Silence Propaganda:
A Semiotic Inquiry into
the Ideologies of Taciturnity

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ABSTRACT

Societies should be analyzed not only from the point of view of what they talk about but also from the point of view of what they are quiet about. Areas of silence in the semiosphere vary across cultures and history and stem from a complex interaction of historical circumstances and social agencies. Implicit norms of taciturnity are often codified into explicit legal frameworks, whose enforcement, though, substantially relies on state and government propaganda. Citizens must interiorize as a second nature the ideology of taciturnity that leads them not to share any content about certain topics. This mechanism of hegemonic silencing is macroscopically visible in times of war, when national interests solidify into specific rhetorics of taciturnity. This article is a comparative analysis of World War II silence propaganda. However, in times of relative peace both autocratic regimes and democratic states also need areas of silence and secrecy to pattern public discourse. Understanding how the creation of collective silence takes place is essential in an increasingly interconnected and global society in which limits to free disclosure and communication often give rise to tensions and conflicts.

Rien ne rehausse l'autorité mieux que le silence.
   —Charles de Gaulle, *Le Fil de l'épée* (1932)

Several forces pattern public communication in society, some seeking to regulate the quantity of information that members are supposed to circulate. Depending on the sender, the receiver (Vittori 1975), the context, the message, the channel, and the code of communication, and above all depending on the topic, implicit norms and explicit laws set the ideal quantitative measure of content that should be exchanged in a given communicative circumstance.

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The English expression "too much information," often abbreviated as TMI, is used to sanction those who, in a certain context, have violated an implicit norm of communication, disclosing more content than they were supposed to in that circumstance. Many of these norms are unwritten, being part of the shared common sense in a society and absorbed through contact with its communicative environment. Belonging to a society means also interiorizing and, therefore, mastering the norms that prescribe how much should be expressed and communicated in a given setting. Intercultural misunderstanding often arises when outsiders disclose too little or too much information—as measured by the insiders' standards.[1]

Talking about one's political opinions openly and passionately, for instance, is not only admitted in the Italian society but is even, to a certain extent, required.[2] Engaging in robust conversation about political news of the day with relatives, friends, and even strangers (maybe especially with strangers) is a favorite national pastime, to the point that being fully integrated into Italian society also means being able to openly and recurrently curse the current government. "Piove, governo ladro" (It rains, [because] the government is a thief) is a famous Italian self-ironic expression regarding the national attitude toward the political sphere.[3] There are other countries, though—for instance, the Scandinavian ones—in which disclosing one's political views so openly and animatedly, and especially with strangers, is considered rude and imposing.[4] As a consequence, the archetypal Italian will frequently be considered overly assertive in Scandinavian social settings; and, vice versa, the archetypal Scandinavian will be often judged as lukewarm in Italian circles.[5] This is because the two societies have a tendency to implicitly admit discrepant quantities of information in informal communicative settings concerning politics. Standards are not explicitly

1. These patterns of disclosure and the standards they prescribe are akin to the maxims of Paul Grice (1975), in particular to that of "quantity," but do not coincide with them, for they do not seek to merely dispel the danger of reticence or redundancy but, as it will be shown later, obey a censorial categorization of the *langue*, resulting from the precise configurations of power that sediment in a culture.

2. On the evolution of the pragmatics of everyday Italian political discourse, in which talk about politics increasingly resembles sport talk, see the subtle semiotic analysis contained in Calabrese (1998), according to which the quotidian discourse of politics can be compared, in Italy, with talking about boxing; cf. Semino and Masci (1996), which, similarly, studies the pervasiveness of soccer-related metaphors in the contemporary Italian political discourse; on talk shows as preeminent linguistic form in present-day Italy, see Novelli (2016).

3. For an overview of current communicative attitudes toward official politics in Italy, especially in relation to the media system, see Colombo (2010).

4. For a bibliography of comparative semiotic studies on political discourse, see Jackson, Nickerson, and Brown Jackson (1982), esp. secs. 4 and 5.

5. It is difficult to convert such anecdotic observation into a semiotic research program on comparative national public discourse styles; for a methodological introduction, see Olza, Loureda, and Casado-Velarde (2014).

codified but are nonetheless so cogent that infractions are immediately frowned upon, leading to social stigmatization and exclusion.

Topics can be arranged along a spectrum, depending on the extent to which society limits conversation about them. At the very liberal end of the spectrum, one finds subjects about which social conversation is allowed limitless unfolding. If such topics are cross-culturally boundless, they become perfect for intercultural conversation. Unfortunately, the more a topic is cross-culturally free from limiting norms, the less it tends to be socially relevant. A typical topic of this kind is weather. Traveling across epochs, sociocultural groups, and ages, one is pretty sure that talking for hours about the current weather will not offend anyone's sensibility. It could even be hypothesized that the British mastery of such topic is somehow related to the fact of having ruled for centuries over a huge and multifarious empire, which was so diverse as to admit only few cross-culturally legitimate topics, such as weather.[6]

Even the most anodyne of topics, however, can suddenly swerve dangerously toward contentious areas. Talking about weather indeed is so inert because it is talking about phenomena that are not controlled by any human agency. Nevertheless, as soon as someone hints at the fact that "this summer has been so hot; it is because of climate change," then human agency is pushed back in the picture, and immediately a peaceful talk on weather banalities can become a heated dispute about political responsibilities for the greenhouse effect. The same goes for other small-talk topics, such as food, for instance. Food can be used as cross-cultural topic for never-ending innocuous conversation; however, as soon as people start talking about which animals should or should not be transformed into food, it is pretty certain that someone's feathers will get ruffled. In general, no topic is so banal as to allow conversation to freely develop without ever causing any strain. Of course, some topics are relatively safer than others, as experts in cross-cultural education know well.

