

CREATIVITY IN THE EARLY REFORMATION PERIOD: TECHNOLOGY, SOCIETY, AND THE MAGIC OF LANGUAGE

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.14712/2571452X.2021.62.2>

Abstract: This article takes its point of departure from Marshall McLuhan's *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962) and Elizabeth L. Eisenstein's *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (1979). The purpose, however, is not a detailed historical critique of both books, but to take issue with fundamental claim underlying both publications: the claim that media technology is the creative agent behind early modern social, political, religious, and intellectual revolutions. The article refers to Eric Voegelin, Hannah Arendt, Ernst Cassirer, and Wilhelm von Humboldt to lay the theoretical groundwork for an alternative claim: creative agency happens in the form of linguistic evocation. The final section of the article provides a brief case study on revolutionary agency, primarily at the example of the radical reformer Thomas Müntzer. It highlights the role of language in the revolutionary transformation of the early reformation period.

Keywords: Marshall McLuhan, Eric Voegelin, Hanna Arendt, Ernst Cassirer, Wilhelm von Humboldt, Thomas Müntzer, Agrippa von Nettesheim, creativity, media technology, printing press, evocation, magic, reformation, revolution

Media as Agents of Change: McLuhan and Eisenstein

When Marshall McLuhan published his work *The Gutenberg Galaxy* in 1962, he aimed to show that media technology changes human sense perception and cognition.¹ Moreover, he claimed that media are not to be seen as mere tools and as strictly separated from our natural sense apparatus, rather they are part of us. They extend and augment and, thereby, alter human sensual capacities.

¹ Marshall McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1962).

The introduction of phonetic script and, even more so, the invention of the printing press brought about a homogenized visualization of experience, he writes, at the cost of other senses, such as audio-tactile perception. And because any change in the relation between our senses must have an impact on how we communicate, it also changes our social relations and, ultimately, 'culture' as such. A revolution in media technology, such as Gutenberg's invention of printing with movable types, therefore, transforms human nature; it means *The Making of the Typographic Man*, as the subtitle of the *Gutenberg Galaxy* suggests. The printing press, thus, appears as the real agent of early modern innovation and creativity. According to McLuhan, it enabled individualism, democracy, capitalism, nationalism, mass society, consumerism or, in short, all decisive features of modern society.

Historians tend to explain the early modern dissolution of the linguistic, confessional, and political unity of the West, at least to some extent, by the failure of the church. The schisms, the corruption of the clergy, the failure of conciliarist reform, the decline of scholastic education, and other factors are often named, when the fragmentation of Latin Christianity is to be explained. If, however, the printing press is the actual primal cause of this transformation, then the Church is exonerated.²

It has been noted (and occasionally denied) that McLuhan's thought is profoundly shaped by his Catholicism. This should not be understood in the banal sense that he hid Catholic dogma underneath the surface of media theory. Rather his book evokes the ideal 'Catholicity' – in the etymological sense of oneness.³ This ideal has an individual and a social component.⁴ The individual component is a

² "Medieval liturgy was mostly acoustic. Church architecture was, above all, dominated by acoustic concerns, and Latin was used almost exclusively. But in the sixteenth century Gutenberg gave such intense visual stress to the vernaculars that it underlies all of our psychic, political, and spiritual specialization and division. His specialization is particularly noticeable in Protestantism." Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium and the Light. Reflections on Religion* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 1999) 142.

³ For the biographical context of McLuhan's Catholicism see Cameran McEwen, "Marshall McLuhan, John Pick, and Gerald Manley Hopkins," *Renascence* 64, no. 1 (2011): 55-76. McEwen gives special consideration to McLuhan's concept of a "Catholicity of mind."

⁴ For interpretations of McLuhan's Catholicism with further references to relevant literature, see John Durham Peters, "McLuhans grammatische Theologie," *McLuhan neu lesen: Kritische Analysen zu Medien und Kultur im 21. Jahrhundert*, ed. Derrick de Kerckhove (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2008) 61-75, and Read Mercer Schuchardt, "The Medium is the Messiah: McLuhan's Religion and its Relationship to his Media Theory," *Renascence* 64, no. 1 (2011): 55-76.

holistic experience of reality that was supposedly available to the primitive man, before it was broken by phonetic script and typography. The latter media technologies transform human perception toward visualization, serialization, and a linearity – a development culminating in the assembly lines of modern mass production. The social component is the image of future re-unification of mankind in a large-scale re-creation of organic and integral community in the “global village,” once another revolution, this time brought about by electronic media, has undone fragmentation of society.

Phonetic script is the original sin, so to speak, aggravated by typography. As is explicitly stated in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, this idea is inspired by the work of the Jesuit scholar Walter J. Ong, once McLuhan’s doctoral supervisee.⁵ Likewise, the eschatological outlook on an escape from the sinful state is also taken from the work of a Jesuit, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin.⁶

McLuhan’s work has a peculiar form. It is largely a collage of works of other scholars, with long quotations often extending over a half a page or more. In-between, it offers lengthy, suggestive, occasionally original interpretations of William Shakespeare, James Joyce, and other poets. Yet, it is also interspersed with mnemonic theses in the size and shape of newspaper headlines, ascertaining that the reader draws the right conclusion from McLuhan’s textual sequencing. Often the theses speak about creativity of technology, such as these:

Scribal Cultures could have neither authors nor publics such as were *created* by typography.

Print, in turning the vernaculars into mass media, or closed systems, *created* the uniform, centralizing forces of modern nationalism.

Print *created* national uniformity and government centralism, but also individualism and opposition to government as such.

The uniformity and repeatability of print *created* the political arithmetic of the seventeenth century and the hedonistic calculus of the eighteenth.

⁵ “Printing was a kind of disease which Western society was catching [...]” Walter J. Ong, S.J., *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1958) 310. Ong is less concerned with phonetic script. In the context of Ramism, it is print that matters.

⁶ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* 37, 51, 135. All these references are to Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *The Phenomenon of Man* (New York: Harper, 1959). Cf. Hartmut Winkler, “Die magischen Kanäle, ihre Magie und ihr Magier: McLuhan zwischen Innis und Teilhard de Chardin,” *McLuhan neu lesen* 158-69.

The typographic logic *created* the outsider, the alienated man, as the type of integral, that is, intuitive and irrational man.

