

Subversive Semantics in Political and Cultural Discourse

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Resemanticizations (Umdeutungen) of cultural concepts and narratives targeted at establishing hermeneutic hegemony are prevalent in political, cultural, and academic fields. Paying special attention to the aggravated range of conflicts over hermeneutic power, the interdisciplinary and international symposium addressed two questions: To what extent do rhetorical maneuvers serve to establish new and powerful belief systems beyond rational and democratic control? And why is it that societies priding themselves in technological and rational excellence as well as broad and deep knowledge may fall victim to an expanding communicative cultivation of ignorance that is coupled with a general hostility toward life, including non-human life?

After introductory remarks by the spokesperson of the graduate school, Martina Kumlehn, and the symposium organizers, these two questions were investigated throughout the international conference by and between experts from literary studies, political science, media studies and communication studies, American studies and sustainability studies. Gesa Mackenthun referred to the contemporary distortions of Civil Rights language and ideals in government statements (in France and the US) calling for a conservative, nationalist educational reform, including attacks on liberal education as being responsible for Islamicist and racist terror. Liberal reform-oriented groups, conversely, rearticulate the ancient chivalric gesture of kneeling to express reverence toward a moral authority beyond the national level. Jörn Dosch pointed out that not all resemanticization is subversive and aims at the production of questionable

alternative knowledge.

ARAM ZIAI (Kassel) analyzed a publication by the German right-wing nationalist political party Alternative für Deutschland (AfD), which proposes a reform of Germany's politics of remembrance in regard to German colonialism. Urging for a nuanced view that allows for positive interpretations of German colonialism, this document highlights what it calls „achievements“ of colonialism, reinforcing the colonial myth that German colonialism released Africa from archaic structures. The AfD claims that the discursive hegemony of post- and decolonial studies in the German public has led to a lopsided ideological view on German colonization and that acts that were honorable in their time should not be condemned in hindsight.

MANUELA CAIANI (Florence) explored the potential role of the internet for radical right organizations, particularly in regard to their identity formation, organizational structure, and mobilization. Viewing the radical right as a social movement, Caiani and her team conducted a comparative analysis of six countries (US, Italy, Spain, France, UK, Germany). Evaluating the vast number of radical right webpages through social network and web content analyses, her research findings show that there are varying degrees of centralization and segmentation within a network of radical right movements. Hence, although the internet serves as a platform for otherwise marginalized groups, it has not yet led to forming a cohesive movement that is able to communicate effectively for taking action. In the discussion, Caiani highlighted the difficulty of identifying differences and boundaries of radical right views when trying to get a grasp of a large and decentralized movement.

CHRISTINE UNRAU (Duisburg-Essen) took a closer look at the emergence of indignation as a political emotion and pointed to incidents in which outrage and indignation seemed to play an important part, such as the Arab revolts in 2011. Defining indignation as a response to the undeserved well-being of others, Unrau explored the term's long history in philosophy and politics, as well as its function as an antidote to indifference. Indignation naturally targets symbols of

political domination, and in this appears as a natural and adequate response to injustice. While the arousal of rage, including its Christian form of „righteous anger,“ is often the goal of political activism in the face of injustice, indignation is used as a mode of action both on the left as on the right. The lack of distinction between left and right uses of anger was discussed, as well as the connection of anger to different levels of knowledge.

SUSANNE LACHENICHT (Bayreuth) examined the relationship of colonial and indigenous concepts of nationhood related to sovereignty rights, territory, and interactions with land in European travel narratives of the 16th and 17th centuries, and in the use and discourse of treaties until today. Negotiations between First Nations and court cases in the „Canadas,“ e.g. regarding the Haudenosaunee’s territory, have shown that native people formerly aim(ed) for independence without reference to the concept of nation. Modern legal discourse occasionally draws on the concept of „co-sovereignty“ from early treaties that acknowledged Native Americans’ territorial possession but is nowadays sometimes also used to question native integrity and sovereignty. The discussion stressed the necessity of colonized groups to perform „strategic essentialism“ (Spivak) in operating within the courts of the conquerors.