Analogously, at the other end of the spectrum, there is no topic that is doomed to generate immediate friction. On the contrary, every topic, even the most sensitive one, can become the subject of polite, tactful, and respectful conversation if the right contextual conditions are given. Nevertheless, as regards some topics, these conditions are bound to be so fragile that conversation is very likely to

6. In many cultures, however, weather is not at all considered as immune from human agency; see one of the most widely known passages in British imperial literature, that is, David Livingstone's "conversations with a rain doctor" (among the Tswana of Southern Africa), which famously illustrates how politically charged discourse about the weather can be (Comaroff and Comaroff 1991, 1, chap. 15).

unfold into a quarrel. This is especially the case when a multicultural conversation is held on topics that do not, cross-culturally, share the same level of normative disclosure. In most societies, for instance, talking about one's personal finances is a big conversational mistake. In some other societies, on the contrary, the question "How much do you make?" is considered perfectly acceptable, even among strangers, at least in some settings. When money is discussed in intercultural circles, uneasiness is, therefore, to be expected, since, unlike weather, money is a conversation topic that societies traditionally regulate in extremely diverging ways. Some rhetorical tools, such as irony, for instance, can be used to smooth away the edges of conversation about these topics, but only to a certain extent, since the sense of irony itself varies cross-culturally.

The cultural analyst must therefore map the semantic sensitivity of communities, including understanding which topics of conversation are generally unrestrained, what is a matter of careful negotiation, and what is considered absolutely taboo. Furthermore, the cultural historian must seek to explain which sociopolitical, economic, and cultural forces have produced a specific morphology of semantic admissibility. For instance, why are Italians eager to discuss their political views, while Scandinavians are so reluctant? This exercise of pragmatic cartography does not have only a theoretical or a historical interest. Indeed, in a society that is increasingly interconnected, in which members of different communities often become virtual or physical conversation partners, recognizing the pitfalls of intercultural sensitivity is useful and necessary if one is to avoid fruitless tension.

This study is also interesting and even urgent from another point of view. The quantity and quality of information that individuals and groups circulate regarding a certain topic are not regulated only by implicit norms dictated by tradition, common sense, and shared community awareness. In most circumstances, the way in which societies seek to "regiment" (Parmentier 1994, 127) the circulation of new semantic content is explicitly coded and enforced by a state-regulated system of laws and sanctions. In no community can members talk about whatever they want; with whomever they want; whenever and wherever they want; for as long as they want; however they want without implicitly or explicitly complying with the regulations of common sense and tradition in the community itself. That is the case also at the level of the state, in which explicit laws usually limit the ways citizens might share contents. Even in the most self-styled liberal societies, there are topics and pragmatic conditions about which no rules are made, but there are also subjects and conversation settings that are scrupulously regulated or even considered taboo.

The cultural analyst therefore must inquire not only as to how different cultures implicitly limit conversation but also how different states explicitly encourage or discourage public talking about certain topics, subjects, and issues. In other terms, every society both implicitly and explicitly sets a standard for which free public conversations are considered legitimate and, on the contrary, bans as morally or even legally unacceptable sharing contents beyond such limits.

The notion of sustainability has been usually associated with the impact of human initiatives on the environment. However, drawing theoretical inspiration from the semiotics of Yuri M. Lotman[7]—who modeled the notion of "semiosphere" after Vernadsky's[8] concept of "biosphere"—one might ask, Which kind of circulation of semantic content in the semiosphere is considered sustainable, and which one is not? In an increasingly interconnected humanity, what implicit norms and explicit rules, if any, currently set a limit on the amount of meaning that is produced and shared by human beings? Which limitations, if any, are deemed as interculturally inadmissible, and which ones, by contrast, give rise to cross-cultural taboos and even legal interdictions?

Observing how societies implicitly or explicitly encourage or even enforce silence on certain topics is an effective point of departure for such an inquiry. In what circumstances do communities consider public talk inadmissible or even prosecutable, and what methods of moral suasion and legal enactment are adopted so as to ensure that no semantic content is shared on certain issues?

The present article concentrates, in particular, on propaganda for taciturnity from World War II onward. That is not the only historical and sociocultural context in which silence propaganda emerged as a powerful strategy for generating consensus, often to the detriment of the free circulation of ideas and expressions (for instance, similar processes characterized countries involved in the Cold War, and these processes may still exist, mutatis mutandis, in current neoliberal nation-states). However, World War II taciturnity propaganda is especially relevant to answer the programmatic questions outlined in the beginning of this essay, both because some of the most sophisticated persuasion means deployed to such effect were created by World War II dictatorial regimes and their adversaries and because the rhetorical frameworks underpinning such strategies are still conditioning the ways people, groups, and institutions communicate or, rather, keep quiet in present-day societies.

7. In Russian: Юрий Михайлович Лотман; Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg), February 28, 1922; Tartu, October 28, 1993.
8. In Russian: Владимир Иванович Вернадский; Petrograd (now Saint Petersburg), March 12, 1863; Moscow, January 6, 1945.

Taciturnity Propaganda from World War II On

Literature on state propaganda is very abundant. Although the word *propaganda* dates back to early modern Catholicism (the *Congregatio de Propaganda Fide* was meant to propagate Catholicism both in Europe and in its colonies), scholars have generally focused their attention on twentieth-century propaganda, specifically in relation to the formation, development, and activities of dictatorial regimes. The evolution of mass media between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth allowed ideologies to be communicated and spread in unprecedented ways. The history of Fascism and Nazism, for instance, could not be fully understood without reference to the concept of broadcasting: an ideological sender was able to reach an immense audience simultaneously and, at the same time, give each member of this mass-mediated audience the idea that she or he was being addressed individually. Perhaps no one better than media artists themselves has been able to capture, sometimes even better than scholars, the power of such mass communication. In the 1977 movie *Una giornata particolare* (A special day), for instance, Italian director Ettore Scola[9] shows perfectly how an Italian housewife, played by Sofia Loren, could develop a blind passion for Il Duce in the late 1930s while being practically secluded at home, reached by Fascist radio and popular magazines (Leone 2016). The study of autocratic propaganda before World War II has been so extensive as to actually shape the present-day disciplines of mass media studies, starting from the pioneer research of Paul Lazarsfeld[10] and others. Propaganda existed well before the twentieth century, and actually even before the word *propaganda* itself was coined at the dawn of modernity. Forms of propaganda circulated ideas and emotions also in the Roman Empire, for instance. Yet, it was during the first half of the twentieth century that social and technological developments converged, giving rise to new sweeping modalities for the transmission and diffusion of ideologies.

