Language under totalitarian regimes

The example of political discourse in Nazi Germany

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Introduction: what is special about language use under totalitarian regimes?

Language as a system does not change with political regimes, but the way it is used does, and the changes under totalitarian rule are arguably the most drastic. In his satirical utopia, 1984, George Orwell characterised these changes as Newspeak, a jargon designed to ‘meet the ideological needs’ of the ruling dictatorship of the fictitious state of ‘Oceania’. Its purpose is to establish ‘doublethink’, the ‘power of holding two contradictory beliefs in one’s mind simultaneously, and accepting both of them’ (Orwell 1984), which finds its most (in)famous expression in the deliberately paradoxical slogans of the ‘Ministry of Truth’ (i.e. the Ministry of Propaganda): ‘WAR IS PEACE, FREEDOM IS SLAVERY, IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH’ (Orwell 1984). Orwell based Newspeak on the experiences of contemporary propagandistic language during the National Socialist and Stalinist dictatorships, in particular, obfuscation of references to historical events, denial and euphemistic cover-up of state crimes, vilification of dissent, and formulaic and hyperbolic discourse. In the following sections, we will argue that these functional features do indeed form a coherent type of political language use that is of specific socio-political significance and thus needs to be on the agenda of any critically interested and engaged theory of political communication.

Any classification of language use as ‘totalitarian’ depends on the extra-linguistic category of ‘totalitarianism’. This concept was first developed in early and mid-twentieth-century political theory to capture the emergent new forms of dictatorship, that is, involving a state leadership controlling all aspects of society on the basis of a coherent ideology, rather than any ‘partial political control’ that leaves some social and private niches free from state interference (Arendt 1951; Bracher 1981; Lams et al. 2014; Shorten 2012; Žižek 2001). The notion of such a special new form of dictatorship has been vigorously contested, not least due to its use as a political stigma in the Cold War era (Gleason 1995). Typical examples of totalitarian states are Nazi Germany and its chief ally, the Fascist Dictatorship of Mussolini in Italy, the USSR under Lenin and Stalin, communist China under Mao Zedong, as well as
state-like structures originating from the military establishment of terrorist movements as rulers over a territory, such as the so-called ‘Islamic State’ in Iraq and Syria in 2014 (Barrett 2014). Even this core group of totalitarian states is characterised by considerable variation in terms of power structures. If less typical cases are taken into consideration, ‘totalitarianism’ as a political category becomes harder to define.

If even political-systems theories find it difficult to agree on a definition of totalitarianism, how can discourse analysis make it into an operative concept? Perhaps, however, this is not the right question to ask as it assumes a primacy of political theory over political discourse. From a critical, Discourse-Historical Approach perspective (within the wider field of Critical Discourse Studies, whose objective is to uncover and analyse the establishment and justification of power hierarchies through discourse, see Fairclough 2014; Wodak 2001, 2013), we can reformulate it so that totalitarian political systems are defined as those that use totalitarian discourses. The latter’s purpose is evidently to propagate and legitimise a ‘total’ control of society through a maximally strict demarcation of “insiders” vs. enemy-“outsiders”’ (Faye 2003; Wodak & Kirsch 1995), so that the latter can be stigmatised, isolated and possibly destroyed. We can then ask the empirical question: which communicative means are being, or have been, used to achieve these purposes? As National Socialist Germany (1933–1945) provides probably the best-documented and most-researched historical case of a (self-consciously) totalitarian state, its discourse will be at the centre of the following sections, with cross-references to similarities to other historical and contemporary discourses.

