Governing by slogans

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Abstract
Throughout recorded history, slogans have been an important part of our public life. From political rhetoric and propaganda, to social movements and awareness-raising campaigns, their usage has overcome historical periods, cultural barriers, ethnic affiliation, political systems, party allegiance or personal taste. Arguably more than any other linguistic 'device', slogans deliver a clearly recognizable message with as little complexity as possible. Nevertheless, despite their rhetorical 'economy', the narratives provided by slogans have also been associated with a simplified or even reductionist portrayal of otherwise complex or controversial phenomena. This article aims to address a range of previously neglected aspects associated with slogans and governmentality. The introductory part provides a genealogy of discussions over slogans and the main shortcomings the use of slogans has been associated with. The central part takes a closer look at zero tolerance, a flagship policy associated with the neoliberal logic of governance. The concluding part of this article outlines the subversive character associated with the mechanism of sloganization.

Slogans and governmentality: some preliminary considerations

Perhaps more than any other linguistic 'device', slogans deliver a clearly recognizable message with as little complexity as possible. Their overall effectiveness – at least at the level of implementation – can be evaluated against simplicity as the single most important criteria of how successfully a particular message has been delivered. At the same time, slogans provide a sense of direction to a particular initiative as well galvanize an audience on a topic concerning public policy. Being easily

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recognizable, slogans have been associated with phenomena as diverse as electoral campaigns (e.g. Dwight Eisenhower's 'I Like Ike'), political rhetoric (including political propaganda [and manipulation]), foreign policy, marketing and advertising (e.g. Nike's 'Just do it' or Tesco's 'Every Little Helps'), military strategies, diplomacy and foreign policy, awareness-raising campaigns (e.g. Live8's 'Make Poverty History'), social movements (e.g. the 'Turn on, tune in, drop out' slogan of the 1960s counterculture) as well as education (e.g. 'Education Matters').

In addition to their rallying function, slogans – as language in general – also raise important theoretical questions including conceptual ones (Reboul, 1979). Paradoxically enough, the more straightforward and comprehensive a particular slogan appears, the more blurry and controversial its policy implications might ultimately turn out to be. For example, the phrase 'My Country, right or wrong' represents a flagship slogan associated with patriotism. Yet, basing one's individual commitment or public policy on this slogan alone does a disservice to the complexity of patriotism and the many problems and dilemmas it has been associated with (Sardoč, 2019). In fact, by promoting it via slogans and other rhetorical 'paraphernalia', patriotism starts to function as an alibi for controversial policies and practices [e.g. Trump's slogan 'America First' as just one among many examples].

It therefore comes as no surprise that slogans figure as an important topic in disciplines and areas of research as diverse as linguistics (Miller and Toman, 2016), policy analysis (Sharkansky, 2002), advertisement and marketing (Reece et al., 1994), fashion design (Tong and Su, 2022), security studies (Nishikawa, 2009), anthropology (Makovicky et al., 2019), computational creativity (Alnajjar and Toivonen, 2021), social psychology (Vaes et al., 2011), literary studies (Mieszkowski, 2016), education (Apple, 1972; Popkewitz, 1980; Schmenk et al., 2018), addiction studies (White, 2005), semiotics (Song and Jeon, 2018) historiography (Dickins, 2017), international relations (Hartig, 2018; Zeng, 2020), philosophy (Reboul 1975; Cherry, 2021), terrorism studies (Nathanson, 2010), educational philosophy and theory (Hare, 1986), political science (Dandeker and Troyna, 1983; Karmazin, 2020), etc.

The interdisciplinary research arising out of this scholarship brings to the forefront a variegated portrayal of slogans and a range of different research problems they give rise to. Interestingly enough, while the analysis of particular slogans has been well documented (e.g. Haydon, 1973; Hyland, 1979; Mieszkowski, 2017; Roth, 2001), the examination of the various shortcomings they have been associated with – alongside important conceptual 'misadventures' – remain at the fringes of scholarly interest (Sardoč, 2021a). In particular, some of the conceptual and policy aspects of slogans have received – at best – only limited attention.