Despite the abundant literature on Fascist, Nazi, or Soviet propaganda, however, scholars have generally overlooked an important issue.[11] This issue is central not only for understanding past propaganda, but also for grasping the ways ideologies are diffused in the present-day world. Thus far, scholarship

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9. Trevico, province of Avellino, May 10, 1931; Rome, January 19, 2016.

10. Paul Feliz Lazarsfeld, Vienna, February 13, 1901; New York, June 30, 1976.

11. Even though several important scholars, such as Foucault and Barthes, significantly touched on this topic (see also Parmentier 1994, chap. 6); more specifically, see Dauenhauer (1979), as well as the other works by this author. An interesting anthropological perspective is in Basso (1970); see also Herzfeld (1997) on the key insight that many social orders are bound together not by overtly articulate statements of shared value but rather by shared zones of silence; on the semiotic link between silence and authoritarian discourse, see also Goldschläger (1982, 12).

has concentrated either on propaganda or on censorship. On the one hand, a public rhetoric is created and diffused in order to instill in citizens certain ideas, emotions, and pragmatic attitudes. On the other hand, signs, texts, images, and discourses that do not align with the central political agenda are censored, banned, and outlawed. Yet, the solidification of a state ideology cannot be explained with reference to these two processes only. Fascist rhetoric, for instance, did not consist only of propaganda and censorship activities. Efforts to circulate a positive imaginary of the regime and to chastise those offering counternarratives were central. Yet, the Fascist regime would have never lasted long without an essential element, that is, silence. Scholars have often concentrated on how communication builds the sociocultural hegemony of a set of ideas, turning it into state ideology; they have equally concentrated on violence exerted in order to protect such hegemony from critiques and debunking. The role of silence in preserving state ideologies, however, has generally been neglected.[12] Silence indeed is not the same as censorship. It is what comes after, but also before, censorship. It is not self-censorship either. It is total lack of communication among citizens.

The main argument here is that, although state ideology requires that citizens endorse it through their words, passions, and acts—all these are of course fundamental for the state ideology to thrive—what state ideology needs the most is not that citizens share certain contents but that they actually abstain from sharing them. State ideology requires silence. That is evident in autocratic regimes: in Fascist Italy, in Nazi Germany, but also in present-day states like China, Iran, or North Korea, huge state efforts are made not only to propagate the ideological tenets of the regime, and not only to detect, censure, and repress dissidents, but also and especially to make sure that people keep silent about certain areas of private and public life. The ultimate goal of the public rhetoric of silence is that citizens do not actually feel the urge to talk about something. They have internalized the ideology of silence so deeply that the limits of their everyday conversation appear totally natural to them, a sort of second nature.

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12. Some notable exceptions are Tannen and Saville-Troike (1985), Jaworski (1992, 1997), and Glenn (2004). Secrecy, on the contrary, has been made the object of abundant literature (starting with Simmel [1908]); an excellent anthology of classic semiotic studies on secret is in Lozano (2012, with an introduction by the editor). But secret and silence are different semiotic concept; silence is necessary to secret, but the taciturnity ideology and propaganda of dictatorial regimes does not simply aim at creating some secret-keeping citizens, but at begetting some quiet-keeping citizens. Citizens who interiorize such ideology do not hold secrets anymore, they simply do not hold thoughts, or the need to express them. Simmel (1908), however, crucially points out that the secret always has two faces; the actual content of the ostensible secret (which often turns out to be trivial) and the public performance of secrecy, which is key to the reproduction and extension of hierarchies of social domination and power asymmetries.

Silence is a universal feature of human communication. There could not be communication without silence. Literature on the philosophical and linguistic nature of silence is, therefore, also abundant. Nevertheless, the role of silence in shaping state ideologies has been often overlooked. Scholars have concentrated on what societies talk about and have usually omitted studying the ways areas of secrecy, silence, and noncommunication are created in a semiosphere.

Moreover, although silence is a transhistorical and cross-cultural feature of human communication, its quality varies depending on the various communicative contexts. It changes especially in relation to the evolution of technologies of communication. The role of public rhetorics of taciturnity has completely changed, for instance, in the present-day internet era, wherein individuals constantly share contents, ideas, and emotions through social networks. Both the Assange and the Snowden affairs point to the new critical limits that states seek to impose on public conversation, not only in autocratic regimes but also in societies that are supposed to champion democracy, transparency, and free speech.

On June 30, 1941, Italian movie theaters screened *Giornale Luce* (Newsreel light) no. 157 (fig. 1). *Giornale Luce* was a Fascist newsreel produced by the Luce Institute in Rome beginning in 1927 (Laura 2000; Passarelli 2006).[13] Preceded by a dramatic soundtrack, a giant right ear appears on the screen and to its side an equally gigantic hand, cocking the ear toward the spectator. A white spiral, rapidly whirling on the screen, draws the viewer's eyes toward the giant ear. A sentence starts to appear, superimposed in white on the image in the typical Mostra font of Fascist typography, rapidly filling the screen. The sentence reads:

> Camerati che forgiate nelle officine le armi ed i mezzi della vittoria, ricordate che siete combattenti fra i combattenti. Nulla esca dalla vostra bocca che si riferisce al vostro lavoro, alla nostra produzione bellica, a tutto ciò che vedete e udite durante il giornaliero lavoro.
> [Comrades, you who are forging in the factories [literally, "workshops"] the weapons and means of victory, remember that you are fighters among fighters. Do not let anything escape your mouth that refers to your work, to our war production, or to anything you see and hear during your daily work.]

