Totalitarian Language: Fidelius Vs. Havel Vs. Rorty

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Totalitarian language, the language of official writing in totalitarian societies, is often characterized by having lost its relation to the world, to reality. Communist language was discussed by the Czech literary critic Petr Fidelius and the playwright and essayist Vaclav Havel. Havel [1965] used the term "evasive thinking" for thinking that led to the creation of an "immobile system of intellectual and phraseological schemata", which "separated thought from its immediate contact with reality and thus crippled its capacity to intervene in that reality effectively." Czech critic Petr Fidelius [1978, 1989] offered an analysis of language that was used by Communist regime in Czechoslovakia in 1970ies and 1980ies, the language that most people learned to distrust and ignore. Fidelius showed that this language reflected specific ideological thinking rather than the world, and, paradoxically, it gave a true account of its totalitarian character. Further on, he argued that in a totalitarian society language becomes a tool in manipulating minds. Fidelius shows how language as a tool of power can paralyze the human mind in two ways: First, Communist totalitarianism fosters a distrust of words, forcing people to doubt that words are somehow connected with reality. Secondly, the free circulation of notions and words in society through which we revise and adapt the meanings of words according to our shifting understanding of reality must to be frozen and a static mechanic relation between words
and notions is introduced instead. The result is the introduction of new speech, in which words have static meanings. Mechanic, rigid relationship between words and the reality to which they refer is established. Language as a tool of manipulation is also a major theme in Orwell's negative utopia *1984*. In his reading of this novel, Richard Rorty (1989) claimed that there is no necessary connection between *any* language and reality, which implies that there is no distinction between the use of language in totalitarian societies and in free societies.

In this paper I intend to present critically these three distinct positions about totalitarian language and suggest that Fidelius' criticism avoids Rorty's implausible conflation of totalitarian language and ordinary language, and Havel's simplistic rejection of what he perceived as "pseudo-ideological thinking" without attempting to interpret how it reflects a social reality that generates it.

**Rorty's interpretation of 1984**

The manipulation of the mind by means of manipulating language, is one of the most memorable themes in Orwell's *1984*. Unlike other interpreters of *1984*, Rorty claimed that Orwell was not a realist philosopher who believed in the existence of moral facts independent of language. Richard Rorty (1989) offered a different interpretation of Winston Smith's famous words: "Freedom is the freedom to say that two plus two make four. If that is granted, all else follows." According to Rorty, "... it does not matter whether 'two plus two is four' is true, much less whether this truth is 'subjective' or 'corresponds to external reality.' All that matters is that if you do believe it, you can say it without getting hurt. In other words, what matters is your ability to talk to other people about what seems to you true, not what is in fact true. If we take care of freedom, truth can take care of itself." (Rorty 1989, p. 176)
Rorty says that language never refers necessarily to the world, in any type of society. In effect, he holds an opposite standpoint to George Orwell, Havel and Fidelius. In his two last books, *1984* and *Animal Farm*, Orwell pointed out that the essence of totalitarian regimes is connected with their use of language. Orwell was well aware of the power of language to manipulate the human mind. Orwell's *Newspeak*, the new official language of *Oceania*, which was supposed to replace standard English by the year 2050, are good examples of such a manipulation. In the year 1984, "there was not as yet anyone who used Newspeak as his sole mean of communication," writes Orwell in the "Principles of Newspeak." (Orwell 1950, p. 246)

In 1984, the leading articles in the Times were written in it, and the Party members were to use Newspeak words and grammatical constructions in their everyday speech. Later in this article I will show Fidelius' analysis of the communist language used in editorials of the Czechoslovak Communist Party daily newspaper *Rude pravo* in 1970ies and 1980ies. The parallel with Orwell's Newspeak, the aim of which was to "make all other modes of thought impossible", is inevitable. "Other" means here all modes opposing the "worldview and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc." The Orwellian newspeak consisted of new words, but mainly of omitting many words and prescribing the meaning of the remaining ones - "stripping of such words... of unorthodox meanings, and so far as possible of all secondary meanings whatever." (Orwell 1950, p. 246) It is clear that Orwell always drew a line between the totalitarian and the "standard English" language. He saw the gradual introduction of Newspeak that would eventually replace standard English at the core of the process of turning free society into a totalitarian state.

