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MYTHS, RADICAL RIGHT MEANING – MAKING, AND THE QUESTION OF THE FUTURE

Abstract: This paper sheds light on semiotic mechanisms that reinforce myths surrounding nationalistically motivated hateful speech communicated by radical right communities and organizations. By drawing on futures studies, I further present considerations regarding ways it can counter the type of meaning-making that characterizes myths of the radical right, and consequently hateful speech. Examples I focus on are meant to be illustrative and revolve around the *Za dom spremni* salute, the World War Two Ustaša legacy, and the 1990s Croatian War of Independence. The paper predominantly concentrates on the semiotic mechanisms of myths of the radical right and offers preliminary considerations regarding the potential of futures studies to counter radical right meaning-making tendencies.

Keywords: meaning-making, futures studies, myths, the radical right

Introduction

The reinforcement of symbols tied to the controversial World War Two Ustaša legacy is best reflected in various instances of the radical right's use of the *Za dom spremni* salute (see, for example Pavlaković 2019; Brentin 2016; Blanuša and Kulenović 2018). While reaching a consensus regarding definitions of right-wing parties still remains (see Mudde 2007), the most prevalent terms are the extreme right and the radical right, while the latter seems to provide relative precision in relying on specific definitions (Norris 2005; see also Veselinović 2016). Accordingly, I will be referring to the radical right throughout this paper.

As Vedran Obućina writes, constituent elements of the radical right in Croatia "are an emphasis on the Ustaša movement during the Second World War, the creation of a strong state with an authoritarian character, territorial expansion of Croatia to its ethnic borders, especially vis-à-vis the Serbs, and a messianic mission of the Croatian nation as a bulwark of Catholic Christianity" (2012, 2). In recent years, a growing rise of nationalism in Croatia has been reflected

in the defense and praise of the Ustaša regime and its belonging insignia (see ECRI 2018). Communicated by a variety of actors and groups, nationalistically motivated hateful speech finds itself intertwined with post-conflict narratives of nation-building through music (Vladisavljević 2020), football (Brentin 2016), public commemorations (Pavlaković, Brentin and Pauković 2018), and online social networks (Damčević and Rodik 2018), among others.

This paper presents two myths that are commonly associated with the *Za dom spremni* salute in radical right-wing circles. Since the myths are introduced primarily as illustrative examples, the paper then proceeds to focus on the logic of meaning-making characteristic for radical-right groups and organizations. Namely, the central concept in this context is autocommunication; a semiotic mechanism that helps explain how certain messages are reinforced and consequently used to maintain symbolic boundaries between particular groups and communities. Autocommunication generally helps maintain an established system of signification – values, norms, habits, memories – of an individual or collective. However, in the case of *enclosed* autocommunication that has been outlined as one of the dominant features of radical right meaning-making (see, e.g. Madisson and Ventsel 2016; Damčević 2021), the main function is to preserve existing boundaries *without* acknowledging difference and by extension, the perceived *other*. Furthermore, and from a cultural semiotics perspective, myths are inseparable from autocommunication; as emphasized by Lotman (1990), myths serve an important social function by organizing the semiotic space of the listener and preserving a particular worldview (see also Sememenko 2012).

Myths and mythical texts do not usually provide new information, but rather perform a mnemonic function by serving as a catalyst of memory that provokes autocommunication (Lotman 2000). In the context of radical right meaning-making, this process functions as a closed cycle by reinforcing existing messages and maintaining the established order. This closed loop is essentially concerned with survival – namely, the survival of the earlier mentioned signification system (i.e. a person's or group's semiotic space) – reflected in the active neglect of the future. More specifically, the future is acknowledged solely for the purpose of reinforcing a present state and an existing signification system.[1] This paper takes a step further when it comes to the relevance of

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[1] In more extreme forms of this practice, violence can be justified through so-called *future-bias* that anticipates future goods that will be accrued through violence, such as through the elimination of perceived threats. As explained by Maynard and Benesch, the future goods can be basic and range from "ensuring that no out-group dare threaten the in-

the future for educating about and countering political myths, and in doing so, provides preliminary considerations concerning ways of actively engaging with potential futures in post-conflict contexts.

Myths associated with the *Za dom spremni* salute

The *Za dom spremni* salute – the official salute of the WWII Ustaša regime – symbolizes rigorous racial laws and genocidal policies that targeted minority communities in WWII. Numerous Serbs, Jews, Roma, and antifascists were murdered, with the Jasenovac concentration camp remaining among the most contested sites to date (see Mataušić 2003; Pavlaković 2019). Being banned during socialist Yugoslavia, the salute reappeared during the 1990s Yugoslav wars when it was used by HOS paramilitaries – the Croatian Defense Forces (*Hrvatske obrambene snage*) – and popularized through right-wing politics (Brentin 2016; see also Milekić 2020). One consequence of the salute's use during the 1990s war is its subsequent intertwinement with the Croatian war narrative – referred to also as the Homeland War myth (Jović 2017) – that acknowledges the war as solely defensive and just and the war veterans as creators of the independent state (see Jović 2017; Sokolić 2019). Tied to the Homeland War myth, any criticism of the salute is perceived as an attack on the official war narrative by members of radical right parties and communities.

