TOWARDS A CONCEPTUAL HISTORY OF CANONIZATION IN TOTALITARIAN SOCIETIES

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Abstract: *Although totalitarian societies, by and large, have uneasy relationships with religion, they tend to produce their own "Messiahs" (people whose knowledge of the future is free from all kinds of uncertainty) and "Bibles" (texts containing explanations for each and every context imaginable). This removal of contingency is accompanied by a reduction of a living being (for example, the Soviet dictator Joseph Stalin) to his portraits and quotations: in the Bolshevik newspaper Pravda, the Soviet dictator is often featured alongside his oversized portraits, and every fourth reference to him is actually a reference to his slogans and speeches. The article compares such a canonization in Soviet Union with parallel processes in Nazi Germany (where Adolf Hitler and his texts are revered to a much lesser degree) and United States of America (where this development is missing altogether despite Franklin D. Roosevelt unprecedented media exposure). It turns out that Stalin's discursive canonization has multiple reasons including his reliance on rigid radial networks of power and communication (as opposed to rotation of political and social roles in democracies), his interactional detachment from listeners and, last but not least, his remarkable passivity in political rituals (echoed by the media).*

Keywords: *Stalin; Hitler; Roosevelt; canonization; history of communication*

Hacia una historia conceptual de canonización en las sociedades totalitarias

Resumen: A pesar de que las sociedades totalitarias, en general, tienen relaciones poco fluidas con la religión, aquéllas tienden a producir su propio "mesías" (personas cuyo conocimiento del futuro está exento de cualquier clase de incertidumbre) y "biblias" (textos que contienen explicaciones para todo contexto imaginable). Esta expulsión de la contingencia está acompañada de la reducción del ser vivo (por ejemplo, el dictador soviético Stalin) a sus retratos y citas: en el periódico bolchevique Pravda, el dictador soviético a menudo es caracterizado mediante sus retratos sobredimensionados, y una de cada cuatro referencias a él es en realidad una referencia a sus eslóganes y discursos. Este artículo compara este tipo de canonización en la Unión Soviética con procesos paralelos en la Alemania nazi (donde Adolf Hitler y sus textos son reverenciados en un grado mucho menor) y en los Estados Unidos (donde este desarrollo no se produce a pesar de la exposición mediática sin precedentes de Franklin D. Roosevelt). Se observa que la canonización discursiva obedece a múltiples razones, incluyendo su dependencia de redes radiales rígidas de poder y comunicación (opuesta a la rotación de los papeles políticos y sociales en las democracias), a su separación interaccional de los oyentes y, por último, a la remarcable pasividad de sus rituales políticos (reflejados por los medios).

Palabras clave: Stalin; Hitler; Roosevelt; canonización; historia de la comunicación

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What is canonization in general conceptual context?

The specific historical meaning of the term "canonization" —adoration of significant people and texts in Christianity— as little to do with 20th century totalitarianisms unless one is confronted with systematic encroachment of the church activity onto the secular sphere (see the discussion of Iosif Stalin' Orthodox canonization in Bodin 2009, 155-190). But if we look at some communicative practices making canonization possible, the formation of textual and visual canon in the public life of secular societies could no longer be dismissed as a mere by-product of spontaneous religiosity. Following (and slightly modifying) the view of Jan and Aleida Assmann (Assman & Assman 1987, 9), I will limit myself to the most miraculous property attributed to the canonical texts – their ability to produce meaningful explanation for each and every context imaginable, far outstripping in this capacity all bystanders' comments and experts' opinions. Although a canonical text is already set in stone and cannot reflect upon the present state of affairs, it still offers the best possible response to it, even if its active involvement in actual communication is negligible: in the extreme cases, quoting random canonical texts could be preferable to addressing their living creators. My primary goal is to show how this paradox strikes root in some (but not all) comparable socio-political contexts; to this end, a preliminary statistical sample evaluating discursive canonizations in Soviet Union, Nazi Germany and the United States is offered for initial discussion.

