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**Trump, existential threats and
the banality of evil – Or why
sociolinguists should (re)read
Hannah Arendt**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to offer a theoretical and empirical contribution to current sociolinguistic discussions about “existential threats”, and their discursive construction in everyday life. Theoretically, the paper argues for the importance of (re-)purposing some of the ideas of Hannah Arendt, a key political scientist, who, however, has remained somewhat neglected in sociolinguistic inquiry. Empirically such theoretical insights will be applied to shed light on a set of text trajectories that begin with Donald Trump’s famous statement: “You look at what happened last night in Sweden” at a rally in Florida in 2017, and ends with a video circulated by the Swedish Moderate Party – *Nya Moderaterna* – in the context of the 2018 general elections campaign.

Ultimately, the argument I make in this paper is that Trump and the members of *Nya Moderaterna* in Sweden are *terrifyingly normal*. Their rhetoric might not be truthful, but links into a ‘truthiness’ built of elements that sound true, and, through a web of discursive devices and intertextual links, creates the dystopian illusion of a truthful and coherent account of society. As Arendt would say, each of these discursive elements is like a spore in a growing fungus that might not have much depth, but is spreading quickly into the very centre of the political debate in Sweden.

Introduction

Over the last few years, there has been increasing interest in the topic of (in)securitisation in a variety of disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities. Within the study of language in society, the notion of “existential threat” has emerged as a productive conceptual entry point through which to understand processes of (in)securitisation in everyday life (see in particular Rampton, Charalambous and Charalambous 2014; Rampton 2018). Against this backdrop, the aim of this paper is to offer a theoretical and empirical contribution to current sociolinguistic discussions about “existential threats”, and how these are discursively constructed in everyday life. Theoretically, the paper argues for the importance of (re-)purposing some of the ideas of Hannah Arendt, a key political scientist, who, however, has remain somewhat neglected in sociolinguistic inquiry (see Wodak 2015 for an exception). Empirically such theoretical insights will be applied to shed light on a set of text trajectories that begin with Donald Trump’s rather famous statement: “You look at what happened last night in Sweden” at a rally in Florida in 2017, and ends with a video circulated by the Swedish Moderate Party – *Nya Moderaterna* – in the context of the 2018 general elections campaign.

More specifically, I draw upon Arendt’s concept of “the banality of evil” (1963) in order to analyse the intertextual, spatial and temporal connections between Trump’s question about an alleged terrorist attack in Sweden and an increased shift to the right in a mainstream Swedish political party. Through an analysis of a corpus of online

media data, I illustrate how totalitarian propaganda is not relegated to the past. Elements of it are a reality in the present, and are deeply linked to issues of integration and migration.

Ultimately, the argument I make in this paper is that Trump and the members of *Nya Moderaterna* in Sweden are *terrifyingly normal*. Their rhetoric might not be truthful, but links into a “truthiness” built of elements that sound true, and, through a web of discursive devices and intertextual links, creates the dystopian illusion of a truthful and coherent account of society. As Arendt (2007) would say, each of these discursive elements is like a spore in a growing fungus that might not have much depth, but is spreading quickly into the very centre of the political debate in Sweden, a country that has been resisting a shift to the right for a long time.

What has Arendt to do with Trump?

It is something of a truism that Trump is pervasive in everyday life. You switch on the TV and he is there, you log onto Twitter, and someone has tweeted something that has to do with Trump. However, my interest in Trump has to do with a tendency that I observed within a group of well-educated, socially critical Facebook friends. They (or better we) seem comfortable to articulate a particular discourse of accommodation and rationalisation in response to the rise of figures such as Donald Trump. Perhaps because it is hard to sustain volcanic levels of outrage every day on a platform that is after all designed to serve as entertainment, this discourse constructs our latter-day would-be autocrats as somehow *outside of society*. Perhaps because we fail to apprehend the coherence of Trumpism and its related formations, we explain Trump with the help of exceptionalising or lampooning discourses. And so he is described as *crazy*, as a *monster*, as merely incredibly *stupid*. We seem to be guarding against appreciating the extent to which he may be a coherent, and even familiar, part of what it means to be a human being; someone we recognise as one of us (see however the contributors to Wodak and Krzyzanowski 2017). Please do not think that I am a Trump supporter; I am not, quite the contrary, but I argue that we should take his rhetoric *very seriously*. This entails *not* treating him as if he were a temporary aberrance, an exception in contemporary politics.

In order to understand Trump and its connections I would argue that we have much to gain from a (re-)engagement with a theorist who has been influential in the social sciences and humanities, but has been somewhat overlooked in the study of language in society: Hannah Arendt. In this paper, I demonstrate how Arendt’s ideas may help us make sense of what is happening in our times. They are also particularly apt in the pursuit of a theoretically informed reflection that does not fall into the trap of historical amnesia.

Among Arendt’s most important works is *Eichmann in Jerusalem – A Report on the Banality of Evil* (1963), which is a collection of articles that Arendt wrote for the *New Yorker* magazine in 1961-1962 to report on the trial of Nazi official Adolf Eichmann in Israel. Arendt’s reflections on the trial generated a heated and polarised debate. Her work was especially challenging to received senses of the correct attribution of culpability to perpetrators and victims under a totalitarian regime, as well as to the broader problem of the possibility of judgment and justice after the *shoah*.