The new electronic interdependence *recreates* the world in the image of a global village.⁷

Obviously, McLuhan's theses are of such simplistic sort that they cannot be taken as serious historical arguments. They are better understood as polemical slogans, supported by a collage of multidisciplinary excerpts from the work of other scholars. Rather late in the book, McLuhan explains his method or "mode of expression" as a "mosaic configuration" or "galaxy." The galaxy does not spell out the interrelation between its components, but rather constitutes a "do-it-yourself kit."⁸

This takes us to one of the most prominent applications of the do-it-yourself kit, Elizabeth L. Eisenstein's work *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe*, first published in 1979. As Eisenstein states already on the first pages, she "had long been dissatisfied with prevailing explanations for the political and intellectual revolutions of early-modern times" and found in McLuhan more satisfactory solutions – despite methodological concerns.⁹ The title of the 1983 abridged version was *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe* and it clarified the main message, namely: the real early modern revolution is a revolution in media technology.¹⁰ Eisenstein calls it "the unacknowledged revolution."¹¹

Even if Eisenstein's central section on the reformation received most attention from scholars, the book takes a wider look at the European republic of letters in the early modern period. Eisenstein describes her general methodological approach as follows:

As *an agent of change*, printing altered methods of data collections, storage and retrieval systems, and communications networks used by learned

⁷ McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy*. In the above sequence, the theses appear on pp. 132, 199, 235, 208, 212, 31. Emphasis added.

⁸ McLuhan speaks here about the approach of Harold Innis, whom he refers to frequently. However, the title of McLuhan's book indicates that he adopted this method. McLuhan, *The Gutenberg Galaxy* 216-17; cf. 269 and 276.

⁹ Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979) xi.

¹⁰ Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, *The Printing Revolution in Early Modern Europe*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005).

¹¹ Thus the title of the first chapter in the unabridged version.

communities throughout Europe. It warrants special attention because it had special effects. In this book I am trying to describe these effects and to suggest how they may be related to other concurrent developments.¹²

As this passage shows, Eisenstein is more careful than McLuhan, when she emphasizes that printing technology is “an” – and not *the* – “agent of change” in the early modern period. Yet, she is less careful than McLuhan with respect to historical causality. Throughout the book she speaks of the press as the cause and of social transformation as the effect.

It is no coincidence that the works of both authors have received renewed interest over the last decades, evidenced by numerous re-editions, a steadily growing secondary literature and a continuous prominence in academic syllabi. In fact, the German academic discussion of McLuhan began only in the late 1980s.¹³ Part of the reason maybe the adaptability of McLuhan’s theses to certain postmodern discourses. The arguably more important reason, however, was the massive transformation of the media through computer technology. While some media theorists of the internet era declared McLuhan obsolete, because his thought was largely based on the experience of radio and television, others attributed an even greater relevance to the utopian vision of the “global village,” precisely because of the emerging and swiftly expanding cyber space.¹⁴ Moreover, the increasing importance of communication through so-called social media has led to a further intensification of the debate over the last two decades. Just a few years ago, enthusiasts were dreaming about a more inclusive, pluralist, and global public discourse, about free-floating information, and about a political culture in the form of a permanent online referendum—a liquid democracy, as some called it.¹⁵ Evidence seemed to come from the important role of social media in the so-called Arab spring rebellions, in the decision-making in new political groups, such as the various European “Pirate” parties, or in the mobilization of the Occupy-Wall-Street movement.

Most recently, however, the discourse has become more pessimistic, due to the experiences addressed as cyber-mobbing, shitstorms, fake news and filter bubbles. Currently, the global village seems to disintegrate into tribes and camps, who fight each other with fierce hostility or ignore each other entirely. Further disillusion

¹² Eisenstein, *The Printing Press* xvi.

¹³ Martina Leeker and Kerstin Schmidt, “Einleitung. McLuhan neu lesen. Zur Aktualität des kanadischen Medientheoretikers,” *McLuhan neu lesen* 19-48.

¹⁴ Leeker and Schmidt 23ff.

¹⁵ Christian Blum and Christina Isabel Zuber, “Liquid Democracy: Potentials, Problems, and Perspectives,” *Political Philosophy* 24, no. 2 (June 2016): 162-82.

resulted from the economic exploitation and algorithmic manipulation of users by “oligo-capitalist” media corporations,¹⁶ the manipulation of democratic elections and, finally, the advance of the surveillance state through precisely those media that once promised an escape from it.

While, only a decade ago, it was a sincere and widely shared hope that new media technologies would change our societies for the better, nowadays, an increasing number of people come to believe that modern media might change our social relations and democratic cultures for the worse. Yet, no matter on which side the participants in this discourse stand, in a broad sense they are all McLuhanists. They all believe that media technologies transform culture and society.

But is that at all true? Let us take another look at Eisenstein. In her chapter on the reformation, she writes:

The advent of printing was an important precondition for the Protestant Reformation taken as a whole; for without it one could not implement a “priesthood of all believers.” At the same time, however, the new medium also acted as a precipitant. It provided “the stroke of magic” by which an obscure theologian in Wittenberg managed to shake Saint Peter’s throne.¹⁷

In other words, without the epiphany of the press, Luther’s protest would have remained a provincial farce.¹⁸

The reference to magic, even if meant ironically, is not a coincidence. Hartmut Winkler confirms the magical implication of the McLuhanist perspective:

In the centre of the magical-metaphysical conception of media stood the construct of the media-apriori itself. Thoroughly in the vein of McLuhan, [media studies] committed to a one-sided perspective on “the media” as cause (*Wirkursache*) and to study their effects in the social realm. Apparently, the reverse set of questions – how the media themselves come

¹⁶ Philip Dingeldey, “A fourth transformation of democracy? Liquid democracy, supra-national democracy and the fate of participation,” *Law, Democracy and Development* 23 (2019): 181-201.

¹⁷ Eisenstein, *The Printing Press* 310.

¹⁸ A few paragraphs earlier she writes: “Rarely has one invention had more decisive influence than that of printing on the Reformation.’ Luther ‘had invited a public disputation and nobody had come to dispute.’ Then ‘by a stroke of magic he found himself addressing the whole world.’” Eisenstein, *The Printing Press* 309-10. The citations are from E. Gordon Rupp, *Luther’s Progress to the Diet of Worms* (Chicago, IL: Wilcox and Follett, 1951).

into the world, whether media technology could look entirely different, why certain media assert themselves and others not, in which way they interact with processes of utilization, and in which way they are baked into structures of wishfulness – was systematically obstructed.¹⁹

As we have seen, McLuhan's Catholicism may be a motive behind this obstruction. Whoever explores the socio-historical context of typography inevitably must address the role of the Roman Church. Precisely the indulgence campaigns against which Luther protested that had turned printing into a "growth industry."²⁰

McLuhan's magical-metaphysical perspective is also expressed in the following, frequently quoted paragraph from the famous 1967 essay *The Media is the Massage*:

Societies have always been shaped more by the nature of the media by which men communicate than by the content of the communication. The alphabet, for instance, is a technology that is absorbed by the very young child in a completely unconscious manner, by osmosis so to speak. Words and the meaning of words predispose the child to think and act automatically in certain ways.²¹

Common sense suffices to see that practically everything in this statement is wrong. Very young children do not learn words and language by absorbing the technology of the alphabet. Very young children learn words in their families and wider social environments through spoken language. In these contexts, they first learn about the meanings carried by words and combinations of words. Surprisingly little has changed in this respect over the millennia. Nowadays, the

¹⁹ Winkler 164-65. Translated by the author.

