

LANGUAGES OF SURPRISE: TOWARD A POLITICAL POETICS OF INSECURITY

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- + As Giorgio Agamben wrote in 2001, security has been the *Leitbegriff*, guiding concept, of state politics since the birth of the modern state.¹ Today, though, we are facing ‘extreme and most dangerous developments in the thought of security’. Referring to Foucault, Agamben argues that unlike disciplinary power, security creates open spaces and is therefore related to ideas of liberalism and globalisation, managing disorder rather than preventing it. It can constantly be provoked by terrorism to become itself terroristic, there are no clear boundaries between security and terror, and security leads to a gradual neutralisation of politics. Nevertheless, security ‘now becomes the sole criterion of political legitimation’. Measures of security require ‘constant reference to a state of exception’ and are therefore irreconcilable with democracy, leading to the danger of a ‘a world civil war which renders all civil coexistence impossible’, which is why ‘nothing is more important than a revision of the concept of security’ (Agamben 2001).

While eight years later we see the fallout of security as the guiding concept of politics all over the globe, we are far away from a better understanding of security.² In this essay, I want to address some of the reasons for this that I consider important, and, in doing so, make an attempt to contribute to this revision. I will try to accomplish this as follows: First, I will take up Agamben’s point about the relationship between security measures and the state of exception. I will follow him in his interpretation of Carl Schmitt in order to show the deeper strata of

violence in the concept. I do so not because I think of Schmitt as a peacenik, but because I agree with Chantal Mouffe's point that Schmitt's thinking renders significant deficiencies in liberal thinking visible (1999: 2) and I believe that this will help precisely in this effort. I will illustrate how the *Grenzbegriff*, or limit concept, of security impacts on potentials of life and of democracy.

Next, I will discuss the violence resulting from the missing boundaries of the concept of security. I will discuss security from a perspective that describes it as 'metaphysical' – as something beyond which it is impossible to go, as something impossible to describe, a source of authority that cannot be questioned but either surrendered to or fought against, both strengthening the concept. The 'overcoming of metaphysics' was a theme in Heidegger's second period and given a leftist twist by Gianni Vattimo, whose interpretation I follow in reading Heidegger (1971, 1993). Vattimo is known for his *pensiero debole*, or weak thought, which advocates a type of overcoming that does not look for a position of strength from which to control, negate, or destroy that which it wants to overcome (2006).

Finally, I will try to weaken security as a guiding concept of politics by following Heidegger's critique of technology as *metaphysical*, and his philosophy of language. I will go beyond Schmitt and Agamben and propose an understanding of security that views it as metaphysical *in so far* as it is technological. As Heidegger develops his philosophy of language as a consequence of his critique of technology, I will look at the languages that emerge around security: there is silence in the heart of politics, where nothing at all can be said and only violence is possible, and there is noise in its peripheral layers, where politics disappears in talk that has become empty because it no longer is capable of stating anything new in public. I will conclude with Uwe Pörksen's perspective on the language of the political, and suggest that weakening security is an effort of political poetics.

Security as Grenzbegriff: Carl Schmitt

Carl Schmitt defines as the sovereign 'he who decides on the state of exception' (1990: 11).³ He describes sovereignty as a *Grenzbegriff*, a 'limit concept'. A limit concept is defined by belonging to the 'outermost sphere'. The sovereign who decides on the state of exception does so from that place, which means that the decision regarding the state of exception can never be fully accounted for. While a decision on the state of exception impacts on the law and on people's rights, it can never be fully substantiated, or be challenged, questioned, or criticized from that place. To Schmitt, this means that the decision on the state of exception is a 'decision in the eminent sense' (1990: 11), something like a pure decision without a foundation that could be rationally discussed or ethically questioned. Such decisions in the eminent sense of the word fall in line with Schmitt's concept of the political, according to which it is the decision between enemy and friend that makes a decision actually political, and that such a decision can never be fully accounted for. All other systems – the economy, culture, society, etc. – have nothing to do with politics, and unless the state is designed in a way that recognises this, they contribute to its neutralisation, to the disappearance of politics, which in Schmitt's view is the fate of the liberal democracy. Real political sovereignty, therefore, is based on the *exception*, not on any norm. With no normative foundation that could form part of a rational democratic discourse, sovereignty is, in the last instance, never based on a *Grund* (foundation), but on an *Abgrund* (abyss).

