

Prospettive discorsive e di educazione linguistica internazionale

a cura di Natasha Leal Rivas

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Unspoken Stories Underlying a More Aware Europe: The Multimodal and Multidiscursive (Mis)Construction of Eastern Europe

Fabio Cangerò (Università degli Studi di Napoli Federico II)

1. Introduction

Social semiotics is a field devoted to the exploration of how semiotic entities – signs capable of triggering the meaning-making process, also known as semiosis – acquire specific relevance in relation to context (Kress, 2010: 26). These studies developed from the opposition between *signifier* and *signified* (De Saussure, 2011), two basic concepts lying at the root of semiosis: while the former refers to the symbol as an element invested with meaning(s), the latter points to the meaning(s) evoked by such symbols and the tangled web of sociocultural associations they conjure up. Furthermore, because each signifier is to be potentially visualised as a conveyor of multiple signifiers invariably anchored in the social context of reference, the analysis of social environments constitutes a preliminary, yet fundamental, step in social-semiotic investigations.

For almost a century since Saussure's definitions of signifier and signified, social-semiotic studies focused on meaning-making as a process that can only take place within and not outside language, resulting in the development of Discourse Analysis (DA) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). The idea that power relationships, symmetry/asymmetry and solidarity/deference can only be expressed through language remained prevalent until technological advance (Sood and Tellis, 2005) forced social semioticians to engage in a deeper reflection on the nature of communication, thereby giving way to Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) (Machin, 2013). This type of study involves paying attention to all the modes – semiotic channels whereby meaning flows (i.e., writing, speaking, images, music, among others) – at play in an ensemble of signs (Kress, 2010: 76) – a semiotic entity/text whose make-up features different modes – and the extent to which their affordances (Kress, 2010: 76) – potentialities – are realised. This field of investigation ultimate-

ly aims to demonstrate that meaning is conveyed under any circumstance, regardless of the presence of written/spoken language, suggesting that any mode can and should occasionally be disengaged from textuality (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 18; Balirano, 2015: 3).

This study sets out to apply analytical categories borrowed from social semiotics and multimodality to phenomena like nationalism and identity in Eastern and Western Europe, particularly looking at the way these two blocs have been socioculturally constructed over time. While it is common knowledge that nationalism manifests itself in different forms in Eastern and Western Europe (Hjerm, 2003), the strategies and practices used to portray Europe as cleft in two may more easily escape notice. Texts of diverse nature and mode, from travelogues to maps, will be put under the microscope to unearth what the divisive discourses underlying this fracture are and how to redress them in light of the foundation of the European Union (Maastricht Treaty, 1993).

Different as they might seem at first glance, travel journals and maps have played a crucial role in shaping westerners' perception of the east through verbal and non-verbal representations. Apparently, the gap in eastern European cartography was to narrow as a result of the numerous western expeditions to the east, which allowed non-eastern cartographers to map the territory and represent it graphically:

[...] at the beginning of the eighteenth century the lands of Eastern Europe were still incompletely mapped by comparison to the cartographical standard of Western Europe, and the mapping of Eastern Europe that took place during the course of that century, often carried out by foreign experts, was a fundamental part of the general discovery which produced and organised knowledge of "these lost lands. (Wolff, 1994: 145)

What is interesting to notice about the quotation above is the conceptual correlation between the drawing of maps and the production and organisation of knowledge of the east on the other side of the continent. This statement lies at the heart of this research, for it works on the premise that maps can be regarded as semiotic entities in their own right, thus capable of activating semiosis. By way of example, it can be seen that trees are the predominant semiotic units in the earliest maps of Russia by the geographer Nicolas Sanson. If on the face of it, this 'semiotic move' might seem irrelevant, if not meaningless, on closer inspection, it bears witness to the designer's view of the area depicted – Russia seen as a thick wood far from civilisation.

Although extensive research has already been conducted into the myths

and fallacies surrounding Eastern Europe,¹ this has often taken an anthropological-literary approach, steering clear of linguistic analysis, which, on the contrary, is what this paper intends to do. Reanalysing the stereotypes and narratives revolving around the east from the perspective of travel journals and their massive impact on map-making proves not only eye-opening, but instrumental in its crumbling thereof.

The findings of this study reveal how precarious and unfounded, yet paradoxically deeply ingrained, anti-Slavic prejudices are and how these have long fed on ignorance, misinformation and, above all, fear of diversity. Dismantling such narratives is one of the main missions of the European Union's project Europe for Citizens, running since 2007, to favour integration at an international level, promote European citizenship, supranational historical awareness and democracy across countries.² This analysis is inspired by the directives of the above-mentioned project, aiming at providing impetus for a process of transnational recollection, overcoming discrimination and establishing an intercultural dialogue.

2. Reflecting on the metaphor of the 'iron curtain' from a social-semiotic perspective

In social-semiotics, every communicative act originates from and in a rhetor, this being somehow an enabler seeking to establish a set of favourable conditions pointing the way to the meaning-conveyance process. More specifically, a rhetor's work can be regarded as both social and semiotic in that they prepare the ground for communication by devoting attention to multiple aspects, such as the pragmatic purpose pursued in the communicative act in question and the conduction of a preliminary analysis of the logonomic system wherein communication unfolds,³ including the social environment and the audience targeted. The data collated by the rhetor are subsequently

¹ Larry Wolff remains one of the major contributors to this field of investigation.

² *European Union: Common Past, Present and Future for You*, available at <https://ec.europa.eu/programmes/europe-for-citizens/projects/efc-project-details-page/?nodeRef=workspace://SpacesStore/3611fa64-1297-4cf0-890d-cc4c9970e21d>.

³ Coined by Hodge and Kress (1988), the term logonomic system refers to the social-semiotic environment where communication occurs. The latter is laden with a series of discourses, practises and beliefs on the basis of which each semiotic entity produces an interpretation relevant to and consistent with its logonomic system of reference. See also Fomin (2020).

passed on to a *designer*, namely, the expert entrusted with shaping data into a message:

Design is the process whereby the meanings of a designer (a teacher, a public speaker, but also, much more humbly and in a sense more significantly, participants in everyday interactions) become messages. Designs are based on (rhetorical) analyses, on aims and purposes of a rhetor, and they are then implemented through the instantiations of choices of many kinds. (Kress, 2010: 28)

In other words, the rhetor tasks the designer with the organisation and arrangement of meaning so that it caters for the audience with a view to fulfilling the rhetor's communicative aim. Therefore, as Kress points out, the designer works and acts in the rhetor's interest, thereby creating a communicative environment conducive to the achievement of the rhetor's original purpose by means of a tailor-made audience-oriented design.