²⁰ "Die Segnungen des Buchdrucks, der um die Mitte des 15. Jahrhunderts um sich greifenden Technik der typographischen Reproduktion mit beweglichen Metallettern, wurden konsequent in den Dienst der Ablasskampagnen gestellt: Werbepлакate, Bullen, Instruktionen der Ablasskommissare und die Formulare für die Beichtbriefe, in die nur mehr die Namen der Begünstigten einzutragen waren, verließen die Pressen. Die mit den Türkenablassen und den Ablasskampagnen verbundene Druckproduktion trug wesentlich dazu bei, dass sich der Buchdruck und die Zuliefergewebe zu Wachstumsbranchen entwickelten." Thomas Kaufmann, *Geschichte der Reformation* (Frankfurt/M: Verlag der Weltreligionen, 2009) 82-83.

²¹ Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore, *The Medium is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects* (Corte Madera, CA: Ginko Press, 2001) 8.

alphabet comes late in child development, typically in the first grade of elementary school; and children do not absorb it in a completely unconscious manner but must learn it, in more or less painful ways. But let us stay with the theme of magic for a while and turn to another set of theories addressing the theme of creativity and social change.

Eric Voegelin's Theory of Political Evocation

In the 1940s, the Austrian-American political theorist Eric Voegelin rebelled against a merely doxographic history of political thought, as it was taught to students via standard textbooks. He contemplated the fundamental question of what a political idea really is. The first paragraph of the introduction to his multi-volume *History of Political Ideas* reads as follows:

To set up a government is an essay in world creation. Out of a shapeless vastness of conflicting human desires rises a little world of order, a cosmic analogy, a cosmion, leading a precarious life under the pressure of destructive forces from within and without, and maintaining its existence by the ultimate threat and application of violence against the internal breaker of its law as well as the external aggressor. The application of violence, though, is the ultimate means only of creating and preserving a political order, it is not its ultimate reason: the function proper of order is the creation of a shelter in which man may give to his life a semblance of meaning.²²

Remarkably, this programmatic statement likens the origin of political order to an act of creation. Certainly, man does not create the cosmos, as God does; rather man creates an analogy to the cosmos, a cosmion. Voegelin takes the analogy even further when he writes that man creates out of a "shapeless vastness," reminiscent of the *tohu wa-bohu* of Genesis 1:2. The exact wording, however, is taken from Walt Whitman's famous poem "Passage to India" (1871), responding, among others, to the opening of the Suez Canal.²³ In many ways, "Passage to India" is a poem about

²² The introduction survived only in a barely legible manuscript. A transcription is now available in volume 19 of the *Collected Works*, as an appendix to the first volume of the posthumously published *History of Political Ideas*. Eric Voegelin, "Introduction," *History of Political Ideas*. Vol 1: *Hellenism, Rome, and Early Christianity*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 19 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1997) 225.

²³ Walt Whitman, "Passage to India," *Selected Poems 1855-1892: A New Edition*, ed. Gary Schmidgall (New York: St Martin's Press, 1999) 315-23.

human creativity. It seems to say that the glorious technological innovations of man, such as the Suez Channel or the Pacific Railroad, create bridges between the dispersed parts of mankind; they achieve globalization, as it were, undoubtedly following a providential plan. "The earth to be spann'd, connected by net-work," are Whitman's prophetic words. Yet technology leaves unanswered the true spiritual questions of man. Science might discover the structures of the physical world, but physical nature continues to appear as cold to the human soul, as alien and 'unnatural.' Alluding to the spirituality of the Upanishads, Whitman explains that only the poet can truly span the earth, by meditating on the common ground of all being, and by uniting with the creative centre of the cosmos:

Bathe me, O God, in thee – mounting to thee,
I and my soul to range in range of thee.
O Thou transcendent! Nameless – fibre and the breath!
Light of the light – shedding forth universes – thou centre of them!
Thou mightier centre of the true, the good, the loving!
Thou moral, spiritual fountain! Affection's source! Thou reservoir!
(O pensive soul of me! O thirst unsatisfied! Waitest not there?
Waitest not haply for us, somewhere there, the Comrade perfect?)
Thou pulse! Thou motive of the stars, suns, systems,
That, circling, move in order, safe, harmonious,
Athwart the shapeless vastness of space!
How should I think – how breathe a single breath – how speak – if, out of
myself,
I could not launch, to those, superior universes?²⁴

Voegelin's allusion to Whitman makes sense since both authors analyze the longing of the soul for meaning and since both contemplate the creative centre of order. Yet, at this point the difference could not be more radical. Whitman's faith allows for the optimistic outlook on the reunion of the soul with the Divine as its "perfect Comrade." In the moment of union, the seemingly incompatible natures of physics and of the soul will be revealed as consistent and congruent emanations from the same creative centre. Then, the technological and the poetical achievements of mankind will be known as subjects to the same Divine Providence. Voegelin, in contrast, shows no trace of mystical optimism. It is human creativity, not providence, which establishes the meaning structures into which emotions, aspirations, appetites, and desires may be integrated. Humans need to create their

²⁴ Whitman 321.

own little cosmion to find “a semblance of meaning,” because the meaning of the surrounding cosmos as well as the meaning of history remains hidden. The human situation before the creation of the cosmion, the pre-political situation, so to speak, is a situation of fear – fear not of an enemy, as in Hobbes, but fear of senselessness. Voegelin summarizes:

Interpreted in these terms, the political cosmion provides a structure of meaning into which the single human being can fit the results of the biologically and spiritually [productive, procreative] energies of his personal life, thereby [relieving] his life from the [disordering aspects] of existence which always spring up when the possibility of the utter senselessness of a life ending in annihilation is envisaged.²⁵

The above quoted paragraphs sketch a unique theory of the political, that is, a theory of the political order as it emerges from the general existential situation of man, and *not* an analysis of a specific order (such as the national state or constitutional democracy) as it arises in a given historical situation. In line with Carl Schmitt, Voegelin establishes a concept of the political which logically precedes the concept of state.²⁶ Yet, the specific content of Voegelin’s concept of the political is opposed to Schmitt’s concept. Schmitt says that the political is determined by the existential distinction between friend and enemy.²⁷ The enemy, in turn, represents existential “otherness” and is therefore a continuous potential source of conflict and war. Thus, the political situation is characterized by the permanent latent possibility of combat.²⁸ Voegelin, on the contrary, insists that the shelter function of the political protects man first and foremost against the meaninglessness of existence; only in a secondary sense, this shelter must be defended against inner and outer enemies. What the conceptions of Schmitt and Voegelin share is the existentialist perspective.²⁹ In short, Voegelin’s concept of the

²⁵ Voegelin, “Introduction” 226.

²⁶ Carl Schmitt, *The Concept of the Political*, trans. George Schwab (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1996) 19.

²⁷ Schmitt 26.