I read Arendt's famous elaboration of the supposed banality of the evil of Adolf Eichmann as displayed at his trial in Jerusalem against her earlier and more theoretically dense account of the origins of totalitarianism. Let us first consider this "banality". In her report on Eichmann's trial, she provocatively concluded that there was nothing monstrous or exceptional in the behaviour of the master logistician of the *shoah*:

The trouble with Eichmann was precisely that so many were like him, and that the many were neither perverted nor sadistic, that they were, and still are, *terribly and terrifyingly normal*. From the viewpoint of our legal institutions and of our moral standards of judgment, this normality was much more terrifying than all the atrocities put together, for it implied [...] that this new type of criminal [...] commits his crimes under circumstances that make it well-nigh impossible for him to know or to feel that he is doing wrong (1963: 276, emphasis added)

This is a point that she expanded and clarified later in a letter to a detractor – Gershom Scholem – who found her normalisation of Eichmann unacceptable:

It is indeed my opinion now that evil is never 'radical', that it is only extreme, and that it possesses neither depth nor any demonic dimension. It can overgrow and lay waste the whole world precisely because it *spreads like a fungus on the surface*. It is 'thought-defying', as I said, because thought tries to reach some depth, to go to the roots, and the moment it concerns itself with evil, it is frustrated because there is nothing. *That is its 'banality'*. (Arendt 2007: 471; emphasis added)

When Arendt argues that evil is never "radical" – i.e. rooted – she is opposing a particular history of thought in the philosophical tradition that views evil as intrinsic to human nature. Critics of Arendt such as Scholem read this as potentially excusing Eichmann, or at least downplaying his responsibility for his actions. Others have countered that Arendt is making a much subtler point: it is not that Eichmann is not absolutely involved in evil; but the pursuit of this evil is not the result of some innate impulse; it has "become institutionalized, depersonalized and mundane" as Simon Swift (2008: 133) points out in a critical exegesis of Arendt's thought.

With some historical distance, it is possible for us to appreciate Arendt's (1963) description of Eichmann as a mediocre *petit bourgeois* whose primary concern was to make a career. His lack of intellectual depth was evidenced in the shallowness of his language, which, as Arendt says, was ridden with clichés. The fact that he was not a driving ideologue of Nazi Germany does not, however, make him any less culpable: by virtue of being part of it he kept the machinery working smoothly.

If we agree with Arendt that evil is not rooted in human nature, but instead grows on the surface, fungus-like in its institutionalised mundanity, then we also recognise that its danger lies in its potential to have tremendous social impact *without people consciously driving a particular ideology*. This raises the important question: Can we use Arendt's model as a diagnostic tool? Is there an Eichmann lurking in your home? Is there an Eichmann among us? Can we as critical sociolinguists trace, expose and ultimately break up what Arendt calls the "crystallised structure" of totalitarian ideas,

before it is too late?

I argue that a form of *banal totalitarianism* is spreading like a fungus, sneakily scattering its spores within the very fabric of democracy, potentially moulding it from within. And so, unlike Ruth Wodak, John Richardson and others, who have published important work on far-right parties and movements (Wodak 2015; Richardson 2017), I will focus in this paper on the political *mainstream*. This mainstream is for the purposes of my argument represented by the Moderate Party of Sweden, a political formation that has historically been part of the “centre” coalition in Swedish politics with large numbers of middle and upper class voters. And because of my focus on “mainstream”, in this paper, I consistently avoid using the notion of “populism”, because no matter how we define it we reproduce a problematic distinction between “the masses”, on the one hand, and an “elite”, on the other. Instead, I believe that “banal totalitarianism” captures the fungal structure of evil, its *fragmentation*, *dispersion* (across social configurations) and *interconnectedness*. I will give you a glimpse of such fragmentation, dispersion and interconnectedness by focusing on a specific trajectory of scale jumps, over very recent history, through which discourses spread quickly in 2017 from Sweden to the USA, through a brief diversion to the UK, and then back again to Sweden.

You look at what’s happening...

The first example I want to focus on is a speech delivered by Donald Trump at a rally in Florida on 18th February 2017. Trump criticised European policy on refugees, offering a list of places that had been hit by terrorists:

Trump: You look at what’s happening in Germany

You look at what’s happening last night in Sweden. Sweden! Who would believe this? Sweden. They took in large numbers like they’re having problems they’d never thought possible. You look at what’s happening in Brussels. You look at what’s happening all over the world. Take a look at Nice, take a look at Paris...we’ve allowed thousands and thousands of people into our country, and there was no way to vet those people. There was no documentation, there was no nothing. So we are going to keep our country safe.

This is a textbook example of what other discourse analysts have identified as one of Trump’s favourite rhetorical strategies: *repetition* (see the contributors to Wodak and Krzyzanowski 2017). As Barbara Johnstone has pointed out, repetition is a powerful rhetorical device because it creates “rhetorical presence” through “the linguistic foregrounding of an idea which can serve to make it persuasive even without logical support” and “make[s] things believable by forcing them into the affective field of the hearer and keeping them there” (1987: 208). The gist of Trump’s speech is that Europe’s accepting of refugees leads to a decrease safety, and that therefore this is something that should not be allowed to happen in the United States (“we are going to keep our country safe”). While the references to Paris, Nice and Germany point to factual events – the terrorist attacks of November 2015, July 2016, and December 2016, respectively – “what happened in Sweden last night” is not immediately

identifiable. Had anything happened in Sweden the night before? Actually, no, as we shall shortly see.