The definitions above beg the questions as to what semiotic process Winston Churchill actualised in the construction of his metaphor: the "iron curtain", and, as a rhetor, what interest he had at heart. To provide a satisfactory answer, it is necessary to draw on the principles of analogy and aptness, for they lie at the core of the development of metaphors. With respect to the former, it has been argued that it can be established when two elements provide a basis for a fruitful comparison capable of smoothing the path for meaning-conveyance via the replacement of signifier A with signifier B so long as both symbols (*signifiers*) point to the same *signified* (De Saussure, 2011).

Regarding the aforementioned "iron curtain", the two constituents of the compound indicate concepts that are paramount to consider when unveiling the ultimate aim of the rhetor: if iron is widely known to be a hard metal frequently employed in buildings designed to be resistant and impregnable, a curtain erects a barrier between the outside and the inside, preventing daylight from streaming through it and passers-by from peeking into somebody's flat. To put it bluntly, Churchill's curtain is a form of protection rendered even more secure and opaque by nothing other than iron, the material of which it is made.

On closer inspection, the metaphor being discussed opens the door to an intricate web of underlying sub-analogies worthwhile mentioning, like the close connection existing between the notions of barrier (iron curtain) and social prejudice. Research based on the British National Corpus (BNC)⁴ re-

⁴ The BNC has been queried via Sketch Engine, an online piece of software, using the function "Word Sketch Difference".

veals that verbs like *remove*, *overcome* and *encounter* co-occur with the nouns ‘prejudice’ and ‘barrier’ with the following frequency:

verbs with "barrier/prejudice" as object					modifiers of "prejudice/barrier"				
erect	49	0	9.7	— ...	irrational	8	0	8.3	— ...
cross	26	0	7.3	— ...	sectarian	4	0	7.3	— ...
dismantle	6	0	7.1	— ...	sexist	3	0	7.0	— ...
transcend	5	0	6.9	— ...	partisan	3	0	6.9	— ...
remove	55	4	7.9	4.2 ...	racial	48	8	9.8	6.5 ...
overcome	24	10	8.0	7.1 ...	unfair	10	7	7.8	6.5 ...
encounter	4	5	5.7	6.5 ...	formidable	0	19	—	8.0 ...
deny	0	8	—	6.0 ...	protective	0	26	—	8.3 ...
confirm	0	8	—	6.1 ...	crash	0	21	—	8.3 ...
reinforce	0	5	—	6.2 ...	vapour	0	20	—	8.4 ...
confront	0	4	—	6.4 ...	tariff	0	28	—	8.8 ...
dispel	0	3	—	7.3 ...	non-tariff	0	26	—	8.9 ...

Table 1. Results of a search of the British National Corpus (BNC), using the function Word Sketch Difference (Sketch Engine) to obtain the shared collocates of the items ‘barrier’ and ‘prejudice’.

Table 1 establishes data-based semantic ground bearing out the connection between ‘barrier’ and ‘prejudice’ hitherto put forward. The most plausible explanation for the number of shared collocates, among which the premodifiers *racial* and *unfair*, is that British English speakers, whose language massively informs the corpus consulted, perceive these two terms as semantically related to the extent that they appear as even interchangeable under certain circumstances. The latter is a classic example of how likeness can occasionally give way to aptness (Kress, 2010: 55), which differs from the former since it allows for the substitution of signifier A with signifier B and vice versa without any alteration in meaning.

In the final analysis, it may be pointed out that the sub-texts comprising the BNC are expressive of language users having subconsciously forged so close a connection between the terms under scrutiny – ‘prejudice’ and ‘barrier’ – that their respective meanings flow into each other in an endless stream of metaphor creation.

As follows, a discussion of how Churchill’s use of the powerful metaphor of the “iron curtain” contributed to the reshaping of European identity, thereupon erecting social, racial, class and cultural barriers which have long divided

the old continent in half. As suggested by Larry Wolff,⁵ this seemingly innocuous expression has done nothing but breed prejudice and stigma among fellow Europeans, fuelling fears whose long-term effects are still palpable in current events.

3. *The conceptual reorientation of Europe and the invention of civilisation*

The history of so vast a territory like Europe has always been marked by internal divisions, whether between north and south or east and west. In this context of interethnic struggle, Larry Wolff argues that the invention of Eastern Europe, which goes back to the age of the Enlightenment, appears as the result of a “work of cultural creation, of intellectual artifice, of ideological self-interest and self-promotion” (Wolff, 1994: 4). In the words of the historian the idea that the dichotomy being described arose from a mere cultural construction engineered to pursue a specific interest shines through, namely, the otherisation of Eastern Europe. With otherisation, scholars such as Holliday *et al.* (2004) refer to the phenomenon occurring in consequence of what Moscovici terms social representation (Moscovici, 1961), that is, the unanimous sharing of common discourses, values and practices by all the members belonging to a community, allowing for mutual understanding and cultural cohesion. The process at issue is fundamental in the construction of sociocultural identity because it conceptualises those features distinctive of a specific group which every member, without exception, must possess. Nonetheless, the drawback to this phenomenon is the emergence of an antinomy between the discursively constructed in-group and the out-group, where the latter encompasses all those social categories which, by nature or choice, do not fit the mould and are, on account of this, ferociously ostracised (Kharshing, 2020).

Before Europe fractured vertically, the continent presented itself as divided horizontally between northern and southern Europe. Indeed, during the Renaissance, when eastern Europe had yet to emerge as a fearsome entity from which to protect western Europe, the south witnessed the blossoming of the

⁵ Larry Wolff is Silver Professor of European History at New York University. His cultural and anthropological take on history led to him approaching the controversial development of Europe, not least its internal conflicts and struggles, from a radically novel perspective. See Wolff (1994).

arts and culture, with Italy at the forefront of an unprecedented revival of the classics. There is no denying that this provided impetus for the widening gap between the north and the south. Cities like Milan, Genoa, Mantua and Florence were ruled by enlightened sovereigns who were patrons of invaluable art works earning Italy a reputation as the hub of culture and progress. At the time, Italy was also home to opera, a new form of the performing arts born out of the genius of visionary artists and distinguished intellectuals from the Florentine Camerata, also known as Camerata de' Bardi (Maione, 1978).

