

These are all unfulfilled goals, sometimes mistaken for achieved realities, even though they are our particular responsibility because Europe’s history has been intimately linked with communication issues. Europe has accumulated significant resources for communicative mobility, but realizing their creative implications remains a task to accomplish rather than a given essence to lean back on. After the euro crisis and Brexit, it became more evident than ever that Europe is “only,” first and foremost, a project and a task whose precise character and global role can only fully develop through a series of inevitable political and cultural struggles of interpretation and communication.

The paradigm of communication has shifting implications and applications in different contexts, and an intertextual reading of many different symbols and narratives is needed to do justice to its complexities. I think the master narrative of communicative resurrection remains a relevant one in these fateful times.

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# First time as a historical driver, second as fantasy: nationalism's Second Coming and the paradoxes of populism<sup>1</sup>

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BY: Ulf Hedetoft

## ABSTRACT

Nationalism is a semiotic system in its own right, pivoting around complex dualisms between people and state. Its associated images cover the entire repertoire of signs, from iconicity over indexicalities to symbolism. Nationalism has brought measurable benefits to lots of people; they feel represented by their elected politicians, and they revel in symbolic abstractions of their ethnic-national identity. At least, this is how the national universe has traditionally been configured. Populism, on the other hand, nationalism's recently assumed version, introduces a less materialistic and more fantasy-based approach to national belongingness, reversing some of the national imaginary's ordinary paradoxes. Hence, its sign universe is almost totally dependent on symbols and their arbitrary, non-motivated connection between *signifié* and *signifiant*. This contribution aims to uncover some of the paradoxes manifested by populism and its attempts to reinvest nationalism with former glory while revealing liberalism and globalization as a historical hoax. Populism is a commitment to the idealism of the state while in the same process rejecting its reality. It clings to the formal promise of nationalism without recognizing its contradictory nature. And it refuses to accept that the uniformity of the People conceals a real struggle between groups, generations, regions, and classes in the private sphere – and the multiple challenges to their living standards and welfare that provided the origins of their populist reaction. Populism sends its supporters back to where they came from, but with a vengeance.

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<sup>1</sup> This article is an expanded and re-worked version of chapter 5 in my monograph, *Paradoxes of Populism. Troubles of the West and Nationalism's Second Coming* (Hedetoft 2020).

## 1. Introduction

In an important sense, nationalism is a semiotic system in its own right. It pivots around complex dualisms between people and state, material interests and cultural belonging, diversity, and uniformity, 'we' and 'they,' hostility and collaboration, pride and shame, historical realities and mythical inventions, banalities and lofty ideas, collectivism and individualism, concreteness and abstraction (Anderson 1983; Billig 1995; Gellner 1983; Hedetoft 1995; Hobsbawn & Ranger 1983). As a historical force, it contains all of these significations while assuming the role both of a forward-looking, progressive modernizer, which liberated scores of ordinary people from thralldom and oppression, and a violent and often brutal eliminator of traditions, cultures, human beings, and occasionally entire regimes. The paradox is manifested in its creation of, on the one hand, welfare states with relatively high levels of prosperity for the majority of citizens, and, on the other, the brutality of fascism and its authoritarian oppression of its own people as well as its raid on other states. The paradox is inherent in the usual but ideological opposition of 'patriotism' and 'nationalism.' One is hailed as a peaceful, harmless and civilizing force. At the same time, the other is connotatively associated with aggression, belligerence, and warfare. However, the truth is that the terms do not refer to two different realities, but to one and the same, which is constituted inherently of two contradictory components (Hedetoft 1995: 15-19). Nationalism is benevolent and frightening at the same time.

Therefore, its associated images cover the entire repertoire of signs, from iconicity and indexicalities to symbolism (Sebeok 1994: 11). Nationalism has brought measurable benefits to lots of people; they feel represented by their elected politicians, and they revel in symbolic abstractions of their ethnic-national identity. At least, this is how the national universe has traditionally been configured. Populism, on the other hand – the recent version that nationalism has assumed – introduces a less materialistic and more fantasy-based approach to national belongingness and reverses some of the ordinary paradoxes of the national imaginary. Hence, its sign universe is almost totally dependent on symbols and their arbitrary, non-motivated connection between *signifié* and *signifiant*. In Peircean terms, the 'object' is either eliminated from the triangulation between sign, interpretant, and object or is totally determined by the sign.<sup>2</sup>

This article aims to uncover some of the 'reverse' (and perverse) paradoxes manifested by populism in all its multiple forms and varieties and highlight its attempt to reinvest nationalism with former glory while revealing liberalism and globalization as a historical hoax created by, and to the sole benefit of, political and economic elites.

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<sup>2</sup> This is most clearly manifested in the disinterest of most populists in the objective relations of the real world, their treatment of fake news (anything that displeases them), their conspiratorial mindset (others have plotted against them), their endless self-victimization and blaming strategies, and the countless promises of the better world that would result if only they had total power. Everything is here dependent on the exclusive power of the sign itself, and the ability / will of the audience to imagine a world decoupled from all the material, economic, social and natural impediments of the real conditions as we know them.

## 2. Brexit and the Second Coming of Nationalism

It is fitting to begin with a lengthy quotation that addresses the Brexit debacle in a way that reveals something fundamental about populism and its inherent paradoxes. In a noteworthy article in *The Guardian* on 2 December 2018, the newspaper's columnist, Matthew d'Ancona, makes the following comments on the Brexit process – comments that miss the heart of the matter only by an inch.

For decades, there was something close to a political consensus that the most important metric was economic prosperity. A wealthy nation was essential both to the aspirations of individual households and the funding of public services. (...)

Brexit is both symptom and cause of a breakdown in this consensus. It can no longer be taken for granted that senior politicians, or the voters themselves, will automatically and reflexively put national wealth first.

As long ago as January 2014, Nigel Farage was **explicit about this**: *'If you said to me, would I like to see over the next 10 years a further 5 million people come into Britain and if that happened we'd all be slightly richer, I'd say, I'd rather we weren't slightly richer.'* (...)

We have reached the point where, to an extraordinary extent, the implementation of the 2016 referendum result trumps all else. Why so? Because, as Farage declared with more candour than most mainstream politicians can yet muster, culture is nudging old-fashioned political economy out of its prime spot. Immigration is now the gravitational centre of the whole debate: a debate much less about national wealth or national sovereignty than national identity. (...)

We live in a world defined by the economic, social, and cultural interdependence of nation-states. And those who promise that leaving the EU will deliver 'control' are really promising something quite specific: a social and cultural reboot. As well as being morally contemptible, of course, this is also a complete impossibility. [my emphasis].

In this rather remarkable article, which is a lot longer than the above quote, d'Ancona manages to hit several nails on the head and highlight some of populism's crucial features, not just in the UK but universally, in a way that should give us pause. The most obvious point is the one that has to do with the link between economics and identity, wealth and culture. Farage says it clearly and without sugaring the pill: I prefer our identity to economic advantages if that's the choice we have. Rather poorer than subservient, rather sovereign than dependent.

D'Ancona characterizes this stance as impossible and (morally) contemptible, since "[w]e live in a world defined by the economic, social and cultural interdependence of

nation-states.” But whereas he is right about the practical impossibility of realizing the imagined goal of ‘taking back control,’ he is not spot-on about the morality question *per se*. Farage and his followers in the Brexit Party at least see the situation differently: in their view, they have taken the moral high ground away from the global opportunists – elites that have filled them with empty promises for years, compromised their trust, and left their British identity by the wayside.

What is decisive about this debate is what they agree on, i.e., that this is a fundamental choice between economics or culture, interest or identity, and that you cannot have your cake and eat it too. The columnist does not directly take a stance on the identity question. Still, it is clearly subordinated to that of wealth, interdependence, and the continued progress of states, in other words to a defense of either Margaret Thatcher’s free-market economism or Gordon Brown’s concern for the social collectivity – since both relied on the premise of a “strong economy.” This has now changed, as d’Ancona is aware: “I think something profound, unsettling but still underexplored, underpins this scale of priorities: a fundamental change that needs to be understood outside the day-to-day disasters of this useless government and even of the Brexit process itself.”

He is right. Pitting the economy against national identity questions is unprecedented and has not been considered for well over 150 years. Nevertheless, it is a crucial feature of the populist awakening and an integral part of the semiotics of populism. It is not universally expressed as vigorously and emphatically as does Farage in the quotation, but it applies everywhere. In Trump’s policy of slapping China with billions of import duties while simultaneously damaging the US car industry or agriculture.<sup>3</sup> In the Danish case, where severe restrictions on international students’ enrolment and English-language courses reduce the Danish economy’s proven benefit from those foreigners who opt to stay after graduating.<sup>4</sup> Or in the Hungarian vendetta against Soros and the CEU, which has widespread support but does not in the least take the financial or foreign-policy side-effects into account.<sup>5</sup>

Populists’ concern with economic matters and what used to count as the national interest is, if not absent, at least negligible and at best secondary to their national ident-

<sup>3</sup> One such reaction is the decision by General Motors in November 2018 to lay off several thousands of workers and close down several plants across the USA, which made Trump attack the company, not for faulty economic behavior, but for... ingratitude! (Boudette 2018). In the spring of 2020 the story repeated itself, when Trump ordered GM, among others, to start producing ventilators in the common good in order to battle the coronavirus (Voytko 2020). The moral element of populism is in clear view.

<sup>4</sup> For readers able to read Danish, see <https://bit.ly/3blGORp> [Accessed 10 December 2018]. The report concludes that the economic benefits of foreign students (even if many return to their countries after graduation) far outweigh the public costs of enrolling them and (for EU students) paying out the student allowance which is commonly given to Danish students.

<sup>5</sup> See e.g. <https://nyti.ms/2N9xw9J> Accessed 3 December 2018. Interestingly, however, the journalist, Marc Santoro, cites the American ambassador to Hungary as follows: “...in an interview with *The Washington Post* last week, the ambassador, appointed by President Trump, seemed to react with something of a shrug to the failure to find a solution.” Populists support each other against the liberal enemy!

ity's existentialism, ordered national universes, and cultural sovereignty. In the conventional terminology of political science, the economy and the national interest thus interpreted has moved from being the independent to the dependent variable. The pooling of political sovereignty has been overtaken by a uniform insistence on the centrality of cultural sovereignty, the population's ethnic purity, and the intransigence of borders. Nationalism is back, and its symbolic politics has intentionally narrowed down to a limited array of core concerns.

This is the second area where d'Ancona is slightly off the mark. He argues that this is a debate "much less about national wealth or national sovereignty than national identity." However, the fact is that 'sovereignty' has changed places and should now be bracketed with national identity rather than national wealth. Populists are, without exception, sensitive to leaving any part of their national sovereignty in the hands of others or just sharing it with other countries. This is because 'sovereignty' for them has come to signify everything they feel passionately about and cannot abide to see in peril: national history, myths, legends, images, memories, culture, people, borders, wars, and victimization, welfare systems, and all the rest of the 'intergenerational' fabric that enters into all kinds of nationalist phantasmagoria. It has been pulled away from the former primarily legal and political definition and has entered the symbolic realm of identities.

### 3. Populism, identity, migrants

Migrants and foreigners also loom large in d'Ancona's article for a (good) reason. Migrants represent the outside world, which in all populist narratives is surrounded with suspicion, fear, and resentment. They are mobile and can pop up within your borders, they are often visibly foreign, and they give rise to all sorts of negative stereotyping, racist slurs, and defensive-aggressive political action. They are the 'enemy within,' in other words, the object of discrimination and hatred. It's OK to belittle and mock people who do not belong here, who (allegedly) do not contribute, and who should go back where they come from. All this is true – as is the presumption of widespread English racism, however we understand it. Nevertheless, I would argue, the role of migration in the populist imagination is often exaggerated or misrepresented.

First, it is exaggerated because migrants only *represent* the fundamental issues; they are not their core. Imagine that there were no migrants or threats of immigration. This would not eliminate the inequality problems stemming from the effects of the liberal order, would not keep elites from being labeled as corrupt, and would not prevent the dichotomy between national interest(s) and national identity that we see in the real world. It might help keep ethnic diversity at bay, but that is only a small part of the populist problem. Migration crises trigger a heap of other issues that seem problematic to the populist mind. Still, they do not create the problems, nor do these problems disappear if the migration crisis abates. Hungary and Poland are ruled by populist elites,

although immigrants' percentage in those countries is negligible. In semiotic terms, the process confuses representation for object.

Secondly, it is misrepresented, not because migration does not enter into the equation, but because the specific reasoning behind what d'Ancona calls the "extremely unpleasant nativism" is not identified correctly. Migrants are not just a sign; in a peculiar way, they are also part of the problem (object). They signify that the political regime has lost control, not merely of national sovereignty, but of the last and most important part of national sovereignty that matters for political elites. The logic runs like this. First, we lose control of our economy and our finances. Then of our ultimate decision-making powers, then of our borders, and finally of our popular base, which is or risks being polluted through immigration, diversity, inter-marriage, and multiple citizenships (read: identities). Thus, we lose control of the socialization of 'our people' and, by implication, their undivided loyalty as well. This is both the view of populist ideologues and their supporters' ethnic base, who cherish popular sovereignty and their preferential position therein as much as do political leaders.

However, it also manifests a predicament characterized by a perceived deficiency. It represents the lack of control in the other areas of sovereign existence that migration *symbolizes* – even when it not (or not yet) in itself a real danger. It, therefore, transposes the problem to other cultural and political domains – e.g., the lack of national control with health, law, housing, crime, finance, labor-market, education, international relations, etc. – calling on populist representatives to tackle the entire sorry state of the nation-state and its identity. Thus, migration comes to occupy the triple role of the sign, object, and representation at the same time. Real problems become mixed and confused with the most unreal fantasies; imagined objectives lead to unimaginable results, and the moralistic vision takes over from hard-nosed analysis.

We are in a sense reminded of Marx' words from *On the Jewish Question*:

The members of the political state are religious because of the dualism between individual life and species-life, between the life of civil society and political life. They are religious in the sense that man treats political life, which is remote from his own individual existence, as if it were his true life; and in the sense that religion is here the spirit of civil society, and expresses the separation and withdrawal of man from man. Political democracy is Christian in the sense that man, not merely one man but every man, is there considered a sovereign being, a supreme being; but it is uneducated, unsocial man, man just as he is in his fortuitous existence, man as he has been corrupted, lost to himself, alienated, subjected to the rule of inhuman conditions and elements, by the whole organization of our society—in short man who is not yet a real species-being. Creations of fantasy, dreams, the postulates of Christianity, the sovereignty of man—but of man as an alien being distinguished from the real man—all these

become, in democracy, the tangible and present reality, secular maxims. (Marx 1978 [1843]: 39)

It is Marx with a difference, however. Whereas in the 1843 version, abstract man carries out his political emancipation by subordinating his moral, conscious, but alienated self to his real life as a civil being in the competition between contradictory social actors, the current situation reverses the relationship: the morality of populism aims to take full and complete control of the anarchic person. This is morality carried to its last resort: populists are willing to put their material interests on the back burner if only foreigners and corrupt elites are be quenched, borders fortified, and the pure national home saved.

#### 4. The general will, moralism and sovereignty

If this must happen at the expense of democratic processes of the liberal kind, so be it. The result is either 'illiberal democracy' or outright authoritarianism – in both cases with a leadership structure that prioritizes charisma and affective bonding over the logic of economic rationality and clear-cut divisions between 'private' and 'public.' In turn, this implies the religiosity of populism (sometimes with a direct link between Church and State), the widespread embrace of moderation and austerity for the great cause of national belonging, and thus a willing suspension of disbelief. For populists, 'identity' eclipses 'interest,' since the main objective is to safeguard people's continuation and well-being as *national citizens* with a shared destiny and a common future. According to this way of interpreting the world, nationalism becomes existential, and nation and state fuse into one.

However, measured by the standards of normal nation-state rules and practices, this half-deluded worldview is a step back from the rational advances made by 'modernization.'<sup>6</sup> Why? Mainly because of populism's divisive attachment to a special definition of the constituent people; because of its basic neo-Puritan anti-materialism (despite some discourses to the contrary); and because it compromises the state's function as the institutionalized *volonté générale* in favor of ruling (or intending to rule) for the 'moral majority' only. Let's look at these arguments in somewhat greater detail.

Populists solve the question of who 'the people' are by nominating a specific part (mostly the select hardworking and nationally minded section, those that globalization has ignored, and those that ideologically represent them) to the status of the whole; the rest is excluded. This interpretation bypasses the legal definition of the people as those who possess formal citizenship and voting rights and instead makes it into a moral question, where those persons and groups that share the policies and preferences of

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<sup>6</sup> This should not be interpreted as identical with the widely held view that populism is a 'distortion' or 'pollution' of democracy (e.g. Müller 2016, Hansen 2017, and many other intellectuals). But it is normally different from the liberal-democratic form of governance, which is undoubtedly its origin of legitimacy.

populists (and *at the same time* have the right background, origin, and documents) are included. In contrast, the rest are excluded, marginalized, and frequently mocked.<sup>7</sup> The moral element of being a citizen – universally inherent in the national citizenship notion, which everywhere demarcates citizens from non-citizens, forming the basis of the nation-states' bio-politics – is thus re-interpreted, foregrounded, and prioritized to reinstate the yearned-for unity of people and elites. Or, according to the populist worldview, do away with elites and elevate the People (and their representatives) to the sole sovereignty factor.<sup>8</sup>

The irony is that whereas 'the People' in this sense feel betrayed and abandoned by the liberal/global elites and react loudly and vengefully (*Wir sind das Volk!*), the 'popular constituent' of sovereignty and its homogeneity of culture is all that these elites have left of their power (see above). The people mandate them (at least the political section), they refer to the people for their legitimacy, they tax the people for their financial resources, and they organize educational activities so that their popular base can represent the nation-state honorably in the global competition for revenue, recognition, and influence. Without the people, they would be nothing.<sup>9</sup> That is why migration looms so large on national (not just populist) agendas. The suspicion is that migrants (particularly Muslim refugees) cannot be counted on, do not share the secrets of 'our' national culture, have at best divided loyalties, and work against the monocultural ideal, which most politicians in the last resort adhere to.<sup>10</sup> In a society of 'global

<sup>7</sup> The most extreme form of an exclusive relationship between political power and a distinct part of the citizenry can be found in Israel, which accepts both Jews and Palestinians as formal citizens, but at the same time insists that the state is only for Jews. This anomaly was legally institutionalized in 2018, see <https://bit.ly/3ppV0nT> (Agence France-Presse in Jerusalem, 2019). Accessed 11 March 2019. In that light, one might be tempted to nominate Israel to the first place among populist nation-states, had it not been for its democracy, which seems rather frayed and definitely not compatible with democracy elsewhere. Conversely, the two facts may be causally connected.

<sup>8</sup> Trump, Orbán, Bolsonaro, Salvini et al are not, in the populist mind, grouped with 'elites' but with 'the people', no matter the wealth they have amassed or the power they possess. They are 'one of us', represent us against the elites 'we' despise and who should be put out of business, prosecuted, and locked up.

<sup>9</sup> If the sad corona situation has highlighted nothing else, it has at the very least shown us the desperate dependency of politicians and other elites on their (national) peoples. All the relief packages, all the trillions of dollars expended on the health sectors of different countries, and all the various lockdowns have one thing in common, ie to protect and maintain the 'human factor' of the production process, despite robotics, technological advances, and AI in general. I do not doubt the humane concern of all these policies and the fact that they are also rooted in honest intentions of saving lives and protecting individuals, but they should not and cannot be fully understood in isolation from the perceived cataclysm of imagining the core productivity and growth factor of the economic system being undermined.

<sup>10</sup> In an important sense, populist politicians are acting in accordance with Carl Schmitt's views as formulated in the *Concept of the Political* (CP): "To belong one must identify with the substantive characteristic, whatever it may be, that marks the identity of the people, and one must agree that this characteristic defines a form of life for the preservation of which one ought to be willing to sacrifice one's own life, in the fight against those who don't belong (CP, 46). (...) Schmitt realizes, of course, that it is possible for people who are not willing to identify in this way to be legally recognized as citizens, and to live law-abidingly, under the norms authorized by some positive constitution. Liberal states, in Schmitt's view, have a tendency to fail to distinguish properly between friends and enemies, and thus to extend rights of membership to those who do not truly belong to the political nation. In a liberal state, Schmitt fears, the political nation will slowly wither and die as a result of spreading de-politicization, it will succumb to internal strife, or it will be overwhelmed by external enemies who are more politically united (CP, 69–79). To avert these dangers, Schmitt suggests, it is necessary to make sure that the boundaries of the political nation and the boundaries of citizenship coincide." (From *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* 2014, see <https://stanford.io/2N7YILh>. Accessed 15 December 2018).

diversity,' they would – so goes the populist nightmare – lose not just their primary productive factor but also the cultural cohesion that constitutes most of their remaining sovereignty. They would have only raw power instruments left in their arsenal. They might still have the monopoly of force but can no longer exercise it effectively when power has become externalized from citizens and does not enjoy their backing.

## 5. Populism and the victimized People

These developments are exacerbated by the increasing absence between class origin and party representation, in other words, by the increase in catch-all parties and the competition for votes on an equal footing. All parties address all citizens, not just some particular section of the population. Ideology (and thus the real leadership function of political actors) is scrapped in favor of trying to pander to voter whims. Differences between party programs and policies dwindle, the personal and moral elements of political actors are credited with extra significance,<sup>11</sup> and it becomes less easy to blame other parties and their politicians for decisions and policies that your own party backs as well. What remains is the narcissism of minor differences.<sup>12</sup> Instead, domestic battles are externalized, other scapegoats are needed, whether in the form of the EU, uncontrollable influx of 'unassimilable' aliens, or international occurrences beyond national control, like the environmental challenge, international terrorism, or economic downturns.

Such processes open the door to populism, conspiracy theories, and the romanticization of the national past, activating memories of heroism and humiliations, fanning the flames of mistrust in elites and ideas of their betrayal of the real, hardworking, nationally based People: the morally informed victimization and revenge syndrome of populist mentality – and, in the process, emphasize the abnegation of their material desires and support the virulent defense of their national attachment.<sup>13</sup> Further, it re-introduces signs of political and cultural differences, even oppositions and sometimes contradictions, into a situation otherwise characterized by relative domestic consensus and international wheeling and dealing based on recognizing other state actors in the European and global environment. The declared end-goal of populist policies might be "our nation-state comes first and to hell with the others." Still, the reality of these fundamental changes speaks a different language and leads us in very different directions.

The first part of this 'reality check' is the implications of populism's view of the people as no longer coinciding with all formal citizens. The latter are no longer recog-

<sup>11</sup> In the USA, this moralization and personalization of politics is not a new thing whatsoever, which explains why Trumpist populism does not strike the American electorate – unlike the European – as a qualitative departure from mainstream politics, but rather as a gradualist development along a well-known track.

<sup>12</sup> A Freudian notion, first found in *Civilization and its Discontents* (2002: 305). The thesis posits that individuals and cultures closest to each other are also prone to finding and enhancing differences between them.

<sup>13</sup> Obviously austerity, self-abnegation, and self-sacrifice have been demanded of citizens all along, also by democratic governments. The novelty is that these 'virtues' are now totally embraced by the populist section of the people as part of their romantic struggle to retain the nation-state framework and its cultural sovereignty intact.

nized *per se* as members of the nation-state's moral citizenry. This is far removed from the normal practice in democracies, where governments of different political persuasions come and go, various groups, classes, and regions might benefit slightly from the specific political likes and dislikes of ministers and parties. Still, they all recognize the legitimate existence of the entire electorate, the whole people, and accept the result of elections. Parties that up on the opposition benches, moreover, do their utmost to do their job as opposition properly and gain acknowledgment for precisely that.

Populists, on the other hand, as a rule, do not recognize any opposition when they have gained power and do not recognize governments when they haven't.<sup>14</sup> In that case, they are branded as corrupt, as traitors, as foreign agents, or just as softies who haven't got the interests of the national population at heart but pursue their selfish concerns, in the process abandoning the people's sovereignty and identity. As pointed out above, a moral definition of the people is superimposed on the legal one, allowing populists – politicians as well as citizens – to apply their moralizing definition and weed out the rotten part of the population, including newcomers with other cultural and ethnic backgrounds, from the 'real People' – the most obvious sign of populism.

The rudeness, lack of ordinary civility, and vengeful behavior of Trump, Orbán, Salvini, Boris Johnson, Marine le Pen, Kaczynski, Wilders, etc., betray this lack of recognition of the domestic Other. It engenders a new kind of political, cultural, and plain human divisions in the national landscape, which cannot be mediated through dialogue and mutual recognition of the opposing side. The differences remain irreparable and potentially produce an unprecedented situation of anarchy, bitterness, and virtual civil war. Eventually, this comes to apply to the liberals too, whose tolerance is tested to its limits and frequently use stereotypes and slurs that compete well with those of the populists. Hillary Clinton's characterization of Trump's supporters as a "basket of deplorables" is only the best known in a long series of abusive, condescending discourses that fail to take the core of the matter into account. Thus, populists, as well as proponents of the liberal-democratic order, are both to blame for the rising chaos and intolerance we face these days, both domestically and in inter-state relations. Liberals and centrists have no reason to be smug.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>14</sup> We should, however, admit that this is just the ideal-type and that realities can take a different form. Populist parties in some European countries have come to accept ordinary democratic rules of the game as their route to power, or at the very least profess this to be the case. This would seem to apply to e.g. Denmark, Norway, Finland, Sweden, and Austria.

<sup>15</sup> As Bernard Yack correctly points out, "Liberals cannot inoculate themselves against the moral problem with nationalism by adopting a more reasonable understanding of nationhood or a greater appreciation of cultural difference. If they choose to endorse nationalism, then they need to be aware of the need to fight nationalism's corrosive effect on their own moral judgments, not just on the judgements of their more illiberal and irrational rivals" (2012: 232).

## 6. The ideal and the reality of populism

However, what is essential is to see and understand the enormous paradox existing between the ideal and rather idyllic vision of the populist movements, fantasizing about the sovereignty lost and soon to be regained, and the tremendous problems on the ground that their vision *in practice* engenders. If they accede to power, they do their utmost to shut the opposition out and tamper with fundamental rights, the rule of law, due process, and the division of powers in such a way that it is next to impossible to topple their rule. If they haven't (yet) managed to get that far, they are maniacally occupied with revenge, conspiracy theories, lying, producing fake news – or more subtly with influencing and skewing the political process in their own direction (like in Denmark or Norway, where populism has put on a more democratic garb). They are certainly not concerned about the resentment and disaffection they engender, nor with the destabilization and disruption that inevitably follow in their wake.

The first defect's direct outcome is the second, which, as briefly argued above, represents an instance of severe historical regression. Populists, if not in theory then definitely in practice, reject the line of demarcation between private and public, the sphere of competition and the sphere of the state, between private individuals and citizens – and thus also tamper with the legal framework of corporations and public institutions. Fidesz, in its party program, wants to nationalize hitherto privately run health services. Trump treats his office as if he were the CEO of a private company. PiS in Poland works in tandem with the Catholic Church, which as a private denomination has a political-cum-religious authority comparable to that of the State. Clearly, Berlusconi did not recognize the division but played simultaneously the role as prime minister, company CEO, and owner of the Milan football club without having any qualms about it at all. Matteo Salvini is suspected of having financial and possibly other links to groups in the Italian mafia.<sup>16</sup> And, most remarkably, none of them recognizes the entirety of their legal citizens as real citizens because they do not enjoy the full backing of all electors and substitute legal reality with moral assessments.

As Timothy Snyder has argued in an article in *The New York Times*, this is mostly due to the 'personality cult' of the populist (he calls them 'authoritarian') movements.<sup>17</sup> When everything hangs on one person, his (or her) charisma and his more or less arbitrary assessments, institutions do not matter, nor do accepted lines of division, neutrality, or respect for the 'rules of the game.' Lying, manipulating, and deceiving are OK if it serves a higher purpose. So is self-posturing and self-celebration. For instance, Trump presumes to see through the experts' phony predictions about climate change and rejects a recent climate change report because of his high intelligence! In an interview to the Washington Post, he explains that "one of the problems that a lot of people like my-

<sup>16</sup> E.g. Tondo and Kirchgaessner 2018. See <https://bit.ly/3dfFskm> Accessed 6 December 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Snyder, The Cowardly Face of Authoritarianism, *New York Times*, 3 December 2018.

self have [is that] we have very high levels of intelligence, but we're not necessarily such believers. You look at our air and our water, and it's right now at a record clean" (USA Today, November 27, 2018).

"We're not necessarily such believers" is a revealing comment, representative of the general approach of populist leaders. Amid an assertion based entirely on wishful thinking and airy-fairy postulates about 'intelligence,' Trump manages to turn the entire world upside-down. The statements and predictions of science are made to appear as religious credos, while Trump's amateurish gobbledygook parades as credible and much closer to the truth. This is one of the results of the thoroughgoing personalization of facts that populism represents. But the truth is different and much scarier: it is populism and its charismatic spokespeople who actually stand for a new national order of belief, denial of reality, and myth-making not seen in a long time. Material goals, economic problems, and global challenges seem to disappear but are nevertheless visible in the populist phantasmagoria of national welfare for all, postulates that 'we' are cleaner than ever, and the ever-present threat coming at us from the outside, whether in the form of Russian trolls, Chinese duplicity, North Korean missiles, European federalism, or migrant caravans.

## 7. Populism as the religion of nationalism

Populism is, in this sense, a religion of nationalism pure and simple. Politics has been diminished to a question of believing, not in a god, but a divinely inspired person, who hijacks the religious spirit away from the private realm and catapults it back into the affairs of State. It may be a comfort that, as the US astrophysicist Neil de Grasse Tyson has said, "[t]he good thing about science is that it's true whether or not you believe in it,"<sup>18</sup> but it is a question if that is the appropriate answer. 'Normal' democratic politics only takes truth and facts into account under the condition they support specific political goals.<sup>19</sup> Populism does not care about truth and facts at all, except for discursive purposes. The gap between iconic representation and symbolic signs can no longer be bridged. It has turned into a game of persuading and retaining supporters against their better judgment.

<sup>18</sup> In Dana Nutticelli, Trump's disbelief won't stop dangerous climate change, *The Guardian*, 5 December 2018.

<sup>19</sup> This is where much talk of a new era of 'post-factualism' errs. Facts and truth have, in democracies, never been respected in their own right, but only in contingent and conditional ways. In this sense, we have been living in 'post-factualism' all our lives. What is new in the populist era is that the conditionality has disappeared and truth has been almost totally replaced by newspeak, fake news and denial of facts. The exception lies in the domains of natural science and technology, because you cannot make robots work, get man on Mars, or create supercomputers by relying on false data and wishful thinking.

We have so far encountered a number of the paradoxes generated by populism in its attempts to find solutions to some of the liberal order's deficiencies and injuries on ordinary people. However, we still need to address the most fundamental paradox, which also explains why populism ends up producing and reproducing the same (or worse) effects, though often in a more affective garb.

This paradox is as evident and banal as it is often overlooked: the *unconditional commitment to the nation-state as the ultimate saving grace, the moral foundation, and the sanctuary of nationalism*. The departure point was the nation-state's historical formation with all its inherent contradictions and its mix between progressive and destructive elements. This led to the creation of the international order, the recognition of like-minded units in the rest of the world, and finally to several ideologies celebrating pluralism, openness, and a politics of negotiated settlements, which gave greater weight to the material interest component than the spiritual identity element of nationalism. In certain places, most clearly in the EU, it also formally affected the rock bottom of national sovereignty and threatened the state's existential reasoning and its links to its people. Sovereignty developed from an implicit *doxa* to a pragmatic bargaining chip in political elites' hands, soon to be followed by their financial and commercial counterparts.

There was (and is) a reason for this. The former nation-state compact has gradually become inadequate for representing the interests that the state and its favored private partners need to defend, in the spirit of liberalism and growth. Parts of the old social-national safety framework need to be sacrificed or downgraded; otherwise, the economy will shrink, 'we' will lose international respect. In the end, citizens will suffer a reduction of salaries and a rollback of national welfare – healthcare, for example. Living standards will, in other words, suffer. Prognoses for the UK post-Brexit order would seem to support this type of conclusion.

Populism's response to this kind of real or projected quandary is, correctly, that the current order is already reducing salaries, producing inequalities, and increasing the workload of ordinary people. Somewhat more doubtfully, populism adds that to avert such unhappy developments, we should return to the pure nation-state condition, forget about international conventions, hold on to 'our' sovereignty at all costs and get our own 'treacherous' elites out of the way to prevent them from harming our identity and cohesion more than they have already done. If, in consequence of all this, there is a slowing of economic growth and income, we should prefer that to the present situation (see Farage, beginning of this article), for we treasure our national identity above all else.

## 8. Conclusion: populism as the collective fantasia of despair

Thus, the economic rationale of the liberal order encounters a mythological nationalism-cum-religion. However, both take the nation-state as their point of reference and legitimacy. The former because the politicians hail from it and are dependent on it for their popular support, and the populists because they have elevated the People as their savior, and, in the process, semiotically eliminated the distinction between themselves as private individuals and as political actors, trustees of their general will.

This is a commitment to the idealism of the state while in the same process rejecting its reality. It clings to the formal promise of nationalism without recognizing its contradictory nature. And it refuses to accept that the uniformity of 'the People' conceals a real struggle between groups, generations, regions, and classes in the private sphere – and the multiple challenges to their living standards and welfare that provided the origins of their populist reaction. Populism sends its supporters back to where they came from, but with a vengeance. Nationalism was once a partly realistic, partly progressive movement, which filled a vital function in civilization's history and the accommodation of contradictory material interests. Now, sadly, it can only be described as a collective fantasia of despair. Any further raids into the semiotics of populism need to be based on this uncomfortable fact.

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# Sémiotique de la politique et systèmes non verbaux: la relation médias-politiciens grecs au temps de la crise économique

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## ABSTRACT

During the Greek economic crisis, the European media engaged in a series of press articles, television reports, and press cartoons particularly critical of the behavior of the contemporary Greek and the quality of the politicians who govern him. This attitude intensified during the radical left government of the SYRIZA party from January to August 2015. In this period, the European media engaged in a semiotic devaluation, an unprecedented deconstruction of Greek politicians' social image of the SYRIZA party's radical left government. The European Union authorities recorded this deconstruction at the level of the three semiotic codes: that of gesture, that of the dress code, and that of proxemics. This study proposes to analyze in a semiotic approach these choices expressed through polysemiotic texts likely to interpret a conscious manipulation of European public opinion, also introducing uses previously unknown in the political and media culture of Europe.

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## 1. Introduction

Au cours de la crise économique grecque (2010-2018), les médias européens se sont engagés dans une série d'articles de presse, de reportages télévisés et de caricatures de presse particulièrement critiques à propos du comportement du Grec contemporain et de la qualité des politiciens qui le gouvernent. Indépendamment de la véracité ou non de ces publications, il semblerait que le monde européen de la communication ait perdu de la qualité qui le distinguait jusqu'alors en se livrant en 2015 à une dévaluation, une déconstruction sans précédent

de l'image sociale des politiciens grecs du gouvernement de gauche radicale du parti SYRIZA. Pour la majorité des citoyens grecs, les choix politiques retenus ridiculisaient les décisions politiques pris par leur gouvernement et toutes les relations avec les créanciers de la Grèce et les autres Etats membres de la zone euro. Alonso (2014) constate que:

on retrouverait dans le discours économique et politique un *récit* pour rendre compte de la crise de l'économie grecque construit de la manière suivante: des événements (la découverte du déficit abyssal de l'économie grecque, par exemple, avec ses effets d'intensification dramatique et passionnelle) jalonnent et rythment un cycle et l'orientent dans un sens ou dans un autre (alors on raconte l'inexorable décadence et la supercherie de l'économie hellénique depuis quelques années) avant de l'intégrer dans une temporalité plus étendue, une structure culturelle et sociale (et alors on affirme la fragilité endémique des institutions ou la corruption structurelle des pays du sud). (Alonso 2014: 64-65)

Dans cette situation, les médias européens ont joué un rôle qui est considéré par une partie de l'opinion publique grecque comme 'ambigu' si on tient compte de la façon dont les médias ont présenté une série d'événements qui concernaient la vie politique grecque. Pour une partie de l'opinion publique, il y avait une dimension sémiotique dans la présentation de ces événements politiques qui connotait un mépris des partis politiques européens dits 'traditionnels' (Droite et Centre) vers les décisions politiques et les déclarations que le gouvernement de gauche radicale du parti SYRIZA souhaitait suivre. Cette dimension sémiotique de la communication médiatique était déjà soulignée par Lamizet qui disait que "le rôle des médias est donc primordial dans la structuration de l'événement: c'est dans les médias qu'il acquiert, pour la première fois, la consistance d'un signe. En mettant en œuvre une représentation de l'événement, les médias lui donnent une dimension sémiotique" (Lamizet 2006: 21).

Cette étude se propose d'analyser dans une approche sémiotique ces choix exprimés à travers des textes polysémiotiques susceptibles de traduire une manipulation consciente de l'opinion publique européenne, introduisant ainsi des usages inconnus jusqu'alors dans la culture politique et médiatique de l'Europe.

## 2. La sémiotique de la politique

Il est généralement connu que la politique suit des règles de communication précises surtout devant la caméra journalistique. Les politiciens, hommes et femmes, prêtent attention à la façon dont ils/elles s'habillent, s'asseyent, se comportent. Ils/elles doivent respecter certaines normes dans le cadre des déontologies professionnelles, des codes

et des rites du savoir-vivre politique. Comme Barthes (1957: 150) le constate, l'image d'un politicien "propose un climat physique, un ensemble de choix quotidiens exprimés dans une morphologie, un habillement, une pose." Pour certains citoyens, les politiciens sont une sorte de symbole ou doivent être une sorte de modèle parce qu'ils font partie de la vie publique qui contraint à des normes précises.

C'est la violation de ces normes précises qui provoque une suite de reportages journalistiques qui visent aux politiciens grecs du gouvernement de gauche radicale du parti SYRIZA. Il ne s'agit pas d'un événement inattendu. Pour Barthes (1980: 150), "le Politique est, subjectivement, une source continue d'ennui et/ou de jouissance; c'est, de plus et en fait (c'est-à-dire en dépit des arrogances du sujet politique), un espace obstinément polysémique, le lieu privilégié d'une interprétation perpétuelle (si elle est suffisamment systématique, une interprétation n'y sera jamais démentie, à l'infini)." Pourtant, la question qui se pose est de savoir les limites de ces interprétations perpétuelles sinon nous traiterons un cas de sémiosis illimitée.

Lamizet (2002: 267) avance plus en soutenant que "[l']indentité des acteurs politiques se fonde moins sur l'image qu'ils donnent ou sur le discours qu'ils énoncent<sup>1</sup> que sur les formes symboliques et les représentations initiées par leurs pratiques institutionnelles et par leurs choix stratégiques." Ces formes symboliques et les représentations initiées par leurs pratiques institutionnelles sont souvent manipulées par les médias qui influencent pour leur part la sémiotique de la politique.

Bronwen & Ringham (2006: 150) définissent la *sémiotique de la politique* comme une branche de la sociosémiotique qui s'intéresse à l'analyse du discours politique, des institutions et des stratégies de persuasion ainsi que du rôle des acteurs individuels. Elle comprend l'étude de phénomènes politiques tels que la construction de l'opinion publique et l'organisation et le fonctionnement de campagnes électorales. Les chercheurs se sont particulièrement intéressés aux représentations du pouvoir dans les médias et à la dimension politique du discours institutionnel<sup>2</sup>.

Dans la définition de la sémiotique ci-dessus ce qui manque c'est la notion de *signe*. Il est à noter que la politique publique est un espace de signes et c'est pour cela que la sémiotique politique tant pour Turpin que pour Lamizet est définie en tant qu'*élaboration des signes*.

<sup>1</sup> Pour Bordron (2013), "la tradition des photographies politiques montre que l'image peut cacher (ne pas dire) et même effacer, ajouter abusivement, donner pour réel un montage de studio, etc. Le point essentiel, dans tous ces cas, n'est pas la vérité de l'énoncé mais bien le mode véridictoire de son énonciation. Il semble bien qu'il y ait une convention du 'montrer vrai', de la rectitude iconique, équivalent au 'dire vrai' du langage."