Alongside 'standard' questions from this area of scholarly research, for example, 'what do slogans mean, how do they function, and what are their characteristics' (Denton, 1980: 10), there is a need to address additional questions that would help to unfold the neoliberal 'revolution' in governmentality and its relationship with language (Martín Rojo and Del Percio, 2020). For example, when – and how – do particular concepts [or a combination of them] turn into slogans [and vice versa]? What is the relationship between a slogan and a particular policy it is related with? What are the most pressing shortcomings associated with the process of sloganization? What problems and dilemmas arise out of the simplifications slogans bring along? These and other questions are a clear sign that existing research has inadequately addressed various issues that are in need of further clarification.

This article aims to unravel a previously neglected aspect of the function of slogans, that is, that of governmentality. In particular, given their rhetorical appeal, slogans have been an important vehicle not only of marketing and advertising or political propaganda but have had played a pivotal role in policy-related issues (Makovicky et al., 2019). In particular, neoliberal governmentality has

relied on various slogans [and language in general] aimed to simplify and make 'self-evident' otherwise complex or controversial phenomena and the policies associated with them (Rojo and Del Percio, 2020). One aspect in particular has been at the forefront of this 'revolution' in governmentality. It is the process of sloganization.

The introductory part of this article provides a genealogy of discussions over slogans and their role in our contemporary civic imaginary. The central part takes a closer look at the main shortcomings the use of slogans has been associated with. By examining the multi-faceted phenomenon of zero tolerance (as both a policy, concept and a slogan), the main problems associated with sloganization will be addressed. In particular, it frames this moralizing slogan as a flagship case of the neoliberal logic of governance. The concluding part of this article frames the shift of emphasis provided by the nexus of sloganization and neoliberal governmentality and then outlines the subversive character associated with the mechanism of sloganization.

The trouble with slogans

Throughout recorded history, slogans have been an important part of our public life including some of the most remarkable individuals or central events. 'Veni, vidi, vici' by Julius Ceasar, 'Libertè, Egalitè, Fraternitè' of the French Revolution alongside slogans such as 'Proletarians of all countries, unite' or 'Let a hundred flowers bloom' – part of a tactical manoeuver by Mao Zedong between 1956 and 1957 during the 'Hundred Flowers Campaign' – are instantly recognizable catchphrases. By crossing historical eras, political systems, cultural barriers, ethnic affiliation, party allegiance or [just] personal taste, slogans have become an integral part of our civic imaginary.

Interestingly enough, 'as a particular cultural form' (Makovicky et al., 2019: 2) slogans are not only a pivotal vehicle for political campaigning or marketing and advertising but have also been given a geopolitical twist. Two contemporary examples stand out as most instructive. First, China's Communist party slogan of the 'Thousand Talents' served as the basis for one of the most ambitious talent magnet programs aiming to replace American higher education as the main global generator of knowledge and the US in general as the 'land of opportunity'. Alongside the 'Belt and Road' metaphor and the narrative of the 'Chinese Dream' propagated by Xi Jinping, slogans have been CPC's main linguistic device (Zeng, 2020).[1] Second, slogans have been a central vehicle in the 2016 Brexit referendum for the UK to leave the European Union (Cooper and Cooper, 2020).

At the same time, slogans have also had an important role in some of the most visible cotemporary awareness-raising campaigns and social movements. For example, 'Make Poverty History' has figured as a flagship slogan for the Live8 campaign aiming to ultimately eradicate poverty. At the same time, some of the recent social movements have also had slogans of their own. For instance, the #MeToo movement was represented by the [somehow controversial] slogan 'Believe women' alongside its alternative version 'Believe all women'.

