

LANGUAGE OF DESTRUCTION

MODERN PROPAGANDA & SEMIOTIC ETHICS

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— ABSTRACT —

Language has always played a major role in both the spreading of totalitarian *ideology*, according to many historians who have studied totalitarian regimes. However, language might play an even more significant role *now* than it did in the times which we usually connote to totalitarian (fascist) propaganda, such as the first half of the 20th-century. One can observe that modern discussions surrounding harmful, propagandistic stereotypes often carry with them a connotative suggestion of visual category. However, in this paper, I attempt to shine light on linguistic forms of modern propaganda in the form of *symbols*, analysing when we could reasonably call a linguistic *symbol* ‘propagandistic’ and what primary characteristics such *symbols* might share with each other and (visual) propagandistic *icons*. Throughout this paper, I assume an Arendtian understanding of ‘*ideology*’ and ‘*common sense*’, as well as analyse her notion of ‘*historical crisis*’ to argue for the contemporary necessity for a novel, simple framework to actively recognise dangerously reductive language as propagandistic. In addition to formulating a potential candidate for such a framework, I analyse what some of the potential dangers might be of the absence of culturally recognising such language for what it is. I argue that obliviousness to such language might exacerbate political rifts by hampering our ability for communication through the alteration of Arendtian *common sense*, as well as potentially influence the ways in which we culturally remember.

— INTRODUCTION —

If one were to look back on the last five decades of Western-European and North-American history, what would they denote as the most important cultural-historical shifts of those times? Perhaps that of rising awareness regarding either the impending climate crisis or corporate-induced economic injustices. These could both be categorised as revolutionary in their own right, but they are in no way—of course—the only major shifts in socio-economic awareness. Underlying the modern movements that both of these insights have birthed is the primary regard for the wellbeing of all peoples as equal. As such, perhaps even more poignant and illustrative of the last decades of (though I detest the term) 'Western' cultural history might be the incredibly broad increase of insight into the inner-workings of social inequalities and the extensive deconstruction of systematic prejudice and discrimination that it has wrought.

I label this shift in social awareness as 'broad' because we can see it everywhere throughout the last half-century. Even more so, it seems to become increasingly difficult to denote a decade as 'the decade of social revolution x '—as would've been easier a century ago. For example, revolutionary gay-rights emancipation has increasingly ran parallel to that of the modern women's-rights movement, the black liberation movement, Native American restoration projects, and trans-rights initiatives—just to name a few of the most well-known ones. This, of course, talks to the *intersectional* nature of social change and the importance of both parallel activism and understanding *intersectionality* in combatting oppression, as previously detailed by many scholars.¹

Especially since the rise of the intersectional paradigm, it seems there has arrived an imminent acceleration in societal processes towards social equality. Simultaneously, however, a clear increase in counter-movements can

¹ See for example both a classic and more modern reading of *intersectional* theory:

- Kimberlé Crenshaw. *Intersectionality and identity politics: Learning from violence against women of color* (In Mary Lyndon Shanley & Uma Narayan, *Reconstructing Political Theory: Feminist Perspectives*, 1997), 178–193.
- Anna Carastathis & Myrto Tsilimpounidi. *Methodological Heteronormativity and the 'Refugee Crisis'* (*Feminist Media Studies*, 18.6, 2018), 1120-1123.

be seen as well. For example, many populist and far-right movements have been gaining in ground and numbers world-wide—recruiting and organising themselves largely online in similar online spaces as progressive activists.² Even more so, white supremacist resurgences, wildly differing in practical form, can be found in—for example: *i*) Sweden’s *Sverigedemokraterna* party (SD) and Austria’s *Freedom Party* (FPÖ), *ii*) throughout the United States as symbolised by the Charlottesville protests and counter-protests to the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement, and (perhaps most poignant) *iii*) the increasing threat of political neo-Nazi violence in Germany, for example.^{3 4}

In the first chapter of this paper, I will analyse how it is possible that such contradicting movements can simultaneously surge. What is important for now, however, is that one would hope that parallel to the increasing societal insight into social inequalities and oppression, policy-makers and modern political spheres would have become adept at recognising the patterns and techniques of violent ideological movements since the end of the 20th-century. However, I fear they might be far from it. The language and aesthetics used by many of these violent ideological movements have changed drastically from their 20th-century counterparts.⁵ Modern *cryptofascist* movements, many online, seem to continuously adapt by adopting symbols, tactics, and aesthetics used by progressives in a seeming attempt to not appear as radical as they are.⁶ Furthermore, a plethora of new, innovative ways have been found to garner support of violent ideological groups online, as well as possibly spread their ideas more subtly through the anonymity of the internet. The general collection of jargon and icons that these movements use is, of

² Imogen Richards, “A Philosophical and Historical Analysis of “Generation Identity”: Fascism, Online Media, and the European New Right,” *Terrorism and Political Violence* (2019), 16.

³ The North-American website ‘First Vigil’ by Emily Gorcenski scours public records for white supremacist and otherwise fascist individuals and projects, which can lead to some astonishing numbers. First Vigil. Homepage, www.first-vigil.com, (Retrieved November 1st, 2020).

⁴ Oltermann, Philip. The Guardian, “Germany slow to hear alarm bells in killing of Walter Lübcke,” (July 2nd, 2019), www.theguardian.com/world/2019/jul/02/germany-slow-to-hear-alarm-bells-in-killing-of-walter-lubcke, (Retrieved November 1st, 2020).

⁵ Gustav Westberg & Henning Årman. “Common Sense As Extremism: the Multi-Semiotics of Contemporary National Socialism,” *Critical Discourse Studies* 16:5 (2019), 564-565.

⁶ *ibid.*

course, always partly in flux. However, they have changed very drastically since the Second World War, while I fear collective understanding of them might have remained relatively the same.

However, I do not think it is correct to say that we are inept at properly recognising propaganda, for we have clearly become societally adept at recognising visual propaganda at the very least. Dangerous, traditional propagandistic tactics are generally barred from—or at least critically denounced in—modern political spheres in Western-Europe. Furthermore, many infamous ethnic caricatures and widespread violent ideological icons are often quickly recognised for what they are. Given these observations, I believe it might be not that we are inept at recognising propaganda, or that we're simply stuck seeing it through a 20th-century lens. Rather, what can be observed is that modern discussions surrounding harmful, propagandistic stereotypes generally carry with them a connotative suggestion of visual category—of iconography used for propagandistic ends. However, in this paper, I would specifically like to shine light on perhaps less generally recognised forms and explicit forms of propagandistic stereotyping—ones which simultaneously might be more subtly harmful. More specifically, I'll focus less on iconography and more on semi- and falsely-descriptive terminology as linguistic *symbols* which could (and do, I believe) serve similar purposes in furthering harmful propagandistic stereotypes. In order to recognise and reveal such language for what it is, I believe we need to look beyond propaganda as consisting of a collection of ethnic caricatures and nationalistic imagery, and towards a more complete view of modern propaganda.

Language has always played a major role in both the spreading of totalitarian ideology and control over the flow of political information, according to many semantic scholars and historians who have studied the history of totalitarian regimes.⁷ However, language might play an even more significant role *now* than it did in the times which we usually connote to

⁷ Natalia E.Gronskaya, Valery G.Zusman, and Tatiana S.Batishcheva. "Totalitarian Language: Reflections of Power (Russian, German, Italian Case Studies)" (In P.B. Helzel & A.J. Katolo, *Authority and Crisis of Powers*, 2012), 277-289.

totalitarian (fascist) propaganda, such as the first half of the 20th-century. We see that increasingly in the way neo-Nazi and *cryptofascist* movements proliferate themselves both in the online- and in the real world.⁸ Yet, while we have the findings of semantic scholars and historians on totalitarian ideology's broader linguistic tendencies, it seems we still lack a proper system of identifying linguistic propagandistic symbols that does not only function in historical retrospect, but can also be actively wielded by anyone (not just the academic) in their day-to-day lives. If we want to safeguard the 21st-century as being one of increasing social equality and intercultural understanding (and mitigate the rise of these violent ideologies), we cannot afford to not fully and exactly understand how these movements proliferate themselves through language and linguistic symbols. And to do that, we need a better way to identify dangerous linguistic symbols that can be adopted by—or lead to—totalitarian ideological thought.

As such, the research question of this paper is: *'when can terminology that reinforces harmful stereotypes reasonably be categorised as propagandistic?'*, which is inseparable to the question of *'what are some of the essential characteristics that linguistic propagandistic symbols share among each other and (subsequently) with propagandistic icons?'*—the answers to which will serve as the the foundation for a new framework I will formulate in favour of actively recognising such language as not dissimilar to iconographical propaganda. Finally, I will attempt to answer (as a secondary research question) the question of *'what are some of the potential dangers of not culturally denouncing/disallowing such terminology?'*. Obviously, I cannot give completely conclusive answers to these complex questions. Instead, my aim in this paper is mostly to formulate the foundation for a novel framework to recognise linguistic propagandistic *symbols* and link it to more 'traditional' views of propaganda as iconography—hopefully initiating further discussion and research into their cultural effects and harm—as well embed it into a reading of Hannah Arendt's writings on *ideology*, *common sense*, and her notion of so-called *'historical crisis'*.

⁸ Richards, *A Philosophical and Historical Analysis of "Generation Identity"*, 16.

I will structure my arguments as follows (building on a previous paper by the name of ‘*Language & (White-)Supremacy*’):

Firstly, I argue that we find ourselves in a historically-unique multitude of what Hannah Arendt called ‘*historical crises*’, culturally unrestful periods of time where previously *common sense* prejudices begin to crumble as they appear to no longer be reasonably reliable in their use.⁹ I argue that during such times (following Arendt’s reasoning), we should be increasingly wary of the rise of totalitarian *ideological* movements. Secondly, believing that we need to shift our focus regarding propaganda to the realm of language, I argue that we should develop a better understanding of the ways in which language can also be a potential vessel for violent *ideological* propaganda—specifically in the form of what I will call ‘*destructive symbols*’. In this paper, I will formulate a novel framework for recognising such linguistic *symbols* and show how these *symbols* are both similar to- and different from traditional, visual propagandistic *icons*. I will do these things by building on three frameworks throughout this paper, namely: *i)* Hannah Arendt’s understanding of *historical crises*, *common sense*, and *ideology*, *ii)* Roger Griffin’s understanding of fascism as ‘*palingenetic ultranationalism*’, and *iii)* Charles Sanders Peirce’s framework of *semiotics*, only in as far as it is needed for understanding the specifics of both ‘*icons*’ and ‘*symbols*’ as subdivisions of ‘*signs*’.

In chapter 1, titled ‘*Historical Crisis: Action*’, to illustrate the need for a such a novel framework, I will detail Arendt’s framework theory regarding *historical crises* (§1 & §2) and argue that the term is even more relevant now than during the time that Arendt was alive—as I contend that we currently find ourselves in at least four parallel *historical crises*. Here, I also analyse modern examples of such crises and their countermovements. In chapter 2, titled ‘*Historical Crisis: Reaction*’, I will detail Arendt’s particular view of *ideology* (§1) to further back my previous claim of urgency and analyse the countermovements detailed in chapter 1. Here, I will also specify my focus by detailing Griffin’s understanding of *fascism* as ‘*Palingenetic Ultranationalism*’ and analyse the inner-workings of totalitarian

⁹Jonathan P. Schwartz. “Political Judgment Confronts Ideology: Hannah Arendt’s Contribution,” *Polity* 50:3 (2018), 495.

propaganda and the totalitarian's need to combat nuanced understandings of 'us' and 'them' (§2 & 3). In chapter 3, titled '*Semiotics of Propaganda*', I will briefly detail in what ways the internet has drastically changed the game regarding the proliferation of propaganda (§1). Following this, I will argue that the foundation for our novel framework for recognising linguistic propaganda (and answering my main two research questions) should lie on propaganda's potential to destroy one's capability for so-called '*representative thought*' and manipulate collective *common sense*—in accordance with Arendt's writings (§2). Here, I will coin the term '*destructive signs*' to denote the resulting *icons* and *symbols* of both these branches of propaganda—in an attempt to build towards a more complete modern view of what propaganda encompasses. Finally, I will detail here my view that the power of normalisation of propagandistic symbols should not be seen as psychological in nature, but as a cultural phenomenon (in Arendtian terms) that is more likely to occur during *historical crisis* and to which particular demographics are more receptive (§3). In chapter 4, titled '*Defining Destruction*', I will build the new framework that includes linguistic propagandistic symbols by defining what exactly is (and what isn't) a *destructive sign*, arguing that they generally have three essential characteristics: *i*) an element of being primarily *affective*, *ii*) a *reductive* element regarding actual lived-experiences, and *iii*) a *divisive* element regarding groups (§1). Here, I will also semiotically analyse a list of modern examples (§1 & 2). Finally, in chapter 5 titled '*Destruction & Memory*', I will detail my thesis that what a repeated communal usage of such *destructive signs* wreaks (in individuals receptive to them) might not simply be a blindness to certain nuance, but (in large enough quantities) the potential for deconstructing societal '*shared memory*' as defined by Avishai Margalit, through *ideology's* inherent '*tyranny of logicity*' (§1-3). Here, I will ruminate on the potential effects that certain specific *destructive signs* could have if left unchecked and unrecognised societally—hopefully proving the necessity of the novel framework in combatting them and answering my final research question.

To be clear, the main research goal of this paper is to formulate and construct a framework for recognising propagandistic language not only retro-

spectively, but continually and pragmatically. I will formulate this framework with policy-makers, organisations, and governmental institutions in mind specifically, in the hope that it can serve a pragmatic purpose in organisational policy. As such, for example, when I refer to a 'we' or 'our' regarding understanding of modern propaganda, I will be referring to policy-makers within political and organisational spheres from a Western-European and Northern-American lens and scope specifically.

— 1. HISTORICAL CRISIS: ACTION —

In this chapter, I will detail the main theoretical writings I base my arguments (regarding propagandistic language) on further into this paper—namely, the notion of ‘*historical crisis*’ as theorised by Hannah Arendt in ‘*Between Past and Future*’. In this chapter, I will underline the modern importance of this notion by giving modern examples to illustrate its relevance.