<sup>2</sup> Toutes les traductions de l'anglais et du grec sont nos traductions.

Plus précisément, pour Turpin:

la sémiotique politique est l'étude des signes du politique et de la manière dont ils produisent du sens. Le champ ainsi défini est très large si l'on considère l'importance des manifestations signifiantes du politique: rites, discours, mais aussi institutions qui peuvent relever de cette étude [...]. (Turpin 2006: 286)

Lamizet (2006b) révèle encore une dimension, celle des pratiques sociales. Quant à Lamizet (2006b: 4), "[...] la sémiotique politique élabore une logique de signes fondés sur l'articulation entre des signes, de toutes sortes, et des pratiques sociales mises en œuvre par des acteurs sociaux dans l'espace publique." Ces définitions reflètent le cadre d'étude des événements politiques, des textes politiques, que nous allons étudier. Nous rappelons ici que pour l'Ecole sémiotique de Moscou-Tartu, "la recherche sémiotique contemporaine traite le texte comme une des notions fondamentales en le considérant non pas comme un objet stable ayant des traits constants mais comme une fonction. Tout peut être considéré comme texte: l'œuvre toute entière, sa partie, le groupe de composition, le genre - bref, toute une littérature" (Lotman 2004 : 152-153).

### 3. Les systèmes sémiotiques non verbaux

La sémiotique de la politique a pu se développer profitant de l'expansion de la notion de *texte* et de *discours* à la politique. Comme Ahonen (1991: 264) le soutient, "l'analyse de la génération de sens en politique reste [...] déficiente si la recherche néglige la substance non verbale en tant que porteur de la politique [...]." Il est vrai que les dernières décennies l'étude sémiotique de la politique semble se concentrer moins aux messages linguistiques en comparaison avec le passé. La communication politique non verbale paraît être plus révélatrice au niveau de sens que les déclarations langagières et la sémiotique peut jouer un rôle important dans ce sens. Comme Drechsler le soutient :

la Science Politique telle qu'elle existe, spécialement ayant une fixation glottocentrique [...] a besoin d'un système systématique, scholastique, théoriquement riche et englobant tous les aspects non glottocentriques de chaque champ. La Sémiotique de la politique peut accomplir cela, à condition que la sémiotique ne soit pas trop exclusivement glottocentrique elle-même. (Drechsler 2009: 91)

En plus, Lamizet et Silem (1997: 506) mentionnent qu’avec le développement des moyens de communication non linguistiques, la sémiotique, en tant que réflexion sur les systèmes de signes ou de significations, s’est affranchie de la réflexion linguistique et a créé ses propres outils.”<sup>3</sup> Nous allons voir que la différenciation du comportement politique des autorités de l’Union Européenne se fait au niveau de la communication non verbale et plus précisément au niveau de trois systèmes sémiotiques non verbaux qui se lient entre eux: celui de la *kinésique* (système gestuel/haptique), celui de *code vestimentaire* (système de vêtements) et celui de la *proxémique* (système de distance).

### 3.1. Le code gestuel

En ce qui concerne le premier système sémiotique, celui de la gestualité, Greimas & Courtés (1993: 165) le relie “[...] au phénomène paralinguistique qui aurait une fonction d’auxiliation dans le cadre de la communication intersubjective.” Plus précisément, comme Danesi le définit:

le langage du corps est le terme général utilisé pour indiquer une communication au moyen de gestes, des positions du corps et d’autres signaux et signes corporels volontaires et involontaires. Cela inclut également les habitudes de toilettage, les styles de coiffure et de vêtements, les pratiques, comme le tatouage et le perçage corporel. (Danesi 2004: 53)<sup>4</sup>

L’importance de la gestualité dans la communication politique est indéniable. Calbris (2001: 130) souligne que “[c]e n’est pas un hasard si le geste précède la verbalisation. Il exprime la pensée, la plupart du temps, avant la parole elle-même. Non seulement il la prépare, mais il la complète d’avance.” Selon Danesi (2004: 53), “le langage corporel communique des informations non-dites sur l’identité, les relations et les pensées des personnes, ainsi que leurs humeurs, motivation et attitudes.”<sup>5</sup> Basso Fossali (2017: 4) révèle le caractère sémiotique du geste en mentionnant qu’“à travers le geste, on sculpte localement une niche de sens qui s’interpose entre la rétroaction énonciative (genèse de l’acte) et la prospection des conséquences (efficacité de l’acte).”

Le code tactile (ou *haptique*), la communication par le toucher, est une composante essentielle dans la gestualité. D’après Danesi:

<sup>3</sup> Alonso fait une autre constatation. D’après Alonso (2014: 62), “[...] la sémiotique semble parfois laisser à d’autres disciplines le soin d’utiliser ou de manipuler certains de ses concepts. Pour ces disciplines – comme le marketing, politique ou commercial –, la sémiotique n’est qu’une sorte de boîte à outils dans les meilleurs des cas ou tout simplement le fournisseur de quelques concepts de schématisation simplificateurs ou de notions passe-partout qui se répandent avec une plus ou moins grande pertinence et efficacité [...]”.

<sup>4</sup> “Body language is the general term used to indicate communication by means of gestures, postures, and other witting and unwitting body signals and signs. It also includes grooming habits, hair and clothing styles, and such practices as tattooing and body piercing” (Danesi 2004: 53).

<sup>5</sup> “Body language communicates unspoken information about people’s identity, relationships, and thoughts, as well as moods, motivation, and attitudes” (Danesi 2004: 53).

dans la plupart des cultures, une forme de salutation de base implique une poignée de main, qui est un exemple parfait d'un comportement social régi par un code tactile, c'est-à-dire par un code qui régit les modèles de contact dans les situations interpersonnelles. L'étude du toucher passe sous la rubrique de l'haptique. (Danesi 2004: 55)<sup>6</sup>

Il est à noter que selon Heslin (1974), la communication haptique, à l'exclusion des comportements ouvertement hostiles tels que les gifles ou la fessée, peuvent être classés en cinq types principaux : *fonctionnel/professionnel, social/poli, amitié/cordialité, amour /affection, sexuel/passion*.

Nous allons constater qu'à l'exception des deux dernières catégories, il y a une grande difficulté à catégoriser le comportement des officiers de l'Union Européenne vers les politiciens grecs en question. Nous allons aussi voir par la suite que la gestualité entre les fonctionnaires de l'Union Européenne et les membres du gouvernement grec de l'époque dépassait de beaucoup les limites du savoir du comportement politique.

### 3. 2. Le code vestimentaire

Pour la sémiotique, le vêtement et ses accessoires, la mode, sont porteurs de sens. Selon Barthes (1967 : 45), "le vêtement est l'un de ces objets de communication, comme la nourriture, les gestes, les comportements, la conversation [...]". Lotman (2004: 172) révèle son caractère culturel affirmant que "telle est, en fait, la fonction de la mode: elle est destinée à être le métronome et le catalyseur du développement culturel." Nous allons voir par la suite que le code vestimentaire des membres du gouvernement grec de l'époque a donné naissance à des commérages qui ridiculisaient le gouvernement grec et le premier ministre même. Selon Danesi:

les vêtements sont plus qu'une simple couverture corporelle destinée à protéger. C'est un système de signes qui est interconnecté avec les autres systèmes de signes de la société à travers lesquels nous pouvons envoyer des messages sur nos attitudes, notre statut social, nos convictions politiques, etc. (Danesi 2004: 178)<sup>7</sup>

Ainsi, Danesi (2004: 177) donne l'exemple d'un homme qui s'intéresse à travailler dans une banque et qui doit passer un interview. Danesi remarque que sa cravate doit être d'une couleur conservatrice et que son utilisation peut être optionnelle.

<sup>6</sup> "In most cultures, a basic form of greeting involves handshaking, which is a perfect example of a social behavior regulated by a tactile code, that is, by a code that governs the patterns of touch in interpersonal situations. The study of touch goes under the rubric of haptics" (Danesi 2004: 55).

<sup>7</sup> "Clothing is more than mere bodily covering for protection. It is a sign system that is interconnected with the other sign systems of society through which we can send out messages-about our attitudes, our social status, our political beliefs, etc." (Danesi 2004: 178).

Dans la communication politique la cravate semble être un accessoire imposé pour les situations dites sérieuses ou formelles.<sup>8</sup> Assez souvent, les politiciens, pour donner l'impression d'une ambiance cordiale, ne portent pas de cravate lorsqu'ils passent à des situations de communication politique non formelles ce qui semble être un acte accepté et justifié après des discussions longues provoquant l'ennui. En particulier la cravate est liée au conservatisme. Le journaliste Florian Delafoi (2017) considère comme "une petite révolution" le fait que le parlement britannique ait assoupli son code vestimentaire, acceptant que la cravate ne soit plus obligatoire.

### 3. 3. Le code proxémique

La proxémique est un système sémiotique pas largement étudié. Greimas & Courtés (1993: 300) définissent la proxémique comme un champ de recherche "[...] qui vise à analyser les dispositions des sujets et des objets dans l'espace, et, plus particulièrement, l'usage que les sujets font de l'espace aux fins de signification." Selon Fabbri (1968: 73-74), «on devrait également étendre le geste proxémique jusqu'à la définition d'un domaine des distances de relations sociales limitée à deux partenaires (dyades). Il est possible que ces relations soient articulées sur la catégorie spatiale universelle *symétrie* vs *dissymétrie*». Fabbri nous explique que:

La symétrie serait reliée à la proximité = près (à la sympathie, aux interactions fréquentes et intimes, à l'usage mutuel du tu. La dissymétrie serait reliée à la distance = loin (l'indifférence et l'antipathie, les interactions rares et formelles, l'usage mutuel de vous); ou aux relations spatiales avant vs après ou dessus vs dessous en se rattachant alors à l'idée de supériorité et d'infériorité (à l'influence et le pouvoir vs soumission, et à l'emploi dissymétrique du tu et du vous). Il en résulterait un modèle généralisé des relations qui rattacherait les universaux des statuts et des affinités à la dimension spatiale interpersonnelle. (Fabbri 1968: 74)

Nous allons voir que la manipulation de ces systèmes sémiotiques lors les rencontres politiques entre des hommes politiques grecs et les autorités de l'Union Européenne a contribué à la transmission par les médias européens d'une certaine confusion en ce qui concerne les intentions bienveillantes de ces derniers pour aider la Grèce à sortir de la crise économique de l'époque. Une confusion qui était difficile d'être interprétée même par les agents de la communication médiatique, les journalistes.

Si on tient compte que, selon Lamizet (2006b: 13), "la communication politique est toujours une *communication destinée*" (emphasis dans l'original), l'inquiétude des agents

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<sup>8</sup> Mayi (2016) constate que le costume avec cravate reste jusqu'aujourd'hui un choix vestimentaire commun pour les hommes politiques français. Parmi les connotations du code vestimentaire dans la vie politique il y a le sérieux et la diligence des hommes politiques.

de la communication politique était justifiée à cause du caractère imprédictable du comportement politique des agents de l'Union Européenne. Comme Lotman (2013: 67) le mentionne, "l'élément imprédictable devient un acte, il est indéniablement soumis à interprétation et on l'attribue d'une motivation additionnelle après l'événement." Et cela se fait parce que:

les sujets de l'énonciation s'y expriment *au nom de*, ils n'expriment pas une parole ou une position singulière, mais leur activité symbolique est toujours située - pour eux-mêmes et pour les autres – par rapport à une institution ou à une dimension institutionnelle dont ils se légitiment. (emphase dans l'original) (Lamizet, 2006b: 13)

C'est cette symbolisation des actes politiques qui sera le but de cette étude tenant en compte que le comportement des dignitaires européens envers les officiels grecs est devenu objet d'analyse pour les grecs. En plus, ce comportement ait jailli le soupçon d'un complot contre la Grèce organisé par les créanciers du pays (surtout par l'Allemagne) pour affaiblir et ridiculiser le peuple, combattre sa résistance contre les mesures économiques exhaustives imposées.<sup>9</sup>

#### 4. Quelques exemples des événements politiques sémiotiques du passé

La question qui en résulte est pourquoi doit-on chercher des aspects sémiotiques aux systèmes sémiotiques non verbaux du moment où une interprétation de la communication non verbale peut être accidentelle? La réponse pourrait être la fréquence de ces événements non verbaux, une fréquence qui connote une certaine intentionnalité. Pourtant, l'exploitation des moyens non verbaux dans la vie politique européenne était assez limitée étant donné que le haut niveau de la culture européenne ne permettait pas la projection publique des événements de ce type par les médias.

Ainsi, nous savons que, le Président de la République Française Nicolas Sarkozy, pour exprimer son désaccord avec l'intention du Premier Ministre grec Georges Papandréou d'organiser en 2011 un référendum contre les mesures d'austérité proposées par les dirigeants de la zone euro, ne l'avait pas accueilli à l'entrée du bâtiment où un sommet se réalisait à Cannes. Mais, en plus, il n'avait pas quelqu'un pour l'orienter dans le bâtiment ce qui avait été interprété par les médias comme un acte impoli intentionnellement enregistré pour exprimer le mécontentement du Président français. Pourtant, l'évocation du hasard peut justifier cet événement qui s'était déroulé loin des caméras journalistiques.

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<sup>9</sup> Voir Kourdis (2016).

Cependant, quand un incident politique se fait devant les caméras journalistiques cela change. Ainsi, l'ambassadeur turc avait été humilié en 2010, devant les photographes et les cameramen, par le Ministre israélien de la Défense Danny Ayalon, en signe de protestation contre la diffusion sur une chaîne de télévision privée turque d'une série jugée antisémite par Israël. Ce dernier avait notamment refusé de lui serrer la main, le contraignant à attendre longuement dans un couloir, puis à s'asseoir plus bas que ses interlocuteurs.<sup>10</sup>

Dans ce cas, les codes gestuels et proxémiques, tout comme aussi l'aménagement dans l'espace, ont créé des connotations négatives qui ont provoqué des déclarations dénотatives pour affronter le problème créé. Mais qu'en est-il quand des événements pareils basés sur les codes non verbaux se répètent, se multiplient devant les caméras journalistiques donnant ainsi l'occasion de produire des interprétations ambiguës, même négatives, pour la bienveillance des dignitaires européens-créanciers.

## 5. La dévaluation d'une idée

Selon Danesi (2004: 53), les signes kinésiques peuvent être *innés* (involontaires), *acquis* (volontaires) ou un mélange des deux. La dimension sémiotique dans l'étude de la communication politique concerne principalement la deuxième catégorie car il semblerait que les signes qui caractérisaient le comportement politique des autorités de l'Union Européenne vers les politiciens grecs étaient volontaires. Ainsi, pendant la première période du gouvernement de la gauche radicale SYRIZA qui a duré neuf mois (Janvier-Août 2015) le public européen s'est trouvé devant une dévaluation sémiotique de ce gouvernement, à notre avis sans précédent dans l'histoire politique européenne. Cette situation n'est pas passée inaperçue par la presse grecque. Ainsi, le journal en ligne grec *iefimerida* publie le 5 Février 2015 un article ayant comme titre "Pourquoi les dirigeants européens oublient-ils leurs bonnes manières quand ils se retrouvent à côté de membres du gouvernement grec ?"<sup>11</sup> Cet article critique contient des photos et des commentaires<sup>12</sup> sur le comportement des dirigeants de l'Union Européenne.

<sup>10</sup> Voir, <https://bit.ly/2Ntdgzu> (dernière consultation le 26.11.2020).

<sup>11</sup> A voir, <https://bit.ly/3u204SW> (dernière consultation le 16.12.2020).

<sup>12</sup> Pour Barthes (1961 : 137), "aucune photographie n'a jamais convaincu ou démenti personne (mais elle peut 'confirmer'), dans la mesure où la conscience politique est peut-être inexistante en dehors du logos : la politique, c'est ce qui permet tous les langages."

Les messages iconiques sélectionnés proviennent des revues grecques et étrangères, imprimées et électroniques qui ont circulé pendant la première période du gouvernement de la gauche radicale SYRIZA en Grèce qui a duré neuf mois (Janvier-Août 2015).

Plus précisément, la première photo concerne l'arrivée du politicien Allemand Martin Schultz, président du Parlement européen, à Athènes le jeudi 29 Janvier 2015. Ce jour-là, il pleuvait, mais le Premier Ministre Alexis Tsipras a descendu les marches du perron de sa résidence officielle de Maxime pour aller à sa rencontre. Entre sourires et poignées de main, la main de Sultz se pose sur le col de Tsipras (fig.1). Le journaliste commente qu'avec ce geste, d'une intimité incroyable envers un Premier Ministre, M. Sultz avec humour soulignait l'absence de cravate,<sup>13</sup> un acte de rébellion politique pour Tsipras.

Il est à noter que le Premier Ministre grec avait déclaré le 24 janvier 2015 qu'il ne porterait une cravate que lorsque la Grèce quitterait les programmes d'aide économique qu'elle recevait des pays membres de la zone euro.<sup>14</sup> En plus, dans une interview au journal américain *The New York Times* le 17 janvier 2015, Tsipras reliait sa décision de ne pas porter de cravate à sa idéologie politique en mentionnant: "je pense que s'il y a quelque chose que les gens apprécient dans Syriza et moi-même, c'est que nous n'avons pas assumé la mentalité des partis établis et leurs façons spécifiques de s'habiller, d'agir."<sup>15</sup>

Un autre journaliste du même quotidien remarque que ce choix vestimentaire est aussi adopté par d'autres membres du gouvernement grec. Ainsi, Yanis Varoufakis, le nouveau Ministre grec des Finances, a rencontré le lundi 2 février 2015 le Ministre britannique des Finances George Osborne, en chemise bleue, veste en cuir et sans cravate (fig.2). Panos Kammenos, le nouveau ministre de la Défense et ancien porteur de cravate, a également commencé à abandonner l'accessoire.<sup>16</sup> Sullivan (2019) supporte que:

dans la gauche européenne contemporaine, le radicalisme anti-austérité combiné à la perturbation vestimentaire est devenu une dominante culturelle. Les attitudes non conventionnelles à l'égard de l'habillement, qui se manifestent par des choix de style, sont devenues emblématiques d'un rejet du statu quo et des défis politiques posés par des insurgés et des opposants aux poli-

<sup>13</sup> Pour Barthes (2001: 180), "toujours pour les hommes ou pour les adolescents, pendant très longtemps, le cou a été noué, fermé par une cravate, la cravate ayant pour fonction, précisément, de cacher le cou," mais pour Owyong (2009: 204), la cravate se distingue modalement et elle est fréquemment le point d'entrée visuel dans le costume connotant un pouvoir, une autorité, un décorum inébranlable.

<sup>14</sup> Boutin, Dard et Rouvillois (2019) relie cette attitude de Tsipras au populisme et ils mentionnent que "le populiste se manifeste enfin jusque dans la transgression des rites de l'ancien monde: c'est ainsi qu'après sa victoire de janvier 2015, Tsipras avait refusé de prêter serment sur la Bible, conformément aux usages traditionnels, et qu'il affiche comme un acte de rébellion politique son refus obstiné de porter une cravate."

<sup>15</sup> A voir, Daley (2015).

<sup>16</sup> A voir, Friedman (2015).

tiques établies jusqu'alors, de Pablo Iglesias, le chef du parti populiste de gauche Podemos en Espagne à Alexis Tsipras et Yanis Varoufakis du parti réformiste de la gauche radicale grecque, Syriza. (Sullivan, 2019: 167)<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 1.** Visite du Président du Parlement Européen Martin Schulz à Athènes (29.1.2015)



**Figure 2.** Yanis Varoufakis et George Osborne à Londres (2.2.2015)

Un jour avant sa visite à Londres (le dimanche 1.2.2015), le Ministre grec des Finances, Yanis Varoufakis, accompagné du Vice-ministre grec des Relations Economiques Internationales, Euclide Tsakalotos, rendirent visite au Ministre français des Finances Michel Sapin à Paris. Le Ministre français prit un bout du foulard de M. Tsakalotos et le lui enroula autour du cou en lui demandant pourquoi il le portait (fig.3). Le journaliste étonné commente l'attitude du ministre jouant avec le foulard d'un ministre d'un autre pays devant les caméras, lors d'une réunion officielle. Le journaliste ne dit pas que peut-être c'était un geste qui connote l'anticonformisme des ministres grecs de la gauche radicale pour lesquels la cravate est un symbole des partis politiques conservateurs et que c'est à cette idéologie à laquelle renvoie le ministre français faisant remarquer l'absence de la cravate qui fait partie du protocole politique et demandant au Ministre grec s'il fait froid à Paris.

Le Vice-ministre grec Euclide Tsakalotos n'était pas le seul face au comportement du Ministre français des Finances, Michel Sapin. Ce dernier arrivant à une conférence de presse commune tient par le bras le Ministre grec des Finances Yanis Varoufakis ce qui connote une grande familiarité (fig.4). Une atmosphère de joie ou une convivialité entre deux hommes, beaucoup plus qu'entre deux politiciens, rien ne justifiant une telle image devant les médias. Il semble que le sourire est le seul 'dispositif' pour dépasser un moment embarrassant.

<sup>17</sup> "On the contemporary European left, anti-austerity radicalism combined with vestimentary disruptiveness has emerged as a cultural dominant. Unconventional attitudes to dress, manifested as style choices, have become emblematic of a rejection of the status quo and the political challenges mounted by insurgent, anti-establishment figures, from Pablo Iglesias, the leader of the populist left Podemos party in Spain, to Alexis Tsipras and Yannis Varoufakis of the Greek radical left reformist party Syriza" (Sullivan, 2019: 167).



**Figure 3.** La visite de deux Ministres grecs à Paris (1.2.2015)



**Figure 4.** Michel Sapin et Yanis Varoufakis (1.2.2015)

Le journaliste de *iefimerida* appelle ces gestes des ‘plaisanteries’ et il commente que ces plaisanteries ont continué lors de la visite du Premier Ministre grec Alexis Tsipras à Bruxelles, au siège de la Commission Européenne, pour rencontrer le Président de la Commission Européenne Jean-Claude Juncker le 4 Février 2015. A Bruxelles, l’image du geste de Juncker de prendre par la main Alexis Tsipras souriant mais embarrassé pour l’accompagner au bureau a fait le tour du monde (fig.5). Le journaliste commente que les blagues vont et viennent puisqu’il s’agit encore une fois d’un geste hors protocole politique. Il est vrai que cette image était négative pour le jeune Premier Ministre Tsipras, récemment élu, mais aussi pour le vieux politicien Juncker qui incarnait le savoir-vivre politique européen.

Ce geste pourrait être interprété comme un geste de manipulation du Premier Ministre grec pour le faire changer d’idée de ne pas payer la dette du pays et d’adopter “la politique réaliste,” une politique de soumission aux marchés internationaux et à l’Union Européenne (à l’Allemagne particulièrement) comme l’avaient fait ses prédécesseurs. Le journaliste du média français *L’Opinion*, Gilles Sengès (2015), parle de “la diplomatie grecque à cols ouverts” soulignant qu’elle rappelle “celle des Bourgeois de Calais qui se livrèrent la nuque dégagee aux troupes d’Edouard III, en août 1347, dans le but de sauver la vie des habitants de la ville assiégée avant d’être épargnés grâce à l’intervention de Philippa de Hainaut, l’épouse du roi d’Angleterre.”<sup>18</sup> Cependant, cette image a fait le tour du monde dans les médias, ajoutant encore un moment embarrassant pour le gouvernement grec de l’époque.

Dans une autre rencontre politique, cette fois en Italie, le journaliste souligne le talent communicatif du Premier Ministre italien Matteo Renzi qui a offert à Alexis Tsipras une cravate (fig.6). Pour lui, à part sa courtoisie, le premier ministre Italien a eu comme but de montrer à nouveau que le Premier Ministre grec devait changer d’attitude et

<sup>18</sup> A voir, <https://bit.ly/3b4wpQw> (dernière consultation le 16.12.2020).

collaborer avec les autres pays membres de la zone euro. Selon le journaliste, puisque l'absence de cravate<sup>19</sup> étant devenue un symbole du gouvernement, le forcer est ennuyeux. Il se demande si la prochaine étape sera un chapeau en cadeau.

Cette remarque n'est pas si innocente. Mettre à quelqu'un un chapeau connote un acte de supériorité dans la pratique grecque, peut-être dans le reste de l'Europe aussi. Il est aussi à noter les paroles du Premier Ministre italien pendant cette conférence: "nous voulons aider la Grèce, mais nous voulons aussi que le moment soit venu pour la Grèce de sortir de la crise, et lorsque ce-ci sera sortie de la crise, alors Alexis portera une cravate italienne." Ainsi, lorsque la Grèce sortira de la crise, le Premier Ministre grec pourra accompagner cet événement par un acte de haute esthétique, une cravate italienne qui connote le bon goût de l'industrie italienne de la mode. Il est à noter ici l'utilisation du prénom<sup>20</sup> par le journaliste du Premier Ministre grec, une pratique qui n'est pas largement adoptée étant donné qu'elle montre un certain manque de respect pour la personne à qui on se réfère.

Quelque soit la relation entre les deux jeunes Premiers Ministres, le protocole exige une image publique précise. L'utilisation du prénom du Premier Ministre grec et l'offre d'un cadeau plus personnelle ne sont pas passés inaperçues par les journalistes grecs et étrangers qui ont utilisé des commentaires vifs pour décrire cette ambiance légère.



**Figure 5.** Visite du Premier Ministre grec Alexis Tsipras au siège de la Commission Européenne (4.2.2015)



**Figure 6.** Le Premier ministre grec Alexis Tsipras reçoit le cadeau de Matteo Renzi (4.2.2015)

Les événements embarrassants des politiciens grecs avec les hauts dignitaires européens non seulement ne cessaient pas mais au contraire se multipliaient. Le 22 mai 2015, le Président de la Commission Européenne Jean Claude Juncker, a placé sa cravate sur son homologue grec, Alexis Tsipras proposant apparemment au Premier Ministre

<sup>19</sup> Devecchio (2019) remarque que "certes, il ne porte toujours pas de cravate, mais comme le fait remarquer une analyste politique, il a ajouté des 'pochettes à ses costumes', ce qui montre une adoption oblique du code vestimentaire soigné pour ses rencontres officielles."

<sup>20</sup> Il est à noter la position de Barthes (1972: 22) selon laquelle "le nom propre est lui aussi un signe [...] c'est un signe volumineux, un signe toujours gros d'une épaisseur touffue de sens [...]."

grec, arrivé sans cravate, de lui prêter la sienne (fig. 7). Cette remarque du journaliste connote que le haut dignitaire européen, politique depuis 35 ans et Premier Ministre du Luxembourg pendant 19 ans, connaissait très bien le protocole politique et que peut-être il y avait un sens caché dans son geste. Il est à noter que cette fois l'incident avait eu lieu lors de la photo officielle de tous les chefs des états et des gouvernements qui participaient au Sommet de l'Union Européenne.

Le langage du corps et surtout les incidents haptiques de la part des dirigeants de l'Union Européenne vers les politiciens grecs devenaient de plus en plus imprévisibles et choquants. Le 22 Juin 2015, Jean-Claude Juncker, le Président de la Commission européenne, tapotait gentiment la joue du Premier Ministre Alexis Tsipras, lors de la pause d'une conférence de presse conjointe (fig.8). En Grèce, mais aussi dans d'autres pays, il s'agit d'un geste entre un adulte et un enfant pour lui exprimer sa sympathie. Le fait que le Président de la Commission soit beaucoup plus âgé que le Premier Ministre grec pourrait aussi connoter l'immaturité politique de ce dernier. Sans doute il s'agit d'un geste public qui diminuait le statut politique et le sérieux du Premier Ministre grec, d'autant plus que cela se produisait devant les journalistes qui s'empressèrent d'immortaliser l'instantané.



**Figure 7.** Le Premier Ministre grec Alexis Tsipras et le Président de la Commission Jean-Claude Juncker (22.5.2015)



**Figure 8.** Alexis Tsipras et Jean-Claude Juncker (22.6.2015)

## 6. L'approche des événements par la presse grecque

La presse grecque semblait confuse devant tous ces événements. Sans aucun doute, l'interprétation de ces événements était une tâche difficile. Lamizet (2006) mentionne que:

comprendre les représentations de l'événement<sup>21</sup> dans les médias, c'est ainsi comprendre comment se forment notre culture, notre mémoire et notre enga-

<sup>21</sup> Selon Sini (2015 : 3), "la notion d' 'événement' ne renvoie qu'à une unité ambiguë, une substance glissante, délicate à circonscrire, dans la mesure où on ne sait pas quel objet il recouvre."

gement politique dans l'espace de la sociabilité: la sémiotique de l'événement est nécessairement une sémiotique du politique, car elle nous amène à interroger de façon critique le sens des médiations constitutives de notre appartenance et de notre sociabilité. (Lamizet 2006: 18)

Dans un tel cadre, certains journalistes affrontent d'une manière légère la situation et, d'autres, ceux adoptent une position critique. Il ne faut pas oublier que:

La teneur d'un événement se saisit au travers de ses conséquences factuelles et des résonances qu'il crée auprès des acteurs sociaux. Il provoque des réactions souvent inattendues et imprédictibles auprès de l'opinion publique, à commencer par les journalistes ou les historiens eux-mêmes et leurs auditeurs-lecteurs, en passant par les décideurs politiques. (Sini 2015: 7)

Ainsi, selon le journaliste du journal en ligne *iefimerida* (22 mai 2015), certains voient que la disposition bienveillante de Juncker cache l'intention d'influencer le jeune nouveau de l'Eurogroupe.<sup>22</sup> En même temps, pour le journaliste de l'édition électronique de la chaîne privée grecque Antenna (22 mai 2015), malgré la gravité de la situation, certains trouvent à plaisanter. L'un d'eux est le président de la Commission, qui continue ses... blagues.<sup>23</sup> Il est à noter que le titre même de l'article ne flatte pas le Premier Ministre grec.

L'intérêt pour ces événements dépasse les frontières grecques. Il ne faut pas oublier que "le geste est mémorable bien au-delà de son inscription; il traverse la recomposition narrative, il participe d'une scène actantielle mais laisse entrevoir toute l'épaisseur potentielle de l'acteur et tout le possible qui se situe au-delà des cadres systématisés des actes codés" (Basso Fossali 2017: 3). C'est pour cela que le journal anglais *Gardian* s'est adressé à un expert en langage du corps pour interpréter le geste de Juncker quand celui-ci tient la main de Tsipras. Selon le *Gardian* (2015), c'est Juncker qui prend l'initiative de tenir la main de Tsipras adoptant ainsi une position dominante de contrôle, un peu comme un parent avec un enfant.<sup>24</sup>

## 7. Le reflet de l'information à d'autres systèmes sémiotiques

L'aspect communicatif de l'art est relevé dans plusieurs études, non seulement sémiotiques. Une œuvre artistique ayant un but communicatif est sans doute la caricature de presse. Lotman (2004: 198) mentionne qu' "on pourrait distinguer deux tendances inverses dans le phénomène de l'art: celle qui consiste à répéter le déjà connu et celle qui

<sup>22</sup> Source: *iefimerida.gr* - <https://bit.ly/3pf6I4U> (dernière consultation le 26.11.2020).

<sup>23</sup> <https://bit.ly/2Zeuzam> (dernière consultation le 16.12.2020).

<sup>24</sup> A voir, <https://bit.ly/3b8EEuS> (dernière consultation le 16.12.2020).

consiste à créer du nouveau.” Les caricatures de presse que nous allons étudier appartiennent à la première classification de Lotman. Elles profitent des instantanés des rencontres politiques entre le gouvernement grec de l’époque et les dignitaires européens se transformant en multiplicateurs des interprétations que la mémoire collective grecque n’avait pas encore éclaircies. Sans doute, elles sont des réactions à l’information et Lotman mentionne que :

une nouvelle étape commence avec l’apparition du décalage temporel entre la réception de l’information et la réaction à celle-ci. Cette étape demande, avant tout, le développement et le perfectionnement de la mémoire. Un autre résultat très important est la transformation de la réaction de l’action immédiate en signe. La réaction à l’information devient une structure indépendante, susceptible de s’accumuler, avec un mécanisme qui se complexifie et se développe. (Lotman 2004: 183)

Une telle transformation en signe est le cas de la caricature de presse. La caricature a été utilisée par la presse de l’époque comme un moyen de reproduction des connotations des incidents des dignitaires européens avec le nouveau gouvernement grec. On pourrait, ainsi, prétendre qu’elle a été utilisée comme une sorte de dispositif de l’évocation de la mémoire politique qui était pour le peuple grec –avant tout– culturelle. Il est vrai que ce mécanisme humoristique a rendu la situation politique en Grèce plus complexe réservant à l’actualité des interprétations que le gouvernement grec de l’époque souhaitait sinon se débarrasser au moins annuler.

La caricature de presse est un moyen particulier de communication massive puisque la transmission efficace du message – qui est un message, d’habitude, implicite– est la composante des différents systèmes sémiotiques participant à la codification de l’humour. Exercice journalistique à part entière, la caricature de presse constitue de ce fait un instrument très efficace de commentaire d’analyse de l’actualité. Selon Charaudeau (2006: 11), la caricature de presse joue un rôle de *catharsis sociale* et de *provocation sociale*, elle n’est jamais anodine et son habillage humoristique ne peut exonérer son énonciateur.

Tous ces événements où les politiciens grecs refusent pour des raisons idéologiques de porter une cravate, a donné naissance à des caricatures de presse humoristiques comme les suivantes. La première caricature publiée dans *L’Echo* (31.1.2015) représente la chancelière allemande Angela Merkel se servant de la cravate comme instrument de strangulation du plus faible (fig. 9). La deuxième caricature publiée dans *Placides Actualité* (5.2.2015) fait allusion à une ceinture hypothétique offerte par la chancelière allemande à Tsipras et faisant allusion à l’expression “se serrer la ceinture” (fig.10). Il est à mentionner que cette interprétation a été reproduite dans la presse grecque.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> A voir, <https://bit.ly/2N6m7HI> (dernière consultation le 16.12.2020).



**Figure 9.** Dessin de Nicolas Vadot publié dans L'Echo (31.1.2015)



**Figure 10.** Dessin issu de Placides Actualité (5.2.2015)

Cependant, les dessins humoristiques ne traitent pas seulement de l'absence de cravate parmi les membres du gouvernement grec de l'époque, notamment du Premier Ministre. Dans la caricature de presse suivante (fig.11) publiée dans *The Guardian* le 24 juin 2015<sup>26</sup>, des dignitaires européens se présentent inquiets lors des négociations sur la dette grecque parce que le Président de la Commission Européenne n'a pas tapoté cette fois la joue du Premier Ministre grec. Leur interprétation sémiotique est que Jean Claude Juncker est furieux contre Alexis Tsipras. Cette interprétation connote que l'évènement qui avait précédé a été jugé comme un acte de satisfaction politique envers le Premier Ministre grec et pas comme l'avait interprété une partie de la presse dévalorisant.

L'intimité dont les dignitaires européens font preuve envers le Premier Ministre grec se reflète aussi dans les dessins humoristiques. Dans la caricature publiée dans *L'Opinion* le 3 février 2015,<sup>27</sup> le Président français François Hollande répondait à la question du Premier Ministre grec en utilisant son prénom, même si le Premier Ministre grec avait utilisé le vouvoiement (fig.12). Le fait que les deux hommes politiques se rencontrent dans un parc d'attractions rend la scène beaucoup plus amusante.

Cette intersémiotique qui se réalise entre le système sémiotique de la photo et celui de la caricature de presse montre que l'environnement politique de l'époque était très chargé –on pourrait dire à cause du rôle des médias dans la diffusion des interprétations politiques et culturelles dans la société. Pour Herzfeld (2016: 12), "[...] il semble que les caricatures sont non seulement acceptables mais remplacent les maigres miettes d'informations et de conjectures que les journalistes cherchent désespérément à glaner pour un public tout aussi désespéré".<sup>28</sup> Pourtant, ces miettes d'information réservaient une polémique entre les deux parties des négociateurs pendant plus de six mois.

<sup>26</sup> A voir, <https://bit.ly/3d8y0HM> (dernière consultation le 16.12.2020).

<sup>27</sup> A voir, <https://bit.ly/2OttARl> (dernière consultation le 16.12.2020).

<sup>28</sup> [...] it seems, caricatures are not only acceptable but a substitute for the often meagre crumbs of information and guesswork that journalists are desperate to glean for an equally desperate public" (Herzfeld, 2016: 12).



Figure 11 (left). Dessin de Kipper Williams publié dans The Guardian (24.6.2015)

Figure 12 (up). Dessin de Kak publié dans L'Opinion (3.2.2015)

## 8. La sémiotique politique du réalisme ?

Nous avons vu que l'absence de cravate fonctionne au niveau sémiotique. Mais aussi son port après quelques années. Le 22 juin 2018, quand les créanciers de la Grèce ont déclaré la fin des programmes d'aide qui pesaient sur elle depuis 2010, une étape 'historique' avait eu lieu. Le Premier Ministre grec Alexis Tsipras avait souligné l'événement par le port inédit d'une cravate (fig. 13), tout en annonçant un tournant vers plus de justice sociale. Delafoi (2017) mentionne un fait historique lié à l'absence de cravate remarquant qu' "au début des années 1970, le président Mobutu, au Zaïre, a interdit le costume-cravate pour s'opposer à l'impérialisme occidental. Il est remplacé par l'*abacost* (contraction de «à bas le costume»), une veste de costume sans col". Il est à noter que la même attitude est aujourd'hui adoptée par les dignitaires de la République Islamique d'Iran.

Il est à souligner que le refus de porter une cravate dans la vie politique grecque avait été initié pendant la période de *metapolitefsi* (la période politique après la chute de la dictature grecque de 1967-1974 en Grèce connue aussi comme la Troisième République Hellénique). Cette apparence avait été adopté par le Premier Ministre socialiste Andreas Papandréou (fig.14). Papandréou qui ne portait pas ni chemise ni cravate, mais un pull à col roulé, style qui avait aussi suivi, au début, des députés de son parti politique PASOK (mouvement socialiste panhellénique).



**Figure 13.** Le Premier Ministre grec Alexis Tsipras portant une cravate (21.6.2018)<sup>29</sup>



**Figure 14.** Le premier Ministre Grec Andreas Papandreou portant le pull à col roulé (1974)<sup>30</sup>

Nous remarquons que les journalistes grecs reproduisent de temps en temps cette imitation (vestimentaire et kinésique) entre Tsipras et Papandréou reprochant au premier que ces similitudes sémiotiques ciblent le corps électoral du parti socialiste créé par le second. Un grand nombre de l'opinion publique considère que Tsipras valorise son statut par ces évocations sémiotiques étant donné que Papandréou était un universitaire et un politicien de renommée internationale.

Le port de cravate s'harmonise à une 'réalité', une norme, dans la vie politique qui demande aux politiciens de respecter le code vestimentaire. Pourtant, cette norme n'est pas arbitraire et va de pair avec un mode de vie et une façon de pensée politique précis. Quand les hommes politiques qui évitent au début le port de cravate adoptent finalement ce style, ils donnent sémiotiquement l'impression qu'ils s'incorporent à une culture politique dominante, au savoir-vivre politique courant.

<sup>29</sup> A voir <https://bit.ly/2OI0YnP> (dernière consultation le 16.12.2020).

<sup>30</sup> A voir <https://bit.ly/37hjkCj> (dernière consultation le 16.12.2020).

## 9. Constatations conclusives

Il est vrai que la crise économique grecque (2010-2018) a inauguré un débat sur l'identité des pays du nord de l'Europe et de ceux dits méditerranéens. Le comportement des dignitaires européens était-il le résultat d'une autre identité qui ne partageait pas les mêmes caractéristiques culturelles avec les autres pays de l'Union européenne? Cet écart culturel se reflète-il dans le comportement des dignitaires européens vers les politiciens grecs?