Glimpses of canonization in (some) totalitarian societies

On November 5th 1936 the Soviet newspaper *Izvestia* chose to portray Iosif Stalin three times, which was unusual even by the standards of the personality cult rapidly spreading in Soviet Union after 1929 (see the statistics of Stalin's visual representations in the media in Plamper 2012, 231). But the sheer frequency of the Bolshevik's leader appearances was not the only notable feature of this issue. Only once was Stalin depicted as a regular communicant, shaking hands and exchanging smiles with a female worker. Two other images were actually

meta-representations, depicting Stalin not as a human being but rather as an absent signified of a ritual object: whereas the oversized banner, displayed in the Bolshoi theatre, anachronistically featured Stalin next to his deceased predecessor Lenin, the poster carried by children during the obligatory demonstration of May 1st was showing "our dear father" with a little girl in his hands. The proliferation of "dead" portraits next to the living ruler would not perhaps raise many eyebrows in the Middle Ages (Kantorowicz 1957), but for the 20th century it was quite striking, particularly compared to the more straightforward depictions of totalitarian and democratic leaders of the 1930s. Indeed, among 99 images of Iosif Stalin on the front page of the party newspaper *Pravda* in 1936, no less than 18 turn out to be "canonizing" pictures of the Soviet leader (such as posters, drawings, paintings, sculptures and engravings): on the first page of the newspaper from November 10th Stalin is peeking over the shoulder of Klyment Voroshilov, his close ally and the People's Commissar for Military and Navy Affairs, at *his own* portrait published in Pravda four days before that. In Nazi Germany, the pictures of Adolf Hitler embellish the first page of *Volkischer Beobachter* almost as frequently (99 appearances), but only 3 of them - a drawing [27.8.], a staged "artistic photo" [20.4.] and a manuscript of *Mein Kampf* [6.5.] —idolatrise the Führer in one way or another. In contrast, *New York Times* does reproduce the handwritten note of the American President Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 29, 1936, but, aside from that, there is but a single official photograph of him on the paper's first page in the whole of 1936. Since the existing studies of the leadership's visualizations in the 1930s have largely glossed over these and others qualitative heterogeneities (see, for instance, Loiperdinger, Herz & Pohlmann 1995), little progress has been made in searching for the discursive equivalent of the visual canon in the 20th century public sphere. It seems pertinent to attempt overcoming this gap in order to propose a functional explanation of canonization in the interwar politics, exploring parallels between political systems, their interaction networks, and their conceptual inventories.

Why canonization is alien to society and communication in general

As a form of systemic activity, both coexistence and interaction with the canon are highly unusual, defying some of the most universal social and communicative conventions. Dealing with the canonical, be it a person or an artefact, means doing business and talking

with the fixed, irresponsive abstraction, which is also *apriori* superior to its human witness and interlocutor: one way or another, the idolater remains subservient to his/her own oversized fantasy, a sort of "das Ich" of transcendental idealists (Feuerbach 1843, 98). This unfruitful reflexivity flies in the face of the most fundamental condition of human existence – the non-singularity of identity – its permanently distributed state (Heidegger 1957; Derrida 1972, 15): it takes two not only to dance but also to build a society and, more specifically, to interact (Luhmann 1998, 139). Indeed, cooperation supplements the egocentric (asymmetrical) perspective *system / environment* with the polycentric (symmetrical) perspective *system' / system''*. In the first, pre-social case the biological identity is summarily and unconditionally opposed to the rest of the world for the sake of its survival (see, for instance, the case of the immune subsystem of the human body (Ishida 1996). In the second case, on the contrary, the opposition between a living being and its "outside" world is specific and conditioned: even such asymmetrical self-references as "I" and "you" (or, in familiar conceptual terms, "right" and "wrong") work only as pairs, applicable to the current message of the addresser ("I"/"right") sent to the addressee ("you"/"wrong") *only* insofar as they are universally applicable to all possible interactions within a given language (Buber 1922, 5; Postoutenko 2010a). In place of a simple biological asymmetry between "self" and "other", we have in the social (and communicative) world the symmetry of asymmetries: the whole industry of asymmetrical counter-concepts would never develop and sustain if "justice", "progress" and "democracy" could not be contested and reclaimed (Koselleck 1979, Postoutenko 2011). Since the whole nature of non-negotiable difference between the silent canon and its eloquent adorer evidently does not fit into this turnover of roles and concepts, the practitioners of canonization often try to conceal from themselves the fact that they "interact" with little more than naturally changing of the environment (Zeitlyn 1995, 191). But there is little point to succumb to this delusion, however beautiful: instead, it appears worthwhile to look for socio-communicative contexts where canonization might feel more at home. This search entails two steps: after a brief description of the cooperative environment, one can proceed to the different forms of its opposite where canonization is more likely to be found.