Although Schmitt does yet not write about security per se, much of what Schmitt says about the state of exception applies to security, and its location in the outermost sphere of the political system. In order to be able to *secure*, security must have no outer boundary, it must have access to a place from which everyone else is barred. It must be able to draw from a source that is outside of the norm, outside of what can be the object of a rational political or ethical discourse.

Because the exception is the *Abgrund* of security, Agamben, interpreting Walter Benjamin, speaks of the state of exception as something permanent, as the

exception becoming the norm. As I have argued elsewhere, one consequence of this is that Schmitt's decisionism is questioned by security because it relies on a clear distinction between the norm and the exception. Security, and its reliance on the 'neutralising' factor of technology, becomes itself a state of exception within Schmitt's thinking and counteracts his decisionist view: when increasingly automated, complex technological systems are employed for purposes of security, technology gradually moves into the place Schmitt had reserved for the sovereign, except that it never takes *the* decision. Instead, what emerges is a diffuse techno-political zone where norms (e.g. civil rights) are silently suspended by technical constraints rather than by the single, unaccountable strike of a sovereign decision (Sütlz 2008). So security as guiding concept, as described by Agamben, both proves and disproves Schmitt's idea of sovereignty as a *Grenzbegriff*: it proves it because security must draw from the exception rather than the norm and cannot be fully controlled with the means available to a liberal democracy (it is irreconcilable with democracy); and it disproves it because the actual act of decision is lost in the permanent calculations of the technological system. Rather than a decision being taken for one or the other, security manages both and keeps them in a permanent waiting loop.

This ambivalence should not come as a surprise; rather, it is precisely what is to be expected from a *Grenzbegriff* which as such can never be fully resolved: in order to resolve a *Grenzbegriff*, one would need access to the *Abgrund*, to the (necessarily occult) exception that it draws on. Such an attempt can be made only at the price of extreme violence towards others and oneself. (This is what terrorists do).

Before I turn to discussing this problem as the problem of metaphysics, I want to cite a few specific areas that illustrate the particular form of violence inherent in security as a guiding concept of state politics.

Firstly, security requires anyone who could be *someone* to live as *anyone*. As a concept without an outer boundary, security applies everywhere and for

everyone, i.e. it is impossible to disagree with its consequences unless one wants to be identified as no one and have no place. It is something one cannot not want. This has a number of particular consequences. One, that security is for everyone means that unless you are like everyone, security is not for you. In other words, security turns people, who are always *someone*, into *anyone*. It places political subjectivity on the level of exchangeability. It does so by separating and appropriating a sheath of data from the individual that render all individuals commensurable. Security technologies such as surveillance and biometrics meet precisely this purpose. They are essentially architectures of sameness:⁴ generating and appropriating personal data means that the political potential of individuals is appropriated by an authority that can always escape accountability for motives of security. It means that those specifics about an individual that make it possible for him/her to be *someone in particular*, to have a *particular* political existence capable of accessing and exercising rights, of having a *voice*, is separated from the existence of the individual.⁵

In practice this means that the choices available to an individual, the choices that would make that individual a *citizen*, are increasingly suspended in a waiting loop, i.e. while they formally continue to exist, they are rendered meaningless or impracticable. For the lives of many people this means that their choices increasingly become de-politicised, most notably by them becoming consumer choices, either through the imposing presence of architectures of consumption, or through the aesthetisation of politics, when governments and parties become indistinguishable from companies. The deafening noise of consumerism owes its growth exactly to the absence of politics in the choices that are available under security as a guiding concept. It is not a coincidence that locations of extreme consumption – shopping malls, airports, plazas – also tend to be heavily surveilled environments.

For others, the violence of having to be *anyone* under security has meant death. This was the case with Jean Charles de Menezes, shot dead by police on the London Underground in 2005. (Sütlz 2007) The Brazilian engineer had crossed

the line from being anyone to being someone, and not because he chose to, but because security performed a calculation that led to this result. And viewed from the logic of security as a concept without boundaries, such a someone *can be nothing else but a potential terrorist*. But perhaps the violence of having to be anyone rather than an individual with control over his/her identity, with a political voice, is nowhere more crude than in anti-immigration regimes, and nowhere experienced with greater violence than by the someones arriving with nothing but their existence at the borders of Europe or North America. The voice they bring is the most radical one, most capable of questioning. Fortress-building, camp-building and biometrical regimes are part of the armory of keeping these radical someones out, or making sure they become anyone.

