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# State Power, Hegemony, and Memory: Lotman and Gramsci

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# State Power, Hegemony, and Memory

**Lotman and Gramsci**

**Marek D. Steedman**

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Louisiana's political renaissance began in the year 1877 when the government of the state was restored to the hands of the white people – the intelligent and property holding classes.  
– Louisiana Governor Newton C. Blanchard

- 1 In August 1904, Louisiana Governor Newton C. Blanchard declared that September 14 of that year would be celebrated as Louisiana Day at the St. Louis World's Fair.<sup>1</sup> The Louisiana Purchase Exposition, as that year's fair was titled, celebrated the centennial of the 1803 treaty with France that brought the large Louisiana Territories to the United States. More recent territorial gains were implicated in the theme. For some, the Louisiana Purchase justified the imposition of U.S. rule on the Philippines, Puerto Rico, and Cuba following the 1898 Spanish-American War. As the country debated whether the United States should practice the Old World politics of empire, the celebration of the Louisiana Purchase commented on expansion into the Pacific. Manifest Destiny had not yet been completed. The Fair staged debates over racial biology and eugenics, while displaying members of Filipino and Native American tribes in specially built simulations of their "native" habitat. The organizers carefully intertwined imperialism, white supremacy, and voyeurism for the visiting public.<sup>2</sup>
- 2 The context could not have been better for a newly elected governor who had fought for white supremacy in his state. But Governor Blanchard had very specific reasons for choosing September 14, a "day justly memorable in [Louisiana's] annals," as Louisiana Day.<sup>3</sup> On that day in 1874, the White League stormed and took control of the Louisiana state government buildings in New Orleans. This white supremacist paramilitary organization had links to the Democratic Party. It ousted the Republican administration, whose legitimacy the League did not concede. The outcome of the 1872 election, which had again given Republicans control of the state, had been contested by the Democrats. They

continued to feel that the election had been stolen from them. The League set up its own government, [controlled] by Democrats.

- 3 President Grant refused to recognize these Democrats. He sent U.S. troops against them, and they surrendered before there was any fighting. Still, as the New Orleans *Daily Picayune* reminded its readers in 1904, Democrats saw the day as the “anniversary of the new birth of Louisiana from the terrible tyranny, darkness and misery imposed upon the State by the infamous Reconstruction acts of a sectional Congress.”<sup>4</sup> What Democratic Governor Blanchard wanted to commemorate in St. Louis was this truncated history, focused on the overthrow of the interracial regime of the Republican Party, along with the eventual establishment of white rule and segregation. In this and other instances, Governor Blanchard sought to construct a historical narrative that would shape the political memory of white Louisianans to constitute the identity of the state and those it sought to represent.
- 4 To interpret the resonances of Blanchard’s 1904 proclamation can be relatively straightforward in light of the relevant historical background. Realists might consider this shaping of political memory to be an incidental or peripheral aspect of power. They might emphasize the violence used to gain power or the legal mechanisms that white Democrats used to maintain it. I argue instead that this case show[s] symbols to be central aspects of state power. Events like Louisiana Day play what Antonio Gramsci calls an “educative” role. They are devices for people in power to produce a “spontaneous’ consent” of the citizenry to their rule.
- 5 Two concerns intertwine here. One is the familiar idea that the meanings of historical events become contested in political struggles. Edmund Burke and the English radicals fought over the meaning of the Glorious Revolution in England; Israelis and Palestinians sift archaeological data for ways to legitimize their claims; nationalists in the Balkans trot out famous battles of the past to the same end. The list could expand without end. A second, closely connected question is how these contests help constitute the identities of the participants. What processes occur?
- 6 To answer the two concerns together, I turn also to the work of Russian semiotician Yuri Lotman. In his *Universe of the Mind*, Lotman explored the ways some forms of communication actively restructure social and personal identities. Working toward a model for the transmission and generation of meaning in cultures, Lotman specified mechanisms for restructuring identities. I show

that his concept of auto-communication allows us to see that some communication does not operate primarily to transmit information or persuade others. Instead it forms an internal dialogue that shapes the identity of the self. Combining insights from Lotman and Gramsci, I explain how Blanchard's politics for state history contribute to politics of personal identity.

## **Hegemony**

- 7 Let us begin with Gramsci. Antonio Gramsci's central contribution to political theory, and specifically Marxist theory, was his development of the concept of "hegemony." Jailed by the Fascist government in Italy in the late 1920s, Gramsci would die six days after the expiration of his prison sentence in April, 1937. In prison, he set himself a course of study, producing the *Prison Notebooks* that represent the bulk of his published writings. The topics covered in the *Notebooks* are extremely wide-ranging: from linguistics, to reflections on Machiavelli's *Prince*, to considerations of Fordist production methods in America. Most influential, perhaps, are his sustained attempts to combat the reductionist "Economism" then dominant in strands of Marxism. In this context, Gramsci centered his analysis on the relation between the state and civil society, especially the mechanisms by which the ruling class secures the consent of the ruled to its control of the state.
- 8 Gramsci identifies two different aspects of this task of securing consent: leadership and education. Leadership can be exercised by hegemonic groups within the broader civil society or state and among various subaltern groups. As Jeremy Lester points out, hegemony is not a negative concept for Gramsci. It is sought even by communists and the working class.<sup>5</sup> Indeed one subaltern group tends to exercise hegemony over the others, educating them to share its sense of the struggle. Thus hegemony implies the ability of some groups to lead others: to win their consent, organize them, and direct them. As "subaltern" suggests, military metaphors run throughout Gramsci's account. Yet the insight crucial to the concept of hegemony is that all leadership depends on the "'spontaneous' consent" of the led.<sup>6</sup> Hegemony is an achievement separable from the simple exercise of force.<sup>7</sup>
- 9 As has been recognized at least since Machiavelli, the coercive apparatus of the state is a crucial prize in political struggles. Central to the modern state is, in Max Weber's formulation, its "monopoly of legitimate physical violence."<sup>8</sup> For our purposes, the

key word is “legitimate.” Sheer control of the state’s apparatus of coercion, its devices for securing “domination,” is insufficient; the control must also be seen as legitimate. Gramsci’s hegemony is what the ruling class achieves when it can secure popular consent for the state’s use of coercion.