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13. The Luce newsreels are accessible through the Luce archive at the website of the Senate of the Italian Republic, http://senato.archivioluce.it/senato-luce/home.html.

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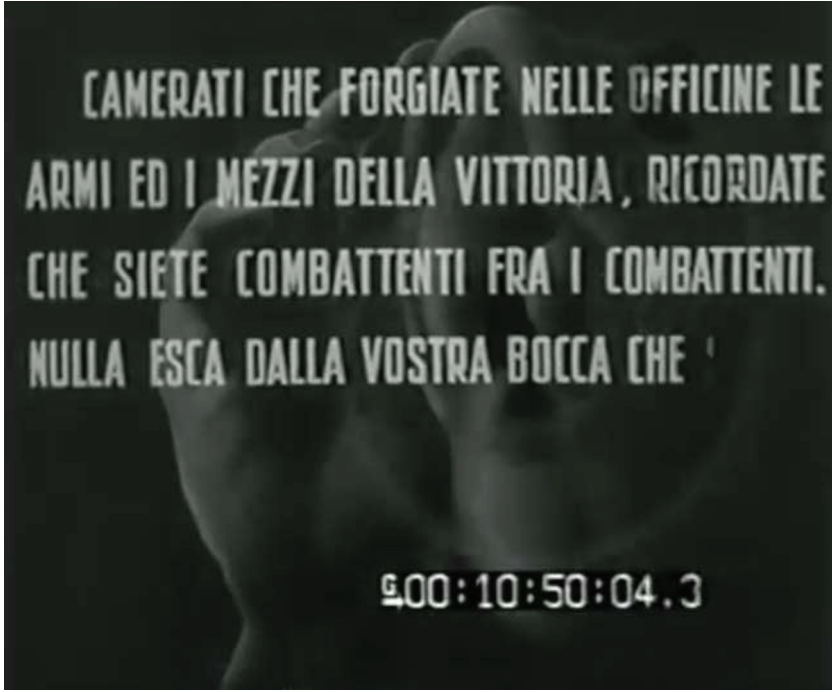NULLA ESCA DALLA VOSTRA BOCCA CHE '

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Figure 1. First photogram from *Giornale Luce* no. 157 ("Tacete! Il nemico vi ascolta. Tacete").

The giant ear then crossfades into a cave, and the cave vanishes into the image of a plane sinking a military vessel. The newsreel ends with one of the most famous slogans of Fascist propaganda: "Tacete! Il nemico vi ascolta. Tacete" (Keep quiet! The enemy is listening to you. Keep quiet).

In the previous months, the Italian navy had indeed suffered heavy losses: on February 25, 1941, the British submarine *HMS Upright* sank the Italian cruiser *Armando Diaz*; on February 27, the New Zealand Division cruiser *HMS Leander* sank the Italian armed merchant raider *Ramb I* off the Maldives; on May 24, just a month before the newsreel described above was screened, the British submarine *HMS Upholder* torpedoed and sank the Italian ocean liner *SS Conte Rosso*, used as a troop ship by the Italian military.

The newsreel, directed by Arnaldo Ricotti, was part of a series of four such reels (the first, no. 156, was screened in early June 1941; the last, no. 159, on July 7, 1941; the first two were directed by Ricotti, and the last two by Arturo Gemmiti). They had different targets and showed slight variations, but all focused on the same message: silence was the best weapon against espionage and

sabotage. They all adopted the image of the monstrous ear and the same slogan: "Tacete, il nemico vi ascolta! Tacete!"

During the Italian Fascist participation in World War II, not just newsreels but also other types of media conveyed this same message. The figure of the giant ear was in fact a visual quotation from a poster by Gino Boccasile,[14] one of the most fervent and prolific illustrators of Fascist propaganda[15] (Guerri 1982). In 1941 he created a poster depicting the helmeted head of a British soldier cocking his ear toward the viewer, his right hand orienting the ear toward the image foreground.[16] The slogan "Il nemico vi ascolta. Tacete!" was superimposed on the image in large and vivid white strokes (fig. 2). The same iconography and slogan also circulated in other formats. In 1942, the Italian postal service produced a special postcard for the army, displaying on the one side a reproduction of Boccasile's poster, leaving the other side blank. The intent of such a postcard was clear: in communicating with their families by this medium, soldiers were reminded they were not supposed to disclose any strategic information. Indeed, especially between 1941 and 1943, the slogan "Tacete" was everywhere: in newsreels, on posters and postcards, but also in other everyday objects like calendars and pins (using the more direct verbal form "Taci!" in the second person singular, as opposed to "Tacete!" in the second person plural). The slogan was also displayed in public places where people were likely to gather and talk (in Ottati, in the province of Salerno, one can still see today, in via Pantuliano, a fading Fascist mural with the words *TACI. VINCEREMO* (Be quiet. We shall win) (fig. 3). The Fascist "iconography of silence" was multifaceted: in one poster, reproduced in postcards too, the enemy was depicted as a spy in plain clothes, eavesdropping on a bar conversation from behind an open newspaper (fig. 4); in another poster, also reproduced in a postcard, the slogan "Tacete" comes from an old woman in the foreground, accompanied by the message "Non tradite mio figlio" (Don't betray my son), reproducing the shaky handwriting of an elderly person, on the background of a battle scene (fig. 5).[17] The Italian Military Intelligence Service (Servizio Informazioni Militare, or SIM) gave rise to a multiplicity of counterespionage activities. From June 10, 1940, to September 8, 1943, the special tribunals prosecuted 163 instances of espionage and 293 episodes of sabotage, deploying

14. Bari, July 14, 1901; Milan, May 10, 1952.

15. An introduction to the iconography of war posters is in Aulich (2007); an introduction to the story of Italian war propaganda posters is in Row (2002); see also James (2009); Facon (2013); and Eybl (2014) on World War I; on World War II, see Paret, Lewis, and Paret (1992); Lamonaca and Schleuning (2004); and Passera (2005); and on Soviet World War II posters, see Snopkov, Snopkov, and Shkliaruk (2004).