§1.1 Historical Crises & Ideology

Returning to the topic of parallel cultural movements discussed earlier, the question arises how it can be that both the largely *intersectional* emancipation-movements supporting the dismantling of prejudice, as well as violent ideological movements opposing them seem to surge in recent times? Though it might seem contradictory, it might not be a discrepancy of sorts at all, according to Hannah Arendt and her understanding of the rise of violent ideologies—an understanding I’d argue is more vital to echo now than ever before. In fact, Arendt argues that it is *exactly* in times of structural social emancipation that such ideologies show their faces more clearly than before.

In ‘*Between Past and Future*’, Arendt detailed the process of how *common sense* prejudices can—slowly and gradually—be dismantled in a society.¹⁰ Arendt refers to prejudices as *common sense* and vice versa. Though this may sound perplexing, it is meant more or less in a positive hermeneutic sense.¹¹ What is meant by this is that all judgements spring forth, as it were, from prejudices, and return to them reflectively and reflexively when a considered judgment is formed—leaving the possibility for reconsideration of prejudice.¹²

¹⁰ Hannah Arendt. “The Crisis in Culture: Its Social and Its Political Significance,” In *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (London: Penguin Books, 2006), 194–222.

¹¹ Hannah Arendt, ed. Jerome Kohn, *The Promise of Politics* (London: Schocken Books, 2005), 17.

¹² Schwartz. *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 495-496.

Prejudices then, as culturally encoded ideas, are an essential ‘background’ feature to all human interaction, relating to what Arendt calls ‘*the web of relations*’ as one half of the total *common world*.¹³ ¹⁴ The web of human relations refers here to all sorts of subjective senses, such as: traditions, cultural meanings and aspirations, as well as cultural (moral) intuitions—prejudice. It serves as a sort of an evaluative background to human relations, a backdrop upon which all of society’s relationships are to make sense.¹⁵ Collective prejudices, in this view, are not something thrown off as easily as an individual might through reflective hermeneutics. It is only through a process of long and arduous societal habituation of sorts that prejudices are dismantled societally. This process starts when such prejudices appear to no longer be reasonably reliable in their use—causing their *common sense* usage to be questioned and their assumed usefulness to gradually crumble.¹⁶ The tenuous period of dismantling these prejudices that follows, she calls ‘*historical crisis*’.¹⁷ It is a term not often echoed in her work or that of her analysts, but I believe it to be vital in understanding not only our history with totalitarianism and violent ideology, but especially current-day struggles with totalitarian language and our political future. As such, it is my focus here.

Arendt argued that times marked by such moral intuitive change—and habituation regarding the gradual abandonment of a specific prejudice—are periods of time where society is vulnerable to the proliferation of totalitarian thought.¹⁸ Arendt argues that during times of *historical crisis*, instead of abandoning the prejudices culturally being dismantled and the language connected to them, there will always arise groups that rigidify their belief in

¹³ Schwartz. *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 498.

¹⁴ The other half she defines at ‘*human artifice*’, by which is meant everything that grants durability to culture—such as laws, art and literature, technology, historical documents, narratives, et cetera. Hannah Arendt. “Understanding and Politics,” *Partisan Review* 20:4 (1954), 311-318.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ Schwartz. *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 495.

¹⁷ *idem.*, 496.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

the defunct prejudices in question.¹⁹ By grasping on more tightly than before, these groups attribute to these prejudices a status of universal validity and objectivity that they never before possessed in the positive hermeneutic sense. In this way, their societal deconstruction stagnates. Instead, as a result, the prejudice in question is ‘*ossified*’ into a pathological, coercive pseudo-theory that masquerades as a system of supra-objective truth to explain a sweeping range of phenomena circularly in terms of its own framework.²⁰ In this way, the prejudice—now embedded in the *ideology*’s framework—is presented as a ‘*supersense*’ to replace the previously held *common sense* prejudice.²¹ In this way, both the dismantling of prejudice and the *ossification* of it are two parts of the same coin during periods of such *historical crisis*—two parts of a single process.

I believe the process of social emancipation she described can be seen clearly regarding the modern examples discussed earlier. Never before has activism intersected so much as today. One can find themselves situated in times where *common sense* prejudices regarding not sexuality, women, race, and gender (as well as its societally ascribed norms) are consistently being challenged in many parts of the world. Never before have so many emancipation-movements ran parallel to each other as before. As a part of these cultural movements, there are a great number of societal *common sense* prejudices being dismantled today. As such, while we find ourselves in multiple, simultaneous *historical crises*—according to Arendt’s view—it should come as no surprise that violent ideological movements increasingly show their faces worldwide. Though I believe this is a crucial understanding of modern ‘culture wars’ (as they are often dubbed in online spaces), that insight itself does not provide us with an answer to the plight of modern neo-Nazi, *alt-right*, and *cryptofascist* movements—or that of illiberal thought more generally.

In the next paragraph, I will analyse modern examples of these culture-shifts—detailing LGBT+-history as well as analysing one of its illiberal counter-

¹⁹ Schwartz. *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 495.

²⁰ *idem.*, 493-495.

²¹ *idem.*, 494.

movements to see whether we could call it *ideological* under Arendt's view, as well as argue that we can reasonably say that 2020 is marked by at least four distinct parallel *historical crises*.



§1.2 A Modern Example

For now, I think it might be beneficial to our framework if we accompany Arendt's understanding of *historical crises* with examples of it in the real world beyond those of the first half of the 20th-century she herself gives of world war times. Beyond it, one of the best of many examples of *historical crisis* I'd argue there is, is that of the tense period of time that started following the famous Stonewall riots of 1969 in Manhattan, New York City. A *historical crisis* in Arendt's terms which we still might not have passed, even.

One could say that one revolutionary shift that the '70s brought to United States (as one of many countries) was a cultural shift in the use of language surrounding certain marginalised groups, such as the LGBTQ-community.²² Many old, reductive, or even deceptive terms were challenged and new, more representative ones popularised—parallel to the rise of *some* (which I already use gratuitously seeing actual historical recountings) increase in goodwill against queer people. An example of such attempts at linguistic change is the word *homophile*, which was wielded by the so-called 'homophile-movement' in an attempt to popularise the term over the traditionally used 'homosexual'—a term which largely carried connotations of illness and disease due to its negatively-laden clinical provenance.²³ ²⁴ Many such older, increasingly rejected terms possessed very little explanatory power of the

²² In modern times, the abbreviation 'LGBTQ(IA+)' is increasingly being substituted by the term 'queer', which is a reclaimed word that was historically used as a derogatory term. There is still some debate as to the institutionalised usage of the word as an umbrella-term, but I will use it in this paper as a synonym for 'LGBTQIA+'.

²³ Nicholas C. Edsall, *Toward Stonewall: Homosexuality and Society in the Modern Western World* (Virginia: University of Virginia Press, 2003), 241-249.

²⁴ *idem.*, 269, 273, 284-290.

actual experiences of queer individuals and groups. As another example, the word ‘*gay*’ was—and still is in part—associated largely with homosexual, ‘*high-camp*’ effeminate males. Common connotations to the word were ones such as of individuals being ‘isolated’, ‘deviant’, and ‘ill-minded’. Yet, prior to the period of time following the foundation of the (initially-named) LGBT-movement, there were not many terms available that *did* carry accurate explanative value in it—let alone popularised terms. I believe this plight for an increase in representational language can be seen as the start of the slow-churning deconstruction of *common sense* prejudice regarding queer people.²⁵

In the late-’60s, the queer community was able to meet each other unlike before. During this time-period in New York, specifically—marked by crack-down policies against gay bars and other such queer-communal gatherings—frustration regarding *common sense* prejudice eventually culminated into the historic stance made against crackdowns during the *Stonewall Inn riots* of 1969, Manhattan.²⁶ These explosive riots and their antecedents, setting in motion a lengthy period of linguistic *unrest* and flux that we are still experiencing today, resonates deeply with what Hannah Arendt calls ‘*historical crisis*’.²⁷ After all, the struggle for representation—both in language and in visual media—only accelerated greatly following the Stonewall riots. Its legacy is the greatly representative and inclusive language that the queer community now has to describe itself and their extremely diverse set of (marginalised) experiences. This representation, as a main focus of many emancipatory organisations—such as TNN (Transgender Network Netherlands) and the COC in the Netherlands, or the GLAAD in the U.S., for example—has greatly promoted the general acceptance and deconstruction of negative *common sense* prejudices regarding queer identities and lives.

²⁵ I don’t regard this as a controversial statement whatsoever seeing the amount of institutionalisation and broadness of far-reaching prejudice that was held against queer people. It is good to remind oneself the history that the queer community has with widely being labelled sexual deviants, ill-minded, untrustworthy, or even child predators (the latter largely in the case of transgender people).

²⁶ Edsall, *Toward Stonewall*, 332-333.

²⁷ The antecedents to Stonewall were extremely multifaceted, seeing the complex nature of emancipating such a inherently diverse collective at once.

Simultaneously, many of these movements still need to be continuously vigilant for anti-movements, such as for example conservative, ‘trans-exclusionary radical feminists’ (TERFs). As of late-2020, its most recent famous backer is the writer J.K. Rowling. As a transgender woman myself actively working for- and with the previously mentioned Dutch organisations, I can say that the small group of (very vocal and most-often also religious) feminists who echo TERF-arguments have imprinted upon me a creeping feeling that theirs is a position bordering *ideological* zeal. If true, it might serve as a good modern example to underscore our argument in the previous chapter. Luckily, there is a clear argument that can be made to say that this (largely North-American) counter-movement is indeed one which harbours *ossified common sense* prejudice under Arendt’s view.

The main argument for this statement is the observation that feminists who ascribe to TERF-beliefs generally tend to circularly—and at times relentlessly—depict transgender women as dangerous to public safety and the proudly-gotten rights of cisgender women.²⁸ This zeal seems to largely be based around a profound anger within the TERF-movement regarding the ‘toilet-myth’: the idea that allowing trans women specifically (who are implied to be confused, deviant, ill-minded *men*) into women’s restrooms will cause rapes and other such violations and crimes against cisgender women.²⁹ These notions have been debunked an astounding amount of times by emancipatory movements and scholars alike, but it does not seem to effectively lessen conservative TERF-movements’ vitriol and zeal in their cause.³⁰ Regardless of research, the movement’s logicity stays stagnant and firmly as: ‘inclusivity shown towards transgender women is a danger to cisgender women’s hard-earned right’.³¹ This fits the bill of Arendt’s understanding of *ossified*

²⁸ Cisgender is the antonym of transgender; so simply meaning ‘not-transgender’.

²⁹ Aleardo Zanghellini, “Philosophical Problems with the Gender-Critical Feminist Argument against Trans Inclusion,” *Sage Open* 10:2 (2020), 5.

³⁰ Gay & Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation (GLAAD), “Debunking the 'Bathroom Bill' Myth – Accurate Reporting on LGBT Nondiscrimination: A Guide for Journalists” (April, 2017), <https://www.glaad.org/publications/debunking-the-bathroom-bill-myth>, (Retrieved November 1st, 2020).

³¹ Zanghellini, *Philosophical Problems with the Gender-Critical Feminist Argument against Trans Inclusion*, 1, 5-9.

prejudice, as I will detail further in a bit. For now, notice the conservative TERF-movements characterisation of transgender people: ‘deviant’, ‘confused’, ‘ill-minded’, ‘criminal’.³² These match the largely disseminated prejudice also found surrounding queer people in general throughout the last century. All four of these accusations were, for example, also historically levelled against lesbians in an attempt to keep them from cisgender women’s locker rooms and bathrooms in the ‘90s.^{33 34}

Given these near-exact resemblances and the unflinchingness of the movement in the face of research pointing towards the untenability of their beliefs, I’d argue the TERF-movement is one which can generally be understood as *ossified* prejudice like its predecessors aimed against lesbian- and gay people. A last observation that might drive us to view the TERF-movement as holding *ossified* prejudice under Arendt’s view is their common usage of seemingly intentionally hurtful terminology. With terms such as the intentionally misgendering ‘trans-identifying male’ (for signifying a transgender woman), as well as a seeming unwillingness to take transgender people and their experiences seriously from the get-go, the demonisation and unreconcilable ‘othering’ of transgender people by the movement seems to fit the bill for *ossified* prejudice detailed earlier in this chapter.³⁵

However, to fully call the TERF-movement *ideological* under Arendt’s view might yet be mistaken, for Arendt aimed at totalitarian thought such as *fascism* specifically. Regardless of the harassment and political violence thrown at transgender people by the TERF-movement, there is still a discrepancy between it and a *fascist* movement. Schwartz notes so as well:

“... [under Arendt’s view] *illiberal political judgments such as racism, sexism, anti-LGBT attitudes, or religious intolerance would not*

³² Zanghellini, *Philosophical Problems with the Gender-Critical Feminist Argument against Trans Inclusion*, 8-9.

³³ C. Fusco. “Lesbians and Locker Rooms: Challenging Lesbophobia,” *Canadian Woman Studies* 15:4 (1995), 67–70.

³⁴ *ibid.*

³⁵ Zanghellini, *Philosophical Problems with the Gender-Critical Feminist Argument against Trans Inclusion*, 7.

*automatically be viewed as ideologies, but rather as political judgments of some sort. This is a clear departure from traditional treatments of ideology, which would typically classify such positions directly as ideologies and instances of false consciousness. Arendt, by contrast, saw such political views as providing fertile ground for potential ideological systems, but not unambiguously as ideologies themselves.”*³⁶

Under this nuanced view, it seems the TERF-movement might still be categorised as holding *ossified* prejudice, yet not of being necessarily *ideological* (yet). What we can say about it with certainty is that, under Arendt’s view, it has at least created a fertile breeding ground for itself and others to cultivate totalitarian, *ideological* thought—sprouting initially from a shared hatred against transgender people. Regardless, it is clear from the previous analysis that we yet need a better understanding of what Arendt means *exactly* by *ideological* thought before we can aim effectively at its modern semiotics and how to recognise it. I will further reach for such understanding in the next chapter of this paper.