- 10 An episode from the life and times of Governor Blanchard can illustrate the point. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, lynching of people of African descent became endemic across the South. State authorities did little to prevent lynching and perhaps facilitated it on occasion. Still the practice undermined the state’s monopoly on the legitimate means of violence, impugning the authority of the state government. Blanchard was committed to reasserting the state’s prerogatives, at least symbolically. Early in 1906 in a northern parish of the state, a black man was tried for murder. The outcome appeared a forgone conclusion, and the accused was convicted and sentenced to death. The political crisis faced by Blanchard revolved around the state’s need to carry out the process. Blanchard traveled to the trial to prevent the man from being lynched by local white people. His personal presence ensured that the convict was not lynched within the three days required by law to intervene between the sentencing and the execution.
- 11 At issue was not whether the man was guilty or whether he would die but whether the state would control the situation. If the death sentence had been carried out by a mob, the legitimacy of the court process and the privilege of the state in the exercise of punishment would have been diminished. Blanchard thought the matter great enough to travel the entire length of the state to attend proceedings in a local court. His purpose was not merely to coerce the local populace into compliance but also to show that the state would mete out “justice” as it saw fit. Above and beyond the racial politics of such trials, Blanchard’s dramatic action attempted to maintain the hegemony of the constellation of forces that had assumed the mantle of white supremacy and exercised state power in its name.<sup>9</sup>
- 12 This example also spotlights the “educative” function of the state. For Gramsci, law is a solution to the “‘juridical problem,’ i.e., the problem of assimilating the entire grouping to its most advanced fraction.” The principal aim of law is less punishment or justice than education: “it is a problem of education of the masses, of their ‘adaptation’ in accordance with the requirement of the goal to be achieved. This is precisely the function of law in the State and

society; through 'law' the State renders the ruling group 'homogenous,' and tends to create a social conformism which is useful to the ruling group's line of development."<sup>10</sup>

- 13 Many laws and court cases from the 1890s into the early twentieth century in Louisiana, as well as the reframed constitution of 1898, can be seen in this light. Their express justification often was to ratify existing practices and protect the traditional, natural, God-ordained order. Of course, segregation and anti-miscegenation laws helped create realities that they were claimed merely to protect. White supremacists wanted such laws precisely because white and black Louisianans had been marrying each other, eating together, and, crucially, politicking together. Once stated, the point seems obvious. Yet U.S. Supreme Court decisions like *Plessy v. Ferguson*, which held segregation to be compatible with the 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, rested partly on the reasoning that the South's racist order – in fact being created then – was not the least new.<sup>11</sup>
- 14 Even today it is hard to shake the sense that the disenfranchising constitutions of this period were "inevitable" results of white racism.<sup>12</sup> But white supremacists like Blanchard had to create legal and political structures that would "educate" Louisianans to that "inevitability." Blanchard's Louisiana Day festivities should be seen this light. In several places, Gramsci made clear that he did not limit "law" to statutes passed by legislatures. Rather the "general activity of law" is "wider than purely State and governmental activity and also includes activity involved in directing civil society, in those zones which the technicians of law call legally neutral – i.e., in morality and in custom generally."<sup>13</sup> Events like Louisiana Day simultaneously presented the newly legalized subordination of African-Americans in Louisiana as natural, inevitable, progressive, even "humanitarian."
- 15 Shaping political memories of past events is one way for those who control the state to achieve hegemony and secure the social conformity, or at least social acquiescence, necessary to sustain their rule. But how can this construct identities? How can shaping the political meanings of events by shaping memories constitute or re-constitute political identities? To explore these questions, let us turn to the work of Yuri Lotman.

### **Lotman and Gramsci**

- 16 A number of scholars have noted similarities between key concepts

developed by Lotman and Bakhtin, on the one hand, and Gramsci and Bakhtin, on the other.<sup>14</sup> This is not the place for an extended comparison of Lotman and Gramsci, yet their theories might be more similar to each other than either is to Bakhtin's. Lotman was a professor of Russian literature at the University of Tartu in Estonia, part of the Soviet Union until the last years of his life. He died in 1993. His work spans literary history and criticism, semiotic theory, and information theory. The semiotics of culture focuses his later work, which remains influential. In the 1960s, Lotman's ideas began to inform work in the West, principally among academicians interested in semiotics and Russian literature. This earned him a reputation as "one of the first Soviet scholars to become famous abroad."<sup>15</sup>

- 17 Lotman's work might not be well known to scholars of politics or rhetoric, but his intellectual trajectory will be familiar. Starting within a broadly Saussurean framework, Lotman moved in what could well be described as a "poststructuralist" direction.<sup>16</sup> His richly detailed, largely historical, accounts of Russian culture and his more abstract elaborations of semiotic theory shift from structure to contingency, from synchrony to diachrony, and from language or (more narrowly) information-processing to the interaction between linguistic and non-linguistic aspects of social life. What Julia Kristeva calls the "subject of enunciation" plays an increasing part in Lotman's theoretical models. Like Kristeva, Lotman described a kind of "sujet-en-process," whose boundaries shift continually and whose internal coherence faces chronic contestation. This subject emerges from a process of engagement between "codes" that comprise the self and alternative "codes" from beyond the self's semiotic boundaries.
- 18 In similar ways, Lotman's work parallels Gramsci's. They shared a concern with ways that people acquire their "conception of the world" in relation to dominant groups. For Gramsci, people always arrive at these conceptions within the context of their larger social identities: "In acquiring one's conception of the world one always belongs to a particular grouping which is that of all the social elements which share the same mode of thinking and activity."<sup>17</sup> Both theorists treated language as central to the reproduction of these conceptions.<sup>18</sup> Lotman's work can give further texture to Gramsci on hegemony. It can show how the shaping of political memory, as an aspect of hegemony, constitutes people's identities. To delve deeper into Lotman's theory, let us begin with its account of the role of memory in the production of cultural meaning and the self. Then we can turn to Governor



Blanchard's politics as a form of what Lotman calls auto-communication.