16. On the image of the enemy in Fascist war propaganda, see Sciola (2009).

17. The poster was designed by Walter Roveroni in 1941.

Figure 2. Italian Fascist propaganda poster "Tacete!" by Gino Boccasile

1,500 men under the direction of General Cesare Amé (Longo 2001).[18] This coercion alone, however, was not sufficient. Italians had to be persuaded to keep completely silent on everything—*tacere tutti su tutto*, literally "being quiet every-

18. Cumiana, province of Turin, November 18, 1892; Rome, June 30, 1983.

Figure 3. Fascist mural in via Pantuliano, Ottati, province of Salerno: "Taci. Vinceremo."

one on everything," as another slogan would read—not only because talk was a possible source of information for the enemy but also because, arguably, eliminating public conversation was the best way to crush any sparkle of internal dissidence.

There is abundant literature on Italian Fascist propaganda, specifically on the imagery produced during World War II. The corpus of images and other messages meant to propagate a "culture of silence," however, have not yet been made the object of in-depth investigation. This propaganda has a paradoxical semiotic nature: it deploys a vast array of channels, media, and messages in order to instill in the Italian population an ideology of noncommunication.

It is hard to ascertain how Italian citizens concretely responded to such propaganda. From the point of view of semiotics—which is interested more in the pragmatic reactions that are planned in and by the semiolinguistic structures of texts, including those of silence propaganda, than in empirical reactions to it—such a question is not highly relevant. It is extremely relevant, however, from the point of view of the history and sociology of communication, public discourse, and everyday conversation. In the case of Italy, one can easily place such empirical reactions along a spectrum. The majority of citizens, as is evident from the history of Italian society under the Fascist regime, not only complied with the ideology of silence promoted by state propaganda, but also deeply interiorized it, which was the most important outcome of the pursuit of such propaganda. At

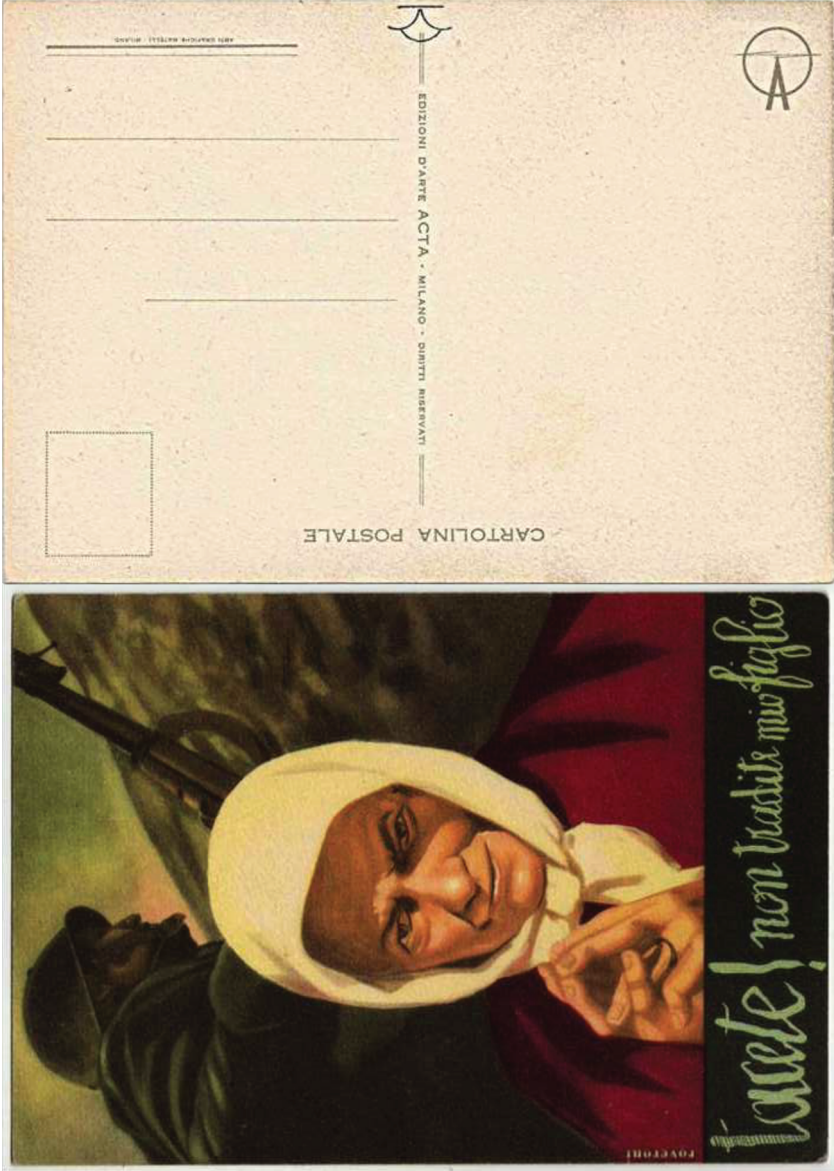**Figure 4.** Recto of a postcard reproducing Fascist silence propaganda poster "Il nemico vi ascolta."