Secondly, because security is a *Grenzbegriff* without an outer boundary, it works against those voices that wish to limit it and hold it accountable, in other words, to base it on a norm that can be made explicit and talked about, rather than an exception that is occult and wordless. This silencing of security is manifest in a number of different ways. It is manifest when no questions are allowed for 'security reasons'. It is manifest when judicial or parliamentary enquiries are suppressed because of 'national security interests', and it is manifest when the freedom of the media is curtailed – by direct censorship or by targeted manipulation of information – for the same motive. It is manifest when artists are treated as terrorists.

Thirdly, as stated before, a *Grenzbegriff* cannot be rationally established or disproven, but it is also not accessible to a normative critique. Security is beyond good and evil, which means it relates to a normative ethical critique as cynicism. This means it keeps the outer form in place while negating political content. Oscar Wilde describes the cynic as the 'man who knows the price of everything, and the value of nothing'. Cynicism is immune to a normative critique because it contains nothing that a normative critique could take issue with. It can accommodate and affirm any normative point without actually responding. It operates on a level of total commensurability and exchangeability. Cynicism

is the ethics of the *Grenzbegriff*, it is, in our present, the actual philosophy of security, it protects security from questions by performing a quick calculation, neutralising whatever point may be made.

Security as Metaphysics: Heidegger

The problem of security as a *Grenzbegriff* has much in common with the problem of metaphysics in philosophy as interpreted by Gianni Vattimo in his reading of Heidegger. According to Vattimo, the problem of an 'overcoming' of metaphysics, which early 20th century philosophy had attempted, lies in the fact that in order to overcome something, a third point that lies beyond that which is to be overcome is needed, an 'outside' from which metaphysics could be dealt with as a problem to be resolved. However, the definition of such an outside point would amount to a *new* metaphysics, it would amount to a relapse, or to a demonstration of the necessity of metaphysics. In his leftist reading of Heidegger, Vattimo describes this metaphysical quandary as violence, as it opens a space of non-accountable power. Therefore, unless one wishes to continue a constant renewal of cycles of violence, the only overcoming of metaphysics is its initial acceptance as an inherited condition or sickness that can be ameliorated but not dialectically overcome.

In politics, democracy is different from monarchy or dictatorship because it works against the existence of non-accountable spaces. With security, these non-accountable spaces are spreading in the entire political system. If we are interested in a critique of the violence of security that is not immediately neutralised by cynicism, we must transcend the rational and normative without becoming violent, i.e. we must become artists. At this point, we must move beyond the ideas of security as a *Grenzbegriff*, and we can do so by following Heidegger's own thinking. The problem of overcoming metaphysics leads Heidegger to his philosophies of technology and language.

The reason why understanding security as a *Grenzbegriff* in the terms of Schmitt and Agamben is necessary but not sufficient lies in technology: Schmitt tries to

identify a *pure* political sphere, and Agamben still refers to security and the state of exception as largely abstract terms. Both do not connect their political/legal theories with a media theory, i.e. by addressing the question by which means, with which technologies security actually operates.

This is where Heidegger's philosophy of technology becomes an essential tool in approaching the difficulty of a critique of security as a critique of violence. Heidegger views technology not merely as an instrument, in his view the 'current understanding' of technology, but as *the culmination of the metaphysical drive of western culture*. Like metaphysics, technology marks an area beyond which one cannot go, and where any attempt to do so will result in more of the same: in more, faster, more powerful, more autonomous technology, in a constant *updating* of something that remains *essentially* the same.

Technology, in its current, instrumental understanding, is metaphysics and resembles the *Grenzbegriff* of security. While the constraints it creates and cannot solve without creating other constraints are the post-modern heir of Schmitt's decisionism, the politics of security and technology form a continuum.

To weaken the cycle of dependence on technology, to establish a 'free relationship' to technology, Heidegger proposes a poetic effort. Technology shapes language in a particular way, it creates a 'technical' language different from 'traditional' language. I will work with this distinction to argue that it is through language, and *poiesis* in the wider sense, that the metaphysical violence of security might be weakened.