### **Memory and Auto-Communication**

- 19 One of the central themes of Yuri Lotman's *Universe of the Mind* is that memory is a basic function of all thought. For Lotman, memory is central not only to an individual human being but also to texts and cultures, which he sees as "thinking' semiotic structures."<sup>19</sup> At this basic level, memory is simply "the capacity to preserve and reproduce information (texts)."<sup>20</sup> But the third part of this volume presents a more complicated account. In cultural terms, memory is a "dialogue" between past and present, not merely a mechanism for transmitting information:

Memory is more like a generator, reproducing the past again; it is the ability, given certain impulses, to switch on the process of generating a conceptualized reality which the mind transfers into the past. . . . The interrelationship between cultural memory and its self-reflection is like a constant dialogue: texts from chronologically earlier periods are brought into culture and, interacting with contemporary mechanisms, generate an *image* of the historical past which culture transfers into the past and which, like an equal partner in a dialogue, affects the present.<sup>21</sup>

Memory is an image of the past re-produced in the present that gives new shape to the present. Thus the commemoration of the Louisiana Purchase in 1904 explicitly placed the meaning of the Purchase in dialogue with the meaning of the Spanish American war. Both acquired new meaning through their juxtaposition and dialogue in the context of Louisiana Day.

- 20 Memory is also, then, the product of dialogue. As such, it involves the translation and incorporation of texts from the past into the cultural system of the present. "Texts" from past and present transform each other through this translation. Since the texts differ enough to be mutually untranslatable in part, and thus asymmetrical in Lotman's terms, any translation generates meaning that is not exactly present before the translation took place. Any text is transformed to some degree when passing into a new cultural context, just as the new text transforms that context. Insofar as culture is a set of texts, translation becomes "a primary



mechanism of consciousness” and a producer of new cultural meanings and memories.<sup>22</sup>

- 21 At its most straightforward, this translation is the transmission of a message from one person (or culture) to another. One speaker transmits a coded message to another, who must “decode” it to extract the meaning. Lotman contrasted this model with auto-communication, where the sender and receiver are the same “person.” The underlying semantic content of the message remains the same in auto-communication, but “recoding” transforms its meaning. Lotman illustrated the concept with the example of “diary jottings . . . which are made not in order to remember certain things but to elucidate the writer’s inner state, something that would not be possible without the jottings.”<sup>23</sup> In such jottings, “the message is reformulated and acquires new meaning;” it is “qualitatively transformed.”<sup>24</sup> A parallel restructuring occurs in the identity of the diary jotter: in auto-communication, “while communicating with himself, the addresser inwardly reconstructs his essence, since the essence of a personality may be thought of as an individual set of socially significant codes, and this set changes during the act of communication.”<sup>25</sup>
- 22 This restructuring happens by “recoding” the original message according to a “second code” that rearranges the elements in the original message. This endows those elements, like the message as a whole, with new and supplementary meaning. Imagine that our diary jotter is undergoing psychoanalysis. On returning to his diary after a session, he would re-present earlier jottings in light of interpretive codes provided by the therapist. The supplementary meaning would result from their restructuring as a new mechanism of interpretation rather than some separate addition of new informational content to the message.<sup>26</sup>
- 23 The jottings themselves take on the quality of signs that refer not only to their own, original semantic content but also to their location within the supplementary code. These signs can be expressed in subsequent jottings by means of shorthand comprehensible only if we have access to the secondary code of the jotter. In this way, texts take on meanings that are not simply reducible to their informational contents.
- 24 Auto-communication reorganizes the personality of the communicator while “raising the rank” of a message yet without erasing its previous semantic content. Like all forms of

communication, it depends on memory: the diary jotter must remember the secondary code in order for the supplementary meaning of the text to be present. The meaning of the text, in all its complexity, depends on linguistic and non-linguistic contexts but also on the ability to reproduce those contexts in subsequent re-presentations of the text. The resulting “dialogue” between the jotter’s past and present reshapes both, and therefore the jotter. Auto-communication and memory combine to remake aspects of his personality.

- 25 The process occurs also beyond individual consciousness. In the context of Louisiana Day, the storming of government buildings by white supremacists in 1874 becomes recoded. Its meaning [now] relates to a larger historical narrative of white imperialism. For Lotman this, too, is an instance of auto-communication. Indeed “culture can be treated both as the sum of the messages circulated by various addressers (for each of them the addressee is ‘another,’ ‘she’ or ‘he’), and as one message transmitted by the collective ‘I’ of humanity to itself. From this point of view, human culture is a vast example of autocommunication.”<sup>27</sup> Culture thus organizes a “collective personality with a common memory and a collective consciousness.”<sup>28</sup> Below the level of all humanity, particular cultures are examples of auto-communication.<sup>29</sup>
- 26 Lotman’s theory displays memory and meaning-making as deeply interdependent. We can see how the production of new meaning entails the production of new memories, just as memory enables the generation of meaning. Lotman specifies a form of communication, auto-communication, that actively involves the constitution and re-constitution of the communicator’s identity. Yet by Lotman’s theory, we need not restrict the “self” to individual biological humans. Instead the “self” can be collective, up to and including humanity as a whole. What remains is to extend this theory to politics.

### **Politics as Auto-Communication**

- 27 What might we learn from seeing Governor Blanchard as engaged in a political form of auto-communication?<sup>30</sup> For Lotman, auto-communication has three characteristics: “it does not add to the information we already have, but . . . it transforms the self-understanding of the person who has engendered the text and . . . it transfers already existing messages into a new system of meanings.”<sup>31</sup> We can see immediately that Blanchard’s pronouncement added no information to what was available to

Louisianans. Most people would have heard about the Governor's action through newspaper accounts and ensuing word of mouth.

