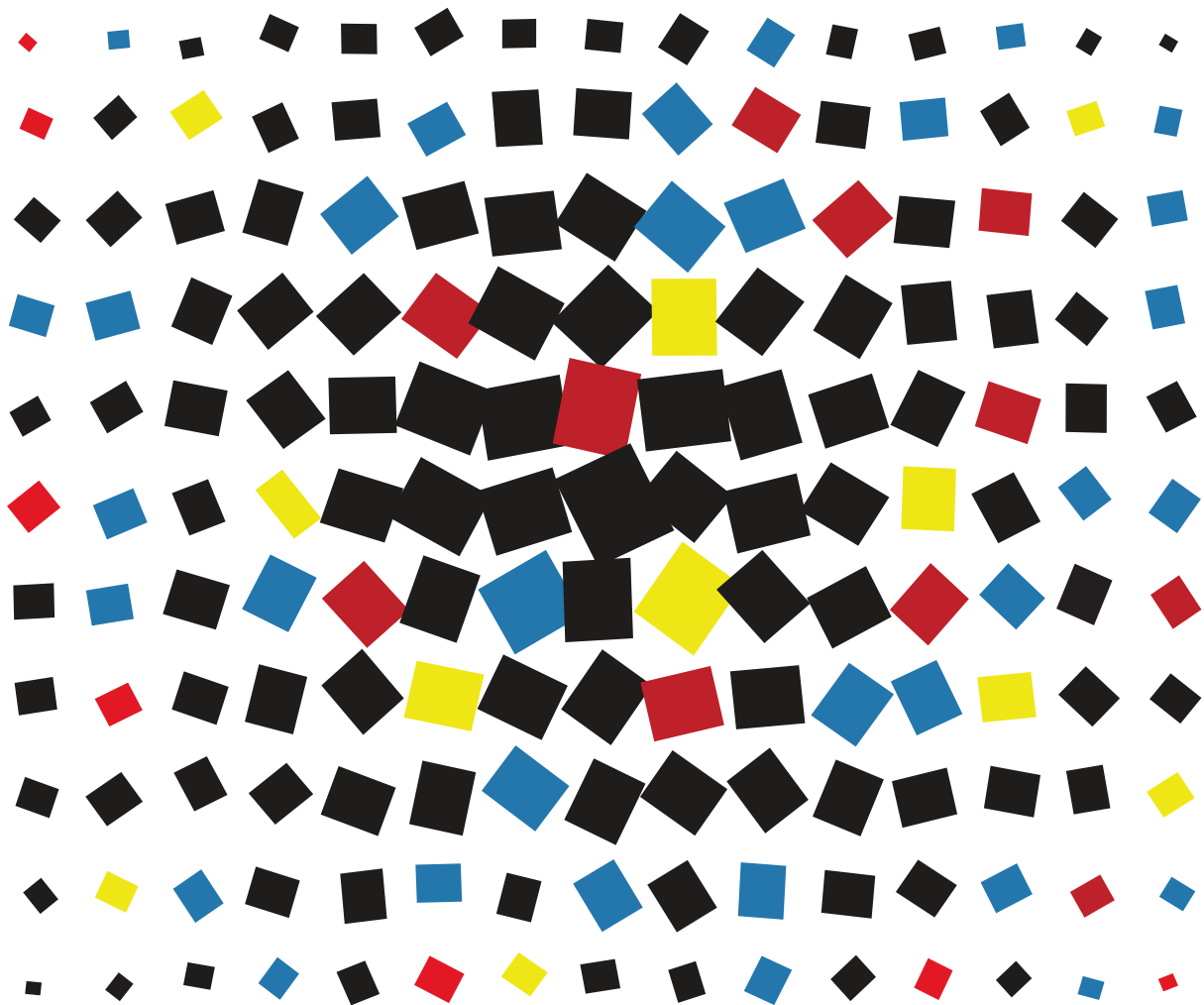# FORGING AUTHORITARIAN CONSENSUS

Workshop | University of Bern | 10th – 12th March 2025

PROGRAM

FORGING AUTHORITARIAN CONSENSUS

Workshop | Raum 0028 HG, University of Bern | 10th – 12th March 2025

Program

Monday, 10th March

I Semiotic Affordances

What semiotic strategies does authoritarian political messaging rely on for achieving discursive success? How are political messages (by political actors, movements, institutions) semiotically "packaged" for achieving maximum discursive force?

