

Probe: Masha Gessen on Authoritarianism, and Walter J. Ong's Thought

Thomas J. Farrell

Volume 4, Number 2, Fall 2024

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1115402ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115402ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

New Explorations Association

ISSN

2563-3198 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Farrell, T. (2024). Probe: Masha Gessen on Authoritarianism, and Walter J. Ong's Thought. *New Explorations*, 4(2). <https://doi.org/10.7202/1115402ar>

Article abstract

First, I highlight Masha Gessen's op-ed "The Seeds of This Political Disaster Were Sown Decades Ago" (dated July 20, 2024) in the New York Times. Next, I highlight certain points from the work of the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) of Saint Louis University. I style my short essay a "Probe" because it is fundamentally exploratory and tentative.

© Thomas J. Farrell, 2024



This document is protected by copyright law. Use of the services of Érudit (including reproduction) is subject to its terms and conditions, which can be viewed online.

<https://apropos.erudit.org/en/users/policy-on-use/>

This article is disseminated and preserved by Érudit.

Érudit is a non-profit inter-university consortium of the Université de Montréal, Université Laval, and the Université du Québec à Montréal. Its mission is to promote and disseminate research.

<https://www.erudit.org/en/>



Probe: Masha Gessen on Authoritarianism, and Walter J. Ong's Thought

Thomas J. Farrell
University of Minnesota Duluth
tfarrell@d.umn.edu

Abstract: First, I highlight Masha Gessen's op-ed "The Seeds of This Political Disaster Were Sown Decades Ago" (dated July 20, 2024) in the *New York Times*. Next, I highlight certain points from the work of the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955) of Saint Louis University. I style my short essay a "Probe" because it is fundamentally exploratory and tentative.

Things have been fast-moving in American politics recently. (As I write, today is July 26, 2024.) In my short *OEN* article "Some Reflections of President Joe Biden's Aging" (dated July 13, 2024), I discussed President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump a bit: <https://www.opednews.com/articles/Some-Reflections-of-Presid-Catholicism-Vatican-Pope-Donald-Trump-Joe-Biden-Joe-Biden-And-Donald-Trump-240713-591.html>.

However, several hours after I posted it, twenty-year-old Thomas Crooks attempted to assassinate former President Donald Trump at an outdoor political rally in Pennsylvania. Fortunately, Trump was only wounded. But the shooter killed one bystander and wounded two others before he was killed by a Secret Service sniper. I used the modify feature at *OEN* to add these points to my article.

On July 15, former President Trump named Senator J. D. Vance of Ohio (born in 1984) as his running mate in the November 2024 presidential election.

On July 21, 2024, President Joe Biden dramatically bowed out of the November 2024 presidential election – and endorsed Vice President Kamala Harris for the Democratic Party's presidential candidate in the November 2024 election.

On August 19, 2024, the Democratic National Convention will begin in Chicago. Vice President Harris has already lined up enough delegates to be selected as the Democratic Party's presidential candidate in the November 2024 presidential election. Now, in the meantime, Masha Gessen (born in 1967), who holds dual citizenship in Russia and the United States, published the thought-provoking op-ed titled "The Seeds of This Political Disaster Were Sown Decades Ago" (dated July 20, 2024) in the *New York Times*:

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/20/opinion/biden-trump-campaign-reality.html>

In it, Gessen reflects on authoritarianism. After reviewing certain recent events, she says, "Biden is right: Trump poses an existential threat to democracy." Subsequently, she says, "The Republican [campaign's] story is one of constant danger, eternal heartbreak, looming catastrophe."

"Autocrats and aspiring autocrats, whatever their political orientation, have been telling this story for a long time. They say that the country is on the verge of catastrophe and that only one person – the great leader – can save it. They use this rhetorical strategy because it works.

That is, it works in times when a critical number of people are feeling insecure, precarious, frightened, as many Americans clearly are.”

“[We] do live in an era of mass displacement, of what Hannah Arendt described as ‘homelessness on an unprecedented scale, rootlessness to an unprecedented depth.’ She was writing about preconditions for totalitarianism in the 20th century.”

