

On the Symbolic Power of Shared Pseudonyms

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This article reflects upon the symbolic power of aliases that are shared by multiple users. Ranging from Ned Ludd, the eponymous leader of the English machine-breakers of the early 19th century, to Anonymous, a moniker borrowed by thousands of Internet activists, shared pseudonyms are invested with the power to act on behalf of their communities of users. Whereas the mode of disposition and use of a shared pseudonym is often controlled by an authorizing context—be it a social movement or an art collective, a union or an Internet-based community—the dissemination of the alias in the public sphere subjects it to idiosyncratic and unforeseen appropriations. In this sense, a shared pseudonym functions as a medium that bridges the gap between a variety of demands, subject positions, and modes of participation.

Cet article propose une réflexion sur le pouvoir symbolique des pseudonymes quand ils sont partagés par plusieurs utilisateurs. L'enquête va de Ned Ludd, le leader éponyme des briseurs de machines anglais au début du 19e siècle, à Anonymous qui est le surnom emprunté par des milliers d'activistes sur Internet. Les pseudonymes partagés sont investis du pouvoir d'agir pour le compte de leurs communautés d'utilisateurs. La manière dont un pseudonyme

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partagé est mis à disposition et utilisé, subit souvent un contrôle dans le cadre d'un contexte qui l'autorise – qu'il s'agisse d'un mouvement social ou d'un collectif d'artistes, d'un syndicat ou d'une communauté sur Internet. En revanche, la dissémination du pseudonyme dans la sphère publique est sujette à des appropriations idiosyncratiques et imprévues. En ce sens, un pseudonyme partagé fonctionne comme une médiation : il comble les écarts générés par une variété de demandes, de positions subjectives et de modes de participation.

In *Language and Symbolic Power*, Pierre Bourdieu defines symbolic power as the magic power of acting upon the social world through words. Drawing from the work of J. L. Austin on the conditions of felicity of a performative utterance, Bourdieu argues that such power is usually exercised by “an individual—king, priest or spokesperson—[who] is mandated to speak and act on behalf of the group, thus constituted in him and by him.”¹ In modern societies, institutions such as the state and the church typically grant this power to an appointed minister so that only a governor can declare the state of emergency or a priest can pronounce someone husband and wife and expect such words to have the force of action.

In my recent book *Improper Names: Collective Pseudonyms from the Luddites to Anonymous* (2015), I have analyzed a set of case studies in which symbolic power is created and exercised outside the boundaries of an institutional practice.² Collective pseudonyms such as Ned Ludd, the eponymous leader of the English Luddites, Allen Smithee, an artificial signature shared by Hollywood film directors to disown movies recut by a production company, and Anonymous, a moniker adopted by thousands of Internet users, are all forms of symbolic power in their own right. But instead of being managed

¹ Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Anderson (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1991), 75.

² Marco Deseriis, *Improper Names: Collective Pseudonyms from the Luddites to Anonymous* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

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through formal delegation, such power is directly managed by the communities of their users. This does not mean that the power is equally distributed among the users of the alias. Rather, the adopters of such pseudonyms determine their mode of disposition and usage within varying *authorizing contexts*, which include art and political collectives, social movements, unions, and Internet-based communities.

Whereas an authorizing context can try and limit access to the pseudonym to its creators, the members of an organization, or an affinity group, as soon as these names are released to the public domain they lend themselves to unforeseen appropriations and third-party usages. It is through their encoding in a variety of media and their circulation in the public sphere that these aliases take on a life of their own and become *improper*. For example, Ned Ludd was originally meant to designate the mythic leader of the framework knitters' organized resistance to industrial machinery in Nottinghamshire. Yet, through its circulation across different regions of England, the alias lent itself to heterogeneous uses in conjunction with a variety of struggles and demands—including demands for higher wages, lower food prices, and even the abolition of the monarchy. Similarly, over the past decade, Anonymous has been utilized to author online apolitical pranks and “raids” against powerless individuals as well as to coordinate political campaigns against public and private institutions that restrict access to

information and information technologies.

In this sense, these aliases have the function of bridging a variety of actions and practices—some of which are collectively planned and coordinated and some of which are more spontaneous and idiosyncratic. This bridging function of an improper name raises questions about its actual capacity—or lack thereof—to operate a synthesis among multiple subject positions and modes of participation. Should these shared aliases, then, be considered *ambiguous signifiers*, which shuttle between a variety of uses and demands without unifying them? Or does the bridging function of an improper name entail a *transformation* of its particular uses into something more than a sum of the parts?

One way of answering this question is to analyze the individual case studies. Indeed, some shared pseudonyms are more ambiguous, undecidable, and unruly than others. For example, Monty Cantsin, an alias introduced by a group of mail artists in Portland, Oregon, in the late 1970s, was released in the public domain for anyone to use, with virtually no guidelines attached. And so were subsequent *multiple-use names* such as Luther Blissett, a pseudonym introduced by Italian activists in the mid-1990s to organize cultural workers, and Anonymous. Obviously, the fact that there are no explicit guidelines on how the name is to be used and by whom does not mean that its users do not share an ethos, and thus an *implicit* set of dos and don'ts.