13:30-14:00	Opening and introduction
14:00-15:00	**Susan Gal** "Capturing the Authority of Cultural Institutions in Contemporary Hungary"
	Chair: *Erez Levon* Discussants: *Kathryn Woolard, Francis Cody* 14:00-14:05 - speaker 14:05-14:20 - discussants 14:20-14:35 - response 14:35-14:55 - discussion
15:00-16:00	**Francis Cody** "Hate, Hurt, and the Circularity of Sentiment"
	Chair: *Julia Eckert* Discussants: *Kathryn Woolard, Andrew Graan* 15:00-15:05 - speaker 15:05-14:20 - discussants 14:20-15:35 - response 15:35-15:55 - discussion
16:00-16:30	Coffee break
16:30-17:30	**Andrew Graan** "Authoritarianism, Liberalism, and the Dynamics of (Non) Circulation"
	Chair: *Agnieska Pasieka* Discussants: *Kathryn Woolard, Susan Gal* 16:30-16:35 - speaker 16:35-16:50 - discussants 16:50-17:05 - response 17:05-17:30 - discussion
17:30-18:00	Summing up
19:00	Dinner

Tuesday, 11th March

II Uptake and Circulation

How are political messages taken up and recontextualized as they circulate within society? How are the presuppositions and meanings of messages accommodated and/or (re)interpreted (or not) as they travel across social groups? What publics does this engagement with political messaging create?

9:30-10:30	**Douglas Holmes** "Gain of Function"
	Chair: *Moyukh Chatterjee* Discussants: *Erez Levon, Julia Eckert* 9:30-9:35 - speaker 9:35-9:50 - discussants 9:50-10:05 - response 10:05-10:30 - discussion
10:30-11:00	Coffee break
11:00-12:00	**Moyukh Chatterjee** "Hindutva Self-Fashioning: Reels, status updates, and songs of the far-right in India"
	Chair: *Susan Gal* Discussants: *Erez Levon, Agnieska Pasieka* 11:00-11:05 - speaker 11:05-11:20 - discussants 11:20-11:35 - response 11:35-11:55 - discussion
12:00-14:00	Lunch break
14:00-15:00	**Agnieska Pasieka** "Occidentalism revisited"
	Chair: *Catherine Tebaldi* Discussants: *Erez Levon, Douglas Homes* 14:00-14:05 - speaker 14:05-14:20 - discussants 14:20-14:35 - response 14:35-14:55 - discussion
15:00-15:30	Summing up
16:00-18:00	**Round table: "Where is the middle?"***
	Chairs: *Julia Eckert, Erez Levon, Nitzan Shoshan, Agnieska Pasieka, Moyukh Chatterjee*
18:00	Apero riche Location: *Institute of Social Anthropology*

* Location: F-123, Lerchenweg 36

Wednesday, 12th March

III Communicative Regimes

How does the circulation and uptake of political messaging rely on broader ideologies about how knowledge is produced, circulated, and perceived? How do these regimes of communicability create specific roles for individuals and institutions (e.g., as expert knowledge producers) and how are these regimes negotiated (e.g., accepted, refused, refined) in everyday interaction?

9:30-10:30	**Catherine Tebaldi** "Digital Traditionalism: From cottagecore to far-right publics"
	Chair: *Julia Eckert* Discussants: *Nitzan Shoshan, Moyukh Chatterjee* 9:30-9:35 - speaker 9:35-9:50 - discussants 9:50-10:05 - response 10:05-10:30 - discussion
10:30-11:00	Coffee break
11:00-12:00	**Nitzan Shoshan** "Say it loud: The metapragmatics of the (un)sayable"
	Chair: *Erez Levon* Discussants: *Julia Eckert, Catherine Tebaldi* 11:00-11:05 - speaker 11:05-11:20 - discussants 11:20-11:35 - response 11:35-11:55 - discussion
12:00-13:00	Summing up

Abstracts

Capturing the Authority of Cultural Institutions in Contemporary Hungary
Susan Gal