This favourable cultural climate was disrupted by two unfortunate events that upset the political harmony of Italy: the invasion of Italy by the French, led by Charles VIII (1492) and the sack of Rome at the hands of German soldiers (1527). It is from that moment onwards that Italian intellectuals like Machiavelli set about portraying their country as hostage to barbarian foreigners, thus setting in motion the wheels of the aforementioned otherisation. In this respect, Wolff cites a telling extract from *The Prince* (1532 [1999]) in which Machiavelli makes a desperate appeal to free Italy from the shackles of barbarians, namely, "Exhortation to Liberate Italy from the Barbarians", contained in the last chapter of the self-same work.

The association of Germans with Scythian, Hunnic and Sarmatian tribes, alongside the one between the French and the Franks, resulted in myriad Italian intellectuals labelling northern Europeans as barbarians and calling for their expulsion. As can be seen, the mental mapping of Europe, to put it in Wolff's words, did not yet present a horizontal (east-west) antinomy, but a vertical one (south-north). For example, it is not rare to stumble across travel books featuring a vertical perspective of Europe; let us consider *Travels into Poland, Russia, Sweden and Denmark* (1785) by Coxe, whom this study will elaborate on afterwards. This writer went as far as to place Poland and Russia, and Sweden and Denmark in the same category, as the title of the book shows. This would be unthinkable nowadays considering the modern mapping of Europe, by which Poland and Russia fall within Eastern Europe and Sweden and Denmark within northern Europe.

Moreover, while in the mid-16th century Italy was falling into the hands of foreign nations, the exponential growth of cities like London and Paris meant they surpassed the Italian courts in prestige and status. Arguably, cultural phenomena like humanism, the Elizabethan theatre, the Protestant Reformation, along with English urban development and the massive migration from the countryside to the cities set the stage for the horizontal reconceptualisation of Europe.

Besides, a pivotal role in the process in question was played by the development of the notion of civilisation⁶ which, according to Norbert Elias (1978), may be etymologically derived from the term ‘civility’. This word, gaining currency throughout Europe thanks to *The Book of the Courtier* by Castiglione (1528 [2004]), became a widespread ideal for the duration of the Augustan Age, as it came to instantiate familiarity with good manners and social graces. It may be regarded as the ability to deal with the other in the social world, observing etiquette and acting within a set of rules that are indispensable in the eyes of society. As this research will show, this concept has been used ever since as an otherisation tool for the creation of the western in-group and the eastern out-group.

However, aside from civilisation, one more argument adduced by the advocates of the ‘eastern-centric’ model is the huge economic disparity between the two blocs dating as far back as the period of the Industrial Revolution, a wave of progress and technological advance that did not spread to Eastern Europe until one and a half centuries later, thus casting it in the role of the lame duck (Sabbatucci & Vidotto, 2008). In this respect, in Immanuel Wallerstein’s analysis of Eastern countries’ management of financial affairs, he contends that the inefficiency and short-sightedness of the eastern economic system is invariably determined by its peoples’ backwardness and lack of civilisation (Wallerstein, 2011): while London, Paris and Amsterdam established themselves as fully industrialised countries around the late 18th century, the Russian and Polish economies took decidedly longer to get off the ground, owing to ultraconservative policies which isolated them from the rest of Europe both culturally and economically. The aim of these measures was to leave unchanged a set of age-old customs the west had long abandoned, serfdom being a clear example. Therefore, if the west could rely on advanced factories involved in the mass-production of goods that were to be exported to Eastern Europe, its counterpart mainly supported itself through the export of grain and wheat. This situation of dependence carried on at least until Witte implemented a series of reforms oriented towards the so-called industrial take-off.⁷ In his investigation into the gap between these two realities, Wallerstein

⁶ The theory advanced by Jean Jacques Rousseau (1968) is that human beings can be compared to a noble savage in the state of nature, hence they are innocent and good-natured by birth. However, as they grow older and interact with the social universe, their initial condition of naivety gives way to the evil and corruption of society.

⁷ This expression is a metaphor indicating the belated industrialisation which Eastern Europe, especially Russia, undertook to maintain pace with countries like England, Germany and France, which, having already revitalised their industrial system, set their sights on extending the borders of their soon-to-be empires. See Sabbatucci & Vidotto (2008).

frames the West as the *core* and the East as the *periphery* of the continent, thereby upholding the asymmetric relation of dependence between the two Europes and the lack of self-sufficiency on the part of the east.

In the sections to come, there will follow a reflection on the various discourses and strategies underpinning alleged western supremacy: the semantic change undergone by the term civilisation (formerly related to the legal field)⁸ and economic policies which would be later rehashed in the ex-Soviet sphere.

4. *Travel journals and philosophic geography*

Throughout the 18th century, the perfect gentleman's education culminated with the Grand Tour, a life-changing journey all noblemen undertook with a view to perfecting their education. Travelling across Europe permitted the visitors to gain first-hand experience of the social and natural world.⁹ Long and eventful voyages awaited the scions who wished to broaden their horizons and come into contact with different cultures. These exciting expeditions into civilisation and barbarism often resulted in travel journals that occasionally metamorphosed into fiction.

More often than not, the route followed by the naïve gentlemen was carefully planned in advance by the tutors entrusted with their education. Increasingly, the interest in the unknown and the undiscovered fired the curiosity of manifold educators who, not without some hesitation, resolved to set sail with their protégées off the beaten track towards uncharted territories such as Poland and Russia. In other cases, expeditions to far-flung corners derived from the need to conduct multilateral diplomatic negotiations, which often involved ambassadors and their entourage travelling across Europe; thus, either for educational or political reasons, the two Europes began to interact.

⁸ In this regard, it is worthwhile noticing that in Samuel Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755), the entry 'civilisation' carries a totally unrelated meaning to that of Present-Day language. In Johnson's dictionary, "Civilisation n.s. [from civil.] A law, act of justice, or judgment, which renders a criminal process civil; which is performed by turning an information into an inquest, or the contrary". As clearly visible from the entry reported, initially the term was semantically linked to the legal sphere, but in the wake of the Enlightenment, it underwent a process of semantic change. Johnson's *A Dictionary of the English Language* (1755) can be consulted online at <https://johnsonsdictionaryonline.com>.

⁹ Only the sons of wealthy families were allowed to set forth on the Gran Tour; women were still excluded in those days.