Moreover, political discourse and public policy in general have been replete with rhetoric imbued with an egalitarian and progressive vocabulary including slogans [e.g. 'opportunity for all'], metaphors ['level the playing field'] alongside various other thought-terminating clichés [e.g. 'Aspiration nation']. These [and other] rhetorical catchphrases, for example, the 'We are the 99%' slogan by the Occupy Movement, have championed not only the eradication of exploitation but also meritocratic idealism (Sardoč, 2022). Furthermore, the Movement for Black Lives (M4BL) rallied under the 'Black Lives Matter' slogan (Hogan et al., 2021) ultimately became a poster image for fight against racial discrimination.

In this respect, slogans give a sense of direction to a policy, campaign or social movement and subsume what the most pressing problems in a particular society or a particular administration might

have been. The 'War on Drugs' by the Reagan administration, George W. Bush's 'War on Terror', Donald Trump's 'America First' and 'Opportunity for all' by Justin Trudeau's government in Canada have been just some of the flagship political slogans that represent the main challenges a particular administration has been struggling with. The analysis of slogans has been founded primarily [or even exclusively] on the functionalist view. Either in political rhetoric or in marketing and advertising, slogans have been viewed as performing primarily or exclusively a particular function.

Nevertheless, slogans unequivocally show some sort of a 'dissociative identity disorder'. On the one hand, they perform a number of functions that makes them the quintessential linguistic device in public life, for example, to highlight a policy, raise the awareness about a particular problem, to convert [or at least persuade] those who are opposed to an issue, to activate a particular group [most commonly through awareness-raising campaigns], to identify with a particular cause, to challenge a policy that may be problematic, to discredit, confront, provoke, polarize or help to redefine (Denton, 1980). As such, slogans are an instrumental vehicle of any public policy initiative or awareness-raising campaign. Their overall rhetorical function associated with its belligerent [Gaelic] etymology therefore makes slogans a *sine qua non* of public discourse and an integral part of the 'world of advertising and political propaganda' (Reboul, 1979: 296).

On the other hand, slogans have been depicted as ambiguous, trivializing, evasive, misleading or even manipulating[and therefore a pivotal vehicle of propaganda and social control alongside other deceitful practices. As Olivier Reboul recounts, 'true slogans are those that succeed best in concealing their real nature' (Reboul, 1979: 296). As he accentuates, the most effective slogans are those 'we do not recognize them as slogans' (Reboul, 1974: 62). Despite the fact that one of their primary functions has been to portray as simple a picture as possible of a particular complex or elaborate issue, this simplification might turn out to be the single most challenging issue associated with slogans. For example, in the case of toleration, as Rainer Först emphasizes, 'the slogan "no toleration of the intolerant" is not just vacuous but potentially dangerous, for the characterization of certain groups as intolerant is all too often itself a result of one-sidedness and intolerance' (Först, 2017).

Perhaps the most intriguing characteristic of slogan has been that of their inhibitory influence on the thinking process. As Robert Denton emphasizes, '[t]he final rhetorical characteristic of slogans is that they usually attempt to create a blindering effect. They are created in such a way as to blind the targeted audience to alternative ways of thinking' (Denton, 1980: 18). Having things presented in a simplified way makes people stop thinking which ultimately inhibits action as well. A slogan, as Olivier Reboul emphasizes, 'stops my thought, and anesthetizes its vigilance [...]. And so slogans are *thoughts* which, in every sense of the word, *arrest* thought' (Reboul, 1974: 62). Reboul made another incisive remark about this effect slogans have, '[t]he semblance of a mathematical puzzle reassures the reader, and, at the same time, discourages him from thinking too hard about it' (ibid. 58).

An analogy borrowed from research on violence can be drawn here. The brutality and immediacy of violence has a deleterious influence over thinking itself. As Richard J. Bernstein points out in *Violence: Thinking Without Banisters*, 'this surfeit of images and talk of violence dulls and even inhibits thinking' (Bernstein, 2013: vii). Slavoj Žižek pointed out in his book *Violence*, 'the over-powering horror of violent acts and empathy with the victims inexorably function as a lure that prevents us from thinking' (Žižek, 2008: 4). Paradoxically enough, it is precisely its immediacy best represented by the slogan 'we recognize violence when we see it' that is a fundamental obstacle in its understanding (Bufacchi, 2009).