- 28 Absent some relevant narrative of history, however, neither the remarks from Blanchard nor the warm words of the *Daily Picayune* would have given much sense of the import of the Governor's choice. The tie between September 14, 1904 and September 14, 1874 occurs solely through allusion and coded references. Blanchard called the earlier day "justly memorable," and the *Picayune* termed it a "glorious day in 1874," yet neither related the actual events of the day. The newspaper came closest, but it still talked indirectly of an "immortal act" and a "new birth" from "terrible tyranny, darkness and misery." In these statements, rhetorical flourish is more central than specific information.
- 29 Of course, it was unnecessary for Blanchard or the *Daily Picayune* to go into details. This was a familiar story to anyone who read about Blanchard's pronouncement. The rhetoric that cast the Democratic return to power as a "Redemption" or "renaissance" of the state had been circulating since at least 1877 – if not, in anticipation, before. In Lotman's words, this is a case of "Let those who understand, understand."<sup>32</sup> "Tyranny" and "imposition by a sectional Congress" were code words deployed by Democrats and white supremacists for the previous forty years of conflict in the state and throughout the American South following the Civil War. The words conjured a "noble struggle" against tyranny and oppression, a struggle conclusively won only through the recent institution of racial segregation and the effective disfranchisement in Louisiana of people of African descent. We can see here precisely the "reduction of words" that Lotman attributed to auto-communication: a small set of words invokes common memories complete with associations built over thirty years of telling much the same historical narrative.
- 30 Applying Lotman's analysis suggests that we should not think of Blanchard as imparting information, transmitting a message, or simply giving new meanings to old events. His public pronouncements and the celebration itself are better seen as forms of auto-communication. They are parts of an internal dialogue that shapes the identity of white-supremacist Louisianans, with the Democratic Party as their "leading faction." Blanchard produced three important effects: he identified white supremacy as a progressive movement; he identified the Democratic Party, as the agent of "Redemption," with the cause of white supremacy; and he identified white supremacy itself with the political

dominance of elite whites like himself. Thus Blanchard drew on and reshaped a set of political memories to reconstitute the “personality” of a white-supremacist Louisiana.

- 31 The celebration of Louisiana Day within the context of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition inserted the “noble struggle” of Louisiana Democrats into a broader discourse and historical narrative. The victory of white supremacy in Louisiana became part of the general expansion westward of white Americans. It fed into the decimation and subordination of non-whites from the Appalachians to the Philippines. The Exposition presented this expansion as progressive and inevitable. One rationale for including displays of Native American and Filipino tribes was precisely that anthropologists expected these peoples to die out in an “irreconcilable conflict of races.”<sup>33</sup>
- 32 The ceremonies marking Louisiana Day reinforced these connections. The celebration reenacted the signing of the Louisiana Purchase Treaty. The State of Louisiana commissioned a replica of the Cabildo where the treaty was signed. In this building, Governor Blanchard joined representatives from Spain and France, as well as ancestors of people present at the first signing, to participate in a drama to recreate it. Before the reading and signing came a military parade. David R. Francis, President of the Louisiana Purchase Exposition Company which had organized the Fair, wrote that “Brigadier General Rice conducted the procession to the Cabildo. Military features of the parade were strengthened by the addition of a detachment of the Jefferson Guard, the battalion of Philippine scouts and band, the battalion of the Philippine constabulary and band, the United States Marine Corps and a battalion of United States troops”<sup>34</sup> Soldiers who had fought in the Spanish-American War marched with soldiers then occupying the Philippines to hail, as Blanchard said, the “new birth” of Louisiana from the “tyranny” of racial democracy.
- 33 The Exposition mixed these potent themes with technological development and scientific progress. It commemorated the centennial of the Louisiana Purchase by incorporating it into an imperialist story of growing domination by the white race over the world. Louisiana Democrats could place their recent history within these new coordinates. White supremacy would not be reactionary and conservative; it would be progressive in the broadest sense, participating in the dynamism of the new age. In this way, Louisiana Day transformed the identity of white

supremacists in Louisiana.

- 34 At the same time, the celebration presented white Louisiana Democrats as central, active figures in Blanchard's narrative of history. What Lawrence Powell has called the "invented tradition" of "September Fourteen" was in fact "largely the symbolic property of the silk-stocking classes" in Louisiana. The tradition affirmed not only white supremacy as such, but the assimilation of white supremacy to the domination of Louisiana politics by "the silk-stocking classes."<sup>35</sup> Governor Blanchard was well aware of this. His "Inaugural Address" of May 1904 had offered a related narrative with a similarly restricted cast of racial "types." The emphasis was on "self-government," meaning domination of state governance by white men from Louisiana – without interference from the federal government.
- 35 This theme of white government appeared in telling terms. Blanchard began with the theme of rebirth. "Louisiana's political renaissance began in the year 1877," he said, "when the government of the state was restored to the hands of the white people – the intelligent and property holding classes."<sup>36</sup> 1877 (rather than 1874) was the year when Democrats took full control of the state government. But Blanchard's theme was the same as in his later Louisiana Day pronouncement. The state had been "reborn" by replacing a Republican and racially integrated regime with white-supremacist Democrats. Yet Blanchard did not portray all white people in Louisiana as equal participants in the narrative of rebirth. He qualified the phrase "white people" by adding "the intelligent and property holding classes." These were not so much a subcategory of "white people" as a delimitation for what counted fully as "white." Self-governance meant white supremacy, but the governing "self" should be these "white people – the intelligent and propertied classes."
- 36 Blanchard had identified the historic character of Louisiana with a specific type, "white people." His purpose was not to deny that people of color lived in Louisiana but to shape "the negro's" identity and relation to the state. "To close the door of hope against any child within the borders of the State, whatever be his race or condition," said Blanchard as a progressive, "is illogical, un-Christian, un-Democratic, and un-American."<sup>37</sup> This might sound strange coming from the mouth of a man who resorted to violence and fraud to prevent some people from voting on account of their race. "The negro is here," Blanchard nevertheless

affirmed. “He is a man and a citizen.”

37 Many northern newspapers praised Blanchard for this observation, but they paid less attention to the next sentences. “He is useful and valuable in his sphere. Within that sphere he must be guaranteed the equal protection of the law, and his education along proper lines – mainly agricultural and industrial – is at once a duty and a necessity. He must be protected in his right to live peaceably and quietly, in his right to labor and enjoy the fruits of his labor. He must be encouraged to industry and taught habits of thrift.”<sup>38</sup> Blanchard was saying that the state must educate its citizenry; and unlike some in the South, he meant this to include “negroes.” But who were these “negroes?” As with “white people,” Blanchard’s delimitation is telling. “The negro” was definable by his “sphere.” In this sphere, he was “useful and valuable,” presumably to “white people.” This sphere was “mainly agricultural and industrial.” Ergo “the negro” was a laborer – and not “closing the door of hope” meant educating “negroes” to be happy laborers.

