

1 ARTICLE

2 Savage Thought and Totalitarianism

3 Rainer E. Zimmermann¹

4 ¹ Lehrgebiet UIG, FB 2 (Informatik), HTW Berlin /
5 Clare Hall, UK – Cambridge
6 rainer.zimmermann@hm.edu

7

8 **Abstract:** In order to clarify some more concepts, we start by classifying some forms of populism
9 and visualize them as precursors of totalitarianism. It goes without saying that media control or at
10 least media domination (especially in this recent age of digitalization) becomes important within
11 this context, because the Turing galaxy follows essentially the development of the Gutenberg
12 galaxy, but at the same time, quite different from the latter, it multiplies, enhances, and accelerates
13 anonymous data pressure that alters the quality of the ongoing discourse. This is what we would
14 like to discuss here in more detail by also asking for a possibly anthropological principle that
15 underlies these developments.

16 *This paper is an extended and revised version of a talk given at is4si2017, Chalmers University Göteborg,*
17 *Netizens Section, in June 2017.*

18 **Keywords:** discourse, communication, media, anthropology, political philosophy

19

20 1. Introduction: Preliminary Remarks & Motivation

21 „When I use a word“, Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, „it means just what I choose
22 it to mean – neither more nor less.“

23 „The question is“, said Alice, „whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.“

24 „The question is“, said Humpty Dumpty, „which is to be master – that’s all.“

25 *Lewis Carroll: Through the Looking Glass, Penguin edition, 1980, 274*

26

27 „I stand before you as a representative of the American people to deliver a message of friendship
28 and hope and love.“

29 *President Trump to the 2017 Arab-Islamic-American Summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.*

30

31 “I love the people in this room. I love Israel. I love Israel. I’ve been with Israel so long in terms of – –
32 I’ve received some of my greatest honors from Israel, my father before me, incredible. My daughter,
33 Ivanka, is about to have a beautiful Jewish baby.”

34 *Trump in AIPAC speech, 2016*

35

36 „It is a great honor to be here with all of my friends. So amazing + will Never Forget!“

37 *Trump at Yad Vashem, 2017*

38 One point of clarification first: Sometimes it is argued that “populism” would be a misled
39 signification, because, in principle, *all politicians* would have the objective to be “populist” after all.
40 However, this is not quite true: The average politician, in order to be re-elected, should be *popular*
41 *rather than populist*. The former points to a politician who cares for the good of his or her electors and
42 tries to find appropriate compromises that can be realized within the governing political discourse.
43 While the latter points to a politician who merely *pretends to care* for the good of the electors by
44 adopting topics of which he or she thinks that they are relevant for many people at the time and by
45 reflecting these topics in ongoing discussions, independent of their precise meaning, consistency, and

46 possible use. In the first case, what is activated is primarily *rational thinking*. In the second case, what
 47 is activated is primarily *emotional tendency*, mainly based on socialized pre-dispositions. In the first
 48 case, political communication is essentially *strategic*, while in the second case, it is essentially *tactical*.
 49 In this sense, one is dealing with *what is actually the case*, the other one is dealing more with *what is felt*
 50 *to be desirable*. Obviously, the first needs *reflexion on facts* therefore, the second needs *imagination*. Thus
 51 populism turns out to be *apparent* (feigned) popularity. Hence, we can legitimately keep the
 52 expression (populism) for the purposes of this present paper.

53 *

54 In order to clarify some more concepts, we start by classifying some forms of populism and visualize
 55 them as precursors of totalitarianism. Essentially, there are four main types of populism as received
 56 by the public described in the following:

57 **Types of Populism as Precursors of Totalitarianism**

58 Passive Choice Behaviour According to Disposition and Public Discourse (communicated in figures
 59 of everyday speech) [and mediated bottom-up]