Analyses of Nazi discourse

The study of National Socialist discourse has been a central feature of linguistic criticism and research and cultural studies for three-quarters of a century. It is powered not least by the ethical and intellectual embarrassment about the fact that its canonical foundation text, that is, Hitler’s Mein Kampf, published in 1925–26, was in the public domain for several years before the Nazis came to power, so that contemporaries ‘could have known’ to some extent what was coming. Evidently, the German public sphere showed insufficient resistance to prevent the rise of Nazi propaganda to ‘hegemonic’ status (Laclau & Mouffe 1985); a few warning voices of journalistic and cultural critics, such as those of Karl Kraus in Austria and Kurt Tucholsky in Germany (Tucholsky 1960 [1930]; Kraus 1933) and abroad were not heard (for overviews of contemporary Anglo-American critiques see Michael & Doerr 2002; Deissler 2003). After the Nazis had gained power in Germany, and later in annexed Austria after 1938 and in the conquered countries after 1939, open criticism of their discourse was impossible in Germany. Instead, the Nazi ‘Minister for Public Enlightenment’ and Propaganda’, Joseph Goebbels, and his academic sympathisers advertised their own jargon as expressing a ‘liberating’ new national world-view (Pechau 1935; Six 1936). They viewed the German language as a ‘mirror’ of the German people’s ‘soul’, which would be enhanced by the addition of lexical material related to Nazism and the reinterpretation of ‘old’ words that were allegedly ‘infected’ by Jewish Marxist ideology. While the scientific value of these publications was minimal (Hachmeister 1998; Simon 2012), such writings are evidence of the Nazis’ claim to create a new language that would match the national/racial ‘instincts’ of the German people. In German academic linguistics, this stance led to a boom in studies of supposed volk-ish roots of modern German vocabulary and grammar in archaic Germanic world-views and to academics’ co-operation with the SS Institut Ahnenerbe (‘Forefathers’ legacy’) (Ahlzweig 1989; Ehlich 1989; Hutton 1999; Kater 2006; Knobloch

Soon after the war, however, two seminal publications on Nazi discourse came out in East and West Germany, which were based on ‘critical insider’ observations. One was authored by the Jewish Holocaust survivor and Professor of Romance Philology at Dresden University, Victor Klemperer; it was entitled LTI (short for the Latin, Lingua Tertii Imperii, (Language of the Third Reich), Klemperer 1975). The other publication was a series of articles by the anti-Nazi political scientists and journalists Gerhard Storz, Dolf Sternberger and Wilhelm E Süskind, which was later re-edited as the Dictionary of inhumanity (Sternberger, Storz & Süskind 1989). The main objectives of these two – and many following – analyses were: (1) documentation and critique of the Nazis’ hate and heroism propaganda; and (2) stigmatisation of lexemes and formulas that expressed Nazi ideology, as a warning to future generations about the deceptive power of manipulative language.

For several decades afterwards, detailed studies on Nazi-language use concentrated on the oratorical performances of Hitler and Goebbels (Beck 2001; Fetscher 1998; Hachmeister & Kloft 2005; Kegel 2006; Kopperschmidt 2003) and on the compilation of detailed dictionaries that documented Nazi-specific lexemes and phrases and their historical origins, as well as on their post-war thematisation as ‘Nazi-typical’ vocabulary (Brackmann & Birkenhauer 2001; Schmitz-Berning 1998; Wulf 1963). Valuable though such analyses were, they failed to explain Nazi-language use as an integral part of a totalitarian socio-political system. In order to understand this aspect, the contribution of social and political historians in the area of media and propaganda research on Nazi Germany proved essential.

One of their major insights from this research was the recognition of the Nazi leadership’s unprecedented control over the media through daily supervision of print media, radio and the film industry (Evans 2005, 2008; Tegel 2007; Welch 2007; for comparison with Soviet media, see Taylor 1998; Weiss 2005). This control was by no means monolithic because there was still competition and confusion about competencies within the National Socialist ruling elite (Abel 1990), but such Nazi-internal competition meant only that the public had to put up with a surfeit of propaganda, never with a shortage, and the public was ‘educated’ to always note and ‘learn’ the latest discourse-rules (Sprachregelungen). Officially approved phrases were constantly refined, reproduced and disseminated, while ‘deviant’ uses were sanctioned and could only be uttered in private and/or in clandestine contexts. However, even such contexts were monitored by the Nazis’ State Police Gestapo and the SS’s secret ‘security service’, the SD (Sicherheitsdienst), which throughout the whole period of Nazi rule produced reports on privately and clandestinely voiced popular opinion from across the Reich (Boberach 1971, 1984; Kulka & Jäckel 2004).

The constant barrage of propaganda events and rituals (e.g. party congresses, national and militaristic memorial events and celebrations), the heavily censored and biased news and development of a ‘homely’ aesthetics of supposedly indigenous cultural forms, as well as their organisational underpinning (e.g. in the Hitler Youth, Nazified trade unions, the school and university system, and professional institutions) have to be taken into account when assessing the conditions for communication in Nazi Germany. While these aspects have been thoroughly researched from social, cultural and political history perspectives (Bachrach & Luckert 2009; Diesener & Gries 1996; Flessak 1977; Frei & Schmitz 1989; Friedländer 1982), their integration with linguistic and discourse studies, especially with the Discourse-Historical Approach (DHA) are still, to some extent, a desideratum. The DHA aims to ‘transcend the purely linguistic dimension’ by combining and comparing it with ‘the historical, political, sociological and/or psychological dimension’ in order to ‘triangulate’
its research findings in an interdisciplinary account (Reisigl & Wodak 2001; Wodak 2001). Such triangulation is necessary in order to assess which communicative and social weight certain speech acts by specific speakers in particular situations have in shaping discourse overall.