Selon Lamizet (2012: 223), "[...] l'acteur politique fonde son identité sur la différenciation d'avec celle de l'autre et sur la confrontation avec elle. Dans ces conditions, l'imaginaire politique se trouve, lui aussi, fondé sur la notion d'adhésion et sur la confrontation avec les autres imaginaires." Toutes ces photos, reportages et caricatures de presse qui ont fait leur apparition dans la presse européenne connote que les politiciens grecs, dont il est question, n'appartiennent pas au groupe de la "famille européenne" parce qu'ils ne sont pas comme eux, ils se différencient au niveau des décisions politiques et, bien sûr, vestimentaires. Dans le meilleur des cas, ils sont des plaisantins, dans le pire des cas, ils sont des marginaux. C'est une des rares fois que le sérieux et la courtoisie qui caractérisaient la vie politique européenne des siècles précédents étaient absents.

Ce n'est pas une exagération de dire que les autorités de l'Union Européenne ont adopté un comportement qui était attribué par Barthes à la petite bourgeoisie. Selon Barthes (1957: 81), "[...] toute la mythologie petite-bourgeoisie implique le refus de l'altérité, la négation du différent, le bonheur de l'identité et l'exaltation du semblable". Les dirigeants de l'UE avec leur comportement ont voulu souligner le différent des idées politiques du gouvernement grec en question et de distinguer sémiotiquement la Grèce de l'époque des autres pays membres qui partageaient le semblable, les mêmes idées économiques et politiques.

A l'époque, en 2015, les autorités européennes voulaient souligner sémiotiquement le manque de maturité politique du nouveau gouvernement grec à qui les hauts dignitaires européens reprochaient son populisme et son manque de réalisme politique. Ainsi, au niveau sémiotique, on constate une double raillerie, l'une, vers le peuple grec qui traversait une crise économique grave, et l'autre, vers ses élus politiques, difficilement acceptés par les autres pays membres de la zone euro à cause de la politique qu'ils souhaitaient suivre.

Ce serait une omission de ne pas mentionner que cette gestualité a caractérisé seulement le gouvernement de gauche radicale de cette période. Quand le même parti politique a changé son orientation politique en ce qui concerne la dette grecque et qu'il prit la décision de collaborer harmonieusement avec les autorités de l'Union Européenne et les crédateurs du pays, tous ces événements ont disparu ce qui permet de

supposer qu'il s'agissait de signes motivés, de signes intentionnels. De cette façon, il semble que si un nouveau gouvernement européen prenait des décisions politiques différentes de celles des autres pays membres, on vivrait à nouveau des situations embarrassantes au niveau sémiotique comme celles de 2015. Cette supposition nous invite à réfléchir sur le futur du rêve commun de l'Union Européenne, de réfléchir sur les valeurs et l'identité communes.

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# Le discours du pouvoir

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BY: Bernard Lamizet

## RÉSUMÉ

Il importe de repenser, aujourd'hui, le discours du pouvoir, en se fondant sur l'articulation sémiotique de quatre instances: l'énonciation politique, l'expression de l'identité de l'acteur dans son discours, la spécificité politique de la performativité du pouvoir et l'expression d'un inconscient politique dans le discours. Trois éléments définissent la spécificité de l'énonciation politique. Le premier est la définition d'enjeux propres à l'énonciation politique. Le second est la définition de ce que l'on peut appeler une *écologie énonciative*. Enfin, l'énonciation politique inscrit dans la communication des représentations des enjeux du pouvoir. L'énonciation du discours du pouvoir articule l'identité de l'énonciateur et un statut d'acteur politique. La communication politique se fonde sur la manifestation d'une confrontation entre les acteurs dans l'espace de l'énonciation. La performativité politique se fonde sur l'identification de l'énonciation et de la manifestation d'un acteur politique. Cette performativité propre au politique se caractérise, dans le cas du discours du pouvoir, par deux faits: l'imposition des modalités de l'énonciation et de l'interprétation et, donc, de la communication, et l'imposition des enjeux de la communication, des références qui lui donnent sa consistance. Comme toute énonciation, l'énonciation du discours du pouvoir est l'expression d'un inconscient du pouvoir. On peut définir et analyser cet inconscient politique en se fondant sur ce que l'on peut appeler la *connotation politique*, qui définit une sémiotique du non-dit dans la communication politique.

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## MOTS-CLÉS:

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## 1. Introduction

Il importe de repenser, aujourd'hui, le discours du pouvoir, en se fondant sur l'articulation sémiotique de quatre instances: l'énonciation politique, l'expression de l'identité de l'acteur dans son discours, la spécificité politique de la performativité du pouvoir et l'expression d'un inconscient politique dans le discours. En effet, le discours du pouvoir présente trois spécificités qui peuvent faire l'objet d'une analyse sémiotique articulant ces quatre instances. D'abord, il met en scène une énonciation propre à un acteur à qui est reconnu un pouvoir, ce qui constitue une forme de performativité. C'est à la fois parce que la tenue du discours est mise en scène dans un espace institutionnel et parce qu'elle est portée par une voix à qui est reconnue un pouvoir que cette énonciation comporte une forme de performativité. Par ailleurs, l'énonciation du discours du pouvoir constitue, en soi, une manifestation de l'identité de l'acteur porteur du pouvoir dans l'espace public. En parlant en public, l'acteur qui tient le discours met en scène l'identité politique et l'engagement dont il est porteur et qui le situent dans l'espace politique. Enfin, comme tous les discours politiques, mais sans doute d'une façon qui lui est propre, le discours du pouvoir s'articule à un *inconscient*. Il existe une forme inconsciente du discours politique, fondée à la fois sur les connotations de ce discours qui renvoient à ce que l'on peut appeler un *inconscient politique partagé*, commun à l'énonciateur et à ceux qui écoutent son discours ou qui le lisent, et à des traces de formes particulières de *refoulement politique*, comme on le verra dans l'analyse du discours d'E. Macron étudié ici.

C'est que nous n'avons pas choisi de parler du discours du pouvoir de façon générale, sans nous fonder sur l'analyse d'un discours particulier, mais que nous avons donné à notre propos l'exemple d'un discours prononcé par le président de la République devant des élus,<sup>1</sup> c'est-à-dire devant d'autres acteurs politiques porteurs de pouvoirs particuliers. C'est ainsi que le discours d'E. Macron offre l'intérêt de permettre d'analyse ce que l'on peut appeler la mise en scène performative de la confrontation de pouvoirs différents dans l'espace politique. Au-delà, on peut même dire que ce discours constitue une illustration de ce que devient l'espace politique dès lors qu'il est ainsi mis en scène par un discours. En effet, le propre du discours politique est d'engager ce que l'on peut appeler *la performativité du discours de l'autre*. Au cours des recherches que nous avons menées sur le discours politique, nous étions parvenu à la définition d'une particularité du discours politique, qui le distingue d'autres types de discours et qui fonde la singularité de son énonciation: *le discours politique engage la performativité du discours de l'autre*. Plus précisément, le propre du langage politique est

<sup>1</sup> Prononcé devant le congrès des maires et des présidents d'intercommunalités, le 19 novembre 2019, ce discours peut être lu *in extenso* grâce au lien suivant qui permet de se connecter au site de la présidence de la République: <https://bit.ly/3dmbvPs>

que son métalangage est l'action de l'autre, ou son engagement dans l'espace politique, ce qui caractérise l'action politique. C'est l'énonciation du discours politique qui définit l'identité de l'acteur politique en situant son engagement par rapport à lui, mais c'est parce qu'il se confronte à un adversaire, ou à un autre acteur de l'espace public que son énonciation revêt un caractère pleinement politique. C'est ainsi que, dans cette perspective, le propre du discours du pouvoir sera d'engager la performativité de ceux qui l'écoutent ou de ceux qui le lisent en suscitant l'expression de leur opinion ou de leur engagement. Dans le cas du discours d'E. Macron analysé ici, ceux à qui il est destiné, détenteurs de pouvoirs locaux, participent à ce que l'on peut appeler la rencontre de leurs pouvoirs avec le pouvoir du président de la République, dans une forme de confrontation que l'on peut définir comme une forme de *spécularité des pouvoirs*. C'est cette spécularité même qui permet de penser ce que l'on peut appeler la sémiotique de l'énonciation du discours du pouvoir. Cette spécularité des pouvoirs se distinguent de la spécularité psychique par le fait qu'elle ne se fonde pas sur l'identification spéculaire de l'énonciateur à l'autre, mais, au contraire, sur leur confrontation, sur l'adversité qui les situe dans l'espace politique.

## 2. L'énonciation politique

Trois éléments définissent la spécificité de l'énonciation politique. Le premier est la définition, dans le discours, d'enjeux propres à l'énonciation politique. En effet, tandis que l'énonciation ordinaire peut ne pas se situer par rapport à des enjeux, l'énonciation politique manifeste toujours des enjeux du discours, qui sont la forme énonciative des enjeux de la confrontation autour du pouvoir. C'est ainsi que, dans le discours d'E. Macron que nous analysons ici, on peut relever trois enjeux propres. Il s'agit, d'abord, de *l'égalité*, qui est figurée, dans les propos d'E. Macron, par la nécessité d'*unir et rassembler* et par *un nouvel aménagement de notre territoire*. On relèvera, d'ailleurs, que, dans ce discours, c'est le *nous* qui représente l'identité de l'énonciateur, ce qui est une manière de refouler les oppositions, les confrontations, ce qu'il appelle les *fractures*, en disant, un peu plus haut: "*fractures territoriales, fracture numérique, sociale, identitaire, culturelle aussi, trop de fractures, comme si la France n'était plus une.*" En refoulant, sous la référence à ce '*nous*,' les différences et les divergences qui font d'eux des acteurs politiques, E. Macron confond les identités politiques des personnalités du débat public en les faisant porteurs d'une forme artificielle de communion, comme dans le discours de l'Église.

La seconde caractéristique de l'énonciation du discours politique est de définir ce que l'on peut appeler une *écologie énonciative*, c'est-à-dire un ancrage du discours dans l'espace politique et dans l'espace public du débat. "*Le temps*," dit E. Macron, "*est à la redéfinition d'un espace et d'un commun.*" C'est de cette manière que ce que nous nous proposons de dessiner par le concept d'écologie énonciative s'élabore, au fur et à me-

sure de l'énonciation du discours, le discours politique engageant la construction de cette écologie, de cet espace-temps propre à l'énonciation. Mais la figure 'd'un commun' va plus loin: en effet, il s'agit bien de définir des modalités de l'énonciation reconnues par l'ensemble des partenaires de la communication, c'est-à-dire de ceux qui participent à la communication engagée par l'énonciation. Si nous proposons de reconnaître cette *écologie énonciative* comme une caractéristique du discours politique, c'est que l'une des significations majeures de l'énonciation qu'il met en œuvre est ce que l'on peut appeler l'institution d'un espace-temps, c'est-à-dire d'une écologie partagée par l'ensemble de ceux qui participent à la médiation et à la communication politique. Mais cette figure du 'commun' est très précisément ce que représente le terme *oikos* du concept d'écologie, l'*oikos* désignant, en grec, l'ensemble de ce qui constitue l'espace commun, qu'il s'agisse de l'espace privé familial ou de l'espace connu, parcouru et habité par l'ensemble de ceux qui sont porteurs de la même identité.

Enfin, l'énonciation politique définit des références du pouvoir, elle inscrit dans la communication des représentations des enjeux du pouvoir, partagés entre l'énonciateur et ceux qui le lisent ou l'écoutent. Dans le discours d'E. Macron, on peut ainsi relever cinq références par rapport auxquelles se situe l'énonciation. Il s'agit de la fiscalité à laquelle se réfère le discours pour proposer d'en élaborer de nouvelles règles (p. 1), de l'union et du rassemblement, qu'il propose de mettre en œuvre par l'engagement de "rituels," qui sont des représentations institutionnels d'une identité partagée (p. 2 et 4), d'actes, définis (p. 3) comme "ce travail quotidien résolu pour faire en sorte que chaque terre de France soit une chance pour celles et ceux qui y vivent, par plus de stages proposés, par les emplois francs développés." Par ailleurs, il s'agit de la sécurité (*sécurité, vigilance, police* apparaissent dans le discours, p. 4) et, enfin, il s'agit de la figure de la *laïcité* (p. 5), qui occupe une place particulière dans le discours politique français depuis que sont apparues les tensions liées aux manifestations des radicalismes religieux. Ce sont ces enjeux de l'exercice du pouvoir, ici présentés et définis par E. Macron, qui définissent pleinement les modalités de l'exercice du pouvoir et le concept même de souveraineté dans une société démocratique.

C'est de cette manière que l'énonciation politique définit une écologie énonciative, qui fonde la spécificité d'une rhétorique et d'un lexique construisant des logiques énonciatives partagées entre l'énonciateur et son public. En effet, l'énonciation politique se caractérise par l'institution d'une situation de communication associant l'énonciateur et les autres acteurs de la communication dans la représentation partagée de l'espace et du temps reconnus comme ce qui fonde le champ politique, ce que l'on peut appeler l'*agora*, c'est-à-dire un espace d'information, de débat et d'échanges symboliques *habité* (c'est le sens de *oikos* et du terme *écologie*) par des acteurs de communication partageant leur identité par le fait de participer à la même situation de communication. L'écologie énonciative dans laquelle s'inscrit le discours du pouvoir ne se limite pas, bien sûr, au

discours des acteurs du pouvoir, mais elle constitue fondamentalement un *espace d'énonciation du discours politique*.

### 3. L'expression discursive de l'identité de l'acteur

La communication politique se fonde sur l'identification de ses énonciateurs, de ceux qui énoncent le discours politique, c'est-à-dire d'acteurs politiques. Cela signifie qu'elle repose sur la reconnaissance de l'identité politique et de l'engagement dont ils sont les acteurs par ceux qui parlent, mais aussi par ceux à qui ils s'adressent. En effet, l'identité des énonciateurs du discours politique se fonde toujours sur l'identification entre des subjectivités et des acteurs. Tandis que, dans les lieux et les circonstances ordinaires de la communication, l'énonciateur du discours et de la parole est un *sujet*, dont l'identité symbolique, en particulier, se fonde sur une relation spéculaire d'identification symbolique à l'autre sujet à qui il parle, à qui il s'adresse, avec qui il engage un échange de paroles, dans l'énonciation du discours politique, l'identité de l'énonciateur se fonde sur *la confrontation à l'autre*, qu'il s'adresse à lui ou qu'il le mentionne dans son discours. Le discours politique ne se fonde pas sur l'identification spéculaire de l'énonciateur à l'autre, mais sur sa confrontation à lui. C'est ainsi, par exemple, que, dans le discours qui nous occupe, il s'agit d'une confrontation entre un acteur porteur d'un pouvoir, le président de la République, et d'autres acteurs, porteurs d'autres pouvoirs, les élus municipaux. Dans ce champ, qui n'est pas un espace spéculaire d'échange symbolique, mais l'espace public, lieu de mise en œuvre de la confrontation entre des identités politiques, l'énonciation du discours du pouvoir articule l'identité de l'énonciation et un statut d'*acteur du pouvoir*, figure à la fois définie par le processus de l'énonciation et par la reconnaissance dont elle fait l'objet de la part de ceux à qui le discours est destiné. Tandis que la communication se fonde toujours sur l'identification spéculaire des énonciateurs qui participent à l'échange symbolique, ce qui est la raison pour laquelle elle engage des *sujets*,<sup>2</sup> la communication politique se fonde, de façon spécifique, sur la manifestation d'une confrontation entre les acteurs dans l'espace de l'énonciation. On ne peut s'identifier symboliquement à un acteur porteur d'un pouvoir, car s'il le détient, c'est que nous ne le détenons pas, et on ne peut s'identifier symboliquement à un adversaire politique, car ce qui fonde notre identité est, précisément, ce qui situe la différence entre nos engagements.

C'est cette confrontation qui est évoquée, par exemple, dans le discours d'E. Macron, par ces mots: "*les mots n'épuisent pas ce que doit être notre réaction collective face au regain des passions, de la division et de la haine*" (p. 4), ou encore (p. 5): "*bien souvent, ce qui*

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<sup>2</sup> Le terme *sujet* est issu, étymologiquement, du latin *subjectum*, c'est-à-dire *situé sous* le regard de l'autre.

*traverse notre société, ce sont les sujets que je viens d'évoquer, légitimes, qui touchent la civilité, l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes, le respect des lois de la République, l'ordre public, et c'est là qu'il nous faut collectivement nous réarmer, peut-être prendre des lois nouvelles, des décisions plus fortes.*" Si, dans son discours, E. Macron emploie de tels mots qui se réfèrent à la violence et à la guerre, en particulier dans la figure du 'réarmement,' c'est bien que le président de la République entend, en quelque sorte, profiter de ce discours pour rappeler une fois de plus qu'il se fonde sur sa confrontation aux autres acteurs politiques de l'espace public.

Mais il faut aller plus loin. Dans son discours, E. Macron soulève plus précisément la question de l'identification des acteurs politiques, en particulier quand (p. 5) il dit: *"Ce qui compte, c'est de faire tomber les masques de ceux qui combattent la devise inscrite sur les frontons des mairies qu'ils convoitent."* Le discours du président s'inscrit ainsi dans la logique de ce que l'on eut appeler l'élucidation des identités, dans le projet de la mise en œuvre d'un éclairage de l'identité des acteurs engagés dans la confrontation qui donne ce que l'on peut appeler son actualité à l'espace public. C'est la signification qu'il convient de donner à l'expression de ce qu'il appelle le 'solidarisme' (p. 7): *"la République sociale, solidaire," "ce solidarisme contemporain auquel je crois profondément."* La figure de la solidarité avait été introduite dans l'espace politique français par F. Mitterrand, quand, en 1981, il avait, pour la première fois, institué, dans notre pays, un *"ministère de la Solidarité."* Il s'agissait, alors, d'unifier l'ensemble des politiques de protection sociale, et cette figure de la solidarité a été, en quelque sorte, amplifiée, aujourd'hui, rendue plus urgente, par la montée du chômage et des suppressions d'emplois, et par la survenue de la pandémie du coronavirus.

C'est, enfin, dans cette logique de la confrontation, en situant ses auditeurs dans le même champ que lui, que le président va évoquer ce qui fait d'eux des *acteurs*: *"Votre moteur,"* dit-il (p. 9), *"c'est de faire, de transformer, d'agir."* De cette manière, le discours d'E. Macron inscrit la communication politique dans une logique de l'acte et non dans une logique de la parole: il ne s'agit pas seulement de mots ou de discours, mais il s'agit bien d'engager des actions dans l'espace politique. C'est, d'ailleurs, bien la raison pour laquelle, dans son discours, E. Macron va parler des actes à venir des maires à qui il s'adresse, en évoquant les *"défis"* (p. 6) à relever: *"Pour réussir ces transformations,"* dit-il (p. 6), *"comme à chaque fois que la République a été confrontée à ces grandes bourrasques, j'ai besoin de vous, et c'est ensemble que nous battons cette action utile."* En fondant l'identité de ses auditeurs sur une logique de l'action, le président de la République à la fois situe le discours politique dans une rhétorique performative et reconnaît à ceux à qui il parle un pouvoir, fondé sur l'action, qui, précisément parce qu'il ne se fonde que sur de l'acte, et non sur la réalité de la reconnaissance d'un pouvoir, a de fortes tendances artificielles, voire illusoires.

## 4. La performativité du discours du pouvoir

Le discours des acteurs du pouvoir s'inscrit dans une logique performative, car, par le discours qu'il tient dans l'espace public, le pouvoir se manifeste, met en scène une forme de réalité de l'exercice du pouvoir. Mais il faut aller plus loin: en réalité, ce n'est pas en propre le discours du pouvoir qui engage une performativité: c'est le *méta-langage du discours du pouvoir* qui s'inscrit dans la logique de l'acte. En-dehors de quelques situations particulières, que nous allons étudier ici, le discours du pouvoir n'est pas en soi un performatif, ce qui engage de l'action, c'est l'interprétation de ce discours par les acteurs à qui il s'adresse.

Commençons donc par analyser les situations institutionnelles au cours desquelles les acteurs du pouvoir engagent une forme de performativité de leur discours, de leur parole. On donnera trois exemples de ces situations. Le premier exemple que l'on peut donner est classique: il s'agit de la performativité des discours que l'on peut appeler les discours institutionnels. Quand un président de séance, porteur d'un pouvoir, dit "*La séance est ouverte,*" cela suffit à ce que la séance ait lieu. C'est aussi le cas des formules par lesquelles le président de la République promulgue une loi. Quand ces mots figurent en tête d'une loi: "*L'Assemblée nationale et le Sénat ont adopté, le président de la République promulgue la loi dont la teneur suit,*" cela suffit à imposer l'application de la loi. Un second exemple est courant, même s'il n'est pas toujours conscient. Quand, à la même question posée par le maire, successivement, à l'un et à l'autre: "*Acceptez-vous de prendre pour époux ... ?,*" une femme et un homme répondent par un simple "*oui,*" cela suffit à ce que l'un et l'autre soient mariés. Enfin, on peut donner un troisième exemple dans les situations de crise, au cours desquelles les pouvoirs exécutifs mettent en œuvre un ensemble de mesures destinées à faire face à cette crise, comme c'est le cas, aujourd'hui, dans la situation de crise engagée dans de nombreux pays par la pandémie du coronavirus, en mars 2020. Sans doute même faut-il aller plus loin, et définir le concept même de *pouvoir exécutif* comme le pouvoir à qui est reconnue la compétence d'imposer des mesures destinées à assurer ce que l'on peut appeler la permanence de l'État, sa pérennité, sa sécurité. Ce que Montesquieu désigne par le *pouvoir exécutif* n'est pas seulement le pouvoir d'appliquer et de mettre en œuvre les lois votées par le pouvoir législatif, mais il s'agit du pouvoir d'engager la performativité méta-langagière qui se met en œuvre dans une situation politique et institutionnelle particulière. Si le pouvoir a une réalité, c'est que le méta-langage qui lui donne sa signification relève de l'acte et non d'une simple réponse ou d'un autre discours.

Mais il faut aller plus loin dans cette analyse de la performativité du discours du pouvoir. Tandis que le performatif se fonde toujours sur l'identification d'une parole et d'un acte, la performativité politique se fonde sur l'identification de l'énonciation et de la manifestation d'un acteur politique. Ce n'est pas la mise en œuvre d'un simple

acte qui définit la performativité du discours du pouvoir, c'est l'institution d'une situation politique particulière, c'est l'imposition d'une contrainte nouvelle à l'ensemble de la population d'un pays sur lequel règne l'exécutif. Ce qui définit l'identité énonciative d'un acteur politique, c'est que l'acte articulé à la performativité de son discours s'inscrit dans une suite d'actions et d'engagements qui l'ont précédé et qui ont pu faire évoluer les enjeux des discours du pouvoir ou les références de sa confrontation aux autres discours politiques de l'espace public. La performativité du discours du pouvoir s'inscrit ainsi dans une mémoire des médias et des autres acteurs politiques et dans une histoire qu'elle définit.

La performativité propre au politique se caractérise, dans le cas du discours du pouvoir, par deux faits : le premier est l'imposition des modalités de l'énonciation et de l'interprétation et, donc, de la communication, et l'autre est l'imposition des enjeux de la communication, des références qui lui donnent sa consistance.

Imposer les modalités de l'énonciation et de la communication constitue une contrainte imposée par les acteurs porteurs du pouvoir. C'est ainsi que (p. 7) E. Macron entend imposer sa conception des mobilités et des logiques qui les structurent. *"Je crois,"* dit-il, ainsi, *"à une écologie de la liberté, de l'innovation. Je crois dans l'écologie des territoires et la capacité que l'on donne à ces derniers de trouver les bonnes solutions."* D'abord, il convient de relever, dans ces mots, la répétition du terme *"Je crois,"* qui inscrit le discours du chef de l'État dans une logique de la croyance, ce qui engage une diminution de la critique appelée par ces propos. Mais, surtout, dans la conception de l'écologie qui est affichée par E. Macron à propos des transports et des déplacements, ce qu'il importe de noter est l'articulation de trois éléments qui donne une pleine signification à ce discours et permet de mieux le comprendre. Il s'agit de l'articulation entre écologie, innovation et liberté, c'est-à-dire entre trois éléments qui orientent ce discours: l'écologie, c'est l'orientation de l'aménagement de l'espace qui entend en conserver ce qui le fonde comme espace d'habitation et de protection de l'environnement contre les dégradations qu'il pourrait subir; l'innovation, c'est l'expression d'une référence au mythe de la modernité, qui fait partie des orientations de la politique industrielle; la liberté, enfin, c'est la référence, en quelque sorte obligatoire, au libéralisme, qui est une orientation fondamentale de la politique économique élaborée et mise en œuvre par E. Macron depuis son accession au pouvoir.

Mais imposer les modalités de la communication signifie aussi imposer des contraintes de l'interprétation du discours et des significations que l'on est amené à lui donner. C'est dans cette logique qu'E. Macron fait référence, à la fin de son discours (p. 12) à la logique de l'engagement. *"Ce qui compte,"* dit-il, *"c'est l'engagement. Ce qui compte, c'est que la République demeure vive."* Dans cette référence, à la conclusion de son propos, à l'engagement et à sa nécessité politique, on peut trouver un lien avec le *"je crois"* évoqué plus haut. Il s'agit, en réalité, d'une articulation entre la dimension singulière de

l'acteur et son inscription dans l'espace public. Il y a, dans cette référence à l'engagement et à ce qu'E. Macron appelle sa nécessité en disant que c'est lui qui "*compte*," une référence à l'articulation de l'identité de l'acteur politique entre sa personnalité singulière et la reconnaissance dont il fait l'objet dans la dimension collective de son inscription dans l'espace public. Finalement, en évoquant cette nécessité de l'engagement, E. Macron situe son discours dans une sorte d'histoire des acteurs politiques, mais, surtout, dans une forme de dimension morale, éthique, des pratiques sociales qu'ils mettent en œuvre. C'est par l'engagement dont ils sont porteurs que les acteurs politiques – en particulier ceux à qui s'adresse E. Macron dans son discours – fonde leur légitimité et la légitimité de leur pouvoir.

Les acteurs porteurs du pouvoir imposent à la situation de communication qu'ils dominent les enjeux de la parole et du discours, ainsi que les références qui fondent la signification du discours. Détenir un pouvoir et se le faire reconnaître par les autres acteurs de l'espace politique, ce n'est pas seulement engager sa représentation du pouvoir et en manifester la réalité dans l'espace public, c'est aussi déterminer les 'règles du jeu' qui définissent les formes et les structures de l'espace politique du discours et de l'énonciation. C'est bien pourquoi le pouvoir politique est à la fois un pouvoir réel – celui de l'action et de la décision, un pouvoir symbolique – celui qui consiste à instituer les règles de l'énonciation à un moment donné de l'histoire du discours politique, et un pouvoir imaginaire – car, si l'on détient un pouvoir, c'est aussi parce que ceux à qui on s'adresse dans les médias ou dans la réalité de l'espace public, se font une certaine représentation du pouvoir que l'on détient dans l'imaginaire politique dont ils sont porteurs.

## 5. Un inconscient politique

Si nous situons l'énonciation du discours politique dans l'articulation d'une instance réelle, d'une instance symbolique et d'une instance imaginaire, c'est en nous référant aux travaux du psychanalyste J. Lacan, qui définit ces trois instances comme ce que l'on peut appeler les trois lieux de l'espace du psychisme et de l'identité du sujet. Comme toute énonciation, l'énonciation du discours du pouvoir est l'expression d'un inconscient du pouvoir, d'un ensemble d'instances faisant l'objet d'un refoulement qui rend la communication possible en définissant des lois imposées aux énonciateurs et aux autres participants à la communication politique. On peut définir et analyser cet inconscient politique en se fondant sur ce que l'on peut appeler la *connotation politique*, qui définit une sémiotique du non-dit dans la communication politique.

C'est ainsi, d'abord, qu'il convient de comprendre l'expression par E. Macron d'un souhait de déconcentration. "*Le numérique dont on parle tant*," dit-il, "*auquel nous tenons, qui nous permet de recréer de l'industrie, de développer des emplois sur notre territoire, doit*

nous permettre aussi d'être inventifs en matière d'organisation de l'État." Ce propos s'accompagne, dans les propos d'E. Macron, d'une critique des modalités de la décentralisation mise en œuvre jusqu'à présent. *"Il faut,"* dit-il, *"que la décentralisation s'accompagne de choix clairs du côté de l'État, il doit lâcher toutes les compétences quand il les décentralise, mais il ne faut pas que ça conduise à la perte collective de connaissances et que, d'un seul coup, on se réveille et qu'on se dise: là, on n'est plus aussi bons qu'avant."* C'est ainsi que, dans son propos, E. Macron met en œuvre une critique de la façon dont l'État a mis en œuvre, jusqu'à présent, les processus de la décentralisation et de la déconcentration. Il s'agit bien, dans son discours, d'une forme de critique de l'État et de ce qu'E. Macron appelle l'absence d'une *"fiscalité claire."*

Cette critique de la politique fiscale élaborée et mise en œuvre en France est désignée par le président de la République comme un *"fétichisme français."* *"Nous, nous avons un fétichisme français: l'autonomie fiscale,"* dit E. Macron, en poursuivant ainsi son propos: *"Je regarde les grands pays décentralisés autour de nous, ils sont beaucoup plus décentralisés que nous, ils n'ont pas d'autonomie fiscale."* *"Ils ont une chambre,"* poursuit-il, *"qui, chaque année, en effet, discute des ressources fiscales qui sont affectées aux collectivités, chaque niveau avec des règles claires. Peut-être qu'il faut en arriver à cela, et, moi, j'y suis favorable parce que, je vais vous dire, l'autonomie fiscale a deux problèmes."* Et le président poursuit en évoquant ces deux problèmes, le premier est le fait qu'*"il n'y aura jamais la bonne fiscalité, en tout cas pour les départements et les régions,"* et le deuxième est ce qu'il appelle *"l'illisibilité"* de la fiscalité locale. C'est ainsi que, dans cet inconscient politique qu'il présente dans son propos, E. Macron évoque, au sujet de la fiscalité locale, ce qu'il appelle *"un fétichisme français,"* à propos de *"l'autonomie fiscale."*

C'est, d'ailleurs, dans cette logique de la critique de l'autonomie fiscale des collectivités locales qu'E. Macron évoque, dans son discours, une culture des cahiers de doléances. *"J'ai, en ce moment,"* dit-il à la fin de son discours, *"une pensée et un remerciement particulier pour Vanik Bernerian qui, avec ces maires, est venu me présenter ses premiers cahiers qu'il avait ouverts en mairie."* En évoquant ces initiatives de certains élus locaux, notamment à l'occasion du conflit des 'gilets jaunes,' E. Macron parle de maires qui ont *"proposé et innové,"* et il définit ainsi le rôle des élus: *"de la commune à la nation,"* dit-il, *"tel est notre rôle: rappeler les droits et les devoirs à chacun, ne jamais oublier cet 'en même temps' républicain auquel je crois profondément."* Dans son discours aux maires et aux présidents des collectivités locales, le président de la République définit *"la République"* comme *"cette soif d'agir,"* *"ces mille fils tendus, cette amitié profonde que nous devons rappeler à nos concitoyens,"* c'est-à-dire comme un espace politique sans conflits et sans tensions sociales.

Sans doute, d'ailleurs, cette absence de conflit s'inscrit-elle, dans le propos d'E. Macron, dans la logique d'une sorte de refoulement. Les gens, dit-il, *"veulent prendre des compétences et pas les responsabilités."* *"On ne peut pas avancer comme ça,"* poursuit-il, *"Donc oui à un grand débat, une grande avancée sur la décentralisation, mais à condition de dire que*

*la compétence va avec la responsabilité démocratique et claire, avec des financements clairs, qui ont la même dynamique, et là, nous serons heureux.*” Sans doute, dans le propos du président, est-ce cette forme de refoulement qui rend possible l’institution d’une véritable démocratie reposant sur une fiscalité locale rationnelle et acceptée.

## 6. Pour conclure

Quatre éléments semblent essentiels, dans cette approche de la performativité du discours politique.

Le premier est que, finalement, on peut dire qu’il n’y a de discours pleinement politique que dans cette performativité du pouvoir ou de l’opposition au pouvoir. De la même manière que Lacan parle de *parole pleine* pour désigner une parole qui énonce le désir dont est porteur le sujet, on peut parler d’une *parole politique pleine* pour désigner un discours dont la rhétorique ne consiste pas seulement à séduire ou à convaincre, mais consiste à faire reconnaître par l’autre le pouvoir dont on est porteur. En ce sens, chaque énonciation d’un discours par un pouvoir est une remise en question de cette plénitude de la parole dans ce que l’on peut appeler l’événement de la tenue du discours et de sa rencontre avec les autres dans l’espace public.

Le second élément important qui caractérise la performativité du discours politique est qu’elle se situe dans l’espace et dans le temps qui la définissent et lui donnent sa signification. Sans doute, d’ailleurs, est-ce là la limite majeure du discours politique: hors de l’espace politique, du pays, dans lequel il est tenu et à qui il s’adresse et en-dehors de la période pendant laquelle celui qui parle est porteur du pouvoir, le discours du pouvoir n’a plus de signification. Tout juste peut-il se voir reconnaître la valeur d’un témoignage ou d’une référence de l’histoire politique.

Par ailleurs, le discours politique est pleinement performatif parce que les mots mêmes qu’il emploie sont chargés de connotations institutionnelles qui donnent son caractère politique à leur signification. Le lexique politique lui-même revêt un caractère performatif : ce n’est pas seulement l’énonciation du discours et la parole elle-même qui sont porteuses d’une performativité, mais cette performativité même se situe dans les mots et dans la signification que lui donnent ceux à qui ils s’adressent.

Enfin, comme son énonciation se fonde sur la confrontation de celui qui parle et de l’autre, le discours politique, il s’inscrit dans une problématique particulière de l’identité, celle que nous avons définie comme *l’alientité*, qui se fonde sur la différence avec l’autre au lieu de se fonder sur l’identification à lui. C’est cette logique de l’alientité qui définit l’espace public comme un espace pleinement politique, comme un espace dans lequel les pouvoirs et les acteurs politiques s’opposent les uns aux autres dans la tenue de leur discours et dans la mise en scène de leurs manifestations dans l’espace public.

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# Critique sémiotique du populisme

punctum.gr

BY: Eric Landowski

## RÉSUMÉ

Comment rendre compte de la faveur dont jouissent aujourd'hui tant de leaders populistes dans le monde? Les explications des politologues combinent généralement trois facteurs contextuels: le pouvoir de séduction des idéologies 'anti-système' (facteur de base) est renforcé par l'impact de la crise socio-économique (deuxième facteur) et par diverses données conjoncturelles — scandales, attentats, catastrophes naturelles, etc. (troisième facteur). Reste un facteur moins exploré, à savoir la force des liens d'ordre sensible (ou 'esthétique') que ce type de leaders établissent avec leurs partisans, presque indépendamment de ce qu'ils ont de précis à proposer en termes de politiques publiques. Cerner les conditions et les effets de telles relations revient à proposer (conformément à un des principes qui fondent l'approche sémiotique) une explication du phénomène dans son *immanence*, c'est-à-dire focalisée sur l'analyse des rapports de contagion thymique qui se nouent entre l'hexis du tribun populiste et chacun de ses partisans. D'où résulte un simulacre de démocratie 'directe' (par opposition à 'représentative') qui, par interdéfinition, trouve sa place dans une typologie sémiotique des régimes politiques.

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## MOTS-CLÉS:

contagion

démocratie

esthésie

populisme

## 1. Expliquer le populisme?

De la Grande-Bretagne à l'Italie, de la Hongrie à la France ou aux Pays-Bas, du Brésil aux Etats-Unis, pratiquement tous les pays occidentaux ont été affectés ces dernières années à des de-

<sup>1</sup> Une version préliminaire du présent article est parue en lithuanien: "Semiotinė populizmo kritika" (trad. Nijolė Kersytė), *Semiotika* 15, 2020.

grés divers par la vague ‘populiste.’ Sans discuter de la justesse ou de l’impropriété de ce terme au regard de la théorie politique, nous le prendrons ici tel qu’on le trouve aujourd’hui en circulation: comme une étiquette appliquée à divers courants à forte teneur nationaliste qui ont en commun de se présenter comme les défenseurs des intérêts du ‘peuple’ (sous-entendu, exclusivement celui de chez soi) et de préconiser ou de prendre à cet effet des mesures qui non seulement vont à l’encontre des principes démocratiques mais qui de surcroît menacent l’équilibre des relations internationales. A ce titre, le phénomène mérite l’analyse et appelle la critique, notamment du point de vue sémiotique. Il est vrai qu’il existe tant d’études en la matière que tout paraît avoir déjà été dit. Un regard sémiotique peut-il apporter quelque chose de plus?

Les interprétations des politologues combinent généralement trois facteurs explicatifs: l’actuel ‘raz-de-marée’ tiendrait à ce que le pouvoir de séduction de l’idéologie (facteur de base) que diffusent les mouvements en question est renforcé de nos jours par l’impact négatif de l’évolution socio-économique (deuxième facteur) sur la clientèle politique visée, et par diverses données conjoncturelles — scandales, ‘affaires,’ attentats ou catastrophes naturelles (troisième facteur) — coïncidant avec les moments de leurs plus grands succès électoraux. Ces interprétations passent en revanche sous silence un quatrième facteur, dont la sémiotique a particulièrement vocation à éclairer les mécanismes. Cet élément susceptible d’expliquer directement la ferveur que suscitent les Salvini, Johnson, Bolsonaro, Le Pen, Orban, Trump et autres, c’est la forme de leur mise en scène, la manière, en grande partie commune à eux tous, dont ils se présentent publiquement, et le type de rapports qui en résultent entre eux et leurs partisans — cela, certes, non pas indépendamment de ce qu’ils ont à proposer mais pour ainsi dire en deçà.

Cerner la spécificité, les conditions et les effets des liens quasi interpersonnels, immédiatement et intimement éprouvés, qui se nouent entre les leaders populistes et leurs auditoires, ce serait (conformément à l’un des principes hjelmsleviens qui fondent l’approche sémiotique) rendre compte du phénomène par une explication *en immanence*, c’est-à-dire fondée sur des données constitutives de l’objet même, sur la relation même entre la source et la cible des pratiques de mise en scène ‘populiste.’ Par là, ce serait aussi apporter des éléments de compréhension complémentaires par rapport à ceux que fournissent les approches les plus courantes puisque, de leur côté, elles ont pour trait commun de faire au contraire appel à des données contextuelles, qu’il s’agisse de la sociologie de l’électorat, de facteurs structurels comme le chômage ou l’immigration, ou circonstantiels comme les ‘affaires,’ les attentats ou d’autres accidents.

## 2. Crise de confiance

Prenons néanmoins comme point de départ la thèse principale qui se dégage des études sociologiques ou politologiques disponibles: les supporters des mouvements populistes seraient tous des ‘perdants de la mondialisation’ et des ‘exclus de la révolution numérique.’ Leur vote serait, autrement dit, ici et là l’expression d’un même genre de frustrations liées au changement technologique et économique global, partout aggravées par un même ressentiment à l’égard d’‘élites’ jugées incapables ou même supposées peu soucieuses de résoudre les problèmes engendrés par ces évolutions.

En termes de sémiotique narrative, on a là affaire à une crise ‘fiduciaire’: c’est la perte de confiance dans le personnel politique et dans les institutions qui a éloigné des formes de participation politique traditionnelles une masse de citoyens victimes de la conjoncture mondiale et a conduit une partie d’entre eux vers l’abstention tout en poussant les plus indignés, les plus révoltés ou les plus résolus du côté de personnalités rejetées par la ‘classe politique.’ Pour des électeurs qui rêvent d’écarter du pouvoir les représentants d’un ‘establishment’ tenu pour responsable de leur injuste sort, quoi de plus logique en effet que de se rallier à des ‘outsiders’ qui s’en proclament les ennemis, au nom du ‘peuple’ justement?