To conclude this first chapter through summary, we seem to be able to denote a couple of things from the previous:

Firstly, it seems reasonable to say that the time following the historic *volta* marked by the Stonewall riots of 1969 can be classified as a period of *historic crisis*, marked by the cultural dissemination of prejudice towards queer people.

Secondly, by observing both the fact that the queer (or LGBTQIA+) movement is not a monolith (but an umbrella movement), as well as the fact that trans-emancipation seems to still receive the same *ossified* prejudicial aggression as lesbian or gay people about fifty years ago, we can denote that this period of *historical crisis* is also not singular in essence. What I mean by that is that it seems more reasonable to treat this period of time as consisting of multiple parallel *historical crises*, instead of bundling all queer-emancipation

³⁶ Schwartz. *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 510.

together—which does not resonate with actual goings-on. Instead, even if we remain conservative by not counting every identity’s separate emancipation as incurring *historical crisis*, it might be more accurate to say that the last half-century (since 1969 at the latest) has been marked by two of such crises: **i)** a *historical crisis* regarding prejudice against marginalised *sexual identities* (gay, lesbian, asexual, et cetera), and **ii)** a *historical crisis* regarding prejudice against marginalised *gender identities* (transgender, non-binary, genderqueer, et cetera).

Thirdly, by marking these periods as *historical crises*, one seems to be forced to admit the fact that ours is a time of *at least* four parallel-running *historical crises*, for there are at least two other emancipation movements that can't be ignored: **i)** the black-emancipation movement (Black Lives Matter protests and continued dissemination of institutionalised racism), and **ii)** the third-wave movement (regarding the continued dissemination of institutionalised sexism). As such, having shown the existence of these parallel crises, it is important for us to focus on vigilance against *ideological* counter-movements and totalitarian language, according to Arendt. However, before researching specifics of modern propagandistic language and attempting to construct a usable framework for its recognition in modern times, we must demarcate and more properly understand the inner working of—and what constitutes—*ideology*. For if we do not understand exactly how language can be utilised to further *ideological* beliefs, we cannot delineate what specific language might serve such a propagandistic purpose (and which might not); undermining the pragmatic use of our framework.

— 2. HISTORICAL CRISIS: REACTION —



§2.1 Arendt's View of Ideology

Building on our brief analysis of the TERF-movement as harbouring *ossified* prejudice, I believe it is in order to briefly further examine what is meant by Arendt when she writes ‘*ideology*’ and such prejudice being a ‘*supersense*’. Arendt seemed to hold a very particular view of *ideology* which I think requires further detailing before jumping into the main focal points of this paper. For example, partial to its essence is the idea that according to Schwartz: “*she believed that the failure to recognize the distinctive validity of political opinion leads either to the nihilistic belief that all opinions are equality arbitrary, or into dangerous ideological fanaticism*”.³⁷ We’ve already partially answered the given research questions of this paragraph in our detailing of her notion of *historical crisis*, of course—namely that *ideology* springs from *ossified common sense* (prejudice). However, I want to go a little more into detail so that no false claims within my argumentation can remain of what movements can be categorised as such. For that categorisation itself might hold dangerous power on its own. In this paragraph, I will mostly refer to Schwartz’ reading of Arendt, as it is an astounding Ariadne’s thread of sorts through Arendt’s—otherwise at times scattered—writings. Arendt’s work focussed mostly on white supremacy and Nazi fascist totalitarianism she witnessed during her life. However, her ideas and theory can be seen to in no way be limited to that time-period—as we’ve seen with our examination of the TERF-movement (or modern neo-Nazism for that matter).

There are a number of characteristics that all ideological thought has in common, according to Arendt: **i)** *ossification*, **ii)** *reification* into a *supersense*, and **iii)** a so-called *tyranny of logicity*.

³⁷ Schwartz. *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 497.

The first of these we have discussed prior to this paragraph. All *ideologies*, according to Arendt, were once *common sense* prejudices (in the positive hermeneutic sense) that have been *ossified* by desperate clinging on to prejudice that is being societally dismantled.³⁸ In this sense, they are essentially related. The relationship between prejudices serving as our background of human interaction in the *web of relations* and the ossification of it into *ideological* thought seems a natural occurrence, according to Arendt.³⁹

The next characteristic is perhaps less so a naturally occurring phenomenon, and more so one prone to occur when individuals with such *ossified* prejudice organise. The *reification* of such prejudice into something more tangible and real than simply a cultural background intuition meant to be reflected upon seems to be described by Arendt as the second step of the forming of *ideological* thought.⁴⁰ Through its *reification*, often simultaneously strengthening the ‘othering’ effect that a prejudice might harbour against marginalised groups, steps are made towards ascribing the prejudice both universal validity and objective truth-value.⁴¹ In this way, prejudice and political opinion are no longer viewed as such by its holder. Rather, they have become akin to fundamentalist belief. It seems that this ‘step’ is where the current TERF-movement discussed earlier is at as an illiberal political movement, according to Schwartz’ reading of Arendt.⁴² Regarding the process of transformation of such an illiberal movement towards *ideology*, he says that: “*Since virtually all illiberal political stances have at their foundations antiquated or tendentious epistemic beliefs, it is difficult to see how they could survive the crucible of pluralistic deliberation without turning themselves into ideologies in order to discount opposing factual evidence simply in principle*”.⁴³

³⁸ Schwartz. *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 496.

³⁹ *ibid.*

⁴⁰ *idem.*, 506.

⁴¹ *idem.*, 496-497, 506-507.

⁴² *idem.*, 510-511.

⁴³ *ibid.*

This half-way point which the TERF-movement finds itself in illustrates the third and final characteristic (or step) of *ideological* thought, according to Arendt's view. When the *ossified* prejudice is attributed universal validity and objective truth, it seems to simultaneously be granted a highly coercive power; a *force majeure* of sorts. Though her writing on this particular force as a step in *ideology*-formation is sparse, we can read in her '*Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government*':

*"The preparation of victims and executioners [...] is not the ideology itself—racism or dialectical materialism—but its inherent logicity. [...] Totalitarian rulers rely on the compulsion with which we can compel ourselves [...] The tyranny of logicity begins with the mind's submission to logic as a never-ending process, on which man relies in order to engender his thoughts. By this submission, he surrenders his inner freedom as he surrenders his freedom of movement when he bows down to an outward tyranny."*⁴⁴

To summarise: what Arendt is implying is that this device of *ideological* thought—its inherent '*logicity*'—which seems to be implied to underpin all thought processes of *ideological* origin, gains its power from the fact that humans seem to harbour an intuitive and deathly "*fear of contradicting ourselves*".⁴⁵ What is meant by the *tyranny of logicity*, then, is the *force majeure* that ideological thought has over its believers to follow its axioms as universally true and always inherently logical to act upon. If the universally true *supersense* is not acted upon, its believer risks contradiction and internal crisis. This last step concludes our understanding of Arendt's view of *ideology*.

⁴⁴ Hannah Arendt, "Ideology and Terror: A Novel Form of Government," *The Review of Politics* 15:3 (1953), 472-473.

⁴⁵ *idem.*, 473.



§2.2 *Palingenetic Ultrationalism*

Before moving on the next chapter of this paper, the last important theoretical detailing that needs to be done is that of our specific focus of *ideology* in this paper—for I do not intend to carry the examination of TERF-beliefs with me throughout my argumentation of propagandistic *icons* and *symbols*. Doing so would be disingenuous, I'd argue—both because and regardless of my personal experiential knowledge regarding the subject. There is, obviously, a much greater importance in discussing the rise of so-called *identitarianism*, neo-Nazism, the *alt-right*, and *cryptofascism* as actual movements of the 21st-century. As an *ideological* movement with both a long history and a pertinent *ossified* aggression to all four of the previously detailed *historical crises* of our time (black-, women's, sexual identity-, and gender identity emancipation), it is the only reasonable candidate among *ideologies* to focus upon, I contend. That is without even touching the academic observations that queer-phobia might, in fact, stem in part from the history of eugenics.⁴⁶

What exactly do I mean by '*fascism*'? Defining fascism is difficult because it may assume a variety of subtly different forms and is not necessarily limited (though relatively very prominent) to white, European cultures. One also needs to be very careful in defining it, because the label itself holds great power and mischaracterisation of a movement as being *fascist* could prove immensely harmful. On the other hand, there are so many synonymical neo-Nazi and extreme-right fascist movements today that we would intuitively label as fascist, but struggle at times in doing so explicitly.

In this paragraph, I will attempt to briefly summarise what I claim to be the most explicit and carefully-erected definition of the broader, underlying form of white *fascist ideology*. Namely, '*palingenetic ultra-nationalism*' as a

⁴⁶ I can, however, recommend Siobhan Somerville's '*Queering the Color Line*': Siobhan B Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000).

theoretical understanding of white fascism as theorised by Roger Griffin. It is extremely concise and specific, yet only speaks to the absolutely essential features underlying fascist movements.

In Griffin's view, *ultranationalistic* means that fascism holds national identity—in contrast to identities revolving one's profession, family status, gender, sex, hobbies, et cetera—to be of utmost importance to one's identity.⁴⁷ Most often, this results in viewing one's nationality as the hallmark identity-characteristic of a person, forcing a reduction of any other identity-characteristic.⁴⁸ The result is that one *is* their nationality.

Next, by *palingenetic* is meant that *fascism* necessarily revolves around mythological notions; specifically ones of rebirth and believing a narrowly defined people to have both waned but be destined to 'rise again'.⁴⁹ In this way, two things are achieved: **i**) through the mythological nature of its *narrative*, it is *reified* (as described in the previous paragraph) and transformed into a *supersense*, and **ii**) through this dichotomisation of 'us' and 'not-us' (or the 'other'), a hero and a villain are constructed as part of the *supersense*. In her analysis of historic (*fascist*) totalitarian regimes, Natalia Gronskaya articulates that the combination of these two grants *fascism* its *teleological view*: the promise of a better, brighter future that serves as the primary driving force of the *ideology's* believers.⁵⁰ In order for this teleological view, *fascism* seems to almost necessarily require a constructed villain as a scapegoat. In fact, Gronskaya's research into similarities of (*fascist*) totalitarian regimes reveals as much. Gronskaya, while analysing such regimes, concluded that among the most essential comparative elements was always: "*polarisation, creating the image of 'the enemy'*", and "*exaltation of 'own victories and accomplishments'*".⁵¹ This in particular

⁴⁷ Roger Griffin. *The Nature of Fascism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2015), 37.

⁴⁸ *ibid.*

⁴⁹ *idem.*, 32, 35.

⁵⁰ Gronskaya et al., *Totalitarian Language*, 279.

⁵¹ *idem.*, 288.

will be of great import to the construction of my framework for recognising modern propagandistic language later in this paper.

There is one concern that needs to be addressed in our categorisation of *fascism* as specific *ideology*, namely the multitudes of (slightly) differing genealogical groups (albeit with similar ideals, ideas, and bonds). As mentioned before, active neo-*fascist* groups include a plethora of different self-proclaimed titles for their movement, such as: the *alt-right*, ‘traditional’ *neo-Nazi*’s, *identitarians*, and *cryptofascists*. I will be rather blunt in my theoretical treatment of their differences throughout the rest of this paper: I will treat and call these as they are, namely different shades of *fascism*. In the same way as we would not refuse to call a poplar a tree, I see little reason to withhold categorisation as such regarding fascist sub-movements. I feel confident in this decision, because *plenty* of research and semantic dissemination has already been done beforehand by many before me, such as Wodak and Westerberg. According to Westerberg, building upon Wodak’s research, “*these different groups are not isolated satellites but overlap ideologically and discursively in different ways*”.⁵² An observation could be made (though I do not propagate to make it here) that these ‘different’ groups seem to thrive in the chaos their semantics sow among analysts. However, all four of these *ideological* movements fall under Griffin’s definition of *fascism*, and as such I will categorise them so.

The last thing that remains for us to do before jumping into the construction of our framework or recognising modern propagandistic language, is a brief analysis of how certain words and *icons* can become propagandistic *signs* potentially furthering *ideological* beliefs. This, I will do in the next paragraph of this chapter.

⁵² Westerberg, *Common sense as extremism*, 564.



§2.3 Fascism & Propaganda

Summarising Griffin's view results in three 'tenets' of fascistic belief: **i)** the nation is of paramount importance, **ii)** the people ruling it should be a narrowly-defined 'us', and **iii)** they should rule simply because it is their destiny. This last tenet marks the mythological (essential) element of *fascist* belief. *Fascism* rejects all reasonable explanation of *why* the 'us' has this divine right.⁵³ They simply just do—which resonates with Arendt's view of *ideology* as essentially a *supersense*. Combatting these tenets can, as such, prove cumbersome as they're based primarily on a mythological sense of belonging, instead of on reasoned argumentation.

This can explain in part why *fascist* regimes have historically relied greatly on propaganda. After all, propaganda concerns affective *signs*, not reasoned arguments. It aims at cherished, affective cultural elements, which it then connects to *fascist* belief in an attempt to have affect overpower critical thinking. In this way, for example, the perception of one's national identity can be *reduced* to affective symbols, as the propagandistic imagery actively drowns out a more nuanced understanding of what national identity means to that person—and who that national identity includes (and excludes). *Fascism* not only requires an 'us', in opposition to an 'other', but also a distinct hatred for this 'other'. This hatred is evoked through charged, negative *symbols* that depict the 'other' as being degenerate, dangerous, untrustworthy, et cetera. In such fashion, for example, Nazi caricaturisation of black and Jewish people also served primarily to evoke fear hatred of them. However, this 'other' can change under the given culture in which the *ideology* is present, simply because the *fascist's* case against this 'other' is not of reasoned argument.⁵⁴ Rather, it is one of requirement, dealing in affect. *Fascism* simply *needs* an enemy as its urgency-factor—a scapegoat—for its worldview to make sense. It matters not if this 'other' is chosen on the basis of sexuality, race, gender, or otherwise.