In response to Trump, Swedish government spokesperson Catarina Axelsson told the local news agency TT that Sweden would demand an explanation from the Trump administration. Less diplomatically, former Minister of Foreign Affairs Carl Bildt, tweeted:



Figure 1. Sweden? Terror attack? What has he been smoking? Questions abound (Carl Bildt 18 February 2017)

Quite interestingly, in addressing the masses in Florida, Trump never explicitly used the words “terror attacks”, but the textual association of Sweden with Nice, Paris, and Germany, where actual terror attacks had happened, warranted Bildt’s uptake of Trump’s speech. Of course we could simply dismiss Trump’s statement as risible because it is based on a lie, possibly as a result of smoking marijuana, as Carl Bildt’s question insinuates. Doing so, however, would distract us from the “crystallisation” of banal totalitarianism, and its spreading like a fungus, which as Arendt points out, strongly relies on the repetition, circulation and naturalisation of lies:

What distinguishes the totalitarian leaders and dictators is rather the *simple-minded single-minded* purposefulness with which they choose those elements from existing ideologies which are best fitted to become the fundamentals of *another, entirely fictitious world*. (Arendt 1968: 362; emphasis added)

What I am calling banal totalitarianism involves the careful selection of elements for their discursive force in a new fiction. So why did Trump choose to represent Sweden as playing such an important part in his *fictitious world*? Sarah Huckabee Sanders, a

White House spokesperson, later explained that Trump did not mean to suggest that a particular attack had happened the night before, but rather was talking about crime in general in Sweden (see Chan 2017). This was followed by Trump’s own clarification on his favourite social media platform – Twitter:



Figure 2. My statement as to what’s happening in Sweden was in reference to a story that was broadcast on @FoxNews concerning immigrants & Sweden. (Donald Trump 17 February 2017)

The manufacturing of truthiness

The reference is to an interview conducted by the Fox News host Tucker Carlson with the filmmaker Ami Horowitz on Fox Channel. During that time, Ami Horowitz was interviewed several times on Fox News, *inter alia* by the British-American economic journalist Stuart Varney because of a reportage that Horowitz had done in Sweden (see Appendix 1 for a transcript of the whole interview). This media exchange serves as a textbook example of Labov and Waletzky’s (1997) model of the narrative structure of storytelling, this time co-constructed between the interviewer and interviewee. We have an *Abstract* in which Fox News host Stuart Varney gives a summary of the story. This is followed by an *Orientation*, which Labov and Waletzky describe as serving “to orient the listener to person, place, time, and behavioral situation”, in this case, crime and supposed “no-go zones” in Sweden. Observe in particular how “person, time, and behavioral situation” are presented as *genuine* through two discursive strategies: (1) Through *prima facie* experience – Ami Horowitz went there, saw with his own eyes, experienced them personally, and (2) through reference to what an authoritative institution says: “the police said...” Like in all good stories there is also a *Complication*, that is, the presentation of a problem culminating in a crisis: the events initiated in the orientation somehow go wrong. Ami Horowitz was actually there and was attacked. But there is *Resolution*: Ami Horowitz gets away and can tell the story on TV. The story concludes with a *Coda*, which returns audiences to the studio, drawing them back out of the world of the story into the world of the storytelling event.

Unlike in the Labov and Waletzky's structure, *Evaluation*, that is, the appraisal of the narrated event, does not follow directly after *complication*, but happens throughout the interview: (1) the newsworthiness of the story is built on incredulity ("no go zones in Sweden?"; "I didn't know..."; "I heard about them; the truth is that I actually didn't believe they are real"; "you are kidding?"; "We have not heard of it"; "Why are we not getting the full story?"); (2) a negative evaluation is offered of the events in Sweden: an impending doomsday is hinted at, and the spread of crime from "no go zones" to the cities is described as happening inevitably and like a virus; (3) there are strategies to intensify the sense of danger such as the visual representation of a burning car; (4) there are also blaming strategies: the Swedish state is trying to "cover up" the situation, and they are also "desperately covering up the ethnicity" of the people involved; (5) there are patronising strategies – "Swedes are nice people", where nice is actually not a positive quality, but is a euphemism for naivety; (6) there is evaluation through *historical references*: "The Swedes are not Vikings – the Vikings are gone", which implies then that things would be better if the Swedes behaved more like Vikings; and finally (7) there is the moral crowning of the narrator/hero: Ami is a "brave man and good man". A compelling narrative has thus been constructed. While the world it creates is *entirely fictitious*, the elements of the fiction do however come from discourses that have a greater degree of reliability.

First of all, crime has increased in Sweden over the last twenty years, but not to the degree that Tucker and Horowitz want their audience to believe. It should be mentioned that Swedish statistics are "inflated" because *all reported events are recorded as crimes* even if some of them are found not to have constituted criminal offences after they are investigated. Moreover, while several offences of the same kind against a single victim will be counted in some countries as a single crime, they are counted separately in Swedish statistics. As the police authority is at pains to explain on their official statistics website, increases in crimes such as rape are due to two factors: (1) an increase in the proportion of events that are actually reported, which may actually indicate an improvement in social mores around sexual violence; and (2) shifting definitions in Swedish legislation of what is considered rape, to broaden the category in the interests of greater protection for victims.