The second myth commonly associated with the salute is that it is actually an old Croatian salute and as such, its primary association cannot be established with the Ustaša regime. As Dario Brentin outlines, there are certain versions of the salute that do date back to the sixteenth century; however, it is not the same phrase (2016, 4). Certain historical events have been relevant for radical right communities to anchor their preferred meaning of the salute. One of them is the 1566 Battle of Szigetvár, when Nikola Šubić Zrinski – a Croatian-Hungarian nobleman and general – supposedly cried out "For home(land), now into battle!". A few centuries later another Croatian nobleman used it with the purpose of motivating his soldiers; in this instance the salute was modified into "For the home(land)", with the troops answering "ready to die." However, the popularity of the salute among the wider public, as emphasized by Brentin, increased through the opera *Nikola Šubić Zrinski* composed in 1867, where a widespread myth claims that *Za dom*

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group again, promising that military victory in a campaign will be achieved through extreme violence, or anticipating economic or scientific benefits from atrocities (2016, 85).

spremni originates from the aria *U boj, u boj* (To battle, to battle) and consequently predates its "misuse" by the Ustaša regime.

Myths and the question of meaning-making

Myths have various functions and can take up many forms (see, e.g. Segal 2004; Gavrilović and Perica 2011), while their importance for the strengthening of different signification frameworks should not be underestimated. As Lotman points out, one of the main purposes of myths is to organize the world of the recipient/listener, which makes them closely tied with the personal semiotic space: "Myths always say something about me" (1990, 153). This becomes especially relevant in the context of meaning-making of the radical-right; myths (and mythological texts) serve an important social function by helping preserve a specific worldview (Lotman 1990; Semenenko 2012). It should be noted that any text – understood here in the widest sense as any meaningful unit relevant for a given community – can serve the mythological function if it is interpreted as a model of reality.

However, what does autocommunication have to do with myths and mythological texts? In comparison to the I – s/he communication, where the aim lies in the exchange of information between at least two interlocutors, the I - I communication is the act of communicating with oneself (Lotman 1990). What Lotman aims to emphasize in the context of the I-I model of communication (i.e. autocommunication) is that the act of communicating with oneself is also dialogic and that autocommunication underpins the maintenance and transformation of identity (Lotman 1990; see also Pummeister 2018). While in the case of I – s/he communication the act is essentially an exchange of messages shared by the interlocutors, the I – I communication is the act of sending a message to oneself, which consequently means that the message is already known to that person and/or group; it is a process in which the code or context shift. As Puumeister points out, this means that "a single message could be repeated in different contexts and be interpretable based on multiple codes, during which the meaning of the message transforms" (2018, 95). As such, autocommunication opens the possibility of identity transformation – be it on the individual or collective level – but it can also be used for the maintenance and stabilization of identity, which is consequently solidified. This type of autocommunication has been characterized as enclosed, meaning that its main functions are maintaining the existing order, *us* and *them* boundaries, and

forming associations based on predetermined meanings (Madisson and Ventsel, 2016; see also Damčević 2021).

Since myths more widely and mythological texts specifically serve the function of reaffirming a particular worldview, they are inseparable from autocommunicative processes. A particular danger behind myths that reinforce enclosed meaning-making is reflected in symbols due to their ease of dissemination and adjustment to different cultural contexts and situations; as such, they become efficient carriers of exclusionary signification practices such as hate speech and the use of contested symbols.

Further, and as pointed out by Semenenko, myths constitute the core of certain microcultural elements – often subcultures – that are characterized by a hermetic organization (2012, 62). Essentially, a hermetic organization is reflected in the process of maintaining rigid boundaries and a strong tendency towards *othering*. This kind of hermetic organization is characteristic for various radical-right wing communities, which focus not on the production of new messages – establishing dialogue and exchange – but rather on the preservation of the existing order that does not allow for the enshrined meanings to be challenged.

Two aspects are relevant to point out here. When it comes to maintaining meanings and referencing myths that are in some way deemed relevant for a particular community, the semiotic logic of inclusion-exclusion becomes prevalent. This dynamic is manifested in the above mentioned attempt to anchor and justify the *Za dom spremni* salute as an old Croatian salute, when different fragments of meaning are connected into a seemingly coherent whole. Moreover, the specific version of the salute used during the Ustaša regime functions as a semiotic condenser that serves the function of condensing ideas and narratives that ultimately fuel its dominant meanings.