²⁸ “The friend, enemy, and combat concepts receive their real meaning precisely because they refer to the real possibility of physical killing. [...] War is the existential negation of the enemy.” Carl Schmitt 33.

²⁹ The existentialist character of the “Introduction” has been noted by Thomas Hollweck and Ellis Sandoz: “the whole burden of making sense of his life rests on man.” Thomas Hollweck, Ellis Sandoz, “General Introduction to the Series,” Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas* 1:18. The best study of Schmitt’s existentialism is Karl Löwith, “Der okkasionelle

political is less agonistic than Schmitt's, but no less relativistic. This takes us to the role of language.

As we have seen, the "Introduction" to the *History of Political Ideas* aims at a clarification of what is meant by "political idea." The existentialist perspective does not allow for attributing primarily cognitive or descriptive functions to the political idea. In a situation of existential void, "its primary function is not a cognitive but a formative one."³⁰ Voegelin writes:

The political idea is not an instrument of description of a political unit but an instrument of its creation. [...] The linguistic symbols (contained) in a system of political ideas, by calling a ruler and a people by name, call it into existence. The evocative power of language, the primitive magic relation between a name and the object it denotes, makes it possible to transform an amorphous field of human forces into an ordered unit by an act of evocation of such units.³¹

The terminology is revealing. Prior to Voegelin, the term "evocation" was hardly used in linguistic theory.³² Yet, it has an established place in the tradition of magic. Voegelin shows awareness of this fact when, in the above quotation, he refers to the "primitive magic relation" between name and object. Therefore, we shall have a brief look at the use of the term in the tradition of magic.

Originally, the Latin term *evocatio* referred to a magical practice in Roman warfare, the calling forth of the enemy's deities before a battle.³³ The classical author on magic evocation in Western esotericism, however, is the German renaissance polymath Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim (1486-1535). In

Dezisionismus von C. Schmitt," *Sämtliche Schriften, Vol. 8: Heidegger – Denker in dürftiger Zeit* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1984) 32-71.

³⁰ Voegelin, "Introduction" 227.

³¹ Schmitt 228.

³² Murray Edelman has employed a similar vocabulary in his political linguistics. Yet Edelman's interest is in the creation of meaning *within* a society rather than in the original linguistic creation *of* society. Murray Edelman, "Symbolic Evocation and Political Reality," *Political Language: Words That Succeed and Policies That Fail* (New York: Academic Press, 1977) 9-12.

³³ "In the case of war, the god of the enemy could be seduced by *evocatio*, a vow offering them continuance of cult or possibly even a temple in Rome, if they withdrew their protection from their city." Mary Beard, John North and Simon Price, *Religions of Rome: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998) 1:34.

his *De occulta philosophia*, a work which Voegelin knew,³⁴ he devotes much of the third book to the evocation of angels and demons; yet the practice of evocation is based on Agrippa's theory of language at the end of the first book.³⁵ After making a historical reference to the ancient Roman practice of *evocatio*, he explains the evocative power of the word by referring to the twofold meaning of the Greek term *logos*. *Logos* may refer, on the one hand, to an inner word [*verbum internum*], meaning the conception of our mind and the motion of our soul [*conceptus mentis et motus animae*] and, on the other hand, the spoken word [*verbum prolatum*]. This spoken word, Agrippa says, has a certain force or energy [*quidam actus*] affecting the auditor:

Words [*verba*], therefore, are the most appropriate medium between the speaker and the auditor, as they bring along not only conception [*conceptum*] but also the force of the speaker [*virtus loquentis*] transfusing into the auditors and recipients with a certain energy [*energia quadam transfudentes in audientes & suscipientes*]. This they sometimes do with such power that they not only transform [*immutare*] the auditors but even bodies and inanimate things.³⁶

The metaphysics behind these words are extremely complex and obscure but need not concern us at this point. The basic claim is clear: Under certain circumstances, language, which has the form of energy, can exercise such strong transformative powers onto the environment of the speaker that a subjective inner reality, thoughts, and emotions, can become an objective reality, accepted by the auditors. Voegelin literally writes in the "Introduction": "The magic power of language is so strong that the mention of a term is always accompanied by a presumption that in using the term we are referring to an objective reality."³⁷

Yet, we must be careful not to impute an occult dimension onto Voegelin's thought. Quite to the contrary, Voegelin insists that political theory must show the

³⁴ Cf. Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas. Vol 5: Religion and the Rise of Modernity*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 23 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri Press, 1998) 171.

³⁵ My analysis relies heavily on the philological expertise of Noel Putnik who also directed me to the relevant chapters in Agrippa's vast oeuvre. Cf. Noel Putnik, "Obtinere mentem divinam. The Spiritual Anthropology of Cornelius Agrippa," PhD dissertation (Budapest: Central European University, 2018).

³⁶ Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim, *De occulta philosophia* (Lyon: Godefroy et Marcellin Beringer, 1550) 159. Translated by the author.

³⁷ Voegelin, "Introduction" 228.

greatest possible detachment from the magical operations of political evocation, even though it can never fully overcome the fact that theorists do not live outside the cosmion. As he remarks, most self-declared political theorists falsely claim a descriptive attitude toward their subject while, in reality, they participate in the same 'magical adventures': "This type of political theory, if we wish to characterize it more precisely, may be said to have ancillary functions on the enterprise of (re-creating), by continuous evocative practices, a cosmion in existence."³⁸

True political theory, even if it may never be fully accomplished, is different. Instead of contributing to the perpetuation of the cosmion, it contributes to its destruction:

When contemplative analysis is carried to its limits it has to explain the cosmion as what it is, as a magical entity, existing through the evocative forces of man; it has to explain its relativity, and its essential inability to accomplish what it intends to do—that is, to render an absolute shelter of meaning.³⁹

Theory, therefore, is opposed to magic; it is a spell-breaking and disenchanting practice, says Voegelin with reference to Max Weber.⁴⁰ It is determined by the attitude of realism⁴¹ and, because of its destructive effect, one could just as well call it anarchic. Consequently, Voegelin references La Boétie's proto-anarchistic *Discours de la servitude volontaire*: "La Boétie's attitude is one of bewildered revolt," he writes; "When the magic has lost its spell and the facade of government becomes transparent, the disillusioned observer can discover nothing but acts determined by tradition and [heredity] or [...] interest and lust of power."⁴²

However, Voegelin did not follow La Boétie into revolt. The reason for this is that he did not identify the lust for power as the ulterior motive behind political evocations.⁴³ As he writes in another unpublished text from the same period: "The driving force of the magical creation is the anxiety of existence."⁴⁴

³⁸ Voegelin, "Introduction" 229.

³⁹ Voegelin, "Introduction" 232; cf. the characterization of the "realists" Niccolò Machiavelli, Jean Bodin, and Thomas Hobbes in Eric Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas. Vol. 7: The New Order and Last Orientation*, Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 25 (Columbia, MO, and London: University of Missouri Press, 1999) 59-60.

⁴⁰ Voegelin, "Introduction" 229.