Hitler’s *Mein Kampf*, for instance, published several years before his dictatorship had come to power, functioned as a key text throughout the rule of the ‘Third Reich’, that is, as a blueprint for countless follow-up discourses produced under the Nazi regime. These discourses cannot be properly interpreted without taking into consideration their derivative relationship with Hitler’s ‘master’ version and their uptake in a ‘streamlined’ public, where open ideological dispute was impossible. These socio-political conditions distinguish totalitarian discourses from other uses of discriminatory and belligerent rhetoric and require a DHA-triangulation of linguistic, socio-psychological and historical factors. In the following section, I attempt such a triangulation of the impact of Hitler’s speech at the 1935 Party Congress.

Before we can embark on that case study, however, we need to study one further analytical approach to totalitarian language in addition to the philological-lexicographic and discourse-historical approaches, that is, cognitive (semantic) analysis. Within the wider field of cognitive studies that encompass Cognitive Grammar, psychology and neuro-linguistic approaches, cognitive semantics and especially Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT) have reformulated traditional research questions with a view to explaining the conceptual conditions of producing and understanding linguistic meaning (Croft & Cruse 2004). Instead of viewing metaphors and other figurative language use as ‘special’ poetic or rhetorical ornaments, CMT stresses their fundamental function for cognitive ‘mappings’ and ‘blendings’ across conceptual domains that underlie all language use (Lakoff & Johnson 1980, 1999; Fauconnier & Turner 2002). Conceptual mappings enable humans to connect diverse domains of experience and knowledge and ‘frame’ them mentally and communicatively as new concepts. A number of cognitive studies have, for instance, focused on Hitler’s use of metaphor in *Mein Kampf* as a case of racist figurative framing (e.g. Chilton 2005; Hawkins 2001; Musolff 2007, 2008, 2010; Rash 2006; for further observations, see Charteris-Black 2005; Goatly 2007). The mapping of biological and religious source inputs (i.e. *parasite*-disease-poison and *devil*-personified evil) onto the socio-cultural/religious target category of *jewishness* resulted in a special type of frame/scenario that depicted the supposed racially constituted ‘people’s body’ (*Volkskörper*) as threatened by a deadly infection caused by the devil-like Jewish ‘parasite’-race, which had to be annihilated.

This mapping, which was elaborated in *Mein Kampf*, was reiterated publicly on innumerable occasions after the Nazi takeover in 1933. It appeared in every prominent Nazi speech and was omnipresent by way of public posters, public stalls and propaganda films, such as *The Eternal Jew*. It was explicitly linked to Hitler’s repeated ‘justifications’ for the extermination of European Jewry as a result of their allegedly having unleashed both World Wars against Germany (Herf 2006), and it was even included in manuals of the SS and police units that carried out the mass murders in Eastern Europe (Browning 2004). While the genocide was perpetrated, this *parasite*-annihilation scenario featured in speeches by Hitler, Goebbels and other Nazi leaders as a ‘prophecy’ that was ‘coming true’, that is, that was being implemented literally to ensure that all Jews would physically disappear from the territories under German control. The conceptual framing achieved by this deep discursive entrenchment was much more than a merely occasional use of discriminatory terminology: it served as an invitation to the whole populace to assist or at least collude in the ongoing genocide.
Such an analysis of Nazi genocide propaganda as part of a self-fulfilling metaphor scenario goes beyond its traditional treatment that concentrated on their rhetorical function as a means of stigmatisation (Drommel & Wolf 1978; Volmert 1989). The use of metaphors to denigrate adversaries is indeed a staple of discriminatory discourse and is by no means restricted to totalitarian systems (Sontag 1978; van Dijk 1991). It is, however, only in the latter that it gains policy-shaping force by being turned into a self-confirming scenario that triggers genocidal actions, such as the Nazi Holocaust. Gestapo reports on popular opinion and German prisoners of war’s secretly recorded conversations show that the parasite-annihilation scenario was in fact well known and understood as announcing the Jewish genocide among the wider German public (Kulka & Jäckel 2004; Musolff 2010; Neitzel & Wälzer 2011). The Nazi-framing of Jews-as-parasites went far beyond the ‘othering’ of opponents that is normal in adversarial political discourse. The ‘other’ of the totalitarian discourse was, as one of the theoreticians of the ‘total state’, the Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt (1932, 1940), formulated, not just an enemy opposed to the collective national ‘self’; rather, it is conceived of as an existential ‘foe’ whose continued existence implies a fundamental threat to the self, which therefore has the ‘sovereign’ right to eliminate that ‘other’.