Richard Rorty misinterprets Orwell to fit his own standpoint. Referring to the later part of *1984*, in which O'Brien explains to Winston why he "must be tortured rather than
simply shot" (Rorty 1989, p. 171) Rorty claims that there are no "plain moral facts out there in the world, nor any truths independent of language, nor any neutral ground on which to stand and argue that either torture or kindness are preferable to the other." (Rorty 1989, p. 173) According to Rorty Orwell gives us an "alternative perspective, from which we (...) could describe the political history of our century." In this interpretation, Orwell's "alternative" is a part of "playing off scenarios against contrasting scenarios, projects against alternative projects". Rorty attempts to show that Orwell himself "was doing the same kind of thing as his opponents, the apologists for Stalin, were doing." (Rorty 1989, p. 174) Rorty affirmatively quotes Orwell from The Collected Essays, Journalism and Letters of George Orwell: "A writer attempting anything that is not coldly "intellectual" can do very little with words in their primary meanings. He gets his effect, if at all, by using words in a tricky roundabout way." Rorty believes that he discovered Orwell to be contradicting himself, denying his own belief in the existence of "plain facts" independent of language, in the ability of language to communicate these facts. Rorty suggested that Orwell himself used the deceptive character of language, in Animal Farm, to "throw the incredibly complex and sophisticated character of leftist political discussion into high and absurd relief by retelling the political history of his century in terms suitable for children." (Rorty 1989, p. 174)

The fact that Orwell was aware of the multiple meanings of words does not imply that he used it to refute certain ideological standpoints, it means simply that as a writer he was thinking about language as such. Nothing proves Orwell's standpoint on language and its misuses by power more than his own novels. Sensitive inhabitants of totalitarian states can recognize the shifts in meanings of words depending on shifts in political developments. Rorty denies this experience, arguing that there is no such a difference. Rorty's conflation of ordinary and
totalitarian language runs counter to the everyday experiences of the subjects of totalitarian societies, and numerous writings of dissident authors. It is just not very plausible.

Havel's Evasive Thinking: Language could reflect reality

In the early 1960ies, Vaclav Havel analyzed the official use of language in Communist Czechoslovakia. His essay "On Evasive Thinking," was originally written as a speech and delivered at a Union of Czechoslovak Writer's conference in Prague in June of 1965. Havel brought an example from an article in Literarni noviny (Literary Newspaper), in which its author praised the current "liberal" situation in Czechoslovakia, the fact that the citizens of Prague were able to openly express criticism when a stone window ledge came loose and fell off a building, killing a woman. In Havel's view, the author of this article relativizes this outcry by appealing to the readers not to limit themselves to such "local matters", but to "focus on themes that were more worthy of the dignity of the human mission and more appropriate to the humanistic notion of man." Literature should, according to this writer, "free itself from all petty, local, municipal matters and begin, at last, to deal with mankind and our prospects for the future."

This argument is for Havel an example of what he calls "evasive thinking." The essence of such thinking is "deformed and fetishized" patterns, which become an "immobile system of intellectual and phraseological schemata", which, when applied to reality, tends to "separate thought from its immediate contact with reality." This concept is very similar to the one which Petr Fidelius outlined when he wrote of the static, mechanic relationship between notions and words. Havel called the linguistic means leading to schematizations "verbal
mysticism". On the one hand, there is a "ritualization of language." "From being a means of signifying reality, and of enabling us to come to an understanding of it, language seems to have become an end in itself" (Havel 1992, p. 12) Certain words "ceased to be a sign for a category", they assumed a "magic" quality and are capable of "transforming" "reality." "It's enough to call a fallen window ledge a 'local matter,' and criticism of the way buildings are maintained as 'municipal criticism,' and we immediately feel that nothing so terrible has happened." (Havel 1992, p. 12) Certain linguistic schemes, among them "false contextualisation" are more dangerous: A concrete, particular problem becomes dissolved in the "vagueness of all the possible wider contexts." The problem of falling window ledges becomes less important if we see it in the context of the prospects of all mankind for the future.

Language as a mean of expression and its stagnation, deformation and fetishization are among the most prominent themes in Havel's work. The idea of language turning into rigid schemes and clichés is the foundation of Havel's 1964 play, the *Garden Party*. The use of clichés, "dead" verbal expressions which were separated from reality, function here as means to characterize the inauthenticity of the main character.

Havel's concept of "evasive thinking" is a useful tool in characterization of language in totalitarian state. It is especially valuable because of the moment in which Havel came up with the concept: during a process which was perceived, often mistakenly, for a liberalization. Havel demasked this apparent liberal state of affairs. Havel showed that language is capable of reflecting reality, but ceases to do so when corrupted by totalitarian use. However, Havel's analysis doesn't bring us further in understanding the character and principles of such a corrupted language. This language emerged at a time and a place and for a reason. The possibility that this language can be used to understand Communist society was examined by
another Samizdat author of a younger generation, Petr Fidelius.