Subsequently, Gessen claims that we are not living “in a low-information environment, but in a low-trust environment.” Subsequently, Gessen says, “If [Trump] is elected, a second trump administration seems likely to bring what the Hungarian sociologist Balint Magyar has termed an ‘autocratic breakthrough’ – structural political change that is impossible to reverse by electoral means. But if we are in an environment in which nothing is believable, in which imagined secrets inspire more trust than the public statements of any authority, then we are already living in an autocratic reality, described by another of Arendt’s famous phrases: ‘Nothing is true and everything is possible.’”

This brings us to the passage in which Gessen explains the title of her op-ed piece: “It’s tempting to say that Trump’s autocratic movement has spread like an infection. The truth is, the seeds of this disaster have been sprouting in American politics for decades: the dumbing down of conversation, the ever-growing role of money in political campaigns, the disappearance of local news media and local civic engagement and the consequent transformation of national politics into a set of abstracted images and stories, the inescapable understanding of presidential races as personality contests.”

“None of this made the Trump presidency inevitable, but it made it possible – and then the Trump presidency pushed us over the edge into the uncanny valley of politics. If Trump loses this year – if we are lucky, that is – it will not end this period; it will merely bring an opportunity to undertake the hard work of recovery.”

Unfortunately, Gessen stops well short of offering any prescriptions for “undertak[ing] the hard work of recovery” from the Trump threat to our American democracy – assuming that “we are lucky” enough to avoid his election to a second term in the November 2024 presidential election. Nor am I going to offer any such prescriptions in the present essay.

In a more recent op-ed in the *New York Times*, titled “The Unnerving Changeability of JD Vance” (dated July 26, 2024), the Jewish atheist columnist Michelle Goldberg says, “Authoritarian personalities, as the German social psychologist Erich Fromm argued, long to dominate, but they long just as much to submit.”

Paradoxical as it may sound, these two compatible longings seem to be two sides of the same coin, as it were.

But I would like to offer here my own reflections on authoritarianism – by drawing on my understanding of the work of the American Jesuit Renaissance specialist and cultural historian and pioneering media ecology theorist Walter J. Ong (1912-2003; Ph.D. in English, Harvard University, 1955).

Now, Ong famously coined the terms secondary orality and primary orality to distinguish our contemporary secondary oral culture that features communications media that accentuate sound from primary oral cultures in pre-historic and pre-literate times in human history.

Now, I have written about Ong's account of our contemporary secondary oral culture in my essay "Secondary Orality and Consciousness Today" in the anthology *Media, Consciousness, and Culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's Thought*, edited by Bruce E. Gronbeck, Thomas J. Farrell, and Paul A. Soukup (1991, pp. 194-209).

However, in my upbeat 1991 essay, I do not explore how the deep resonances of our contemporary secondary orality in the collective unconscious of the human psyche bring archetypal patterns in the human psyche into interactions with ego-consciousness. The Jungian psychoanalyst and Jungian psychological theorist Edward C. Whitmont (1912-1998) discusses some of these archetypal influences in his important 1982 book *The Return of the Goddess*.

For a Jungian account of the masculine archetypes in the human psyche, see Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette's 1990 book *King, Warrior, Magician, Lover: Rediscovering the Archetypes of the Mature Masculine*.

Now, primary oral cultures and residual forms of primary oral cultures tend to foster tradition-directed people, and they also tend to foster authoritarianism. Generally speaking, what Gessen, Goldberg, and Fromm refer to as authoritarianism is contrasted with what Ong at one time referred to as the inner-directed person – borrowing the term inner-directed from the Harvard sociologist David Riesman's widely read book *The Lonely Crowd: A Study of the Changing American Character* (1950).

More recently, Ong has come to refer to the inward turn of consciousness – in his most widely read, and most widely translated, 1982 book *Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word* (pp. 178-179).

For Ong, the inward turn of consciousness emerged historically in the phonetic alphabetic cultures of the ancient Greeks and the ancients Hebrews. What Ong means by the inward turn of consciousness in those ancient cultures is often conceptualized as the movement from an honor-shame culture to a guilt culture. In Ong's terminology, honor-shame cultures are aligned with primary oral cultures, and with residual forms of primary oral cultures.