Telling Silence and Empty Talk

I noted earlier that the politics of security creates two linguistic zones: a silent, occult inner in which nothing is said but where politics actually occurs, and an outer zone of noise divested of any political meaning. A secured situation can therefore be a silent situation, or deafening chatter, and is usually both at the same time. It can be wordless acquiescence and obedience to commands, be they

implicit constraints or explicit admonitions, and it can be a powerful stream of loud emptiness.

In order to better understand the nature of these two zones, Heidegger's philosophy of language provides a useful tool. For one, Heidegger defines the essence of language as *sagen*, or saying, which is different from mere speaking. It is possible, therefore, and part of everyday experience, to speak without saying anything, and to be silent but say something precisely by being silent. There can be *nichts-sagend* speech (a non-saying speech, or empty, meaningless talk) and *viel-sagend* silence (a 'telling silence') (Heidegger 1989: 23). For another, Heidegger distinguishes between 'traditional'⁶ language on the one hand, and 'technical' language on the other. Let us look at both these distinctions as they relate to security.

The silence at the core of politics that is generated by security is an expression of the 'telling silence' Heidegger speaks of. Although nothing is said, this is where whatever remains of actual politics occurs. This is also the zone of quiet, frictionless, user-friendly management, of automated technological systems, of ambient computing, surveillance, etc. It is the zone in which human beings have lost their voice in so far as it is a voice capable of *saying* something. Politically speaking, this is the zone of curtailing of civil rights, of shutting up and of censoring, of structural suppression of voices. It is the zone where critical voices are persecuted or killed, where dissenting voices are nipped in the bud. It is, ultimately, the zone where life is life only in so far as it can be terminated at any moment, therefore the zone of state violence. Note the hostility of the military towards common language and its grammar, note the formalisation and reduction of language to acronyms and codes that occurs here, the restriction of communication both inside and outside; note finally how the ultimate form of a telling silence is the silence of the deserted battlefield.

This telling silence is the silence generated by technological language. Rather than from life, this language emerges out of technology and carries its metaphysical

marks. Like technology, it intends to be precise, fast, and as formalised as possible. Heidegger describes this language as 'information' (1989: 22). Reduced to signals, it allows universal exchange. It is the language of facts and of description, and it aims at the fact as its vanishing point: a fact is something that has been settled and allows no further questions; facts generate silence.

Most importantly, though, technical language is the place where language becomes *calculation*, and calculation is at the heart of security operations. Security calculates in order to reduce the number of possible outcomes to a manageable size, ideally, to predict. This also marks a conjunction between security and technology: in order to become more efficient in calculating, the machinery of calculation is constantly upgraded and developed, although it is precisely the development of ever more powerful and complex technologies that then increases the number of possible outcomes.

The calculations of security are intended to avoid surprises. Yet the very idea of democracy is the possibility of saying something new, of *surprising the government*, which is why elections are secret and why PR agencies and polling institutions are so keen to find out what people might think *before* they vote. By reducing variables, security takes the 'risk' out of democracy, and democracy remains as a cynical construct (formally intact, but non-political). Technological language has another key characteristic that should not be overlooked, that is, it is imperative in nature. Even though when not phrased as commands, factual statements are imperative in so far as they allow no objections, and like commands, they are not invitations for discussion.

On the other hand, there is speech as chatter, as *nichts-sagend*, empty talk; I have referred to this as 'noise'. This type of speech spreads where language explodes by losing any connection to meaning. The lack of meaning, that is, of potential for political change, means that there is no instance at all capable of directing or ending talk by tying it to a potential. As a result, the volume of this talk increases constantly and its sphere expands and its expansion accelerates.

There is no stopping, as is easy to observe in today's media and entertainment landscapes. This speech is secure because it will never be able to generate any political consequences, creating instead a vast continuum of a simulated political sphere, of politics neutralised by entertainment, commerce, etc. Noise is the result of the shredding of language that occurs through technology, and, invariably, through security. Noise is what *could have been* language, i.e. it is the *negated potential of a political language*.

By creating silence and noise and neutralising language, the politics of security does what is its essential task: it destroys the potential of an autonomous, political voice of citizens, for no reason that would be outside of security itself. The essential task of security is to *secure itself*, which marks the definitive entry of a metaphysical form into politics. This is, in my view, the deeper political meaning of what Heidegger calls *Verwüstung* (desertification, devastation) of language: it destroys not just the human, it destroys the very *potential* of humanness.