An element that further reinforces hermetic meaning-making among radical right-wing individuals and communities is a strong tendency towards presentism; a regime of historicity encapsulated in "the sense that only the present exists, a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of an unending now" (Hartog 2015, xv). Since the main purpose of hermetic meaning-making of the radical right is the maintenance of rigid boundaries and established meanings, a tendency towards presentism manifests through the condition of the past and the future being important solely for the sake of the present (see also Puumeister 2018).

Our stories make who we are. In the words of Anna Maria Lorusso, "nobody describes him/herself as contradictory; in their eyes every semiotic subject is coherent" (2015, 74). Whether

aware of it or not, we all strive for our semiotic space – our sphere of meanings and ultimately our self-image – to maintain stability and coherency. We feel threatened and uncertain when something that is tightly associated with our semiotic space becomes challenged or even radically disrupted. Semiotics of culture helps explain precisely this dynamic logic of attempting to maintain established meanings as well as the importance of differing perspectives for learning and the generation of new meanings. In the end, we learn through difference, not sameness, regardless of whether the point of reference is an individual or collective.

Meaning-making and futures studies

The future is inherently unpredictable and uncertain, which might be one reason why it is harder to actively and explicitly consider questions such as: How do we think about the future and what kind of future do we actually want? What are some procedures that we rely on when doing so? At any given time, what are the alternative courses of action available to us? Futures studies is a field of inquiry focused on the systematic and explicit thinking about alternative futures; it aims to demystify the future and increase people's agency in approaching and constructing various future scenarios (Bell 2009 [1997], 2).

Thinking about the future is certainly not a new practice and conceptions about time and the future date back to human prehistory (for a thorough overview, see Bell 2009 [1997]; also, Bishop and Hines 2012). As an academic endeavor, the origin of futures studies can be traced back to the 1960s and 1970s; the period is not a coincidence since more concrete investigations into the future arose after WWII in the form of strategic planning, technological forecasting, economic analysis, and the creation of first mayor think tanks (Masini 2002; Hicks 2007). Heonju Sun (2015) provides a concise sketch of Futures Studies while focusing on three main periods: the first phase – mid-20th century – focused on scientific and technological progress; the second phase that was increasingly concerned with global visions of the future and the equally global business interests; and the third phase beginning in the 1990s and characterized by a fragmentation of views of the future, reflected in the prevalence of neoliberal institutions and worldviews.

As pointed out by Hicks, being clear about what we want in life and what we want to say 'yes' to is equally relevant as knowing what we want to say 'no' to (2007, 171). The future, accordingly, functions as an empty space where we are able to assign a multiplicity of meanings and consider multiple paths and scenarios. More often than not, however, we do not explicitly

engage with what kind of future we want, why we want it, and how we could get there. At the same time, the point of futures studies – and futures thinking specifically – is not to come up with a grand plan (or plans) with the purpose of predicting specific outcomes. The 'future' cannot be predicted nor can it be studied because:

> *the future does not exist. Futures studies does not – or should not – pretend to study the future. It studies ideas about the future (what I usually call 'images of the future') which each individual and group has (often holding several conflicting images at one time)* (Dator 1996, xix-xx).

Therefore, one of the main tasks of futures studies is to identify and examine diverse alternative futures as images of the future that individuals and communities operate with. In order for this to happen in the most efficient manner possible, futures studies have the task of facilitating individuals and groups "in formulating, implementing, and re-envisioning their preferred future" (xix-xx).

Creating alternative futures

Actively engaging with potential futures is relevant for any individual and collective. Not only does this ensure a sense of agency, but also a level of openness and preparedness, both of which are crucial for people being active co-creators of their lives (see Inayatullah 2008). The need to engage with – and create – potential futures becomes even more prominent in the context of post-conflict societies where the centrality of formative myths and narratives takes center stage. Rather than shifting efforts towards imagining what society should (and could) be like – and taking concrete steps towards achieving specific goals – the saturation with memory and practices of remembrance pose a danger reflected in perpetuating narratives of the past. Surely, we cannot discuss the future without learning from the past, but a simple fact remains: the future(s) present a blank slate of meanings waiting to be imprinted on. Those meanings are not imprinted through a fixation on the past, rather through the process of learning from – and acknowledging – the past in order to act more wisely and responsibly in the present and while doing so, creating a more desirable image of the future along with strategies for achieving it.