Cette vision en noir et blanc et la logique d’exclusion qu’elle suppose ne paraissent pourtant pas suffisantes. Mis à part certains cas de ralliement quasi mécanique à un candidat par simple rejet de son adversaire, il ne suffit généralement pas de se défier d’un camp pour se rallier au camp opposé. Il y faut en plus un minimum de motifs positifs, un élan, une séduction, certaines affinités assez fortement ressenties pour attirer. Or, si on voit bien comment la confiance se perd (par exemple comment celle qui a été placée dans un dirigeant peut être rompue pour cause de non-respect de ses engagements), il est moins simple de discerner comment elle se gagne. Surtout quand il s’agit, comme cela arrive de plus en plus fréquemment, de l’accorder non pas à des professionnels de la politique connus de longue date mais à des postulants nouveaux, issus de la ‘société civile’ et de ce fait restés trop éloignés des fonctions de représentation et de gouvernement pour qu’on puisse imaginer ce dont ils seraient capables, en bien ou en mal, s’ils accédaient au pouvoir.

Pourtant, c’est précisément de cette sorte de virginité politique que se prévalent la plupart des candidats populistes. Leur art consiste à tourner en vertu leur relatif manque d’expérience, leur non-professionnalisme et leur distance par rapport aux mœurs, au langage, à l’esprit même des sphères politiques établies. Cette forme d’amateurisme qui serait rédhitoire pour tout autre type de carrière n’empêche pas, de nos jours — au contraire — de devenir maire d’une grande métropole, premier ministre ou chef d’Etat. De fait, se présenter comme politiquement novice, comme quelqu’un qui n’a jamais été mêlé aux intrigues de la ‘politique politicienne,’ qui ne dépend d’aucun

parti, qui n'a aucune part de responsabilité dans les fautes des gouvernements précédents, c'est se donner l'allure d'un brave citoyen 'comme nous,' étranger aux compromis et aux mensonges du 'système' mais en revanche victime ou, pour le moins, observateur outré par ses errements, ses injustices, ses tromperies.

Cette insistance sur l'appartenance au monde des humbles par opposition à celui des puissants, au 'peuple' par opposition aux privilégiés, et en même temps (car dans la bouche des populistes cela va de pair) sur l'enracinement dans la mère patrie, par opposition à des étrangers, immigrés ou réfugiés, vus comme des accapareurs d'emplois et des promoteurs d'insécurité, tout cela va dans le même sens. De tels gages de solidarité et de complicité avec les indignés sont apparemment, pour ce type paradoxal de politiciens anti-politiciens, les meilleurs moyens de construire l'image de candidats dignes de confiance. A les voir et à les entendre, tout donne à croire qu'une fois au pouvoir ils ne risqueront de trahir ni les victimes de la globalisation ni les 'laissés-pour-compte' de la fête digitale qui mettent en eux leurs espoirs de revanche.

### 3. Vers l'esthésie

Si la confiance qu'inspirent les leaders populistes repose sur le type d'éléments qu'on vient d'évoquer — la possession d'un 'casier politique vierge,' la position 'hors-système,' la qualité de 'vrai autochtone,'<sup>2</sup> — alors il faut en bonne logique admettre qu'elle n'a pas pour condition nécessaire une compréhension approfondie de la politique qu'ils s'engagent à mener sur le plan économique, social, international, etc. Peut-être d'ailleurs une bonne partie de leurs électeurs sont-ils ou se croient-ils encore moins que d'autres à même de juger en ces matières souvent présentées comme très techniques. Peut-être même n'en ont-ils pas le souci. Le fait que cela ne les empêche pas de savoir qui applaudir renforce l'idée que le contenu précis des programmes politiques n'est pas le critère principal de leur choix: l'image de la personne l'emporte sur le détail de ses propositions.

Mais l'image ne suffit pas. Cette notion implique une distance entre celui qui regarde et ce qu'il voit. Or, en politique, il ne s'agit pas toujours — pas forcément — de regarder et de juger pour, ensuite, décider. Comme la sympathie ou l'antipathie, l'adhésion politique peut aussi être de l'ordre de l'élan spontané, 'sans raison.' Ou plutôt, il peut aussi s'agir d'une impulsion qui a bien certaines 'raisons,' mais des raisons *éprouvées* plutôt que raisonnées, autrement dit qui reposent sur des sentiments d'affinité immédiate relevant d'un plan de pertinence distinct du plan cognitif. Ce ressenti, cet éprouvé, on les voit se développer face au tribun populiste au moins selon deux modes complémentaires.

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<sup>2</sup> En universalisant le nom du parti populiste finlandais, les Vrais Finlandais.

D'un côté, sur le mode d'humeurs partagées. Il s'agit là d'une composante essentielle de l'ethos populiste: c'est la xénophobie — ni un parti pris idéologique ni une option réfléchie mais une compulsion de rejet à base émotionnelle et même somatique, 'viscérale.' Pour un leader sans scrupule, donner à ses supporters l'occasion de communier dans la haine des autres, voilà un puissant moyen de rassemblement autour de sa personne. D'où l'intérêt des démagogues à exciter, outre l'exécration des 'élites,' les pulsions à connotation raciale, même si elles ne sont nullement l'apanage des milieux 'populaires.' Lorsqu'elle a pour ressort le partage du sentiment de différer ensemble face aux 'envahisseurs' au point de 'ne pas pouvoir les sentir' (ce qui veut dire les exécrer en tant que corps jusqu'au fond de son propre corps), la dévotion au chef ne tient à rien d'autre qu'à un pur *sentir*, le plus brut et le plus brutal. Sur ce point, le modèle historique insurpassable est le discours de meeting hitlérien. Là, ce qui compte est moins l'argumentation qui cherche à motiver la haine (en tant que passion fondée sur des raisons de haïr) que le ton, le geste, le rythme, la fantastique dynamique corporelle d'un orateur capable de faire partager la haine, de la faire vivre en tant que motion somatique contagieusement induite.

Mais d'un autre côté, la confiance se fonde aussi, plus pacifiquement, sur l'exaltation des similitudes entre soi. Le plus élémentaire dans cet ordre d'idée, c'est la certitude de se trouver entre proches, du même monde et du même bord. Or l'un des principaux talents des leaders populistes est précisément de savoir se faire passer pour proches de leur clientèle. Pour beaucoup d'entre eux, une présence continue sur les réseaux sociaux est devenue, on le sait, le moyen le plus efficace d'entretenir avec leur clientèle un lien de familiarité pour ainsi dire intime. Parallèlement, en montrant qu'ils se comportent 'comme tout le monde' dans la vie de tous les jours, leur mise en scène sur les grands et petits écrans atteste à chaque instant qu'ils partagent 'nos soucis,' et que s'ils les partagent, c'est parce qu'eux aussi ils sont 'du peuple.' S'exprimer avec le même langage familier que 'vous et moi' en sera la preuve. Certains vont même plus loin, passant de la familiarité à une grossièreté calculée pour scandaliser le 'beau monde' (les gens 'd'en haut') tout en faisant jubiler leurs fidèles (les gens soi-disant 'd'en bas'): sur la scène politique, savoir-faire scandale par une parole dont l'insolence gage la 'vérité' fait aussi partie des compétences du *bouffon*.<sup>3</sup>

Fondée sur de tels éléments, la crédibilité d'un leader ne dépend ni de la faisabilité de ses projets ni de la cohérence ou de la véracité de ses propos. Puisque c'est une sympathie à fleur de peau pour la personne même qui emporte l'adhésion des supporters à ce qu'il énonce, ni la démagogie de ses promesses ni la fausseté éventuelle de ses assertions ne peuvent lui nuire. Pour ceux qu'il fascine, il ne peut y avoir de sa part ni

<sup>3</sup> Bouffon, clown, histrion? Falstaff, Ubu, Coluche... Trump, Johnson, Bolsonaro, Grillo, Le Pen... toute une lignée professionnelle, de la scène de théâtre à la scène politique, atteste que ces termes n'ont rien de déplacé. Sur le bon usage de la grossièreté en politique, cf. Landowski (1997, chap. 7, 'Régimes de présence et formes de popularité').

discours mensonger ni parole délirante. Aucune réfutation, aucun fact-checking ne pourront donc être crus ni même entendus. Non pas qu'on les juge à leur tour faux mais tout simplement parce qu'aux yeux des fidèles ils ne sont pas pertinents en tant qu'actes de langage : par définition, contre la parole du dépositaire d'une confiance aveugle, aucune argutie n'est recevable.

On a là le point d'aboutissement d'un changement radical d'attitude épistémique. Une forme de discursivité faite de rigueur argumentative a perdu sa prégnance tandis qu'à côté d'elle mais aussi, en grande partie, à sa place, le sensible, l'esthétique, en est venu à jouer un rôle prépondérant.<sup>4</sup> Cela ne veut certes pas dire que le pouvoir d'incantation des orateurs populistes soit à lui seul suffisant pour gagner les suffrages de n'importe quel auditoire. Leurs discours ne peuvent certes avoir prise que sur ceux dont la vision du monde les prédispose à croire aux solutions miraculeuses que promet le démagogue vu comme un sauveur. Sans un minimum de conditions de cet ordre, qui par nature relèvent du plan cognitif, le charme exercé sur le plan esthétique n'opèrerait pas. Mais pour peu qu'elles soient réunies, alors un timbre de voix, une expression physionomique, une gestualité singulière, un ton, un rythme, la vertu contagieuse d'une forte 'présence' peuvent servir de points de cristallisation pour la formation de liens éprouvés comme si c'était de personne à personne et les yeux dans les yeux.<sup>5</sup>

#### 4. Régimes sémiotiques et régimes politiques

Pendant longtemps, dans les régions du monde actuellement en proie au populisme, a régné une parfaite concordance entre le régime juridico-politique de la représentation, ou 'démocratie représentative,' et le régime sémiotique dit de la *manipulation*, où des procédures de persuasion réciproque débouchent sur des accords entre sujets. L'électeur-citoyen, tout comme le héros du récit sémiotique canonique, était, au moins en théorie, un sujet autonome, guidé par un *principe d'intentionnalité*, doué de volonté et de raison. Conscient de lui-même et de ses intérêts, il décidait de tout en connaissance de cause, sachant peser le pour et le contre et estimer la juste valeur des 'valeurs.' Même ses emportements passionnels obéissaient à une forme de rationalité qui les rendait sensés et grosso modo prévisibles. L'*homo politicus* (et son frère l'*homo æconomicus*), à l'instar de l'*homo semioticus*, était essentiellement un actant-sujet cognitivement compétent — un esprit 'intelligent.'


Puis, dans la théorie, est apparu non pas son contraire (un agent sans discernement ni volonté ne serait plus en effet, à proprement parler, un 'sujet') mais son complémen-

<sup>4</sup> Sur la notion d'esthésie, cf. Greimas (1987).

<sup>5</sup> Sur l'intimité paradoxale du rapport médiatique, cf. Landowski (2004, chap. 10).

taire : un sujet incarné, perméable, corps et âme, aux qualités esthétiques du monde et des présences humaines qui occupent son voisinage — en un mot, un sujet ‘sensible.’ L’intégration du *principe de sensibilité* ainsi reconnu à l’intérieur d’un modèle interactionnel élargi a conduit à la mise en lumière, à côté du régime de la manipulation fondé sur le principe d’intentionnalité, d’un régime de sens et d’interaction tout à fait différent et jusqu’alors sémiotiquement inconnu, celui de l’*ajustement*. Mais à la manipulation et à l’ajustement, le modèle interactionnel que nous proposons articule deux autres régimes: celui de la *programmation*, fondé sur un *principe de régularité*, et celui de l’*accident*, caractérisé au contraire par l’absence de toute régularité, autrement dit régi par un *principe d’aléa*.<sup>6</sup>

Séparément ou combinés les uns aux autres, ces divers régimes permettent de rendre compte de la dimension signifiante de l’interaction dans toutes sortes de domaines. Dans le domaine qui nous intéresse ici, à chacun d’entre eux correspond un type de *régime politique* déterminé:

<b>Principes de signifiante et d’interaction</b>	La régularité		L’imprévisibilité
<b>Régimes d’interaction</b>	La programmation		L’assentiment à l’aléa
<b>Régimes politiques</b>	<i>Totalitarisme</i>		<i>Absolutisme</i>
<b>Principes de signifiante</b>	La distinctivité		La sensibilité
<b>Principes d’interaction</b>	L’intentionnalité		La disponibilité
<b>Régimes d’interaction</b>	La manipulation		L’ajustement
<b>Régimes politiques</b>	<i>Démocratie représentative</i>		<i>Démocratie directe ou démagogie populiste</i>

Punctum.

Les *totalitarismes* sont des régimes politiques où la collectivité tout entière est soumise à des principes rigides, des régularités théoriquement immuables, en général appuyées sur une prétendue connaissance scientifique des ‘lois’ de la société et de l’économie. Les interactions entre agents sont en conséquence encadrées par des réglementations et orientées par des planifications qui ont pour effet de réduire les comportements individuels et collectifs à l’exécution d’algorithmes préétablis: en termes

<sup>6</sup> Présenté initialement dans *Les interactions risquées*, Limoges, PULIM, 2005, ce modèle a été actualisé in Landowski (2019) (<https://bit.ly/3b1U2t0>).

sémiotiques, c'est la syntaxe du régime interactionnel de la *programmation* qui est ainsi mise en œuvre. Du corporatisme de la France de Vichy, sous l'occupation allemande, à la mise en ordre sociétale nazie, fasciste ou stalinienne, les exemples historiques de ce type de régimes largement soutenus par les masses, et, en ce sens, 'populaires,' sont trop connus pour qu'il soit nécessaire d'entrer dans des détails. On doit en revanche se demander si les formes actuelles de normalisation à grande échelle rendues possibles par le développement des instruments de surveillance informatique ne vont pas tout doucement dans la même direction, celle d'un totalitarisme certes d'allure plus 'soft' mais d'autant plus efficace qu'il est mieux accepté sinon même désiré par la masse de la population ('populiste' comprise).<sup>7</sup>

Non moins rigides et contraignants, bien que d'une tout autre manière, les *absolutismes* placent les sujets politiques sous la dépendance d'une autorité toute puissante dont les décisions ne dépendent que de son propre caprice: c'est la volonté souveraine et arbitraire du prince qui détermine le sort de tout un chacun sous la forme de diktats aussi difficiles à anticiper que les accidents de la vie ordinaire. L'autorité ne se fonde plus alors sur une 'science' de la société mais sur un dogme, tel celui de la transcendance du pouvoir 'de droit divin' investi dans l'autorité suprême du temps des anciennes monarchies. Qu'il s'agisse du monarque au sens propre ou, à l'époque moderne, de figures de pouvoir investies d'une sacralité laïque (depuis le Petit Père des Peuples ou le Grand Timonier d'antan jusqu'aux divers 'hommes providentiels' actuellement révéérés par les populistes un peu partout dans le monde), les décisions que prennent de tels dirigeants relèvent d'un pouvoir quasi-discrétionnaire. Par suite, leurs choix ne sont guère plus prévisibles que ne le sont les 'décrets' du hasard. Le régime sémiotique qui en résulte pour les sujets est donc celui de l'*accident* inévitable — mais aussi, en même temps, bien souvent, celui de l'*assentiment* à l'arbitraire de l'autorité suprême: le plus généralement, face à l'absolu du pouvoir, que peut-on en effet, si ce n'est y consentir comme à une fatalité? Si le 'culte de la personnalité' a constitué naguère, dans divers pays, une des formes les plus notoires d'un tel assentiment, la dévotion actuellement manifestée par des millions de supporters à l'égard d'individus aussi 'capricieux,' sinon lunatiques, qu'un Donald Trump, un Boris Johnson ou un Jair Bolsonaro (au Brésil) relève du même régime.

Bien entendu, il n'est aucune forme, passée ou actuelle, de totalitarisme ou d'absolutisme qui ne soit aujourd'hui formellement rejetée par l'ensemble des partis ou mouvements politiques: tout le monde, dictateurs inclus et populistes compris, se proclame 'démocrate.' Ce terme, il est vrai, n'est pas en lui-même d'une grande clarté puisqu'on a connu naguère des 'démocraties populaires' à caractère typiquement totalitaire et que se multiplient à présent des 'démocraties illibérales' à forte tendance ab-

<sup>7</sup> Sur la logique sémiotique du piège numérique, cf. Landowski (2016).

solutiste (comme en Hongrie, en Pologne ou en Italie). Mais dans la conjoncture politique actuelle, le débat se concentre essentiellement autour de la distinction entre deux formes de 'démocratie,' l'une 'représentative,' l'autre dite 'directe,' c'est-à-dire qui, de nos jours, moyens informatiques aidant, permettrait une participation de tous les citoyens à la prise de décision sans passer par l'intermédiaire de représentants élus. Comme on sait, les populistes se déclarent expressément les adversaires de la première forme et se proclament les promoteurs de la seconde.

Nous l'avons déjà noté, la démocratie *représentative*, telle que traditionnellement pratiquée dans les pays occidentaux, constitue, en termes de sémiotique de l'interaction, un accomplissement parfait du régime de la *manipulation*. Est-ce à dire que, du seul fait qu'ils s'opposent à cette forme de démocratie et prétendent instaurer à sa place une démocratie *directe*, les populistes mènent une politique qui relève sémiotiquement du régime interactionnel de l'*ajustement* ? Pris à la lettre, le modèle ci-dessus pourrait le laisser croire. Pourtant, la réponse ne peut en réalité être que négative. Voilà qui demande quelques explications.

## 5. Danger de l'esthésie

Nous croyons qu'une forme d'organisation de la vie politique qui mette en œuvre une syntaxe interactionnelle correspondant à ce que nous appelons 'l'ajustement' est bel et bien possible. A nos yeux, c'est même cela qui mériterait la noble appellation de 'démocratie directe.' Mais la forme de démocratie proposée par les populistes n'en est que la caricature. Que recouvre donc au juste le concept d'*ajustement*, et en quoi la démagogie populiste le dénature-t-elle?

L'ajustement, tel que nous l'entendons, ne doit pas être confondu avec l'adaptation (ou l'accommodation), qui relève de la programmation — régime où un actant ne peut agir sur, avec ou contre un autre qu'à condition de respecter les régularités qui régissent son comportement. Il ne consiste pas non plus, comme la manipulation, à faire en sorte que l'un des actants accepte de se plier, fût-ce de mauvais gré, à la volonté de l'autre, car l'ajustement est un régime d'interaction entre *égaux*; de plus, à la différence du manipulateur, sujet *intentionnel* qui sait d'avance ce qu'il veut et manipule autrui dans la ferme intention de l'obtenir, le sujet de l'ajustement est fondamentalement un sujet *disponible*. Par 'disponibilité' nous entendons une disposition actantielle et modale tournée non pas vers l'appropriation du monde mais vers l'accomplissement du potentiel des choses, des gens, et de soi-même. Un sujet 'disponible' ne convoite donc a priori rien de particulier, ni pouvoirs ni honneurs, ni femmes ni richesses... Il aspire seulement à vivre et si possible s'épanouir: c'est un être ouvert à tout ce qui se présente, au présent même et à autrui.

Lorsqu'entre deux partenaires une telle disponibilité est réciproque, leurs rapports peuvent prendre la forme d'un processus de co-crédation de sens et pour ainsi dire de réinvention de la vie. N'étant plus exhaustivement encadrée par de rigides déterminismes ou des règles sociales contraignantes (comme dans la programmation), pas non plus entièrement livrée à l'aléa (comme sous le régime de l'accident-assentiment), ni même constamment suspendue à de difficiles négociations entre des intentions divergentes ou des intérêts opposés (comme dans la manipulation), la vie peut alors être conçue, ou pour le moins rêvée, comme une aventure gratifiante – libre et créative – une aventure où, dans l'immanence des rapports entre des entités interdépendantes et sensibles les unes aux autres en même temps que respectueuses de leur autonomie respective, chacun cherche à s'accomplir moyennant l'accomplissement corrélatif du potentiel propre à l'autre ou aux autres. Si cela s'applique si bien, par exemple, à l'*amitié*, c'est parce que l'*amitié* met en jeu une dynamique d'incitations réciproques grâce auxquelles les partenaires créent entre eux un rapport sans visées ni règles préétablies mais permettant l'invention d'un mode d'être, de penser et de vivre ensemble à caractère inédit (Landowski 2008). Sous sa forme idéale, voilà ce qu'est 'l'ajustement' entre des sujets 'disponibles.'

On se doute qu'un tel idéal est loin d'avoir cours dans l'univers autoritariste et xénophobe du populisme! De nombreuses études sémiotiques ont pourtant montré qu'un tel régime est applicable au fonctionnement de la vie sociale, économique et politique. Une des plus récentes parmi ces études montre (sans utiliser le terme même d'ajustement) quelle révolution culturelle et politique est susceptible d'introduire dans le fonctionnement social des organes de production économique et dans le vécu quotidien de leurs agents, le recours à une telle syntaxe (Fontanille 2018). D'autres travaux indiquent à quelles conditions il peut en aller de même dans des domaines de la pratique les plus divers, du sport au design (Demuru 2015; Scóz 2018), de la recherche à la prière (Petitimbert 2017, 2015), ou encore en matière de gestion de collectivités publiques ou privées (Ciacco 2013; Cervelli 2013; Petitimbert 2013; Catellani 2018). Débouchant sur une écologie du sens, la logique du régime d'ajustement offre même, selon nous, une voie de réflexion alternative sur les dramatiques problèmes environnementaux et sociétaux de notre temps (Landowski 2017; Calame 2015).

Mais que ce soit sur le plan microsocial ou sur un plan plus large, les formes de démocratie directe envisagées par ces diverses études ne sont possibles qu'à condition d'observer à la fois les *deux* principes dont une syntaxe d'ajustement suppose la conjonction, celui de sensibilité, certes, mais aussi celui de disponibilité. Or, du régime d'ajustement ainsi défini, les populistes ne prennent que ce qui leur convient, à savoir le seul côté sensible. Et s'en remettre exclusivement à la contagion du sentir et à l'emprise psychologique que procure une présence de chaque instant sur les réseaux sociaux, c'est ouvrir la voie aux pires formes d'asservissement en transformant la

collectivité en une ‘masse thymique’ indifférenciée, amorphe et malléable. Comme on dit, le tribun ‘électrise’ les foules: son ‘fil conducteur,’ ce sont les corps à travers lesquels passe sa puissance énergétique, si bien que d’un corps à l’autre la ferveur populaire se propage d’elle-même dans tous les azimuts. En fait de ‘démocratie directe,’ il ne reste plus alors qu’un slogan à valeur connotative, trompeur qui plus est.

Aussi, quand nous avons introduit, sous le nom de ‘contagion,’ la dimension sensible parmi les variables de la relation intersubjective, nous avons d’emblée distingué à son propos deux usages possibles, bilatéral ou unilatéral (Landowski 2004: 130-133). L’usage unilatéral, c’est l’annihilation de l’autre en tant que sujet, par absorption ou fusion. L’exploitation du sensible peut alors être mise au service de la ‘manipulation,’ non pas seulement au sens établi par la sémiotique narrative (où elle engage la persuasion et débouche sur le contrat) mais aussi selon l’acception usuelle et péjorative: soumettre l’autre à soi en jouant sur son corps, comme dans l’hypnose qui réduit l’autre à un non-sujet programmé, ou sur ses pulsions, telle la publicité qui ‘fait désirer’ par contagion sensible (Landowski 2007).

La propagande actuelle ne fait pas autre chose. Misant tout sur l’esthésie au point d’arriver à faire passer les *fake news* les plus rocambolesques pour des vérités établies, elle paraît neutraliser les facultés de raisonnement de beaucoup de nos contemporains. Il n’en reste pas moins que contrairement à ce que la candidate démocrate à l’élection présidentielle nord-américaine de 2016, Hillary Clinton, eut un jour la maladresse d’insinuer, les électeurs séduits par la rhétorique de bateleur et les clins d’œil de son adversaire n’étaient pas, constitutivement, moins capables de jugement que les autres : eux aussi, ils étaient, comme nous tous, à la fois sensibles *et* intelligents. Le fait qu’ils aient été esthésiquement réceptifs face aux charmes incantatoires (et capillaires) de leur héros alors que, corrélativement, ils ne pouvaient pas supporter l’hexis ‘bon genre’ de sa rivale, sa morgue de femme en tous points ‘comme il faut’ (de la coiffure à la chaussure), ne les empêchait pas, par ailleurs, d’évaluer cognitivement divers aspects moins ‘épidermiques’ de la situation. Et pourtant, en l’occurrence, c’est une logique du sensible suspendant la décision au jeu des attractions et des répulsions immédiates qui a prévalu sur le poids des arguments.

Le fait que le cognitif et l’esthésique, loin de s’exclure l’un l’autre, soient au contraire, en théorie, conjointement présents à la base de tous nos choix, y compris politiques, n’empêche donc pas que néanmoins, dans certains contextes, ils tendent à se neutraliser l’un l’autre. C’est ce qui permet de comprendre qu’une campagne électorale et même une stratégie de communication à long terme puissent, au choix, s’appuyer préférentiellement sur l’une ou l’autre de ces deux facettes de notre compréhension du monde. Mais on ne parlerait pas de populisme si les grands et les petits bouffons de notre temps n’avaient pas depuis longtemps fait à cet égard leur choix.

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# From Malthus to far-right terrorists: an explorative study on the uses and abuses of the ‘overpopulation’ discourse

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## ABSTRACT

In the 19th century, Thomas Malthus introduced the concept of human overpopulation into the scientific demographic debate, establishing the myth of population growth causing famine and starvation. The concept has recently resurfaced in international discussions on climate change and world leaders' speeches. Still, it will likely come into the spotlight in the coming years of the climate crisis, mass displacement, and migration. Our research examines literary and visual texts from the early to the most recent debates, declarations, and uses. Our focus is primarily on the current academic and eco-fascist uses of the concept.

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## Introduction

This article analyzes the concept of human ‘overpopulation’ in the public sphere, including its online presence. The aim is to investigate the concept’s past and present significance through the semiotic study of academic and cultural documents. Our corpus includes a series of written, oral, and visual texts. Amongst them, both well-known and lesser-known documents, ranging from 1798 (when Thomas Malthus’ *An Essay on the Principle of Population* was published) to the recent writings of white supremacist perpetrators of heinous massacres (2011 - 2019). There seems to be an unfortunate continuity between the term’s scientific and political uses, based on an equally unreflective semantics of ‘reality’ (or ‘truth’). Therefore, we need to examine how the referential illusion is constituted and maintained (Grei-mas 2007: 272) in passing from scientific to political discourse.

The analysis consists of a qualitative, exploratory investigation, which employs literary and visual semiotics in political communication studies. By demarcating a specific field for research, it seeks to deduce some implicit rules, namely, those conventions that “shape the reader’s expectations, guaranteeing, beyond the language system itself, the predictability of the content, as well as the assumptions and inferences of the reading”<sup>1</sup> (Bertrand 2002: 22). We will reflect not on quantitative data<sup>2</sup> but only on the rhetorical use of scientific, political, and cultural narratives in the social sphere. Starting our investigation with the emergence of the overpopulation’s concept is due to the strategic importance its original construction has in current thinking and practice. In fact, “the synchronic approach to structures does not contradict either the diachronic approach to history or the pragmatic approach to reading”<sup>3</sup> (Bertrand 2002: 22).

Analysis of the texts was preceded by online keyword research, which revealed additional study objects through concordances and original language words linked to the lexeme ‘population’ and its derived lexemes. Malthus and Ehrlich’s texts were considered due to their historical relevance, followed by an analysis of the recent, widely reported, academic debate. In the political field, we identified the most significant trends in the last two decades through web research, including the term’s appearance in the 2020 US presidential campaign. Finally, in the case of terrorists’ texts, we focused on the parts containing the word ‘overpopulation’ and the links between their manifestos.

This article forms an initial exploratory study of the direct evocation of the overpopulation term. It employs historical semantics to highlight the evolution of the term’s meaning. Semiotics, on the other hand, is employed to highlight the term’s synchronic aspects and different uses, based on the premise that “the semiotic analysis of discourses on the environment would consist, first of all, in the identification and denunciation of the veridictory figures, as well as those of the strategies of ignorance”<sup>4</sup> (Fontanille 2018: 67).

## 1. Overpopulation

Since Plato and Aristotle’s time (Feen 1996), the concept of overpopulation entailed diagnosing a social problem, an imbalance, potentially resolved by famine, pestilence, war, and earthquakes. In modern times, overpopulation discourse has spread everywhere; in academic debate, politics, and fiction (Domingo 2015; Clark 2016). From

<sup>1</sup> Our translation.

<sup>2</sup> Models based on one or more variables relating to “population growth”, such as the recent and emblematic study by Bologna and Aquino (2020), are not analyzed here.

<sup>3</sup> Our translation.

<sup>4</sup> Our translation.

Dickens to Asimov, from Ballard and several other sci-fi authors to Thanos, the villain in the recent Hollywood movie *Avengers: Infinity War* (Newell 2018), who states: "Little one, it's a simple calculus. This universe is finite. Its resources, finite. If life is left unchecked, life will cease to exist. It needs correction" (Markus).

Natural sciences and urban studies use the term overpopulation to refer to the 'crowding effect' as the self-regulative mechanism via which an ecosystem adapts to the animal or plant species supernumeraries (McAdam 2004; Evert 2010). On the other hand, in urban planning, overpopulation involves large metropolitan conglomerates' high population density—an overcrowding problem in an urban space (Clark 2016).

As a term, overpopulation is based on a familiar word (population), amenable to modifications (e.g., subpopulation), and regularly associated with demography, nature, and human environments. The quantity prefixes do not create a compound word: they only reinforce the idea of 'population' - i.e., of "all the people living in a particular country, area, or place" (Cambridge Dictionary) - as is commonly used to indicate a series of undifferentiated units determined by spatial boundaries and temporalization.

Therefore, the term is polysemic; its meaning always dependent on its co-text and its use for different places and populations. To date, some online dictionaries define overpopulation as: "The condition of having a population so dense as to cause environmental deterioration, and impaired quality of life, or a population crash" (Merriam-Webster); "Excessive population of an area to the point of overcrowding, depletion of natural resources, or environmental deterioration" (The Free Dictionary); "Situation in which the number of individuals of a given species exceeds the number that its environment can sustain. Possible consequences are environmental deterioration, impaired quality of life, and a population crash" (Britannica.com); "To fill with an excessive number of people, straining available resources and facilities: Expanding industry has overpopulated the western suburbs" (Dictionary.com). In all these definitions, the word refers to any population that causes a worsening of the living environment. The imbalance concerns the relation between the number of consumers and the environmentally available resources. Only in the last case is the human component explicit as an example of using the word in context. The Cambridge Dictionary instead refers implicitly to the human context, plus comparative examples of use. 'Overpopulation' is a noun indicating:

the fact of a country or city, etc., having too many people for the amount of food, materials, and space available there. Overpopulation is one of the country's most pressing social problems. People are dying because of overpopulation, poverty, and disease. (Cambridge Dictionary)

Although the human condition is not necessary to explain the term's meaning, some dictionaries focus on the 'human' attribute and exclude the 'non-human.' It is only the demographic and social sciences that use the technical term 'relative quantity index' to refer to any type of living population.

## 2. The origins of the contemporary debate: two fundamental texts

In this section, we take up Fabbri and Latour's invitation "to analyze scientific texts for how they are actually produced" (Fabbri 2000: 260). The modern debate about overpopulation began with Thomas Malthus, in the eighteenth century, to return in vogue with the publication of Paul Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* in 1968. In both cases, public opinion is warned by intellectuals eager to confirm a much older theory: we are too many, there won't be enough resources.

### 2.1. Thomas Malthus's *An Essay on the Principle of Population*

Thomas Malthus' *An essay on the principle of the population as it affects the future improvement of society with remarks on the speculations of Mr. Godwin, M. Condorcet, and other writers* was published in 1789. Revised repeatedly by the author over the years, the book comprises nineteen chapters. The first seven are devoted to presenting his theory, and the rest in confuting William Godwin and the Marquis de Condorcet's views. Malthus's book forms the cornerstone of the discourse on overpopulation (Tobin 2004: 2), inspiring Darwin's evolution theory (Herbert 1971). He elaborates the concept of overpopulation based on a specific theory of population: "It is an obvious truth, which has

been taken notice of by many writers, that population must always be kept down to the level of the means of subsistence" (Malthus 1798: vii).

Malthus's appeal to self-evident truth ("a proposition so evident that it needs no illustration") and, therefore, to his readers' common sense, is a constant that, combined with the opposition 'control vs. nature', presupposes some social organization/State that acts as a social control body, in the eugenic/positivist sense. He rejects the historical possibility of a civil society free to manage its birth rate ("in no state that we have yet known has the power of population been left to exert itself with perfect freedom"). In this way, a significant opposition running through Malthus's book is 'control vs. nature' (Fig. 1).

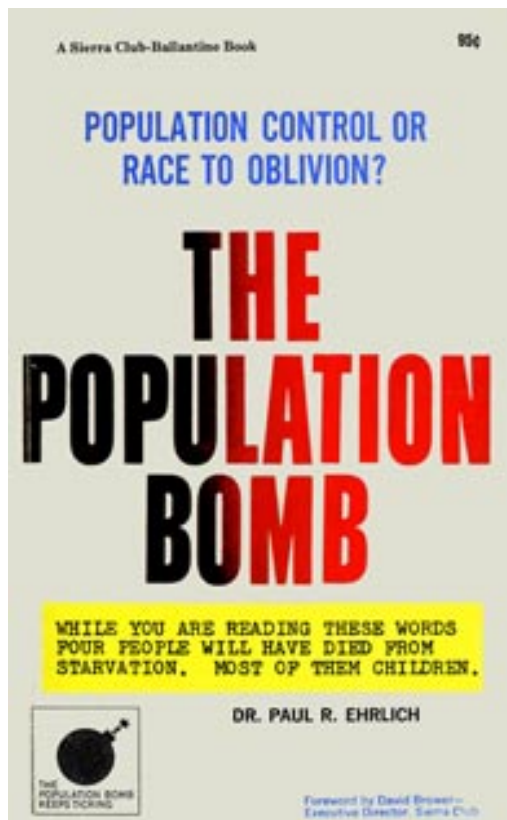


Figure 1. Control vs. Nature

The narrative scheme is quite evident: the population is the object of value, as a superficial semantic component of Greimas's Generative Trajectory, with its unconscious 'growth.' Malthus as the addresser, therefore, turns to the State as a control body (as well as to the reader), while certain anti-addressers (William Godwin and the Marquis de Condorcet) try to refute his analysis. Argumentation proceeds with historical calculations and economic demonstrations aiming to warn about the dangers of a State's failure to prepare for population management.

Among various other evils, overpopulation causes famine, crime, poverty, and war; these are linear consequences of the population exceeding the means of subsistence. 'Natural' population growth increases in a 'geometrical ratio' (by multiplication) – i.e., it doubles from year to year – while the production of food increases in a linear, 'arithmetical ratio' (by addition). Inevitably, then, population growth will quickly outdo the available resources (Malthus 1798: 4).

Posing as an extradiegetic scientific narrator, Malthus presents his thesis following the time's objectivist style. His continual appeals to the 'obvious truth,' familiar to every author, are linked to the impersonal 'having to do' of another subject: the State, whose object of value is the population balance (civilization) vs. overpopulation (= the cruelest rebalancing of nature itself).

Therefore, Malthus appears as an impartial authority, eager to persuade the reader how far the population increases when it grows out of control (unchecked). He presents readers with a precise, scientific formula whose consequences, equally scientific, indicate how to overcome food production's ensuing insufficiency. The State should behave between "preventive checks," such as the moral restraint of postponing marriage, or "positive checks," such as famine, disease, and warfare. Moreover, "the check that represses an increase which is already begun, is confined chiefly, though not perhaps solely, to the lowest orders of society" (Malthus 1798: 23). Performance (as a moment of realization of the State-subject) is given by effective control (positive sanction) or by its complete absence (a sort of *laissez-faire*, the worst solution), which indicates a natural decline of humanity itself (nearly negative sanction, due to the failure of the subject).

This natural inequality of the two powers of population and of production in the earth, and that great law of our nature which must constantly keep their effects equal, form the great difficulty that to me appears insurmountable in the way to the perfectibility of society (Malthus 1798: 5).

Famine is both a misfortune and a solution (a necessary evil), an unpleasant rebalancing produced by humanity's very nature. Therefore, we must understand the idea of a higher authority's control in a social-evolutionary sense. It suggests the idea of a "perfectibility" that shifts the discourse not towards the demonstration of the "obvious

truth” but to social management and control, and more precisely, to State demographic policy and its ability to contain the damage by limiting population.

In Malthus’s scientific discourse, engagement (“I said that population, when unchecked”), impersonal observations (“Let us then”), and appeals to the general public, combine in a paratactic logic that legitimizes historical and anthropological considerations based on hypothetical data and dubious demonstrations. The form of the utterance creates “that particular form of credibility known as ‘referential illusion’” (Bertrand 2002: 63 - 64); the reality-effect which nullifies the distance between the enunciator (the empirical author) and the enunciatee (the empirical reader). This argumentative path intends to be taken as a natural / scientific law, as a precise and far-sighted appeal with progressive objectives, in an evolutionary sense. Notwithstanding Malthus’ later revision of the apocalyptic tones used, it is the path that inspired the current of the neo-Malthusians (Trewavas 2002: 668).

This particular enunciative instance’s foundation lies in enunciative disengagement, using the impersonal typical of objective discourse. From a semantic perspective, Malthus’s text leaps from the natural (living species) to the social context (the human species as an analogy). On the syntactic level, this involves making arbitrary presuppositions inferred, not from a naturalistic description but rhetorical manipulation.

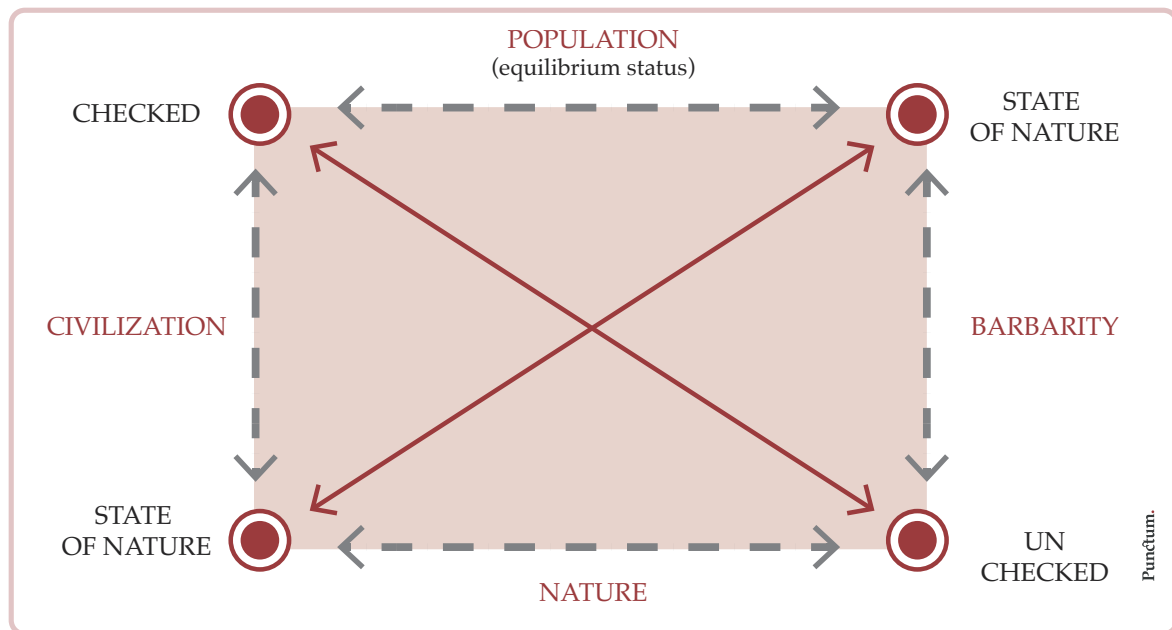
## 2.2. Paul R. Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb*

The post-World War II baby boom drew public attention to the global demographic issue. Professor Paul Ehrlich stands out among the diverse organizations and intellectuals concerned about the sudden population increase. A staunch supporter of population control policies, he was responsible, according to Murray Bookchin, for “giving birth to an army of Malthusian population-bombers” (Bookchin 2010: 14).