**Petr Fidelius: - Language as a mirror of totalitarian power**

In his essays on Communist language (1998) the Czech critic Petr Fidelius went further than Vaclav Havel in revealing the surprising character or essence of this language. "People, Democracy, Socialism", the first of three essays on the language of Communist power by Petr Fidelius, was written in 1978. By then the communist rhetoric in Czechoslovakia was not developing new ideas, as in the early 1950's, it was not trying to communicate anything new. At the time when Communist speech was generally understood as lies or meaningless tittle-tattle, as a language manipulated ad hoc to defend current communist party politics, Fidelius decided to subject it to a semantic analysis. He did so with much wit and with an interest, which could have almost seemed bizarre to other Czech critics who would choose any other topic just to depart of the mediate "normalization" atmosphere of the 1970ies and 1980ies. Fidelius revealed that the official communist language is not meaningless, but rather constructs a cohesive, "logical" system (in a particular sense of "logical"), and reflects an ideological image of the world. Fidelius argued that paradoxically, when its own words are analyzed, communist power gives a true account of its own totalitarian character. Importantly, he pointed out that the distinctive features of the communist speech were developed already before the "socialist world order" was established in Czechoslovakia after the communist takeover in 1948. "Communist speech is not mere propaganda, purposefully turned to the outside, but it "limits, binds" the mind of its producers: they were bound by certain vision of the world..." (Fidelius 1998, p. 13)
It is not clear who is talking in the editorials of Rude pravo, the Czechoslovak Communist daily, as much as it is not clear to whom they are addressed. The voice talks in first person plural. Is it the "state" addressing its "citizens" or the Communist Party talking to its member? Although the quoted texts do not mention it directly, the articles defending the socialist system were apparently a response to the Charter 77 Declaration Document written and made public at the beginning of 1977. Paradoxically, the Charter 77 Document called on the Communist government to adhere to its own laws that included the 1975 Helsinki final act on Human Rights that it signed into law. Charter 77 declaration provided an opportunity for the Communist regime to state and defend its own positions in the Rude Pravo editorials. There is a notable parallel between Fidelius' analysis and the text of Charter 77 - both decided to take the regime's acts and words seriously to show how it denounces itself. According to Fidelius, language has a transcendental quality which betrays those who use it as a mean for ideological manipulation. I show later how he develops this idea in his book.

In a society undergoing a process of "normalization" or "consolidation" (terms used by official propaganda to describe the repressive period which followed the Soviet invasion in 1968), the Communist newspeak was ubiquitous. Ideological slogans were regular part of the visual scene: banners on buildings and bridges, posters in store windows, fliers in bulletin boards, without anybody paying them any attention. Among the key Communist language concepts were: "the people", "democracy" and "socialism". Fidelius' method is to show how these specific key words of the Communist language are being used. These words are so tainted by their ideological subtext and connotations that it was hardly possible to use them after the fall of Communism; they became an indistinguishable part of the historic ideological context. His main example is "people" (lid). Although the word "people" is in the Communist propaganda
ubiquitous, it is also a word with a rather blurry and unclear meaning. Does it refer to all inhabitants of a certain state, or merely to some of them? Fidelius calls the conceptualization in which only some inhabitants are part of "the people" "restrictive". This is the sense in which the Communist propaganda used the word "people" and defined according to its shifting present needs who belongs to this entity and who doesn't. "Working" is the typical attribute of "people" (pracujici lid); these are also the terms in which the word is defined in the 1971 edition of the Czech Dictionary. Fidelius brought several examples to show how the word "people" is used, and who, within that particular use, is apparently not a part of this entity. For example, it appears that "artists are not part of 'people'," since, as it is written in one editorial, 'artists' are going 'with our people and our people go with them' (Fidelius 1998, p. 21). "It is the people who are the source of all the power in the state", says the Czechoslovak (Communist) Constitution of 1948, and the 1960 Constitution asserts that "all power belongs to working people". Since "working people" are entitled to "all power", it is important to know who is part of the people and who isn't, argues Fidelius. Sometimes the definition of "people" is wider, sometimes narrower. Democracy in the socialist state is here "for the working people, for the overwhelming majority of the people". It is therefore disturbing to realize that some part of the population, even a small minority, is not a part of "the people", and therefore is not entitled to democratic rights. According to Communist propaganda, the scope of "the people" can in various historical times differ. However, as Fidelius points out, the core of "people" is composed of the "immediate producers of material values". The "core" is surrounded by various temporary "peels", other stratas of society that might become part of "the people" in those historic periods when they constitute the "progressive role in history".

It is apparent that the Communist Party decides who belongs to "the people"
and who does not. The party can decide so because it posses the knowledge of "historic truth" - this "possession of truth" is a stated axiom, which is never further discussed or defended. The Communist Party is entitled to differentiate among groups of people and decide whether or not they are part of the "people" because it relies on the "Marxist Leninist scientific position". The core of the "people," the "producers of material values", are the moving force of history. Led by the Communist Party, they "objectively" and "consciously" create history. It is assumed that the "producers of material values" are the progressive element in history. This is not being disputed, it is an axiom on which stand the other elements of the Communist worldview. The "people" are conscious of their historical role due to the guidance of the Communist Party. Without this leadership, "the people" are unable to move purposefully, to think and decide "independently."