Similar uses of the parasite-annihilation scenario as a means to denounce large groups of people as ‘anti-social’ enemies and justify their elimination can also be found in Soviet Russian discourses in the Leninist and Stalinist eras (Figes 1996; Fitzpatrick 2006) and in Maoist slogans in Communist China (Lu 1999; Lynteris 2013). These ‘leftist’ versions of parasite-annihilation discourse can be traced back through nineteenth-century Marxism to the ‘Jacobin’ terrorist strand of French Revolutionary discourse, where it was first used to stigmatise monarchy and aristocracy as corrupted and corrupting parts of the ‘people’s body’ in analogy to bio-parasites (de Baeque 1997; Musolff 2014). Obviously, the precise historical circumstances of such uses of the parasite-annihilation scenario differ from those of the racist versions, but they all have as their common denominator the absolute other-vilification as a frame for genocidal policies. They combine a radical denunciation of whole classes or ‘races’ as deadly enemies of the supposed elite people with the pseudo-scientific certainty of ‘explaining’ their impending destruction as objectively necessary and ethically justified.

**Case study: how to deliver a perfect speech in a totalitarian state**

The annual National Socialist Party Rally in Nuremberg of 1935 was billed as the ‘Congress of Freedom’, in celebration of the Nazis supposedly having freed Germany from the Versailles Treaty obligations. Today, however, it is chiefly remembered as the occasion when the race laws ‘for the Protection of German Blood and Honour’ and a newly defined citizenship were proclaimed, which lay at the core of judicial terror against Jews in Germany. The ‘Nuremberg laws’ excluded Jewish people in principle from German citizenship and from marriage or sexual relations with ‘Aryan’ (= non-Jewish) Germans (Kershaw 1999, 2008; Longerich 2006). In his main Congress speech, Hitler justified these laws as designed to ‘make it possible for the German people to have a tolerable relationship with the Jewish people’; at the same time, he denounced Jews as the ‘enemy within’ (innere Feinde) and threatened that if legal and bureaucratic means did not suffice, the ‘living’ German nation itself would ‘solve’ the problem, as quoted in the Nazi newspaper Völkischer Beobachter (16 September 1935).

This speech has been thoroughly analysed by historians and political scientists as a milestone in the prosecution of Jewish people in Nazi Germany, and so has its reception in
the German public (Gellately 2001; Kulka 1984; Longerich 2006). We have, thus, a detailed picture of the socio-historical context on which to base a discourse-historical assessment of Hitler’s announcement; in addition, there is a unique ‘reading help’ for it by no other than his propaganda chief, Goebbels. On the last day of the Congress, in a special meeting for party propaganda leaders from across the Reich, Goebbels commended Hitler’s speech as an exemplary feat of clever propaganda:

If I make clear in my propaganda that the Jews have absolutely nothing to lose – well, then we mustn’t be surprised that they fight back. […] No, you have to always leave it open-ended, just as the Führer did in his masterly speech yesterday: ‘We hope that the laws concerning the Jews have opened the chance for a tolerable relationship between the German and the Jewish peoples and …’ [laughter]. That’s what I call skill! That works! […] if you leave a little chance to them open, then the Jews will say, ‘Hey, if we start atrocity propaganda from outside, it’ll get worse, so let’s keep quiet, and maybe we can stay on after all’ [laughter, applause]. Above all: the Jews are not going to run away.

(Goebbels 1971)

As their reactions show, the audience was in no doubt about the laws being intended as a basis for the destruction of Jewish life in Germany. Goebbels could use their shared insider knowledge to give them a master-class, as it were, in misleading the wider German and international public, including Jewish people. Colluding or sympathising groups in the Nazi party and the wider populace were thus given to know that antisemitic practices would be condoned as long as they could be ‘legitimised’ within the terms of the new laws. The non-committed German and international public were discouraged from showing any solidarity or sympathy with the victims, and at the same time reassured that all measures taken would be legal. The Jewish victims were kept in the dark about the future repression and given illusionary hopes until it would be too late for them to take counter-measures. As Gestapo reports, diaries and resistance groups’ documents show, Hitler and Goebbels’ strategy worked: the party’s most zealous anti-Jewish activists felt vindicated; the wider German and international public perceived the Führer’s proclamation as restoring calm and proving foreign ‘atrocity propaganda’ about state terror against the Jews wrong; Jewish groups inside and outside Germany were isolated and individuals fooled into postponing immigration and toning down protests (Behnken 1980; Kershaw 2008; Klemperer 1995; Kulka & Jäckel 2004). The only true ‘discourse-insiders’, that is, ardent party members, were ‘promised’ the chance for future repression and power-gain beyond the momentary measures, without having to fear criticism or sanction.