60 Passive Choice in Elections According to Populist Propaganda (movements, parties) [bottom-up]

61 Active Participation in movements and/or political parties [bottom-up]

62 Active Radicalization (Ideology, Terror) [bottom-up]

63 We can notice here that all these types are basically organized in a bottom-up manner, and they
 64 spontaneously emerge within a set of boundary conditions reflecting the pre-dispositions available.
 65 Hence, the *habitus* dominating a local field (by somewhat adopting the terminology of Bourdieu's) is
 66 responsible for the pre-dispositions of a social group, but whether or not this group selects its
 67 behaviour from the available choices (and in particular, to which degree of choice ranging from
 68 passivity to activity, from merely uttering opinions to finally damage persons) depends on the
 69 explicit structure of boundary conditions that are the outcome of the present historical evolution. The
 70 four types mentioned belong to the preparatory conditions of populism that eventually extend from
 71 local movements to the whole state and, by doing so, imply a manifold of possible transitions into
 72 some form of actual dictatorship:

73 **From groups to institutions: nation states.**

74 Dictatorships already achieved [top-down]

75 Democratic states on the way to dictatorship [bottom-up]

76 Here a top-down version as opposed to a bottom-up version signifies the final state of the given
 77 evolution. If we look around on our planet, then there are very many countries that can be classified
 78 as actual dictatorships of one or the other form, and most of them have always been in that state – as
 79 measured in terms of the experiential life-time of present (critical) observers. *But also, recently, more*
 80 *and more countries that are more or less democratically organized tend to become dictatorships by public choice.*
 81 This is not only the case in Asia, Africa, or Latin America, but also in the United States (most recently),
 82 and in the European Union. *It is this second type of "nationalizing" populism which is most dangerous after*
 83 *all.* It goes without saying that media control or at least media domination (especially in this recent
 84 age of digitalization) becomes important within this context, because the Turing galaxy follows
 85 essentially the development of the Gutenberg galaxy, but at the same time, quite different from the
 86 latter, it multiplies, enhances, and accelerates anonymous data pressure that alters the quality of the
 87 ongoing discourse. This is what we would like to discuss here in more detail by also asking for a

88 possibly anthropological principle that underlies these developments, independent of the exterior
89 conditions such as the technological state of media and so forth.

90

91 2. Introductory Example Syria: A Study in Political Complexity

92 We shortly look at the present [as of Spring 2017] situation in Syria in order to clarify the
93 quantitative and qualitative aspects of what we have mentioned above. In Syria, we can identify
94 about 14 immediate actors (or agents) within a confrontation network of political interactions.
95 Obviously, these interactions change according to rational and (apparently) irrational actions to be
96 taken.

97 Following a New York Times report, we can state that on the morning of 4th April, there was a
98 Sarin gas attack on Khan Skeikhoun. Quickly, the Assad regime was charged with being responsible
99 for this attack. While having a meeting with King Abdullah II of Jordan and President Xi Jinping of
100 China, US President Trump ordered a retaliation, and the Russian command on location was
101 informed in advance on short notice. On 6th April, at 7.40 p.m., a Tomahawk missile attack on Al
102 Sharyat airfield took place.

103 Despite the seemingly linear action taken (Syria attacks, the US punish), the analysis of the
104 original incident looks much more complex:

105

106 Possibility A: Syrians have hold back Sarin gas from former times and used it then in an air
107 strike. (Did the Russians know?)

108 Possibility B: Syrians have hold back Sarin gas that had been recovered by one of the rebels
109 group which used it for producing confusion. (Then not by air strike.)

110 Possibility C: One of the numerous other (rebel) groups produced Sarin gas and used it. (Ditto.
111 And could they actually achieve this?)

112 Possibility D: Turkey provided Al Nusra with Sarin gas who used it then, but not by air strike.
113 (Remember the case of Can Dündar.)

114 [to be continued ...]

115

116 What we notice is that it is virtually impossible to clarify the case completely, mainly, because
117 the number of un-re-assessable possibilities is rather large. *The adequate strategy to be taken in such cases*
118 *would be to search for the largest plausibility.* One important criterion is thus the past frequency of similar
119 incidents. And we should ask for the means and occasions available. Obviously, if dealing with an
120 explicit air strike, given the fact that in former times, gas had been used in attacks by the Syrian
121 government, the most plausible answer points to Syria. (Note: We would argue, with a certain
122 amount of plausibility that this points to Syria rather than Russia, but on the other hand, what is the
123 plausibility attached then to the possible originator of the nerve agent attack on father and daughter
124 Skripal in Salisbury?)