Interestingly enough, this dystopian characterization of slogans as having an inhibitory effect on cognitive processes brings to the forefront another phenomenon associated with this linguistic device. One of the most pressing issues arising out of the use and application of slogans has been that of 'sloganization'. As Schmenk et al. emphasize in their introduction to *Sloganization in Language Education Discourse*

'[s]loganization is meant to denote a tendency to use a range of popular terms in scholarship, policy papers, practical applications and curriculum development *as if* their meaning were obvious and shared across the globe. Assuming that the meaning of a popular term is obvious and globally shared leads to foregoing precise definitions, ignoring the whereabouts of concepts, overlooking the variety and in-consistencies of different meanings attached to them, and perpetuating seemingly straightforward and unproblematic terms that would sometimes more appropriately be considered *slogans*. (Schmenk et al., 2018: 4)

On this interpretation, the main effect of sloganization has been that of making appear complex or controversial issues as simple, self-evident, unquestionable, self-explanatory or uncontroversial. A number of [either intended or unintended] side effects have also been associated with this phe-nomenon, for example, simplification, trivialization and reductionism. These epistemic short-comings have a twofold policy effect. On the one hand, in order to function as a 'rallying cry', slogans simplify or reductively present a particular topic. On the other hand, while most slogans ultimately hit the target they nevertheless somehow miss the point (at least at the conceptual level). In this respect, a number of negative side effects outweigh the allegedly positive outcomes as-sociated with slogans. An instructive example of this imbalance of effects [both intended and unintended] has been that of zero tolerance, one of the pivotal mechanisms associated with the neoliberal logic of governance.

Sloganization and governmentality: the case of 'zero tolerance'

As a hallmark of neoliberal governmentality and its dystopian vision of society, zero tolerance has become a flagship public policy when dealing with undesirable conduct that has been labelled as morally problematic or even unacceptable (Wacquant, 2009). Calls for zero tolerance when it comes to female genital mutilation (Boddy, 2020; Earp, 2020), hate speech and cyberbullying (Cohen-Almagor, 2022), weapons, illegal drugs (Bell, 2015), violence (Kodelja, 2019, corruption (Gong and Wang, 2012), etc., are just some of the most recent pleas to install this policy as a default approach when dealing with some of the most pressing contemporary issues. Interestingly enough, zero tolerance has been an integral part of the standard repertoire by a variety of different slogans, initiatives and manifestos aiming to increase our sensitivity towards practices and actions that are recognized as morally deviant (Goode and Ben-Yehuda, 2009).

Despite the diversity of these problems, all variants of zero tolerance have the same basic structure: regardless of the type or degree of 'offence' any act or practice that is being recognized as the object of zero tolerance is equally unacceptable and should therefore be equally penalized. In fact, equating the moral unacceptability of both minor and large 'offences' is the basic assumption of zero tolerance. As Zdenko Kodelja emphasizes,

Not only does zero tolerance presuppose harsh punishment as a necessary condition of its effectiveness, it also permits unjust punishment, that is, equal punishment for unequal offences, and disproportionate punishment. Such punishment is, at least within the retributive theory of punishment, unjust even if it is

deserved. For, it is always an injustice when there is no proportionality between an offence and the imposed punishment. (Kodelja, 2019: 6).

This comes as no surprise as zero tolerance is based on the theory of 'broken windows' as articulated in their essay 'Broken Windows: The Police and Community Safety' by George Kelling and Wilson (1982). Here, the authors have used the metaphor of broken windows to illustrate the problem with the toleration of petty crime which would consequently lead to major forms of antisocial behaviour. The very essence of zero tolerance, as Sarah James and Rick Freeze have argued, is 'the automatic and non-discretionary implementation of clear and pre-determined consequences for certain behavioral offenses' (James and Freeze, 2006, 583). Its moralizing rhetoric makes it among the most recognizable linguistic devices in public policy and awareness-raising campaigns. Portraying violence, corruption, illegal drugs, etc. in a simplistic and unidimensional way leads not only to a reductionist understanding of these phenomena and ultimately to bad policy but – most importantly perhaps – to injustice (Feinberg, 1970). Yet, notwithstanding its simple anatomy and a straightforward rhetoric, zero tolerance faces a set of empirical as well as conceptual objections.[2]