⁵³ This is congruent with Arendt's notion of ideology as a *supersense*.

⁵⁴ Schwartz, *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 506.

The only thing that matters in this choice is that the marginalised group that can be categorised as not ‘us’. In this way, the mythological structure of *fascist ideology* under Griffin’s definition also seems to very easily amount to Arendt’s notion of *tyranny of logicality*.

It seems when reading accounts of previous historic fascist regimes—such as that of Gronskaia—that a common ‘fascistic strategy’ entails the ignoring of language describing the *actual* state of affairs and the replacement of it with *reductive symbols* that fit the particular fascist conception of reality.⁵⁵ Central to it seems the drive to *destroy* nuanced understandings of what constitutes ‘us’ and the ‘other’ through these *reductive symbols*. This will be of great importance to my framework in the next chapter. This drive to destroy nuanced understanding—as well as the cementing of a *tyranny of logicality*—might be further underscored by Gronskaia’s observation that (*fascist*) totalitarian regimes always aim at “*sacralising power and creating a cult of its leaders*”.⁵⁶ She furthers this by saying that:

“Here, ideological persuasion becomes indispensable, and the regime creates a special system for ideological conditioning, using language as the primary instrument of symbolising reality and sacralising power.”⁵⁷

Gronskaia calls this *propaganda*—and for good reason. However, linguistic symbolism in this way might differ somewhat from the layman’s perception of what propaganda is: namely, generally understood as primarily iconographic in category (as discussed previously). These forms of propagandistic coercion do not concern imagery at all. As such, it seems they are much more subtle and are thus also much harder to effectively recognise and combat.⁵⁸ That difficulty, following Gronskaia’s reasoning, warrants the

⁵⁵ Gronskaia et al., *Totalitarian Language*, 279-280.

⁵⁶ *idem.*, 279-280.

⁵⁷ *idem.*, 279.

⁵⁸ Mostly because we societally only possess adequate frameworks of recognising them retrospectively; instead of when they emerge.

observation that common understandings of the term ‘propaganda’ as primarily categorised as visual iconography might potentially hamper one’s ability to recognise their counterparts: namely, linguistic propaganda—specifically in the form of *symbols*. To underscore this: the language, symbolism, and aesthetics utilised by *fascist* movements have all radically changed from the time of the Second World War, dealing less in *icons* and more in *symbols* (as we will continue to see in the next chapter) making the primarily iconographic understanding of propaganda less effective.⁵⁹ Additionally, Gronskaaya notes in her research regarding the commonalities between fascist regimes that a control over the flow of political information through language is one of the most important aspects of (*fascist*) totalitarian regimes.⁶⁰ If we are to believe Arendt, we need to be vigilant against such forms of coercion of *ossified* prejudice now above all, as we find ourselves amidst multiple *historical crises*. However, even more so, reductive language might play an even more significant role *now* than it did during the first half of the 20th-century which Gronskaaya describes.

In the next chapter, I will further detail my belief that a semiotic focus on such linguistic *symbols* over visual *icons* as propaganda might be much more important in combatting *ideological* (primarily *fascist*) movements in current times—as well as give attempt to formulate terminology to commonly refer to such propagandistic language. The latter of this shall be the start of my construction of a framework that can help us to recognise them not only retrospectively, but continually and pragmatically, as the main research goal of this paper.

⁵⁹ Westerberg, *Common sense as extremism*, 564.

⁶⁰ Gronskaaya et al., *Totalitarian Language*, 278.

— 3. SEMIOTICS OF PROPAGANDA —

In the struggles of the homophile-movement in the '50s—detailed in chapter 1—we can see a particular struggle for power of linguistic control. Struggles such as theirs seem to be one for dominance and authority over the right to name one's own marginalised groups (and their experiences). This notion of the reclamation of power through language is still very much a central part of today's activist movements. Language matters greatly to the extent that marginalised groups can identify themselves, and thus in what numbers they can find each other and organise movements. In the contemporary narrative of queer communities (both online and offline), it is generally understood that the increase in terminology expressing *actual* experiences of queer people inspired a sense of camaraderie among the marginalised identities—as well as an understanding of the oppression of them. But more importantly: it is understood that it inspired community formation under strict crack-down policies in most *western* countries, like during the period of the Stonewall Riots.

The dominance of reductive language can be an enormous hurdle to societal emancipatory progress, as we saw in the struggles of the early queer-emancipation movement in chapter 1.⁶¹ Simultaneously, the dominance of such reductive language can strengthen the apparati of (*fascist*) totalitarian thought, as shown in chapter 2. All the while, reductive language might be very difficult to overcome, partly because it is difficult to recognise in the moment—often only commonly recognised as reductive in retrospect. The abandonment of reductive or derogatory language—and the formation of actual representative and inclusive language seems a slow process. Meanwhile, the process of societal recognition of visual *icons* as reductive or propagandistic often might be much more of a clear-cut path, it seems.

⁶¹ I mention queer-emancipation in particular because of its rather unique quality of being so multi-faceted. In contrast to trans-emancipation of black-emancipation, queerness is a broad spectrum of sexual- and gender-identities—something which was only increasingly understood thanks to increased terminology that was accurate in regards to actual experiences.

In this chapter, I will further detail my belief that a new focus is in order regarding the combatting of violent and illiberal *ideologies*: namely, a focus on the linguistic *symbols* (instead of solely on *icons*) such *ideologies* adapt from common language or themselves employ from already existing culture to conserve and effectuate their beliefs. I will also move to the main focus of this paper, namely the search for a framework that can help us to recognise such *symbols* not only retrospectively, but continually. Finally, I will detail what I believe might be the essential effectuating power of *destructive signs*—namely ‘normalisation’ not as a psychological mechanism, but a cultural phenomenon that influences the content of culturally-shared *common sense* (in Arendtian terms) and hampers political communication between groups.



§3.1 *Modern Propaganda & the Internet*

One of the most salient arguments for this new focus regarding propagandistic language revolves around the question of: ‘why now’? The idea that Nazism has been ‘beaten’ during the Second World War (and that what remains are simply fragments of the former *ideology*) still seems lingeringly present in neo-liberal politics. Regardless of the demonstrable resurgence of *fascist* movements world-wide, particularly the question of ‘why now’ is a question that one generally owes an answer when speaking about totalitarian propaganda in the 21st-century. In this paragraph, I will detail another reason why a new focus regarding propaganda as linguistic (as well as iconographical) might be drastically needed in current times.

The internet has changed the world in ways which we might have not foreseen during its societal implementation. So too has it drastically changed the ways *fascist* movements move, organise, recruit, and talk.⁶² Such

⁶² Richards, *A Philosophical and Historical Analysis of “Generation Identity”*, 4,16.

movements increasingly spread their ideas through online new media, such as 4Chan and YouTube—the digital corners of which then become platforms for recruitment.⁶³ The great changes that these platforms have brought to far-right *ideologies* can be seen in the new language they now employ to identify each other. A landscape of modern overt ‘dogwhistle’ terms has been cultivated, ranging from terms such as ‘*boreal Europe*’ (as even used by far-right parliamentarians such as Marine le Pen from France, and Thierry Baudet from the Netherlands) and ‘*clownworld*’, to more obscurely symbolic ones such as ‘*Pepe*’, ‘*kekistan*’, and ‘*88*’/‘*1488*’.⁶⁴ By ‘overt dogwhistles’, I refer here to specifically (linguistic) *symbols* with two different interpretations that are inserted into a message by ways of relaying a message differently to people within one crowd.⁶⁵ These keywords of totalitarian thought and language function as symbolic signals to its in-crowd.⁶⁶ This is done through the *codification* of this dogwhistle only within a specific group of people—so that only that subset of audiences will understand its *codified* meaning, as opposed to its traditional meaning.⁶⁷ A good example of this is the term ‘clown world’, which is a far-right overt dogwhistle *codified* and popularised online with anti-LGBTQ and anti-Semitic meaning. To illustrate: Recently, in 2019, the chairman of the youth-department of Dutch far-right populist party FvD (and now active politician for the FvD main party) held a speech for a political youth gathering in which he used the term overtly.⁶⁸ Although its use was relatively blatant and unmasked, none but one of the big Dutch media-companies jumped on the use of this dogwhistle—showing how successful

⁶³ Mark Alfano, J. Adam Carter, and Peter Clutton, “Technologically Scaffolded Atypical Cognition: The Case of YouTube’s Recommender System,” *Synthese* 1:24 (2020), 1-5.

⁶⁴ While some of these terms still allude detailed scholarly analysis, see for example Glitsos' & Hall's dissemination of the ‘Pepe’ *symbol*:

Laura Glitsos & James Hall, “The Pepe the Frog meme: an examination of social, political, and cultural implications through the tradition of the Darwinian Absurd,” *Journal for Cultural Research*, 23:4 (2019), 381-395.

⁶⁵ Manuel Almagro, and José R. Torices. “The Nature of (Covert) Dogwhistles,” Proceedings of the IX Conference of the Spanish Society of Logic, Methodology and Philosophy of Science (13-16 November, 2018), 93, 95-96.

⁶⁶ Gronskaya et al., *Totalitarian Language*, 289.

⁶⁷ *ibid.*

⁶⁸ Frank Hendrickx, Volkskrant, “Jonge aanhangers Baudet dromen van strijd met de gevestigde orde.” (June 9th, 2019), <https://www.volkskrant.nl/nieuws-achtergrond/jonge-aanhangers-baudet-dromen-van-strijd-met-de-gevestigde-orde~b4c0eb23/>, (Retrieved November 1st, 2020).

these *symbols* have become in their use thanks to the sheer interaction-speed of the internet.⁶⁹ Such dogwhistles might change rapidly in their adaption and abandonment, as the use of certain intention dogwhistles is simply strategic; in favour of in-crowd identification purposes.⁷⁰

What the success of such overt dogwhistle terms as *ideological symbols* points towards is the great affinity of (for example) *fascist* movements with online spaces and communication. I argue the successful marriage of these two is attributable to at least three characteristics of the modern internet, namely: **i)** its *echoing-effect*, **ii)** its *anonymisation*, and **iii)** its *fragmentation-effect*.

The first of these regards the phenomenon of “echo-chambers”. These are situations where beliefs are reinforced through artificial repetition within a closed system; shielded from contact with contrasting beliefs. This insulates these beliefs or ideas from rebuttal. Modern ‘new media’ can be observed to creating these echo-chambers not only online. Matthew Levendusky has noted, for example, how increasingly polarised political discourse in differing contemporary news media has also allowed the citizenry which it focusses on to only consume the sources supporting their particular worldview.⁷¹ However, media companies which solely deal in online spaces seem even more adept at this. Research such as that of Mark Alfano, among others in recent years, has confirmed our predictions that algorithms such as that of YouTube also create echo-chambers that can prove extremely rapidly polarising and self-sustaining.⁷² Such algorithms, made to maximise viewer-retention and watch-time, prioritise outwardly ludicrous takes and ideas because it tends to better stimulate and goad viewers into more watch-time—which then leads to a shift over time of which views are dubbed ‘radical’.

⁶⁹ Frank Hendrickx, *Jonge aanhangers Baudet dromen van strijd met de gevestigde orde*.

⁷⁰ The movements that primarily use them can be classified as *cryptofascist*; dealing in covertly codified *fascist ideology*.

⁷¹ Matthew Levendusky, and M. Johnson, “How Partisan Media Polarize America,” *Perspectives on Politics* 12:2 (2014), 482.

⁷² Alfano et al., *Technologically Scaffolded Atypical Cognition*, 1-5.

The second way in which online spaces might be such a great tool for recruitment and movement of *fascist* movements is that of the radical anonymity of these spaces. One can masquerade as anyone or be completely faceless, creating unique ways in which *fascist ideological* thought can subtly be inserted into common conversation—through spambots, for example.⁷³

Finally, the *fragmentation* of political information that online spaces have brought with them might be what proves such an opportunity for online *fascist* movements. Schwartz, in discussing Arendt, says the following about this:

*“As modern profit incentives and the decentralized nature of Internet news and social media have increasingly fragmented political information along partisan lines and blurred the distinction between entertainment and journalism, the very possibility of a common set of facts presently seems almost utopian.”*⁷⁴

I contend this fragmentation specifically can lead to *ideological* thought’s illusory explanative power seeming even stronger than in times prior to the internet—especially in conjunction with the previously discussed in mind. After all, as trust in the notion of a common set of facts deteriorates, increasing trust might be put into *ideological* thought as a *supersense*.

With this analysis in mind of modern ways of *fascist* proliferation through language and digital media (as well as the previous on the difficulties of *linguistic* propaganda specifically), I hope to have closed the part of this paper proving the modern need for a novel view on propaganda. As such, I will move on to formulating what I believe to be a fruitful foundation for this new framework for recognising linguistic propagandistic *symbols*.

⁷³ Richards, *A Philosophical and Historical Analysis of “Generation Identity”*, 4, 8, 16.

⁷⁴ Schwartz, *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 506.



§3.2 *Destructive Signs*

“The aim of totalitarian education has never been to instill convictions, but to destroy [the] capacity to form any.”⁷⁵

In Arendt’s view, as well as Juan Fuentes’ reading of it, totalitarian thought is to an extent the reversal of liberal thought—formed and spread through a certain destruction it wreaks.^{76 77} Destruction both of *common sense* specifically as the faculty for any preliminary understanding, according to Schwartz’ reading, as well as liberal language in order to achieve this, according to Fuentes.^{78 79} Arendt argued that when *common sense*, as the ‘Ariadne-thread’ of our understanding-faculty, is hampered, so is the possibility for what she called *representative thought*.⁸⁰ This type of thought—a form of ‘enlarged mentality’ and ‘communal sense’—helps us develop insight and cultivate diverse and inclusive understandings of the lives we view as ‘other’.⁸¹ Both Arendt and Fuentes seem to argue that this destruction is wreaked primarily in an *affective* manner, through reductive iconography and reductive symbolism.⁸² Before continuing, I believe it is important to note that this destruction of the capability for empathic understanding of the ‘other’ seems so essential to the totalitarian struggle and historical analyses of its prior regimes, I argue it should stand central to our analyses of the *symbols* we seek to categorise.⁸³ We can also

⁷⁵ Hannah Arendt, ed. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Schocken Books, 1973), 468.