125

126 3. Savage Thinking (Lévi-Strauss)

127

128 In order to illuminate somewhat the anthropological foundations of the above-mentioned,
129 primarily of the *intrinsic antipathy against complex boundary conditions* which seriously restrict the
130 hermeneutic capacity of humans, we will discuss here aspects of what is usually called "savage
131 thinking". And we take as a first, provisional definition that *savage thinking* visualized as a kind of
132 untamed human thought can be defined as a type of reflexion that continually gathers and applies
133 structures wherever they can be used. If scientific thought is represented by asking questions and
134 trying to design an adequate, if not optimal or complete, solution, *savage thought* resembles the work
135 of the *bricoleur* (the "tinkerer") who constructs things using whatever is at hand. This concept, dating

136 back to Claude Lévi-Strauss, is explained by himself in terms of a famous example given in his paper
137 on “The Sorcerer and his Magic” (1949). [In: id.: Structural Anthropology, vol. 1 (1958)¹]:
138

139 After a young man of the Zuni in New Mexico had grasped for the hands of a young woman, she collapsed.
140 The man was accused of applying magic what he first denied. But because the people did not believe him, and
141 the death penalty was immanent, he then admitted the deed and performed a complicated ritual entering a state
142 of trance. Then he said he (and she) would be cured now. But during the night he tried to escape and was re-
143 captured and once-more charged with magic. This time he admitted again, telling a lengthy story, and said his
144 magical power would rest on a set of magical feathers in his possession. The judges asked him to show them.
145 He led them to his house, but could not find any feathers for a long while, apologizing for not having used them
146 recently. Finally he found a very small, old feather behind a wall covering, and he presented it proudly, saying
147 at the same time that now he would have lost his magical power completely. In the following assembly he
148 repeated his story with many more details. And the judges were composed now and discharged him.
149

150 Lévi-Strauss comments: „We realize that the accused does not achieve his discharge by
151 exculpating himself, but by admitting his supposed deed – even more: he improves his situation by
152 presenting different versions of the deed, one always more detailed and embellished than the other.
153 The judges do not expect that he contests a thesis nor that he disproves any facts, they instead demand
154 him *to confirm a system*.“ As Mario Erdheim supplements: „An essential function of magical rituals
155 [of healing] is therefore to assert the community its omnipotence within its centre. [...] This
156 omnipotence results in a loss of autonomy for the individual who exchanges for this shelter and a
157 feeling of security. Without such a group contact the individual is hardly viable.“

158 In other words: *The logical foundation of savage thinking is in the confirmation of a given system rather*
159 *than in the exploration of actual facts*. The idea is not to understand the world *as it is*, but to comply with
160 what the majority of the reference group is believing. Obviously, this is the same when talking about
161 the basic elements of religion, or of esoteric thinking as to that. In a sense, we can visualize this as the
162 social (and political) function of savage thinking. Hence, we could also legitimately speak of “magic”
163 or “mythological” thinking. Modern and more recent examples of this are numerous cases which are
164 discussed from time to time in the relevant public media: such as the story of the Knights Templars,
165 the existence of witches, the story of the Holy Grail (see e.g. Baigent, Leigh, Lincoln, 1982; and
166 notoriously: Dan Brown, 2003, 2006), the equally notorious Protocols of the Sages of Zion (published
167 first in 1903 in Russian, then demonstrated to be a fake in 1921 by The Times), various stories related
168 to what is called ufology (famous for its impact in the radio play by Orson Welles, 1938), or related
169 to an alleged faking of the Moon Landing (invented probably by Kaysing, 1976), or stories about the
170 interaction of mobile phones with cosmic radiation (Ghana, 2008), conspiracy theories related to the
171 events around 9/11, and so on, and so forth. Umberto Eco’s novel “Foucault’s Pendulum” (1989) is a
172 good illustration of all of this (the difference being that the latter is also funny and entertaining).²

173 Hence, the common aspect is always that there is a [usually syncretistic] world view derived
174 from a closed system of thinking with its own logic that abandons empirically verifiable facts. This
175 closed view within a context of closed collective subjectivity is indeed magical. And it possesses the
176 obvious function to relieve the group from the burden of increased complexity in the ongoing
177 interaction with its environment.
178

179 **Note on „Political Correctness“**

180 Visualized in the sense of what has been said above, we can realize that the behaviour
181 introduced as “politically correct” is also an example of savage thinking indeed, because “political
182 correctness” implies that there could be an absolute (context-independent) meaning of words
183 associated with one uniquely correct formulation. There is also implicit a striving for conceptual

¹ We quote and paraphrase here according to the German edition (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M., ²1981, 187 sqq.)