Interestingly, many travelogues and memoirs inspired by the Gran Tour open a window into the multimodal social construction of the dichotomy between Eastern and Western Europe. For this reason, analysing this material may lead to a better understanding of how the (mis)representation of geographical features and social mores from the perspective of the western eye, as Conrad (1990) would put it, has gradually given rise to an unbridgeable cultural gap.¹⁰

Among those who crossed what they viewed as the boundary of civilisation, Count Luis-Philippe de Ségur, French diplomat and historian, was sent on a trade mission to Russia by none other than Louis XVI himself, thanks to which the noble was able to navigate those regions whose culture appeared irreconcilable with his own. So intense was the Count's curiosity that, when asked whether he would rather travel by sea or overland, he did not hesitate to opt for the latter so as to stop off from time to time in the various areas he was to traverse on his route to Moscow. No sooner had he approached Warsaw than he jotted something down in his travel diary:

The eye is already *saddened* by *arid* lands, by vast forests. [...] a *poor* population, *enslaved*; *dirty* villages, cottages little different from *savage huts*; everything makes one think one has been *moved back ten centuries*, and that one finds oneself amid *hordes* of *Huns*, *Scythians*, *Slavs* and *Sarmatians*. (Wolff, 1994: 29, emphasis added)

The analysis of this excerpt, which is particularly revealing as it sheds light on what would become the widespread (mis)perception of Eastern Europe in Western Europe, enables us to reconstruct the linguistic strategies adopted in the otherisation of the east. More specifically, attention will be paid to the derogatory language items and their semantic interconnections.

To start with, one of the first aspects readers should focus on is the Count's use of an *-en* verb (*saddened*) to describe his eye's response to the sight of the foreign lands. For the purposes of a linguistic analysis, this is relevant in that all *-en* verbs point to an alteration of the erstwhile state, signalling a change. In this case, scarcely does Ségur arrive in Poland when his vision is immediately perturbed by disturbing sights: if in the beginning, his gaze falls on the geographical morphology of the thick forest, afterwards, he plays the part of the anthropologist and turns the spotlight on the local inhabitants, comment-

¹⁰ Such a gap would not be tackled by political organisations until the fall of the Berlin wall and the ensuing disbandment of the USSR, which paved the way for some of the former Soviet Democratic Republics to enter the European Union.

ing on their penury (he defines them as *poor* and needy) and their archaic establishment which still condoned serfdom and torture.¹¹

Further, Ségur calls into question the hygienic conditions of Polish houses and villages by using the adjective “dirty” and the highly evocative image of the “savage hut”, leading the reader to immediately forge a connection between the prehistoric world and the lands described. In addition, he argues that one is bound to confront “backwardness” when leaving the West – “one has moved back ten centuries”. In so doing, he depicts the east as underdeveloped, implying that its inhabitants have no alternative other than to lag behind the rest of Europe forever.

Last but not least, the French nobleman also makes use of ‘a horde of’, a quantifier prosodically representative of “a large crowd moving in a noisy uncontrolled way”, which lends itself to marking a noun in a negative manner.¹² The final effect produced by the deliberate use of this vocabulary is the construction of eastern peoples as barbarians located beyond the bounds of civilisation and on the fringes of Europe.

Adopting a social-semiotic perspective, in which both the sender and the receiver are actively involved in the meaning-conveyance process,¹³ it seems interesting to consider what Larry Wolff suggests regarding the passage above: “his gaze was far from passive, engaging and transforming the landscape” (Wolff, 1994: 29). As a matter of fact, the initially motionless and static Polish lands come to life thanks to the traveller’s gaze itself, which inquisitively scrutinises their irregularities and identifies substantial differences with the eastern European geomorphology. Far from being self-defining, the locative circumstances of this vivid description aim to fulfil the rhetor/designer’s interest, this being the otherisation of eastern Europe.

In this regard, what merits attention are the historical and geopolitical

¹¹ It is remarkable to observe that in the age of the Enlightenment, Europe was drawn into a heated debate over the illegitimacy of inflicting torture on prisoners, a topic which would attract the attention of Italian thinkers such as Cesare Beccaria (2016).

¹² Definition taken from the *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online*, consultable at <https://www.ldoceonline.com/>.

¹³ According to Shannon and Weaver (1998), the process underlying communication could be conceived of as based on three main entities: (1) sender, (2) receiver and (3) message. The central role is played by the sender, responsible for shaping information into a message and transmitting it to the receiver. However, the weakness of this model is the little importance attached to the receiver, who would limit their activity to passively regurgitating a piece of information without making any contribution. On the other hand, Roland Barthes insists on the cruciality of the receiver’s part, for they carry out a further remodelling of the message on the basis of their own design and interests, thereby actively contributing to the meaning-conveyance process. See also Barthes (2001).

ramifications of this western-centric discourse for the redefinition of European borders in the mid-18th century. Scholars like Wolff suggest that these unpublished pieces of literature, circulating amongst the most influential members of the European elites, may have provided the basis for claims of territorial expansion. Actually, literary evidence reveals that the Prussian sovereign Frederick II engaged in conversation with Ségur on his way back to France, which might have inspired imperialist feelings towards the Grand Duchy of Lithuania according to Wolff (1994: 18).

In view of this, it is no mere coincidence that 1755 witnessed the first of the numerous partitions Poland was to experience throughout history, with Austria, Russia and Prussia taking control of some of its territories. Half a century later, at the height of his powers, Napoleon laid claim to his right to invade Poland ostensibly to spread western democracy through countries still marked by an *Ancien Régime* system. During World War II, Hitler championed the cause of *Lebensraum*¹⁴ – ‘living space’ in English – claiming that it was time for Germany to establish complete authority over Poland, which inevitably resulted in the breach of the diplomatic agreements secured in Munich (1938) and the outbreak of the war. Afterwards, in 1941, the Barbarossa Operation was launched by the Nazis, marking the first time eastern Europe dared to overstep the Ural border.

The geographical proximity of countries sharing the same borders such as Germany–Poland, and Austria–Slovakia, did not stop Western travellers from perceiving the neighbouring areas as diametrically opposed where culture, social practices and lifestyle are concerned. Based on associative and comparative processes, the mental rearrangement of the two blocs as crossed by a longitudinal divide in social and economic terms is an interesting phenomenon defined as philosophic geography (Ledyard, 1996). More specifically, association takes place when the in-group frames the out-group as a cohesive community composed of identical members, ignoring all the elements of difference characterising each individual sub-community (i.e., Russians, Polish and Ukrainians), whereas comparison occurs by likening the in-group’s social practices, discourses and values to the out-group’s in order to demean and otherise the foreigner:

¹⁴ *Lebensraum* – living space – is a concept that saw the light of day consequently to the development and spread of Darwinian theories on evolution. The misapplication of the anthropologist’s ideas to the social sphere would fuel discrimination and cause the notion of race to gain further traction. During the Nazi’s electoral campaigns, the claim to *Lebensraum* held great appeal to Hitler’s supporters. See Abrahamsson (2013).