38 To be sure that he wasn’t misunderstood, Blanchard concluded with standard fare for white supremacists:

No approach towards social equality or social recognition will ever be tolerated in Louisiana. Separate schools, separate churches, separate cars, separate places of entertainment will be enforced. Racial distinction and integrity must be preserved. But there is room enough in this broad Southland, with proper lines of limitation and demarcation, for the two races to live on terms of mutual trust, mutual help, good understanding and concord. The South asserts its ability to handle and solve the negro question on humanitarian lines . . .<sup>39</sup>

“Lines of limitation and demarcation” were central to Blanchard’s purpose. In his inaugural address and his declaration of Louisiana Day, Blanchard effectively constituted the boundary, as well as the identity, of “Louisiana.” For Lotman, drawing boundaries is “one of the primary mechanisms of semiotic individuation.” Indeed the boundary “can be defined as the outer limit of a first-person form.”<sup>40</sup> As Lotman makes clear, “The boundary of the personality is a semiotic boundary. For instance, a wife, children, slaves, vassals may in some systems be included in the personality of the master, patriarch, husband, patron, suzerain, and not possess any



individual status of their own; whereas in other systems they are treated as separate individuals.”<sup>41</sup> Blanchard’s rhetoric operated within this logic. Rather than exclude people of African descent from the personality of Louisiana, Blanchard’s rhetoric included them – in the form of “the negroes” – as “citizens” within Louisiana. Yet their role was unmistakably subordinate: “no approach to social equality or social recognition” was left open.

- 39 Relegated to the margins of political significance, the political and social gains of African-Americans in the 1870s and after do not surface in Blanchard’s categories. “Negroes” do not include politicians, newspaper editors, planters, shopkeepers, or any of the other social positions that real African-Americans might have occupied in the decades before Blanchard’s words in 1904.<sup>42</sup> Instead he defined “negroes” as members of an agricultural labor force, now properly returned to positions of happy subservience.
- 40 Some people, however, were so “marginal” to Blanchard’s narrative that they might as well not exist. As Lotman put it, “whole layers of cultural phenomena, which from the point of view of the given metalanguage are marginal, will have no relation to the idealized portrait of that culture. They will be declared ‘non-existent.’”<sup>43</sup> “Poor whites” made no appearance in the Louisiana narrated by Blanchard. In the early twentieth century, poor whites were marginal politically as well as socially. The voting restrictions embodied in the new Constitution of 1898, aimed primarily at black Louisianans, also disenfranchised poor whites. Louisiana’s voting population, of 206,354 in 1896, declined by 1904 to only 54,222. Roughly half of the drop was due to the virtual disappearance of blacks from the voting rolls after 1898; the rest reflected a sharp decline in registration among poor whites.<sup>44</sup> As voting citizens, therefore, black and lower class Louisianans were indeed effectively declared “non-existent.”

### **Center and Periphery**

- 41 Lotman’s semiotics of culture give us a firmer grip on how political contestation over the meaning of past events can constitute our political identities. They help us de-code Governor Blanchard’s political rhetoric. Yet they do not guarantee success for strategies like Blanchard’s. Lotman’s account of center and periphery clarifies what is at stake.
- 42 Clearly the Blanchard narrative failed to correspond to the worldviews or identities of many Louisianans, particularly those of



African descent. Lotman's conception of center and periphery can help us think about their positions in this cultural landscape. In *Universe of the Mind*, Lotman suggested that a culture's "self-description" is continually contested. "One part of the semiosphere," or cultural space, "in the process of self-description creates its own grammar. . . . Then it strives to extend its norms over the whole semiosphere. A partial grammar of one cultural dialect becomes the metalanguage of description for culture as such."<sup>45</sup> This extension is never wholly successful. Even for the "center," with norms that become the standard for the culture as a whole, this description is an "idealization."

- 43 The farther in cultural terms that people are from the "center," the less its idealized description corresponds to the "semiotic reality lying 'underneath.'"<sup>46</sup> On the "periphery," there is often a large gap between the norms or values of the dominant description of the culture and the actual practices, norms, or values of those who inhabit this cultural location.<sup>47</sup> For Lotman, this gap is the precondition for "semiotic dynamism."<sup>48</sup> On the periphery, where the gap is widest between local activities and central norms, new and subversive semiotic practices emerge. Ultimately the periphery bids to become the center of the semiosphere, imposing new norms on its predecessors.
- 44 In many ways, the post-Civil War history of Louisiana corresponds closely to this pattern. Governor Blanchard's "intelligent and propertied classes" had successfully imposed their views of Louisiana's history and political culture on the polity as a whole. For forty years, Louisianans had struggled over the meanings of freedom and citizenship, who should own land and who should benefit from cultivating it, and what place people of African descent should have in the state and its society. By 1904, white supremacists were the victors. As Blanchard's words and deeds show, the "center" tried to impose its description of the social hierarchy on the state: blacks were agricultural laborers, whites were intelligent and propertied, while whites and blacks could live in harmony and happiness if whites solved the race question "on humanitarian lines." For people murdered, assaulted, or raped by these same white supremacists, however, there was a "gap" of enormous proportions between this description and their own understandings of recent history, especially in their personal lives.
- 45 People of African descent in Louisiana had their own "semiotic practices" to subvert those of the white supremacists. The testimony of a former slave, Eliza Pinkston, illustrates this. She

was attacked in her home in north Louisiana in November of 1876, when Democrats waged a campaign of terror against black and white Republicans. Her husband and child were killed in the attack; Pinkston was raped and left for dead. Escaping in late November to the relative safety of New Orleans, she brought a criminal case against two of her attackers. It was heard in a New Orleans municipal police court.