In tandem with the emergence of the postwar environmental movement (Schreurs 2020: 249-250), Ehrlich proclaims that “overpopulation is now the dominant problem in all our personal, national, and international planning.” Far more alarmist than Malthus’s discourse, Ehrlich’s *The Population Bomb* (1968) would come to legitimize the so-called neo-Malthusian movement.<sup>55</sup>

I believe that overpopulation is the most important issue facing the world today and that the United States as a world leader should be doing everything in its power to meet it. Starvation is a fact of life in many areas of the world right now and will be worse tomorrow. Every incident of unrest around the world can be traced at least in part to overpopulation, and as the pressures from increased population heighten, so will the unrest. Surely there is no more serious problem (Ehrlich 1968: 212).

<sup>55</sup> “Well, we wanted something dramatic to start the book,” Erlich stated during a radio interview for [climateone.org](http://climateone.org) (KQED Public Radio).



**Figure 2.** The Population Bomb book cover

The book's title includes a powerful metaphor, reproduced visually in the book's cover, whereby the human population's exponential growth is represented as a bomb (Fig. 2). The metaphor's textual anchoring ("The population bomb keeps ticking") reinforces the idea of an imminent explosion. At the top, the logline emphasizes the tensiveness aspect, the relationship between the lasting element and the terminating element of a process (Greimas 2007: 355): "Population control or race to oblivion?" This race against time can be won through the classical Malthusian solution: population control.<sup>6</sup>

The cover, but also the chapter titles of the book, effectively summarize Ehrlich's appeal: "too many people, too little food," "a dying planet." Beginning by presenting the problem, the chapter titles proceed to indicate its culmination ("the ends of the road"), then to temporalize (Greimas 2007: 354) to the past ("what is being done"), to the future ("what needs to be done") and finally to the present, activating the reader's direct engagement ("what can you do?"). The latter starts right with the book's cover teaser: "While you are reading these words, four people will have died from starvation. Most of them children." The book is not aimed at just a few intellectuals but the wider public. Malthus's thesis is recalibrated: the issue now is to save the entire planet as an object of value. Overpopulation is a global problem demanding the attention of environmental activists, intellectuals, politicians, individuals as well as institutions.

<sup>6</sup> An example of its most authoritarian version: "We should have sent doctors to aid in the program by setting up centers for training para-medical personnel to do vasectomies. Coercion? Perhaps, but coercion in a good cause" (Ehrlich 1968: 165-166).

Unlike Malthus's writings, scientific language is used with a sense of urgency mixed with the disclosure's difficulty. The planetary emergency must be revealed precisely because it is hidden. Ehrlich's prophecy about the future of the planet and humanity is clear: a global famine will break out in less than ten years after the publication of the book. "The battle to feed all of humanity is over. In the 1970s, the world will undergo famines - hundreds of millions of people are going to starve to death despite any crash programs embarked upon now" (Ehrlich 1968: 11). It is no longer a question of State control and 'perfectibility' but of saving humanity and the planet, and everyone is called to participate. Ehrlich's *The Population Bomb* adapts to the times and marks the symbolic passage from the national-human question to the demographic-environmental one.

Although the specific prophecy has not come to pass,<sup>7</sup> Ehrlich repeatedly returned to editorial success, most recently with an article titled *The Population Bomb REVISITED* (2009). Here, he admits the fallacy of calculation (inherent in any scientific enterprise) while glorifying his book's ultimately beneficial effect:<sup>8</sup> an early warning about the overpopulation problem (Ehrlich 2009: 69). With Ehrlich, the scientific legitimacy associated with the theory of overpopulation augmented the authority of political discourse (Cedroni 2014: 18) by facilitating the transition from the technical lexicon to political language (Petrilli 2015: 43 - 44).

### 3. On academic debate and its popularization

After Ehrlich, many academic studies appeared either in support of or against the theory of overpopulation. A thorough overview of this vast literature (ranging from ecological studies to economics to anthropology) is beyond this article's scope. Apart from a few selected mentions, our focus will be on the most recent media appearance of explicitly neo-Malthusian visions.

A range of recent studies support<sup>9</sup> overpopulation theory by associating it with climate change and sustainable development (Valentine 2010), the feminist agenda for women's rights (Weld 2012), the challenges of national development (Garg 2017), or international relations (Radavoi 2017). In effect, this scientific literature legitimizes the institutions and authors associated with the overpopulation cause. Significantly, the overpopulation issue is often characterized as taboo, a keyword that retains its impact in the scientific field.

<sup>7</sup> About the failure of Malthusian theories in those years, see the analysis concerning the 'Green Revolution' (Flachs 2016).

<sup>8</sup> It's useful to recall social psychologist Leon Festinger's observation: "Here once again we note the appearance of increased enthusiasm and conviction after a disconfirmation" (Festinger et al. 1956: 16).

<sup>9</sup> In environmental humanities, there is no direct support to the overpopulation theory; however, it can be considered an issue to take seriously (Clark 2016).

At the recent United Nations Climate Change Conference (COP25, 2019) in Madrid, one panel was entitled *Overpopulation & Climate Change: A Seat at the Table* (Facing Future 2020). The presentation of the speakers included multimedia support with syncretic texts. During the debate, a world map was used to illustrate how the population, from homo sapiens to the present day, has spread worldwide. The first speaker proposed a graph showing a parallelism between population growth and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions (which increase climate change). Other multimedia items were scattered throughout the conference: an infographic on the personal impact of significant choices to reduce CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, in which choosing “one fewer child in the developed world” is equivalent to “58.6 tons”, compared to “2.4 tons” for the choice of “don’t own a car.” Once again assuming the form of truthful discourse (“the core problem at the heart of us to all the planet’s environmental challenges”), whose opacity grounds the idea of overpopulation, the accusation is that the issue has been removed (“never cited”) from the list of things to do to resolve the ecological crisis (Facing Future 2020).

Other non-scientific materials reinforced the speakers’ message: hyperbole in a comic strip that suggests a planet with overcrowded lands,<sup>10</sup> synecdoches in a documentary film on Chinese metropolises, the simile of a man running on a treadmill as a predictive formula. Following Ehrlich’s failed prophecy, the proof offered is in all cases modeled in terms of recurrence and urgency:

Now, when I think about this issue of consumption versus population, I like to go back to the metaphor that Paul Ehrlich proposed. And he said, you look - This whole environmental impact, this carbon footprint is a rectangle and it may not be entirely sure whether the long side of the rectangle is consumption, or maybe it’s population, but the size of the rectangle stays the same. (Facing Future 2020)

From world hunger to climate change, Ehrlich’s analysis remained the standard reference point for sustainability issues. All the speakers asked for a seat at the table to ensure that these dramatic events’ fundamental problems remained on the agenda.

The second speaker referred to naturalist studies and, using images of various species, focused on the parallelism between the animal and human kingdoms.

We must not only reduce our consumption but we must reduce our numbers. They are connected. If we keep ignoring this exponential population rise that has put us in severe ecological overshoot, Nature will reduce the human population for us [...] we’re dying of an excess of political correctness. It continues to impede the truth as we tend to try to be careful rather than correct. Our overpopulation activists, including myself, are falsely accused of sinister agen-

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<sup>10</sup> On the web, there are many journalistic cartoons on this theme. They use either the isotopy of the ascending graph, as a ‘human wave,’ or with the same meaning of urgency implied by Ehrlich’s bomb, with clocks and the onomatopoeic timing ‘tick!’.

das while our numbers spin out of control on our limited planet. (Facing Futures 2020)

The theme of the Malthusian “positive checks” returns here, as well as the idea that nature will make up for the inactivity of the States (a synonym of the collective ‘we’ in this narrative). There is also a well-defined anti-addresser, acting against the “truth” proposed by the neo-Malthusians: political correctness.<sup>11</sup> It is a fascinating rhetorical tool that connects the scientific approach (description) to the political question tout court (solutions). Of course, it is undervalued correctness, short-sighted and deaf to the scientific appeal of the neo-Malthusians.

The last speaker, based on Jevons’ paradox,<sup>12</sup> outlined an anthropological picture of humanity being unable to control its consumerist impulses, suggesting an economic-utilitarian reduction in which “family planning is essential” (as a possibility for women to “prevent or avoid”):

People want, will want to increase their consumption of meat products as described in the literature. When people get a little bit more extra money in their pockets, one of the first things they do is consume animal products. (Facing Future 2020)

The ‘alarmist’ model links the quantitative phenomenon (only numbers matter) to the human population (institutions are asked to do something about it, rather than develop sustainability policies). Given that the veridiction issue is based on the opposition between ‘appearing’ and ‘being’ (Bertrand 2002: 151), the quantitative demonstration merges with a narrative based on secrecy (overpopulation does not seem a problem but, in reality, it is) and on the others’ lies (we seem to be guided by “sinister agendas,” but we proclaim the “truth,” hampered by “political correctness”). Co-host Regina Valdez effectively summarizes this in her conclusive metaphor: “the elephant in the room that no one discusses is these overpopulation issues.” A formulation that links the idea of the ‘secret’ (what is but does not seem to be) to the idea of an ‘inconvenient truth,’ at times visible (for political elites) and at times invisible (to public opinion).

The semiotic assembly of infographics on exponential demographic growth configures visually the credibility of the data collected by the neo-Malthusians. Originating in the academic sector, the ‘inconvenient truth’ about overpopulation passes on to popular science publications (Juniper 2018: 16-17). The overpopulation thesis is supported in a manual on adverse environmental impact facts (Juniper 2018: 16-23), where the same infographics are accompanied by ecological vocabulary (‘population ex-

<sup>11</sup> “...we not die of political correctness. We have overcome many religious tenets that are stuck in the Dark Ages, and, as a naturalist, it’s adapt or die. And this is part of adaptation; we must change our rules and our ideas of what the future can bring based on cultural norms” (Facing Future 2020).

<sup>12</sup> The Jevons paradox concerns how a given resource’s higher production efficiency (lower costs) leads to a greater demand for it. Regarding the validity of this theory, see Richard York and Julius Alexander McGee 2015.

plosion') and expressions inherited from Ehrlich ('demographic time bomb'). However, the national population's myths are contradicted by the different average consumption of individuals or the variables of class, origin, gender, social distribution of resources, and production ethics, as critics of the neo-Malthusian theory point out.

From a syntactic point of view, therefore, the neo-Malthusian discourse envisages the revealing of scientific truth, differing only superficially from Ehrlich's political-alarmist model. This return to 'truth,' to the need to face the problem, provides a state of visibility guaranteed by visual elements (such as infographics and maps) and an "alarming" figurative component (such as bombs and waves).

An equally vast academic literature has developed, accusing neo-Malthusians of skewed calculations and collusion with conservative worldviews. Starting by problematizing or refuting neo-Malthusian data, academic criticism ends up denouncing their instrumental use. For example, Fletcher examines the construction of the "overpopulation scapegoat" (Fletcher et al. 2014); Hendrixon highlights the manipulative use of overpopulation by international relations narratives (Hendrixon 2018); Bettini shows how neo-Malthusian narratives are employed to turn climate refugees into national threats and depoliticize global climate change governance (Bettini 2013), and Dyett denounces the overpopulation discourse as a rhetorical tool for the suppression of certain populations and marginalized communities (Dyett 2019). Still, others highlight, for example, the abuse of a technical term "for the ends of the few over the hopes of the many" (Ross 2000: 1). Seidl and Tisdell suggest that the concept of "carrying capacity" does not apply to socio-economic issues (Seidl 1998).

These are just a few examples of counter-Malthusian publications, many of which focus on how neo-Malthusians reduce overpopulation to a single variable or limit the discussion regarding production, distribution, and consumption. For example, they level the climate impact between rich and poor, first and third world, women and men).<sup>13</sup> In the extra-academic field, Pope Francesco's *Laudato si'* (2015: 45 - 46) is the most recent and famous example of this approach (in a pronatalist sense). Another example of pop-criticism is the website [overpopulation.world](http://overpopulation.world). It highlights the neo-Malthusian perspective's partiality, basing its infographic demonstration on the demographic transition theory (Kurzgesagt).

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<sup>13</sup> "Despite formidable and compelling criticism, it continues to produce in the West and among Western-influenced elites unremitting anxiety about 'over-population. However, its greatest achievement has been to provide an enduring argument for the prevention of social and economic change and to obscure, in both academic and popular thinking, the real roots of poverty, inequality, and environmental deterioration. [...] The Malthusian argument has consistently overwhelmed other explanations of poverty. Malthusian famine scenarios have systematically distracted attention from the fact that it is not people's reproductive habits that are the principal source of most of the misuse or waste of the world's resources, but the contradictions and motives of capitalist development. This briefing aims to show that today's debates about such issues as welfare, the minimum wage, and immigration continue to be influenced by obscurantist Malthusian arguments which reaffirm the privileges of the few over the hopes of the many." (Ross 2000: 1)

Overpopulation theory supporters claim to illuminate a generally forgotten question, obscured either by impersonal enunciation (i.e., there is no talk of overpopulation) or abstract anti-subjects (i.e., 'political correctness'). On the other hand, the theory's critical investigation involves the continual interrogation of neo-Malthusian arguments and data. As a rule, criticism takes the form: <subject (S1) omits/reduces/enhances something (O)>. Therefore, the accumulation of secondary narrative programs in a text, and the different objects of value considered in an intertextual sense, work to disperse the effects of criticism.

Both sides of the debate exhibit an attitude of parrhesia and disclosure and a sliding to political discourse. A kind of discourse that, according to Fabbri, is never merely 'representational.'

[Political discourse] cannot be described as a set of utterances in a cognitive relationship with reality. It must be considered *a discourse in the field*, destined to call and respond, dissuade and convince; a discourse of men to transform men and relationships between men, not just a medium for reproducing reality.<sup>14</sup> (Fabbri 1985)

Overpopulation is a 'technical' term in the field of natural sciences. Still, it becomes problematic when used in political discourse (Petrilli 2015: 19) and urban micro-politics (i.e., concerning metropolises or megalopolises), and even more so in the macro-political debates on the global population and the planet. Vazquez reminds us that "at the heart of the ensuing conflicts is the impossibility of definitively casting the issue of overpopulation as an exclusively natural/biological problem instead of a social/cultural problem" (2019: 39).

Therefore, the transition from the natural to the social sciences can not be said to have been resolved. The politicization of the issue derives precisely from carrying over the debate to the social sciences. On the other hand, the neo-Malthusian rhetoric does not consider the dialogue between human and natural sciences, the importance of which is today more evident than ever before (Latour 2020). Critics from both the natural and the social sciences are instead annoyed by the wear and tear of "negative communication" (Cosenza 2012) arising from neo-Malthusianism.

#### 4. From political debate to eco-fascist discourse

The political debate on overpopulation, driven by the need to 'set limits,' always focuses on the importance of control. Today, this control is limited to women's rights (e.g., policies on birth and abortion rights). Assertions about overpopulation in the political

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<sup>14</sup> Our translation.

sphere resurface from time to time. Among the most direct and long-winded ones is a press article (October 25, 2007) by the current British Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, then Mayor of London. The article's title - *Global overpopulation is the real issue* -, rephrased at its end - "the real number one issue," sums up his case. Johnson (2007) perceives overpopulation as the primary cause of global warming and is solvable only by birth control.

Johnson overviews vast areas of high population density from a zenith perspective: "You can see it as you fly over Africa at night, and you see mile after mile of fires burning red in the dark, as the scrub is removed to make way for human beings." In this way, he adopts the conspiracy angle characterizing overpopulation supporters: "I simply cannot understand why no one discusses this impending calamity, and why no world statesmen have the guts to treat the issue with the seriousness it deserves." In line with neo-Malthusianism, he takes population growth to simply mean more consumers. Adopting the idea of an almost forgotten but crucial and as yet unsolved problem, Johnson accuses politicians of "political cowardice" about overpopulation<sup>15</sup> a taboo term for both right and left politics

But over the years, the argument changed, and certain words became taboo, and certain concepts became forbidden. We have reached the stage where the very discussion of overall human fertility – global motherhood – has become more or less banned. (Johnson 2007)

Overpopulation is a term effectively excluded from contemporary democratic debate. It resurfaced timidly in the 2020 US presidential campaign. On January 21, 2020, at the World Economic Forum, Trump declared:

To embrace the possibilities of tomorrow, we must reject the perennial prophets of doom and their predictions of the Apocalypse. They are the heirs of yesterday's foolish fortune tellers, and they want to see us do badly, but we won't let that happen. They predicted an overpopulation crisis in the 1960s, mass starvation in the 70s, and the end of oil in the 1990s. These alarmists always demand the same thing: absolute power to dominate, transform, and control every aspect of our lives. (Morano 2020)

During a rally in Conway, South Carolina, to the related question on overpopulation and climate change, Trump's opponent, Joe Biden, answers: "It's the first time population is not growing," a position that immediately turns into an appeal for women's rights (WCNC 2020).

Overpopulation is a demographic concept that adding a quantitative estimate to the term 'population' implies an ideal population balance and a concomitant survival

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<sup>15</sup> Here is an excerpt: "Isn't it time politicians stopped being so timid, and started talking about the real number one issue?" (Johnson 2007).

threshold. A true masterpiece of the art of academic rhetoric. The term, based on the axes of the self-excluding lexemes, such as 'growth' and 'decline,'<sup>16</sup> whose frame of reference is scientific-political, or rather descriptive-normative, strongly depends on its veridictive the premise: 'we need to admit it.' In public debate, the problem is not denied but removed as not-now or not-after, not concurrence (Greimas 2007: 71).

Although there is much talk about the need to politicize scientific discourse, we cannot yet discuss the significance of the term overpopulation in political debate (Zehner 2012). In the latter case, it remains an implicit term, used to discuss something else or less controversial 'preventive checks,' like contraception or women's education. Also, it can introduce into political discourse an apocalyptic tone or, alternately, be condemned as a false apocalypse. The association between overpopulation and apocalypse is a recurrent phenomenon, despite the emergence of new technologies capable of bringing food production in line with population growth (Trewavas 2002).

In these discourses, 'overpopulation' becomes an anti-subject that limits the economy, or a pretext to talk about something else, such as women's rights.<sup>17</sup> On the other hand, nationalist discourse can evoke the overpopulation theory, mixed with conspiracy theories (for example, the Kalergi Plan conspiracy theory).

Thus, in 2014, Jean-Marie Le Pen suggested that Ebola could solve the "global 'population explosion' and, by extension, Europe's 'immigration problem'" (Willsher 2014). The nationalists have transformed the aphorism 'we are too many'<sup>18</sup> into 'they are too many,' aiming to distinguish between two populations: the native, targeted by pronatalism rhetoric, and the foreign, targeted by exclusionary policies (Hendrixon 2018: 8).

#### 4.1. Terrorism

From the removal of foreigners to their elimination is but a short step. This is a striking example of how the theme of overpopulation works as a pretext to talk about something else. This section will briefly consider the eco-fascist perspective on the overpopulation issue, based on three far-right terrorists' manifestos. The first is 2083: *A European Declaration of Independence* by Anders Behring Breivik (see 2011).

<sup>16</sup> So, the term 'subpopulation' is equally effective, always regarding heterogeneous spatial contexts (neighborhoods, cities, areas, nations, the world).

<sup>17</sup> The democratic position uses overpopulation as a pretext to introduce women's rights issues: a woman 'must be able to do' whatever she wants with her body. In Trump's speech, overpopulation is a bugbear: woman as a passive subject ('cannot do') for external coercion (she 'cannot be forced to' i.e., have only one child). The Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker, the State Department said it was dropping the funding on the U.N. Population Fund (UNFPA) because it "supports, or participates in the management of a program of coercive abortion or involuntary sterilization." - Nichols 2017).

<sup>18</sup> Recently intersected with the COVID pandemic and the slogan "we are the virus" (see Newton 2020).

Still, there are pockets of resistance. Professor Sigurd Skirbekk at the University of Oslo questions many of the assumptions underlying Western immigration policies. One of them is the notion that rich countries have a duty to take in all people from other nations that suffer, either from natural disasters, political repression, or overpopulation. According to him, it cannot be considered moral of the cultural, political, and religious elites of these countries to allow their populations to grow unrestrained and then push their excess population onto other countries. (Breivik 2011)

Breivik turns to academic sources to legitimize his anti-immigration views and denounces all kinds of elites as promoters of mass migration to more affluent countries. The element of conspiracy theory is again present: this time, it is the environmentalists that suppress the truth about overpopulation: “Environmentalism - obsession with global warming instead of focusing on overpopulation (no calls for birth / population control in the developing world)” (Breivik 2011). Just as in the mainstream political debate, the overpopulation issue is used to talk about something else. The refugee / immigration issue and the “white genocide” (Davey 2019: 7) presumably carried out by “Cultural Marxism / multiculturalism” and “political correctness” (von Brömssen 2013: 19-20).

The second manifesto is *The Great Replacement* by Brenton Tarrant. In this case, too, overpopulation theory is used to deal with another question; once again, immigration.

Why focus on immigration and birth rates when climate change is such a huge issue? Because they are the same issue, the environment is being destroyed by overpopulation, we Europeans are one of the groups that are not overpopulating the world. The invaders are the ones overpopulating the world. Kill the invaders, kill the overpopulation, and by doing so, save the environment. [...] There is no Green future with never-ending population growth; the ideal green world cannot exist in a World of 100 billion, 50 billion, or even 10 billion people. Continued immigration into Europe is environmental warfare and ultimately destructive to nature itself. (Tarrant)

Patrick Crusius's manifesto, *The Inconvenient Truth About Me*, takes up the right-wing rhetoric on 'invasion' and 'ethnic replacement,' referring directly to Tarrant's text.

In general, I support the Christchurch shooter and his manifesto. This attack is a response to the Hispanic invasion of Texas. They are the instigators, not me. I am simply defending my country from cultural and ethnic replacement brought on by an invasion. [...] My motives for this attack are not at all personal. Actually, the Hispanic community was not my target before I read *The Great Replacement*. This manifesto will cover the political and economic reasons behind the attack, my gear, my expectations of what response this will generate, and my personal motivations and thoughts. (Crusius)

There is no natural process of population growth (e.g., encouraged by development), but rather the intention of some 'secret' governmental or social entities to move from one subject (i.e., the refugee/migrant) to another (i.e., the 'white race'). The 'planned invasion' is yet another conspiracy theory integral to far-right and eco-fascist discourses. It is a vocabulary that intends to insinuate itself into ecological discourse, prioritizing the elimination of 'invaders' as a solution to the environmental crisis (Tarrant).

The use of the impersonal to validate pseudo-scientific statements alternates with the first person and performative verbs to underline the actions excluded from the democratic field (famines, war, pandemics, and sterilization). Taking direct measures for population control, terrorists appear as heroic *vigilantes*, single-handedly challenging 'cosmopolitan culture' from their distorted eco-fascist perspective. The recurring mythic pattern of national-populist culture reinforces the overpopulation argument with mythic imagery's intrusion (Turpin 2006).

## 5. The overpopulation discourse, demography, and political sciences

The term overpopulation's semantic polysemy is due to the different meanings it assumes in different ecosophies, academic disciplines, and policy areas (Tobin 2004). Considered apart from its diverse uses, it becomes problematic as the quantitative prefix loses its descriptive instrumentality. Overpopulation is a nearly atopic issue of debate, a political slogan that slides from the legislative arena to the daily discussion with phrases like 'the earth (or the nation) is full,' or 'we (or they) are too many.' The appeal to science aims to persuade than to describe. Overpopulation is seen as a real problem (or, conversely, a false problem) when debated in the global political sphere, connected to the world environmental crisis. Therefore, the delimitation of space (i.e., city or planet) is vital in understanding the controversy's specific character and stakes. It is also crucial in understanding when the myth of original homogeneity comes into play (Turpin 2006).

The affirmation of a state of overpopulation is also an essential premise for the future's temporal expectation, confirming a systematic "lack of historical perspective" in neo-Malthusian discourse (Aligica 2009: 75) politicizing the planetary framework. The speakers at the COP25 Conference use the complex term 'population' (Fig. 1) in the debate to show a subject in equilibrium but precarious when the temporalization focuses on the future. Painting the future in apocalyptic tones is based on hypothetical models and narratives (Kaplan 1994). To quantify and contextualize elements involves a moment of transformation or performance that adds the idea of *danger*, a pathemic dimen-

sion typical of the populist rhetoric (Cedroni 2014: 41) based on *fear*. It offers more legitimacy to the narrator's competence and less to the public's: there is a state of pressing urgency, and it is essential to listen to the call.

Another fundamental aspect concerns the theme of top-down control. There is a natural transition from neo-Malthusian to authoritarian discourse based on narrative syntax and meaning structures involving the 'secret' or excessive use of the nominative case, typical of right-wing culture (Jesi 2011: 287). In this case, overpopulation is a word-myth that requires no explanation; its evocation involves two simple elements: quantity and people. Its atopic sense and pressing urgency are enough to make it understandable. By evoking a lateral discourse, it becomes a keyword for the activation or deactivation of control policies (coercion, family planning) on citizens' bodies and the legitimization or delegitimation of refugee/migrant life.<sup>19</sup> It is, therefore, above all a question of delimiting the space of its appearance. It is the fundamental association/prescription based on a calculation that poses the "population problem in economic terms" (Murphy 2017: 205). A slippery concept is used to qualify a population that has become an integral whole, passive, and malleable. A reification that transforms "a human subject into an object" (Greimas 2007: 274).

The isotopy of 'overcrowded' recurs in journalism and academia, particularly in visual form. Its visual figurations evidence how the spatial dimension is connected to the human collectivity's figure. The whole confined in a restricted space is the essence of overpopulation. The public diffusion and resonance of the concept, on the other hand, make its explanation superfluous. Paraphrasing Malthus, overpopulation is evident to all: what it is and what needs to be done.

For a long time, demography, by "declaring itself an intellectual activity with no connection to policy and politics and developing its identity as a highly quantitative and mathematical field" (Greenhalgh 2009: 30-31), has been associated with the Malthusian language. In recent times, however, the latter has evolved. There is a renewed discourse on overpopulation, a policy-oriented discourse in the neo-Malthusian sense, whose effectiveness is related to the following distinctive elements:

- the importance of the actantial disengagement, third-person scientific character;
- the simplistic algebraization of human impact tout court;
- the polemic as spatial expansion increases;
- the state of emergency and the necessity for control;
- the thematization of the future as apocalyptic;
- the importance of referential illusion in scientific-political communication.

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<sup>19</sup> It is worth pursuing the further investigation of the relationship between overpopulation and the 'people' as "alternating synecdoche" (Cedroni 2014: 56).

The last point is fundamental if we consider the political discourse's vocabulary on the subject of future sustainability (Latour 2020: 395). What we are dealing with here is the renegotiation of the semantic value of terms that "can be defined as the exploitation of the semantic vagueness of words"<sup>20</sup> (Petrilli 2015: 27-28). The neo-Malthusian discourse forces upon its critics the problem of veridiction. If the problem of political discourse, therefore, concerns "questioning the referential uniqueness of the terms in favor of a different interpretation"<sup>21</sup> (Petrilli 2015: 29), the rejected term 'overpopulation' becomes a secret to be unveiled; when affirmed, it coincides with the modality "what modifies the predicate" (Greimas 2007: 202), a "speech act" (Cedroni 2014: 13), or simply, how we do (political) things with words.

The fundamental point in analyzing the political language on overpopulation is to consider the political dimension as "a power effect," or as "the transformation of the modal competences of the parties involved in political communication and, subsequently, the transformation of the conditions for carrying out their respective action programs"<sup>22</sup> (Landowski 2003: 275). Hence, we need to start from the discursive structures considered and the modalities invested in them.

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<sup>20</sup> Our translation.

<sup>21</sup> Our translation.

<sup>22</sup> Our translation.

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# Irish on the walls: the branding of a language

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## ABSTRACT

By the time the Belfast City Council launched a new logo in 2007, rebranding Belfast had become a central issue. The symbolic center of Belfast, the City Council building, presents itself as a post-modern and fully globalized space, neutralizing the memory of an area stigmatized by decades-long violence known as The Troubles. Like other cities with a traumatic past, such as Berlin, Belfast tries to promote itself as a modern and lively place, well aware of the importance of exploiting memory as a tourist attraction. The article examines the Irish language's resemantization in Belfast, particularly in the Gaeltacht quarter area, during and after The Troubles. Based on a paper by Siun Carden (2017), the article tries to connect the core of the author's observations to language's phatic function. The idea is that the contemporary branding of Irishness through the use of the Irish language on Belfast's murals works as an effective *mythomoteur*, a concept comparable to the *mythe projectif* elaborated by Bertrand (2019) in the case of Paris's rebranding.

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## 1. A new logo for a 'new' city

This article concerns the recent past and the present image of the city of Belfast. Adopting a semiotic approach, we examine the ideologies underlying Belfast's rebranding strategies, from the new city logo to the redefinition of its historical and cultural heritage and its highly publicized muralism. Belfast, the capital of Northern Ireland, has been studied as an example of a divided city in several works (see Bollens 2012). The ethno-nationalist conflict between the Catholic nationalists (republicans)

and the Protestant unionists (loyalists) named The Troubles broke out in 1968 and ended in 1998 with the Good Friday Agreement and the subsequent peace process. The British Army also took part in the guerilla type conflict (Kennedy-Pipe 1997), which mainly involved bombing attacks and target shootings. The Troubles left more than 3500 people killed and a still segregated country, with sporadic acts of violence occurring even after the peace process began. At the beginning of the 2000s, Northern Ireland's violent image necessitated a drastic revamping, if only to revive its crippled tourist trade. The need to convey the image of an attractive and peaceful new Belfast internationally meant that the Northern Ireland capital had to redefine itself as a brand.

In 2007, thanks to a London branding consultancy, the Belfast City Council adopted a new logo, a heart-shaped letter B (Moore 2016), which proved hugely successful. Its design was quite challenging. Choosing a symbol or a particular color can become a highly controversial matter in the knotty context of Belfast and the entire Northern Ireland, where despite 22 years of formal peace following the Good Friday Agreement, a symbolic and memory war still exists. To avoid possible controversy, a multi-colored palette - comprising a total of sixteen colors - was chosen, as well as different taglines, playing with the sound of the letter B as 'be' (to be).



In his study on Belfast's rebranding, Moore underlines its essential character as a marketing investment. As in the case of the branding of Skopje, studied by Graan, the actual audience is tourists to whom the site must convey an idea of "modernity and dynamism, its sophisticated pleasures, and its 'European' character" (Graan, in Moore 2016: 143). All the same, the opinion of the local people was taken into account. The project team responsible for the rebranding was perfectly aware of the need to ensure the local

people appreciate the city's revamping and, ideally, actively promote the new values associated with it to both foreigners and the new generation. They actively pursued the engagement of the community, the youth, and the tourism sector personnel.<sup>1</sup> As Moore points out, the aim of involving all these in the rebranding process was to avoid potential discord about which symbols and colors will represent the city. Three actors could put forward diverging perspectives: the Republican/Catholic and the

<sup>1</sup> The same effort in collecting inputs and the public feelings towards the image of Belfast has been put in place more recently, in 2017, when a new logo has been launched by the City Council. The new logo is shaped on the image of the city from a satellite view, and once again uses a multicolored palette.

Loyalist/Protestant communities, and the City Council. These two historical communities are rooted in longstanding symbolic traditions, visible almost everywhere in Belfast streets, walls, lampposts, etc. In particular, color plays a crucial demarcating role: the red, white, and blue of the flags marking the Loyalist areas are opposed to the green, white, and orange of the Republican ones. The communities' colors feature prominently in their war over values and memories and play a critical role in their identity displays.

The City Council's new logo aimed to forge a new city identity, distant from these historically rooted symbols. The sectarianism associated with the variant chromatic traditions was to be avoided at all costs if the rebranding campaign was to be successful. Quite clearly, the ideological intention was to promote a new image of Northern Ireland, consistent with an economic rationale that sought its integration into the globalized scenario. The values promoted by Belfast's rebranding appertain to what Moore defines as "postsectarian citizens," a reality yet to come, a dreamed collective where "the dignity of industrial work has been replaced by the playfulness and flexibility of 'the new economy'" (Moore 2016: 159).

## The issue of historical representation

The City Council was the key social actor promoting the refurbishing of Belfast's complex urban fabric. Being the epicenter of modern Belfast, the powerhouse of political politics and urban strategy, it is set in an impressive building, facing Donegall PI and Royal Avenue's shopping streets. Similar in its aspect to the centers of many cities worldwide, Belfast's heart is nowadays a pleasant and dynamic place, making it difficult to imagine the Troubles' traumatic past. There are no specific references, no plaques helping the visitors to ruminate over Belfast's harrowing recent history; commemoration concerns only events unrelated to the sectarian conflict. Amongst the many statues and monuments marking the City Hall area, the Titanic memorial and the Garden of Remembrance with the Cenotaph stand out, designating Belfast's center as a mourning place *par excellence*. There is no space, however, for forms of commemoration diverging from those sanctioned by the State. In contrast with Belfast's working-class areas, which are firmly attached to their specific idea of identity, the city center is the critical site of the global financescape and the unified and reconciled version of Northern Ireland.

Andreas Huyssen (2003) has noticed a similar phenomenon in postwar Berlin, another city with a traumatic past. The German capital's center was and still is the city's political and economic heart, whose globalized and post-modern image leaves no space enabling the remembrance of its conflict-ridden historical heritage. In theory, there are two alternatives: either the city center becomes the site of an institutionalized, non-conflictual memory, or the vexing past is radically erased. The outcome of both policies is

an atmosphere of *neutrality*. In this respect, Berlin is an especially enlightening case: the post-unification architecture of *Potsdamer Platz*, the city's symbolic center, is built on a space left vacant for a long time after the war, on account of being the site of the Nazi institutions which ruled over Germany and occupied Europe. Postwar Germany's inability to process collective guilt through a positive historical narrative had led to a refusal of that space in the reconstructed Berlin. This empty center's paradox was highly symbolic, while, thanks to the emptiness, it was unintentionally turned into a marked site, appropriately called the *prairie of history* (Mazzucchelli 2010).

Both the policies mentioned above are ideologically marked. In the first case, we have the production of an inarticulate space that demonstrates a refusal to deal with the burden of the past. In the second case, the city center's reconstruction involves adopting the model of the postmodern city. This latter is one of the many attempts to erase or rework the traces of history. A *sanitation* practice felt as indispensable for creating a space appropriate to the neutrality of an economic and future-oriented environment. This kind of urban renovation comes close to Baudrillard's concept of hyperreality (Baudrillard 1981). In this case, though, the sense of inauthenticity arises not from falsifying the city's aspect but through the city's overwriting by globalization. Peculiar, new forms of memorialization are an integral part of this overwriting. For example, the Titanic memorial placed in the Belfast City Hall gardens cannot claim any representative function. The ship was built in the Belfast shipyards, the now so-called *Titanic Quarter*, on whose site the museum Titanic Belfast opened in 2012. However, the event commemorated by the memorial took place in the middle of the ocean, decisively far away from Belfast.



The evident impossibility to 'commemorate' the tragedy in the 'actual' place of the occurrence imposed the need to find an appropriate memorial space. The final choice of locale breaks with the memorials and monuments' general conception as traces directly related to the original site in which the commemorated event took place or is supposed to have taken place. The weakening of the indexical relationship between the memorial and the memory it evokes fosters the virtualization of the real event (i.e., the shipwreck), thus inducing its transformation into a universal symbol. This process pertains to the current deterritorialization of memory through different media, which shape it following the norms of a globalized, typically

transnational, and multimedia memory system, just as it happened recently with the Holocaust (Rigney 2018).

Because of its global nature, Belfast's modern center can be perceived as a *non-place* (Augé 1992). The neutrality and abstraction associated with *non-places* are also found in the postmodern centers of Western cities. The *non-place*, usually described as non-relational, unbound from any sense of identity, is also non-historical. Its inability to integrate other times and memories is also the inability to integrate other preexisting spaces and converse with them. Emblematic of the post-modern era, *non-places* are spaces of transition, like airports or shopping malls, but also more dramatic realities like the refugees' camps. Considering how they deal with time and history, we can perceive both non-spaces and postmodern city centers as 'flat' sites. Augé describes *non-places* as totally focused on the present, due to their amusement and consumption function, making them spaces shaped almost exclusively on esthetic values.

The same can be said of the way memory is treated in Belfast's city center. The political objective of creating an official *lieu de mémoire* (Nora 1989), befitting the institutionally sanctioned identity, requires the exclusion of alternative or counter-narratives. This exclusion turns the memory celebrated by the City Hall monuments into a form of *frozen* history. The voice of the past is esthetically fixed in the statues' timelessness and the Cenotaph grandeur. The representational choices made by the political authorities aim to 'domesticate' the past, avoiding the contradictions that collective memory inevitably entails. Therefore, what we experience is a depthless temporal dimension. In this sense, Belfast's center is non-historical, precisely like Augé's *non-places*. The architectural and figurative styles adopted do not relate to local identity but to a classic style, which embodies a non-controversial version of history, expressed in a universal language.

Monuments and memorials form a fundamental part of urban planning. Being symbols of the political elites (Bellentani 2017), they play an essential role in what Bellentani calls 'transitional societies,' as Northern Ireland has been until recently and, to a large extent, continues to be. Bellentani points out that semiotics and cultural geography have traditionally focused on monuments' intended meanings and functions from the elites' perspective. What the Belfast case-study tries to demonstrate, however, is how the local communities' cultural heritage can work as an ideological discourse as much as the institutional memory discourse. The policy-makers' ability to appreciate certain urban spaces' importance to promote some specific interpretation of the past is directly related to the city's conception as a brand. Like Augé's *non-places*, the center of Belfast can become a *text*, in a semiotic sense,<sup>2</sup> and a primarily visual text, at that. The City Hall building has been relaunched as a successful touristic brand, as evidenced

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<sup>2</sup> Understanding the city as a text relates to the turn of semiotics from the sign to the text as an object of investigation. An isolated sign can only be analyzed on an abstract level, since reality involves a complex interaction of multiple signs, i.e., a *text*, in the etymological meaning of *woven*.

by the merchandise sold (the *Visit Belfast* center overlooks the building's square) on websites. The proliferation of images that anticipates the visitors' discovery of the city echoes again Baudrillard's idea of hyperreality, according to which iconic imagery acquires a sense of authenticity that feels more real than the reality it stands for.

So far, we have examined the ideological underpinnings of Belfast's rebranding from the perspective of institutional policy. In the following section, we focus on how the Irish language and culture are represented during and after the Troubles.

### 3. How to promote tradition: the *Gaeltacht* case

West Belfast is known as a Catholic area par excellence. The recently established Gaeltacht Quarter appears like an Irish fortress in the city landscape. Being a working-class neighborhood, Gaeltacht Quarter has experienced a lot of violence during the Troubles because of its closeness to Shankill Road's protestant area. The high concentration of murals, flags, and other nationalist insignia work as a reminder of Belfast's tragic past and a still vital representation of the local population's identity. In opposition to the city center, the Gaeltacht quarter is an area proud of offering its houses' surfaces to the Troubles' representations and the recent past sufferings. The conflict and the sectarianism of Belfast's working-class zones can be read through the murals and the walls themselves, still surviving markers of the two communities' residential segregation. Walls, peace-lines, and barbed wire are present almost everywhere, at once territorial markers and barriers for maintaining peace (McAtackney 2011), delineating a place that appears authentic and genuine in tourist's eyes compared to the 'ordinary' appearance of Belfast's center. The rebirth of tourism in Northern Ireland after the Good Friday Agreement has given a powerful impetus to a new way of reading these partisan emblems. Considered as political devices during the thirty-year long conflict, they became heritage signs in the post-conflict period. This change has been outlined by Siun Carden (2017), who focuses on how the Irish language has come to acquire a different social and political status in the Gaeltacht quarter.