⁷⁶ Juan Francisco Fuentes, “Totalitarian Language: Creating Symbols to Destroy Words,” *Contributions to the History of Concepts* 8.2 (2013), 45-66.

⁷⁷ Schwartz, *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 510-511.

⁷⁸ Fuentes, *Totalitarian Language*, 52-55.

⁷⁹ Schwartz, *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 508.

⁸⁰ *idem.*, 501-502.

⁸¹ Hannah Arendt, and Ronald S. Beiner, *Lectures on Kant's Political Philosophy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 237.

⁸² Fuentes, *Totalitarian Language*, 52-53.

⁸³ Gronskaya et al., *Totalitarian Language*, 278.

recognise the need for such destruction in Griffin's framework of *fascism* detailed earlier. Though Arendt primarily describes *representative thought* within our *common sense* framework as being actively threatened by *ideological* and illiberal beliefs, I ascribe to Fuentes' and Gronsokaya's belief that such nuanced understandings of 'us' and 'them' can also be threatened by certain reductive iconography and reductive language.⁸⁴ ⁸⁵ For example, the cultural normalisation of reductive language describing supposed experiences of marginalised groups results in the *common lingua* available to the non-marginalised for grasping the struggles and lives of such groups generally becoming less representative of reality. As such, the plight of understanding their positions in society might generally become harder for both the layman and policy-makers.

With this, however, I do not mean to argue that any and all people are equally vulnerable to such propagandistic attempts at such destruction. It seems an easily made observation that certain groups of people are likely more receptive to propagandistic *symbols* (and *icons*), while others are perhaps more armed to recognise and face them. In the last paragraph of this chapter, I will further detail why I think this in itself does not in any way diminish the dangers of language that might effectuate such destruction of *representative thought*. For now, however, this observation does support the necessity for a novel framework that can help us more actively recognise such potentially destructive language—should cultural and political rifts between groups be exacerbated by such potential differences in their receptiveness to such language.

George Orwell famously exemplified such forms of (totalitarian) transformation of nuanced language into reductive (non-informative) *symbols* in his novel '1984'. In it, a philologist character by the name of *Syme* helps the novel's totalitarian government in radically reducing the totality of available public language in a malicious attempt at a sort of thought control. In the book, this is achieved through an intense simplification of the original

⁸⁴ Gronsokaya et al., *Totalitarian Language*, 278.

⁸⁵ Fuentes, *Totalitarian Language*, 52-53.

language (*'Oldspeak'*) by systematically ridding it of most synonyms and antonyms aiding any subjective description of experience, instead replacing these words with impractical, greatly reductive words. This new, child-like language is dubbed *'Newspeak'*. Words like *'bad'* are discarded in favour of *'ungood'*—and *'excellent'* and *'splendid'* are replaced by *'plusgood'* and *'doubleplusgood'*.⁸⁶ What is left are hollow replacements; an eviscerated language devoid of nuance or artistic usage, consisting of incredibly few remaining words with which one can describe their own lived experience; or the human experience, for that matter. In the book, the character Syme describes this process to the protagonist at one point as *'the destruction of words'*:

*"It's a beautiful thing, the destruction of words. [...] After all, what justification is there for a word, which is simply the opposite of some other word? [...] In the end, the whole notion of goodness and badness will be covered by only six words – in reality, only one word. Don't you see the beauty of that, Winston?"*⁸⁷

It seems that what Orwell was aiming to show is that by diminishing available vocabulary, or specifically by popularising reductive language, it is inevitable that range of thought automatically becomes narrower as an effect. The implied horror in *1984* does not stem from the evisceration of language, of course, but from the destruction of critical- and *representative* thought that such evisceration brings with it; and the immense cultural control that gives the overarching totalitarian government. *1984*'s message resonates with us deeply; even (or especially) today. Once again, to be complete, replacing ideas and language with reductive *signs* can, of course, occur in two ways: **i)** through the replacement of language with (reductive) visual *icons* (e.g. traditional iconography; propagandistic posters), and **ii)** through the replacement of language with (reductive) linguistic *symbols*. The difference I use here in

⁸⁶ George Orwell, and Erich Fromm, *1984* (London: Penguin Nooks, 1961), 51.

⁸⁷ *idem.*, 51.

particular stems from Charles Sanders Peirce's framework of semiotic theory.⁸⁸ Regardless of the method, the resulting *signs* are comparable in effect: through reduction, they destructively hamper shared *common sense* nuances by inciting primarily affective responses and thereby limiting critical thinking. I hold this to be the most essential element of propagandistic language, as well as the most fruitful foundation for the novel framework. As such, in Orwellian terms, I will from now on call both of these types (visual *icons* and linguistic *symbols*) 'destructive'; (specifically) destructive of shared *common sense* and the capability for *representative thought* in Arendtian terms.

To illustrate an example of the linguistic kind of such *destructive symbols* before our exact definition of our framework, one contemporary example immediately springs to mind. Namely, the Dutch dichotomy between 'allochthon' and 'autochthon' ('allochtoon' and 'autochtoon' in Dutch). The word *allochthon* means simply 'emerging from another soil'. Similarly, *autochthon* means simply 'emerging from this soil'. Clearly, these definitions already convey nationalistic undertones. Pragmatically, however, they are also extremely reductive and carry extremely little descriptive power with them. As such, they are rather unwieldy due to the fact that they define an exceptionally and overly broad range of people and backgrounds.⁸⁹ To illustrate, the heir apparent of the Dutch royal family—Princess Catharina-Amalia—is by this definition considered an *allochthon*, as is her father.⁹⁰ No Dutch person would label these two individuals as *allochthons*, however, in the *common sense* way the terms are used. Furthermore, an abundance of Dutch people tends towards preservation of the term, denoting that these terms are more affectively

⁸⁸ I use 'signs' here in the widely-used semiotic theory of Charles Sanders Peirce, where *signs* can be either:

- An *Icon*—such as a portrait or a pictogram—which resembles or imitates an object and denotes it by virtue of their resemblances.
- An *Index*—such as a footprint in the snow—which denotes an object through its actual physical connection involving the object.
- A *Symbol*—such as any non-indexical word like 'this/that'—which denotes solely by virtue of its interpretant through a process of *semeiosis* and connotation.

⁸⁹ Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek (CBS), "Wat Verstaat het CBS Onder een Allochtoon" (2017), <https://www.cbs.nl/nl-nl/faq/specifiek/wat-verstaat-het-cbs-onder-een-allochtoon->, (Retrieved October 26th, 2019).

⁹⁰ King Willem-Alexander is—according to the official definition—a second-generation *allochthon* because his father, Prince Claus, was born in Germany. His daughter Catharina-Amalia is, however, not third-generation because her mother, Queen Máxima, was born in Argentina.

wielded in our lexicon than concretely useful in their informativity and practical use. Rather, throughout its use, it has increasingly become a term to label *outsiders*—or the previously detailed (heavily problematic) ‘*not us*’. In their reductive nature and (nuance-)destructive potential, I thus levy these terms as primary examples of *destructive symbols*.



§3.3 Cultural Normalisation

Though Newspeak is, in reality, likely never imaginable or achievable, one could respond to the previous by arguing that it borders conspiratorial thinking to argue that modern *ideological* groups carefully and premeditatedly ‘design’ certain words and *symbols* in order to spread their beliefs.⁹¹ However, I do not at all believe that *destructive symbols*, specifically, are malicious in their genealogy. The most likely scenario is that (if any at all) only a very limited number of such *symbols* are in actuality fabricated in a likewise fashion as *fascist* iconography (e.g. propagandistic posters) or overt dogwhistles are. Rather, I believe it is much more likely that they mostly always already exist naturally in any language—such as with the example of ‘allochthon’/ ‘autochthon’, which were first introduced as more nuanced alternatives to words more akin to ‘alien’. However, a sigh of relief that such terms are mostly likely not maliciously fabricated does not at all eliminate the urgency from the problems described throughout the first half of this paper. The fact that *destructive symbols* are not necessarily fabricated in such a manner doesn’t eliminate the possibility that they could be adopted by violent *ideologists* seeking to use them to spread their beliefs. In such a scenario, which is likely not at all uncommon as we will see in the next chapter, the violent *ideology* in question still benefits from the destruction of nuance the *symbol* wreaks. As such, it is likely to assume that that *ideology* would want to preserve such reductive terminology in spreading their worldviews; even if simply because it

⁹¹ Fred Eidlin, “The Breakdown of Newspeak,” *Political Communication* 5:4 (1988), 225-236.

resonates with their worldview. I will further investigate the inner-workings of such interplay between *ideological* thought and reductive language in §5.3.

I believe it is also important to note here that one does not need to themselves hold the *ideological* beliefs that resonate with such *destructive* language in order to utter it. It is often the opposite, I believe, that these words and terms are simply not generally recognised as being potentially problematic or reductive—and only incidentally resonate with such *ideological* beliefs—which heightens the potential for a cultural normalisation of these words (and, in turn, potentially their connected implied beliefs). This also resonates with the example of ‘allochthon’/‘autochthon’, which are still used widely by wildly varying groups of people, generally not with malicious intent or underlying *ideological* belief at all. Assuming so would be immensely disingenuous.

In the last paragraph, I contended that it is most likely to assume that certain groups of people are more receptive to propagandistic *symbols* (and *icons*), while others (e.g. due to backgrounds involving particular education, or whatnot) are perhaps more armed to recognise and face them. However, I do not believe that (for now) further investigation into these differences is warranted—in part because it could devolve into an analysis of psychological effects of such language (which I do not hold to be sufficiently important at this point). I could sit and write a whole other paper on the potential psychological effects that propagandistic language can have on us, and how that relates to the spreading of *ideological* thought. However, I do not believe it to be fruitful to approach the normalisation of such reductive language (and consequently thought) at a psychological level at all.⁹² Of course, it could very well be that there are certain psychological effects that *destructive symbols* might possess, such as for example shifting discourse power dynamics (as further investigated by Mihaela- and Jeremy Wyatt) or reinforcing belief through

⁹² I heartily thank Martin Blaakman and Frans Brom for their input on this matter; which helped me further develop this insight into Arendtian theory in particular.

utterance (as further investigated by Hirst and Echterhoff).⁹³ ⁹⁴ However, I'd argue the effect of normalisation of such reductive language (and consequently thought) should be approached primarily as a cultural phenomenon under Arendtian theory as discussed previously.

Under this view, I do not think the observation that certain groups are more receptive to *destructive* language in itself diminishes the dangers of such language; language which might effectuate hampering of *common sense* and destruction of *representative thought* in Arendtian terms as previously discussed. After all, as detailed previously, the effectuated destruction of such language (as mainly concerning one's potential for *representative thought*) lies within collectively shared *common sense*; the culturally encoded ideas and thought-frameworks serving as the essential 'background' feature to all human interaction, according to Arendt.⁹⁵ These conceptual frameworks are denoted as *common sense* because they are generally shared and culturally normalised between groups as communicative tools. If, then, these previously *common sense* conceptual notions and frameworks (which are generally collective) are transformed for certain groups *only* (in contrast to transformation under *historical crisis*, which is understood as a *collective* shift in *common sense*), communication with said groups is hindered drastically under Arendt's understanding of the *web of relations* previously discussed.⁹⁶ Hypothetically, in this view (further assuming propagandistic language, like propagandistic icons, *does* carry a potential to destroy nuanced viewpoints as argued by Fuentes, Arendt, and Gronskaia), even if only less than one-fifth of the world population is receptive to reductive language such as *destructive symbols*, that still serves as an immense potential problem. After all, the potential disconnect from otherwise shared *common sense* by such an huge collection of groups is likely to greatly complicate political understanding of- and

⁹³ William Hirst, and Gerald Echterhoff, "Creating shared memories in conversation: Toward a psychology of collective memory," *Social Research: An International Quarterly* 75:1 (2008), 183-216.

⁹⁴ Mihaela Popa-Wyatt, and Jeremy L. Wyatt, "Slurs, Roles and Power," *Philosophical Study* 175:11 (2017), 2879-2906.

⁹⁵ Schwartz. *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 498.

⁹⁶ *ibid.*

communication with each other. This understanding could explain in part the great polarisation of political thought and antagonism of political ‘camps’ one can observe broadly, though that is a subject for another paper entirely. In this view, however, the importance of recognising such language in our political- and policy-sphere is further underscored.

What is important here, I believe, is that the normalisation of such *destructive* language (which we can assume to nearly always not be maliciously fabricated, but naturally occurring and often simply not recognised as being reductive) is a cultural phenomenon most likely to occur broadly during periods of *historical crises* in Arendtian terms—when *common sense* prejudices are already culturally being dismantled within a cultural collective. In this view, its psychological effects should not be the focus in these analyses. Rather, the cultural shifts underlying such particular normalisation should stand centre-stage. However, one can still investigate the common characteristics shared between such *destructive symbols* and *icons*, in an attempt to better understand and be able to recognise them—which is what I’ll do in the next chapter of this paper.

Now that we have detailed the limitations of this particular research and embedded it within Arendt’s theory, as well as decided upon the foundational aspect of our novel framework for recognising modern propaganda (namely *destruction* of the capability for *representative thought*), we can move on to the detailed formulation of the framework. I have prepared a list of *icons* and *symbols*, all of which I claim to be *destructive signs* in similar fashion as the ‘allochthon’/‘autochthon’ *symbols* are. In the next chapter, I will detail a set of necessarily shared characteristics by which we can rather easily identify *destructive signs*; showing my reasoning for the chosen set of examples along the way and why all *signs* on the given list can be labelled as *destructive signs*. Integrated in the research of the next chapter, building on the previous, lay the main answers to my primary research questions.