The second 'truth' in the fiction is about race: while Swedish institutions are not trying to "cover up ethnicity", it is true that it is illegal in Sweden to collect information about ethnicity, race and/or minority status when reporting crime statistics. This policy was instituted in order to avoid the drawing of facile causal relations between behaviour and race/ethnicity. So while the decision aimed to protect racial, ethnic and linguistic minorities from potential attacks aimed at them, the new narrative cancels out these intentions.

The third 'truth' element, which cannot be seen in the transcript in Appendix 1 but is reproduced in Figure 3 below, is the footage of a burning car showed during the interview in order to visually represent unrest in Sweden. While the car was clearly burning, it was not burning in Sweden. It is 'real' enough; it has just been placed in a new context. I will return to the burning car in the context of another video that will be presented below.

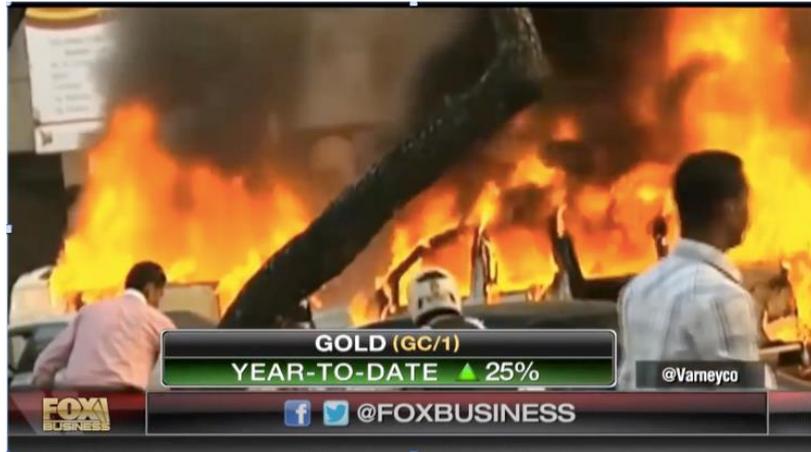


Figure 3. A burning car. In Sweden?

This kind of highly *selective recontextualisation* is also at the heart of my fourth point, which is how the process of visual editing constructs the narrative that lies behind Horowitz's vision of Sweden. To understand how this works, let us consider a very short extract from the documentary that Ami Horowitz made about migrants in Sweden.

- Horowitz: The Government gives enough to the immigrants?
 Speaker 1: Yeah, everything is enough. There's good work here.
 Horowitz: Yeah, life is good better
 Speaker 1: Yes, life is good better here
 Speaker 2: They give me a lot, they give me a house, room, clothes, my school
 Horowitz: All these things the Government pays for

The brief sequence of interactions between Horowitz and his interviewees creates the image of migrants/refugees as exploiting the Swedish welfare system. The very *choice* of a sequence of interviews, instead of a voice-over narration that may merely assert a particular interpretation, is important to highlight here, as it creates the illusion that the viewer has *direct access to visual truth*. In this way, the ideological manufacturing of the video is obscured. Put simply, it is as if audiences were told: look, meet these refugees! Hear what they say, and you can make up your own mind, I am not influencing you, you can hear and see for yourself, can't you?

There is one element, however, that disturbs Horowitz's attempt at building a coherent picture of the refugees, where the attempted narrative slips. In response to the question whether the Government gives enough to migrants, the first interviewee replies that life is better in Sweden *because of work*. It emerges here how migrants are not leeching on the welfare system, but they are actually contributing to the Swedish economy. This moment is but a fleeting incoherence. Viewers are quickly rushed to the another interviewee who lists goods and benefits which the Swedish state seems to be dispensing freely, in return for what is implied is to be a mixture of aggression and indolence.

The issue of the editing of the video was raised by the policemen who had been interviewed by Horowitz. In the liberal daily newspaper *Dagens Nyheter*, they

distanced themselves from the way in which their answers have been used in the documentary:

We don't stand behind it. It shocked us. He has edited the answers. We were answering completely different questions in the interview. This is bad journalism. (Lindkvist 2017)

Horowitz replied in an interview with Radio Sweden that: "As we say in America, CYA (cover your ass), they have to cover their butts" (Radio Sweden 2017). At this juncture, it is legitimate to ask ourselves: Did Ami Horowitz invent the "no go zones" in Sweden? Interestingly, he did not. If one traces the textual history of the word in relation to Sweden, one can see that the discourse originated with a report published by the Swedish police at the end of 2014 about what they called "vulnerable areas" (*utsatta områden*). Linguistically, it is important to observe that in Swedish *utsatta* is a participle adjective that means "exposed". In this context, it highlights how certain neighbourhoods have been "exposed" to increased violence, criminality etc. Unlike the expression "no go" that indicates a spatial characteristic of the area, the participle form *utsatta* highlights that these neighbourhoods are the *targets*, rather than the *agents*, of an action, process or phenomenon. The report was followed by an influential op-ed article in the conservative national daily *Svenska Dagbladet* entitled 55 "no-go" zones in Sweden (Gudmunsson 2014). While it is true that the expression "no-go" is indeed used in article, it should also be noted that it is put in scare quotes to indicate the author's distance from it, not only because it is an English expression in an otherwise Swedish text, but also because, as the columnist cautioned

It is worth remembering that many so-called segregated areas haven't lapsed into lawlessness, and the greatest majority of people who live in segregation are victims, rather than perpetrators. (Gudmunsson 2014).