⁴¹ Voegelin, "Introduction" 230.

⁴² Voegelin, "Introduction" 230.

⁴³ This distinguishes Voegelin from more recent theorists of political language and political discourse, such as Michel Foucault, Murray Edelman, or Benedict Anderson.

⁴⁴ Quoted from Jürgen Gebhardt, "Editor's Introduction," Voegelin, *History of Political Ideas. Vol. 7* 15.

Toward a Linguistic Theory of the Political

Voegelin's later thought developed in different directions; but at one moment of his intellectual life, when he wrote the "Introduction" to the *History of Political Ideas*, Voegelin had an almost intuitive insight into the creative power and magic of language. A moment of astonishing similarity we find in the work of Hannah Arendt. In *The Human Condition* Arendt writes about the nature of the public realm:

For us, appearance – something that is being seen and heard by others as well as by ourselves – constitutes reality. Compared with the reality which comes from being seen and heard, even the greatest forces of intimate life – the passions of the heart, the thoughts of the mind, the delights of the senses – lead an uncertain, shadowy kind of existence unless and until they are transformed, deprivatized and deindividualized, as it were, into a shape to fit them for public appearance. The most current of such transformations occurs in storytelling and generally in artistic transposition of individual experiences.⁴⁵

The German version of this text, also written by Arendt herself, shows a slight yet significant difference in the last sentence, as it explicitly uses the words of the poet Rainer Maria Rilke: "Solche Umformungen sind uns aus unserer täglichen Erfahrung ganz geläufig, sie finden bereits bei dem einfachsten Erzählen einer Geschichte statt, und wir begegnen ihnen ständig in den 'unbeschreiblichen Verwandlungen' (Rilke) individuellster Erfahrungen, die in den Gebilden der Kunst vorliegen."⁴⁶ The words are taken from a poem of Rilke which, unsurprisingly, is entitled "Magic" ("Magie"). Here, the poet expresses his astonishment over the fact that he can create reality by poetically articulating his inner motions:

Aus unbeschreiblicher Verwandlung stammen
solche Gebilde—: Fühl! und glaub!
Wir leidens oft: zu Asche werden Flammen;
doch, in der Kunst: zur Flamme wird der Staub.
Hier ist Magie. In das Bereich des Zaubers
scheint das gemeine Wort hinaufgestuft ...

⁴⁵ Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago, IL: The University of Chicago Press, 1958) 50.

⁴⁶ Hannah Arendt, *Vita Activa, oder vom tätigen Leben* (München: Piper, 1998) 62-63.

und ist doch wirklich wie der Ruf des Taubers,
der nach der unsichtbaren Taube ruft.

[From an indescribable transformation
these creations stem—: Feel! and believe!
We suffer this often: the flame turns to ashes,
yet in art: dust turns to flame.
Here is magic. Into the realm of sorcery
the simple word seems to be elevated
and it really is like the call of the male dove
calling forth the invisible female dove.]⁴⁷

Obviously, this is a poem about evocation. But the cryptic reference to Rilke is Arendt's final word on magic. It is regrettable that neither Voegelin nor Arendt continued their studies of the creative and transformative power of language – regrettable because a study of the existential or anthropological origins of the political would have to start exactly here, in the magic moments that Eric Voegelin called “evocative situations.” Yet, Voegelin's “destructive” theoretical approach in the “Introduction” does not allow him to pursue the topic further. But there are other authors who can help to fill the gap.

In a passage in Plato's *Protagoras*, Socrates tells his Sophist counterpart:

For I hold that there is a good deal in what Homer says—

When two go together, one observes before the other; for somehow it makes all of us human beings more resourceful in every deed or word or thought; but if one observes something alone, forthwith one has to go about searching until one discovers somebody to whom one can show it off and who can corroborate it.⁴⁸

In this passage Plato, admittedly, does not formulate principles of political theory but the foundations of dialogue. Yet, he has captured something important: inner realities become firm realities only in the intersubjective realm. Therefore, man feels the desire to speak to someone, in order to find confirmation.

Hannah Arendt confirms:

⁴⁷ Rainer Maria Rilke, “Magie,” *Werke in drei Bänden* (Frankfurt/M: Insel, 1966): 2, 174-75. The author's English translation attempts to render the poem literally (and not poetically).

⁴⁸ *Protagoras* 348c-d. Plato, *Laches. Protagoras. Meno. Euthydemus*, trans. W.R.M. Lamb, Loeb Classical Library, No. 165 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1924) 215.

Each time we talk about things that can be experienced only in privacy or intimacy, we bring them out into a sphere where they will assume a kind of reality which, their intensity notwithstanding, they never could have before. The presence of others who see what we see and hear what we hear assures us of the reality of the world and ourselves [...].⁴⁹

Another thinker who devoted extensive research to this phenomenon, is Helmuth Plessner in his study on human expressivity.⁵⁰ All three authors, Plato, Arendt, and Plessner, refer precisely to the dimension that is missing in Voegelin's "Introduction," namely the insight that the evocative act responds to a concrete experience – sensuous or intellectual – of a concrete person. Evocation is the calling forth of an experience into the intersubjective realm. In the early Voegelin, in contrast, the evocative act is seen as motivated by existential angst alone. Man creates not for a concrete reason but because otherwise there would be nothing but the "shapeless vastness" of unstructured desires and emotions. Voegelin's anthropology describes man as a deficient animal, leading an incomplete existence, which needs to be complemented by the meaning structures of the cosmos.⁵¹

Voegelin corrected these shortcomings in his later works, when he characterized the symbolic structures of social order no longer as seemingly arbitrary evocations but as articulations of existential experiences, i.e., experiences of order and participation.⁵² But this change of perspective does not eliminate the problem of magic. Yet, even if we have clarified the original motive for the evocative act with the assistance of Plato and Arendt, other questions are still

⁴⁹ Arendt, *The Human Condition* 50; cf. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind. Vol. 1: Thinking* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978) 98.

⁵⁰ Helmuth Plessner, *Die Stufen des Organischen und der Mensch* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1975) 321-41.

⁵¹ Similar views are found in Johann Gottfried Herder and Arnold Gehlen. Clifford Geertz, apparently unaware of the earlier *Mängelwesen*-theories, described symbolic orders as necessary "cultural programs" for ordering man's behavior, as he would otherwise be an "incomplete, unfinished animal." Clifford Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures* (1973) (New York: Basic Books, 2000) 42-46.

⁵² In 1966, Voegelin wrote that the creation of political order is "the process by which concrete persons create a social field, i.e., a field in which their experiences of order are understood by other concrete men who accept them as their own and make them into the motive of their habitual actions?" Eric Voegelin, *Anamnesis. On the Theory of History and Politics*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 6 (Columbia, MO, and London: University of Missouri Press, 2002) 400. The magic, obviously, is lost.

open: How does this transformation work, which first turns the experience of a concrete person into a meaningfully structured sound, not only recognizable but also, to some degree, understandable? How can it happen that, in a second stage of the process, the auditors imagine that the experience of the speaker and their own experiences are of the same kind? How does it work that the mere reception of words transforms a multitude of more or less contingent auditors into a structured community with common aims and convictions, potentially the nucleus of a new major society, a nation, a state, a church? In other words, is the problem of evocation really solved?