Political Poetics

The effort of contributing to a real critique of the politics of security is therefore an effort of *political poetics*. It is an effort of creating and learning to use a language beyond silence and noise. I will conclude by following the German linguist Uwe Pörksen in tracing the contours of such a political poetics. In his work on the language of the political, Pörksen addresses the 'lacking autonomy of the political' (2002: 17), and the 'diminution of politics' (2004: 7), both of which he attributes to the rise of 'great powers' in society, these being 'science, technology, and economics' on the one hand, and 'media, opinion polls, political parties' on the other (2002: 19, 27).⁷

These two coalitions of powers mirror the divide between telling silence and empty talk. In both areas the autonomy of the political is lost: in the area of silence it is surrendered to calculation (which reigns in technology, science, economics); in the area of empty talk it becomes indistinct and vanishes in

generalised noise.

In Pörksen's view, the language of the political is a poetic language in so far as it is capable of 'saying something that is not yet existing', and to 'begin something new in public space'. But it is not a poem or fiction, as it has a factual, objective dimension, too. However, it is part of the quality of a good political speech that this objective dimension is not just the silence between words. A good political speech is one that 'chooses the right word on the level of language, while finding the appropriate word on the level of the object'. Such a political speech is beyond the secure neutralised languages of silence and noise, which is why making use of it is a 'step into uncertainty' (Pörksen 2002: 42).

I understand Pörksen as advocating a political poetics in whose art consists in finding a place for the new and the experimental on the level of the object, i.e. that a potential of something new can be created at precisely that place where under the conditions of security the silence of calculation rules. Conversely, such a political poetics would bring empowering technology into the noise environment, supporting meaningful messages so they can be heard amidst the noise. This is an effort that is technological in so far as it is poetic, and poetic in so far as it is technological. The way the two languages change through this techno-poetic work is not one of harmonisation or reconciliation, or opposition, or synthesis. It is a relationship beyond calculation. I call this relationship one of *contamination*. It is the spontaneous, unpredictable, dynamics of contamination that makes the political poetics Pörksen outlines something insecure. Where something new can be said, *surprises* are possible, the very surprises that provide democratic politics with legitimacy. Political poetics under security as a guiding concept of politics must create languages of surprise.

If I am not mistaken, it is in thinking about and working on a political poetics of this kind where a potential for a critique of security lies. This would be a critique that refrains from direct negation as much as from a merely rational or normative discourse, and it would be a critique that is an effort of political

poetics capable of *weakening* security, rendering it useless as a guiding concept. This may not be a grand thing. But the nature of security as a metaphysical concept and *Grenzbegriff* should teach us that every grand scheme will probably only further deepen the divisions and strengthen the violence generated by the politics of security. If I am not mistaken again, it is the work of artists, poets and scholars to promote the contamination of languages and to contribute to this political poetics. '*A good speech stand above violence*', says Pörksen. 'This is not a historical truth, but it is probably true.' (Pörksen 2002: 187; his emphasis)

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NOTES:

1. The quotes from this source follow Soenke Zoehle's translation of the original article published in the *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*, but the German *Leitbegriff* is translated as 'guiding concept' here (not as 'basic principle', as in Zoehle's translation).
2. What 'better understanding' here means is providing a description or a rational critique, as the very essence of security will turn either into affirmations of the status quo. This will become clear in what follows. Instead, it refers to contributing to a body of knowledge capable of a critique of the particular form of violence inherent in security.
3. Translations of the quotes from the German by W.S.
4. I have argued elsewhere that Nietzsche's tragic thinking contains markers for a critique of security, in this particular case his 'eternal recurrence' (Sützl 2007).
5. This separation reflects the biopolitical distinction between *zoe* and *bios*, as described by Agamben. The *bios*, the particular form of life is separated from bare life. In the state of exception, politics is based on bare life.
6. 'Traditional' is a translation of the German *überliefert*, meaning 'handed-down' or 'transmitted'. It does not refer to a particular tradition or set of values, or conservative ideology, but can be understood as poetic or common language.
7. All Pörksen quotes translated from the German by W.S.

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