This op-ed, however, took on a life of its own, circulating in the Western media and portraying Sweden as a country in disarray. In an interview on Fox News in January 2015, a few weeks after the op-ed's publication, Steve Emerson, a self-described "expert on Islamist terrorism", described parts of Europe as "totally Muslim where non-Muslims just simply don't go in" (see Sanchez 2015). According to Emerson, these areas included parts of France, parts of London and the whole of Birmingham, as well as parts of Germany and Sweden. He stated: "You basically have zones where Shariah courts were set up, where Muslim density is very intense, where the police don't go in, and where it's basically a separate country almost, a country within a country" (see Mackey 2015).

Then UK Prime Minister David Cameron said he choked on his porridge when he heard the claim, saying that Emerson "is clearly a complete idiot" (Holehouse 2015) Here we can see once again how easy it is to dismiss these people as idiots. But, as I will show you in the next section, by 2018 the "no go zone" rhetoric has become institutionalised and normalised in Sweden where "No go zones" entered the discourse of the Moderate Party's electoral campaign in 2018.

No go zones: from Sweden to the USA and back again

For contextual purposes, it should be clarified that the Moderate Party of Sweden is *not* a historically far-right wing party like for example the ones studied by Ruth Wodak (2015) in her latest book *The Politics of Fear*. The Moderate Party of Sweden has over the past twenty years been a solidly liberal, if by Swedish standards conservative, political formation that supports free markets, personal freedom, EU membership, and same-sex unions. The Moderate Party was in power between 2006 and 2014, and its leader Fredrik Reinfeldt gave a powerful speech on 16 August 2014 in the wake of the increase of asylum seekers in the country in which he appealed to the Swedish people to “open their hearts”:

Show openness. Show tolerance when it is said that “there will be so many”, “it will be trying”, “it will be difficult”. Show tolerance and show that you remember we’ve done it before. We have seen people who have come from distress, and escaped oppression, who have entered our society, learned the Swedish language, found work, and now help to build a better and a free Sweden. (Reinfeldt 2014)

By the end of 2017, however, the party rhetoric had shifted quite radically. During a party conference in preparation for the parliamentary elections in 2018, the Moderate Party, led by Ulf Kristersson, suggested: (1) introducing quotas for the maximum number refugees that the EU should accept; (2) abolishing the possibility of applying for asylum from within the EU; and (3) introducing a Swedish language and culture test. Thus, within a period of only three years, the party moved from viewing migrants and refugees as hard working, potentially Swedish speaking to considering the same people a burden that needs to be coercively tested for its commitment to Swedish linguistic and cultural assimilation.

Two Moderate Party slogans that appeared in the linguistic landscape of Stockholm in 2018 are contiguous with this rhetorical shift:



Figure 4. *In Stockholm there shall only be go zones*



Figure 5. *The cops should be included*

In the first slogan, the Swedish modal verb *ska* both marks futurity, and is the equivalent of the English word ‘ought’, implying a strong level of commitment to duty on the part of the speaker/writer. Obviously the slogan builds on the presupposition that there *are* indeed some neighborhoods that are off-limit, i.e. the idea that “no-go” zones actually do exist, and that the Moderate Party promises to change this situation in the future. The second slogan is also interesting in its many layers of references. On the level of content, it plays with a well-known slogan of the Moderate Party’s archenemy – the Social Democrats: *alla ska med* (“everyone should be included”). Yet it twists the Social Democratic plea for inclusion by replacing *alla* “everyone” with “*ayna*”, a derogatory slang word for the police. The word comes from the Turkish expression *aynasiz*, which means “those without mirror”, and refers to the police lacking honour and consequently being ashamed of looking at themselves in the mirror. Why Turkish? *Ayna* is one of the most well-known words in the Swedish contemporary urban vernacular known as “Rinkeby Swedish” (see Stroud 2004; Jonsson 2007; Milani 2010). And Rinkeby is one of the supposed “no go zones” in Horowitz’s documentary. As a large body of scholarly work has demonstrated (see e.g. Milani and Jonsson 2012), Rinkeby Swedish is spoken by adolescents from many ethnic backgrounds, including some who identify, and are viewed by others, as “ethnic Swedes”. Research has also demonstrated that usage of Rinkeby Swedish is not limited to Swedish urban suburbs, but occurs in interactions between adolescents across many social contexts. That being said, Rinkeby Swedish continues to be associated by politicians and other commentators with “ethnic otherness” – i.e. it’s “their” language – and to violence and urban segregation.

Against this backdrop, it is interesting to note that the slogan does not explicitly or overtly refer to “no-go zones”. It suggests a place the police cannot go but ought to, while invoking Rinkeby Swedish; this reference functions as a metapragmatic cue that indexes Rinkeby both as place and as ‘deviant’ language variety. Language therefore works here as a marker of authenticity – the “*hood*”, to use a parallel American expression. However, such authenticity is paradoxically appropriated by a mainstream

political party in order to argue for increased police presence. So, on the one hand, as some commentators have pointed out (Shakir 2018), the usage of “ayna” makes it sound like the Moderate Party is “down with the kids”. But this is in bad faith, especially considering that the party wants to introduce a Swedish language test for both permanent residence permits and naturalisation. It is also in bad faith if we read both slogans together. On the one hand, the police should be included, but, on the other hand, the Moderate Party does not trust the Swedish police’s repeated statements that there are no “no-go zones” in Sweden.