Zero tolerance and its critics

Despite a rise of pleas for zero tolerance over morally problematic or even unacceptable actions and practices, a number of objections have been advanced. Whereas some critics raise a number of questions over the effects of zero tolerance, others have focused on a number of objections against this reductionist and one-dimensional understanding of various social problems. Instead of an 'easy solution', as H A. Giroux emphasized succinctly, zero tolerance, became part of a 'complex problem' (Giroux, 2003: 561).

A number of empirical research points out that zero tolerance is inadequate due to a number of allegedly counter-productive effects including discrimination and injustice (Bell, 2015; White and Young, 2020). At the same time, different studies confirm that certain practices or actions that are the object of these policies are carried out more frequently by minorities or immigrants as compared to other social groups, which are – in one way or another – disadvantaged in comparison to the majority of the population, leading therefore to the so-called 'problem of discrimination' (e.g. Curtis, 2014; Giroux, 2003; Kafka, 2011). These objections are therefore not targeting the relativization or even ignorance of social problems, but in criticizing the equation of mutually incompatible social practices as well as the injustice and discrimination of the zero tolerance policy approach.

Among the most pressing objections addressed against zero tolerance are primarily those based on their alleged unfairness, disproportionality and asymmetry (Sellers and Arrigo, 2018). For this reason, its critics have regularly equated it with 'zero intelligence' as setting an equation between a minor and a major 'offence' is a priori unfair [*the non-equivalence criticism of zero tolerance*]. At the same time, applying the same sanction to a minor or a major offence relativizes the larger offence compared to the minor one [*the disproportionality criticism of zero tolerance*]. Moreover, zero tolerance is also largely insensitive to the differences between a one-time offence compared to a repetitive practice or behaviour [*the asymmetry criticism of zero tolerance*]. These and other objections lead to the conclusion that zero tolerance is inconsistent with the principle of proportionality as one of the basic criteria of fairness.

These objections point toward two separate criticisms which should be sufficient in confirming the inadequacy of zero tolerance to cope with morally problematic practices and the associated

social problems. The first criticism points towards the unclear value of zero tolerance, since the latter would not have been able to generate consensus around the definition of its very subject, for example, violence, corruption, hate speech, etc. In contrast, the second criticism is based on the assumption of the 'snowball effect'. This mechanism is built on the assertion that taking no action in the case of minor offenses will necessarily follow in quantitatively greater excesses. One of the key challenges associated with zero tolerance is actually the absence of the very limits of (in)tolerance as the very assumption of these policies is that it singles out any form of a particular 'social problem', for example, it does not distinguish between a minor and a major form of offence.

Zero tolerance is therefore a flagship example of sloganization. Interestingly enough, by understanding zero tolerance as a slogan, its rhetorical implications – at least *prima facie* – cannot be but positive. There is hardly anyone who would not object to the tackling effectively of the different social problems, for example, violence, drugs, hate speech, etc. As Olivier Reboul emphasizes, a slogan is always 'a sign of commitment to something' (Reboul, 1979).[3]

Yet, despite the positive message of the various awareness-raising campaigns, programs, slogans and manifestos as well as the legitimacy of the objectives of these policies, the rhetoric of zero tolerance obscures the complex and multi-faceted nature of its 'traditional' objects including hate speech, violence, drug abuse, corruption, etc. Ultimately, zero tolerance faces a kind of an impasse: if these policies are the result of increased sensitivity towards the problems it aims to address, one of the paradoxes of zero tolerance in that the sensitivity to the differences between various manifestations of morally problematic practices is actually reduced (Sardoč and Prebilič, 2015).