Figure 5. Postcard reproducing Fascist silence propaganda poster "Tacete! Non tradite mio figlio" (Walter Roveroni, 1941)

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the margins of the spectrum, nevertheless, the same propaganda was received as a highly contested field of cultural production and semiotic interpretation rather than as a monolithic set of norms that the citizenry would absorb uncritically. As a matter of fact, many subjects historically resisted the Fascist state's propaganda; they stayed silent under this regime of top-down enforced social representation, exactly because they did not buy into state-regimented interpretations of reality in the first place.[19]

This effort was not unique to the Italian Fascist propaganda. In 1940, the Deutsche Propaganda Agentur created an analogous poster (fig. 6): against the background of a factory, it depicts a worker with the head of a goose, its beak wide open. The slogan clarifies the meaning of the image: "Schäm Dich, Schwätzer! Feind hört mit—Schweigen ist Pflicht!" (Shame on you, chatter! The enemy is listening. Silence is a duty!) (Fleischer 1994). At the other end of the ideological spectrum, in 1945 the Czech Communist Party produced a poster with the slogan "Dříve Kolaborant, Dnes Panikář" (fig. 7). It depicts a former collaborator with the Nazis turned into a rumor monger who causes panic. The bottom of the poster reads, in part, "The traitors and fascists . . . spread lack of faith in building the Czech state. Silence them!"—although in this case the encouragement was not only to passively keep quiet about the failures of the communist state but also to actively silence its detractors.

This "iconography of silence," however, needs a comparative study not only because it was deployed in several dictatorial regimes, but also and especially because it was paradoxically present in democracies too. Several of the posters produced and diffused by the US Government Printing Office during World War II (mostly in 1942–43) focused on "loose lips": "The Sound That Kills" (Eric Ericson, 1942); "Someone Talked" (Frederick O. Siebel, 1942); "The Enemy is Listening" (William H. Shuster, 1942, drawing); "Closed for the Duration— Loose Lips Can Cost Lives" (Howard Scott, 1942); "Loose Talk Can Cost Lives" (Holm Gren, 1942); "Sailor Beware! Loose Talk Can Cost Lives" (John Philip Falter, 1942); "A Careless Word . . . a Needless Sinking" (1942, Anton Otto Fischer); "Button Your Lip! Loose Talk Can Cost Lives" and "Be Smart, Act Dumb! Loose Talk Can Cost Lives" (1942, both by Otto Soglow); "Don't Be a Dope and Spread Inside Dope—Loose Talk Can Cost Lives" (1942, Cecil Calvert Beall); "Loose Talk Can Cost Lives" (Stevan Dohanos, 1942); "Bits of Careless Talk Are Pieced

19. Literature on the topic is vast; a punctual analysis is in Sulzenbacher (1999); for a recent general introduction, see Bonsaver and Gordon (2005); in any case, the cultural reactions that silence propaganda could trigger among the citizenry in terms of resistance, subversion, and overall counterhegemony against the communicative power of the state should be made the object of a farther contribution.

Figure 6. Nazi silence propaganda poster "Schäm Dich, Schwätzer!" (Deutsche Propaganda Agentur, 1940).

Figure 7. Czech silence propaganda poster ˝Dříve Kolaborant, Dnes Panikář˝ (1945), sesigned by Návrh Stepán and A. Haase. 130.2 × 97.8 cm.

Together by the Enemy" (Stevan Dohanos, 1943); and "Serve in Silence" (Clay Spohn, 1935–45).

Some of these posters explicitly thematized the dilemma of articulating an "ideology of silence" with a "culture of free speech." The poster "Free Speech Doesn't Mean Careless Talk!" (Ess Ar Gee, 1939–45), for instance, resorts (like

the German poster) to an animal representation of the chatter (in this case, a parrot; fig. 8). Ess Ar Gee (Seymour R. Goff) was also the designer of what is probably the most famous and iconic poster in the series, "Loose lips might sink ships", whose slogan has become an idiomatic expression (fig. 9).

There are also plenty of analogous British posters, such as "He's in the Silent Service—Are You?"; "Watch Your Talk for His Sake"; "Careless Talk May Cost His Life"; "Ports Are Often Bombed When Convoys Are In Because Somebody

Figure 8. American silence propaganda poster "Free Speech Doesn't Mean Careless Talk!" (Ess Ar Gee, 1939–45).
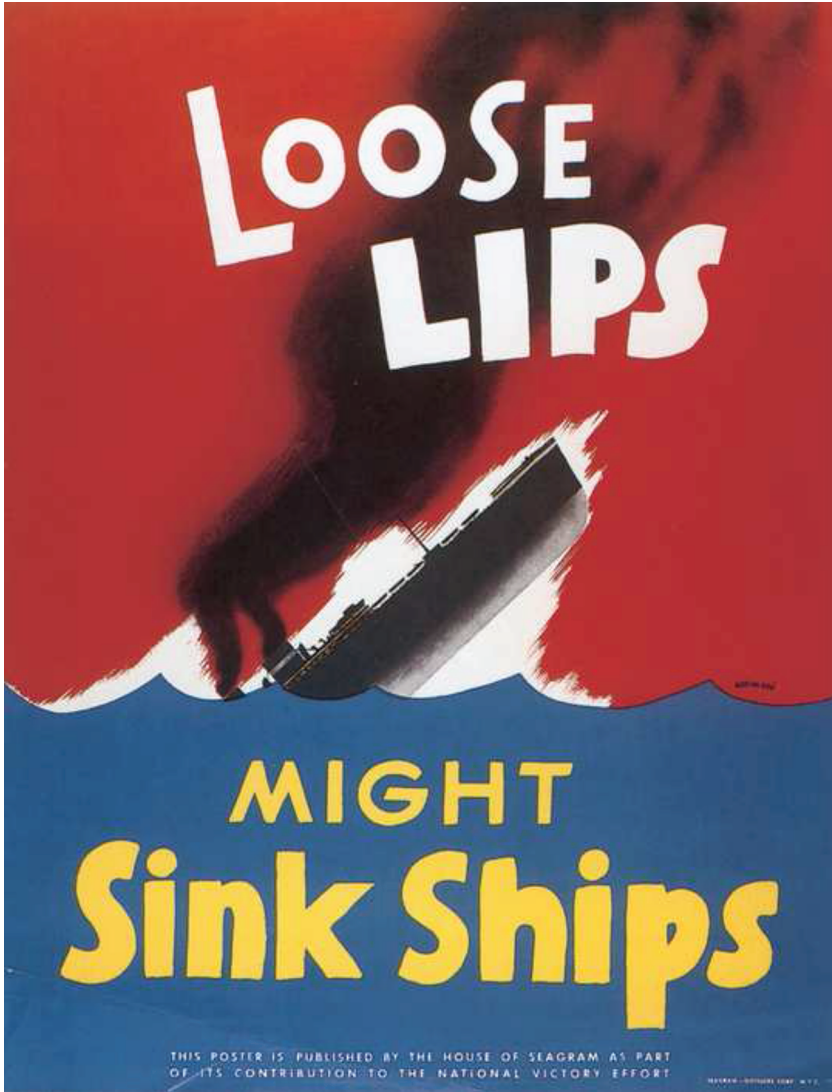
Figure 9. American silence propaganda poster "Loose lips might sink ships" (Ess Ar Gee, 1939–45).