Once again, it is worth repeating Arendt’s words about the sheer *purposefulness* with which elements from existing ideologies fitted together to become the fundamentals of *another, entirely fictitious world*. To form a new coherence, anything that does not fit must be brushed aside. We can see this practice in action in the way that the Moderate Party presents Sweden’s second largest city – Gothenburg – in a video originally released in September 2017, but which went viral on social media in the context of the general elections in 2018 (see Appendix 2 for a full transcript and translation of the video).

While in the TV interview on Fox News Horowitz and Tucker co-constructed a particular story, here we have an interesting example of a contemporary tale that is told within a particular moral, historical, and political framing. The historical frame is a useful starting point. The formulaic expression *det var en gång*, which is the Swedish equivalent of “once upon time”, orients the tale temporally around a mythical time in which Gothenburg was a “proud” city with a specific “character”. Observe in particular the strategy of exceptionalism: “Nowhere else could one find such a great atmosphere”, followed by the cautioning “Not because life was easy”. Here the mythical *incipit* is corroborated visually by birds-eye views of the city, which give away to a more realistic portrayal of the city’s working-class character linked to the fishing and heavy industries – both Volvo and SKF headquarters and assembly lines are based in Gothenburg. Of course, the mythical image of working-class *bliss* erases the very long tradition of Trade Union struggle based in Gothenburg, much of it *against* the Moderate Party and everything associated with it. In fact, the municipality of Gothenburg has had one of the longest left-wing rules in Sweden. Either way, myth reaches its climax at the time when “nothing felt impossible” “but that was a long time ago”.

It is at this point the tale switches to the reality of the present: “people are shot dead”, “cars are set on fire”, “cities have developed within the city”, and the “city is being torn apart”, followed by the question “How did the front side of Sweden become a lair for jihadis and criminal gangs?”, which is more of a rhetorical question than a genuine request for information. It is quite obvious that the implied answer here is: “immigration” not least because the linguistic message is coupled with the visual representation of a burning car, which has become the icon of “no go zones”.



Figure 6. The burning car

In a context like Swedish mainstream politics where direct references to religion are frowned upon, it is noteworthy that Islam is *overtly* thematised here in the mention of *jihad*. In terms of narrative structure, the rhetorical question builds up to the climax of the section about the present. “Enough is enough” marks a shift to inspiring descriptions of what will be seen in the future if the Moderate Party has its way: more employment, a reduced reliance on benefits, more police, more construction, less red tape for industry. How this change will be achieved is left to the audiences to speculate. Considering the party’s neoliberal inclination, one can only assume that they will promote competition on the free market, lower taxes, and outsourcing.

However, there is also an implied dimension to the solution that is altogether more *sinister*. The future is so bright in the video, well... it is “*blonde*”. Consider the visual association of fair-haired kids with the message about a future city in which “young families put down roots, and students stay on after graduation”, a future furthermore “where we are one city again”. In a text where (1) the main assumption is that immigration has led to fragmentation, and (2) fair-haired kids are visually represented as the embodied “reproductive futurity” (Edelman 20014) of young families, it is not completely unfounded to infer that “the future where we are one city again” and “the best days that are yet to come” are those which do not feature any immigrants in it, and yes “nobody is left out” provided that you are ethnically Swedish. The inclusion of only one person who appears to be a migrant – and on investigation turns out to be a Moderate Party politician – suggests that if you are not actually ethnically Swedish, you need to be a small minority that blends in, perhaps preferably by being a member of the Moderate Party.



Figure 7. “Young families put down roots, and students stay on after graduation”

The video generated a flurry of very heated reactions. Central to the negative reaction was the image of the burning car: the state radio channel P3 revealed that it was actually taken from a riot in Vancouver, Canada, after the local ice hockey club lost the Stanley Cup against the US team Boston Bruins. Hampus Magnusson, the local representative of the Moderate Party justified the usage of the video footage saying:

We have ordered this movie from our agency, and it is obvious that we cannot light up cars ourselves. And nobody can deny that there have been cars burning, so it does not change the credibility [of the film] in the least. (12 February 2018)

If the situation was so bad in Gothenburg, and there were burning cars, why would one even suggest the possibility of lighting up cars themselves? As Arendt puts it,

Totalitarian propaganda thrives on escape from reality into fiction, from coincidence into consistency... Before they seize power and establish a world according to their doctrines, totalitarian movements conjure up *a lying world of consistency* which is more adequate to the needs of the human mind than reality itself; in which, through sheer imagination, uprooted masses can feel at home and are spared the never-ending shocks which real life and real experiences deal to human beings and their expectations (1968: 50-51)

A lying world of consistency where “nobody can deny” this or that is the emerging picture of the way that crime and “no-go” zones in Sweden are invented from what seems like thin air. But in my opinion the burning car is a red herring that distracts our attention from the far more problematic issue of the subtly Aryan grounds on which the film rests, in which the future of unity is actually based on the implicit promise of the recreation of racial and ethnic homogeneity. It is in tension with crime and no-go zones that this future is constructed, and thus that we can see a banal network of evil crystallising again. We need not search for it in the extreme far-right wing parties, but in the very midst of mainstream politics.