Ledyard had a name for such freely constructed geographical sentiment; he called it “Philosophic Geography.” Such was the Enlightenment’s subordination of geography to its own philosophical values, its investment of the map with subtleties that eluded the stricter standards of scientific cartography. (Wolff, 1994: 6)

The paradox at the heart of this quotation is that mental representation seems to definitely override geography and reality themselves, because of which John Ledyard insisted that so long as he did not go to the other side of the Prussian border, acting as a boundary between Poland and Austria, he would still find himself outside Europe.¹⁵ Such writings were probably the first pieces of literature to create what may be called a ‘cultural Europe’ scornfully dismissive of the ‘geographic Europe’ in search of recognition.

While so far this research has reflected on the way language has given shape to the two Europes, the section below will look into how modes other than writing have long been at play in the perpetuation and perpetration of this bipolar system.

5. *Transducting words into images*

In exploding false myths surrounding what might be wrongly called the ‘uncultured’ Europe, Larry Wolff compiles a mini-corpus of texts by western visitors representative of their aversion towards local easterners. Among them, Coxe’s *Travels in Poland, Russia, Denmark and Sweden* (1809) is a case in point: the opportunity for travelling presented itself as he was asked to escort John Churchill, first duke of Marlborough, on his educational tour of Europe. In the passage below, his impression of Eastern Europe is clearly expressed:

Though in most countries we made a point of suspending our journey during night, in order that no scene might escape our observation; yet we here even preferred continuing our route without intermission to the penance we endured in these receptacles of filth and penury: and we have reason to believe that the darkness of the night deprived us of nothing but the sight of gloomy forests, indifferent crops of corn, and objects of human misery. The natives were poorer, humbler, and more miserable than any people we had yet observed in the course of our travels: wherever we stopped, they flocked around us in crowds; and, asking for charity, used the most abject gestures. (Coxe, 1917)

¹⁵ John Ledyard was one of the explorers venturing hazardous journeys with Captain James Cook between 1728 and 1789 to explore and map theretofore untrodden lands such as Cape of Good Hope, New Zealand and Hawaii.

It is no coincidence that Ségur's and Coxe's portrayals of Eastern Europe present similar patterns in the description of the Slavic peoples, the morphology of the landscape and their way of life. His account abounds in passages featuring stark contrasts between his homeland and the East, whereby he constantly degrades the foreign regions.¹⁶ The educator relates nightmarish experiences in dreadful inns that he terms "hovels" described as "receptacles of filth and penury" that recreate the setting of a Dickensian novel. Having set the scene through writing strategies distinctive of fiction, he moves on to offer a ghastly depiction of the locals who, being abhorrently presented as "poor, humble and miserable", also undergo zoomorphisation by means of the verb "flock".¹⁷

Hypothetically, were the reader asked to transform this piece of writing into a picture and perform a transduction,¹⁸ they would probably visualise it as a high-angle shot featuring two represented participants:¹⁹ Coxe and the "horde" of locals "flocking" around him. More specifically, employing Kress and Van Leeuwen's terminology, the locals could be framed as *actors* and Coxe as the *goal*. The researchers use the term *actors* to define the participants involved in performing an action – "the ones who do the deed" (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 46) – and the term *goals* in relation to the participants who are affected by an action – "the ones to whom the deed is done" (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 46) – as experiencers. Any process triggering interaction between the participants is called *vector*, that is, the realisation of action verbs in the visual mode by means of which pictures can reproduce (inter)action between the participants (Kress and Van Leeuwen, 2006: 42–46). However, while at first glance these labels might seem appropriate to describe the participants' 'visual behaviour', on closer examination, there may be further cat-

¹⁶ Both Ségur and Coxe make extensive use of the comparative technique above discussed to achieve the otherisation of the out-group.

¹⁷ Research conducted via Sketch Engine on the BNC suggests that the first collocate of 'flock', as a noun, is 'sheep'. As above discussed, the use of quantifiers fulfils a highly important role in the representation of nouns in that they precede the noun. Therefore, besides conveying quantity, the function of these grammar operators is to qualify, above all, the nature of nouns.

¹⁸ Transduction is a term used by Kress (2010: 124-125) to define the passage of a text from one mode to another. While an ordinary translation involves the intra-modal transformation of a text from its source language to the target language, a transduction involves the adoption of another mode to convey the same meaning as the source text. In other words, a transduction is a translation across modes.

¹⁹ A high-angle shot is a photographic technique used when pictures are taken from above, as a result of which the viewer is under the impression of looking down on the represented participants in the picture. This often affects the interpretation of the image because the relationship (tenor) between the represented participants in the picture and the viewer conveys power and asymmetry. As Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006: 143) point out, the viewer seems to assume the role of a supervisor that towers above the represented participants.

egories more fitting for classification. For instance, Coxe could also be said to play the role of *reacter*, which differs from the actor in that reactors perform an action only via their looking, thereby establishing an eyeline between them and the participant they are looking at, namely, the *phenomenon*.

Applying these categories introduced by Kress and Van Leeuwen to create a grammar of images, the result of this transduction reveals that: (1) the locals (*actor*) are immortalised in their plea for help from the visitor, which confirms the narrative of dependency and lack of self-sufficiency previously presented with respect to Wallerstein, (2) the visitor (*goal*), whose behaviours and comments are reminiscent of a coloniser, portrays himself as a hero coming from another world willing to provide help after overcoming the initial shock at the “gloomy sight” of the natives and (3) beneath this veneer of western benevolence and fatherlikeness lurks a patronising and condescending attitude towards foreigners.

To close this section, it seems evident that in the visual transduction developed above, the writer’s intention is to breed a (mis)representation of the east as needy and desperate for the help of its western counterpart, represented by Coxe, who feels almost obliged to offer his aid. In other words, the west/Coxe appears to be under a moral and ethical obligation to westernise the east based on an urgent call for help by eastern peoples themselves.