During the Troubles, the Irish language experienced a revival due to the Republican community's systematic promotion of Gaelic culture and tradition and the broad international exposure of the Blanketmen's protest at the beginning of the 1980s.<sup>3</sup> Carden suggests that, in the beginning, the Irish language functioned as a political tool marking the Catholic-Republican territory as a nationalist space, all the while signaling the un-

<sup>3</sup> The *Blanketmen* were the paramilitary Republican prisoners detained in the so-called H-Blocks, because of their shape, in the Long Kesh prison, who went on a strike in order to obtain the restoring of their political status, which had been suspended in 1976. The last phase of the protest, the hunger strike, led to the death of many prisoners, amongst them the republican hero Bobby Sands. Their name derives from being scantily clad with just a blanket because they refused to wear the prison uniform (see Feldman 1991).

desirability not only of the Protestants but above all the British soldiers sent to ‘solve’ the conflict between the two rival communities.<sup>4</sup> In structuralist terms, Irish was opposed to English, while Irish acquired its specific meaning *because of* this opposition. Messages conveyed by the Irish language couldn’t be understood either by the unionists (mainly) or by the British troops and by many members of the Republican community. Irish was a pure signifier, immediately recognizable but virtually unintelligible for all these people. That use of Irish produced an effect of *reification*. It was perceived as a pure thing, obstructing rather than facilitating communication; nevertheless, the language gained its awareness from its opposition to English.

By the end of the conflict, the necessity of being understood grew stronger. Since the explosive media attention for the Blanket Protest and the Hunger Strike, which led to one of the leaders, Bobby Sands, elected as MP shortly before his death, the republican strategy had been slowly changing from the armed struggle to the political engagement. Sinn Féin, the Irish republican party, became an important actor in policymaking and the peace process. This changed situation also affected the Irish language’s status and prospects as there was a new place for it in post-conflict Northern Ireland. The presence of the murals and their growing resonance as a tourist attraction also played a crucial role. Since the recovery of Northern Ireland’s tourism, it was no longer possible to consider the Irish language in a sectarian way.<sup>5</sup> A propaganda strategy and seeking ‘international’ support have been latent right from the beginning of nationalist muralism. However, at the end of the conflict, this approach turned into a new political direction, no longer at the urging of the previous period’s pressing demands. It turned instead into a social and community remembering, often aimed at justifying IRA’s violent position through the image of an Ireland prisoner of the colonialist United Kingdom, opposed to the protestant version of a land always under siege. In this panorama, the importance of promoting the glorious past, mostly a mythical one, and all the aspects related to Ireland’s Gaelic soul came to be a fundamental step in constructing nationalist rhetoric, where language held a central place.

The conflict of memories found its ground in the areas which had suffered the most violence, the working-class neighborhoods, culturally and visually distant from the center and its institutional memory. As shown above, this latter creates the space of a unified country, whose grief has been erased by the commercial energy of a growing

<sup>4</sup> The long history of conflict and violence in Ireland, dating back to remote times, has been labelled as *The Irish problem* since the XIX century. During the Troubles, the British government believed deploying the army could put an end to the conflict. The Catholic community initially welcomed this move, but subsequently, the role of the British Army in the conflict became highly controversial. British soldiers were seen as modernday ‘colonizers’ of the Irish land and targeted by paramilitary attacks (see Kennedy-Pipe 1997).

<sup>5</sup> Northern Ireland’s tourist income has significantly increased, particularly in the cities of Belfast and Derry/Londonderry, making the murals and everything connected to the Troubles major attractions. Many studies have investigated the phenomenon, e.g. Skinner and Jolliffe (2017), Crooke and Maguire (2019).

nation, and mourning occurs in a controlled normative framework. Nevertheless, politics is not alien to initiatives involving the communities and their remembering. The recent murals on which the Irish language appears are the products of a double objective: on the one hand, they are the result of the state policy's recommendation that the two communities must cultivate a new, violence-free visual culture; on the other hand, they reflect the republicans' tactical adaptation to the changed context of the post-conflict political arena.

Murals and other nationalist symbols, but also more complex identity manifestations, as the *Féile an Phobail*,<sup>6</sup> all highlight the need to consider the Irish language as a local peculiarity, yet harmoniously integrated into the wider Northern Ireland society. It is a way of conceiving the language in a *glocal* perspective, which tries to save the identity of a peripheral reality and, at the same time, promote it as evidence of modernization and commercial success. Irrespective of this rhetoric's actual impact in the global markets, it is relevant to examine how it has contributed to the visual look of the recent murals and the Irish language's semiotic status.

Firstly, it is striking how hard it is to find murals with slogans written exclusively in the Irish language. As a rule, Irish inscriptions are accompanied by their English translation, to be widely legible, following the present-day nationalist agenda's political exigency. The Irish's social status is, evidently, no longer defined in terms of its opposition to English. Secondly, the writing of Irish has acquired a sort of decorative aspect. While communicating something, the signifier is once again more important than its signified.

Frequently, slogans on the murals are written directly in English but in fonts typically associated with what can be called an air of Irishness. Carden observes that these fonts are based on typefaces "used to represent the Irish language until the mid-twentieth century" (Carden 2017: 244). Because of their strong association with Ireland and Irish, they continue to be used in a wide variety of merchandise. This new trend has turned Irish into a visual sign, behaving more like an icon than a symbol. The arbitrariness of the verbal sign is not perceived; the fonts are *naturally* read as the real essence of Ireland, according to the myth-making mechanism described by Roland Barthes (1957). Here the visual aspect of writing, the fonts used on the murals, gives rise to a new signification, i.e., Irishness.

The historical dimension inscribed in the fonts, connected with the typefaces society uses at a particular time, is almost completely lost in the final signification, appearing as entirely natural. The notion of Irishness has a confused set of associations. However, it is so successful in presuming a pure and enduring essence of Ireland and its people that everybody, even tourists, can grasp it. The fonts' strategic use demands

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<sup>6</sup> The *Féile an Phobail* (meaning the community's or the people's festival) is an arts and cultural organization set in West Belfast, organizing different celebrations, focusing particularly on the promotion and preservation of the Irish language.

neither knowledge of the local tradition nor the work of translation into another code. Irish is still perceived as a language, conveying perhaps a nebulous meaning. Yet, its perception as a tongue is undermined due to the foregrounding of its iconic aspect that negates the arbitrariness characterizing the linguistic system.

The success in using Irish in the Gaeltacht quarter as a modern brand has re-launched West Belfast's area as the city's dreamed authentic soul. Although superficial, Gaeltacht's aura of traditionalism gave it a competitive advantage as a tourist destination over the anonymous center. In contrast to the universalism projected by the City Hall's architecture, the Gaeltacht imagines itself as the local heritage's rebirth site. The Irish inscriptions on the walls signify the public declaration and affirmation of a distinct identity caught in the collective memory of struggles that still cuts off certain Belfast areas from the rest of the city. The decorative use of Irish on the murals, a sort of *frill* which exalts the signifier's power, has vital ideological relevance, to be explored in the following section.



#### 4. The Republican murals: an example of the phatic function?

In an article dedicated to enunciation and dialogue, Émile Benveniste (1970) points to the case Malinowski calls *phatic communion* (1923), whereby conversation is not driven by a leading interest in the content of the information exchanged. Malinowski perceives here a way of using language that prioritizes the psychosocial function of creating and maintaining intersubjective contact. He has in mind certain forms of courtesy typical of specific social environments, or even the case of rhetorical questions, where speaking seems to be devoid of any particular meaning except that of reaffirming the social relationship between two or more interlocutors. The phatic communion highlights language's social character, meaning its capability to build and reinforce human coexistence. Specifically, it reintroduces the importance of the practical aspects of lan-

guage. The actual information exchanged in speech is almost null, creating the effect of a highly conventionalized enunciation, of a signifier folded onto itself. This socio-pragmatic function of language reinforces the naturalization phenomenon, just as the ideological structure at the basis of the notion of Irishness. The phatic communion has proven to be extremely effective in maintaining and reinforcing social bonds, as the daily social interaction frequently involves such mechanical components. This linguistic function works thanks to contextual inferences from the specific situation in which the exchange occurs; nevertheless, these latter are so introjected in the interlocutors' habits not to be discerned, as an automatic process, similar to how we read Irish fonts nowadays.

Malinowski's intuitions have been developed further by Roman Jakobson, who defined the *phatic function* as one of the six functions of language (1960).<sup>7</sup> Following Malinowski, Jakobson insists on the specific purpose of creating a contact between the sender and the receiver, partially independent of what the message says. Coming back to the use of Irish on Belfast's nationalist murals, it is interesting to see how the phatic function model applies to the relationship between the observers and the creators of some of the most recent of them, appearing in the Gaeltacht quarter.

In earlier nationalist murals, we find an entirely different use of Irish. In their case, the relation observer-creator can be described in terms of Jakobson's metalinguistic function. The latter involves the message's focus on the interlocutors' code (i.e., on the language itself). For example, this happens when the Irish or the fonts connected with it are employed to refer directly to themselves, mostly concerning the Irish's social status in Northern Ireland. Despite the similar effect of the signifier folded onto itself, this function requires the receiver's specific knowledge and awareness of the code used and the position occupied by the Irish language in present-day Northern Ireland. A metalinguistic sensibility was highly active during the Blanketmen protest and the subsequent Hunger Strike, since the republican prisoners in the H-Blocks used to write the messages smuggled out of prison in Irish and even to teach some classes illegally (McA-tackney 2014). Quite probably, this linguistic awareness is no longer valid nowadays. As described above, the exigency of turning Irish into a brand and improving its possibilities of success in the job and tourist market requires not necessarily the consciousness of the language's real status or the competence to speak and understand it. It wouldn't be understandable otherwise that on the Gaeltacht's murals, in an area that proudly proclaims its distinct identity, Irish stands along with English, or even English seems to replace it by appearing in Irish fonts.

<sup>7</sup> The six functions of language identified by Roman Jakobson are the referential, the poetic, the emotive, the conative, the metalinguistic and the phatic. See his article *Linguistics and poetics* (in T.A. Sebeok, ed., *Style in language*, 1960) which is based on a conference speech he gave at the Indiana University, in 1958.

Apart from the growing importance of tourism and the political clout of Sinn Féin, it should be remarked the renowned tendency from the nationalist murals, already operating during the first wave of the republican muralism in the 1980s, to depict a series of personalities and ideological struggles to which the community is supportive. Carden defines it as an 'international framework,' addressing a public other than the locals and, therefore, suggesting a different *horizon of expectation* (Jauss 1982). The growing adoption of English instead of Irish can also be explained as an ideological turn, offering a shallow entrance into a supposed Gaelic tradition to a culturally distant audience. But it is a political turn as well. The *Gaelicization* of English is often accompanied by slogans in other languages, mostly Arabic, supporting the Palestine cause, or marginalized languages like Basque or Catalan, to underline that Irish's social and political position is in a comparable danger. The paradox stands in the decision to manifest this awareness in the language Irish used to be opposed to, thus weakening this opposition and the sensibility towards the code's vulnerability. To gain institutional recognition is the basis on which the relaunch of Irish in Northern Ireland would be possible, yet with an international and cosmopolitan nuance. That is at least the nationalist demand of Sinn Féin's political agenda.



## 5. A linguistic mythology

### 5.1. Irish in Northern Ireland: an example of *mythomoteur*

We can approach the use of Irish as an iconic sign based on Anthony D. Smith's concept of the *mythomoteur* (1986).<sup>8</sup> The *mythomoteur*, a myth that provides the foundation of a particular ethnic and national community, reveals in its etymology the dynamic nature of the myth, conceived not as a static symbol but as an active process evolving with the change of the social and historical context in which it flourishes and grows (Forker and McCormick 2009). This interpretation of the myth allows for the emergence of new values and contexts, despite the apparent endurance of mythical representations. The evolution in the ways of performing the Irish identity, briefly traced in the preceding sections, obeys a similar mechanism, passing from depicting a segregated and fully self-conscious, freedom-fighting community to the proud portrayal of an imagined modern and cosmopolitan one. Nowadays, the Irish language wants to represent itself as the paradox of a local identity seeking its integration into the global economy. In this context, marketing one's not so distant and traumatic past to tourists looking for strong emotions has become a profitable opportunity, as demonstrates the phenomenon of *dark tourism*. The 'taste of Irishness' promised by places like the *Gaeltacht* quarter works as a visual hook for the visitors while condensing the community's ideological strategy. In his study of the Irish communities' visual displays, Neil Jarman (1997) examines the variety of subjects depicted in contemporary Northern Ireland's murals and their enhanced attractiveness compared to earlier murals. A broader, international address and the mediation of global media make it necessary to consider the murals' making as a complex ideological tool much more than a simple expression of ethnic identity or a contested space's sectarianism.

### 5.2. The myth of the city or the city as a myth

We can read both Belfast's rebranding and the resemantization of the Irish language under the sign of a campaign to promote another collective image of Belfast mainly addressed to the international audience but simultaneously aimed to solicit a utopian scenario for the local people. In the previous section, the notion of *myth*, in its variant known as *mythomoteur*, is suggested as a useful tool in understanding the ideological underpinnings of the current relaunch of the Irish language. To clarify further this suggestion, we will turn to the case of another capital, Paris.

In 2015, a series of urban renovation projects was launched to refurbish the city's profile called *Réinventer Paris* (Bertrand 2019). This operation, precisely as it happened

<sup>8</sup> The concept of *mythomoteur* is extensively used by Anthony D. Smith in his *The ethnic origins of nations* (1986). The term had been employed earlier by other authors but entered common usage thanks to Smith's works.

with post-conflict Belfast, required creating a powerful collective imagination capable of engaging peoples' desires and aspirations. Bertrand proposes the notion of *mythe projectif* to describe the campaign's atmosphere, which stands for the paradox of a mythical narrative not looking at the past of a nation, as it usually works, but turning its attention towards the future, in a sort of 'anticipated construction.' Like the Irish of the present-day Gaeltacht, the language of a future utopian community, the linguistic aspect involved in the *Réinventer Paris* project plays a fundamental role, to the point that, in Bertrand's opinion, it is possible to talk about a *new language*. At the basis of the narratives about the urban interventions, the French language is again a utopian language. However, the idyllic effect here is created not through the change of the socio-political context in which the language operates but by using it in specific ways. The oxymoron, the acronym, the metaphor, along with others, are examples of a plethora of figures of speech mobilized to create this dreamful language of collective enthusiasm, working towards a more or less viable future.

The Irish on the murals and the French of a renovated Paris share the disturbing reality of the non-existence of the social model they promote, at least in the present time. In both cases, the promise of a thoroughly modern and ideal space relies entirely on language, as though it suffices for a change on a practical level. Language features as a magic instrument; to say is to act, to name is to create or alter a given reality. This mechanism can work only to a certain point, without forcing too much the idea of a possible world. The collective imagination that language activates is founded on what Bertrand considers an *innovation* rather than an invention: the difference lies in the pragmatic nature of the first one since the imagination must, in any case, set itself in a realistic socio-economic context. In effect, to avoid perturbing the globalized ideal grounded on the elites' economic interests, the new must not be entirely new but, at least, partly familiar and recognizable.

This last aspect was indispensable for the Irish's new place in the changing society of Northern Ireland, as the figurative stability of the traditional font could guarantee an almost immediate recognition of the identity status. The functioning of every myth necessitates, after all, an established collective imagination, even more so in cases where it is imperative to produce or reactivate the values needed for a drastic change in the socio-economic milieu. Working like the *mythomoteur*, which is intrinsically dynamic, the concept of *mythe projectif* entails a similar future orientation. For its assimilation, it needs to be rooted in an imaginary past whose mythical essence is widely acknowledged. Paris must still be recognizable as Paris. If promoting the innovation of the ultra-modern capital city, like Irish, it must be identified as Irish, a specific language yet able to rethink itself fashionably. The ideological move that makes a myth so efficacious relies on some primal narratives' reactivation in a new environment. This attests to the difficulty of imagining a logic other than a patrimonial one, where dominates the value of a supposed authenticity and the obsession with the past (Leone 2019).

The sharing of memory, of a shared past, brings the institution of a collectiveness that the mythic narratives' circulation fosters. A myth circulates in society as an indispensable element to forge a political or identity imagery, as Bernard Lamizet (2019) notes, underlining its role in community-building. Media are the means typically employed to diffuse or even forge the collective myths in the public space. The narratives of the urban campaign for the renovation of Paris or the Belfast streets' murals can be considered, respectively, as a particular type of media or media-like agents. A community's capability to represent itself is a fundamental point in creating or maintaining social cohesion, both at the local and the national level. Similar strategies can be successfully deployed both by state authorities and by local groups on a much smaller scale, confirming that the ideological apparatus is flexible enough to adapt to different contexts.

This result can be read as the effect of a reality in which local and global tend to flow into each other, what previously, following the suggestions of Siun Carden, has been defined as that *glocal* tendency, so common in the worldwide economic system. This interpretation is particularly important for the promotion of another way of understanding the post-conflict society of Northern Ireland and its way of dealing with how to forget/remember the past. The use of Irish on the walls exemplifies the murals as a local and global synthesis, as Debbie Lisle (2006) has suggested. Whether in opposition or in combination with the widespread interpretation that takes murals as local symbols, another understanding has emerged, proposing that murals should be read in a broader frame, allowing for their tourist promotion and dialog with other events worldwide.

Although controversial, this *glocal* aspect of the more recent phase of post-Troubles Northern Ireland represents a significant step towards containing the country's persisting sectarian attitudes, evident also in the urban structure of Belfast and its long-standing walls (McAtackney 2018) and the cross-community policy for coping with division (Hargie and Dickson 2003). Lisle, citing Neil Jarman's observations about the importance of media in representing the murals, underlines their ability to provide a specific globally shared Belfast scenario, capable of creating an idea of the 'authentic' city on a worldwide scale. From simple images like the ones depicted on postcards to the fashionable practice of taking personal photos or selfies with pieces of landscapes in the background, this visual material is perceived as proof of the tourist's place (Papadaki 2019). This openness of the image to the global networks again comprises a branding strategy, obeying specific ideological motivations that power elites and communities skillfully manage. From the start, Northern Ireland's murals have acquired monuments' status due to their reflexive and complex function of representativeness. They are strategically conceived and used, mainly by the Republicans, who grew more aware of and sensitive to the power images, narratives, and even their bodies are liable

to trigger since the 1981 Hunger Strike (see McAtackney 2014). No less than the City Council's efforts, muralism tried to impose its own voice in the historical debate, nowadays reinforced by the tourist interest and its economic consequences. Understanding the murals' value in the new Northern Ireland tourist routes demands acknowledging their place in the global market and how local stories can reinvent themselves in it. Future research must be fully aware of the ideological interplay between the center and the predominantly working-class areas of Belfast and contextualize memory discourse in a way that involves both communities and the State.

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# Governmental propaganda in Mexican comics. The case of *El Libro Vaquero*.

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## ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze comic books' use as vehicles for political communication. Employing socio-semiotic methodology, we describe the discursive operations utilized to disseminate governmental propaganda (a particular type of political communication) in Mexican popular culture. Our corpus comprises institutionally commissioned comic inserts in one of the most iconic magazines of contemporary Mexico: *El Libro Vaquero* ['The Cowboy Book']. According to our findings, these comics tend to make citizens primarily responsible for implementing public policy, ignore the structural causes of the social problems they represent, reducing them to a sum of individual issues, and, finally, downplay state responsibilities while painting a positive image of the different State institutions. Consequently, we should take these comics as a type of institutional propaganda rather than as social marketing.

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## Introduction

This article examines comic books' uses as political communication vehicles by governmental institutions during the last decade in Mexico. Employing socio-semiotic methodology, we describe the discursive operations utilized in these popular media to disseminate political messages. Focusing on four issues of the institutional comic series *El Libro Vaquero* ['The Cowboy Book'], we conduct a formal analysis of the narrative structure and representation of environmental problems, corruption, food hygiene, and the population consequently affected.

Political communication studies take either a theoretical approach or a more empirical one. The former elaborates different models of understanding political communication's specificity, whereas the latter develop descriptive works about contemporary democracies' specific issues. The theoretical approaches include Nifenegger's model of the four Ps (product, promotion, price, and place), rooted in traditional marketing theory; Reid's model of buyer decision-making processes; Kotler and Kotler's six-stage model of the marketing process, as applied to political campaigns; Harris's model, which incorporates new elements, such as the personalization of politics and public relations; and Newman's model, which distinguishes between the marketing campaign and the political campaign as two different processes of political marketing (Cwalina, Falkowski and Newman 2011: 30ff).

The relation between marketing and politics has also been studied using Lees-Marshment's market-oriented party model, which proposes three basic political party types: the product-, sales-, and the market-oriented party (Lees-Marshment 2002). Product orientation can be understood as the old-style programmatic campaigns based on the party's platform for action. In contrast, the sales and the market orientations refer to different political communication concepts. The former refers to the type of communication that focuses on the spread of pre-conceived messages: propaganda, involving the use of marketing tools to spread the demand for voting (Pratkanis 1991; Alboury 1994; Lilleker 2006: 163-4). The latter refers to the type of communication that utilizes marketing research tools to develop the message's structure and content before planning its dissemination (Kotler and Kotler 1999; Lees-Marshment 2002; Henneberg and O'Shaughnessy 2008).

Models of political communication also tend to focus on the importance of the internal party mechanism during election periods (Ormrod 2008; Lamprinakou 2008) or the use of marketing-oriented models for social marketing (Akbar and Lawson 2019). From this point of view, social marketing refers to using marketing tools to change people's behavior to reach a greater good, such as having healthy food, quitting smoking, doing exercise, stopping discrimination, etc. Therefore, while propaganda and political marketing aim to secure people's votes, social marketing aspires to modify unsustainable social behavior. Scholars have recently stressed the need for social marketing to pursue systemic problems by focusing not on individuals but all citizens and collective behavioral change (Rundle-Thiele et al. 2019).

Empirical approaches to political communication focus on specific phenomena in our democracies, such as spots, television debates, the uses of social media, or the relation of politicians with journalists and digital technologies, especially the internet (Kellner 2009; Coleman 2012; Lee 2012; Kruikemeier 2014; Fuchs 2019; Pickard and Berman 2019). In our age of multimodality, there is noticeable stress on studying political communication's specifically visual nature (Yu 2020). From that viewpoint, the study

of a popular product such as the comic book and its uses as a political communication vehicle appears to be the right choice.

The political dimension of comics has been studied from different perspectives: the teaching of political issues to schoolchildren (Dougherty 2003; Woodcock 2006), the understanding of comics as a type of political journalism (Vanderbeke 2010), the socio-semiotic analysis of the representation of Pakistani women in webcomics (Sanaa and Sarwet 2014), or the uses of comics in electoral campaigns (Brantner and Lobinger 2014). Comic books have also been examined as cultural objects enabling the rethinking and critique of a traumatic historical event — such as war, totalitarianism, and dictatorship — (Mitaine and Alary 2011; Rosch 2013; Barker and Sabin 2012; Magnussen 2014), and systematically involved in cultural politics and power relations (Packard 2014; Cortsen, La Cour, and Magnussen 2015).

However, there is a gap regarding the governmental uses of comic books, i.e., comic books as a communication vehicle not by political parties but by state institutions. Our study examines the political content of one of the most iconic comic books in contemporary Mexico, the fortnightly *El Libro Vaquero*, with a circulation of 120.000 copies. On account of its wide-ranging popularity, institutional comics were inserted in the end pages of the publication.

The article comprises four sections. The first describes the history of Mexican comics and their importance in popular culture. The second examines *El Libro Vaquero*'s current importance and uses as an advertising and propaganda vehicle. The third describes the methodology employed to analyze the four comics selected, and finally, the fourth section summarizes our analysis's main findings.

## 1. Propaganda and the educational comic in Mexico

The first comics in Mexico appeared in the pages of the Sunday supplements in the 1920s. Soon after, they moved away from American influence and became 'Mexicanized,' adopting the language of the citizens' daily life and incorporating characters with whom the population could identify.

A decade later, the so-called Golden Age of the Mexican comic began. It was inaugurated in 1934, with the publication of *Paquín*, the first miscellaneous comic book magazine in the country, and followed by *Pepín* and *Chamaco* in 1936. The government's literacy campaigns favored the appearance of many comic books (Aurrecoechea and Bartra 1993:181), besides the comics published in the dailies and Sunday papers. At the peak of comics' popularity, iconic series were born, like *La Familia Burrón* ['The Burrón Family']. During that stage, there were only a few comics with propagandistic content, e.g., *El Maestro Mexicano* ['The Mexican Teacher'], produced by the Secretariat of Public

Education and published in *Chamaco* in 1945. This comic presented the teacher as a “cultural hero and an apostle of the alphabet” (Aurrecoechea and Bartra 1993:23). Another case is *Segurito*, published in *Pepín* in 1947. The Mexican Institute of Social Security created this character to encourage people to attend the institution’s hospitals in the face of a smear press campaign engineered by the business class, which opposed establishing a social security policy (Hernández Nieto 2020).

The Society of Jesus published the comics magazine *Chiquitín* (1945-1963), which promoted Christian values and propagandized the Catholic version of universal and Mexican History. From 1954 to 1972, they also published *Vidas ejemplares* [‘Exemplary Lives’], devoted exclusively to saints’ lives and other Catholic Church’s exemplars. Both these comic magazines were directed by Jesuit clergy (Pepines UNAM 2020).

The subsequent, so-called Silver Age of the Mexican comic began in the mid-1950s and culminated in the early 1980s. During this stage, some of the most popular series were *Kalimán* and *Lágrimas, Risas y Amor* [‘Tears, Laughter and Love’] and *El Libro Vaquero* [‘The Cowboy Book’]. The cartoonist Eduardo del Río ‘Rius’ stands out as the initiator of the didactic comic in Mexico. In the 1960s, Rius created the magazine *Los Agachados* (1968-1981), addressing various political, scientific, and humanistic issues in a comic format. Del Río’s criticism of the government cost him a mock execution, ordered by the then-President Gustavo Díaz Ordaz. Later on, with *Marx para Principiantes* [‘Marx for Beginners’] (1976), he started the popular illustrated books’ collection *Para principiantes* (Gómez Romero 2019: 21).

In 1966, the Secretariat of Public Education published *Relámpago* [‘Lighting’], a magazine featuring passages on Mexico’s history. Between 1981 and 1982, the Secretariat undertook an ambitious comic publishing program to introduce readers to the world of literature and books (Aurrecoechea 2015). With a team consisting of cartoonists and academic consultants, they published the comic magazines *México, Historia de un Pueblo* [‘Mexico, History of a People’], *Novelas Mexicanas Ilustradas* [‘Illustrated Mexican Novels’], and *Episodios Mexicanos* [‘Mexican Episodes’].

In the 1980s, the comic industry was dying out due to declining profitability. From 2000 on, comics have been used in different electoral campaigns to promote Mexico’s presidential candidates. In 2000, Francisco Labastida Ochoa, of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI), published *Una Vida Ejemplar* [‘An Exemplary Life’]. In 2006, Andrés Manuel López Obrador (nicknamed ‘El Peje’), of the Party of the Democratic Revolution (PRD), featured as a superhero fighting corruption in *PGman*. In 2012, two presidential candidates used the comic genre: Gabriel Quadri, of the New Alliance Party (PANAL), adapted his campaign television spots to the comic’s format, while Josefina Vázquez Mota, of the National Action Party (PAN), adapted her professional life to a comic book titled *¿Quién es Josefina?* [‘Who is Josefina?’]. In the 2018 elections, José Antonio Meade, of the Institutional Revolutionary Party, Green Party, and New Alliance

Party, published a comic book about his work in different governmental positions. In these same elections, the team of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (before being elected) published two comics: *Un Aeropuerto que no Debe Aterrizar* ['An Airport that Should Not Land'], expressing his disagreement with the construction of a new airport, and *Peje-nomics*, presenting his economic project.

Government institutions have also employed the comic for social campaigns. For example, in 1997 and 1998, the National Council for the Prevention and Control of AIDS (CONASIDA) distributed the comic book *Más Vale Prevenir* ['It Is Better to Prevent'] among immigrants to the United States. *El Libro Vaquero* has published several governmental comic book editions, the most famous being the *Guía del Migrante Mexicano* ['Guide for the Mexican Migrant'], commissioned by the Ministry of Foreign Relations (SRE) in 2004. A recent case of using comics to address the Mexican population is *Marihuana para Principiantes* ['Cannabis for Beginners'], a propaganda comic book published in 2020 by the Hemispheric Institute, the legislator Jesús Rodríguez, and the activists Zara Snapp and Jorge Hernández; a group supporting the legalization of cannabis in México. The publication was promoted by the National Regeneration Movement Party (MORENA), a fraction of the Chamber of Senators.

## 2. *El Libro Vaquero* as a vehicle of advertising and propaganda

*El Libro Vaquero* survives from the last successful Mexican comic books phase, being in publication since 1978. At its peak, the magazine had a weekly circulation of 1,500,000 copies. Created by the cartoonist Rafael Márquez, it is set in the 1800s Mexicanized West and concerns cowboy stories about duels to the death, intrigues, and passions. One of its characteristics is that girls appear with sculptural bodies and sexy clothes (Fig. 1). Different companies owned the magazine over the years, such as Novedades Editores, Nueva Impresora y Editora, S.A. NIESA, and, more recently, HeVi Editores. According to the National Registry of Printed Media of the Mexican Government (2020), *El Libro Vaquero* currently has a circulation of 120,000 copies fortnightly. As for its readers, 28% are women, and 72% are men, 95% live in an urban area, and 5% in the countryside. The majority of them have a high-school education or a technical career (49%), 39% have an average standard of living and income, and 33% are below average in both these variables.

The relationship between the Mexican government and *El Libro Vaquero* began years ago. The administration of Presidents Vicente Fox (2000-2006), Felipe Calderón (2006-2012), and Enrique Peña Nieto (2012-2018) utilized popular comic books to publish advertisements from at least 15 different institutions. Official political propaganda

approaches a diversity of topics, such as property regularization, the prohibition of clandestine logging, family planning, and preventive information on diabetes (Proal 2009: 59). The comics we analyze here pertain to Enrique Peña Nieto's term of office. President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's government (2018) drastically reduced spending on official advertising, and no other official comics have been published to date.

Since 2010, HeVi Editores publishes comics for private companies and governmental institutions, a service known as custom publishing. The publisher's cartoonists create comics on the subjects requested by their clients, and these made-to-order comics are printed in *El Libro Vaquero*, supplementing the journal's typical Old West fare. HeVi Editores' LinkedIn (2020) page expressly states that these comics are made following the client's idea and message. The production cost of these made-to-order comics is between 100,000 and 200,000 Mexican pesos (appr. US\$ 5,000 and US\$ 9,000) (Murillo 2015).

In the social imaginary, *El Libro Vaquero* is associated with the popular classes, as it is considered low-quality reading. The dominant approach in Latin American academic studies of comics is Frankfurt School's first generation theory; specifically, Adorno and Horkheimer's conception of mass culture as mass-produced standardized cultural goods used to manipulate society and suspend critical thinking (Zubieta 2000:119). This perspective permeates studies such as Ariel Dorfman and Armand Mattelart's *Para leer al Pato Donald* [How to Read Donald Duck, 1971], and Irene Herner's *Mitos y Monitos* [Myths and Cartoons, 1979]. In the same vein, González Ponciano considers *El Libro Vaquero* a "manifestation of the low culture itself of functional illiterates, whose only relationship with the written text is reduced to this literature" (2012:220). Genaro Zalpa aptly points out that "using a circular argument, researchers have asserted that the popular classes are simple because they read comics and comics are simple because they are the favorite reading of the popular classes" (2005: 17).

Mexican comics have been the subject of other rigorous studies as well, such as by Juan Manuel Aurrecoechea and Armando Bartra (1993) or Anne Rubenstein (1998). However, the latter concludes that "Why bother studying Mexican comic books and the other trashy periodicals that sit beside them on newsstands? There are good reasons to think them trivial" (Rubinstein 1998: 163).

Comics have been used as an educational or information resource (McLaughlin 2013; McNicol 2014), advertising material (Bugee 2016), or a vehicle for advancing social rights (Lent 2009; Mason 2009; Alshiban 2017). Although political communication in comic books has been analyzed (Brantner and Lobinger 2014), less attention has been paid to the comic's uses to spread governmental propaganda. Regarding *El Libro Vaquero's* uses, directly relevant to our project is Bruce Campbell's (2009) analysis of the *Guía del Migrante Mexicano*.

Before proceeding with *El Libro Vaquero's* analysis, it is essential to clarify the difference between propaganda and social marketing as political communication types. As we have seen, the latter consists of employing marketing techniques to modify people's behavior or activities to achieve social good; therefore, it represents a modality of governmental communication. In contrast, propaganda seeks to gain support for a political party, a candidate, or an institution. Therefore, comics propaganda can be seen as a form of a permanent campaign that aims to manipulate people to engage in the act of governing itself (Kumar and Dhamija 2017:39).

Government-commissioned graphic narratives are found in other countries, as well. In Japan, for example, the *manga* is present in all facets of daily life: "television, advertising, product catalogs, fashion, or art; and it is used in education for informative or didactic purposes in informational brochures and manuals, as well as in academic and scientific writings, or in the representation of historical facts for educational use" (Santiago 2010: 270). In 2016, the Japanese Ministry of Defense published a *manga* inviting young people to join the Army in the face of a possible threat of Chinese expansionism and North Korean missiles. In its pages, "it sold the idea that becoming a military man can be attractive, cool and, in the case of women, sweet and sexy" (Robledo 2016). Also, on the Japanese island of Hokkaido, the authorities commissioned the illustrator Manabu Yamamoto to create a comic showing the population how to survive in case of a North Korean nuclear attack (Arana 2017).

### 3. Analyzing *El Libro Vaquero*: individualization of responsibilities and the absence of structural causes

The socio-semiotic approach (Verón 1998) recognizes the social dimension of any discourse: it is impossible to understand the meaning of any discourse if we do not consider the historical context in which that discourse was produced and received. To elucidate production conditions, we focused on the following rhetorical and thematic categories: the uses of stereotypes and the presence of what we call the 'institutional voice,' the absence of relevant information, the individualization of responsibilities, and the lack of thematizing structural causes. In our analysis, we considered the heuristic potential of each of these categories. Amongst the range of possible categories for investigation, we believe that the selected ones permit us to understand both the discursive construction of institutional comics and the representation of the commissioning institutions themselves.

Our analysis employs Luis Gasca and Román Gubern's definition of the *stereotype* as a simplified image or idea, stable and ritualized, which is widely accepted (1988: 27). By turning appearance into a sign of identity, a stereotype often carries deprecative

connotations, that is, meanings appended to conventional figures that adjectivize them.

The *institutional voice* refers to a character who reaffirms the official discourse. While the narrator is situated outside the diegesis and interpellates the reader, characters are inside the diegesis, behind the fourth wall. However, in the institutional voice's case, we find a mixed type; this character type begins the story inside the diegesis and interacts with the other characters but, at some point, breaks the fourth wall and interpellates the reader. This modality reinforces the official discourse's main idea.

As for the *absence of relevant information*, we bore in mind what type of information would be appropriate according to the comic's title and the institution sponsoring the comic. As we've seen in the Introduction, this is a vital dimension of social marketing. If the goal is to change citizen's behavior, clear information is crucial to persuade them.

With *individualization of responsibilities*, we refer to cases where the main problem represented and its resulting solution are left in the citizens' hands. The state's role is obscure when society is defined as an aggregate of individuals, implying that society remains in the balance as long as they carry out their duties. Therefore, the state should only convey information to its citizens.

Finally, the *absence of thematization of structural causes* is correlative to the last category. If responsibility lies in the hands of the citizens, then the issue is always about individual responsibility. The role of structural factors —i.e., economic maldistribution, the lack of education and job opportunities, discrimination because of religion, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, language, and nationality— remains unaccounted for.

We analyzed four comics associated with governmental communication: *Alimentos sanos y de Calidad a tu mesa* ['Healthy and Quality Food at Your Home']; *Ecobici. La Ciudad en Bici* ['Ecobike. The City on a Bike']; *Con agua crecida cuida tu Vida* ['In Flood Times, Take Care of Your Life'], and *El Libro Anticorrupción* ['The Anticorruption Book']. As pointed out, Mexican comics reach many citizens, most of whom do not have access to state communications. They are in an advantageous position, then, to inform them about public policies, to educate, to gain support for a candidate or a political party, or to promote the image of specific institutions. In all these cases, the political content of comics corresponds to the propaganda type of political communication.

A brief note on the comics' stylistic dimension is also due. Institutional comics' authors often take for granted that these simply entail a juxtaposition of text and image (Beltrán 2009: 150). As a result, such comics usually have a relatively uncomplicated narrative, reduce the vignettes to mere illustrations of the accompanying text, and have very few speech balloons. In effect, they disregard most of the core elements of comics' graphic language: the iconography, the semantic utilizers of speech balloons, the grammar of framing, the mounting laws, the plot, and the storytelling, among others (Eco 2006: 155-160).

*El Libro Vaquero* has remained one of Mexicans' favorite comics because, over the years, and despite employing several different cartoonists, it has maintained a distinctively dynamic drawing style. This contrasts sharply with the official comic books we analyze. Their drawings entail a clear line, flat colors, and simple treatment; that is, there is no use of kinetic resources, no shading, no volume effects, or color gradients. Captions (text boxes placed at the top of the vignettes) and speech balloons are visually heavy due to the large amount of information given to the reader. This textual overload attempts to compensate for the lack of plot in the stories. The vignettes are equally sized, and the dialogue appears outside the picture's space. Therefore, there is no dynamism, and there is a deficient use of framing. Occasionally, drawings seem disjointed, incapable of composing a situation; consequently, there is no other frame that graphically constructs another action.

### 3.1. Healthy and Quality Food at Your Home

The first governmental comic in our corpus was commissioned by the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Development, Fisheries, and Food (SAGARPA). The story narrates a day in the life of a character named José: he has breakfast with his family, goes to work in a meat-processing plant, and has dinner at home. In the different scenes and dialogues, there are descriptions of SAGARPA's activities and its specialized agency, the National Service for Agro-Alimentary Public Health, Safety and Quality (SENASICA). At work, José talks with the other characters about his job and his duties in securing good quality food (Fig 2).

The stereotypes in this comic correspond to the imaginary of rural Mexican people: José is tall, strong, has a mustache, short black hair, and is presented as the family provider. His image resembles the macho stereotype found in rural-themed 1940s movies. Similarly, his wife (who remains unnamed) appears in a traditional dress and braided hairstyle. Both are represented according to stereotypes created by the cinema of the Golden Age, which "marked a pattern in the social imaginary of what constitutes 'Mexicanity'" (Silva Escobar 2011:7). José functions as the vehicle of the institutional voice. After describing SENASICA's activities and importance, José turns to the reader and reiterates the importance of following the institutional requirements while holding an official document. As we can see in Figure 3, the official document occupies nearly one-third of the vignette.

This representation of the hierarchy of the bureaucratic duties consists of the information presented in the comic and corresponds to the comic's central theme: along with its story, the characters talk about the documents required by SENASICA and emphasize the importance of having the permit, without giving any more information about the latter. The story lacks two essential components, at least according to its title: to explain the importance of consuming 'healthy and quality food' and properly sani-

tizing food. If we take this comic as a type of social marketing employed to achieve social good, it is evident that such information is necessary. Even more so, if we consider that Mexico has the second-highest obesity rate in the world (OECD 2017), with nearly 70% of Mexicans being overweight and almost one-third obese. There is no reference to the importance of a balanced diet, the benefits of consuming vegetables and fresh fruits, the adverse side-effects of beverage concentrates and highly processed food, or even to SENASICA's role in ensuring and certifying food safety and quality.

Concerning the individualization of responsibilities, it is essential to mention two interrelated items. The first is that, according to the dialogues among the characters, food producers must comply with all of SENASICA's requirements. Since nothing is said about how food can be considered healthy or not, the sole condition is to follow the bureaucratic procedure to certify their products. If a product receives the official seal of approval, it is considered sufficiently healthy (Fig. 4). In Mexico, small family farms are responsible for nearly 60% of agricultural production. Given the high rate of illiteracy and the complexity of the bureaucratic procedures outlined in the comic — i.e., submitting a written solicitude, fulfilling the requirements of the SAGARPA health norms, undergoing several inspections, and being assigned an official Medical Veterinarian — it is evident that only a corporation can obtain the necessary certification. What happens in the meat-processing plant where José works is quite revealing. Half of the story takes place in this location; therefore, the comic's scenario induces semantic proximity between the character's daily life and the agroindustrial complex. It is the industrial entrepreneurs, not the small producers, that are shown to comply with the bureaucratic procedures. At the same time, José, the story's protagonist, is not a small or family producer but a salaried worker in the food industry.