HANS-JÜRGEN PUHLE (Frankfurt am Main) delved into the variety of populisms, unfolded the properties of what he calls „populist democracy“ and finally came to criticize populist strategies of semantic reallocation. Populist democracy can be understood as a structure of public fear, political communication and mobilization. Emphasizing that populists usually classify themselves as grass-root movements or movements of an underdog culture, Puhle would characterize their conspiracy narrations as myths rather than theories. He identifies the creation of alternative realities to rely on cultural constellations and peculiar subversion, based on an atmosphere of anti-establishmentarianism. Referring to Nadia Urbinati, he highlighted the fiction of unmediated relationships between the people and powerful representatives as essential elements of populism. He finally iden-

tified conspiracy narratives such as „gender madness“ („Genderwahn“) or the denial of climate change.

In relation to these considerations, VOLKER WEISS (Hamburg) focused on the theory-loaded movement of the New Right. Reflecting on their typical current rhetorical exaggerations (such as calling democracy dictatorship), he pointed out that this rhetoric by now mobilizes considerable masses. It usually follows the same pattern: terms are appropriated, their substance is altered and then terminology is returned to political discourse in a sense that strengthens the New Right’s ambitions. Yet, the view that democracy is not different from dictatorship is not only a verbal maneuver but taken seriously by its adherents. Weiss pointed out that current semantic shifts already present a century ago provide whole lexises. The discussion also extended the conversation on early copied aesthetics such as the painting style of Käthe Kollwitz. Directly asked for strategies to cope with these shifts, Weiss insisted on their artificial character that requires rebuttal and unmasking.

EIKO GRIMBERG (Berlin/Leipzig) continued the analysis of semantic and symbolic shifts. Interested in signs in public spheres both on the streets and online, he took pictures of several political and cultural expressions as area marks or their rejections. Grimberg showed the range of these takeovers of aesthetics ranging from the adaption of iconic labels to insider greetings. CasaPound Italia, for example, encourages right-wing squatting, thus inverting the formerly leftist concerns of urban squatters critiquing neoliberal urban planning and evictions. Popular graffiti and symbols, e.g. male action heroes, are used for right-wing urban resemanticizations of historical sites. Grimberg critically compared such signs in the Italian public sphere with left and feminist aesthetic articulations.

WHITNEY PHILLIPS (Syracuse) introduced ecological metaphors as a new way of talking about mis- and disinformation. According to Phillips, ecological metaphors allow for bigger conversations that do not just call attention to obvious sources of harmful information but instead focus on its problems and producers. Employing the metaphors

of redwood root systems, land cultivation, and hurricanes, her analysis asks for complex metaphors and allegories to show the complexity of phenomena as supposed to simplifications offered by the right. Using the example QAnon, Phillips illustrated how taking lessons from the natural world to understand crises can foster a more holistic story about challenges society faces. In the subsequent discussion, the need to critically reflect on existing narratives was emphasized. Alternative realities and declining trust in political institutions are necessary in creating awareness of where information comes from.

EMMA HART (St. Andrews) traced the historical semantic origins of the urban-rural divide that still dominates our thinking. Analyzing book covers of recent academic publications, a celebrated agrarian myth becomes obvious. Hart offered insights into critical readings of the countryside in Europe and the Americas from the 18th century onwards. She pointed to numerous historic sources that pay witness to the dangers and consequences of this agrarian myth, such as plantation advertisements showing settler colonial violence, and selling slaves as goods. Justifying the exploitation of land and non-white people in the name of capitalism, the Agrarian Ideal serves to establish a romanticized view of the Americas that reinforces white supremacy to this day. After her analyses, providentialism was discussed, as well as the persistence of imperialist political beliefs, such as enclosure policy.