Without a strong guidance. When ideological influence is weak, "there is a space for antagonistic tendencies" (s. 36). "The guidance of the leading force in history is the raison d'etre of the Party." Thus, it becomes apparent that the Party takes over the role of leadership from the "people".

Occasionally, the Party becomes "the core of the working class". This happens when all the "peels" or all the temporary components of "people" fell off the "core", and even the core itself is led astray from its historically progressive path. Then, the Party itself fills the role of the "core", it becomes the "core of the core", temporarily taking on itself the role of the "people", until the seduced "core" finds the way back from its confusion. "In times of crisis, the Party by itself creates 'all people!'". Consequently, the People is the Party, could easily be one of the Orwellian oxymoronic slogans. However, we can continue the reduction even further. As some historical examples demonstrate, even members of the Party can be sometimes misled, and therefore in extreme situations it can happen that one person, one Leader remains the essence of
the Party. As a matter of fact he substitutes for the people as a whole. Consequently, sometimes the "people" equals a single leader. The words "Party" and "people" can therefore substitute for each other. Fidelius calls this process "nuclear reduction of the first or second degree."

This kind of reasoning has dangerous social consequences, and as Fidelius shows, it is amazing that the Communist power does not attempt to conceal its tendencies on the theoretical level, but rather constantly expresses them explicitly, in daily newspapers or proclamations on banners or bulletin boards. Irrespective of its power, it is notable that this ideological reasoning bears basic logical fallacies. The fallacy of division and the fallacy of composition are the common fallacies in reasoning about parts and wholes: "The fallacy of composition may occur when we reason that a property belonging to the parts is possessed by the whole." Similarly, "the fallacy of division may occur when we reason that a property belonging to the whole is possessed by the parts." (Nolt 1984, 257 ff) It is implied in the Communist propaganda that in extreme cases, as described above, the leader equals all the people. The Communist ideology, as its language reveals, thus commits the classical fallacy of division. According to its proclamations, power belongs to all the people. In extreme situations, the sum of all the people can consist of only a single figure, one member of the leadership of the Communist party, who thus "logically" assumes all power.

In a later essay, Totalitarian Language [1989], Fidelius analyzed Communist speech as a tool for manipulation. At the time when the Communist regime becomes "totalitarian", it is no longer characterized by revolutionary zeal and physical brutality. The leader of the totalitarian regime does not have an ideal of which he wants to persuade the people. He becomes interested only in power. In this stage language becomes a tool of manipulation. The goal is to rule over the human mind by means of language. Fidelius shows how language is being
manipulated in order to prevent people from thinking for themselves. The very ability of people to think is to be paralyzed. Thinking is dependent on language; speech gives a form to thought and connects the human mind with the world. In this respect, Fidelius echoes Wittgenstein's (1953) philosophy of language: There is no thinking outside language, and language cannot be private, but always shared by at least two people.

Yet, Fidelius holds that it is characteristic of words to have multiplicity of meanings; words never fully capture our thought. The imperfection of language is positive, we constantly need to think about the meanings of words and with every new use we give them new meaning, thus reshaping our thoughts. The gap between the word and the idea we want to express creates a space for a question, which forces us to rethink the idea again and again. Fidelius characterizes this process as a "renewal of a fragile balance between our thinking and reality." (Fidelius 1998, p. 182)

Fidelius then shows how to paralyze the human mind by using language as a tool of power. Words in New speech have static meanings. Mechanic, rigid relationship between words and the reality to which they refer is thus established. There is no space left for a question and creation of a new meanings. Thus, there is no space left for thinking between language and reality.

Conclusion

Fidelius discovered that the Communist language refers to an "imaginary"
world. His strongest impression, he writes, was to discover that "in its own words the Communist regime gives completely truthful picture of its own nature." This is a great discovery against the background of an almost universal dismissal of Communist language as a meaningless, incoherent propaganda. It is apparent, against Rorty's view, that Fidelius proves the existence of separate, distinctive totalitarian language, reflecting certain type of ideological thinking, which exists alongside "ordinary" language. Fidelius goes further than Havel who merely noticed this language and listed its differences from "ordinary" language. Additionally, Fidelius analyzes some characteristic features of totalitarian power in its self-reflexion, as it was revealed through language. Language plays here an interesting role, deceiving the ones who use it, revealing the totalitarian character of their thinking. It was said that under the so called normalization, Communists did not enforce their policies through sheer violence; it is worthwhile to think to what extent people were indeed manipulated by the totalitarian use of language.

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