This quasi-conspiratorial practice of signalling genocidal intentions to insiders through vague and metaphorical statements was not restricted to prominent public pronouncements, but extended right to the centre of the totalitarian regime and its internal, backstage discourses. The protocol of the so-called ‘Wannsee-conference’ of January 1942 on logistical details of the Holocaust, which included its top administrators, who among themselves, spoke openly and drastically about the mass-murder methods to be implemented, was, as the minute-taker and policy-implementer, Adolf Eichmann, himself testified in his trial in Jerusalem, deliberately redacted in such a way that any ‘over-plain talk and jargon expressions’ were replaced by abstract ‘office language’ (Cesarani 2004; see also Roseman 2002).
Such ‘gatekeeping’ (Shoemaker & Vos 2009) over access to insider interpretation of official discourse is to some extent a general characteristic of political discourse, but it assumes an extreme form in totalitarian discourse. In less tightly monitored political systems, meanings of official statements remain still negotiable. In totalitarian systems, however, the vast majority of the receivers of political statements are left guessing, with only small circles of insiders having definite knowledge about the concrete implications of policy statements formulated by the power-holders. As long as the latter maintain this privileged access, they maintain an unassailable power over the discourse community, with the added advantage of presiding over a competition among their second- and third-ranking followers for access to authoritative interpretations and membership in central parts of the ruling elite. Observers and critics on the outside are reduced largely to guesswork, as experienced not only by many international commentators on Nazi Germany, but also of the Soviet Union (‘Kremlinology’), on Maoist China, or of state-building terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda and ‘Islamic State’ (Barrett 2014; Matusitz 2013; Schwarz-Friesel & Kromminga 2014).

Absolute control over the public sphere is also a precondition for the seemingly paradoxical tendency in totalitarian discourse to advertise its oppressive practices and treat them at the same time as state secrets or taboos, the very mention of which can trigger repression and genocide. This feature is different from, but complements, the already-discussed ‘vagueness’: instead of under-determining informative content, it over-determines it through explicitly denying and at the same time triumphantly asserting it, leading to a cognitively dissonant mental representation for non-insiders. After the so-called Kristallnacht (Crystal Night) state pogrom on 9 November 1938, for instance, which cost several hundred lives and led to the brutal arrest of about 30,000 Jewish people, the Völkischer Beobachter (11 November 1938) claimed that ‘not a single hair had been touched on a Jewish head’. Anyone who contradicted such obviously misleading information in public was likely to be arrested, given a ‘sharp’ warning in Gestapo custody and put under observation (Kershaw 2008). During the war, reference to the ongoing genocide and/or war crimes, or doubting final victory for Germany would be classed as crimes to ‘undermine the war effort’, punishable by death. Such bans on any counter-discourse conferred on official propaganda a ritualistic status, so that topics not covered by it became ‘taboo’ in the sense that even the fact of them being banned fell under a ban.