Concluding remarks

To go back to how I began this paper: how can it be, as we reject and ridicule Trump, representing him as a sick and ridiculous man outside of society, that some of his core ‘ideas’ (if you can call them that) become mainstream, and represent a new ‘normal’? The more we push him away, the closer he seems to get to a position of hegemony. Taking my cue from Arendt, I would like to suggest that it is in imagining that there is some profound and radical dimension to human evil that needs to be pushed outside of our account of the ‘normal’ society, that we miss the banality of its expansion. Laughing at the fungus does not help stop it; calling Trump an idiot does not substantially slow down the spread of this insidious discourse.

Rather, in analysing the textual circulation of Trumpism, we have much to gain from remembering some of the ingredients, which led to totalitarian regimes in the Europe in 1930s. Totalitarian propaganda is not something that may easily be relegated to the past; elements of it are a reality in the present. And I hope I have demonstrated here that it is fragmented, dispersed but interconnected: it is part of the texture of what we call “free speech” and “democracy”.

To conclude, Trump, Horowitz and the members of the Moderate Party of Sweden are *terrifyingly normal*. Their rhetoric might not be truthful, but it links into a ‘truthiness’ built of elements that *sound* true, and, through a web of discursive devices and intertextual links, creates the illusion of truthful and coherent account of society. Each of them is a spore in a growing fungus that might not have much depth, but is spreading quickly into the very centre of a democratic country like Sweden. And it is in this apparent normality that lies its terrifying character because as Arendt pointed out:

It is quite conceivable, and even within the realm of practical political possibilities, that one fine day a highly organised and mechanised humanity will conclude quite democratically – namely by majority decision – that for humanity as a whole it would be better to liquidate certain parts thereof (Arendt 1968: 298-99)

While we have not yet reached this extreme scenario, the spores of banal totalitarianism are already presenting an existential threat to the very nature of what we call democracy.

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Appendix 1

Varney: Our next guest has just returned from a trip to Europe. He went over there because he wanted to see the migrant crisis firsthand for himself. He went to no-go zones in Sweden—I didn't think there were such places, but there are—no-go zones where the police do not go. While he was there, he was jumped by five apparently Islamic thugs. The filmmaker Ami Horowitz is the man who went over there, and he joins us right now. First of all, I didn't know there was any such thing as a no-go zone in a place like Stockholm, Sweden. There is?

Horowitz: I, I heard about them. The truth is I didn't actually believe they were real, right?

Varney: Right.

Horowitz: Figured this is probably some kind of propaganda.

Varney: Yes.

Horowitz: I went there, met with the police officers, they said, 'When we're pursuing a suspect, and they cross that threshold'—and there's about thirty or forty of them in Sweden—they will not pursue. They will simply not pursue.

Varney: There are thirty or forty no-go zones in Swedish towns and cities?

Horowitz: Correct.

Varney: Thirty to forty of 'em?

Horowitz: That's right.

Varney: Did you say that there were guns being used in these no-go zones?

Horowitz: Th-th-they used to have, about five years ago, the police officers who I met with would say, they'd have an incident of gun violence, let's say, once a month, once every few months. Every day there's gun violence going on. And it's not simply staying—here's the problem, it's not simply staying in these enclaves, which, by the way, they say are states within states. Swedish law doesn't apply in these places. What they do is, they're now coming out, and the rape—it's become the rape capital of Europe.

Varney: You're kidding.

Horowitz: No. I kid you not.

Varney: But we know nothing about this. Well, well, we've not heard of it.

Horowitz: That's my job, Stuart. That's what I do for a living, I warn you guys.

Varney: Yeah, I know, but we've not heard of this. I mean, okay, now you went into one of the no-go zones.

Horowitz: I did.

Varney: Right? And you went in—now, were you wearing your yarmulke?

Horowitz: I wasn't.

Varney: Did they know that you were Jewish?

Horowitz: They did not know I was Jewish. My nose is slightly larger than normal, but it was not exactly—

Varney: No, no, no, no, don't get into that. But you walked in with a camera crew?

Horowitz: Yes.

Varney: That identified you as an outsider?

Horowitz: Correct.

Varney: They jumped you? Tell me.

Horowitz: Yeah, they said, 'You guys have to leave right now.' They gave us a little bit of a warning. My crew, they're smart, they took off, and I just said, listen, I just tried to explain what I was gonna do, and that was it, five guys.

Varney: They jumped you?

Horowitz: Yeah.

Varney: Beat you up?

Horowitz: Pretty good, yeah. Beat pretty good.

Varney: Uh, and what was the response of the Swedish police?

Horowitz: The police said, 'Listen, you can stay here for, you know, a month or two, and you can go through the system, but we're not going there to find those guys, and it's, it's gonna end up being pointless.'

Varney: Now, h-here in America, uh, we're told, frequently told, that everything's going just fine in Europe. We know there are isolated incidents of culture clashes, and we, we know about that, but we did not know that there were thirty or forty no-go zones in a place like Sweden. What's going on? Why are we not getting the full story?