Hungary is a paradigm case of destroying liberal democracy by legal, democratic means. Aptly called "autocratic legalism," since laws are changed, not broken. A self-abstracting liberal public is not totally eliminated; remnants remain to contest how the regime legally, explicitly discriminates against embodied citizens (gendered, racialized, migrated). I have argued that the authority of the regime's legal moves relies on rhetoric that shapes public opinion. A semiotic meta-process of "grafting" makes authoritarian innovations such as a controlled press, bridled judicial system, and opposition to gender equality seem like mere extensions of long-accepted values of national sovereignty, anti-communism, religion, and common sense. Since values are lodged in institutions, the regime targets those that have reproduced liberal values: education, press, scholarship, arts. Extending the notion of grafting (as material, interactional process) I aim to show how these institutions seem to continue as before, but now enact values that authorize the regime, creating fear/threat for opponents.

Hate, Hurt, and the Circularity of Sentiment
Francis Cody

Drawing on the archive of recent attacks on journalists who have been charged with criminal offenses for reporting on the hateful speech of others, this paper seeks to understand how the appearance of consensus is forged in a contemporary India defined by the majoritarian claims of Hindutva, or Hindu nationalism. One major power of enforcement works through the (1) juridical-ization of sentiment which solidifies (2) historically sedimented zones of compulsory consensus. The law might style itself as unsentimental in the governance of affects that are attributed those excitable subjects that live under its sway, and the language of "hurt sentiments" is all over the Indian Penal Code. Dominant communities, however, enjoy exclusive rights to having sentiments that are protected in ways that create domains of socio-political life where "disturbing the peace" leads to serious criminal charges. Such disturbance is often attributed to texts and images posted by journalists that circulate virally on social media. The paper explores this intersection of technology and legal ideology on the premise that the analysis is applicable to forms of consensus enforcement that are not as explicitly "illiberal," even if the rhetoric structuring how the domain of the sayable is delimited varies across political contexts.

Authoritarianism, Liberalism, and the Dynamics of (Non) Circulation
Andrew Graan

This paper thematizes the question of how discourse is made *not to circulate* in order to investigate the institutional moorings of both "authoritarian" and "liberal" publics. Michael Warner (2002: 62) famously conceptualized "publics" as a "social space created by the reflexive circulation of discourse," and much subsequent research on publicity has examined the norms,

practices, institutions and ideologies that organize how discourse circulates within and between publics. Yet, processes of discursive circulation often co-occur with and can depend on norms, practices, institutions and ideologies that discourage or impede the circulation of other forms of discourse. This paper explores this dynamic of circulation *and* non-circulation through two cases: (1) the practices of media control and intimidation exercised in Macedonia during Nikola Gruevski's premiership in the 2010s, and (2) the increasingly controversial use of non-disclosure agreements in US and UK legal settlements. In each case, I examine how efforts to secure the circulation of some discourse included efforts to marginalize and silence other discourse. The resulting vantage point offers a new perspective on the politics of interdiscursivity, one that understands "silencing" as a semiotic, trans-contextual achievement that is endemic to publics of all kinds. The paper then concludes by revisiting distinctions between liberal and authoritarian publics to instead show the dynamics of (non)circulation that condition each.

Hindutva Self-Fashioning: Reels, status updates, and songs of the far-right in India
Moyukh Chatterjee

Over the last decade, I have been following far-right Hindu vigilante groups in western India as part of a larger effort to understand the everyday life of Hindu supremacy. While music and media, including posters, television shows and cassettes, have been an integral part of the Hindu nationalist movement, and its uptake among subaltern groups, how do a new generation of far-right activists use the affordances of smartphones and platforms like WhatsApp and YouTube in their offline and online work. This work is not only the intimidation of religious minorities and public violence but also to join, circulate, and create new forms of authoritarian consensus through a new mixture of sound and image. I will address this broader question by focusing on, among other things, status updates of far-right Hindu supremacists, propaganda films, and the interface between the offline and online world of Hindu nationalism in contemporary India.