The comic highlights SENASICA's crucial mission in ensuring food quality. For example, José explains to his wife and children the task of the institution. It does not explain, though, *how* SENASICA controls quality at the meat-processing plant where José works. The comic's propagandistic intention is clear: in over 32 pages, SAGARPA and SENASICA have a total of 13 mentions (counting balloon dialogues, text boxes, and logo inserts), equivalent to their presence in nearly 50% of the content. Besides, there is mention of the Government of México. In some vignettes, a trailer is visible in the background. The transport box's color is the one used in past official campaigns. It carries the official logo of the Government of Mexico next to the slogan *México más Fuerte* ['Strongest Mexico'], which features in Enrique Peña Nieto's administration's spots (Fig. 2 and 3). The comic's title suggests that it is about 'healthy and quality food.' Still, another aim is also evident: to spread and reinforce in the readers the positive image and importance of SAGARPA.

### 3.2. The Cyclist's Book. The City on a Bike

The second comic, *Ecobici. La ciudad en bici* [Ecobike. The City on a Bike] was commissioned by Mexico City's government and concerned with its public bicycle system. Through forced dialogues between different characters who ride bikes throughout Mexico City, readers are informed about the Mexico City government's policies on this mode of transport: the existence of a program for the correct use of a bicycle and a manual for Ecobike policies, the expansion of bike paths, and improvements in the city's other public means of transport (Fig 5). The characters voice the institutional discourse with their conversations relaying the government's public policies.

Unlike the previous comic, here stereotypes are absent. Only the institutional voice is used, mainly through an unnamed police officer's character. Representing the category of the public functionary, he introduces the *Manual del Ciclista Urbano* [Manual of the Urban Biker] in the story and explains the government's public policies. In Figure 6, we observe that this character is represented just as José in the previous comic: holding the manual, he directly addresses the readers, once again breaking the fourth wall and placed outside the diegesis. In this case, moreover, we note another way of representing the official document. The manual held by the police officer is relatively small, but the following vignette zooms in on it. In the speech balloon, under the police officer, appears the web link to the manual.

Although there is ample information on the Mexico City government's public policies, some critical relevant information is missing. The comic says nothing about Mexico City's traffic problems, the lack of urban planning, high population density, the lack of public transport maintenance, or the over-concentration of jobs and medical services in specific areas. Moreover, it says nothing about air pollution, which is only implied by drawing a truck's exhaust emissions (Fig 7).

Concerning the individualization of responsibility, the narration stresses the necessity of using the bicycle as a clean alternative to cars. Therefore, the citizens are represented as those solely responsible for solving the current problems. All air pollution problems are reduced to a unique assumption: citizens must use bicycles more. These are those who must acquire the 'new bike culture.' But nothing is said about what produced air pollution: not the traffic, but the industries around Mexico City and the lack of urban planning, that is, the structural problems that led Mexico City to become one of the cities with the most air pollution are ignored.

In this comic, we find a mixture of social marketing and propaganda. On the one hand, there is a discourse that emphasizes the importance of riding bicycles instead of using cars; this activity is represented as having several benefits, such as reducing air pollution and citizens engaging in exercise. On the other hand, what prevails is a propagandistic dimension that includes several references to the Mexico City government's

public policies. During the ride of Angélica and the police officer along Paseo de la Reforma Avenue, we observe a succession of Mexico City landmarks, such as the Angel of Independence, the Monument of the Revolution, and the Clock Tower of Polanco. Through these emblematic sites, the comic reiterates the history of Mexico City and its government's public works. Umberto Eco defines this feature as *a continuum*, meaning that "the montage of the story does not tend to solve a series of still frames in a continuous flow, as in the film, but to realize a kind of ideal continuity through a real discontinuity" (Eco 2006: 157-8). In the comic, this *continuum* corresponds to the city's routes. The artist drew this series of emblematic buildings to imply a continuity between static images that can be imaginatively perceived by the readers as a chain-in-motion. Thus, through the city's drawings and the characters' conversations, the comic reinforces a positive image of both Mexico City and its government.

### 3.3. In Flood Times, Take Care of Your Life

The third comic analyzed is *Con agua crecida cuida tu vida [In Flood Times, Take Care of Your Life]*, paid for by the National Water Commission of Mexico (CONAGUA). The story is about a neighborhood situated in a risky zone, near a river. Amalia, one of the characters, does not want to go to the Mexican Civil Protection headquarters to obtain flood preventive information. When the flood takes place, she and her family manage to escape, but they lose all of their possessions. The Civil Protection officer, who helps them escape, stresses the importance of having preventive information when living in a risky zone.

In this comic, no stereotypes reveal class hierarchy — although the neighborhood people are portrayed with dark skin and living in precarious houses. But we do find the institutional voice, this time in the character of the (unnamed) Civil Protection officer, who explains the safety measures for avoiding damage from the flood and the importance of following the Civil Protection's instructions. At the end of the story, the officer directly addresses the readers, stressing that "listening to the authorities is a serious thing", while, in the background, the other characters express their agreement. All of these are outside the diegesis, but the officer is the one who assumes the identity of the institution: he is a public servant, his uniform displays the colors of the Mexican flag, and, while speaking, points authoritatively his finger at the reader (Fig. 8).

In this comic, we come upon the individualization of responsibilities correlated with total silence about the structural causes. The citizenry must be informed of the safety rules and obey the Civil Protection officers. The state, however, appears to have no other responsibility for the danger they face. It is obliged to provide information and shelter to those living in flood risk zones. Still, there is no mention of the lack of urban planning or infrastructure maintenance, or public housing policies.

The risk zones referred to in this story are places where there are irregular settlements, often located in ecological reserves or city peripheries that lack the infrastructure or sanitary services. This problem is frequent in Latin America and other underdeveloped countries, which “are characterized by the existence of a large sector of the population that does not have the economic capacity or access to formal credit mechanisms to obtain a home” (González et al. 2003:182). Another major problem is the lack of state control.

The state’s image as represented in the comic obscures all these failures. The comic demonstrates the state’s presence and action in the orientation meetings (top vignette, Fig. 9), while the officers are represented as heroes. After the flood has taken place, we see them battling wind and rain to assist the flood victims (Fig. 10). It is noteworthy that this comic is the only one in which we find something similar to an antagonist: the flood itself, as a ‘natural’ and unpredictable disaster. The disregard of the structural causes also contributes to the individualization of responsibilities. The state is not represented as having other duties aside from providing information and shelter to the citizens. Its function is only palliative, not preventive. Focusing on the representation of the officers who play the institutional voice role, this comic corresponds to the propagandistic rather than the social marketing type of political communication. The narrative’s central theme is the importance and tasks of CONAGUA and Civil Protection while obscuring state policies’ inadequacies and failures.

### 3.4. The Anticorruption Book

The last comic we analyze is *El Libro Anticorrupción* [‘The Anticorruption Book’], ordered by the Ethos think tank and Caucus Anticorrupción, a group made up of various Mexican legislators. In 2017, the comic was presented to the Chamber of Representatives. According to the press release, the publication aims to avert acts of corruption and to encourage citizen complaints (Animal Político 2017) (Fig. 11).

The story begins with Gabriel and Omar’s characters, two young delivery men on their way to deliver an order to the *Fonda de Doña Mónica*. In Mexico, a *fonda* refers to a small, family-run restaurant, where the owners do everything, from cleaning and shopping for ingredients to cooking. To make time, they go down the wrong way of the street and are stopped by a traffic patrol. After bribing the police officer, the latter lets them go. Meanwhile, Doña Mónica, the restaurant’s owner, talks with a man about the procedure to regularize her business after her husband’s death. A woman named Diana appears in the restaurant, and Doña Mónica explains to her that, when she inquired about regularizing her restaurant, the civil servants requested money from her to carry out the procedure. At that moment, the delivery men appear and explain their delay by recounting the traffic patrol incident. Diana accuses Gabriel and Omar of being corrupt and acknowledges that “we can all be part of an act of corruption.” The

new National Anticorruption System, she explains, sanctions officials for engaging in acts of extortion and concludes with inviting (both characters and readers) to report acts of corruption (Fig. 12).

It is noteworthy that female characters are built via opposing stereotypes that tend to reinforce class discrimination. Doña Mónica bears the burden of being a dark-skinned, poor widow. Diana, on the other hand, appearing in the story unexpectedly, is light-skinned and formally dressed. Although we know nothing about her, the way she questions the other characters and talks about legal matters indicates she may be a lawyer or a civil servant. Through their opposing representation, Diana is legitimized as the character who has all the necessary social and cultural authority to serve as the institutional voice. In this role, she makes explicit the position defined as individualization of responsibilities: “we can all be part of an act of corruption, either actively participating by offering money to officials, or wanting to ‘facilitate procedures’” (Fig 13). Once again, responsibility is placed on the individuals, ignoring the structural factors that shape (informally, tacitly, and implicitly) everyday social practices and, in this case, involve coping mechanisms employed to deal with poverty, economic and social insecurity. This overlapping of inequalities between the ruling classes and those of the popular classes is reflected in Diana’s first sentence: “We do not have to be corrupt just because they are.” On this page, the graphic representation of her gaze at the reader serves to suspend the narrative’s diegesis to interpellate the reader directly. Diana does not address Omar or Gabriel (as she does in the previous and subsequent pages) but

The *Anticorruption Book* is silent about the structural causes of corruption, which can be considered relevant information. The focus is solely on the citizens’ actions and agency capacity, placing them on a plan that renders inequalities invisible while equalizing responsibilities. Simultaneously, the tone of Diana’s speech, with its quasi-admonitory features, turns her into a moralizing character (Steimberg 2013:65).

Once again, we cannot consider this comic a type of social marketing; instead, it corresponds to propaganda. Throughout its pages, the comic reiterates the anti-corruption system’s importance (although it is never fully explained) and the citizens’ duty to denounce acts of corruption. However, nothing is said about corruption in politics or commerce and how it affects the citizens’ daily life.

#### 4. Conclusion

Mexican government’s uses of *El Libro Vaquero* exhibit some essential common characteristics. First, the individualization of responsibilities appeared in all four comics studied: in the obligation of fulfilling the bureaucratic procedures to obtain the *SENASICA* seal-of-approval; in recommending bicycle-riding instead of driving cars; in obtaining flood preventive information and following the Civil Protection directives,

and in denouncing acts of corruption. Second, in all four comics, the structural causes causing the problems represented are ignored. There is no mention of what has caused the deterioration in the dietary behavior of the Mexicans, no reference to the air contaminating activities of the industries around Mexico City or to the lack of urban planning and public housing policy. Similarly, there is no mention of the social inequalities that foster corruption at all levels, nor about the corruption in business and politics and its impact on the daily life of the Mexican population. Third, and somewhat expectedly, all four comics paint an unreservedly positive image of the commissioning institutions.

Focusing on institutional activities instead of providing clear and useful information while simultaneously obscuring the state's responsibility to solve the problems' structural causes, *El Libro Vaquero's* made-to-order comics operate as vehicles of governmental propaganda rather than as vehicles for social marketing. The mechanism through which they communicate institutional propaganda is multiple. The use of institutional voices is perhaps the most evident. Still, propaganda messages are also thematized through the dialogue balloons, the text boxes and the narration itself, and the visual representation of the institutional logos and the characters' stereotypical depiction.

Our analysis demonstrates the importance of studying the propaganda uses of comics, which are far more popular and widely read than other, more 'serious' publications and even national newspapers. However, in the case of custom publishing products, it is not the artists responsible for the stories but the state institutions that commission them. However, to what extent these state institutions achieve their propaganda objectives is an issue that demands future investigation.

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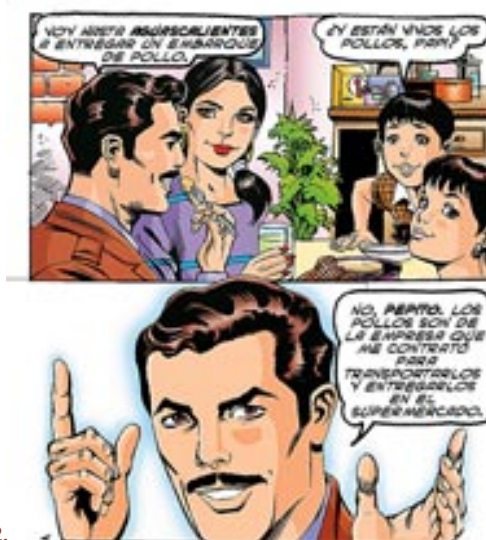
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# One word to rule them all: 'Civic-mindedness' and Danish Prime Minister Frederiksen's Nationalist Covid-19 rhetoric

punctum.gr

BY: Lisa Villadsen

## ABSTRACT

The essay is a case study critically engaging the Danish Prime Minister's rhetorical leadership during the early phase of the COVID-19 crisis. Through conceptually oriented rhetorical criticism of a series of press conference speeches given by the PM, the essay demonstrates how her rhetorical leadership in the early stages of the corona crisis relied on communitarian appeals couched in nationalistic terms whereby contributing to stopping the spread of the virus gradually became inscribed in a Social Democratic narrative about community and solidarity and which eventually was presented as part and parcel of an essential 'Danishness.' The argument is that the PM's speeches successfully framed the national response to the epidemic as just that, a national or even nationalistic response. Analysis of the salient phrases 'standing together by keeping apart', 'civic-mindedness,' and 'taking care of Denmark' inform the characterization of the PM's rhetorical strategy and its ideological underpinnings. The term 'civic-mindedness,' specifically, was used as a short-hand referent for all the government's instructions, advice, and admonitions to change the public's behavior, and functioned as a guideline for the people in Denmark regarding their understanding of and reactions to the corona epidemic. One word to capture many words, and one word to guide, even rule, a people.

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## 1. Introduction

At the end of the summer of 2020, the corona pandemic seemed to be under control, and Danish public life had resumed a semblance of normalcy after the spring lockdown. It was with good reason, then, that Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen opened the Danish Parliament, on October 6, with a triumphant note to her opening remarks:

They say that crises show the material one is made of. The spring of 2020 was a test of strength for Denmark. A common enemy. A global epidemic. And what material! Togetherness. Civic-mindedness. Ability to act. Denmark demonstrated what we can. We were reminded of how vulnerable we are when we are alone. And also how strong we are when we stand together. [...] We do not allow a virus to destroy the trust in our societal model. (Frederiksen 2020i)<sup>1</sup>

Besides capturing the good-will of the audience by praising the country (and by implication the members of Parliament) for its determination, perseverance, and ability to work together, these remarks were thinly veiled self-congratulatory as they summed up the essence of Frederiksen's corona policy. This had consistently underscored the joint responsibility to protect the most vulnerable members of society (the elderly) and appealed to 'civic-mindedness' – i.e., a shared sense of obligation to the community – to justify and offset the limitations on social activities, changed working conditions, loss of income and jobs, bankruptcies, etc. caused by corona restrictions. And most significantly, this opening passage illustrates Frederiksen's framing of the COVID-19 crisis as a uniquely Danish problem with a particularly Danish solution. The saying quoted in Frederiksen's opening – that a crisis will show the material one is made of – allowed her to essentialize the national response to the corona crisis. Danes, she suggested, are made of particularly strong material. They have a unique ability to act driven by a sense of solidarity with other Danes and commit to the welfare state.

Interestingly, in the ensuing debate, Frederiksen's description of the Danish people's unique character and the Danish social model as the key explanation for the country's relatively moderate losses due to COVID-19 went uncommented. One expects that such praise would be positively received. Still, it is remarkable that Frederiksen's nationalist narrative of a unified people following their true calling by working together did not spark any comments from Parliament members, not even the opposition.

The article argues that Danish Prime Minister Mette Frederiksen's early corona crisis speeches successfully framed the national response to the epidemic as just that, a national or even nationalistic response. The Danish guidelines for containing the coronavirus infection were similar to those in many other countries (including social dis-

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<sup>1</sup> All translations from the Danish are the author's own.

tancing, hand hygiene, and not going out if feeling sick). However, the PM's public appeals during the early stage were, I suggest, increasingly ideologically laden and overlaid with a nationalistic tone. In effect, Frederiksen's corona rhetoric framed the efforts against the virus as an essentially national calling. Frederiksen's rhetorical leadership in the early stages of the corona crisis relied on communitarian appeals couched in nationalistic terms where contributing to stopping the spread of the virus gradually became inscribed in a Social Democratic narrative about community and solidarity, which eventually was presented as an expression of an essential 'Danishness.'

Before examining the PM's rhetoric's constitutive and ideological functions, a brief overview of the context and the material chosen for analysis is in order. I lay out the theoretical and methodical basis for my reading of Frederiksen's early corona speeches before showing how they participate in a constitutive, nationalistically tinged rhetoric. The article ends with a brief discussion of the analytical results and their implications.

## 2. Denmark's 'corona commander in chief'

Early in 2020, the coronavirus spread became the most pressing societal problem, first in China, then Italy, and soon globally. The threats posed by the pandemic to public health and national and global economies called for effective crisis leadership, all the while raising a daunting communication challenge to political leaders and public and health authorities. Strategies varied significantly from country to country in terms of who communicated what, how, and when. The Danish Prime Minister, Mette Frederiksen, a Social Democrat heading a one-party government supported by two center and left-wing parties, so conspicuously placed herself at the front of the response efforts that already by March 14, a political reporter called her "Denmark's corona commander in chief," alluding to the power invested to the US presidency to command the armed forces (Mogensen 2020). The military allusion notwithstanding, the official Danish response to corona was rarely framed in terms of war. Still, the reporter had spotted a key characteristic in the Prime Minister's reaction to the corona crisis. Namely, that she emphatically took the helm and framed the efforts to avoid the epidemic's potentially devastating consequences.

## 3. Frederiksen's press conference introductions, a hybrid genre

This study focuses on Frederiksen's public statements during the first month of the corona crisis. The combination of uncertainty and urgency in the early stages of the crisis makes this a fascinating period for the study of rhetorical crisis communication. At this

stage, the PM not only launched the official response to the epidemic but framed it in a way that lent it a particular social psychological valance meant to boost popular support and compliance. Between March 6 and April 6, 2020, Frederiksen headed eight press conferences dedicated to the corona outbreak.<sup>2</sup>

Held in the State Department, the press conferences typically lasted about one hour. Using personal and appropriately spaced out lecterns, the PM was accompanied by varying cabinet members, spokespersons from the health services, the police, and other authorities, depending on the meeting's focus, and two deaf interpreters. The PM opened each press conference with a comprehensive statement, up to twenty minutes long, with an update on the situation and announcements of the government's decisions and the public authorities' guidelines. She then passed the word to the other participants who made statements on their competence field before allowing the press questions. In this way, the setting for Frederiksen's statements resembled other press conferences, but they were clearly addressed directly to the Danish public and not to the press. Whereas press conferences rarely attract the public's attention, these events were announced in 'breaking yellow' on online newspapers and the hourly radio news. TV stations had live coverage leading up to and following each press conference, and they were broadcast live on national television. Content-wise the PM's statements had rhetorical traits (such as extended arguments justifying various sanctions and emotional appeals to the audience) that would not be seen in a regular press conference briefing. On this basis, I refer to this genre hybrid as the PM's *corona speeches*. Frederiksen herself thought of these events as opportunities to speak directly to the population. In the March 6 speech, for example, her intention to address a broader public was evident when she made a direct appeal, "Today, I once again would like to call for solidarity [fællesskab], and that everyone does everything possible to contain and prevent [the spread of the virus, LSV]" (Frederiksen 2020a). She generally addressed the public in the first person plural, 'we,' e.g., "We must take care of each other." Still, on occasion, also in the second person plural, 'you,' e.g., "you have taken on a huge responsibility." A few times, she addressed particular groups directly, e.g., health personnel, the elderly, and young people, expressing special appreciation and concern.

#### 4. Theoretical and methodological approach

My reading is a conceptually oriented rhetorical criticism. James Jasinski describes this as proceeding "through a process of *abduction* that can be thought of as a back-and-forth movement between the critical object (e.g., text, message) and the concept(s) that is being

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<sup>2</sup> Full manuscripts of some of her introductory statements and video recordings and transcriptions of the rest have been obtained from the PM's website.

investigated simultaneously” and thus through a “constant interaction of careful reading and conceptual reflection” (Jasinski 2001: 135). The featured concept is *nationalist communication*, and the guiding question is how Frederiksen's corona speeches in spring 2020 rested on nationalist appeals. George Lakoff's work on *framing* provides another basis for my reading, which draws primarily on Edwin Black's notion of the *second persona*, Michael McGee's notion of the *ideograph*, Maurice Charland's theory of *constitutive rhetoric*, and Michael Billig's concept of *banal nationalism*. Taken together, this constitutes a framework that combines rhetorical theory, drawing primarily on Kenneth Burke's work, with critical theory. It also rests on linguistics and semiotics – the latter informing both Charland's and McGee's work – and basic nationalism theory. Collectively this theoretical framework is chosen for its ability to critically interrogate discourse for its underlying ideology and ability to project particular values to an audience.

Although George Lakoff's primary focus was on metaphor (Lakoff 1980), a stylistic element not prominently featured in Frederiksen's speeches and therefore not a primary concern here, his more general attention to the power of framing to activate certain expectations and valances in the audience fundamentally informs this study (Lakoff and Wehling 2016, Musolff 2019). Thus, when I talk of Frederiksen's *framing* of the COVID-19 crisis, I refer to a conceptual framework that, following Lakoff, provides “a larger interpretive template” for her message to become meaningful (Lakoff and Wehling 2016: 75). My claim is that Frederiksen's portrayal of Denmark as something to be taken care of and of the Danes as uniquely caring and collectively oriented prepares her auditors to accept and follow the corona restrictions with pride and without questions since this would mean questioning their commitment to their country.

Edwin Black's concept of the *second persona* seeks to theorize what he calls ‘moral’ evaluation of rhetorical discourse, which might more appropriately be labeled ideological criticism. Black broke away from a hitherto strong tradition in rhetorical studies of evaluating public discourse by standards of effect. He was among the first theorists to call on rhetorical critics not merely to think in instrumental terms but instead consider rhetorical utterances as symbolic actions with ethical and ideological significance. Rhetorical critics have since argued convincingly for a ‘critical rhetoric’ that “examines the dimensions of domination and freedom as these are exercised in a relativized world” to “unmask or demystify the discourse of power” (McKerrow 1989: 92) and claimed its necessity because “rhetorical critics would be oppressors or liberators as they ignored or engaged the linkage between social order and language” (Klumpp & Hollihan 1989: 84).

Black's approach to such critical rhetoric is using the notion of an *implied audience*. Rather than looking to the actual, physical audience for a given rhetorical text, Black suggests looking for the audience implied by the text, in other words, a hypothetical construct to evaluate the discourse. According to him, “It seems a useful methodological assumption to hold that rhetorical discourses, either singly or cumulatively in a

persuasive movement, will imply an auditor, and that in most cases the implication will be sufficiently suggestive as to enable the critic to link this implied auditor to an ideology" (Black 1970: 112). This assumption, he claims, allows the critic to "see in the auditor implied by a discourse a model of what the rhetor would have his real auditors become" (Black 1970: 113). In other words, by carefully studying how a text seeks to persuade, the critic can discern the text's underlying ideologically informed presumptions and values, and on that basis, deduce the nature of the worldview the rhetor would ascribe to the 'ideal' auditor/reader of the discourse. Evidence for ideological underpinnings, Black suggests, is best found in substantive claims, but will "most likely...be in the form of stylistic tokens" (Black 1970: 112) because even when discourse makes apparently neutral and innocuous claims, a closer examination of lexicon and style will reveal a general attitude that is morally or ideologically inscribed (Black 1970: 113). Hence, careful analysis of the kind of mindset invoked through either direct or more subtle appeals in a text does, Black argues, "make moral judgment possible" (Black 1970: 113).

The impetus of studying word choice, not as a matter of style, but as an indication and carrier of ideological content that Black initiated saw a renewed interest in Michael McGee's work on the *ideograph*. Ideographs, McGee explains, are words that, "like Chinese symbols, ... signify and 'contain' a unique ideological commitment;" they are "one-term sums of an orientation," and members of a culture are not permitted to question the fundamental logic of ideographs' (McGee 1989: 7). Ideographs are essential to study, McGee suggests, because they function as "agents of political consciousness" (ibid.). They are intimately bound up with the culture they define, and their significance lies "in their concrete history as usages, not in their idea-content" (McGee 1989: 10). Examples of ideographs in McGee's own, North American culture are 'people,' 'liberty,' and 'religion.' These words have particular legal and common language meanings. Simultaneously, they are terms often used to carry significant but not explicitly stated ideological meaning. They are thus ambiguous and, according to Jasinski, provide "advocates with considerable, but not absolute, degree of latitude" (Jasinski 2001: 310). He gives the example that Americans "might not have considered the ability to choose any doctor they wanted as an indispensable prerequisite for the good life prior to the organized campaign of Bill Clinton's administration in 1993. But that campaign articulated, or connected, doctor choice and personal 'freedom.' The meaning of freedom was subtly modified as the ideograph was extended to a new topic" (Jasinski 2001: 310). To Condit and Lucaites ideographs "represent in condensed form the normative, collective commitments of the members of a public, and they typically appear in public argumentation as the necessary motivations or justifications for action performed in the name of the public" (quoted in Jasinski 2001: 309). The ideograph concept is useful in explaining the particular rhetorical power in Frederiksen's use of the word 'civic-mindedness' [samfundssind]. As I will argue, it serves precisely the functions described

by Condit and Lucaites; namely, providing motivation and justification for various corona-related restrictions and especially self-regulated changes in behavior. In this connection, Claude Lévi-Strauss's notion of the *empty signifier* (Lévi-Strauss 1950) is also relevant, especially as it has been taken up by Ernesto Laclau (1996). An empty or 'floating' signifier is a word that points to no actual object or has no agreed-upon meaning but can be used to hegemonic ends due to their vagueness and malleability. Because it can mean different things to different people, an empty signifier potentially has significant rhetorical force because it appeals to listeners in ways that obscure the fact that they attribute different meanings to it, making it difficult to keep a critical distance. In this sense, it has significant ideological power.

Maurice Charland's concept of *constitutive rhetoric* focuses on language's ability to perform an ideological function. It thus recommends itself to identify the nationalistic ideology underlying Frederiksen's corona speeches. Charland's work partakes in the general project of theorizing the ideological work performed by public discourse, as pursued by McGee and McKerrow. Moreover, Charland shares Laclau's fundamentally skeptical approach to what is posited as given, namely national identity and the presumed unity of purpose accompanying it. The concept of *constitutive rhetoric* applies both to a genre and a more general theory for understanding rhetorical processes. In an encyclopedia article, Charland provides this brief explanation: "constitutive rhetoric accounts for the process of identity formation ... where audiences are called upon to materialize through their actions an identity ascribed to them" (Charland 2001: 616). In conceptualizing how some rhetorical audiences are not given but instead emerge as a discourse's function, Charland draws on Louis Althusser's concept of *interpellation* and Kenneth Burke's identification concept. Linking the rhetorical effects of identity formation with narrative theory, Charland posits constitutive rhetoric as constructing "political subjects through effects of identification that 1) provide a collective identity for an addressed audience; 2) construct the audience as a subject in history, and 3) demand that subjects act in accordance with their identity as enacted in history" (Charland 2001: 617). In other words, rhetors call forth an audience by offering them a collective narrative identity that serves as a template for present action. In effect, they provide individuals "with narratives to inhabit as subjects and motives to experience" and inserts such subjects-as-agents into the world (Charland 1987: 143).

The element of nationalism I wish to draw attention to in Frederiksen's corona speeches mainly relates to Michael Billig's notion of *banal nationalism*. This concerns nationalism as experienced in long-established national states where it is as prevalent as it is typically overlooked. The 'banality' does not suggest harmlessness but instead that such nationalism is so ingrained and normalized that it goes unnoticed. By this seeming innocuousness, it succeeds in exerting a subtle yet shaping influence on our mindset. Far from ostentatious pathos-laden patriotism, the concept of banal nationalism provides a lens for spotting the everyday performance of nationality. In Billig's oft-cited

words, “the metonymic image of banal nationalism is not a flag which is being consciously waved with fervent passion; it is the flag hanging unnoticed on the public building” (Billig 1995: 8). We must pay attention to it is because this constant flagging of nationhood has far-reaching implications for our understanding of collective identity and as priming for political action pursuing nationalist aims.

## 5. Crisis communication calling for collective action

The following reading of Frederiksen’s corona speeches focuses on the element of ideological nationalism at play in her rhetoric. A few general observations will serve to introduce the analysis: While each of Frederiksen’s early corona speeches responded to a particular conjuncture – typically a new development of the epidemic and the government’s response – they share a common theme: the problem’s seriousness and significance to everyone. Common to the PM’s early corona speeches was a format which loosely followed the standard argumentative development of moving through the stages of first stating facts (number of persons infected, hospitalized, and in intensive care), then defining them (a ‘serious’ situation), and eventually, advocating some action (admonishment and appeals to follow instructions from health authorities, announcements of new regulations). Across the eight speeches during the first stage of the corona crisis, there is a similar development. Whereas the first speeches were dedicated primarily to establishing a common understanding of the epidemic, including responding to doubts about its seriousness, the later speeches focused on advocating and admonishing the public to follow official guidelines for safe behavior. From the very beginning, Frederiksen framed the corona-crisis as a societal issue calling on citizens to act on an individual basis and collectively for the most vulnerable members of society and the Danish society’s sake as a whole.

The emphasis on motivational appeal in the speeches is clear: Throughout the corona crisis, the PM’s primary message to the population was that for all the restrictions and mandated obligations introduced by authorities, it came down to each person, together as well as individually, to protect themselves and help protect others. Since much of the really effective contagion preventive behavior was beyond the reach of what could be lawfully enforced, rhetorical strategies fit to change behavior were crucial. Thus, on March 6, the PM admonished the population, “I hope that everyone, also in specific instances, will rise above and regard this from a societal perspective [*med samfundsbriller*, literally: ‘with society glasses’]” (Frederiksen 2020a). Also, on March 10, she twice reiterated that “everyone’s behavior” needed to change and that “everyone must take on a large individual responsibility” (Frederiksen 2020b). Were Frederiksen able to appeal to the population in a way that would make them acknowledge the relevance of the problem and their potential role in mitigating the risk to themselves and

others, the prospects of avoiding overstretching hospital capacity would vastly improve. In the beginning, the PM's approach to this was to clarify that the epidemic was a threat to everyone and thus a collective exigence. Later, it encouraged and urged the population to follow official recommendations for safe behavior. By March 11, this dual-purpose call had found a pithy formulation which soon gained an almost slogan-like status: "We must stand together by keeping apart" [Vi skal stå sammen ved at holde afstand] (Frederiksen 2020c). Such an appeal to the population's better selves might seem at once too vague and too sentimental. Not so, however, for a country proud of its high level of education and public trust. Appealing to a sense of connectedness was PM's choice to reflect an attitude of positive expectations toward a literate and conscientious population, competent and trusted to understand and follow the authorities' guidelines. Still, as I will suggest, what was presented as general and inconspicuous appeals had ideological underpinnings that served to cement the PM's political position and left political opponents in the awkward position of having little space for dissent.

A quote from the March 11 speech is especially telling for the communitarian and nationalist undertone in the PM's corona speeches. This was the day when Frederiksen announced a national lock-down and when the reach of personal, social, and economic consequences of the restrictions was beginning to dawn on the population. Frederiksen appealed to the public, "Now is the time for us to show what we can when it counts. The Danes are at it. We are showing civic-mindedness [samfundssind]. This is what works. Much of the solution to what we face rests on the Danes' shoulders" (Frederiksen 2020c). In the following section, we shall consider in more detail how Frederiksen framed Denmark's response to COVID-19 as an effort deeply rooted in a particular national ethos.

## 6. Covid-19 as a Danish problem to be solved in a Danish way

Three phrases, in particular, characterized Frederiksen's corona speeches: the spacious and encompassing term 'civic-mindedness' [samfundssind] (used eleven times across the eight speeches); the catchy 'standing together by keeping a distance' [stå sammen ved at holde afstand] (used six times), and the more pathos-laden 'taking care of' (the most vulnerable/society/each other/the Danes/yourselves) [passe på (de mest sårbare/samfundet/hinanden/danskerne/jer selv)] (used 17 times). Together, these three phrases represent three abstraction levels and make up the core of Frederiksen's appeals to the Danish population. Let's consider them one by one and in reverse order, beginning with the least abstract appeal, that of 'taking care' of the most vulnerable, each other, Denmark, etc.

### 'Taking care'

In the Danish, the phrase connotes a protective, nurturing attention as one would give a child (keeping it out of harm's way) or a fragile or sick person (seeing to their well-being). While not strictly metaphorical, Frederiksen's use of the phrase "taking care of" clearly places the auditor in a caring and responsible position, a framing fit to activate compliance rather than contestation. It was first and foremost used as an appeal to follow the general safety guidelines regarding hygiene and social distance and the work of health and social care personnel. However, soon, the phrase started to appear in a more abstract sense, with the 'we' –i.e., the care-taking agency – referring as much to the government as to the population's members. At times the phrase functioned as a warrant for the government's strict measures, as when Frederiksen stated, "We must all do all we can to take care of the Danes. Of Denmark. Of each other" (Frederiksen 2020c). Here, as in many other instances, the government's restrictions on commercial, social, cultural, and private life in the country were justified with reference to the apparently universally held value that taking care of Denmark is both a worthwhile and unequivocal goal to be obtained.

The phrase "taking care of Denmark" [passe på Danmark] is not uncommon in contemporary Danish political discourse. It has been used for several issues, including anti-terror legislation, anti-immigration measures, and austerity measures. Frederiksen's favorite phrase has also been a catch-all goal for her Social Democratic political agenda (Jørgensen 2020). Its prior use in some political contexts has seemed somewhat odd, due to its protective and nurturing meaning – rather than defensive, resistant, or even pro-active wording, which at times would seem to correlate better with the subject matter), it seemed particularly apt in connection with the corona crisis. The phrase worked well due to its protective overtones casting all Danes in the role of potential COVID-19 patients. The whole population needed to be shielded from infection, not just by authorities but mutually, and for the sake of the greater context. In the first corona speech, Frederiksen said, "We must take care of the most vulnerable in our society. We must take care of each other because that is the prerequisite for taking care of all of society in this situation" (Frederiksen 2020a). Here, she links the wellbeing of the individual to the health of the entire country, presenting them as two sides of the same coin: mutual responsibility will save both the individual and the collective. Two weeks later, the link Frederiksen sought to establish between the protective approach, and a civic mindset was evident as she said, "And we are doing it [securing that the economy not come to a standstill and minimizing adverse economic consequences, LSV] together. We are demonstrating civic-mindedness in Denmark. And we stand together to take care of those most vulnerable and exposed. Yes, in fact we stand together in taking care of our society" (Frederiksen 2020f).

### **'Standing together by keeping a distance'**

The phrase "standing together by keeping a distance" was first used by Frederiksen in her third corona speech on March 11. The oxymoronic nature of this slogan-like phrase not only made it both memorable and easily repeatable but also effectively merged the core health safety advice in a time of virus spread with Frederiksen's framing of the effort to limit the epidemic as not just a collective but a culturally inflected civic calling. Frederiksen introduced it as intimately linked to Danish identity and culture, "As Danes, we seek togetherness [fællesskabet] by being close together. Now we must stand together by keeping a distance" (Frederiksen 2020c). The unifying idea between the two sentences is a commitment to the community held together by solidarity (standing together). Here, the values invoked echo a Social Democratic imaginary, for which 'standing together' is a phrase typically associated with labor conflicts and union solidarity. Much like the 'taking care' phrase, the 'standing together by keeping a distance' slogan originally referred to individuals' behavior but soon took on a more civically oriented meaning, making it both a matter of national character and national survival. Frederiksen's March 23 is one example of this:

Denmark stands together by keeping a distance, and we must continue doing so. [...] We stand together in something we have not tried before. We are writing history, and we all choose – both individually and collectively – what kind of history we really want to write. It is my belief, it is my hope, and my expectation that we will emerge unscathed from this on the other side because we have the capability of standing together and because the civic-mindedness is as strong as it is. (Frederiksen 2020f)

Another example is from the March 30 speech: 'Denmark stands together – by keeping a distance [...] That is the Danish strategy. All the parties in Parliament stand behind it. We are doing it together' (Frederiksen 2020g).

### **'Civic-mindedness'**

Together with repeated language about 'taking care of each other' and 'standing together by keeping a distance,' the term 'civic-mindedness' [samfundssind] soon became a common denominator, or super-warrant, for the government's COVID-19 initiatives. The PM herself used the term in all her speeches since the crucial March 11 lockdown speech, in which she mentioned it three times. It was also adopted by cabinet members and state and health authority persons interviewed at the press conferences.

An early analysis of the public use of the term civic-mindedness described it as an empty signifier in Ernesto Laclau's sense of a word with a meaning so broad that it really has no meaning and yet can be used to fulfill a hegemonic role (Marker 2020). Among the nodal points making up the chain of equivalences, Marker identifies 'duties'

(stay at home, abide by the advice of the health authorities, etc.), ‘prohibitions’ (don’t visit elderly or sick people, don’t gather in large crowds, etc.), and ‘extra-obligations’ (help each other, consumers should support local businesses, businesses should not lay off employees, newspapers should provide free access to virus-related information, etc.). Marker’s analysis is useful in pointing to the spaciousness of the term and relevant by pointing to the potential for a hegemonic function of empty signifiers.

*Samfundssind* translates literally to ‘societal mindset.’ A dictionary definition has it as “an attitude that bears witness to someone’s putting society above their own interest,” and here I translate it to *civic-mindedness*. The word dates back to around 1939 and is often used in argumentation concerning economy, e.g., for workers to moderate their wage demands, about tax evasion as destructive for the welfare society, or for businesses to own up to their social responsibilities, e.g., by taking on apprentices and thus participating in educational programs, but also in appeals to politicians to compromise to finalize legislation for the common good. Carsten Jensen, a Danish author and public intellectual, defines *samfundssind* as “the feeling of belonging to a community and the ensuing experience of having a responsibility to others than oneself and one’s nearest of kin.” He distinguishes *samfundssind* from the Christian notion of love for one’s neighbor because, although it shares the concern for others, “[it] requires the mobilization of all one’s intellectual resources and a healthy dose of self-control to realize the necessity of giving away one’s money to a community which seems very distant and of no personal concern.” *Samfundssind*, he concludes, comprises both spontaneous care for others and plain obligation (Jensen 2001: 17).

As mentioned, the word first appeared in Frederiksen’s game-changing March 11 speech, where she declared the country’s lockdown. Said Frederiksen, “We will need civic-mindedness. We will need helpfulness. I would like to thank citizens, businesses, organizers, voluntary organizations – all who up to now have shown that this is precisely what we have in Denmark – civic-mindedness” and later, “The Danes are at it. We are showing civic-mindedness. This is what works” (Frederiksen 2020c). In the following speeches, Frederiksen thanked the population directly for the civic-mindedness they were showing and explained that civic-mindedness was a “very, very great part of the solution” to getting through the crisis. On March 17, she praised “many, many Danes” for “showing an amazing civic-mindedness, even though it is hard” (Frederiksen 2020e), and on March 23, she declared, “We are doing it together. We are showing civic-mindedness in Denmark. And we are standing together to take care of the most vulnerable and exposed. Yes, we are, in fact, standing together to take care of our society” (Frederiksen 2020f).

While most of the examples mentioned seem to focus on individual citizens’ actions and attitudes, presumably showing civic-mindedness by adhering to the government’s and authorities’ recommendations and being helpful and showing consideration to

others, a different aspect of civic-mindedness was in focus in the March 30 speech. Referring to agreements between the government, employers, and labor unions regarding help packages designed to keep companies afloat and limit a rise in unemployment rates, the PM linked civic-mindedness to taking economic responsibility, "I am incredibly proud to live in a country where businesses, as something completely natural, show enormous civic-mindedness. Danish businesses are taking your responsibility and more so. You are, along with your employees, part of carrying Denmark through a historic crisis. It is quite unique." Drawing on this observation, she concluded, "We have a society that builds on togetherness, solidarity, and trust" (Frederiksen 2020g). On April 6, Frederiksen again linked civic-mindedness to economic responsibility as she appealed to large housing companies to show civic-mindedness by deferring due housing rent (Frederiksen 2020h). These two aspects, mutual social and economic responsibility for the sake of the common good, are central to Frederiksen's use of the word civic-mindedness; solidarity must undergird society both economically and interpersonally. This is a different way of expressing classic Social Democratic principles of solidarity and the welfare state's vision where "the widest shoulders carry the heaviest burdens." In addition to these aspects, that evoke citizens' moral commitment to protect and uphold the welfare society, Frederiksen lends the term an almost metaphysical quality when she declares: "We share a power that cannot be put in a formula. But which has proven indispensable. Civic-mindedness" (Frederiksen 2020g).