In order to maintain its taboos, Nazi propaganda operated not just a combination of threats, lies, denial and vague hints, but also used a camouflage terminology, especially for referring to the institutions or practices of oppression. Labels such as Schutzstaffel (SS) (protection corps), or Schutzhaft (protective custody) for arrest by Gestapo or SS, often including transfer to and torture and/or murder in a Konzentrationslager (KZ) (concentration camp) suggested a ‘protective’ character for Nazi repression institutions. Other terms belonged to the field of administrative vocabulary, for example, Umsiedlung/Transport (deportation and transport) for transfer to extermination camps in Eastern Europe, Sonderbehandlung (special treatment) for torture/murder by Gestapo/SS, or Einsatzgruppen (task forces) for the murder units (Forster 2009; Klemperer 1975; Wulf 1963). Semantically, such terminology can be classified as ‘euphemistic’ insofar as neutral- or even positive-sounding labels cover up referents that would normally be given a negative evaluation. Pragmatically, however, the cover-terms, like most euphemisms (Burridge 1998), quickly lost their power to conceal secret facts because the latter were in fact ‘open secrets’ (Kaplan 1998; Taussig 1999), which everyone was meant to know about and be terrified by. The true referents of SS, KZ, and so on as parts of a system of brutal oppression and state terror were well known to the public, and parts of it actively collaborated with them, for example, by
way of mass denunciations (Bankier 1992; Gellately 1990, 2001; Kershaw 1983; Longerich 2006), or stood by passively when witnessing the public humiliation, brutalisation and dehumanisation of the regime’s ‘enemy’-victims. The post-1945 conceit that adult members of German-speaking communities were fooled by Nazi propaganda’s euphemisms is as disingenuous as the excuses of having misunderstood Hitler’s parasite-annihilation prophecies and boasts as mere metaphor. In Nazi Germany, as well as in Stalinist Russia and Maoist China, the existence of a secret police that had the task of arresting, torturing and killing enemies of the state was made widely known through the mass media and supported by mass experience, but officially denied and violently suppressed by the ‘security agencies’ when mentioned in public.

Descriptions of totalitarian discourse as ‘euphemistic’, ‘manipulative’ or as ‘othering’ their victims are in fact understatements because they gloss over their qualitative difference to the biased and polemical character of all political language use. Polemical disputes in open societies that allow for public debate without imposing violent sanctions can be antagonising and highly divisive and manipulating (and hence also socially problematic), but they are still based on the assumption that counter-discourses are possible in principle. By contrast, the deceitful discourse of a totalitarian dictatorship takes place against the background of latent state-terrorism, that is, the threat and enactment of denunciation and brutal punishment of any counter-discourse. This special communicative context does not change the conventional meanings of words or utterances, but it distorts their socio-pragmatic value and significance so as to turn them into matters of life and death.

The afterlife of totalitarian discourse and lessons for its critical analysis

The breakdown of a totalitarian regime does not lead automatically to the disappearance of its discourse from the public sphere. Even if the regime’s institutions of propaganda and repression are dismantled, as happened in West Germany after 1945, or in the more gradual process of de-Stalinisation in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, societies retain for some time totalitarian attitudes, not least due to many of their members being implicated in the former repression systems. These attitudes encouraged, for instance, parts of the Nazi elites and historical ‘revisionists’ to deny or belittle Nazi atrocities (Engel & Wodak 2013; Lipstadt 1994; Shermer & Grobman 2000; Wodak 2011; for similar tendencies in post-Stalinist Russia and in Eastern Europe: Applebaum 2003; Getty & Naumov 1999; Jones 2013; Kozlov 2013; Kreß 2013; for post-Maoist China: MacFarquhar & Schoenhals 2008). Relying on the public’s short memory, these former elites continue to use metaphors and argumentation topoi to stigmatise specific victim groups, while at the same time pretending that they are neutral, for example, German and Austrian post-war right-wing politicians reviving antisemitic stereotypes, denouncing opponents as ‘rats and flies’ or immigrants as ‘parasites’ (Keller-Bauer 1983; Musolff 2014; Posch et al. 2013; Wodak et al. 1990).

A different, though no less problematic, form of instrumentalisation of Nazi discourse has been its use as a label to denounce political opponents by blaming them for manipulating language ‘like the Nazis’. This topos, as used in Western countries, fitted the equation of Nazism and Communism as variants of ‘totalitarianism’, which was particularly fashionable during the Cold War (Dieckmann 2007; Eitz & Stötzel 2007; Forchtner 2013; Niven 2002, 2006; von Polenz 2005). Such ascriptions have little or no basis in scientific discourse-historical research. By contrast, analysing present-day discourses by way of highlighting parallels with empirically based studies of historical-totalitarian language use can help deconstruct the pseudo-rational underpinnings and taboos of recent totalitarian movements,
for example, fledgling terror-states such as the ‘Islamic State’ and Al Qaeda, but also uncover emergent proto-totalitarian discourse tendencies in countries whose publics consider themselves democratic and therefore immune to them, for example, trends to establish globalised neo-liberalism as the only rational form of social order, or the erosion of minority rights through scapegoating. Whether it is immigrants, socially deprived, sexually ‘deviant’ or ‘disabled’ groups, any community that allows itself to stigmatise people as ‘parasites’ on its social self’s ‘body’ is in danger of reinforcing and reifying its boundary-maintaining mechanisms (Douglas 1966) into totalitarian power structures and practices of exclusion.

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