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Yet because a multiple-use name is immediately open to the unforeseen it cannot operate in advance a synthesis of its heterogeneous uses.

By contrast, a *collective pseudonym* indicates the authorizing context's attempt to control the mode of disposition and usage of the name. For example, the Directors Guild of America (DGA) originally introduced the aforementioned Allen Smithee as a collective bargaining tool to bolster film directors' creative rights within Hollywood and allow them to work "outside of their reputation" so to speak. As directors kept borrowing the signature, over the course of three decades, in order to disown a wide range of recut films and TV episodes, the signature began to accumulate negative symbolic capital.³ By the late 1990s, Smithee had evolved from an alias that was supposed to signal abuse to Hollywood insiders, to a contested signature that openly signified violation of a director's creative rights. Finally, after film producers expressed concerns that, if *understood* by the public, a Smithee credit could jeopardize the marketability of a film, the DGA decided to discontinue its use, opening it up to third-party usages.

Thus, whereas collective pseudonyms and multiple-use names are

³ For Bourdieu, the possession of symbolic capital—understood as the possession of a socially recognized competence—is a precondition for the magic of words to act performatively on the social world. The difference between symbolic capital and symbolic power is that the former is a competence that has been accumulated over time, whereas the latter is the actual exercise of this competence. See Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 72.

attributes that describe an improper name in terms of varying degrees of control (from the centralized to the decentralized), it is only when a shared alias is fully released to the public domain that it loses its proper intended function. Yet, regardless of whether or not an authorizing context is able to exert control over the iteration of an improper name, there is no doubt that these aliases perform a unifying function as they bring a disparate set of practices into a single discursive space.

From a linguistic standpoint, this is possible because, as John Stuart Mills and Saul Kripke have convincingly argued, proper names denote without connoting, that is, they do not have any meaning besides their indexical function. In particular, Kripke has demonstrated that the linguistic function of a proper name is to fix a referent “in all its possible universes,” that is, regardless of its changing properties.⁴ In other words, once a proper name has been introduced it remains fundamentally indifferent to any change in the status of the referent. Indeed, as Jean-François Lyotard argues, the proper name is a “pure mark of the designative function” which invariably refers to a subject *x* independently of the position that subject occupies in a sentence (as *x* can be found in the position of addressor, addressee, or referent) at different temporal intervals (as *x* designates the same referent at *t* and at *t*+1), and on different levels of reality (as *x* can stand both for a referent endowed with

⁴ Saul Kripke, *Naming and Necessity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1980), 135.

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material reality as well as for a purely fictional one). “This is because to name the referent is not the same as to show its ‘presence,’” writes Lyotard. “To signify is one thing, to name another, and to show still another.”⁵

But if the proper name is merely an index and an empty link which does not have the power to endow a subject with reality (that is, to show its existence) nor with sense (that is, to attribute any property to it) then a shared pseudonym can function as the lynchpin among a variety of subjects, deeds, and objects—at least insofar as there is a *community of speakers* who agree to use it to refer to this heterogeneous assemblage. And this is because, as Slavoj Žižek puts it, it is “*the retroactive effect of naming itself...* which supports the identity of the object,” allowing us to identify an assemblage of elements which would otherwise belong in different worlds.⁶ To return to our question, does this bridging function entail a transformation of the assemblage’s parts? It certainly does, but not to the extent of subjecting the particular uses of a pseudonym to a single definition and purpose.

In *Anti-Oedipus*, Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari note that in an assemblage “the whole not only coexists with all the parts; it is contiguous to them, it exists as a product that is produced apart from them and yet at the

⁵ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Differend: Phrases in Dispute*, trans. Georges Van Den Abbeele (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 42.

⁶ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (London: Verso, 1989), 95.

same time is related to them.”⁷ From this angle, improper names do not unify a set of practices and authorial strategies from a center or from above, that is, they are not totalities, which exist independently of the parts. As previously noted, an assemblage of enunciation has the capacity to act upon the social world insofar as a social group invests a spokesperson—be it a physical person or an artificial construct—with the symbolic power to undertake action on its behalf. Within the sociosymbolic universe of shared pseudonyms this transfer of power is not always planned in advance nor does it necessarily proceed from the many to the one.

Rather, my wager is that the symbolic power of an improper name is always constructed *a posteriori*, that is, from subsequent iterations, uses, and adaptations of the name to different contexts. In this sense, the performativity of a shared pseudonym—i.e. its ability to endow its words with the force of action—is always unpredictable and subject to contestation. When brought to an extreme, such unpredictability can undermine the pseudonym’s authoritativeness and reputation. But when kept within certain boundaries it can increase the pseudonym’s capacity to express the unexpected, thus challenging established forms of political and aesthetic representation. It is precisely the *porosity* of shared pseudonyms that makes them highly adaptable

⁷ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 43-44.

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to changing circumstances. And this is certainly not a negligible advantage in this age of semiotic overload and accelerated disconnection of signs and referents. At the same time, a diffused ethical commitment and affective attachment to these names' reputations and symbolic capital remains essential to the reproduction and expansion of their symbolic power across different contexts.

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