— 4. DEFINING DESTRUCTION —



§ 4.1 Key Dissimilarities

One thing we have to be very wary about in our categorisation of *destructive symbols* as a specific type of *symbol* is the problem of over-generalisation. Our theory of *destructive signs* should serve to aid us in recognising linguistic propagandistic symbols in their similarities to visual propagandistic ones in order to better arm ourselves against them. As such, we should be wary of categorisations that are *too broad*—lest we create a large overlap with the modern usage of ‘propaganda’—as well as categorisations that are *too narrow*—lest our categorisation proves largely unwieldy and impractical. Parallel to this endeavour, I believe it is vitally important to not be miserly in using our intuition to aid us in investigating which symbols *should* and which symbols *should not* be considered *destructive*—as these symbols themselves deal greatly in the matters of affect and intuition. With this in mind, let’s go over some examples of *destructive signs*. Throughout this chapter, I will explain my reasoning for why I hold these *signs* to be *destructive* as part of our formulation-effort. My proposed list of *destructive signs* is as follows:

DESTRUCTIVE ICONS.	DESTRUCTIVE SYMBOLS.
The Jewish caricature	‘Allochthon’ / ‘Autochthon’
The German soldier	‘Transgenderism’
The hyper-sexualised woman	‘White genocide’ / ‘the great replacement’
The tainted statue	‘All lives matter’

As we can clearly see from the get-go, there is great variety in the origins and gravity of the different symbols. In order to argue that all these symbols can be categorised as *destructive* (in the way that I’ve shown *signs* can be in chapter 3), we need to properly understand the workings and structure of

these *signs*. To do that, we need to be very aware not only of their similarities, but also their dissimilarities. I argue there are three key dissimilarities between the list of *signs* I've presented.

The first dissimilarity between some of these *signs* is their **genealogical intent**. The histories and provenance behind the given symbols differ, particularly regarding gravity of usage and the possibility of malintent behind the *sign's* origins. For example, if we first focus on the (visual) *icons*, the hyper-sexualised woman is something that we see every day as an *icon*. It is so heavily institutionalised and normalised in everyday life that we might see it commonly in a bustling, 'proper' place like Times Square. It is not an *icon* that necessarily finds its roots of provenance in malintent, but rather seems to be one grown more organically through historical gender-inequalities and conservative gender roles. There is, of course, a clear critique of the usage of this *icon*, but nowhere near as much as there would be if instead of that the hyper-sexualised woman, there would be a visual usage of a Jewish caricature on Times Square screens. The latter has a history of *genealogical malintent*, meaning that it intuitively carries with it in part the malice by which it was first conceived as a propagandistic *icon* during the last century. The same holds true for the (linguistic) *symbols*. The terms 'allochthon' and 'autochthon' are still (though both dated terms) widely in use and critique of their usage is still relatively sparse. These *symbols* were originally conceived as progressive alternatives to even more outdated *symbols* and, as such, grew organically without *genealogical malintent*. In contrast, the utterance of the *symbols* 'white genocide' or 'the great replacement' would quickly incite widespread critique and denunciation upon the utterer—for good reason. These *symbols* carry with them great contempt and *genealogical malintent*, as I will further discuss and investigate in more detail in chapter 5 of this paper. Regardless of their history beyond their first conceiving, the gravity of these latter *symbols* is always greatly affected by their *genealogical malintent*.

Of course, the gravity of a *sign* also has to do in part with their history beyond their first conceiving. Which brings me to the second key dissimilarity

between some of these symbols: their **temporal-(in)significance**. How long these *signs* have been in usage, the amount of normalisation regarding them, the presence or absence of historic events connected to them; these all matter in regards to the temporal context of these *signs*. The specific temporal context in which a *symbol* is uttered or *icon* depicted might matter greatly to its *output*—what affect it might produce in an observer—while this might not be the case for other *signs*. A good example of this is the *symbol* of ‘transgenderism’. While previously in use as an outdated medical term, it was only during the last decade that it was adopted by anti-transgender movements to symbolise their arguments that transgender-identities are caused by a craze or trend; a supposedly propagated ‘ideology of trans-ness’. One such movement—besides the TERF-movement already discussed—were North-American evangelical Christians behind the ‘Nashville-Declaration’, a declaration hailing from the United States that served as a statement of opposition against non-heterosexual sexualities and transgender-identities. By publishing the term ‘transgenderism’ plainly and repetitively throughout the declaration (which also found its way into the Netherlands through some Dutch politicians signing it) the term was in turn widely used by uncritical Dutch media companies in the many articles denouncing the declaration. During my research on Dutch transgender media-representation for TNN, my team and I saw reflected throughout our research that this widespread institutional usage of the term breathed new life into the term as a *symbol*.⁹⁷ Once moved out of the medical sphere into that of political *symbols*, it now carried with it a gravity that it did not previously possess as a medical term—namely its implication of ‘transness’ involving some *ideological* foundation. After all, the ascription of ‘ism’ to a movement can forcefully connect it to connotations of doctrinaire thinking and origin.⁹⁸ As such, in its transformation from a medical term to a political-charged *symbol*, it gained a very different *output* to what it possessed previously—perhaps becoming *destructive* in the process. In this way,

⁹⁷ Alphen, Elise van, Nora Uitterlinden, Freya Terpstra, Valesca van Vliet, and Emma Kroon (Transgender Netwerk Nederland), *Monitor Representatie Transgender Personen 2019* (2020).

⁹⁸ Jussi Kurunmäki, and Jani Marjanen, “A Rhetorical View of Isms: An Introduction,” *Journal of Political Ideologies* 23:3 (2018), 242.

this particular *symbol* carries with it a **temporal significance**, while others on the list might be largely **temporally insignificant**.

The previous two key dissimilarities regarded the historical gravity of a particular *sign*. However, there is also a key dissimilarity of a more foundational nature. Namely, the kind of ‘subject-object relationship’ they possess, or what I will simply call the *sign’s focus*. For example, the Jewish caricature as an *icon* focuses on identifying an outsider; an ‘other’ (opposed to an indeterminate ‘us’). The *icon* simultaneously gives a misleading and generalising account of their identity as a supposed outsider. The German soldier as an *icon*—although being used historically for similar purposes as the Jewish caricature—focuses on demarcating an in-group; the ‘us’. The *icon* simultaneously gives a glorifying and generalising account of the identity of the individuals within the in-group. Likewise, regarding the *symbols*, ‘transgenderism’ and ‘allochthon’ focus on identifying an ‘other’, while ‘autochthon’ focuses on demarcating an ‘us’. I will return to discuss this key dissimilarity in the paragraph, as I hold it to be very important to the essence of what *signs* we aim at.



§ 4.2 Defining A Framework

Having identified these three key dissimilarities between the given *signs*, we can begin to formulate our precise categorisation of what constitutes these *signs* as inherently *destructive*. As I formulate key characteristics of *destructive signs*, I will not continuously discuss every single given *sign*. That would be too much of a cumbersome and superfluous task seeing the evident ascription of many of the *signs* to the given characteristics, as we will see. I will, however, discuss some good illustrative examples and detail my reasoning for the *signs* on the previously given list that might not immediately spark recognition in readers.

To clarify once more, I do believe one does not need to hold *ideological* beliefs that resonate with *destructive symbols* particularly in order to utter them. Rather, it is the (in Arendtian terms) cultural phenomenon of potential normalisation that has our focus. As such, the commonly shared characteristics of *destructive signs* that I will detail in this chapter are exactly that—*characteristics* by which we can identify them, not *effects* that such signs hold. Their destructive effect lies in their potential for cultural normalisation through commonplace utterance by groups receptive to them and the partial alteration of *common sense* that it brings as a result. What is important in this chapter is to detail *destructive signs*' common characteristics so that we can formulate our framework to be able to more actively, and widely, recognise not propagandistic *icons* and language more easily in day-to-day life and (particularly) within the political- and organisational policy-making spheres.

I have already set one characteristic of *destructive signs* in the process of argumentation in the first chapter of this paper. Namely (and simply), that they are distinctively *destructive* in the way that they can undermine *common sense* reasoning and *representative thought* in the observer through overriding affect and overgeneralisation. This is a complicated composite characteristic, containing multiple elements, however—though one that all of the given examples of *signs* share, obviously. Also, it is akin to an effect, yet we are looking for simple characteristics. However, it is clear that what is key here is some sort of an element of **destructiveness**, specifically of *common sense* as one's 'Ariadne's thread' for reasoning.⁹⁹

Through the overriding of critical—*common sense*—political thinking, it is easy for a worldview to be superimposed unto the observer; or at least influence the worldview of the observer. This is the main identifying factor between all of the *signs* previously discussed. After all, they all do this regarding a specific group of people—regardless of *genealogical intent*. The German soldier *icon* superimposes a view of the white (Arian) soldier as a superior 'us', as hyper-masculine and vigilant—though nothing else.

⁹⁹ Schwartz, *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 501-502.

Meanwhile, the Jewish caricature superimposes a view of Jewish peoples as miserly, untrustworthy and wicked—and again, nothing else. I could go on, but in all of the given symbols, there is superimposed the idea that the identity of the individuals making up these groups is both uniform and rigid. Even the linguistic *symbol* of ‘white genocide’ superimposes upon the observer the idea that the ‘us’ (a nondescript white ‘people’) is in danger, threatened by (another non-descript) ‘other’ who seeks to replace them. Regarding this specific *destructive symbol*, everything said about these groups after this statement is made obsolete due to the graveness of this conspiratorial statement.

However, to say that the primary characteristic of *destructive signs* is that they are destructive seems incorrect. Their *destructiveness* is not essential to their composition as *signs*, but is rather an effect that they have as *signs*. Again, I do not believe many (let alone most) of these *signs* carry an insidious *genealogical malintent* with them. It is largely in their commonplace usage that their destructive nature becomes potent, after all. I think this hampering of *common sense* is in part a consequence of the affective overriding of *critical thinking* (in the positive hermeneutic sense if we try to follow Arendt’s view). The destructive nature of the *signs* discussed previously is then in part wrought by its *affective* nature; in the way that it distracts from-, subverts and overrides critical thinking through its being primarily dealing in affect. As such, I think we can formulate the first characteristic of *destructive signs* not as destructive or subversive of critical thought (which are effects rather than solely characteristics), but rather as being primarily **affective** in regards to both their meaning and potential insinuations (as will be further supported later on in this paragraph). A particular formulation of this characteristic might be:

A — AFFECTIVE: Dealing primarily in affective meaning and insinuation.

The resulting destruction of a *destructive sign* clearly cannot come from the *sign* dealing primarily in *affect* alone, obviously, even if we accept that such a characteristic might inspire effects of critical thought subversion. There must be an element of a focal point of the *sign*; a specific group whose broad

experiences are being reduced. This rather quickly brings us to what I argue to be the second characteristic of *destructive signs*, mentioned earlier, namely that they are necessarily **reductive**. With this, I mean that—intentionally or not—they hold relatively little explanative power without that fact being obvious. In this way, all *destructive signs* necessarily contain an over-generalisation like the ones detailed earlier in this paragraph. And since our main focus here is people—not things—we might say that *destructive signs* necessarily contain an overgeneralisation of a specific group of people, as the object of destruction is *insight* into the broad experiences of that group. As such, the second characteristic of *destructive symbols* can be formulated as followed:

- B — REDUCTIVE:** Containing a overgeneralising, reductive supposition that holds little explanative power regarding (a) specific group(s) of people.

So far so good, because both of the given characteristics seem to hold true for all of the previously given *signs*. For example, to give further illustration for some of the given *signs*: **i)** the *icon* of the hyper-sexualised woman reduces women to sexual objects, **ii)** 'transgenderism' as a political *symbol* reduces transgender-experiences and identities to an ideological (dogmatic) 'craze', **iii)** 'allochthon' as a *symbol* reduces a broad spectrum of immigrants (as well as natives) to an outsider through arbitrary qualifications, and **iv)** even the *icon* of the German soldier reduces a diverse group of people to an easy-to-digest whole under (for example) strict gender roles. However, if we take the characteristic as currently defined as our jumping-off point, it might be that we run into the problem of sweeping broadness later. Given this concern, we might opt to change the reductiveness-characteristic to concern only reductive over-generalisations of marginalised groups; of a supposed 'other'. However, I do not think this is a legitimate concern for three reasons:

Firstly, to reiterate, it is the effect of destructiveness that is essential to the previously given *signs*. Propagandistic *signs* (both *icons* and *symbols*) such as the German Soldier and 'white genocide' are both greatly destructive of

common sense reasoning and *representative thought*. The *icon* of the German soldier was wildly successful during the second world war in presenting a reductive view of the (white) German man meant to undermine anti-regime thinking. Likewise, the *symbol* of ‘white genocide’ *still* serves as a hallmark symbol for modern *fascist* movements meant to override critical thinking with a wild, sweeping over-generalisation and destroy *representative thought*. If we limit *destructive signs* as a term to those *signs* whose focal point is marginalised groups, we fail to categorise the German soldier and ‘white genocide’ as destructive—which they clearly are, regardless of their focal point.

Secondly, the more we disseminate these *signs* for their inner-workings, the more we might notice that the classifications of ‘us’ and the ‘other’—regardless of how nondescript they might be at times—rely on each others’ demarcation. What I mean by that is that we cannot reasonably disconnect these classifications from each other by pointing at the focal point of any given *sign*. One begets the other, as an ‘other’ is only demarcated as such when the ‘us’ is made clear—and vice versa. Whether the *sign* carries both of these demarcations or not, and thus regardless of the *sign’s* focal point, it is a natural effect of it in the observer to demarcate both simultaneously. For example, though ‘white genocide’, the German soldier, and tainted statues of slave drivers as *signs* all do not have a marginalised group as their focal point; these marginalised ‘others’ are made incessantly clear through implicit demarcation.