² Note that shortly before publication of this novel, the secret lodge P2 (= Propaganda Due) was indeed unveiled that had been active from 1887 through 1944 in Italy, and came to an end not before 1981.

184 “purenness” pointing to a language hygiene common in right-wing conceptions. Obviously,
185 something like this cannot actually exist at all. On the other hand, it is “political correctness” that
186 aims at an equi-distribution of the value of different opinions and beliefs in order to dispose of any
187 inherent ranking in arguments. However, this is also a conceptual error: There is no reasonable
188 argument that stands against the priority of scientific results and insight derived from them.
189 Democracy guarantees the right to always utter what one thinks, but it does not guarantee that what
190 one thinks is always right. Because facticity is much more than personal opinion. Hence, an
191 essentially good idea in the first place (to look for the correctness of language) has been more and
192 more perverted to an instrument of language hygiene.

193 A recent example from politics shows how savage thought based on „alternative facts“ can be
194 rejected in time by a political correctness which is understood in its original sense, when president
195 Obama attacks during the 2011 White House correspondents dinner. Cf.
196 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k8TwRmX6zs4>

197

198 4. Reading Capital (Althusser)

199

200 In Marxist theory, the discursive aspects discussed here are directly referred to the process of
201 scientific investigation itself. We can see this in Althusser with respect to economics. The starting
202 point for Althusser’s approach is the mis-conception of hermeneutic techniques, if applied within the
203 framework of a given ideological viewpoint that is not quite consistent when compared with the
204 “state of the art”. Hence, explicitly parallel worlds can be encountered according to the chosen
205 perspective of interpretation. I paraphrase here: “What the classical political economy does not see is
206 not really what it does not see, but it is indeed *what it sees*; it is not what is missing, but on the contrary
207 *it is what is not missing*, it is not what it falls short of, but on the contrary *what it does not fall short of*.
208 The error is in not seeing what one actually sees: This error does not refer to the object, it refers to
209 seeing itself. The error is one that concerns seeing itself: the non-seeing is thus something which is in
210 the interior of seeing, this is a form of seeing itself and is hence in a necessary relationship to seeing.”³

211 This hermeneutic approach can be straightforwardly applied to other fields, too. In particular, it
212 is also true for the field of public communication, especially with a view to modern digital media.
213 This figure of not seeing what one actually sees has been discussed in detail within the theories of
214 semiology (semiotics) and psycho-analysis in the French tradition. What we learn from this is
215 essentially that the type of savage (or magic or mythological) thinking mentioned here is part of what
216 in the terminology of existentialism had been called “mauvaise foi” (insincerity or bad faith) before:
217 It is the person’s *choice of a conceptual context* that serves a hermeneutic interpretation of his or her
218 own situation compatible with what has been imagined as the person’s individual project before.
219 Usually, this results in a considerable reduction of complexity, because, obviously, this chosen
220 context is the more stable, the less complex it is. Hence, the aversion against observable complexity.⁴

221

222 5. Totalitarianism (Arendt)

223

224 It is interesting to note that in her famous book, Hannah Arendt⁵ follows a very similar line of
225 argument when describing the origins of totalitarianism: She differentiates the developmental phases
226 of Antisemitism (Jews are visualized as supporters of the state that cannot be controlled), Imperialism
227 (downfall of colonialism) – including the emergence of “Pan Movements”, Total Governance

³ I quote (and translate) here from the New German edition: Louis Althusser et al., *Das Kapital lesen* [Reading Capital (1965 sqq.)], ed. F. O. Wolf et al., Westfälisches Dampfboot, Münster, 2015, 31 sq.

⁴ See for more details Rainer E. Zimmermann: *Diskursive Aberration als Grundlage des Gelingens*. In: Hans Feger, Manuela Hackel (eds.), *Existenzphilosophie und Ethik*, de Gruyter, Berlin, Boston, 2014, 355-368.