Horowitz: Well, first of all, Sweden has done a phenomenal job of trying to cover it up. So, for example, there were a series of music festivals in Sweden, and there were these gang rapes that went all across these music festivals. They specifically tried to

hide the attacks themselves, but they couldn't, 'cause there were just so many victims. It wasn't dissimilar to what happened on New Year's Eve in Germany.

Varney: In Cologne? Oh, yes, ah, right.

[Off-screen presenter: Cologne, yeah.]

Horowitz: Exactly. Same thing, where the government was specifically trying to cover it up, and more than that, what they were desperately trying to do was cover up the ethnicity of the people making the attacks.

Varney: Why?

Horowitz: Because, they're pro—

Varney: They know they've got a problem.

Horowitz: Yes.

Varney: And they know they can't do a thing about it.

Horowitz: They're doubling down. They're bringing in as many migrants as they possibly can to Sweden.

Varney: But what do the Swedes think about this? Good Lord.

Horowitz: The Swedes are—they're, they're, they're not—they're, they're, they're not Vikings. Those Vi—the Vikings are gone. They're, they're a sweet people. They wanna help. And they—if you bring up the ethnicity of any of these attackers, the first thing they say to you is you're a racist. You're a racist to bring it up.

Horowitz: That's the problem you're dealing with.

Varney: This is incredible. This is incredible. I mean, I'm, I'm shocked by this. Now, you took video, I take it?

Horowitz: Of course, yeah.

Varney: And you're, you're organizing it, right?

Horowitz: Yeah.

Varney: And you're gonna make a, is it a documentary you're making?

Horowitz: It's like a short, uh, eight-minute video of [XXXX]

Varney: When you've done it, can we see some of it?

Horowitz: I think we could make an arrangement.

[Off-screen presenter: (Laughs.)]

Varney: If you could—(laughs) thank you very much indeed, we'd like to see that.

[Off-screen presenter: Yeah, we would.]

Varney: Uh, Ami Horowitz, you're a brave man and a good man, and we wanna see that video, and you can come back any time you like.

Horowitz: Ah, thanks.

Varney: Yeah, yeah, right. But, but thank you. Seriously, good stuff. Thank you, sir.

Appendix 2

Swedish original	English translation
Där var en gång en stolt stad	There once was a proud city
Med en alldeles egen karaktär	With a character all of its own
Ingen annanstans fanns en så god stämning	Nowhere else could one find such a great atmosphere/mood
Det berodde inte på något överflöd	This wasn't because of abundance
Nej	No
Det här var en stad där man strävade och kämpade	This was a city where people strove and struggled
Där man gjorde rätt för sig	Where people did the right thing
Där var hårt arbete, tung industri	There was hard work and heavy industry
Men det gav resultat en känsla av sammanhang	But they resulted in a sense of cohesion/togetherness
För varje kullager, varje bil, och varje fartyg som lämnade hamnen stärktes gemenskapen	With every ball bearing, car, or ship that left the harbour, the community was strengthened
Inget kändes omöjligt	Nothing felt impossible
Inte ens att spela in UEFA cupen två gånger	Not even making it into the UEFA Champions League twice
Det rullade på bra för stan	Things were going well for the city
Men det var längesen nu	But that was a long time ago
Människor skjuts ihjäl	People are shot dead
Bilar sätts i brand	Cars are set on fire
Det uppstod städer i staden, och Göteborg slits isär	Other cities have developed within the city, and Gothenburg is being torn apart
Hur blev Sveriges framsida ett tillhåll för jihadister och kriminella gäng?	How did the front side of Sweden become a lair for jihadis and criminal gangs? <i>How did the face of Sweden become a lair for jihadis and gangsters?</i>
Nu räcker det	Enough is enough
Vi måste till en förändring	We need change
Om alla arbetar hårt och är stolta över att	If everybody works hard and is proud to

vara Göteborgare då kan framtiden blir en annan	be a Gothenburger, we could have a different future
Låt oss bli fler som går på jobbet	Let more of us be in employment
Och färre på bidrag	And fewer of us be on benefits
Låt oss möta fler poliser	Let's see more police
Och färre vapen på gatorna	And fewer weapons on the streets
Låt oss se fler byggkranar	Let's see more construction cranes
Och färre överklagande	And fewer administrative delays <i>And less red tape</i>
I en stolt tradition, vi kan få en lysande framtid igen	In a proud tradition, we can once again look forward to a bright future
Där barnfamiljer slår rot och unga stanna kvar efter sin utbildning	Where young families put down roots, and students stay on after graduation
Där entreprenörer startar nytt och etablerade företag bygger huvudkontor	Where entrepreneurs start new businesses, and established ones build new headquarters
Där Göteborg växer och fler välja bli Göteborgare	Where Gothenburg grows, and more people choose to be Gothenburgers
En framtid där vi är en stad igen	A future where we are one city again
En stad där vi vågar stå upp for värderingar som är värda att bevara	A city where we dare to stand up for values that are worth preserving
Ett samhälle där rättsstaten aldrig backar	A society where the rule of law never backs down
Eller lämnar någon utanför	And nobody is left out
Vår bästa tiden har inte varit	Our best days are yet to come
Tillsammans bygger vi Göteborg starkt igen	Together, we will build a strong Gothenburg again