Bad for canonization: cooperation and feedback loops
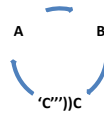
For a society, it is generally sufficient to have 1+x similar identities defined summarily (as "*citoyens*", "*Volk*" etc.), but communication cannot be initiated by this sheer *différance* alone. Unlike some basic biological systems operating on the premise *one being / one function/one message* (Stent 1972, 44-45), human systems need changing addressors and addresses that can tell (or write) different things to each other: if diverse states produce one and the same response from all communicators, society de facto stops reacting to itself and its surroundings, which basically means death. Interactions approaching the stasis of complete symmetry are usually deemed meaningless or even dangerous: and in non-verbal communication, the front-to-front position at a table - especially combined with silence – is said to be more prone to conflicts than any other [Schefflen 1976, 33]. Overall, the typical reaction to the symmetrical static tension is its careful defusing in dynamic, asymmetrical fashion: in this way, the highly dramatic mutual gazing between betrayed Jesus and repenting St. Peter is shown by Luigi Tansillo as a dialogue between Jesus' "tongue" and St. Peter's "ears": "*Ogni occhio del Signór lingua veloce // paréa che fusse, et ogni occhio de'suoi // orecchia intent ad ascoltár sua voce*" [Tansillo 1560, 176].

This simple cooperation schema $t°\,(A \rightarrow B)\,»\,t°^{+1}\,(B \leftarrow A)$ looks good enough for creating a minimal interaction network, or exchanging ritual pleasantries, but it is hardly suitable for full-blown cooperation. The exchange "*Thank you*" /"*You are welcome*" sounds noticeably better than "*Thank you*"/ "*Thank you*", but its endless bouncing back and forth could hardly serve any purpose other than conveying general politeness (and avoiding hostility): after all, most of the people say "*You are welcome*" merely because they hear "*Thank you*", which puts the informational value of such an exchange dangerously close to nil. Hence most of the communication scholars and political scientists tend to describe cooperation in longer sequences with more actors $(t°(A \rightarrow B)\,»\,t°^{+1}(B \rightarrow C)\,»\,t°^{+2}(C \leftarrow A))$ which ultimately feed back to the original source. Indeed, the triad "*I am very sorry I have to go*" / "*Not at all*" / "*I mean that*" [Owen 1983, 35] appears to be vastly more informative than the standard binary formula just

quoted. In political analysis, the circular nature of societal cooperation was probably pioneered by Wilfredo Pareto, who fiercely contested binary schemes in religion and politics: "We are accustomed to viewing the history of that time as a struggle against Christianity and other religions or doctrines which we believe to be essentially dissimilar, and we imagine that the course of modern history would have been altogether different if, instead of Christianity, the cult of Mithra or some other oriental cult had triumphed, or if paganism had flowered again. All this does not hold true. There was indeed a violent struggle between sects A, B, C..., which all sprang from one single cause X, and facts A, B, C... are only secondary. It cannot be said that they were of no importance at all, since form too has some value in modifying phenomena determined by substance, but the error consists in assigning first place to something that must stand in second place" [Pareto 1901, 31-32]. Pareto's emphasis on the process of circular role exchange as *the* main indicator of social cooperation was largely lost on his critics accusing him of "elitism" [Hirschman 1991, 55], but half-a-century later Karl Deutsch, using the same ternary A-B-C scheme, offered a much more sophisticated, elegant and modern reading of basic social cooperation, which reads, among other things, as a way out of Hegelian "*Herr-Knecht*" dichotomy: "If in a card game a queen has a higher value than a jack and a king a higher value than a queen, we must stipulate that the king must also have a higher value than the jack. At first glance this seems logical, but it is quite possible to have games where this rule does not apply and where A takes B, B takes C, but C takes A. Such non-transitive or loop patterns of dominance have been observed by biologists in the peck order of chickens, and they may have their counterpart in the relationship of the British Parliament to the Prime Minister, where the House of Commons can overthrow the Premier, but the Premier can dissolve the House, or in the relationship of the British voters, where the voters at election time can turn out the old Parliament but where the Parliament can postpone the period of election and, at least in theory, could postpone such elections on the ground of war or emergency for an indefinite period" [Deutsch 1966, 54].