Finally, it is important to note that the characteristic of reductiveness excludes overt dogwhistles, as discussed earlier, from our framework. After all, overt dogwhistles are not necessarily reductive. In fact, they are created by a process of *codification* which adds on to the informative value of the linguistic *symbol* specifically (since overt dogwhistles are generally words): whatever traditional meaning such a term had before its becoming a dogwhistle is now supplemented by a second *codified* meaning. I think this choice of excluding overt dogwhistles is correct. My problem with their integration into our framework for recognising *destructive symbols*, is two-fold: **i)** they do not primarily serve as tools for recruitment (rather, they are tools for covert in-crowd identification), **ii)** the fact that they are not solely reductive at all (rather, they

are constructed by additional *codification*) makes them a nigh-untouchable target for *common sense* analysis. If we are to include overt dogwhistles in our framework of *destructive signs*, we risk jeopardising the usefulness of the framework. After all, anything can be an *ideological* dogwhistle through covert *codification*, and our framework should be as *common sense* as possible if it is to be useful. As such, I argue we should focus on the aspect of reductionism in our analysis of what are—and what aren't—*destructive signs*.

Given these considerations, I contend the characteristic of reductiveness should stand as given previously while we look for another (perhaps final) characteristic.

Luckily, I believe we may have just found it, namely that *destructive signs* necessarily contain an element of **divisiveness** in their logical order. Regardless of the focal point of a *destructive sign*, it carries with it a demarcative division between an 'us' and the 'other'. If a *sign* does not, there is no connected representation as part of *representative thought* regarding a spectrum of experiences to destroy—and thus no destruction of which to speak. As such, we might formulate the third characteristic of *destructive signs* as follows:

C — DIVISIVE: The implicit or explicit demarcative categorisation of certain groups as an 'other', opposed to an 'us'.

This seems to line up with all previously given *signs* as well. Not much more needs to be said about this except for that even the *icon* of the German soldier—the *icon* which focuses most of all on an 'us' and not an 'other'—contains a demarcation of the 'other' in it. Namely, and very simply put, the enemy which it is fighting. During the Second World War, this role of the 'other' would often be portrayed 'the Russian', of course.



§4.3 Further Mentions

If we now once again take a look at the previously given list of examples of *destructive signs*, we can see that three perhaps have yet to be detailed further:

DESTRUCTIVE ICONS.	DESTRUCTIVE SYMBOLS.
The Jewish caricature	'Allochthon' / 'Autochthon'
The German soldier	'Transgenderism'
The hyper-sexualised woman	'White genocide' / 'the great replacement'
The tainted statue	'All lives matter'

These are the *destructive symbols* 'all lives matter' and 'white genocide', as well as so-called 'tainted statue' as *destructive icons*—as I've yet to properly mention both in this chapter. While they might not be as intuitively *destructive* to some readers in the sense as the others on the list might, I believe they most definitely fit the bill as *destructive signs*. I'll elaborate on both 'all lives matter' and the 'tainted statue' briefly in this paragraph, and 'white genocide' more extensively in the next chapter.

The statement 'all lives matter'—which I'm sure nearly everyone has heard echoed throughout the last couple of years—is a relatively novel politically-laden statement that is yet surrounded by much misunderstanding and confusion. It symbolises criticism on the global emancipatory Black Lives Matter movement's 'black lives matter', as well as a dismissal of its importance to modern political debate as a callout to institutionalised anti-blackness. Though its similarly used counterpart 'white lives matter' is easy to spot as a *destructive symbol*, 'all lives matter' requires some clarification perhaps. I argue that—under this common *symbolic* use—the phrase 'all lives matter' falls within our categorisation of a *destructive symbol*. After all, it is primarily **affective** in the sense that it is an emotional plea distracting from the message of 'black lives matter' through powerful *affect*; implying that it isn't a statement

against anti-blackness, but rather one that is selfish, oversensitive, and not inclusive enough. It is also **reductive**, dismissing the particular plight and experiential knowledge of black people as institutionally oppressed. And curiously, it is simultaneously also **divisive** in the way it dismisses these things rhetorically, while still implying and underscoring the dominant power structure that ‘black lives matter’ addresses as being unjust and oppressive; reiterating the institutionalised racial demarcations of ‘us’ and the ‘other’ through affective overgeneralisation.

Finally, there is the so-called ‘tainted statue’—a term which I borrow from Chong-Ming Lim’s astute, in-depth research on the subject—primarily denoting physical commemorations of historic figures responsible for great injustice.¹⁰⁰ Such statues, for example of infamous British imperialist Cecil Rhodes (located at Oxford University), have been a topic of continued debate throughout the 2010s. Though I will not argue that every physical commemoration of such a historic figure can be labelled a *destructive icon* under my view, I do believe a great number can and that my framework for *destructive signs* can be of use in the debate regarding which of such *icons* should be removed from public view.¹⁰¹ Without treading into too much detail—lest I start debating a whole other topic—I argue such tainted statues can become *destructive icons* if two conditions are met: **i)** they fail to include and/or commemorate the appropriate targets (namely, the minorities worthy of commemoration), **ii)** the continued commemoration of the tainted figure in itself has social power (as Chong-Ming Lim argues many such commemorations do).¹⁰² The latter is largely applicable when an unjust social hierarchy relevant to the historical time-period of the tainted figure still persists in current times.¹⁰³ Under these circumstances, tainted statues can become almost wholly **affective** in their use as *icons* of false pride, **reductive** in the sense that (through affective iconography) they are

¹⁰⁰ Chong-Ming Lim. “Vandalizing Tainted Commemorations,” *Philosophy and Public Affairs* 48:2 (2020), 185-216.

¹⁰¹ A similar argument could be made to label street- or other location names implicitly honouring (through reference) such figures as *destructive symbols*, for example.

¹⁰² Chong-Ming Lim, *Vandalizing Tainted Commemorations*, 191-192.

¹⁰³ *ibid.*

diminutive of the legacy of both the tainted figure (and in turn, their connotative historical injustice) and the relevant marginalised group(s), and **divisive** in the sense that their continued public commemoration reinforces yet-existing divisive social hierarchies of ‘us’ and the ‘other’.

Now that we have the framework in order and functioning properly, I’d like to see if we can investigate further the destructive potential that these symbols potentially carry with them throughout the next (and last) chapter of this paper.

— 5. DESTRUCTION & MEMORY —

In the previous chapters, I hope to have demonstrated the profound relevance of theorising on the nature of *destructive signs* and my specific focus herein on language and the potential of certain words for adoption by violent *ideologies*. Yet there is still ample further investigation to be done, I argue, in regards to the destructive potential of these *signs*. Though I can obviously not discuss all facets of *destructive signs* in this paper, there is one I think is of great import to mention at this stage—one which I primarily hope will incite further research by others. Specifically, the given framework in conjunction with Arendt's insights into *ideology's tyranny of logicality* might give insight into bizarre phenomena such as Holocaust-denial, as I will detail in this chapter.

To quickly summarise the previous chapter, I argue the requirements for categorising a *sign* as 'destructive' can be defined as the *sign* comprising of three distinct effects:

- A** — **AFFECTIVE:** Dealing primarily in affective meaning and insinuation.
- B** — **REDUCTIVE:** Containing a overgeneralising, reductive supposition that holds little explanative power regarding (a) specific group(s) of people.
- C** — **DIVISIVE:** Containing an implicit or explicit demarcative categorisation of certain groups as an 'other', opposed to an 'us'.

I also want to stress once more the two boundaries of my previously detailed framework on linguistic destructive symbols, as to not invite any excessive broadness of definition.

Firstly, the destruction that *destructive signs* bring about is that specifically of the possibility for *representative thought* and nuanced understandings of what characterises certain groups and their experiences (a phenomena to which certain groups are more receptive or vulnerable than others), as well as destruction of notions of 'likeness' or 'kinship' to the people within such groups. After all, *destructive signs*—as previously discussed—subtly invite a belief in the supposed

‘otherness’ of such groups, while strengthening a supposed belief in a (superlative) ‘us’. This is, in part, why such *destructive signs* are so often adopted by violent *ideological* groups such as *fascist* movements that mean to exacerbate beliefs in such rifts—and mischaracterise marginalised groups to this end.

Secondly, I want to stress that I do not believe that most (or even many) *destructive signs* find their origin in genealogical malice or a predicative concoction of sorts. Rather, I argue that they mostly always already exist naturally in any language, yet that through time they risk: **i)** being adopted by those with malintent, and **ii)** being actively proliferated during periods of *historical crises* by such movements. With this in mind, let’s continue.



§5.1 Deceptive Metaphors

As discussed in chapter 2 of this paper, ascription to fascist belief (understood as *palingenetic ultranationalism*) fundamentally rests upon a number of mythological, almost biblical, metaphors. Curiously—as shown briefly before in the last chapter through the example of the ‘white genocide’ *symbol*—the language surrounding such metaphors overlaps with what I have theorised as *destructive symbols*. What sets such *destructive symbols* apart most from the others on the previously given list of *signs* is their unique combination of genealogical malintent and premeditated, metaphorical nature in combination with their being a (linguistic) *symbol*. I believe there is merit (regarding how such *destructive symbols* function) in further investigating these *symbols*.

In the second chapter ‘*The Ethics of Memory*’, Avishai Margalit starts off discussing processes of collective remembrance by detailing common, psychological misunderstandings that people often exhibit in the way we speak about memory. The primary misunderstanding Margalit discusses is that of the ‘*deceptive metaphor*’: a metaphor in which dissimilar features from the primary domain (that of **individual** psychology) are carried over into the

secondary domain (that of **collective** psychology). According to Margalit, such dissimilar features passing as similar gives a false account about collective psychology.¹⁰⁴ One such example of a deceptive metaphor—namely that of a *collective will*—underlies the unique *destructive symbols* such as the ‘white genocide’ *symbol*, as well as *fascist* belief more generally. The notion of a *collective will* carries over to the domain of collective psychology, a particularly dissimilar feature from *individual will*, namely that of ‘having a centre’. However, it seems unprovocative to state that society has no equivalent to the self as a centre, and *collective will* therefore has no such focus. Margalit himself describes the particular political danger that pervades this common *deceptive metaphor*, namely the space it leaves in the collective to be filled by a Führer of sorts—held to be the embodied centre of the *collective will* and guarantor of its unity.¹⁰⁵

The *palingenetic* aspects of fascist beliefs rest largely on this particular *deceptive metaphor*, I’d argue, in regards to the in chapter 2 and 3 detailed notions of attacks on a defined ‘us’ as an ethnic group or the mythical resurgence of said group through great conflict. One such linguistic *symbol* that furthers the *deceptive metaphor* of a *collective will*, is the *destructive symbol* of ‘white genocide’—which is a very common term in neo-fascist ideology, especially on new digital platforms.¹⁰⁶ This linguistic symbol and its synonyms propagate the idea that ‘the white race’ is systematically being diminished due to growing non-white populations and ‘forced assimilation’ (e.g. through immigration).¹⁰⁷ Such symbols are particularly **affective**, **reductive** and **divisive**. After all, many specific ethnic groups can be (and have been) strategically added to- or removed from the supposed great collective—the ‘us’ of *palingenetic ultranationalist* belief. Both Italian and Irish ethnicities have been incorporated into the collective in such a way during the last century, similar

¹⁰⁴ Avishai Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2002), 49.

¹⁰⁵ *idem.*, 49-50.

¹⁰⁶ There are many synonyms to ‘white genocide’ in many languages. For example, Dutch fascists may use ‘omvolking’—while North-American fascists may also refer to ‘the great replacement’ (words which, when translated, effectively mean the same).

¹⁰⁷ Moon-Kie Jung, Eduardo Bonilla-Silva, and João Helion Costa Vargas, *State of White Supremacy: Racism, Governance, and the United States* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011), 47.

to how Jewish ethnicities have been removed from the conditional-definition.¹⁰⁸ Furthermore, both terms are not naturally linguistic terms in the sense that they are not ‘adopted’ by violent *ideological* groups from a pre-existing common use, but rather describe a belief these movements held prior to its usage as a metaphoric *destructive symbol*. However, the destructive nature of these terms is very clear: they implicitly seem to reduce extremely complex modern phenomena to a singular, normative utterance of mythological belief, potentially drowning out nuanced understandings of different groups and inspiring the halting of *common sense* reasoning. As such, it seems that such *symbols* must be incorporated into our framework of *destructive signs*.

One could also make the argument that ‘*Judeo-Christian values*’ is similarly a *destructive symbol* frequently used by neo-fascist, specifically *cryptofascist*, movements. This term is, in current day, not seldom used to draw a line between imagined Christian values and the supposed threat of Muslim immigration—regardless of its historical antifascist etymology. However, my aim in this paper is—once again—not to give a detailed lexicon of *destructive signs*, but rather to argue for their existence and common usage as propagandistic metaphors. Yet, it is still relevant, I contend, to name briefly as a *destructive symbol*, as it is similarly used to falsely substantiate the *paligenecy*-features of (white) *fascist* beliefs.

The reason why I have chosen to highlight these particular *destructive symbols* once more is that they—above all others—show that *destructive symbols* might have a profound impact on the way that groups receptive to them remember and view history. In the next paragraph, I will go more into mnemonic-aspects discussed at the start of this chapter and how such theory ties into garnering a deep understanding of the effects of *destructive symbols*.

¹⁰⁸ In this sense, the collective of ‘whiteness’ is more of a taxonomy in its arbitrary definition.



§5.2 *Alternate Remembrance*

Margalit distinguishes between two main categorisations of memory, namely: *i)* *common* memory, and *ii)* *shared* memory.¹⁰⁹ To distinguish between these terms, I will use the example of remembrance of the Holocaust—for reasons which will become clear later on in this chapter. *Common* memory, in Margalit’s view, is an aggregate notion:

*“It aggregates the memories of all those people who remember a certain episode which each of them experienced individually. If the rate of those who remember the episode in a given society is above a certain threshold (say, most of them, an overwhelming majority of them, more than 70 percent, or whatever), then we call the memory of the episode a common memory...”*¹¹⁰

Most of us will have at least a vague memory of the history of the holocaust. As such, one could clearly say that there is yet a *common* memory of the holocaust present in society. However, this memory is not simply an aggregate of different understandings of the Holocaust. Rather, it is largely a *shared* memory, which is a much more complex form of group-based remembrance.