Conclusion: the triangulation of slogans

As has been showcased in the analysis of 'zero tolerance', slogans are an integral part of neoliberalism's political technology: an effective way – not primarily that of indoctrination – but of making look complex or controversial issues self-evident and straightforwardly simple. Slogans, as Robert Denton emphasizes, are not only a direct 'political weapon' (Denton, 1980: 10) but also an important vehicle of the neoliberal logic of governance. As Catriona McKinnon and Dario Castiglione accentuate, 'zero tolerance' stands as a slogan 'for a less forgiving society' (2003: 1). This opens up a range of separate problems with important conceptual and empirical challenges. As Glen Newey emphasizes, [t]he political rhetoric of 'zero tolerance' provides an expression of this way of thinking, which subverts toleration by appropriating its vocabulary of commendation' (2013: 46).

Two contrasting interpretations can be drawn here. First, any zero tolerance initiative and the associated slogan(s) turn out to be inherently paradoxical. 'Zero tolerance for hate speech (e.g. the *Council of Europe* campaign) or zero tolerance for corruption together with other initiatives of this kind are all premised on the assumption that there is a clear, uncontroversial or agreed upon definition of hate speech or that of corruption, etc. Interestingly enough, in contrast with traditional cases of toleration, the basic question over zero tolerance is no longer centred over the limits of toleration but over a more foundational and substantive issue, that is, what qualifies as a moral problem one aims to tackle, for example, violence, hate speech, corruption, drugs, sexual harassment, weapons, etc.

On the other hand, and far less optimistically, zero tolerance is not only a euphemism for intolerance. The sloganization of zero tolerance actually turns out to piggyback on the positive valence of toleration as the ordinary usage of what being tolerant entails positive characteristics. As Wendy Brown emphasizes, being tolerant 'conjures seemliness, propriety, forbearance, magnanimity, cosmopolitanism, universality, and the large view […]' (Brown, 2006: 178).[4] In this respect, zero tolerance figures as a flagship example of the neoliberal 'doublespeak' and is acting as a

complementary element to the other mechanisms associated with neoliberal governmentality in-cluding 'big data' (Ben Shahar, 2016) and the phenomenon of 'governing by numbers' (Grek, 2009).

In this respect, as Makovicky et al., have accentuated, slogans function as 'an integral part of state experiments in governance' (Makovicky et al., 2019: 2). In fact, they function as a *sine qua non* of the 'neoliberal logic of governance' (ibid. 2). The sloganized concept of zero tolerance actually subverts the classical contractualist argument of 'taking men as they are, and the laws as they can be' best depicted by Jean-Jacques Rousseau in the introductory sentence of *The Social Contract* (Rousseau, 2002: 155). The moralizing language of zero tolerance views men as can [or should] be and the laws as they are. Interestingly enough, it is not the first part that arouses suspicion as slogans are part of a wider 'civic' project every state needs to carry out (Song and Gee, 2020). It is the shift of emphasis associated with the neoliberal technology of governance that subverts the ongoing legitimation the state and its institutional framework require.

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Notes

1. Compared to other countries or political systems (except perhaps for that of the former USSR), the literature on slogans includes a number of articles discussing the use of slogans in China. See, for example, Karmazin (2020), Song & Gee (2019), Zeng (2020).
2. Another important issue needs to be pointed out here: a particular idea can simultaneously function both as a concept and as a slogan (Dandeker and Troyna, 1983). The simultaneous 'existence' of a particular idea in different language registers is actually what makes its use evasive or ambiguous (Klein, 2022).
3. At the conceptual level, zero tolerance is problematic because of its incoherence and ambiguity, as the phrase 'zero tolerance' itself speaks about intolerance of morally unacceptable practices or acts. For the elaboration of this point, see Kodelja (2019).
4. In contrast to its ordinary or everyday usage, a scholarly definition of toleration is crammed with paradoxes, puzzles and dilemmas, with different conditions and circumstances torn apart by the different conceptions of toleration itself. For a detailed presentation of the problems and challenges associated with the usage of toleration in different language registers, see Sardoč (2021b).

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