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CLAES TÄNGH WRANGEL

Centre for Multidisciplinary Studies on Racism
claes.wrangel@cemfor.uu.se

*Chang, G. C. (2023). Revolution and Witchcraft: The Code of Ideology in Unsettled Times. Palgrave Macmillan. 415 pages; ISBN: 9783031176814.*

How to study and critique the role that language plays in the governance of human behavior and subjectivity is a founding question within political philosophy. Within the history of ideas, academic discussions have located within language the space of politics, at once a matrix of power and domination as well as the location of radical action and resistance. For Giorgio Agamben, the relationship between language and our world is "the fundamental relation – the onto-logical relation" (2015, p.271), a relation that we may not be able to escape, but one that nonetheless also carries with it the means through which we are able to act on and in the world. Within this tradition, language is often conceived as a space of hope. "As long as there is language", Terry Eagleton writes, "hope remains possible" (2015, p.124) – hope that the world in which we live is not fixed, that power can never be absolute, that language can both constitute and transform the world.

It is within this long and rich tradition that one must situate Gordon C. Chang's book *Revolution and Witchcraft: The Code of Ideology in Unsettled Times*. The task Chang sets for himself is a daunting one, one that engages some of the most fundamental questions of social science: to answer, in Chang's words, "key questions about the human condition: why do people end up doing what they do? Why do things happen in a society the way they do?" (2023, p.1). To do this, Chang pays particular attention to the role of language in the establishment of social order. The book's ambition is to identify a "basic mechanism" of how language and idea systems "shape the thought processes of entire societies" (2023, p.1) in order to regulate human behavior across time and space. Even more ambitiously, Chang ventures forth - in the spirit of, yet without reference to the critical tradition introduced above – to provide a guide on how language can be used to escape the exclusions, limits and power relations orchestrated by totalitarian idea systems.

To realize these ambitions, Chang pursuits a series of carefully analyzed case studies: 1) of the European witch-hunts in early modernity (chapters 2 through 7), 2) of the Communist revolution led by Mao Zedong between 1949 and 1976 (chapters 8-13) and 3) the early phases of the US-led War on Terror during the

beginning of the 2000s (chapters 14-18). The cases represent for Chang a set of ideal typical idea systems: from the evidentiary driven idea system maintaining the European witch-hunts, via the ideationally driven Communist revolution to the hybrid discourse of the War on Terror, which, according to Chang made use of both evidentiary and ideational elements. Read individually, the case studies are incredibly detailed, and they offer a timely contribution to discourse studies, showcasing how discursive regimes or idea systems are expressed, practiced and negotiated in various contexts as well as how idea systems can be studied analytically. Chang excels in the empirical readings, guiding the reader through the different idea systems expressed in both high-level policy discourse and in institutional practice, paying close attention to minute details in both language and social practices.

Across the three cases, Chang focuses on the central role afforded to the governance of social difference, in particular with respect to how individuals and minority groups were surveilled, identified, and targeted - "coded" in Chang's terminology – as threats to the integrity of the idea system as a whole: women in the case of the European witch-hunts, Muslims in the case of the War on Terror and people arbitrarily deemed as potential counterrevolutionaries in the case of Mao's China. To that end, Chang makes visible the central role of violence and social exclusion in the formation of social subjectivities and order: how different idea systems matched —"per the principle of resemblance" (2023, p.378) —idealized images to "particular concrete situations, characters, and activities (information)" (ibid.) in order to identify and differentiate between socially promoted behavior and behaviors and individuals perceived as potential threats. In this respect, Chang's analyses offer an important addition to Foucauldian inspired analyses of the biopolitics of security and control, which have tended to focus on liberal societies and modern practices of security. In religious contexts, Foucault's notion of pastoral power, which emphasizes the paradoxical violence of care, has been more readily applied than the language of discipline, security and violence that Chang makes use of to study the European witch-hunts. This is a much-needed contribution, that Chang could potentially have made more explicit.

It is when Chang combines the three case studies in order to realize his general ambition to identify a "basic mechanism" of discourse that his study unfortunately becomes a bit more controversial. Throughout the book, Chang offers a plurality of concrete methods and analytical tools to define and study discourse. According to Chang, an idea system is defined as containing "seven domains of components for idea construction" (2023, p.16). Yet outside these seven domains, Chang also analyses a series of alternative linguistic processes, such as the role of drama (ibid., p.169; p.299); the use of fixed vs fluid categories (ibid., p.183) and the role of enumerations to produce a sense of order and control (ibid., p.184). Chang also distinguishes between what he calls "discursive shorthands and discursive longhands" (ibid., p.293) as well as evaluates each idea system by reference to believability, resilience, adaptability, developmental potential and ease of use. In my view, it is only in his analysis of the European witch-hunts that he really makes use of his definition of idea systems. Together, the heterogenous set of analytical tools that Chang identifies – more than 60 according to Chang – risks contradicting the ambition to create a universal methodological apparatus that can be applied to any idea system. On the contrary, the heterogenous set of tools and definitions employed implies rather that there are qualitative differences between idea systems that cannot

be transcended – differences that demand that different analytical tools be employed when studying these systems.

To my mind, Chang could have also substantiated his normative ambitions further. Chang develops his normative through what he calls "fair-mindedness" (ibid., p. 405), an individual capacity to "mitigate the worst effects of dangerous idea systems" (ibid., p.406). Chang describes fairmindedness as a form of "embodied hope" (2023, p.406) - "at once an *attitude* and an *ability*" as well as a "state of *developed humanity*" (ibid., p.405., original emphasis). According to Chang, the capacity for fairmindedness is an exclusive capacity, a prerogative of a select group of individuals that is "very difficult to achieve" (ibid.). In Chang's words, only "a rare few could [ever] attain" it, least of all "a mass of society" (ibid.). Chang's emphasis on fairmindedness as an individual capacity risk, in my reading, contradicting the actual empirical analyses that Chang so masterfully conducts, which focus less on elite actors, and more on the social relations established, maintained and reproduced through idea systems. Key questions, such as under which social conditions an ethic of fair-mindedness can be fostered among individuals and the general public, are placed outside of analysis. On the contrary, Chang emphasizes the difficulties of such a task, given what he describes as the "biological limits of the mind" among "the general populace" (ibid., p.399). A distinction is thus produced between those with the intellectual and cognitive capacity to change and use language to one's ends, and the blind masses, capable only of following and repeating language. As such, Chang's book risks reproducing, rather than critiquing, liberal ideas that equate politics and power with individual agency – ideas that the field of discourse studies, including Chang's rich empirical analyses, have for so long sought to critique. Indeed, if there is one thing that we have learned from the works of critical discourse theory it is to *not* place our hope for another world in the intellectual capacity of a predefined elite, but rather to identify this hope in the im/possibilities of language, in what Eagleton calls the "unfinished nature of the actual" (2015, p.52). Beyond his normative claims, Chang's empirical analyses offers those of us interested in identifying and acting on such im/possibilities an invaluable set of analytical resources, primed to the task of deconstructing the power of ideas.

## References

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