Talked" (H.M. Stationery Office, 1939–45); "Beware, the Walls Have Ears" (Jack Leonard and Walls Have Ears Organization, 1939–45).[20]

These posters, their slogans, and their iconography represent an extremely intriguing case of visual persuasion and iconic propaganda. They constitute a

20. On World War II British posters, see Slocombe (2014).

challenging semiotic corpus, not only because they advocate silence through verbal and visual communication, but also because, in the case of American and British silence propaganda, they strive to inculcate in citizens an "ideology of taciturnity" while heralding free speech, in contrast to the autocratic regimes in Italy and Germany. From this point of view, investigation of this corpus relates to the wider subject of the "iconography of silence."[21]

To give an example, the figure of the giant ear can be found in the iconography of Japanese World War II–era counterespionage (fig. 10). It reproduces a pair of Japanese playing cards of the kind known as *Iroha karuta* ろはかるた. *Iroha* ろは is a reference to a Japanese poem, probably dating from the Heian period 安時代 (794–1179) and first attested in 1079. This poem has the particularity of being both a pangram and an isogram, that is, it contains all the syllables of the Japanese syllabary only once. The term *karuta* かるた, instead, transcribes the Portuguese word *carta*, for it was the Portuguese who introduced playing cards in Japan in the sixteenth century. *Iroha caruta*, hence, is a card game based on the Japanese syllabary. Until World War II, Japanese children played with these cards in order to improve their ability to read and memorize traditional Japanese proverbs and their educational content. Cards are divided into two decks of 47 + 1 cards each. Those of the first deck contain the text of as many proverbs, each beginning with one of the different *kana* 名 (syllabic transcriptions) of the Japanese alphabet; the cards of the second deck contain images that represent these proverbs. The game measures the participants' ability to associate the cards of the first deck with those of the second.

In the card reproduced in figure 10, however, the proverb has been replaced by a wartime propaganda slogan in katakana 仮名 (one of the three systems of syllabic transcription used by Japanese), which reads:

yu ユ dan ダン ni ニ
te テ ki キ ga ガ
me メ wo ヲ tsu ツ ke ケ ru ル

21. Besides these cross-national and even cross-ideological semiotic features, however, other characteristics were specific of national propaganda contexts; a significant divide can be detected, for instance, between how taciturnity propaganda in despotic countries would usually directly address, and threaten, the individual, and how, instead, in democratic societies, it would more customarily take the form of advice generally addressed to the entirety of the population, without the prefiguration of a culprit; in other words, the structure of the enunciation of the former tended more to the instauration of an "I-You-dialogical"—and, therefore, more personal—discursive relation, whereas that of the latter would more often establish an "It-historical"—and, therefore, less personal—discursive framework.

Figure 10. Japanese militarist silence propaganda playing card (1943)

yudan ユダン [= 油断] 'negligence'
ni ニ 'to'
teki テキ [= 敵] 'the enemy'
ga ガ (particle indicating subject of the sentence)
mewotsukeru メヲツケル [= 目を付ける] 'to take advantage of'

[The enemy takes advantage of your distraction][22]

The image on the background specifies the object of negligence. It depicts a
military harbor in the upper half of the image, an airport in the lower half, with

22. The overall implication is that through the ear the enemies will, literally, "use your eyes." The playful-
ness across visual and linguistic genres, which relates to the dialectics between power and silence, shapes the
linguistic-iconographic forms of such propaganda also through a refashioning of the body politic in the crea-
tive redeployment of body parts. Significantly, a sensory device that citizens cannot "shut", namely, the ears,
is playfully reconfigured in relation to a sensory device, the eyes, that citizens can, on the contrary, voluntarily
alienate from perception (by closing their eyes).

the temporal indication "18 3 1," that is, March 1, 1943, the production date of the card. The card on the left, paired with the first, visually indicates who will take advantage from such negligence: first, through a reference to the corresponding Japanese word ユダン (negligence), here recalled by its first syllable, ユ, prominent in the upper right corner, white on a red background; second, through the image of a gloved hand—most likely that of a spy—collecting written military information that someone incautiously left behind; and third, and above all, through the image of a blue wall from which emerge a big eye that sees all and a big ear that hears all.

As did the propaganda of Fascist counterespionage then, so also would the Japanese militarist propaganda resort to the figure of a giant ear. However, this figure was not new. One could find it already in the moralized manga of the mid-nineteenth century, such as the famous *Shingaku osana etoki* 心学推絵時 (Illustrated moral philosophy for children), by Utagawa Kuniyoshi (1842) (fig. 11).[23] Titled "Kabe ni mimi ari" 壁に耳あり (Walls have ears)—part of the Japanese saying that usually continues with "shoji ni me ari" 障子に目あり (the doors have eyes),[24] this print was supposed to inculcate in mid-nineteenth century Japanese children, but also in adults, through an entertaining iconography, the idea that conversation was always a potential public fact, observable and, therefore, censurable. The figure of the "walls with ears" is to be found in many traditional cultures, so that when Italian Fascist posters (or Japanese militarist posters,[25] such as the one in fig. 12) attributed this giant ear to an enemy, invisible, and pernicious spy, they did not create it ex nihilo but reactivated instead an ancient imaginary whose ramifications included, in Europe, also the religious iconography of sin (the giant eye of god that sees and judges everything was replaced by the giant ear of the enemy that hears everything[26]; taciturnity propaganda, however, also alluded to the fact that, while the spy eavesdropped on the incautious chatter, the regime was simultaneously watching both and would punish them accordingly).