- 46 Remarkably Pinkston found herself cross-examined in the case by John McEnery, the man named Governor by the Democrats during their brief coup of September 14, 1874. One of the men she accused was Tom Lyons, a “colored Democrat,” whom she located at the murder of her husband. McEnery asked her whether she knew where Lyons lived. Henry Pinkston, Eliza’s husband, had apparently been to Lyons’ house in the past, when Lyons had tried to persuade him to join the Democrats. McEnery asked sarcastically, “When colored people visit each other, do they not know where each other live, generally?” She simply responded, “I don’t know sir.” But asked again “whose plantation” Lyons lived on, Pinkston shot back, “When colored people visit they never say they are on such and such a place, but on a place of their own, but that such and such a man has authority.”
- 47 This answer reveals a way black cotton workers subverted the naming practices of white people. Even as they recognized the inequalities that shaped plantation life, African-Americans did not follow whites in calling a plantation by the name of its white owner or occupant, as in “the McEnery Place.” Black resistance to white naming practices had wide ramifications. The antebellum legal system endowed white landowning men with authority as household heads – authority that included control over their wives, children, slaves and employees. White men’s naming practices revealed that, even after slaves had been emancipated, landowning white men still saw a social landscape shaped by the antebellum legal system. A white man like John McEnery continued to emphasize his control over the land, yet black sharecroppers like Eliza Pinkston had come to see their homes as “their own.”<sup>49</sup>
- 48 There were alternative, if not always subversive, semiotic practices on the “periphery.” In 1904, these did not provide resources sufficient for a challenge to the supremacy of the dominant political discourse, but Lotman’s account suggests that this is always a live possibility. When Pinkston brought her court case, in 1877, ensuing years of struggle were not guaranteed to end in

disfranchisement and segregation. Nevertheless it had become clear by 1904 that black Louisianans would face radically limited opportunities for producing their own public discourse, let alone challenging that of white Democrats.<sup>50</sup> Lotman did not imply that every move from the periphery would succeed; indeed his account connects with Gramsci's in describing a form of power where semiotic mechanisms can help the center maintain its position. Thus we can think of Governor Blanchard as exercising power to maintain the position of silk-stocking white supremacy as the center of Louisiana's political culture by fending off incipient cultural rebellions from black and poor-white Louisianans on the periphery.

### **Conclusion: Hegemony and Auto-Communication**

- 49 Neils Helsloot has argued that “linguists study, often on too abstract a level, the way social groups are ‘articulated’ by language practices. Alternatively, they could take up organizing/dispersing practices, struggles for schism *and* alliance, as part of the way in which human individuals form their lives (their identities/differences) through language.” Helsloot has urged that we attend to the ways in which language constructs identity and difference *in one and the same move*. Linguistic or semiotic strategies aimed at consolidating a particular identity aim simultaneously at dispersing alternative forms of identification. Helsloot has meant his remarks to correct, through a link to Volosinov (Bakhtin), what he has seen as an excessive emphasis in Gramsci on the need to achieve a “totalizing and all absorbing unity.”<sup>51</sup> I have used Gramsci and Lotman to explain how white supremacists went about achieving unity, in part by marginalizing and dispersing alternative identities. In combination, the two can help us trace such dynamics.
- 50 A number of striking similarities in the two theories make their combination attractive. Particularly intriguing is the resonance between Lotman's relationship of center to periphery and Gramsci's dialectic of hegemonic and subaltern groups. For both Lotman and Gramsci, communication takes place in the context of structural asymmetry. Gramsci's framework corresponds class identities to specific locations in a system of production, but this resembles Lotman's view that people acquire and develop a cultural “grammar” within the context of a (possibly more complex) terrain of cultural identities and practices.<sup>52</sup> Gramsci,

like Lotman, described a process of competition among groups that seek to impose their conceptions on others. Their struggles shape individual consciousness and “collective consciousness” for the people involved. For Gramsci, “critical understanding of self takes place therefore through a struggle of political ‘hegemonies’ and of opposing directions.”<sup>53</sup> As for Lotman, the struggle is over which group can impose its “idealization” on the whole society.

- 51 For both theorists, this imposition implies a gap, or at least potential for one, between the conceptions of the dominant group and the peripheral or subaltern groups. According to Lotman, the “grammar” that comes to dominate the semiosphere is an “idealization,” even an “illusion.”<sup>54</sup> As we approach the periphery, it is increasingly so, though the idealization structures real social relations. According to Lotman, it is nonetheless from the periphery that new cultural productions, new meanings, arise. Similarly the Communist Party operated for Gramsci precisely in the gap between the worldviews generated in a civil society dominated by capitalist interests and the new forces emerging among the working classes. Success by the Communist Party in organizing a collective will among workers would be the precondition for a general restructuring of society. The Communist Party would be a “myth-prince,” waging an ideological battle. Still to the extent that it could reorganize the world in its own image, the Party also could reshape social relations.
- 52 Here is one source of dispersal, of the unity of the center, through challenges arising in the periphery. In Blanchard’s Louisiana, as we have seen, these contests were muted. To mount an effective challenge to white supremacy in Louisiana would have entailed a solid alliance between African Americans and poor whites, but white Democrats had defeated just such an alliance in the previous decade.
- 53 The success of white Democrats itself depended on another mechanism of dispersal identified by Lotman. The boundary is, for Lotman, the basic mechanism of individuation. It is easy to think of this in terms of Hegel’s familiar claim that identities are always formed, in part, with reference to some Other, external to the self. But the boundaries that Blanchard drew also had the effect of actively dispersing alternative ways in which Louisianans might have thought about identity. Rather than alliances based on class, religious, or linguistic differences (to mention three possibilities salient in Louisiana), Blanchard’s semiotic practices combined with legal, economic, and violent forms of intimidation

to solidify race as the relevant form of identification.