In my view, Marion Owen and Karl Deutsch show (in their own disciplinary ways) why canonization is hardly compatible with active participation in democratic politics: if roles and messages are mutually interchangeable *and* dynamically interdependent, no social actor, however strong, can politically afford silence: in Pareto's terms, the only alternative to the intra-societal circulation of functions and information is the circulation of societies and their unstable idolatries themselves. Similar to the archaic period studied in his *Rise and Fall of the Elites* (see reference above), the first half of the 20th century is rich on autocracies, and the

formation of political canon in the discourse of totalitarian societies is in principle as probable as formation of religious canon in the discourse of monotheist religions. It remains to be shown how communication and politics in totalitarian society might be particularly conducive to canonization, and why Stalin's texts could be a more likely object of adoration than Hitler's.

Good for canonization: non-cooperation and radial networks
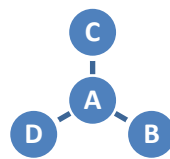
The fact that all social and communicative systems are feedback loops loosely based on cooperation is hardly contestable today [Watzlawick, Bavelas & Jackson 1967, 46]. It does not mean, however, that the spontaneity and responsiveness of such systems goes challenged: indeed, most of the autocracies attempt, with mixed success, to prevent free circulation of utterances, elites and functions described by Pareto, Owen and Deutsch: ritualistic exchanges tend to supplant unscripted conversations, chief executives sabotage rotation by staying in power for decades, and leaders avoid accountability by dissolving parliaments or rigging elections. Arguably the most effective form of doing all this is the creation of radial networks with the relay in the centre: if in the cooperation scheme $t°(A \rightarrow B)$ » $t°^{+1}(B \rightarrow C)$ » $t°^{+2}(C \leftarrow A)$ A, B and C are all interchangeable, dependent upon each other and could be directly interlinked, in the non-cooperation scenario all connections should be made through A, which has a power to allow or refuse connection, and also a privileged position for transmitting its own messages to B, C and D ($t° (A \rightarrow B)$ » $t°^{+1} (A \rightarrow C)$ » $t°^{+2} (A \rightarrow D)...$) and receiving feedback from them ($t° (B \rightarrow A)$ » $t°^{+1} (C \rightarrow A)$ » $t°^{+2} (D \rightarrow A)$). We should resist the temptation to reduce A to a flesh-and-blood human being in charge: in most cases it is an agency consisting (in various combinations) of personalized power, monopolized media, and overblown censorship and surveillance programs [Rosenfeldt 1991, 145; Postoutenko 2010b, 28]. Nevertheless, dictators usually take centre stage in public interaction, and it would be natural to relate their leadership styles to the possibility of their political canonization:

metaphorically speaking, the leader practicing *domination* (moving around, making himself seen and giving speeches) is too mobile to harden and become a monument of himself, whereas the leader attuned to *divination* (preferring to stay away from it all, keep quiet and sift through oaths of loyalty), has somewhat better chances to get canonized.

The abundance and variety of visual references to Iosif Stalin presented at the beginning of this paper makes him a good candidate for interactional canonization, i.e. the *divination*-oriented discursive identity (see rather similar conclusions in the more historically-oriented studies: Plamper 2003, Rolf 2004). It seems reasonable to offer tentative assessments of this hypothesis and then offer some (but by no means all) explanations of this phenomenon.