In the next step, we are helped by Ernst Cassirer, whose *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* played an important role in shaping Voegelin's vocabulary of "experience" and "symbolization."⁵³ Cassirer defined his concept of symbolic form as follows: "By 'symbolic form' we mean any energy of the mind [*Energie des Geistes*], through which a meaningful content of the mind is connected with a concrete sensuous sign and is internally assigned to it."⁵⁴ Cassirer's philosophy is only of secondary importance here; because of its neglect of the political and its idealist conception of the mind it does not connect well with Voegelin's theory. The interesting part of Cassirer's definition is the concept of energy which refers us back to Agrippa of Nettesheim. Agrippa, as we remember, spoke of an *energia quadam*, an energy by which the speaker can cause a transformative impact on his human and non-human environment. In Cassirer, this energy is more clearly described as the energy which transforms an inner content of the mind into the symbolic form of language; in other words, an energy which gives experience an effective form. Cassirer does not justify his choice of words but instead betrays his source, the late work of Wilhelm von Humboldt. In *On the Multitude of Human Language Structures and their Influence on the Intellectual Development of Mankind*, written in the early 1830s, Humboldt wrote:

Language, if conceived in its real essence, is continuously and permanently transitory. Even its preservation in script always remains an incomplete, mummy-like conservation, which again requires to be re-sensualized in recitation. It is therefore not a work (*ergon*) but an activity (*energeia*). Its true definition, therefore, can only be a genetic one; because it is the eternally

⁵³ Eric Voegelin, "The New Science of Politics," *Modernity Without Restraint*, The Collected Works of Eric Voegelin, Vol. 5 (Columbia, MO, and London: University of Missouri Press, 2000) 96.

⁵⁴ Ernst Cassirer, *Wesen und Wirkung des Symbolbegriffs*, (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997) 175. Translated by the author.

self-reiterating mental labour of making the articulate sound capable of expressing thought.⁵⁵

In Humboldt's work, we observe how, by means of comparative linguistics and philosophical anthropology, the problem of magic transforms into observations on the human situation: on the physical and mental constitution of man, on historical and social constraints, but also on the essential liberty of human intellectual activity. We see how the magic is gone in the same moment as Humboldt understands that language is not essentially the work of a nation, finished and codified, subject to logical rules of vocabulary and grammar. He sees that it is not the work (*ergon*) of the human mind but its actual and permanent activity (*energeia*), or put differently, that understanding means speaking.⁵⁶

Humboldt also seems to be the first philosopher to maintain that language does neither reproduce an objective external reality nor a subjective inner reality but that it permanently creates and recreates the 'standpoint' from which we perceive internal and external reality. The last quotation from Humboldt here shows that he, like Voegelin, identified the sphere of the political as the primary sphere of perception that is formed by language:

Just as a single sound intervenes between the object and man, language as a whole intervenes between man and the internal and external nature which are affecting him. He encloses himself in a world of sounds in order to perceive and process the objective world. These articulations in no way transgress the measure of simple truth. Since man's perception and action entirely depend on his imagination, he lives together with objects exclusively in the way language conveys them. In the same act, in which he spins language out of himself, he spins himself into language; and every language draws a circle around the nation it belongs to – a circle one can only leave by entering another one. Learning a foreign language should therefore mean the same as gaining a new world view [...].⁵⁷

⁵⁵ Wilhelm von Humboldt, *Werke in fünf Bänden. Bd. 3: Schriften zur Sprachphilosophie* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1963) 418. Translated by the author.

⁵⁶ Cf. Hans Schwarz, "Enérgeia, Sprache als (Humboldt)," *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, ed. Joachim Ritter, Karlfried Gründer and Gottfried Gabriel (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 1971-2007) 2:492-94.

⁵⁷ Humboldt, *Werke* 3: 434. Translated by the author.

The aim here is not to build a linguistic theory by complementing Voegelin's unfinished framework with seemingly suitable building blocks; the aim rather is to show where the origins of social creativity are to be sought for: in the complex ways in which humans communicate meaning through language and *not* in the technologies employed for this purpose. For good reasons, this article makes little reference to modern sociolinguistics or the even younger sub-discipline of political linguistics, concerned with political rhetoric. Any attempt at understanding creativity cannot begin there, because in these disciplines, the existence of societies is always presupposed, wherefore the decisive moments of socio-political creation, the evocative acts, never come into sight.

Thomas Müntzer's Revolution

The final section of this article is devoted to a brief case study taking us back to the question raised at the beginning: what are the creative processes that lead to religio-political transformations in the early modern era.

Despite their theological and political differences, chief protagonists of the early reformation, such as Martin Luther, Andreas Karlstadt, and Thomas Müntzer, were masters of language: their actual creativity lies not in the use of media, but in their use of the vernacular. Eisenstein rightly remarks that, already in the years 1517 to 1520, Luther's writing had been sold in hundreds of thousands of printed copies. But what would have been the numbers, had Luther written exclusively in Latin? Luther, Karlstadt, and Müntzer, all built on the vernacular theology that had been created by late medieval mystical preachers, especially by the Dominicans Meister Eckhardt, Henry Suso, and Johannes Tauler, but they were no longer addressing monks and nuns. Thus, the reformers created an entire linguistic universe, in which lay people could discuss all religious and social matters, and articulate internal and external experiences. They were teaching the people a new language, so to speak.

Already the pre-Gutenberg era had witnessed a massive rebellion in Bohemia and the (albeit temporary) religio-political breakaway of a major European region from the Roman Church.⁵⁸ The decades leading up to the rebellion see an exponential growth of vernacular preaching and an interrelated, swiftly growing spiritual sensitivity of the laity, even in the countryside.⁵⁹ The same can be said about the early reformation period. In 1979, Elizabeth Eisenstein certainly had a

⁵⁸ This fact is conspicuously downplayed by Eisenstein. Cf. Eisenstein, *The Printing Press* 310f.

⁵⁹ See Pavel Soukup, "Jan Hus as a Preacher," *A Companion to Jan Hus*, ed. František Šmahel (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2015) 96-129; especially the quantitative data on pp. 96-98.

point when she complained about the neglect of technological developments by intellectual historians. Nowadays, the slogan “No Reformation without the printing press!”⁶⁰ has become a commonplace and has overshadowed the agitative and formative force of the vernacular.⁶¹ More recent research shows that it was not the printing press that created a public sphere for vernacular theology; rather it was the growing desire for vernacular theology that caused the enormous output of print shops.⁶² In the background of the desire is the declining faith in the Latin-speaking clerical church and its sacraments as a safe way to redemption.