## 7. Word of the year

Fast forward nine months. In December 2020, the Danish Language Council (a governmental research institution under the Danish Ministry of Culture), in collaboration with a nationally broadcast radio program dedicated to matters of language, selected the word *samfundssind* ('civic-mindedness') as the word of the year 2020 (Dansk Sprognævn [Danish Language Council] 2020). From a pool of 291 words nominated by the public (including 'corona,' 'herd immunity,' 'face mask,' and 'elbow greeting'), *samfundssind* won. The decision was based on the fact that its use increased significantly during 2020, that it has a fluid but potentially positive meaning, and that it represents a 'particularly Danish' twist to public discourse about the coronavirus (Danish Broadcasting Corporation 2020). One jury member, a foreign editor on a conservative newspaper and former candidate for Parliament for the moderate libertarian party Venstre, expressed some reservations regarding the word's overbearing use. Still, she ended up voting for it in the spirit of positivity.

The fact that *samfundssind* was chosen as the Danish word of the year 2020 may not prove much. However, it demonstrates that the PM had successfully framed the country's corona response as a matter of civic-mindedness and successfully implied that this

word aptly described a particular Danish reaction to the crisis, thereby rendering it difficult to reject as a motivational frame for corona-safe behavior. In what follows, I will develop this argument by interpreting the analytical observations made regarding the PM's use of the phrases 'taking care of each other,' 'standing together by keeping a distance,' and 'civic-mindedness.' In doing so, I will link them to the claim that Frederiksen's corona speeches not only reflected a Social Democratic vision of a welfare society but framed the country's anti-Corona efforts in terms of banal nationalism.

## 8. Frederiksen's nationalist corona rhetoric

To demonstrate how Frederiksen's constituted Denmark's population as united in spirit and a purpose, Black's notion of the *second persona* can help characterize the inscribed audience for Frederiksen's corona speeches. Black suggests looking to substantive claims and stylistic tokens to get a sense of the underlying ideology driving an utterance. Examples of substantive claims in which auditors get a sense of what Frederiksen's ideal audience would be like include: "We must, as a country, look each other in the eye and acknowledge that this situation may develop seriously, very seriously," "everyone must take on a large individual responsibility," "a very clear underscoring from our side, that everyone must contribute to handling this situation in the best manner" (Frederiksen 2020b). In the following days, these appeals to solidarity among the population that is both assumed and encouraged continued: "This will only succeed if everyone does it together," "We must help each other. Show care for others – think of others. Especially those who are vulnerable" (Frederiksen 2020c); "And therefore all Danes must continue doing what we are already doing: Keeping a distance from each other, helping each other and showing consideration, not least to the most vulnerable;" "It is a common responsibility, and no one can excuse themselves from it. Everyone must shoulder the responsibility" (Frederiksen 2020d). In other words, Frederiksen clearly stated the expectation that Danes would share and respond to calls for thinking of themselves as part of a larger whole for which they carried an individual responsibility.

Black also suggests considering stylistic tokens. Frederiksen's corona speeches have little verbal flourish but are instead characterized by a simple oral style with very short, even clipped, parataxic sentences and a lexicon of everyday words. There are few metaphors, few stylistic figures. The three phrases discussed above, 'taking care,' 'standing together by keeping a distance,' and 'civic-mindedness' thus stand out as the most noticeable wordings together with the heavy use of the first person plural 'we,' which sometimes refers to the government ('and this we will not do to the Danes') (Frederiksen 2020e), sometimes to the population as a whole ('we must continue to help each other') (ibid.), and sometimes a mix of the two ("In Denmark, we have chosen our route.

We find common solutions to common problems.... We are fighting for our entire societal contract. For the Denmark we are and want to be") (Frederiksen 2020g).

In other words, Frederiksen's style is extremely accessible, and her key appeals and admonishments to the population are easily understood and remembered. This rhetorical style puts clarity before nuance and simplicity before adornment – a very democratic style that would leave few listeners in doubt of the message. It is also a rhetorical style that insistently calls listeners to self-identify as Danes. Frederiksen uses the words 'Danish,' 'Denmark' and 'the Danes' [dansk, Danmark, danskerne] remarkably frequently; they appear more than 60 times in the eight speeches.

Some of those uses are necessary for clarity, e.g., when comparing other countries, mentioning the closing of (the Danish) borders, or talking about help to Danish nationals stranded abroad. In some other cases, the PM mentions 'Danes' when she might as well have said 'people,' 'citizens,' 'each other' or 'our' (e.g., "many, many Danes who use public transport every day," "we must help each other, and this is what the Danes are doing," "The biggest mistake we can make is to hesitate, and this we will not do to the Danes") and in others still, the use of such words seems to unnecessarily and without purpose underscore nationality, as when Frederiksen mentions "Danish businesses" and "Danish wage earners," that "Danes can go shopping," and how concerned she is for "Danes in critical condition" and how proud she is of "Danish children and young people." The latter two types of flagging nationhood partake in what I see as a deliberate strategy to build a community based on nationality and inscribe this collective with a particular ideology. One part of this relies on the use of *deixis*, the grammatical act of pointing by using the definite article: 'the' Danes. It could be argued that talking about 'the Danes' in the third person is odd when Frederiksen addresses them. Nevertheless, Frederiksen uses this phrase multiple times, presumably because the definite article suggests a more specific and defined group than an undefined reference to 'Danes' or even 'citizens' and perhaps thereby signals that they collectively have her particular attention. The fact that the Prime Minister is focused on the country she heads and the population in it and mentions them repeatedly is, of course, hardly surprising, and the frequent use of these words most likely goes unnoticed. Still, I suggest that this heavy use of words expressing national identity exemplifies Billig's notion of banal nationalism: they systematically and most often unnecessarily flag nationality without calling attention to it. In Black's terms, the second persona in Frederiksen's corona speeches is someone whose self-understanding entails the Social-Democratic ideology of solidarity as the highest civic value and whose self-identification as a Dane implies an element of national exceptionalism.

With Maurice Charland, we can further describe the ideological function at play here. To Charland, constitutive rhetoric creates political subjects through identification, which offers a collective identity to an addressed audience, posits the audience as a

transhistorical subject, and inscribes it in a narrative that demands that subjects act in accordance with their role in history. They convey a particular view of what the audience has in common, their role in history, and how they ought to act accordingly. As seen above, Frederiksen systematically calls her auditors into a collective ‘we’ and as *Danish*, underscoring their commonality and, simultaneously, obfuscating individual, socio-economic, geographical, ethnic, or political differences. While this might seem of little significance since she addresses the Danish population, the following two elements of Charland’s theory help clarify the ideological work at play. Charland explains how narrative can associate an audience with an ideology when it presents the present as an extension of the past. This results in what he calls *the transhistorical subject*, where people of the present are one with people of the past. Frederiksen’s corona speeches contain several examples of this: “We Danes have dealt with great challenges before, and we must do it again” (Frederiksen 2020e), “In Denmark, we have chosen our path. We find common solutions to common problems. We have a long tradition of doing this. We are fighting for a generation that laid the first stones for our welfare society. We are fighting for our entire societal contract. For the Denmark we are and want to be. We all know that we stand in a historical time” (Frederiksen 2020g).

In these excerpts, Frederiksen links the present to the past – including the Nazi occupation’s hardships of 1940-1945 and the building of the welfare society in the 1960s and 70s – and underscoring the transhistorical identity between generations. The way for auditors to assume this identity is, of course, by acting in accordance with the mantras of ‘taking care’, ‘standing together’, and exhibiting civic-mindedness. Charland points out that, to the extent auditors allow themselves to be interpellated by the collective identity offered, they are less moved by the discourse’s explicit appeals than brought to act in specific ways, according to the subject position inscribed in constitutive rhetoric. Thus, the question is if, for all Frederiksen’s appeals to the population to ‘take care’ of each other by keeping their distance and practicing good hand hygiene, the most effective strategy was presenting them with a collective identity as Danes characterized by showing civic-mindedness. Thus constituted Danes could think of themselves as helpful, considerate, responsible, community-oriented, respectful of older generations’ contribution to the wealth of the society, and crucial to the continuance of the country’s democratic tradition, and best of all, united with other Danes in this communitarian ethos. To Charland, the ideological effect of constitutive rhetoric springs from narrative use because it presents the acting subjects in ways that obfuscate the fact that they are but textual constructs and presents a “naturalized representation of cultural categories that legitimate institutions of power” (Charland 2001: 618). Interestingly, in the last speech in the material for this study, the eighth speech dedicated to the topic of corona, Frederiksen herself acknowledged what Charland would call the ideological trick performed by her rhetoric:

Everything I have said today exists only on paper. It is still only an option. It will be up to each one of us – you and me and everyone else – if what has been said today will come true at all. It will only come true if we all continue taking good care of each other and ourselves in these corona times. (Frederiksen 2020h)

Frederiksen's comments here, however inadvertently confirming Charland's point, speak eloquently to the ideographic nature of the term civic-mindedness. As we have seen in the PM's corona speeches, this word served to present in a condensed form a normative, collective commitment among members of the public to motivate and justify action and rule compliance for the sake of the common good. It became a short-hand referent for all the government's instructions, advice, and admonitions to change the public's behavior. It functioned as a guideline for the Danish people regarding their understanding of and reactions to the corona epidemic. One word to capture many words; one word to guide, even rule, many people.

## 9. Conclusion

From an effect-oriented perspective, Frederiksen's strategy for the early corona speeches seemed well-chosen: the Danish population generally abided by the official guidelines for corona-safe behavior and thus contributed to curbing the spread of the virus, and her personal approval ratings, as well as those of the Social Democratic government, went up during the corona crisis. From the perspective of an ideological critique, Frederiksen's strategy may, however, call for a more nuanced evaluation. The call for civic-mindedness likely was a way for many Danes to make various personal and societal challenges and deprivations meaningful and served as a motivating mantra for continued self-control. However, its overbearing nature would have been felt by others as it increasingly identified the 'proper' approach to the epidemic with an essentially Social Democratic vision of the welfare state where the wellbeing of the weakest became the test of the effort's success. Moreover, and perhaps more problematic, was the essentializing nature of Frederiksen's corona rhetoric. With proper corona safe behavior presented as an instantiation of a truly Danish ethos, this left non-native inhabitants of the country ignored and conceptualized the national reaction to the pandemic as that, a national, issue with a nationalist solution, rather than a local, political instantiation of international medical expertise of epidemiology. Framing the crisis in nationalist terms risked de-incentivizing a more collective, international effort and left the difficulties of affected countries less materially and organizationally privileged than Denmark out of sight. Finally, the ideographic nature of civic-mindedness tied up with conceptualizing what being Danish is, made it difficult to challenge political principle without appearing to be somehow in opposition to the alleged essential Danishness in-

herent in Frederiksen's version of civic-mindedness. With the word civic-mindedness, Frederiksen seemingly hit upon effective rhetorical crisis management to stay in control at the cost of alienating political opponents whose differing views, just by differing from Frederiksen's, were cast as somehow un-Danish or even unpatriotic. Further, while the nationalist appeal secured Frederiksen high approval ratings, this framing of the COVID-19 did little to prepare the country to enter discussions about international vaccine distribution programs and other border-crossing initiatives to combat the pandemic. This case study from Denmark raises questions about how the exigencies of the COVID-19 pandemic may have influenced political discourse in this and other countries and particularly how the health and economic crisis may have spurred nationalist and populist political discourse in different settings.

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# A 'semio' approach to fashion discourse: critical perspectives on the luxury industry

BY: François Provenzano

punctum.gr



Eleni Mouratidou, 2020

## Politiques de re-présentation de l'industrie de la mode. Discours, dispositif, pouvoir

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ISBN 978-1-78406-678-9 (e-book), 206 p.

This book offers rich and clear critical perspectives on the luxury fashion industry and its market mediations. It relies on a multi-layered methodology and deals with a wide variety of materials: texts, images, but also objects, experiences, exhibitions, buildings, interiors. By doing so, Mouratidou demonstrates the unity (in other words: the standard format) of the politics of *re-presentation* in the luxury fashion industry and the unity of the *semio* approach she defends. Grounded on the semiotic analysis of discourses (from Greimas to Dondero and Fontanille), this approach includes the numerous insights of the most recent works in Communication studies. The book also offers a fruitful overview of the French tradition of critical works on cultural industries and mediations (from Barthes to Jeanneret); it also sheds light – most appropriately – on this tradition's Critical Theory background (Benjamin, Adorno & Horkheimer, Debord). In addition, we must also highlight Mouratidou's terminological creativity. In her case studies, she proposes a range of stimulating theoretical terms, such as *re-presentation*, *semiotic capital*, *culturalisation*, *fictivation*, *event-formula*, and others adopted from theatre studies.

The book opens with a robust yet stimulating theoretical introduction, settling the main conceptual frameworks and interpretative hypothesis. Its originality lies in Mouratidou's

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focus on what she calls *re-presentation* strategies of luxury fashion brands and their consideration as *politics*. The brands do not merely present products that represent them in the public sphere; they also *re-present this representation* to requalify the semiotic units used in the representation. This metasemiotic and reflexive process is considered as a generalized apparatus (in Foucault's sense): it tends to occupy the whole media and public space, where it conceals the very economical, ethical, and ideological nature of the market mediations.

The book is structured in three parts, which draw an analytical path from the most exposed *re-presentation* units to the fashion industry's deepest socio-economic machinery. In each part, thorough case studies (based upon major luxury brands such as Louis Vuitton, Dior, Gucci, Balenciaga, Chanel) alternate with more methodological, interpretative, or political considerations (about the ideological function of the fashion discourse in society).

The first two parts consider the "enunciative thickness" (*épaisseur énonciative*) of advertising campaigns that *re-write* other cultural forms and contents to link them with luxury fashion values. Fine arts, literature, religion, and politics are followed and decrypted by Mouratidou in fashion discourse. Each topic is treated through specific and always illuminating case studies, where Mouratidou shows a great talent for the detailed description of her materials and demonstrates that a *semio* approach requires mainly a *postural* work: paying attention to the details, considering every angle of a given phenomenon, immersing oneself into the semiotic experience of this phenomenon, and building, from within, the critical distance. For example, she analyzes the collaboration between Louis Vuitton and contemporary art big star Jeff Koons through its verbal and iconic dimensions, but also the specific event of the opening session in the Louvre museum, through its media coverage in the social networks, and the material dimensions of the object *sac-à-main*.

Hybridizations with fine arts and high culture enable fashion brands to requalify themselves as artistic instances. In doing so, they cover up the commercial nature of their relations with the clients with more legitimate values and roles. Their clients become a distinctive audience, invited to contemplate Beauty itself. On its side, the religious intertext puts the commercial instances into the scenography of worship and connects them with the Biblical narrative's sacred values (Grace, Salvation, Adoration, Holy Relic). In this chapter, Mouratidou analyses, in particular, the Kering group headquarters at the Hospice des Incurables and details the semiotic construction of both the Inaccessible *and* the access to the Inaccessible.

The political intertext plays an even more pervert function in fashion discourse, as it recycles, from within the capitalist system, the same forms and formulas of anti-capitalist protest. Moreover, the political quotes in fashion discourses rely on what Mouratidou calls *fictivation*, i.e., altering a source-text to make fictional materials out of

non-fictional ones. From this perspective, Mouratidou analyses the 2014 Chanel fashion show, which was based on the semio-pragmatic codes of a street protest, and other discursive forms recycled from May '68 iconography, the *Gilets Jaunes* movement, or the feminist paradigm. In each case, Mouratidou shows how the fashion discourse erases the "social reference" and these topics' originally political meaning, using them in an iterative and confused way.

The critical perspective becomes even sharper in the third and last part of the book, which considers the fashion industry's socio-economic backstage aspects. A brief and vivid historical review explains the development, in the 1980s, of a new paradigm based on "management creativity." The concepts of *panoplie* (Labelle), *reinvestment* (Maingueneau), *phantasmagoria* (Benjamin, Jeanneret), and *forme-loisir* (Mouratidou) offer us insight into both the economic and symbolic logics of this industry. These logics have one goal, suggests Mouratidou: to redeem all the (many) dysphoric aspects of the luxury fashion's global industrialization. While the luxury industry's ecological, ethical, and socio-psychological impact has never been so dramatic, the brand consortiums (LVMH, Kering) have never been so powerful, both economically and symbolically. This power relies on the standardized politics of re-presentation: Mouratidou's critical edge culminates when she demonstrates that the most distinctive fashion sector's communication strategies are similar to *prêt-à-porter*.

This book is undoubtedly a must-read for everyone interested in the modern fashion industry's deep structures and surface discourses. Furthermore, its illuminating case studies show how a *semio* approach works in practice: refraining from theoretical dogma, Mouratidou assembles an appropriate and effective toolbox by freely drawing from critical theory, discourse analysis, communication, and mediation studies. Concerned to pay attention to the forms, she succeeds in involving the reader.

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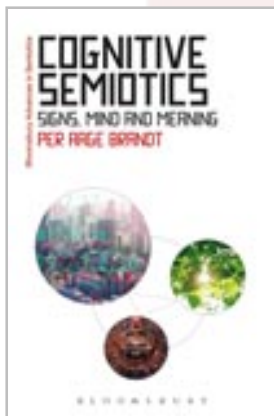
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# Cognitive dynamics

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BY: Luca Tateo



Brandt, Per Aage, 2020

## Cognitive Semiotics: Signs, Mind, and Meaning

London: Bloomsbury Academic. 241 pp. £95.00 (HBK, ISBN 9781350143302, epub/Mobibook ISBN 9781350143326, pdf/ebook ISBN 9781350143319) ISBN 978-1-78406-678-9 (e-book), 206 p.

The proliferation of disciplinary labels, distinctions, borders, and hierarchies is an interesting semiotic phenomenon *per se*. In particular, the need to circumscribe a new semiotics field and then denoting it as transdisciplinary appears instead to be an exercise of politics. One cannot but fall into the paradox of any systemic organization, nicely described by Simmel a long time before:

By choosing two items from the undisturbed store of natural things in order to designate them as “separate,” we have already related them to one another in our consciousness, we have emphasized these two together against whatever lies between them. And conversely, we can only sense those things to be related which we have previously somehow isolated from one another; things must first be separated from one another in order to be together. (Simmel 1994: 5)

The field of Cognitive Semiotics emerged as a reaction to computationalism in cognitive sciences (Zlatev 2012). Any form of structural reductionism soon confronts the problem of meaning (Brandt 2020). In the introductory chapter of his seminal *Acts of Meaning*, Jerome Bruner, one of the founders of the so-called ‘cognitive revolution,’ attributes its partial failure to overlooking the human being as an active producer of meaning in favor of the modular brain idea as a mechanism of informa-

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tion processing. Hence, the need for a new holistic look at the meaning-making processes that characterize the human species. Simmel's paradox also applies to studying psychological functions as distinct submodules of the human mind. Once separated, cognition, volition, emotion, and body demand the development of a theory that puts them back together. The solution of cognitive semiotics is to replace the notion of structure and modularity with the idea of "architecture," i.e., a stable hierarchical organization of structures and functions whose form is not interchangeable. The modularity notion implies the possibility of recombining hierarchically equivalent modules without dramatically altering the whole's identity. As the prefabricated modules used in the building industry, one can recombine them as Lego bricks in different equivalent forms. Architecture has to do with the unique creation of 'patterns' through the hierarchical organization of elements. For instance, in an 18th-century neoclassical building's façade, the order and number of the columns and windows constitute the building's unique personality. If we modify one of its sub-parts, the whole system of proportions comes apart. It will become a different type of building.

## A cognitive architecture of meaning-making

Per Brandt's book is quite literally built as a combination of architectural elements – new chapters combined with republished, earlier works - aimed at presenting a general theory of how "representational meaning can be modeled" (Brandt 2020: 71). The central tenet is that the semiotic behavior of humans is not just an emergent property of embodied processes, but that meaning requires a form of *representation*, to the extent that meaning is "related both to the imaginary and to the experiential world" (Brandt 2020: 71). In the first part of his book, Brandt tries to provide a general model of the cognitive architecture that makes human meaning-making possible. He claims that, to link afferent (sensation) and efferent (action) behavior in the physical world, there must be a part of the circuit/ architecture which is situated on a different plane, enabling the appreciation and the planning of past and future actions, as well as those alternative courses of actions that will never appear in the physical world. Such mental architecture that operates in between afferent and efferent behavior has the form of an integrative cycle: "perceived forms → categorized objects → integrated situations [that Brandt calls "mental spaces"] → action-planning reflections → evaluating affects" (Brandt 2020: 73). This architecture allows the integration of *qualia* into objects, objects into categories, and a system of relations that can be called *situations* – in real or hypothetical forms. Conditions allow the creation of notions, abstract and generalizable representations, that finally lead to affects, i.e., the emotional appreciation of the experience.

The cognitive architecture's key element is *mental space*: a portion of meaning "that comes with an internal conceptual structure, a minimum of imagery, and a phenom-

enological status as a scenario that can be referred to.” (Brandt 2020: 83). The topical notion is the organization of objects into configurations according to principles that may come from the distal experience of culture, proximal phenomenological experience, or the production of fictional worlds. Meaning production occurs when humans compare, transfer, and blend the references of different mental spaces. In the second part of the book, Brandt provides several examples of using the meaning’s mental architecture to analyze different kinds of texts (novels, poems, translations, numbers, money, etc.). The author’s goal is to demonstrate that his architecture can account for the production of meaning in human activities, relating the embodied experience and the mental representation without necessarily conflating them into the monist notion of a non-representational physically-embodied emerging mind. His mental space model can map all the phenomenology of human meaning-making manifested in cultural products.

## Critical remarks

Although Brandt provides several interesting examples, his claim of having developed a comprehensive theory of representational meaning, alternative to the other path towards universal semiosis, biosemiotics, seems too ambitious. Brandt’s work remains within the limits of a semiotic of text, which of course, applies to different textual genres. Brandt’s model is topological, not really dynamic, and processual. Indeed, his representation of the transformation between two meaning spaces, or the transformation of the reference due to the establishment of a new relationship between the spaces, does not account for the process of transformation. Brandt takes two repeated pictures of a building to observe the transformation of the architectural arrangement. Moreover, he presents two different buildings’ images, showing how the architectural patterns have been placed in the two buildings. This is what he does, in effect, when he analyses two poems by Yeats and Woodsworth, respectively, where he discusses the imaginative process and the meaning spaces.

A repeated series of pictures cannot account for dynamism; it can be a two-dimensional representation of a process unfolding in time. Besides, a combinational model, such as Brandt’s hierarchic architecture of *qualia*, objects, situations, evaluation, and affects, defines a topology but not the rules of transformation over time. Brandt’s different graphic representations account for the relationships between the elements before and after a transformation, but not for the reconfiguration process that produced this transformation. In other words, the structural aspect of systems of oppositions/relations prevails over a dynamic view of parts/whole relationships. Brandt’s model is quite useful in mapping different kinds of texts and showing how meaning is actively produced by creating mental spaces networks. Yet, I think it overlooks one crucial point of

Peirce's universal theory of semiosis. *Firstness* is the encounter not with *qualia* but with the un-distinct flow of the world. The first relationship with the world is affective and physiognomic (Tateo 2018). We do not initially experience redness, softness, coldness, etc., and proceed to form objects and then relations, to finally decide or appreciate something about these objects in the context of their relationships. We primarily experience physiognomies, aesthetic configurations of elements, with which we relate affectively (Tateo 2018).

Distinctions emerge later, when affect and preferences attach to them: first, I experience ABC as a physiognomy. Subsequently, my relating to it produces a distinction  $A+B+C$ , which is affectively charged. If A is distinct from B and C, one *must* be better than another. Hence, this time within what Brandt calls 'mental space,' a new reconfiguration can emerge. As Simmel (1994) points out, we can experience distinction only between things that are related, and we can create relationships only between things that are distinct. *Secondness* and *Thirdness* are the conditions for meaning production. However, the exact lower and upper *thresholds* of meaning cannot be precisely located (Innis 2016). Before distinction-making, which is mainly socially guided through symbolic work, certain meaning-making forms precede the segmentation of experience or exceed it. Biosemiotics and aesthetics try to account for those phenomena, while cognitive semiotics seems not interested in them.

How does Brandt's model can be developed in a more dynamic-processual direction? For instance, let's take an example of his semiotic blending model from the book (figure 1, in Brandt 2020: 107).

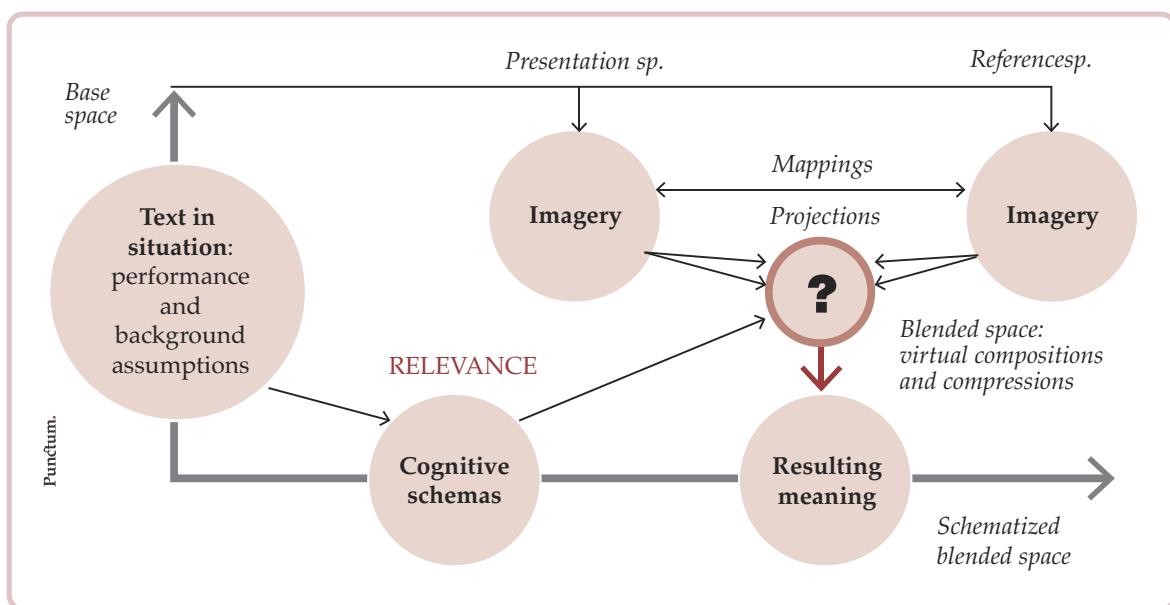


Figure 1. The semiotic blending model (Brandt, 2020, p. 107)

In the chapter discussing the interpretation of Leonard Cohen's famous song *Hallelujah*, Brandt (2020) describes his blending model as a flow from a previous existing schematization of meaning to a new schematization emerging from the blending. This movement creates a new meaning space in which all the previous meanings are virtually present and potentially activable for generating interpretation. In other words, sign-complexes constitute polysemy fields activated contextually and stored in personal culture. The problem is that Brandt's model only works at the level of human linguistic communication, namely the production and interpretation of different text genres. This is still a topological model: it is a closed cycle that leads from one schematization to another. How can one introduce transformation over time?

The first step is, of course, the introduction of time, as infinite semiosis presupposes temporality (figure 2). The second element is the introduction of the wholeness and schematization dialectic over time.

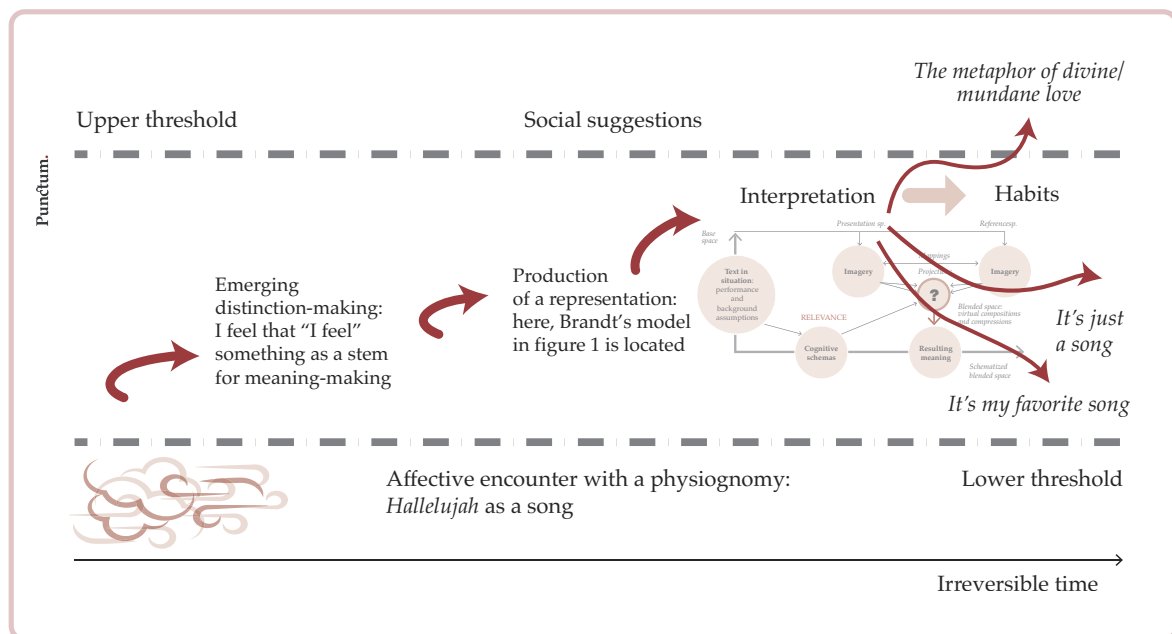


Figure 2. Dynamics of interpretation

In his analysis of the *Hallelujah* song, Brandt focuses on the linguistic level. Yet, this is not what we primarily experience. Since the first chord, we experience a physiognomy made of several sign-complex elements: we experience a gestalt quality. Indeed, no matter what instrument or performer is playing, we immediately relate to the sign-complex. The recognition of the song is based on this primary affective relating. Yet, recognition is already a semiotic process that calls into question the text's cultural aspects, e.g., the song form, the performative dimensions, the ballad genre, the biblical title, etc. The lower threshold's location between the *Firstness* of the gestalt quality of the melody and the *Secondness* of the relationship between me as the audience and the text is pro-

bably fuzzy. It stems from my affective relation to the material qualities (not necessarily the *qualia* as distinct elements): I feel that I feel is the stem for the meaning-making. When I position myself as the audience, I create the conditions for an interpretation, and here comes into play Brandt's mental space model. It does not describe the whole process, but a part of it. The unfolding of the process in time implies that the moment after any sign is produced, we also have the production of a constraint, of a habit.

Social suggestions represent another set of constraints, what Brandt calls the reference space, that guide my interpretation in a specific direction. If I accept these suggestions (I am, of course, not *obliged* to do so), I can, for instance, produce an interpretant like the one suggested by Brandt: the song is a blend of the spaces of meaning referring to the divine and mundane love. Once I produce the interpretant 'love,' I activate a meaning field that is infinite and fuzzy, like all signs referring to human values. This meaning field is characterized by being above the schematization threshold: they are *hyper generalized* signs (Valsiner 2005). Both the meanings below and above the threshold cannot be represented through Brandt's schematization. Primary affective experience can only partly be schematized (experiencing *Hallelujah* as an affective gestalt) because the meaning field can only partially be circumscribed in schematic terms. Everybody understands what I mean by 'love,' but we cannot agree on a schematic and finite definition.

The process of interpretation thus builds on top of the levels I have described in figure 2. Moreover, interpretation as an action is partially constrained by the previous chain of interpretations (habits as a framework) but at the same time produces a sign in the immediate future (habit as channeling). Interpretation is not *determined*; instead, it results from a field of vectorial forces. The outcome of the interpretation process can lead to very different effects in the future. I can comply with the social suggestions as in the example of Brandt's interpretation). I can simply produce a sign that neutralizes the schematization ("it is just a song"), or I can create my version of it and make it my ("My favorite song").

## Conclusion

Per Brant's book is a very productive attempt to design a general cognitive architecture model to account for the meaning-making process. In this sense, Cognitive Semiotics succeeds in creating a consistent model and introducing a precise terminology. However, I think it fails in introducing any radical novelty. The extent to which cognitive semiotics' enterprise moves beyond the existing theoretical reflection in biosemiotics, semiotic cultural psychology, linguistic anthropology, and textual semiotics is somewhat unclear. The attempt to bring a humanistic and holistic perspective into cognitive

science is relatively unachieved since Bruner's (1990) times. Bruner has already demonstrated that it is impossible to reduce the problem of human meaning to schematization. We need a dynamic and temporal understanding, such as the narrative mode of thought (Bruner 1990). Brandt's model certainly has potential; still, it is a structural model that needs to be inoculated with the temporal dimension. This limitation becomes especially acute when discussing the narrative form (in chapter 9) of the modern novel. His mapping continues to be that of a set of repeated pictures of structural transformations.

The infinite semiosis process is based on the dynamic dialectic of schematization and wholeness, whereas *Firstness* feeds into *Thirdness* only to generate a new cycle in irreversible time. Brandt's book and cognitive semiotics seem focused on mapping relationships' configuration while overlooking their dynamic aspect as if cognition was limited to schematization.

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# To laugh or not to laugh? That is the question.

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BY: Villy Tsakona



Marszalek, Agnes, 2020

## Style and Emotion in Comic Novels and Short Stories

London: Bloomsbury Academic. 171 pp. £65 (Hbk, ISBN 9781350054585, epub/Mobi, eBook ISBN 9781350054608, pdf/ebook ISBN 9781350054592)

We usually think of comedy and tragedy as opposites, but perhaps we should consider them as two sides of the same coin. As Morrell (1999: 21) suggests, “[t]he most basic belief [which the comic and the tragic visions of life] share is that life is full of incongruities, discrepancies between the way things ought to be and the way they are. The difference between the two visions of life is more in their attitudes than in any beliefs about matters of fact.” They involve different and usually opposite ways of evaluating the same human condition. In other words, comedy and tragedy are built on incongruities assessed and framed to generate positive and negative emotions, respectively. Furthermore, comic/humorous and tragic/serious elements may co-occur in the same text, even if the text is primarily intended as funny. In such cases, texts become a blend of humorous utterances/parts and serious or even tragic ones – the latter constitute what Attardo (2001: 89) calls *serious relief* in humorous texts.

There is relatively little research regarding the interplay between comedy and tragedy and the co-occurrence of humorous and serious comedy parts. In exploring these two topics, Agnes Marszalek makes a significant contribution in addressing this gap. More specifically, she aims to demonstrate how comic narratives may not only amuse but also provoke emotions like anxiety, suspense, embarrassment, and distress. Having a robust interdisciplinary perspective that draws on linguistics, psychology, philosophy, and literary/film/televi-

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sion studies, she studies a corpus of English comic novels and short stories of diverse styles and authors, written over quite a long period (1889-2008).

Chapter 1 presents the main concepts used in the analyses to follow. More specifically, the author defines *comic narratives* as texts relying on “specific stylistic devices that direct our emotional experience in order to entertain us” (p. 1). Such texts contain *narrative worlds*, namely “imaginary spaces built partly from the linguistic elements present in the text and partly from the readers’ knowledge and cognitive mechanisms” (p. 1). In comic narratives, the constructed narrative worlds are *humorous worlds*, which “elicit an overall impression of humor in the reader – an impression which can enhance the humorous potential of the individual elements that appear in the world” (p. 5). Their stability depends on stylistic cues causing the opposite effects of *distance* or *immersion*: the first one is associated with humor creation and the latter with the disruption of humor experience.

In Chapter 2, the theoretical background of the study emerges more clearly. The author discusses how a narrative’s words enable the reader to construct a narrative world (see above). Since texts generate (positive or negative) emotional judgments and feelings, such as empathy, suspense, and curiosity, the narrative world is explored not only as a mental but also as an emotional construct. The chapter also discusses humor’s main theories, especially incongruity theory (see Morreall 1999 above), utilized in the book’s analytical part.

In Chapter 3, Marszalek investigates the mixing and balancing of humorous and non-humorous parts in comic narratives. She proposes that comic writers adjust readers’ expectations by establishing a *humorous mode*, i.e., a “cognitive state that facilitates a humorous interpretation” (p. 33). It is a mode intended to create a *humorous mood*, i.e., the “affective state that predisposes us towards experiencing the emotion of amusement” (p. 33). This is achieved through *paratexts* (e.g., cover design, titles, blurbs, book review extracts on the book cover, prologues) and comic narratives’ openings. The author also investigates the stylistic cues comic writers employ to shift from the humorous mode/mood to the non-humorous one. The stabilizing/distancing cues invite and allow readers to laugh with/at the narrated events. In contrast, the destabilizing/engaging ones disrupt the humorous mode/mood and yield “complex humorous responses” (p. 48), combining amusement with negative, unpleasant emotions. Thus, comic narratives turn out to blend entirely opposed modes/moods.

Chapter 4 investigates the categories of stabilizing and destabilizing cues as resources for characterization in comic narratives. Characterization in combination with humor may trigger three primary emotions: sympathy, empathy, and identification. The author draws on Northrop Frye’s (1957) four comic character types – self-deprecator/*eiron*, impostor/*alazon*, buffoon/*bomolochoi*, churl/*agroikos* – and their merging in the *misfit* figure to account for instances of stereotyping, miscommunication, impolite-

ness, and social disruption; all of them familiar sources of humor in comic narratives. Marszalek uses these concepts in different combinations to show how different character configurations and narrated events (de)stabilize the prevailing humorous mode/mood in the texts examined.

Chapter 5 continues and completes the analysis of (de)stabilizing cues in comic narratives. This time, Marszalek focuses on how story structure, the order of the narrated events, and the amount of information disclosed may provoke either amusement or complex humorous responses, including negative emotions. On the one hand, stabilizing cues such as foreshadowing, comical complications, and their resolution make readers expect the unexpected, usually leading to a happy ending. The author underlines the significance of readers' familiarity with comedy as a genre: knowing that a happy end will eventually occur, they look forward to the heroes' overcoming of all accidents or obstacles. On the other hand, destabilizing cues such as (comic) suspense, dramatic irony, and recurrence make readers bear the unbearable. They manage to endure the problematic or even painful plot events' negative emotional impact on them and not lose sight of the prevailing humorous mode/mood.

Chapter 6, finally, outlines the study's findings and summarizes them in a three-page table, which is especially helpful to researchers wishing to apply the author's analytical model.

Marszalek's style and argumentation are clear and persuasive, while the examples she discusses are well-chosen and analyzed in great detail. The author also elaborates on subtle differences between overlapping notions (e.g., suspense/surprise, repetition/recurrence, comic events/gags). An essential asset of the book is that the author's analyses are complemented and confirmed by actual readers' comments of the books comprising the corpus. The author collected them from publicly accessible online sources. Unfortunately, these comments are used rather sparingly in the analysis. Ideally, they could provide more diverse interpretations of the books examined to illustrate, among other things, whether readers shift modes/moods while reading, as proposed by the author (on the methodological significance of analyzing authentic and spontaneous reactions to humor, see Tsakona 2020).

The book is highly recommended to scholars from a wide range of disciplines (linguistics, literary studies, semiotics, narratology, cultural studies, media studies, to name but a few) interested in the overlap and fuzziness between comedy and tragedy, humor and seriousness. It paves the way for more research to shed light on the interplay between comedy and tragedy and between the humorous and non-humorous/serious aspects of the same text. Such research would eventually offer more sophisticated analytical tools, which would help us account for the diverse or even opposing reactions to texts intended as humorous, especially in cases where some readers do not reach a humorous interpretation.

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