*“A shared memory, on the other hand, is not a simple aggregate of individual memories. It requires communication. A shared memory integrates and calibrates the different perspectives of those who remember the episode [...] each experiencing only a fragment of what happened from their unique angle on events—into one version.”*¹¹¹

Consequently, those not present at said historic episode can synchronically be *plugged into* the experience of those who were, through channelled

¹⁰⁹ Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, 50-51.

¹¹⁰ *idem.*, 50.

¹¹¹ *ibid.*

communication and retelling.¹¹² As such, shared memory is built on a division of *mnemonic labour*: a continuous, historic act where the aggregate memories of a historic episode are narratively bound as a more coherent whole. This practice of mnemonic labour is not only synchronical, but can also be extended diachronically. To illustrate, there is no largely clashing remembrance of the Holocaust. Rather, throughout mnemonic labour during the last century, we have (largely) come to a more coherent, narrative understanding of the historic episode of the Holocaust, its impact, and its aftermath. As such, our remembrance of the Holocaust can be called a *shared* memory. A *shared* memory is more narrative in nature, though not necessarily normative. Another good example of a shared memory is one explained in chapter 1 of this paper, namely the shared memory that the modern queer community world-wide has regarding the formation of the LGBT-movement following Stonewall in 1969. Shared memory, in this way, is also a tool for community-building.

With regards to dramatic events, however, we are in part dependent on an emotional connection to sustain such narrative *shared* memory throughout the decades as widely held.¹¹³ As events in *common* memory fade further into the past, so does emotional connection that *impersonal* (second hand-) rememberers have to said events.¹¹⁴ Such sustaining thus requires continued mnemonic labour and is in part realised through archives, (non-tainted) monuments, but also formal institutions. Once nearly all *personal* rememberers have passed and the only line to the historic episode becomes the tradition of mnemonic labour—and the canonical *shared* memory that resulted from it—the memory may become a *closed* memory, according to Margalit:

“Other historical lines to the original event may be tolerated and even welcomed as long as they confirm the version of the traditional memory,

¹¹² Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, 50-51.

¹¹³ *idem.*, 54.

¹¹⁴ *idem.*, 59.

*but they are prohibited if they contradict or conflict with the traditional line of shared memory.”*¹¹⁵

Though there are still live, personal rememberers of the events of the Holocaust, one might argue that our memory of the historic episode is creeping closer to becoming a *closed* memory in Margalit’s terms. This transition of societal remembrance is greatly relevant to the assessment of the impact of *destructive symbols*, I believe. Perhaps in ways we might not expect. Though our traditional *shared* memory of the Holocaust is still taught widely as vital to historical canon, a surge of Holocaust-denial can be found in modern conspiracy thinking and neo-*fascist* rhetoric. Even disregarding the denialists, our *shared* memory of the events of the Holocaust seems to be increasingly done away with as irrelevant to current sociopolitical phenomena, or even plainly forgotten.

I argue that this, in part, is an effect brought about by the usage of *destructive symbols* such as ‘*white genocide*’ and its likes, and that repeated utterance of such *destructive symbols* can have a pervasive impact on the way we *remember*. In the final paragraph of this chapter, combining all prior theory, I will detail such potential effects of the repetition of *destructive symbols*—which I hope will highlight the dire importance of us becoming societally more recognisant and sceptical of their usage.



§ 5.3 *The Power of Destructive Symbols*

In 1947, German linguist Viktor Klemperer wrote on totalitarian language:

*“Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed and seem to have no effect, but after some time the toxic effect is there after all.”*¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Margalit, *The Ethics of Memory*, 60.

¹¹⁶ Viktor Klemperer, Translated by A. Grigoriev. *Language of the Third Reich: A Philologist’s Notebook*, (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 1998), 25.

According to Gronskaia's analysis of Klemperer's writings throughout the rise and fall of the Third Reich, he observed that posters, leaflets, banners—or even speeches as we often think—were not the primary tools for spreading totalitarian thought.¹¹⁷ Rather, Klemperer saw that it was individual words, sentence forms and linguistic expressions that unconsciously drilled the totalitarian worldview into its users and observers through relentless repetition. Through my formulated framework, we can recognise such subtle, yet powerful language as being *destructive symbolism*, but the question still remains in part of how exactly such language harbours the power to incite the acceptance of totalitarian thought so broadly as described by Klemperer.

With my previous findings, I argue that we can deduce two specific inner-workings of *destructive symbols* in relation to inciting totalitarian *ideological* thought:

Firstly, through stringed-usage in one's environment, *destructive symbols* (as not always recognised as reductive) might have the potential of introducing to us radical worldviews normally contained within the boundaries of totalitarian *ideological* thought. Repetitive use has the potential to culturally normalise what is being said—and through repetitive observation of *destructive symbols* (which are often not seen as harmful directly as we have seen) one can subtly be introduced to a world of ideas otherwise unknown to them (e.g. totalitarian ideas implicit in certain *destructive symbols*). In this way, some *destructive symbols* can potentially act as gateways—peepholes—into totalitarian worldviews and historical narratives if their subject matter overlaps. Such is the case with 'white genocide', for example, which is used surprisingly broadly in some cases.¹¹⁸

However, as we've seen in the last paragraph, some of such worldviews are connected to particular accounts of memory. If we assume that it is possible that one can be exposed to such totalitarian ideas and worldviews

¹¹⁷ Gronskaia et al. *Totalitarian Language*. 289.

¹¹⁸ For example, late 2020 in the Netherlands, the building of *The Black Archives* organisation was vandalised with racist intent—the vandals leaving messages arguing that governmental forbiddance of blackface equals genocide. Anna Herter, Het Parool. "Pand The Black Archives in Dapperbuurt besmeurd: 'Roetveegpiet is genocide'" (December 3rd, 2020), <https://www.parool.nl/amsterdam/pand-the-black-archives-in-dapperbuurt-besmeurd-roetveegpiet-is-genocide~b5ed77e2/>, (Retrieved December 6th, 2020).

through a stringed-usage of *destructive symbols*, one is potentially then automatically also exposed to the implicit narrative *shared memories* within that *ideology*—if such a link is present. Once again, take for example the *destructive symbol* of ‘white genocide’. This *symbol* does not solely act as a representation of *fascist ideology*’s worldview (that the ‘white race’ is systematically being replaced by the ‘other’), but also as a form of *mnemonic labour* in its stringed-usage—furthering a particular view of history and shared memory through its lens and normalising repetition (e.g. the narrative shared memory that the emancipation of non-white peoples, women, and marginalised genders has destroyed ‘Judeo-Christian values’ and endangers civilisation).¹¹⁹ Mnemonic labour resulting from the active and conscious utterance of such *destructive symbols* should be seen as a destructive counterpart to organically occurring societal mnemonic labour (as described by Margalit); and all resulting *shared memories* should likewise be labelled as a false, manipulative reflection of organically formed *shared memory*. After all, these *shared memories* do not form from uniting an aggregate of representative experiences, but from aggregating false experiences sprouting from a circular, all-encompassing *ideological supersense*. Furthermore, this potential for exposing people into totalitarian worldviews and false *narrative memories* through particular language might have the effect of normalising such viewpoints more broadly—which is particularly dangerous as an effective tool for spreading totalitarian thought and behaviour.

Secondly, *destructive symbols* might hold the power to reinforce an *ideology*’s *tyranny of logicity*, as discussed in chapter 2 of this paper. As we’ve seen previously, once one has embraced such an *ideological worldview*—whether through the use of stringed destructive semiotics or otherwise—its *tyranny of logicity* gains power over them. This powerful, embedded tool of *ideological thought* is the *force majeure* that it has over its believers to follow its axioms as universally true and always inherently logical to act upon. If the supposedly universally true *supersense* is not acted upon, its believers risk contradiction of their overarching belief-system—which results in internal crisis. In this way, *destructive symbols* can potentially aid in avoiding such internal crisis through

¹¹⁹ Once again, with ‘mnemonic labour’ here is meant the continuous act where the aggregate memories of a historic episode are narratively bound as a more coherent whole.

the reinforcement of the *supersense*, through continued repetition of what is supposedly ‘known’. As such, *destructive symbols* can become part of a critical -thought-destructing mantra of sorts that the *ideology’s* community wields. The praxis of this may be found in such psychological phenomena as the saying-is-believing effect, such as researched in this context by Hirst & Echterhoff.¹²⁰ If both you and the people around you continue to repeat a certain idea implicit in the language you all use, that idea is given cultural legitimacy through its repetition alone. What is so interesting (and particularly dangerous) about this is that this human fear of inner internal logical crisis might be so great that going as far as to change our perception of the past might not be out of the question. This effect is—in part—exactly where I claim Holocaust-denialism and such phenomena stem from. After all, it seems clear that Holocaust-denialism is in itself a false *shared memory*. Such denialism, observed as ridiculously absurd and outlandish by any outsider of the totalitarian worldview, might be a way for the ideologue to escape internal crises of logicity under the *ideology’s tyranny of logicity*—an effort which can be aided through the communal repetitive use of *destructive symbols* as artefacts of the *ideology*.

To sum up these complex inner-workings, I argue that *destructive symbols* might hold the power to: **i)** subconsciously expose observers into totalitarian thought otherwise foreign to them (*destructive symbols* can thus be used as tools for the normalisation of totalitarian ideas), and **ii)** aid *ideologists* in escaping internal crises of logicity through communal, mantra-like repetition (*destructive symbols* can thus be used as tools for follower-retainment within totalitarian movements). Through these effects, *destructive symbols* could also have a dire influence on valuable *shared memories* of our time and culture, influencing how we view history and groups of people. Though this topic requires further research, these observations constitute final pressing reasons for why we should societally become more recognisant and widely sceptical of the usage of *destructive symbols* within politics, organisations, and public policy.

¹²⁰ William Hirst, and Gerald Echterhoff, “Creating shared memories in conversation: Toward a psychology of collective memory,” *Social Research: An International Quarterly*, 75:1 (2008), 183-216.

— CONCLUSION —

Throughout this paper, I hope to have shown that it is not that we are inept at recognising propaganda in any way, or that we simply are still stuck seeing it through a 20th-century lens, but that a more complete commonplace understanding of it might be needed. One not thought of primarily in terms of visual category, but tailored more towards the theoretical inclusion of (often subtle) linguistic forms of propaganda. The observation that we find ourselves in at least four parallel cultural movements of *historical crises* (in Arendtian terms)—as well as the observation that *ideological groups* rely heavily on language to further their goals—further signifies the need for this framework, as such are times when totalitarian *ideology* flourishes; something which can be seen in many troubling ways in current day. Particularly through the modern internet’s acceleration of particularly *fascism’s* potential for recruitment and organisation, language is playing an even larger role in modern *ideological* propaganda than before.

In this paper, I have primarily focussed on propagandistic *symbols* that have the potential to hamper *common sense* and (in Arendt’s understanding) with it destroy one’s capability for *representative thought* regarding nuanced understandings of lived experiences of both ‘us’ and the ‘other’. I have formulated the primary shared characteristics of *destructive signs* to be *affective*, *reductive* of actual lived-experiences, and implicitly *divisive* in regards to groups—formulating a framework through which such *destructive signs* (including linguistic *symbols*) can be recognised actively, not just retroactively through highly theoretical lenses. I have also argued that the danger of normalisation of such *signs*, particularly *symbols*, should not be understood through their psychological effects, but primarily as a cultural phenomenon occurring more easily in times of *historical crisis*. Though certain groups might be more receptive to *destructive signs* than others, I argued this doesn’t under-mine the political dangers as cultural normalisation of *destructive signs* might hamper Arendtian *common sense* for certain groups, complicating political discourse collectively.

I have also argued that what a repeated communal usage of these *destructive signs* wreaks might not simply be blindness to nuance, but that it might also potentially leave the possibility of deconstruction of societally accepted *shared memory* through *ideologists'* inherent fear of internal-contradiction under the *ideology's tyranny of logicity*. Though this topic in particular warrants further research, I hope to have shown the profound impact that the societal allowance of *destructive symbols* can potentially wreak. My goal here was to show the problematic interplay at hand, yet I hope more scholarly work revolving this topic will be done regarding modern examples of *destructive symbols*.

Similarly, while I don't propagate to have formulated a necessarily perfect framework for recognising *destructive signs*, I do believe mine is useful and pragmatic in its current form. As such, I would invite any scholar to challenge and improve upon this framework, as long as its use remains pragmatic enough for policy-making and organisational ethics—lest it becomes unwieldy. After all, I would aim the plight demonstrated in this paper at governmental instances, corporations and other organisations. I believe it is primarily through the adoption of a pragmatic framework such as mine in organisational policy that change can be made regarding our societal capability in combatting *destructive signs* top-down. Even if this paper only serves as a 'back of the mind' reminder of the dangers of such *signs*, something has been achieved, I believe.

That being said, simply being aware of the phenomena detailed in this paper is not sufficient in the long run, I fear. Ultimately, it might turn out that we need to pursue a language in our political and organisational sphere ridden of *destructive symbols*. The absence of such a political language might: **i)** continue to give a sense of public legitimacy to the proliferation of *destructive symbols* and their users, but mainly **ii)** allow for more unimpeded movement of *ideological* (particularly *fascist*) beliefs within the political sphere—as it will share in such belief's preferred terminology. This fear could prove unfounded, however, as the power of radical progressive critique has been underestimated before, as shown in chapter 1 of this paper. Such radical critique of language

and the power-struggles surrounding it have the potential to dramatically deepen our perspectives—something which Schwartz also notes in the concluding remarks of his analysis of Arendt.¹²¹ I sincerely hope this paper has served a role in such a movement and that the insights garnered here can serve to further such efforts in the future.

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¹²¹ Schwartz, *Political Judgment Confronts Ideology*, 511.

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