In view of this multimodal transduction, it is possible to deepen one’s understanding of the subtle descriptive strategies in travel literature, which lie at the core of multiple myths surrounding prejudices and stereotypes about eastern culture. In conclusion, it might also be argued that transduction affords the opportunity to dissect semiotic entities and look into them from a different perspective, allowing hidden meanings that would never surface in their original mode to be brought to light.²⁰

6. *Shaping discourse as a western privilege, the bison and Plica Polonica*

It is essential to thoroughly explore the sociocultural context underlying the development of semiotic entities if a multimodal analysis is to be conducted with scientific rigour, for each of them rests on a set of socially construct-

²⁰ As a fluid and multifaceted dimension, Europe’s complexity can be unravelled only by looking at it from different perspectives. See Cavaliere (2017: 6).

ed beliefs, habits and costumes. In other words, the analyst cannot avoid pre-studying the discourse of reference before proceeding to the unravelling of the covert meanings in the interstices of texts.²¹ In view of this, by looking at two practical examples that embody the narrative woven by the west in the representation of the east, this section offers new lines of interpretation to make sense of the semiotic work of the texts heretofore discussed.

By way of introduction, it seems worthwhile pointing out that, in the 19th century, European intellectuals developed a keen interest in natural history – the study of the development of animal species and plants across time in the natural environment – resulting in many researchers venturing into the exploration of untrodden virgin lands in Eastern Europe (Wolff, 1994: 28). Among them, the above-mentioned author, Coxe, stands out for writing a travel journal that, as mentioned before, is overflowing with racial stereotypes conveyed by means of notable strategies. As can be read in Coxe's travelogue, the author stumbled across Jean-Emmanuel Gilbert, one of the many scholars travelling eastwards in search of data for their research. In Coxe's reconstruction of the encounter with Gilbert, the former argued that, at the time of his journey, natural history was a non-existent field of study in Eastern Europe. Having identified yet another weakness, Coxe took this opportunity to reiterate the backwardness responsible for the increasingly yawning gap between the two Europes.

Interestingly enough, the journal features a passage wherein Coxe and Pallas²² engage in conversation about the current state of natural sciences in Eastern Europe, both concurring with the need to further develop the field. It was indeed to this end that, after securing Catherine II's patronage, Pallas resolved to leave Germany and temporarily move to Lithuania. Coxe's remark²³ indirectly contributes to the construction of the out-group since the writer appears relieved that it was a western rather than an eastern scientist to pioneer studies into the natural world,²⁴ betraying a deep distrust of research conducted outside the west. Arguably, the very fact that scientific literature came from the west acted as a guarantee of its reliability and ensured its trust-

²¹ For the notion of 'discourse', see Foucault (1971) and Fairclough (1992).

²² Pallas was a German scientist who attended different universities, among them the University of Halle, the University of Göttingen and finally the University of Leiden. In 1767, he received an official invitation from Catherine II of Russia to join the St. Petersburg Academy of Sciences, thanks to which he travelled extensively to deepen his knowledge of natural history.

²³ Coxe (1795: 216) comments on "the infant state of natural knowledge in this country".

²⁴ "[He] seemed to take for granted that it was best left in the hands of someone from France" (Wolff, 1994: 28).

worthiness in the eyes of the prospective readers. It can thus be concluded that membership of the western in-group, obtained through the acquisition of civilisation, entitled its members not only to set the rules of the game but to shape knowledge and discourse as well.

In the following passage, punctuated with comments on the geographical features of Lithuanian forests, Coxe recounts coming face to face with a bison while travelling to St. Petersburg:

[...] this species of the wild-ox, which was formerly very common in Europe, exists no where in that continent, but in these Lithuanian forests, in some parts of the Carpathian mountains, and perhaps in the Caucasus. (Wolff, 1994: 193)

Although he probably describes this encounter only to enliven his writing and seize the reader's attention (Lacombe, 1999), this mention should definitely not be overlooked as it provides further insights into the otherisation process. In particular, the writer throws in snippets of exoticism here and there, playing on the fact that, though the sighting of a wild ox sounds completely absurd to the 21st-century reader, it was undeniably credible to the 19th-century one.

Wolff goes as far as to contend that Coxe may have derived inspiration from Peter Simon Pallas's works, in which the researcher argues that it was still possible to sight specimens of bison far into the depths of the Lithuanian forests. What appears evident in this excerpt is that Coxe draws on Pallas's evolutionary hypothesis to widen the gap between the east and the west even further, reflecting those sociocultural differences even on the geographical landscape.

After thoroughly scrutinising the flora and fauna of the foreign lands, the western visitor's gaze falls on the natives, whose physical features attract Coxe's attention. The locals' physiognomy is another tool whereby to perpetuate the otherisation of the out-group. Not unlike the future proponents of eugenics (Nye, 1993), Coxe (1795) grounds the difference between the natives' and his physical appearance in scientific and genetic factors, making medical claims lacking any empirical basis.

The passage below is emblematic of the extent to which medical discourse could be infested with groundless and fanciful theories developed with no purpose other than to increase the distance between the in-group and the out-groups. This extract speaks volumes as to the dangerous consequences of racial stereotypes, distorting the perception of illness on the basis of an erroneous belief system:

Before I close my account of Poland, I shall just cursorily mention, that in our progress through this country we could not fail observing several persons with matted or clotted, hair, which constitutes a disorder called Plica Polonica: it receives that denomination because it is considered as peculiar to Poland; although it is not unfrequent in Hungary, Tartary, and several adjacent nations. (Coxe, 1795: 209)

On Coxe's arrival in Eastern Europe, these misconceptions were already widespread, so it did not take him long to spot several cases of Plica Polonica. As explained in the quotation above, the latter was believed to be a condition that typically hit Slavic populations (Coxe mentions Poles and Hungarians) who would manifest symptoms like itching, convulsions, eruptions and swellings. Specialists suggested that growing the patients' hair would alleviate pain, for the longer the hair, the more it would absorb the pathogen (Guesnet, 2019).

In the 17th century, Joseph Romain Louis Kerckhoffsa, a Swiss scientist, claimed to have isolated this infectious virus, asserting that it must have first developed in Poland due to factors such as the insanitary condition of houses, severe lack of hygiene and undrinkable water (Wolff, 1994: 30). More recent studies have debunked the myth surrounding Plica Polonica, revealing that its invention incarnates nothing more than the essence of stigma and a ploy to foreground the backwardness of Eastern Europe.

The two cases above presented, that is, the use of exoticism in the description of the foreign areas and reference to Plica Polonica, show how insidiously this anti-Slavic sentiment crept into scientific and medical discourse to erect barriers between the east and the west. In conclusion, it might be argued that the establishment of the USSR was only the culmination of a process going back to the age of the Enlightenment, when a group of philosophers and intellectuals unwittingly laid the theoretical foundation on which to develop racist west-centred stereotypes.