- 54 As Andreas Schönle has argued, then, Lotman did provide a “semiotic theory of social power.”<sup>55</sup> In contrast to Gramsci, Lotman focused neither on the state nor on how ruling classes secure consent to their rule. Nor did he attend to the relation between cultural economic or political forms of power. But the similarities may be more important than the differences. The shared emphasis on asymmetrical communication, on language or culture as a site of power, and on struggles for hegemony within the domain of culture can sustain an approach drawing from both theorists. While each depart[s] from the structuralist orthodoxy of their predecessors, both retain a robust sense of structure in their accounts of culture, politics, and economics. Moreover they presume some form of underlying coherence as necessary for meaningful communication to take place. For Gramsci, this is a political achievement, the result of hegemony rather than its precondition; for Lotman, such a conception of the semiosphere is susceptible to naturalization.<sup>56</sup> [But, broadly, these commitments] connect Gramsci and Lotman more closely to each other than to Bakhtin.
- 55 In combination, each can be used to overcome limitations of the other. Where Lotman’s semiotic theory risks presenting power as a relation among “texts,” Gramsci’s political theory attends to who is producing those texts with what political agendas. Where Gramsci showed how some dynamics generate cohesion, Lotman explored how related dynamics disrupted it. Where Lotman’s account might focus too exclusively on culture, Gramsci’s can remind us of connections among culture, economy, and polity. And where Gramsci’s concept of hegemony seems to imply that identities are shaped through contestation over “worldviews,” Lotman’s semiotics can give us a more precise account of how this happens.
- 56 Drawing on this combination, we can see how leaders like Blanchard deployed diverse resources – legal and political, semiotic and extra-semiotic – to reshape Southern conceptions of citizenship. Blanchard and company had come to control these resources largely through force and fraud. As Gramsci and Lotman suggest, however, the Southerners used these resources to reconfigure the relationships between the state and its citizens, black and white. They justified their exercise of state power as the protection of an established white supremacy that they were in the process of creating. And they structured the social landscape

around racial identification. Leaders like Blanchard achieved each of these steps, in part, through semiotic state practices that reconceived the relationships between the rulers and the ruled while giving those relationships concrete forms.

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## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Many thanks to John Nelson, Andreas Schonle, Jeremy Shine, Amy Mandelker, Joan Sitomer, Ryan Hudson, Harwood McClerking, Brian McKenzie, Tasha Philpot, and two anonymous reviewers for *Poroi*, for invaluable comments on earlier drafts of this essay.
- <sup>2</sup> Robert W. Rydell, *All the World's a Fair: Visions of Empire at American International Expositions, 1876-1916*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1984.
- <sup>3</sup> *Daily Picayune*, August 21, 1904.
- <sup>4</sup> Newspaper clipping from the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, August 21, 1904; in Newton C. Blanchard, *Scrapbooks, 1892-1906*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Libraries, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, volume 3.
- <sup>5</sup> Lester, Jeremy, *The Dialogue of Negation: Debates on Hegemony in Russia and the West*, London and Sterling, Virginia, Pluto Press, 2000, particularly chapter 3. Lester offers an “archaeology” of pre-Gramscian uses of the concept. The literature on Gramsci’s political theory is large – some recent examples include Christine Buci-Glucksmann, *Gramsci and the State*, London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1980; Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness, and the Revolutionary Process*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1981; Benedetto Fontana, *Hegemony and Power: On the Relation Between Gramsci and Machiavelli*, Minneapolis and London, University of Minnesota Press, 1993.
- <sup>6</sup> Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith, eds., London, Lawrence and Wishart, 1971, p. 12.
- <sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.



- 8 Max Weber, "The Profession and Vocation of Politics," *Political Writings*, Peter Laswell and Donald Speirs, eds., Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, pp. 309-369.
- 9 Newspaper clipping from the New Orleans *Daily Picayune*, February 22, 1906; in Blanchard, *Scrapbooks, 1892-1906*, volume 3.
- 10 Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 195.
- 11 *Plessy v. Ferguson*, 163 U.S., 1896, pp. 537 and 559.
- 12 For a recent example of this argument, see Rogers Smith, *Civic Ideals: Conflicting Visions of Citizenship in U.S. History*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1997.
- 13 Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 195 and p. 242.
- 14 For comparisons of Gramsci and Bakhtin, see Lester, *Dialogue of Negation*, pp.98-103, Craig Brandist, "Gramsci, Bakhtin, and the Semiotics of Hegemony," *New Left Review*, no. 216, March/April 1996, pp. 94-109, and Niels Helsloot, "Linguists of all Countries ...!, On Gramsci's Premise of Coherence," *Journal of Pragmatics*, 13, 1989, pp. 547-566. Amy Mandelker compares Bakhtin and Lotman in "Logosphere and Semiosphere: Bakhtin, Russian Organicism, and the Semiotics of Culture," *Bakhtin in Contexts Across the Disciplines*, Mandelker, ed., Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1995, pp. 177-190, as does Gunhild Agger in "Intertextuality Revisited: Dialogues and Negotiations in Media Studies," *Canadian Aesthetics Journal/ Revue canadienne d'esthetique*, volume 4, Summer/Ete 1999, available at [http://www.uqtr.quebec.ca/AE/vol\\_4/gunhild.htm](http://www.uqtr.quebec.ca/AE/vol_4/gunhild.htm).
- 15 Quoted in Thomas A. Sebeok, "The Estonian Connection," *Sign Systems Studies*, 26, 1998, pp. 20-41. A number of other essays are also useful as introductions to Lotman's work, among them, Julia Kristeva, "On Yury Lotman," *Publications of the Modern Language Association (PMLA)*, 109(3), 1994, pp. 375-376, and Umberto Eco's "Introduction" to Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture*, Ann Shukman, tr., London, I. B. Tauris, 1990. A more technical introduction to the work of Soviet-era semioticians, along with a collection of articles by Lotman and others, can be found in Daniel P. Lucid, ed. and trans., *Soviet Semiotics: An Anthology*, Baltimore and London, The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977.