If we look at the evocation of new communities in the early reformation period, the case of Martin Luther is most surprising, since the foundation of a church was not planned; it rather happened to him.⁶³ Since Luther had declared the Pope to be the Antichrist and since he had shaken the institutional foundations of the Roman Church – indulgence and absolution, sacramental ordination, scholastic

⁶⁰ The slogan was coined by the German reformation scholar Bernd Moeller in same year 1979, in which Elizabeth Eisenstein published her *Printing Press as an Agent of Change*. Bernd Moeller, “Stadt und Buch. Bemerkungen zur Struktur der reformatorischen Bewegung in Deutschland,” *Stadtbürgertum und Adel in der Reformation. Studien zur Sozialgeschichte der Reformation in England und Deutschland*, ed. Wolfgang J. Mommsen (Göttingen: Klett-Cotta, 1979) 30.

⁶¹ Joachim Bauer, Stefan Michel, *Alternative Predigt? Beobachtungen zur kursächsischen Predigerlandschaft neben Luther, Karlstadt und Müntzer bis 1525* (Mühlhausen: Thomas-Müntzer-Gesellschaft, 2018).

⁶² “Dass die Druckproduktion infolge der Reformation dauerhaft angestiegen ist, wird man als Konsequenz einer nachhaltigen Wirkung infolge eines spezifischen Funktionsgewinns des volkssprachlichen Buches zu interpretieren haben.” Thomas Kaufmann, “Ohne Buchdruck keine Reformation?” *Buchdruck und Buchkultur im Wittenberg der Reformationszeit*, ed. Stefan Oehmig (Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt, 2015) 31.

⁶³ In *Doctor Faustus*, Thomas Mann beautifully described this counter-intentional evocation of church community at the example of a religiously inspired émigré to America: “But then a new wave of religious emotion had swept over him, and he followed the inner call to lead the spare, totally isolated life of a hermit in the wilderness, thinking only of God. But as it often happens that the fugitive, in fleeing humankind, may find his life entwined with his fellow man, he, too, soon found himself surrounded by a host of admiring followers and imitators of his seclusion; and instead of being rid of the world he was promptly, on a moment’s notice, made head of a community that quickly developed into an independent sect, the Seventh Day Baptists, whom he ruled all the more absolutely since, to his knowledge, he had never sought out leadership, but had been called to it against his wishes and intentions.” Thomas Mann, *Doctor Faustus. The Life of the German Composer Adrian Leverkühn as Told by a Friend*, trans. John Woods (New York: Vintage International, 1999) 71-72.

theology, dogma, canon law –, his followers were looking for alternatives. Naturally, Luther's evocation of an invisible Church as the true kingdom of Christ was not suitable for revolutionary agitation, and it was not meant to be. But while Luther was reluctant to create a new church, alternative religio-political evocations soon emerged from the circle of his followers, for instance, Andreas Karlstadt's evocation of a "Christian City." Luther intervened forcefully and reclaimed his leadership over the German reform movement. But by negative-polemical evocation, his own church was slowly taking institutional shape, with censorship as one of its first visible features.⁶⁴

A positive and revolutionary evocation of community, in contrast, we find in Thomas Müntzer. Already in his 1521 *Prague Manifesto*, he announced that from his preaching activity a renewed apostolic church (*renovata ecclesia apostolica*) would emerge. This community of saints would survive the ravage of Turk and Antichrist and would then receive, from Christ's own hands, the dominion over a purified world for all eternity.⁶⁵ In this future theocracy, "the God of the Gods will appear on Zion forever."⁶⁶

Müntzer was not as easily silenced as Karlstadt. As an itinerant preacher he created an enormous uproar in a number of larger and smaller cities. Wherever he arrived, he followed the same basic strategy.⁶⁷ First, he identified the most important competitors, priests, friars, and soon the followers of Luther; next, he denounced them as preachers of a fictitious faith and ridiculed them in sermons. Then, he established his own teaching of the "true" faith as a radical alternative. Finally, he explained that there were only two choices: to be with him or against him, to be with Christ or Antichrist. It is amazing to see how quickly the linguistic

⁶⁴ Lyndal Roper, *Martin Luther: Renegade and Prophet* (New York: Random House, 2017) 206-37. "Over the next years, and through a series of polemics, pamphlets, letters, disputes, and negotiations with his rivals, Luther tacitly abandoned the project of reforming the Church. Instead he began to create a church of his own." Roper 333. Cf. Heinz Schilling, *Martin Luther. Rebell in einer Zeit des Umbruchs* (München: Beck, 2013) 415-17.

⁶⁵ Thomas Müntzer, *Thomas-Müntzer-Ausgabe. Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, ed. Helmar Junghans and Armin Kohnle (Leipzig: Sächsische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2004-17) 1:427. For context and a detailed source analysis see Matthias Riedl, "Thomas Müntzer's *Prague Manifesto*: A Case Study in the Secularization of the Apocalypse," *Éthique, politique, religions* 4 (2014): 47-68.

⁶⁶ *Thomas-Müntzer-Ausgabe* 1:440.

⁶⁷ See Matthias Riedl, "Apocalyptic Violence and Revolutionary Action: Thomas Müntzer's *Sermon to the Princes*," *A Companion to the Premodern Apocalypse*, ed. Michael A. Ryan (Leiden and Boston, MA: Brill, 2016) 275-76.

evocation of two antagonistic collectives created actual social realities. Wherever Müntzer arrived, he managed in a very brief period to split the populace into two parties, his followers and his enemies, who would soon start to fight each other. In most cases, Müntzer's conduct led to his expulsion by municipal or territorial authorities. Not so in the city of Allstedt, where the entire citizenry submitted to his spiritual leadership and Müntzer could finally begin to shape the community he had imagined.

In a first stage, he translated the Latin Mass into German, a pioneering step in the German reformation. Lutherans accused him of merely translating the text without revising it according to reform theology. But this is not a fair allegation. In many instances, Müntzer purposefully changed the wording to evoke the counter-image of Luther's invisible church. Wherever the original texts address "the people," "the faithful," or simply "humans," Müntzer put "the elect."

The German mass put a lay community in the position to sing responsorials, psalms, and canticles in their own language and to grow in the awareness that preacher and audience constituted a visible community of God's elect.⁶⁸ Contrary to previous practice, Müntzer faced the community and not the altar when celebrating the mass, adding further to a sense of eschatological equality.

Soon, Müntzer announced the creation of a new covenant with God; and the linguistic evocation in his sermon instantly took institutional form: "After the mass, the crowd moved to the cellar of the town hall and entered their names in the new list of the covenant."⁶⁹ The people must have felt some magic in this revolutionary moment, when they signed up for salvation. And, maybe, the experience of a formative force radiating from speech constitutes the core of what we otherwise address as charisma.