7. Dangerous modes: the role of maps in the construction of the foreigner's identity

The entrenchment of an anti-Eastern discourse fatally poisoned the destiny of Europe during the Age of Extremes, as Hobsbawm (2020) defined it, since at the root of all the conflicts which wreaked havoc across Europe often lied racist stereotypes. However, it was not until the end of World War II (1939–1945) that the two blocs polarised at opposite ends of the political spectrum, leading to the break-up of Europe. The need for new categories to make sense of historical reality gave rise to new labels (Bar-Tal, 1989), so that the previous

opposition – ‘civilised’ versus ‘uncivilised’ – evolved into ‘capitalism’ versus ‘communism’. Such labels arose from the adaptation of pre-existing ones to the post-war political climate.

While the Democratic Republics within the orbit of the USSR promoted economic statism (Kress, 2010: 20), based on total state control over financial issues and social homogeneity, the American bloc, by creating numerous markets in the interest of corporations, enacted policies of irreversible fragmentation of the social fabric. In this regard, scholars commented that the term ‘civil servant’ seems apt to represent the citizen of the Soviet Republics, whilst ‘consumer’ is a word that better describes the mindset on the other side of Europe.²⁵

This section will draw attention to the mode of maps, focusing on how semiosis, as an interest-based process, shaped their configuration over the years of the Cold War, conveying an anti-socialist ideology (Kress, 2010: 6). In this field, Edoardo Boria, Professor of Geopolitics at the University of Rome La Sapienza, conducted research on the cartographic strategies for the dissemination of nationalist propaganda, analysing in-depth maps produced in a period going from the outbreak of World War I to the fall of the Berlin wall (Boria, 2012).

To begin with, it should be noted that a common feature shared by all maps drawn in the post-war era is the presence of geographical inaccuracies. By way of example, an element typical of 20th-century cartography is the tendency to manipulate geographical distance to stir certain emotions in the user. The Soviet Republics and the NATO bloc were frequently represented in close proximity, bordering on collision, as if there were no ocean between them. Boria suggests that the visual impact of maps was so profound that they might even raise concerns about prospective incursions. Such characteristics of map design beg the question as to whether cartographers distorted geographical distance at will or they pursued some underlying interest. The most plausible answer may be that it was a political move to instil in map users a paralysing fear of the enemy, depicted as being menacingly close.

²⁵ The Republics of the Soviet Union included the Armenian Soviet Socialist Republic, Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic, Byelorussian Soviet Socialist Republic, Estonian Soviet Socialist Republic, Georgian Soviet Socialist Republic, Kazakh Soviet Socialist Republic, Kirghiz Soviet Socialist Republic, Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic, Lithuanian Soviet Socialist Republic, Moldavian Soviet Socialist Republic, Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic, Tajik Soviet Socialist Republic, Turkmen Soviet Socialist Republic, Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic and Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republic.

Just as interesting is the use of maps as visual instruments to represent the Gulag camps, always marked in red, all over the USSR. The Gulag, a system of concentration camps introduced during Lenin's rule "swallowing"²⁶ the transgressors of Communist law, was one of the most compelling arguments adduced by the NATO bloc to undermine the legitimacy of their opponent's administration. With respect to Soviet concentration camps, Solzhenitsyn, a Gulag survivor and intellectual, shattered the conspiracy of silence surrounding the treatment of detainees in the belatedly published *The Gulag Archipelago* (1973), a Nobel-prize-winning historical chronicle.

While Germany's defeat in World War II led to the disbandment of the Nazi camps, Stalin's survival enabled the USSR to still resort to such a coercive political establishment to stifle any dissenting voice. As a result, the capitalist bloc drew public attention to the unethical nature of the Gulag system whose internal structure blatantly violated human rights. Among the maps shown in Boria's study, *Carte come Armi* (2012), one is particularly revealing as it illustrates in red the geographical distribution of camps around the Soviet Union. The colour red was not arbitrarily chosen: it was rife with references to the USSR history and symbolism. For instance, the background of the Soviet Union flag was red as a tribute to the Paris Commune (1871), the name of the Soviet army was Red Army and, last but not least, red was reminiscent of the blood that the Russian working-class had unjustly shed at the hands of the aristocracy. Conceivably, using red as a visual move was geared to arouse horror among western citizens shocked at the savagery of this surveillance society.

²⁶ The verb 'swallow' is often utilised in a metaphorical sense by Solzhenitsyn to indicate the speed with which victims were arrested at night and forcibly transported to the appalling jails of the Gulag never to see daylight again. See Solzhenitsyn (2018).

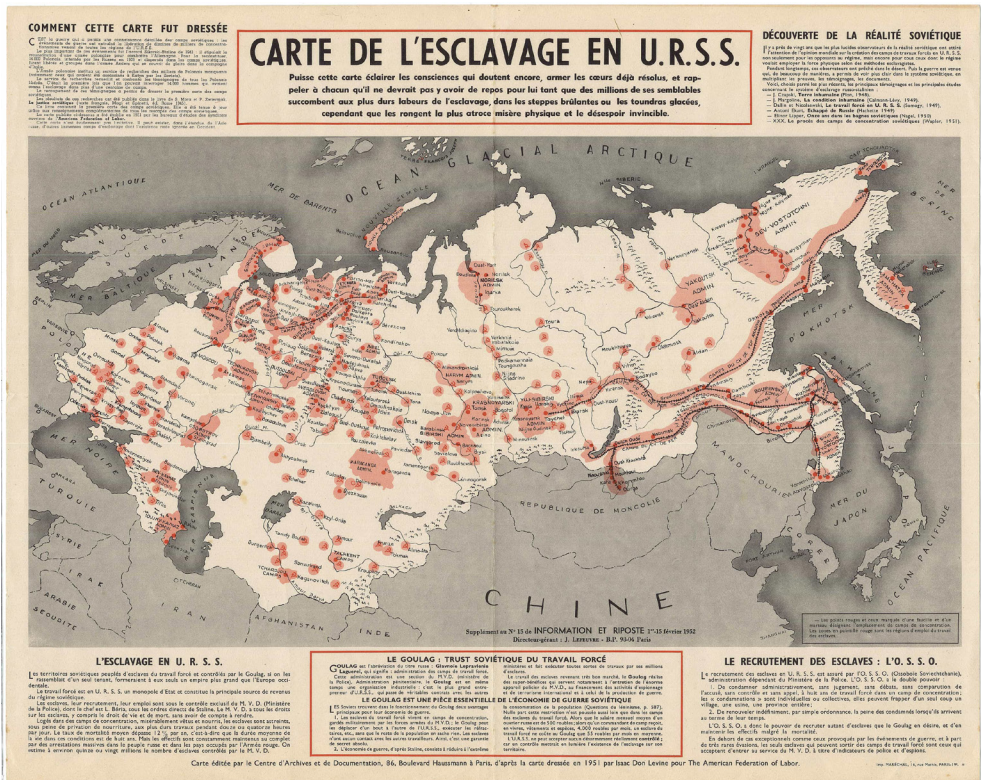


Figure 1. Map illustrating the distribution of the Gulag labour camps all over the USSR (Boria, 2012: 129)

