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Neologisms and Neo-Nazism: On Anders Breivik’s Diagnosis

François Rastier

SCHIZOPHRENIC OR NEO-NAZI VOCABULARY?

On July 22, 2011, Anders Breivik killed seventy-seven people in bombings in central Oslo and a shooting rampage on the island of Utøya during a convention of young members of the Labor Party. In their November 29 report, two psychiatrists, Synne Sørheim and Torgeir Husby, stated that he could not be held responsible for his actions by diagnosing him with paranoid schizophrenia.

Specifically, they interpreted the use of neologisms as a sign of schizophrenia. However, neologisms are entirely ordinary in the language of the Far Right, for several main reasons: (i) They reflect the pamphleteer style that the Far Right is fond of and that linguistically makes its violence concrete; (ii) They seem to shatter the language’s proprieties found in its vocabulary, which is considered as doxa, and thus solidify a “revolutionary” radicalism; (iii) Often, through compositions, such as fédéaste (Jean-Marie Le Pen), which combines the political abomination of federalism and the “unnaturalness” of pederasty, they create repugnant hybrids that the discourse then condemns; (iv) Finally, they create an effect of complicity, which surpasses sectarianism and extends to populism.

However, it is understandable why the World Health Organization’s diagnostic manual (ICD-10) considers the invention of neologisms a symptom of schizophrenia: the schizophrenic may literally demonstrate
his alienation through linguistic usages that are incomprehensible to others (see Louis Wolfson, *Le Schizo et les langues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970)).

The psychiatrists who examined Breivik undoubtedly applied the guidelines of their manual, which they cite dozens of times, but they also took for neologisms words that are calques of English expressions of which no element is neologistic. For example, in *national Darwinist*, *national* is no more neologistic than *Darwinist*, but in Norwegian the calque *nasjonaldarwinist* is still a neologism. Its use by Breivik is not a sign of alienation, but rather a demand for integration into the international neo-Nazi community, where the expression *national Darwinist* is common; it is so widespread that it can be found, for example, in the *New York Times*. Thus the Norwegian calque of English words and expressions is not an invention that would demonstrate alienation. What seems to be a neologism in the oral interview in Norwegian with the psychiatrists is no such thing in the 1,500 pages of Anders Breivik’s English-language manifesto, which was posted online the day before the massacre. English is so much the language of his militant activities that he signs his manifesto with an Anglicized version of his name—Andrew Berwick—thereby indicating that he truly belongs to an international sphere of influence. Moreover, he was “trained” in neo-Nazism during his visits to England, where he specifically built organizational ties with the English Defence League.

One may only vindicate Breivik when, upon the publication of the diagnosis, he noted with bitterness that the psychiatrists understood nothing about ideologies. Furthermore, they would undoubtedly benefit from educating themselves about linguistic concepts before using linguistic criteria.

The diagnosis suggests that he is not responsible for his actions and therefore should not be subject to legal action. Could he have killed seventy-seven people in one frenzied breath? His published writings, the meticulous planning of his attacks, as well as the support he received from radical opinion (including in France) confirm that he belongs to an international sphere of influence that is arming itself and preparing for a “holy” war against Arabs (many of his victims were indeed young people from immigrant backgrounds).

The diagnosis hides this political and organizational dimension: in seeking individual “reasons,” it obviously cannot discern the local and
international implications of the massacre. Herein lies the diagnosis's effect, even if one may think that it was not its purpose.

THE “STRANGE IDEAS” OF A MASS MURDERER

The psychiatrists who examined Breivik also based their diagnosis on his “strange ideas.”

(i) In the first place, these ideas relate to contagion. Perhaps the psychiatrists did not know that this is a major theme of Nazi biological racism. All the writings of this sphere of influence describe immigration as a dangerous epidemic that endangers the purity and very identity of the people and the race.

(ii) Breivik therefore thinks that Norway is the victim of an “ethnic cleansing.” Here again is a common theme of neo-Nazi organizations: in this civil war, even if it is a hidden conflict (lavintensiv borgerkrieg), mass murder becomes a legitimate act of struggle for survival.