This corpus of taciturnity propaganda messages constitutes a fundamental term of comparison in order to understand present-day crucial problems, such

23. 歌川 国芳, January 1, 1798; Edo, April 14, 1861.

24. Or typical Japanese sliding windows made of wood and paper.

25. The ideology of taciturnity circulated in Japan also through songs, recently gathered in an album あなたは狙われている~防諜とは~スパイ歌謡全集 1931–1943 (Japan's spy prevention songs, 1931–1943; cf. Orbaugh 2015); on World War II propaganda in Japan, see Kitayama Setsurō 北山節郎 (1997); and Ōzorasha 大空社 (2000).

26. A classical study on war propaganda posters, inspired by Aby Warburg's art theory, is Ginzburg (2001).

Figure 11. Moralized manga "Kabe ni mimi ari" 壁に耳あり, from the *Shingaku osana etoki* 心学推絵時 (Illustrated moral philosophy for children) by Utagawa Kuniyoshi.

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Figure 12. Japanese militarist silence propaganda poster of the civil counterespionage (市民防諜 *shimin bōchō*) created to publicize the counterespionage week (防諜週間 *bōchō shūkan*) and prescribe the allegiance to the five ammonitions (五訓ヲ守レ).

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as those stemming from the often problematic relation of democratic governments with social networks conversation, conspiracy theories, data mining, and so on. The analysis of the public rhetoric and propaganda of taciturnity from World War II on must entail (1) surveying posters and other artifacts advocating silence on certain topics as a socially appropriate or even legally enforced attitude; (2) reconstructing the historical and material production context of these objects; (3) analyzing through semiotics their specific visual and verbal message, and identifying their target, ideology, and expected effects; (4) comparing and contrasting "taciturnity propaganda" in different countries, and paying specific attention to the difference between democratic and autocratic countries; (5) proposing a gendered reading of these materials: in many cases, indeed, women are explicitly or implicitly evoked as the weak link in the chain of taciturnity (Gal 1991; Chetty 2004).

Ideologies of Silence

All societies impose limits on the free circulation of knowledge, information, and other semantic content. Some of these limits are enforced for economic reasons. Such is the case of copyright: one cannot freely reproduce a movie, an image, a song, or a quotation from a book. One must abide by copyright law and its prescriptions. Some other limits are imposed for moral reasons. For instance, in many societies, so-called pornography is subject to diffusion limits. Public conversation, however, can be restricted also for political reasons, for instance, when a country is at war with another country. In peacetime, these constraints are often relaxed but never eliminated. The constitutions of many democratic countries contain provisions against unlawful disclosure of information. Several of the most controversial issues of present-day societies concern precisely this tension between, on the one hand, the need to protect the freedom of speech and, on the other hand, the need to defend the state's interests. The situation is paradoxically complicated by the fact that, while many states impose limits on the amount of content citizens can freely circulate, the same states relax limits, especially in times of international tension, as regards the amount of information they can gather from private conversations. On the one side, thus, the state regiments public conversation, whereas on the other side, it monitors private conversation.

   In both tasks, however, coercion is never sufficient, just as it was not sufficient during World War II. Laws are accompanied by a continuous efforts of moral suasion and propaganda, which aim to inculcate in citizens a certain ideology of speaking and to set a specific balance between disclosure and taciturn-

nity. Indeed, governments cannot limit themselves to enforce an ideal standard of sustainable public conversation. They must also endorse it through an ongoing propaganda effort, so as to convince citizens that, for instance, Edward Snowden was not a hero but a traitor, since his conduct imperiled national security interests.

Also, as a consequence of state propaganda, citizens often show a tendency to interiorize these standards, laws, and constraints. In other words, they develop communicative habits that cease to question the rationale of such limitations. Why shouldn't the photograph of a painting be freely reproduced? Why shouldn't sexuality be publicly discussed in schools? And why is military information to be kept secret at all costs? The sclerosis of these communicative habits is worsened by the fact that public conversation about them is frowned on or even outlawed—a vicious circle that discourages renegotiation of semantic sustainability both within a state and internationally.

Research must react to such paralysis of public debate not through suggesting new standards of semantic disclosure. Ultimately, society itself must regulate the quantity and quality of information that it lets freely circulate in the semiosphere. On the contrary, research must point out the historical and, therefore, contingent roots of existent standards and point out the possibility of alternatives. It will underline the role of governments and other institutional agencies in implicitly or explicitly advocating for secrecy and taciturnity and pinpoint the way this rhetoric and propaganda of secrecy are instrumental to the hegemonic power of certain classes or groups of interest, at least from World War II on. In the age of digital interconnectedness, no national community can abstain from painstakingly negotiating and renegotiating its standards of communicative sustainability at the international level.[27] Nowadays, what we decide to talk or not to talk about is no longer a personal matter, nor an exclusively national matter either, but an issue that concerns the entire and continuously ongoing global conversation. Semiotic research is meant to cast new light on present-day public ideologies and rhetorics of taciturnity.

27. Concentrating on the genesis of silence ideology propaganda from World War II on is important also because it was in such a period that national semiospheres started to interact at different levels, often with such intensity that the correspondence itself between national and semiotic spaces was blurred; the interpretative agency of propaganda makers, espionage operators, long-distance deployed soldiers, and even commoners extended way beyond the borders of the nation-state. In such a period as well as nowadays, however, postulating the semiotic coherence of national semiospheres is a useful, if not indispensable, point of departure in order to understand how this coherence is then challenged and sometimes even disrupted by trans- and cross-national semiotic phenomena.

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