  In order to shape more favorable and inclusive futures, it is necessary to create stories that support such change and challenge signification frameworks that are predominantly hermetic and

exclusive. Ivana Milojević argues precisely for the latter when she discusses the relevance of emancipatory futures narratives that can play a notable role in healing traumatic pasts (2017, 13). This can be done by employing various tools of futures ideas in formal and informal education, where futures studies encounter particularly fruitful ground (see, e.g. Bishop and Hines 2012; Hicks 2007). While contemporary education predominantly does focus on current and prevailing issues, actively exploring preferred alternative states that need to be worked towards tend to remain neglected (Hicks 2007). Addressing current issues – be it radical right movements, hate speech, and nationalism – and analyzing underlying causes and mechanisms – does not accomplish much in the long run. Namely, being aware of something is not the same as actually doing something about it and actively engaging in creating steps for changing it, regardless how small those might seem.

One way of doing so are the so-called 'futures workshops' developed by Robert Jungk in the 1960s. The purpose of futures workshops was to help people develop ideas and projects that could lead to a better society, while it was observed that those usually arose from personal, local, or regional concerns (Jungk and Müllert 1987). Jungk developed a participatory process that consisted of the four following phases: **a) critique**, which includes the collection of complaints and criticisms about the immediate problem; **b) fantasy**, which includes various processes such as brainstorming or scenario planning in order to generate a series of 'utopian schemes' that might resolve the problem; **c) implementation**, in which the most popular suggestions are identified and checked for applicability; and **d) follow-up**, in which detailed action plans are reviewed and finalized (Jungk and Müllert 1987; see also Hicks 2007).

Radical right meaning-making and futures studies

Rather than the reinforcement of existing meanings and the maintenance of established boundaries between *us* and *them* – largely grounded in myths and narratives of the past – futures studies (in the widest sense) includes the exploration of alternative futures, with specific focus on investigating and challenging existing worldviews and mythologies that underlie those futures. Gaining more in-depth insight into the established worldviews and mythologies of a given society and/or community is crucial since it sheds light on the underlying systems of meaning-making that either facilitate or hinder the creation of competing images of the future. With the limited (or often

non-existent) tendency towards openness to alternatives and multiple perspectives reflected in radical right thinking, futures studies can help counter said thinking in some of the following ways.

Firstly, investing in futures studies initiatives in education helps increase a sense of agency among the youth, increase their capacity for futures thinking and acknowledging alternatives, as well as learning about the past in order to act responsibly in the present and take concrete steps towards common and individual goals[2]. Actively engaging with the future while considering multiple paths and alternatives helps increase a sense of purpose and community, both of which are crucial in today's rapidly changing world and heightened uncertainty to which the youth are particularly vulnerable. The quest for meaning and a sense of belonging are likely to lead more vulnerable individuals into various extremist circles. Addressing this head-on by providing a space for the exploration and development of alternatives and hopeful futures scenarios might help mitigate the tendency in the long run.

Secondly, exploring the capacity for futures thinking along with potential images of the future among extreme-right members can further help shed light on ways how they construct meaning and consequently justify their actions in the present.

Last but not least, when it comes to creating and exploring competing images of the future, the normative implications of futures studies should be accounted for. Namely, as with cultural memory and practices of remembrance, the future can become intertwined within diverse power dynamics and competing interests and agendas. Questions such as *who* is advocating for a particular image of the future and *why* should not be neglected. Moreover, considering *who* is provided with the space for voicing images of the future is of vital importance, since the purpose of imagining and constructing futures images should not be to impose one dominant version. It is rather to open the space for the creation and circulation of various images of the future and finding common ground in order to act towards more desirable and probable ones.

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[2] The concept of *destination identity* advanced by Demneh and Morgan (2018) was developed in order to examine the role of futures images in the formation of identity. In so doing, the authors propose viewing society "like a ship moving towards a common destination, based upon its image of the future and cohesive social identity rather than somewhat-fractured / somewhat-shared ethnic, racial, linguistic, cultural, and historical identities" (52).

Zaključak: Autorka je u ovom radu osvjetlila jedan dio semiotičkih mehanizama koji jačaju mitove o nacionalistički motiviranom govoru mržnje koji prenose radikalno desne organizacije i stranke. Ističući mogućnosti budućih izučavanja ove teme, autorka iznosi razmatranja o načinima na koji se može suprotstaviti tipu stvaranja značenja koji karakteriziraju mitove radikalne desnice, a time i govor mržnje. Primjeri na koje se fokusira u ovome radu trebaju biti ilustrativni, a poglavito su prikazani oni oko pozdrava "Za dom spremni", ustaškog naslijeđa iz Drugog svjetskog rata i Domovinskog rata iz 1990 -ih. Rad se pretežito koncentrira na semiotičke mehanizme mitova o radikalnoj desnici i nudi preliminarna razmatranja u vezi s potencijalom budućih studija da se suprotstave radikalnim desničarskim tendencijama.

Ključne riječi: stvaranje značenja, buduće studije, mitovi, radikalna desnica

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