What is canonization in a specific discursive context: data and some tentative explanations

As has been said before, verbal and visual idols, being closed systems, may respond to changes in their environment but cannot cooperate by attuning themselves to the interactive frameworks offered by their counterparts: a paperback may tremble while being shouted at, but it will never give an answer to the question asked by the shouting person. Nevertheless, unlike elusive oracles, books have lots of potential information, packaged in an almost conversational form, so in principle it is possible for every questioner to imitate a dialogue with a book by excising bits from the text and treating them like responses: after all, children all over the world still have fun by playing this game, and one of Dostoevsky's early *flâneurs* even managed to treat rows of houses as groups of people greeting him during long night walks (Dostoevsky 1848, 103).

In the public discourse, this model is exemplified by prevalence of references to the respective leader's *text* ("...*Stalin's slogan*") as opposed to reports on *interaction* ("*X has spoken with Roosevelt...*") and *non-interactive actions* ("...*Hitler's visit / visited Hitler...*"). The data in the TABLE 1 seems to confirm the impression that Stalin's discursive identity is the most canonical one of all the three: for the period between January and March 1936, the references to Stalin's texts in *Pravda* - invariably favourable, to be sure - are twice as frequent as the respective coverage of Hitler in *Völkischer Beobachter* or Roosevelt in the *New York Times*. Stalin's relative inactivity in interaction with his followers is underscored by the fact that in his 1936-1937 speeches (Stalin 1936, Stalin 1937, approximately 650 sentences) he directly addresses his followers

(*"you"/"comrades" etc.*) in every 28th sentence - more often than Hitler (every 44th sentence – see Hitler 1935, Hitler 1938) but *far* more seldom than Roosevelt (every 8th sentence – see Roosevelt 1936a - Roosevelt 1936g) in samples of the roughly similar size. The latter figures suggest that the idolization of Stalin's discursive and visual identity that took place in Bolshevik Russia could in principle happen in another totalitarian state, as the Führer's interaction with his followers in the course of public speaking was even more limited than the Secretary General's. So why did it happen in the Soviet Union and not in Nazi Germany? It seems that any definite answer would be a gross simplification, but it might still be fitting to conclude this paper by offering at least some discursive explanations of political canonization in Stalin's Russia:

- *In his 1930s speeches, Stalin mentions "people" far less often then Roosevelt or Hitler*: among his references to different executive (President, Government), legislative (Parliament), Judicial (Courts) and political ("Party") power structures, the percentage of such references is only 3,6 % compared to Roosevelt's 9,0 % and Hitler's whopping 57, 1% (Postoutenko 2010c, 46). *This noticeable lack of interactional initiative towards the followers amplifies Stalin's monumental detachment from his alleged constituency and encourages his followers to study and emulate his texts rather than engage in interaction.*

- *In the national press, Stalin is less likely to be referred to as "agent" ("Stalin gave a talk") and more likely to be referred as "recipient" ("Greetings to Stalin") or "owner" ("Stalin's speech") then Hitler or Roosevelt:* his "agent" /"recipient" / "owner" ratio is 30.5%/28.8%/40.7% compared to Hitler's 43.0%/24.4%/32.5% and Roosevelt's 59.9%/15.0%/25.1% (Postoutenko 2010c, 47). These figures add even more weight to the data in the TABLE 1 showing that of all the three leaders, Stalin is the least likely to be engaged in interactive and especially non-interactive actions. *The coverage of Stalin in the loyal Soviet media reinforces the image of the leader's relative passivity in political interaction, emphasizing the followers' duty to feel this void by constantly addressing their silent leader.*

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TABLE 1

Texts, interactions and actions of three political leaders through the prism of the media
Sources: Völkischer Beobachter 1936 January-March (Hitler) Pravda 1936 January-March (Stalin) New York Times 1936 January-March (Roosevelt)

	Leaders	Texts ...Stalin's slogan...	Interactions ...X spoken with Roosevelt...	Actions ...Hitler's visit / visited Hitler...	Total (100%)
1	Roosevelt	118 (12,7 %)	235 (25,3 %)	577 (62,0 %)	930
2	Stalin	194 (25,0 %)	173 (22,2 %)	411 (52,8 %)	778
3	Hitler	89 (12,4 %)	115 (16,1 %)	512 (71,5 %)	716