Occidentalism revisited
Agnieska Pasieka

Contemporary European far-right actors tend to be presented as xenophobic, anti-migrant and anti-Muslim, and as such: as self-proclaimed defenders of the "West" or "Western civilization" against its alleged enemies. While such a description undoubtedly resonates with political discourses of numerous far-right leaders, it simultaneously fails to grasp a phenomenon that has been developing parallelly: namely, a heightened critique of the West by various far-right constituencies aiming to forge a new illiberal consensus. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork with youth far-right activists, in my paper I would like to put into the spotlight the image of the "liberal West" and "Western man." In so doing, I aim to contribute to the workshop by focusing on two questions: How is the image of liberalism/liberals construed, circulated and (re)interpreted across youth radical movements, often representing different national contexts? And, considering the movements' grassroots operating, what role does their political messaging play in creating/shaping normative publics?

Round table: "Where is the middle?"

The question "where is the middle" can be addressed in at least three ways: First, as a question about the reconfiguration of the political topography, in which labels such as 'left' and 'right? are inadequate to grasp the various alliances, the different projects, the positionalities that political "camps" encompass. The specific conglomerates of today are new. Historical fascisms were also made up of and successful because of their specific conglomerates. The question "where is the middle" thus harks back to the discussion about the class base of fascism, begun by Theodor Geiger in the 1930s, and then continued by Lipset in the 1960s that both considered fascism the extremism of the middle classes, or the "Mittelschicht", the petty bourgeois, and a particular goal oriented 'moralism'.

There is a second way to address the question "Where is the middle", namely by asking where the conventional middle, the mainstream is in all this, i.e. how they/we are complicit in normalizing and "mainstreaming" extreme right tropes.

This brings us to a third way to ask "where is the middle": Where for heaven's sake is the middle to stand up against all this? Or: What are the obstacles to defending humanist universalist values and institutions? Does this bring us back to the first way of addressing the question of "where is the middle", namely that the new alliances, or what we called a conglomerate of positionalities, projects and aspirations on the right is mirrored by a fragmentation of all opposing positions?

Digital Traditionalism: From cottagecore to far-right publics
Catherine Telbaldi

This talk explores digital traditionalism, or how modern social media inspires and makes circulate calls to return to tradition and go back to nature. It asks how the multiple indexicalities of Tradition, Nature are regimented to fit reactionary ideologies and sold to a public who taught to link mundane practices with far-right meanings. Responding to the workshop section on authoritarian publics and institutions, it asks how the institutions of platform capitalism make authoritarian politics circulate and shape publics imagined, even instructed, to desire them. It does this through tracing images of the mountains outside Bern and other pastoral images of Switzerland through multiple digital contexts, from the everyday to the extreme, to show how the image takes on meanings: A picture mountain becomes a post on Instagram tagged #cottagecore and becomes about a rural escape from modernity. Circulating into r/cottagecore, a digital platform devoted to romantic pastoralism with the tagline "your grandma but hip", it becomes a symbol of tradition as rural, but also European and white. Finally, it is taken up into explicitly political digital media, Swiss People's Party (SVP) and the far-right Generation Identity. Tracing the link from the everyday to the extreme, this work in progress aims looks how hate comes to seem like "meaning" , through the work of the institutions of platform capitalism shape everyday life and mundane desires into calls for gendered reaction, xenophobia and eco-fascism. Platforms are institutions which, from Musk's fascist salute to Zuckerberg's desire to

remasculinize the internet, are increasingly authoritarian, constitute increasingly reactionary publics around everything from mountains to milk.

Say it loud: The metapragmatics of the (un)sayable

Nitzan Shoshan

Grievances about presumed cultural censorship have been commonplace in recent right-wing discourses across diverse contexts. Often attributed to "politically correct" or "woke" policing of linguistic practices, such presumed surveillance and disciplining of expression is said to repress unsavory truths that fail to align with leftist, elite, or liberal political agendas. Claims of such infringements on the freedom of expression have backgrounded a range of right-wing discourses, from calls for historical revisionism in Germany to the termination of moderation and fact-checking mechanisms in sociodigital networks or the rhetoric of populist leaders who presume to really say what they think. In this paper, I focus on the case of Germany to examine, first, how such metapragmatic framings of putative constraints on speech draw on both situated contexts and globally circulating tropes in order to index authoritative speech and become widely compelling; and, second, what are the political ends for which they are deployed and what effects do they exercise on the truth-value of other, metonymically related pronouncements. I draw on both ethnographic research and mass mediated discourses in order to highlight the intertextual indexing of resistance to linguistic repression and its mobilization within far-right political projects.