Incidentally, the psychiatrists seem to know little about modern history: when Breivik, in order to reestablish racial purity, refers to “breeding factories” (massefabrikker for fødsler), it is not an issue of personal fantasy. He is continuing the project of the Lebensborn of yesteryear (a neologism at the time): everyone knows that in these “human stud farms,” the Nazis coupled selected SS officers with tall, blond, blue-eyed young women in order to improve the threatened Germanic race. Around ten centers were opened in Norway. Thus negative eugenics (the killing of threatening, nonindigenous persons) is complemented by the positive eugenics of the “breeding factories.”

(iii) Among the “atypical” concepts picked out by the psychiatrists is the “love for the people” and the “sovereign.” However, in totalitarian politics, the biological unity between the people and the sovereign (guide orführer) is intensified by a mutual emotional fusion (see, for example, Carl Schmitt’s essay, “State, Movement, People”).

(iv) The psychiatrists are surprised that Breivik sometimes uses I and sometimes we, and here they see a depersonalization and weakening of identity. However, in this militant speech, the we on the contrary asserts a collective identity, that of the Gemeinschaft, the “community” in whose name the elite individual may fight in order to save the people to which he belongs. This was already the case in Mein Kampf.
(v) Finally, the experts stress that Breivik uses many figures, in a technical discourse, without emotion. It would be discourteous to see in this assessment a description of their own discourse.

Let us recall, however, that executioners, in the past as well as in the present, have always shown a surprising lack of emotion (from Höss to Stangl, and to Douch and Nuon Chea). Moreover, Nazism also excelled at technical discourse (cf. Eugen Fischer and the Institute for Racial Hygiene). The technique has simply evolved, and Breivik demands the widespread administration of DNA tests in order to objectively determine the right to life.

Separating Breivik's discourse from corroborating elements and deliberately ignoring the history and ideology it invokes, in fact make it incoherent; however, this discourse regains its political and organizational meaning as soon as one returns these “elements of diagnosis” to their context and corpus of interpretation.

How, then, should this “patient” be treated? The psychiatrists advise, among other things, medications in order to develop dopaminergic activity, which is known for stimulating the brain's reward network, in short, to help to look on the bright side of life.

On December 22, 2011, the committee of experts presided over by Karl Heinrik Melle did not raise “any significant objection” to the psychiatrists’ report and validated it as it was. If, at the end of his trial that is set to begin on April 16, 2012, the court follows the psychiatrists who declare him not responsible and commits him to a psychiatric hospital, his medical file will be reexamined annually and he will be released as soon as he is declared cured—based on the same criteria as those that made it possible for him to be declared ill. For this, he will need only to speak a language that is accessible to the experts and in which they will find nothing strange.

At present, the experts’ discourse is spreading out around us, in all areas of social life and in economics above all: it multiplies figures, devises indices, applies evaluation grids that are removed from all debates. When it does not simply hide the truth by making it illegible, expertise thus displayed often has some of the characteristics of a widespread removal of responsibility, and even serves to providentially justify lack of responsibility.
NB. Translated into French by Anje Müller Gjesdal, whom I wish to thank for her valuable clarifications, this text appeared in Norwegian in Bergens Tidende (January 9, 2012).

On Friday, January 13, the investigating judge ordered a new expert assessment by two other psychiatrists, Agnar Aspaas and Terje Tørrisen. Several specialists had disputed the initial report. Randi Rosenquist, who was responsible for Breivik’s psychiatric follow-up care in prison, did not find him depressive or psychotic. On December 7, 2011, Johan Cullberg, a renowned Swedish clinician and theorist, published an analysis in which he said that Breivik’s manifesto showed no trace of verbal blockages or stereotypes attributable to schizophrenia, but developed an organized philosophy of his criminal act. He concluded that Breivik is sane enough to be tried.

François Rastier

François Rastier is a linguist who specializes in semantics. He synthesizes knowledge of hermeneutics and philology in order to promote a historical and comparative semantics of texts. His research interests lie in the general context of a semiotics of cultures. His publications include Meaning and Textuality (Toronto UP, 1997), Arts et sciences du texte (PUF, 2001), Semantics for descriptions (Chicago UP, 2002), Sémantique interprétative (PUF, 2009), Sémantique et recherches cognitives (PUF, 2012), and La Mesure et le grain—Sémantique de corpus (Champion, 2011). He has also published various studies on the literature of extermination and the genre of testimony.