DANIELA GOTTSCHLICH (Lüneburg) explored the ambivalent relationship of the right in regard to ecological issues. She highlighted two developments within the extreme right in Germany: While some deny the scientifically proven climate crisis, others reinscribe ecological and environmentalist themes in a neofascist narrative about local roots, conservative values and traditions, and „Heimatschutz.“ Gottschlich and the discussants agreed that resemanticizations of the term „Heimat“ or the iconic images of the human hand holding a seedling can also be observed at, and should be reclaimed for, the other end of the political spectrum – in ecological-liberal contexts and in the Christian discourse of international solidarity. Discussants pointed out the need to address rural topics (such as landgrabbing

and the failures of industrialized agriculture), preventing them from being an easy target for radical ideologies.

MICHAEL BUTTER (Tübingen) examined conspiracy theories, which rely on so-called experts who claim to deconstruct arguments of scientifically accepted experts. In a complex world, as issues become less self-explanatory, conspiracy theories become more convincing, as they offer to make sense of complicated structures and produce a sense of security that may be a response to the disenchantment of the world. In the following discussion, the term conspiracy „theory“ was debated, as it may suggest scientific value where there is none. This may be avoided by using the terms „narrative,“ „story,“ and „myth,“ and by referring to the distributors of such stories as conspiracy entrepreneurs and merchants of doubt.

In the final talk, JOSEPH USCINSKI (University of Miami) described conspiracy theories and the dimensionality of politics. In contemporary US politics, a toxic political rhetoric exists that feeds off of misinformation and allows for conspiracy narratives to spread. In analyzing why politicians express populist, conspiratorial, and Manichean sentiments and why these sentiments have become so prominent in elite political discourse since 2015, Uscinski pointed to the kinds of conspiracy stories that typically arise in the partisan tribalism of the US. He further stressed that many „regular folks“ are rather uninterested, uninformed, ideologically innocent. They see politics not as a battle against opposing political elites, but against elites at large. Uscinski's theory of two-dimensional politics suggests that traditional left-right identities are unrelated to most conspiracy beliefs, whereas they are more prone to anti-establishment sentiments with deep roots in US political discourse.

In the closing discussion, Gesa Mackenthun evaluated the symposium's theme „subversive semantics“ as productive, also in light of the graduate school's research focus on conflicts over interpretation, which are always conflicts about meaning and language. While it is important to theorize rhetoric and performance along the political spectrum, emotionalizing narratives and gestures need spe-

cial attention as their effect on an increasingly divisive public sphere is not to be underestimated. For academic research it remains important to name problems, historicize them, analyze their genealogies, and assess the underlying conceptions of history and (human) nature, as well as to intervene in attacks on democracy and continue sociological and discourse analyses. The task of research in tackling these problems must be the search for a language that is aware of itself and the implications of its metaphors, narratives, images, and signs.

Conference overview:

Aram Ziai (Kassel): Legitimizing Colonial Rule in the 21st Century. The AfD and the Politics of Remembrance

Manuela Caiani (Florence): The Radical Right, the Internet and European Democracy

Christine Unrau (Duisburg): Time for Outrage? Globalization and the Emergence of Indignation as a Political Emotion

Susanne Lachenicht (Bayreuth): Contested Nationhood in the Americas

Hans-Jürgen Puhle (Frankfurt am Main): Populisms, Populist Democracy, and the Shifting of Meanings: Subverting – Disfiguring – Transforming

Volker Weiß (Hamburg): Verwandlungskünstler. Die semantischen Strategien der Neuen Rechten

Eiko Grimberg (Berlin/Leipzig): Biographie der Zeichen

Whitney Phillips (Syracuse): The Adaptive Consequences of Ecological Metaphors: New Ways of Talking about Mis- and Disinformation

Emma Hart (St. Andrews): Americans Construct the Urban-Rural Divide: Refracting Discourses of Rural Virtue through a Settler Colonial Past

Daniela Gottschlich (Lüneburg): Rechte Landnahme

Michael Butter (Tübingen): Conspiracy Theories as Counter-Narratives

Joseph Uscinski (Miami): Conspiracy Theories and the Dimensionality of Politics

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