Hans-Jürgen Goertz writes about this moment: "The new convenient replaces the old legal order; it is a revolutionary institution, the first organizational consequence from his revolutionary theory."⁷⁰ This is correct, but in-between theory and institution lies speech, linguistic evocation. Müntzer initiated religio-political discourses, which did not only allow for explaining all the misery that people were confronted with; it also enabled people from all standings to integrate into the discourse and, thus, become part of new social structures.

⁶⁸ For the interrelation of ecclesiology and liturgy in the early reformation period see: Artur Göser, *Kirche und Lied: der Hymnus 'Veni redemptor gentium' bei Müntzer und Luther. Eine ideologiekritische Studie* (Würzburg: Königshausen und Neumann, 1995).

⁶⁹ Hans-Jürgen Goertz, *Thomas Müntzer. Mystiker. Apokalyptiker. Revolutionär* (München: Beck, 1989) 114. Translated by the author.

⁷⁰ Goertz 115.

The evocation of the new covenant was a spectacular success. Thousands flocked to Allstedt from neighbouring communities, until the processions were violently stopped by frightened territorial lords, executing the 1523 imperial decree against reformation preaching. An angry Müntzer turned to the higher authority of the Saxon Elector, evoking in ever more fantastic images. In his famous *Sermon to the Princes*, he explained that his movement was the apocalyptic stone from the Book of Daniel, rolling toward the destruction of the idol, meaning the entire religio-political order. The princes could either roll with the people or be rolled over.⁷¹

But Müntzer was no less creative in evoking negative images of the enemy. Already in his earlier *Prague Manifesto* he had painted the powerful image of a Catholic clergy, ordained by Satan and anointed with the oil of sinners.⁷² Addressing the rulers of Saxony, he likened the cooperation of secular lords with Catholic prelates to “eels and snakes coupling together immorally in one great heap.”⁷³ The propagation of such images needed no printing press, by word of mouth people learned what Müntzer had dared to speak into the face of the mightiest princes.

A related area of creativity is insults. Martin Luther enriched the German language with many innovations, ranging from proverbs to swearwords.⁷⁴ Müntzer was no less fanciful. He crafted new adjectives like *hodenseckysch* (scrotum-like) and *hurnhengestig* (stallion-like-hot for prostitutes).⁷⁵ And he addressed the Pope as the pisspot of Rome and Luther as a sack of maggots or as the softly living flesh of Wittenberg. Luther paid back in kind, addressing Müntzer as the Satan of Allstedt and a swarming spirit. Yet, the purpose of these insults was not polemics alone. The pictorial character of their insults, often with sexual connotations, provoked the imagination of the auditors and made them laugh. Most people may not always have known the precise content of Luther’s or Müntzer’s teaching, but they knew by what names the reformers called the Pope and by what names they called each other. Well-crafted insults are like magic spells; with reference to Agrippa of Nettesheim, they may be seen as a form of negative linguistic energy which ridicules and, thereby, deprives the opponent of power.

⁷¹ Riedl, “Müntzer’s Sermon to the Princes” 261-62.

⁷² *Thomas-Müntzer-Ausgabe* 1:436-37.

⁷³ *Thomas-Müntzer-Ausgabe* 1:314-15.

⁷⁴ Cf. Hartmut Günther, *Mit Feuereifer und Herzenslust. Wie Luther unsere Sprache prägte* (Berlin: Dudenverlag, 2017).

⁷⁵ Cf. Ingo Warnke, *Wörterbuch zu Thomas Müntzers deutschen Schriften und Briefen* (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1993).

It seems that Müntzer was on the best way to becoming more popular than Martin Luther. Certainly, his reform project, which aimed at a complete renewal of the religio-political order, was more attractive to many than Luther's *Fürstenreformation*.⁷⁶ When the peasants began to revolt against their lords, Müntzer shifted his attention from the towns to the countryside. He became the preacher of an army which carried a rainbow flag, the symbol of God's postdiluvial pact with Noah.⁷⁷ The evocation of the covenant reached ever wider segments of society.

Horrified Luther agitated fiercely against his chief rival, also by means of the printing press. Eventually, he succeeded, but not because he was more widely published than Müntzer. Luther succeeded because his model of reform appealed to the mighty and left the established princely powers in place. Ultimately, Müntzer was not stopped by the printing press, but by an army and a headsman.

Müntzer was no less eager than Luther to see his pamphlets printed. The prints were often produced under precarious and clandestine circumstances. They were circulated in underground circles and discussed within the incipient Anabaptist movement. But in the second half of the 1520s, after all uprisings had been crushed, all leaders executed, and all revolutionary hopes evaporated, not a million printed copies of the *Sermon to the Princes* would have revived the rebellion. The experiential situation was now a different one.

Conclusion

Since Michel Foucault, discourse analysis tends to search for the power mechanisms behind the production and containment of discourses. Moreover, discourses themselves or the ominous "will to power" seem to constitute the real agents of history, while the "subject as an agent of change" disappears.⁷⁸ But the Foucauldian perspective is no less one-sided than the McLuhanist one. It is true that Foucault increased awareness of the fact that experience and symbolic articulation occur in discursive environments and are never purely "subjective," but his approach cannot explain the immense creativity of individual agents. The sensuous and intellectual experience of the reformer is real; it is an internal reality,

⁷⁶ Schilling 304-10.

⁷⁷ Goertz 145.

⁷⁸ See Foucault's programmatic inaugural lecture at the Collège de France: Michel Foucault, "The Order of Discourse," *Untying the Text: A Post-Structuralist Reader*, ed. Robert Young (Boston, MA: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1981) 51-78. Cf. Mark Bevir, "Foucault, Power, and Institutions," *Political Studies* 47 (1999): 349.

which desires to become an external social reality, through the articulation of experience in symbolic narratives.

The linguistic evocations of the early reformation period initiated the transformation and re-shaping of the European religio-political order, even if they are not the only factors in the play. They created the cosmions, which allowed millions of people to reintegrate their individual existence, after the old symbolic orders could no longer integrate desires for salvation and protect from notions of meaninglessness and despair. In this process, the printing press was a powerful tool, but at no point it was the agent of change and the source of creativity. The source of creativity was the experience of religiously and politically sensitive individuals. But experience and sensitivity are not enough: it also needed the rare linguistic and symbolic resourcefulness of the likes of Luther and Müntzer that allowed for an evocation of alternative realities, for transforming experience into discourses and, consequently, new social forms.

The intention of this article is not to deny the role of media technologies in the transformation of societies; this would be a foolish endeavour. The intention is rather to express a warning against establishing simplistic causalities. Such a warning may be topical today for the reasons outlined in the beginning. We should be careful ascribing too much creativity to the media also in our own days, creativity in a constructive or destructive sense. Media technologies play an enormous role in the proliferation of discourses, of destructive ones, such as conspiracy theories, but also of constructive ones, creating awareness of social discrimination or environmental pollution. These discourses are shaping new social and political realities: protest movements, political parties, and interest groups. However, then and now, it is people who speak, with or without the use of technology.

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