⁵ Hannah Arendt: *Elemente und Ursprünge totaler Herrschaft*. [The Origins of Totalitarianism](1951) Piper, München, Berlin, Zürich, 2016.

228 (downfall of the national state, end of human rights, downfall of class society), and Mob & Elite that
229 co-operate temporarily in order to establish an institutionalized apparatus forming terror as a new
230 form of state (propaganda is functioning as an instrument to prepare this).
231 She formulates with a view to this propaganda: „The main difficulty of totalitarian propaganda is
232 that it cannot fulfil the yearning [nostalgia] of the masses for a consequent, comprehensible, and
233 predictable development without coming into conflict with common sense. [...] It is as if the masses
234 would demand for a permanent repetition of the Septuaginta’s miracle that reports that seventy
235 disjoint translators achieved an identical Greek translation of the Old Testament.“ And she continues:
236 „This *possessed blindness* which is characteristic for the escape of the masses from actuality into a self-
237 consistent fictitious world corresponds to their homelessness within a world where they cannot exist
238 anymore, because the anarchic coincidence in the shape of annihilating catastrophes has become their
239 master.“ [...] [We have here the advent of progress & complexity. The emphasis is mine.] Hence: „The
240 masses’ revolt against common sense’s intuition of actuality and what appears to be plausible within
241 the course of the world is the result of an atomization by which it has not only lost its position within
242 society, but also the whole sphere of communal relationships within whose frame only common sense
243 can function in a reasonable way.“ *The key word is “possessed blindness” here.* This is practically bad
244 faith on a global scale (with respect to the relevant social collective). The menace for the people is one
245 of the immanent evolution of which they are not active agents: History happens to them. So she
246 continues: „In a situation of complete spiritual and social homelessness, the well-balanced insight
247 into the mutual conditioning of the arbitrary and the planned, of the coincidental and the necessary,
248 by which the course of the world constitutes itself, does not make sense anymore. Only where
249 common sense does not make sense, can totalitarian propaganda slap into its face. [...] and this not,
250 because they are stupid or bad, but because within the general collapse of chaos this escape into
251 fiction is at least what seems to guarantee them a minimum of self-respect and human dignity.“⁶

252

253 Conclusion

254

255 Hence, we can conclude that Savage Thought is to be understood as an answer to the increasing
256 complexity of everyday life. Essentially, in the European countries, this tendency has accumulated
257 after World War II, while it was initialized a long time before, in Germany probably from the period
258 immediately after the Austrian and French wars. Accelerating increase of complexity means explicitly
259 the increase in the quantities and qualities of observable differences (cultural, moral etc.). Hence,
260 more recently, this concerns mainly: globalisation, industrialization, digitalisation in technical terms,
261 change in work and life balances (emancipation of women, of the youth etc., change in sexual
262 behaviour, change of life styles and so forth). The militant refusal of complexity leads to a social
263 backward-oriented motion which can be identified as a modern version of mythological thinking.
264 Technically spoken (and sufficiently abstract), the discursive structure is one where the signifier is
265 identified with the significate (in Lacanian notation: $S = s$). Similar motions have been discussed in
266 detail at various occasions under different names (alienation/ideology (Marx), non-simultaneousness
267 (Bloch), bad faith (Sartre) and some others). Altogether what we deal with here is the explicit *refusal*
268 *of complexity* which is thus a moral attitude, and not an ethical one.

269

270 Acknowledgements

271

272 Thanks for illuminating discussions in the past go to José M. Díaz Nafría (León), Kyriaki Goudeli
273 (Patras and Athens), Annette Grathoff (Vienna), Wolfgang Hofkirchner (Vienna), Michael Keller
274 (Munich), Kanelia Koutsandrea (Athens), Cecile Malaspina (London), Silvia Mazzini (Berlin),
275 Muraad Nofal (Munich), Klaus Ruthenberg (Coburg), Tomáš Sigmund (Prague), Verena Streitenberg
276 (Berlin), Evi Maria Weigl (Munich), Doris Zeilinger (Nuremberg), Zhang Xiaomeng (Beijing)

⁶ Ibid., 746 sqq.