- 16** Amy Mandelker discusses this possibility in “Logosphere and Semiosphere.”
- 17** Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 324.
- 18** Lester, *Dialogue of Negation*, pp. 70-71. Gramsci’s rather scattered remarks on language are collected in “Notes on Language,” translated with an introduction by Steven R. Mansfield, *Telos*, no. 59, 1984, pp.119-150.
- 19** Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, p. 2.
- 20** *Ibid.*
- 21** *Ibid.*, p. 272.
- 22** *Ibid.*, p. 126.
- 23** *Ibid.*, p. 21.
- 24** *Ibid.*, p. 22.
- 25** *Ibid.*
- 26** Lotman uses examples of “rhythmical series, ranging from musical repetitions to repeated ornamentation” as ways poetry, for example, exhibits this autocommunication. Lotman says that these are strictly “constructed according to clearly expressed syntagmatic principles but have no semantic meaning of their own; we can treat them as external codes whose effect is to restructure verbal communication. However, for the system to work there has to be a confrontation and interaction between two different principles: a message in some semantic language and the intrusion of a purely syntagmatic, supplementary code” (*ibid.*, p. 25). The example of psychoanalysis is not accidental. Lotman’s description of autocommunication is remarkably close to Julia Kristeva’s contrast of “chora” and the “symbolic,” though without her theory of drives. Like Lotman, Kristeva treats meaning as generated partly through the confrontation between two different principles, one linguistic in the narrow sense and the other not, though they still are in some way “ordered.” And for Kristeva, as for Lotman, this is expressed most purely in poetic form. See selections by Julia Kristeva from her *Revolution in Poetic Language* in Kelly Oliver, ed., *The Portable Kristeva*, New York, Columbia University Press, 1997.

**27** Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, p. 33. This works on the principle of the “isomorphism” of individual and social levels of analysis. Merrell, among others, has criticized this as a failing of structuralism that Charles Pierce avoided. The concept of social or group “identity” seems to warrant a limited sense in which social entities and individuals are similarly structured, but below I turn to ways that political identities differ. See Floyd Merrell, *Sign, Textuality, Word*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1992, p. 18.

**28** Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, p. 34.

**29** More properly stated all cultures involve both autocommunication and ‘I-she’ communication. Lotman suggests the possibility of categorizing specific cultures according to which of the two predominates.

**30** In treating politics as autocommunication, I build on a suggestion by Michael Urban in “The Politics of Identity in Russia’s Postcommunist Transition: The Nation Against Itself,” *Slavic Review*, 53, Fall, 1994, pp. 733-765, on p. 744.

**31** *Ibid.*, p. 30.

**32** *Ibid.*, p. 27.

**33** Eric Breitbart, *A World on Display: Photographs From the St. Louis World’s Fair, 1904*, Albuquerque, University of New Mexico Press, 1997. The quotation is from William T. Sherman’s letter to David F. Boyd on May 20, 1867: *William T. Sherman Letters*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana State University Libraries, Louisiana and Lower Mississippi Valley Collections, folder 1.

**34** David R. Francis, *The Universal Exposition of 1904*, St. Louis, Louisiana Purchase Exposition Company, 1913, pp. 272-273.

**35** Lawrence Powell, “Reinventing Tradition: Liberty Place, Historical Memory, and Silk-Stocking Vigilantism in New Orleans Politics,” in Sylvia Frey and Betty Wood, eds., *From Slavery to Emancipation in the Atlantic World*, London and Portland, OR, Frank Cass Publishers, 1999, p. 128.

**36** Blanchard, *Scrapbooks, 1892-1906*, volume 3.

**37** *Ibid.*

- 38 *Ibid.*
- 39 *Ibid.*
- 40 Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, p. 131.
- 41 Women are entirely absent from the narrative as well. On the relation between gender and institutionalized white supremacy in the U.S., see Glenda Gilmore, *Gender and Jim Crow: Women and the Politics of White Supremacy in North Carolina, 1896-1920*, Chapel Hill, University of North Carolina Press, 1996.
- 42 Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, p. 138.
- 43 *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- 44 Joseph G. Dawson III, ed., *The Louisiana Governors: From Iberville to Edwards*, Baton Rouge, Louisiana University Press, 1990, p. 201. Mark T. Carleton writes the biographical entry for Newton Crain Blanchard. The specific mechanisms included literacy and property qualifications plus a poll tax. To insure that at least some whites who would have been disenfranchised by these measures would still be eligible to vote, the 1898 Constitution had a “grandfather clause” for those had voted or whose father or grandfather had voted before January 1, 1867. They could continue to register, but there was only a four-month period to take advantage of the exception. Details on the provisions and debates over their adoption appear in Michael L. Lanza, “Little More Than a Family Meeting: The Constitution of 1898,” *In Search of Fundamental Law: Louisiana’s Constitutions, 1812-1974*, Warren M. Billings and Edward F. Haas eds., Lafayette, LA, Center for Louisiana Studies at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, 1993, pp. 93-109. The classic source on effects of the disfranchisement constitutions across the U.S. South is J. Morgan Kousser, *The Shaping of Southern Politics: Suffrage Restriction and the Establishment of the One-Party South, 1880-1910*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1974.
- 45 Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, p. 128.
- 46 *Ibid.*, p. 129.
- 47 *Center* and *periphery* are relational terms; and the distance between them is semiotic, not necessarily geographical.
- 48 Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, p. 134.

49 Testimony of Eliza Pinkston, to the U.S. Senate on *Denial of Elective Franchise in Louisiana at Election of November 7, 1876*, 44th Congress, 2nd Session, Senate Report 701, volume. 2, part 2, pp. 909-987. I explore these issues more fully in “Gender and the Politics of the Household in Reconstruction Louisiana, 1865-1879,” *Gender and Emancipation in the Transatlantic World*, Diana Patton and Pamela Scully, eds., Durham, NC, Duke University Press, forthcoming.

50 There were still many institutions within the black community itself. On the role of women, for example, see Evelyn Brooks Higgenbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women’s Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920*, Cambridge, MA, Harvard University Press, 1993.

51 Helsloot, Neils, “Linguists of all Countries ...!,” p. 564.

52 The most prominent extension of Gramsci’s concept of hegemony seeks precisely to unmoor the concept from its traditional Marxist underpinnings: Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy: Towards a Radical Democratic Politics*, London, Verso, 1985.

53 Gramsci, *Prison Notebooks*, p. 333.

54 Lotman, *Universe of the Mind*, p. 128.

55 Andreas Schönle, “Social Power and Individual Agency: The Self in Greenblatt and Lotman,” in *Lotman and Cultural Studies: Encounters and Extensions*, Amy Mandleker and Andreas Schonle eds., Madison, University of Wisconsin Press, forthcoming, p. 10. On p. 11, Schönle points to two “technologies of power,” one for the center-periphery logic discussed here and the other centered for terror and unpredictable behavior. Lotman’s example of a terrorist is Ivan the Terrible.

56 Helsloot, Neils, “Linguists of all Countries ...!,” p. 553ff.