In addition to altering citizens’ perception of the east, maps came in useful in spreading war propaganda and mobilising public opinion in view of the impending anti-communist Vietnam campaign (1961) (Chandler, 2019). In this respect, the US presidency has always proved highly effective in devising successful communicative strategies; just like the Great Depression (1929), when Roosevelt’s skilful use of radio bolstered the audience’s morale in the famous ‘fireplace chats.’²⁷ Likewise, Kennedy capitalised on television, the multimodal device par excellence, in the run-up to the American military intervention in Vietnam, a controversial issue badly digested by pacifists. In

²⁷ Fireplace chats were speeches delivered by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on the radio to raise citizens’ spirits concerning the financial crisis America was going through and public disquiet with World War II events. See Vidotto (2008).

order to drum up the population's support in a climate that had moved in the direction of non-interventionism since the end of the war, Kennedy appeared on television, showing three maps:



Figure 2. Image dating back to 1961, when President Kennedy staged an anti-communist campaign to mobilise citizens' support in the lead-up to the Vietnam War (Boria, 2012: 131)

Each map captured the Communists' advance in Vietnam, marking in red the areas where the Socialist Republic of Vietnam (SRV) had spread its tentacles. The design of such maps undeniably aimed to convey how powerful the enemy bloc had become at the expense of the Americans, which appears as an implicit invitation to counterattack. In conclusion, it might be argued that the careful design of maps was aimed at (1) affecting Western citizens' perception of reality, and (2) rousing them to action against the Communist bloc.

Again, the configuration of the map shown in Figure 1 confirms the initial hypothesis put forward in the Introduction of this study, that is, the stylistic organisation of any semiotic entity invariably springs from the interest(s) pursued by the rhetor and its logonomic system of reference. This also explains why looking at the maps in question nowadays without an understanding of the context in which they developed would never elicit in the user the same semiotic process as it had in the past.

8. *Concluding remarks*

In the post-pandemic era, in which maps have completely fallen by the wayside, superseded by Global Positioning System (GPS) and satellite navigation, due to an unprecedented process of digitalisation, communication hardly ever occurs on paper and political discourse mostly conveys itself online, through the internet and social media. Notwithstanding this, to make sense of the current strategies developed to perpetuate the gap between Eastern and Western Europe on social, racial and financial grounds, it is necessary to diachronically reconstruct how these differences were multimodally delivered in the past.

In the aftermath of World War II, the countries involved in the conflict made every endeavour to sweep their responsibilities under the carpet in a desperate attempt to safeguard their image in the eyes of international organisations (Traverso, 2006). Henry Rousso coined the expression *Vichy Syndrome* (Rousso, 1991), a metaphor drawing on medical language, to describe France's discomfort in coming to terms with its past and admitting to offering support to the Nazis after the invasion of France (1940–1944). For years, discriminatory measures against Romani, homosexual individuals, leftists, to say nothing of the Jews, enforced by Petain's government remained untold and unreported, and Vichy Government was portrayed as an illegitimate organisation totally unrelated to the official government of France (Gordon, 1995). It was only under Chirac's presidency, in the wake of the manifold post-war trials, that France undertook a retrospective journey into its collaborationism, coming face to face with its past.

Distorted, not to say biased, historical narrations are often passed from one generation to the next through a set of malpractices causing 'narrated history' to become increasingly divorced from 'actual history'. Examples abound in this respect, but an interesting phenomenon is that of *communicative memory*, defined as:

[...] based exclusively on everyday communications [and] characterized by a high degree of non-specialization, reciprocity of roles, thematic instability, and disorganization. Typically, it takes place between partners who can change roles. Whoever relates a joke, a memory, a bit of gossip, or an experience becomes the listener in the next moment. There are occasions which more or less predetermine such communications, for example train rides, waiting rooms, or the common table. There is a "household" within the confines of which this communication takes place. Yet beyond this reigns a high degree of formlessness, willfulness, and disorganization. (Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995: 126)

As narrated history is subject to multiple distortions and utilised by changing governments and political leaders as a vehicle to legitimise their positions, the danger of spreading a self-interested historical memory is always around the corner. In light of this, developing a ‘critical ear’, so to speak, and an awareness to the mono/multimodal strategies for mudding narrated history with untrue facts is vital to resist the temptation to explain historical phenomena of great complexity through stereotypes and prejudices.

Analysing phenomena such as the deep-seated anti-Slavic feeling in multimodal and social-semiotic terms might open the floodgates for a multiplicity of new interpretations and narratives. Actually, the exploration of new avenues for the cultivation of a shared historical memory respectful of each other’s pasts and traditions has become a top priority ever since ex-socialist countries entered the European Union (e.g., Hungary, Poland, Croatia and Lithuania, among others).

Drawing to its conclusion, it only remains for this study to invite future researchers to pursue what Prutsch (2013) called the Europeanisation of historical memory, a field in urgent need of attention and contributions, especially in view of the current war-torn scenario and the ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine (2022). Europeanising memory, according to Prutsch, means considering a historical event in its totality from a transnational angle and ceasing to look at it from the perspective of one single country. For instance, the heatedly debated post-bellum Paris Peace Treaties (1947) occasioned a redefinition of international borders: Italy lost out all its colonies in Libya and Istria to members of the former Yugoslavia. Therefore, while this agreement may represent to many a blow to Italian national pride since “it is thus clear that Italy loses her sovereignty over her former colonies with the moment of the coming into force of the Treaty” (Kunz, 1947: 624), it is on the other hand a victory to celebrate for countries like Slovenia which extended their sphere of influence.

Overcoming national particularisms and the public use of history (Eley, 2011) is one of the main objectives of the European Union, but to fulfil so ambitious an aim, it is important for each country member to abandon chauvinistic myths and embrace a supranational approach to historical narration that can account for the sensibilities of all fellow European nations. To this end, adopting Multimodal Critical Discourse Analysis (MCDA) in this field could really raise awareness and expose the discriminatory practices of myth-building which prejudice feeds on.

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