But this rudimentary discussion of Ong's terminology brings us to his discussion of the print culture that emerged in our Western cultural history after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s.

Now, Ong's pioneering study of print culture is also his pioneering work in media ecology theory, *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue: From the Art of Discourse to the Art of Reason* (1958; for specific page references to the aural-to-visual shift in cognitive processing in our Western cultural history, see the entry on aural-to-visual shift in the "Index" [p. 396]).

I have discussed Ong's thought in his massively researched 1958 book *Ramus, Method, and the Decay of Dialogue* in my OEN article "Walter J. Ong's Philosophical Thought" (dated September 20, 2020).

Now, for Gessen, Goldberg, and Fromm – and probably also for Riesman – the authoritarianism of Hitler and the Nazis emerged in Germany. But the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Germany as did Luther and the Protestant Reformation – the cultural vehicles for what Riesman refers to as inner-developed characters!

Thus, Hitler and the Nazis in German represent cultural backsliding on a grand scale. As this unfortunately spectacular example shows, cultural backsliding is possible.

Now, because the Roman Catholic Church celebrates its sense of tradition, we should see its celebrated tradition as an expression of its cultural roots in the residual form primary oral

culture in our ancient Western cultural history. However, we may also align the rise of the so-called cafeteria Catholic around the 1960s with what Ong refers to as secondary oral culture. So-called cafeteria Catholics can be understood as, in effect, practicing their own idiosyncratic versions of what T. S. Eliot refers to in another context as “Tradition and the Individual Talent” – to wit, Tradition and the Individual Catholic.

However that may be, I suspect that what Ong refers to as our contemporary secondary oral culture will tend to prompt authoritarian tendencies such as those that we Americans associate with Hitler and the Nazis in Germany and with the Communist Soviet Union and Communist China – and with Trump and the MAGA movement today.

Our American experiment with democracy emerged in what Ong refers to as typographic culture that emerged in our Western cultural history after the Gutenberg printing press emerged in Europe in the mid-1450s.

Now, for my exploratory purposes in the present short essay, I would also call your attention to Ong’s fascinating essay “Voice and the Opening of Closed Systems” in his 1977 book *Interfaces of the Word: Studies in the Evolution of Consciousness and Culture* (pp. 305-341). Briefly, ancient and medieval chirographic culture and then modern typographic culture (also known as print culture) in our Western cultural history tended to favor closed systems, but our contemporary secondary oral culture tends to favor open systems.

Because the history of the Roman Catholic Church encompasses ancient and medieval chirographic culture as well as modern typographic culture and, more recently, our contemporary secondary oral culture, we can also extend Ong’s 1977 characterizations of closed-system and open-system thought to church history. Within this large conceptual framework, we can see the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in the Roman Catholic Church as adopting open-system thought, after centuries of advancing closed-system thought – most notably in the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*) and the Declaration on the Church’s Relation to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*).

For the six key documents promulgated at the Second Vatican Council, see the book *Vatican II: The Essential Texts*, edited by Norman Tanner, S.J. (2012). In this paperback book, Tanner includes fresh English translations of six key documents of Vatican II: (1) the Constitution on Sacred Liturgy (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*; pp. 29-78); (2) the Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (*Dei Verbum*; pp. 79-99); (3) the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (*Lumen Gentium*, pp. 100-188); (4) the Pastoral Constitution on the Church (*Gaudium et Spes*; pp. 189-298); (5) the Declaration on Religious Freedom (*Dignitatis Humanae*; pp. 299-318); and (6) the Declaration on the Church’s Relation to Non-Christian Religions (*Nostra Aetate*; pp. 319-328).

For an informed account of what happened at the Second Vatican Council, see the American Jesuit church historian John W. O’Malley’s *What Happened at Vatican II* (2008). Concerning the ongoing interpretation and reception of the documents promulgated at the Second Vatican Council, see *The Oxford Handbook of Vatican II*, edited by Catherine E. Clifford and Massimo Faggioli (2023). This massive 800-page book includes three useful indices: (1) “Index of Names” (pp. 755-766); (2) “Index of Subjects” (pp. 767-772); and (3) “Index of Vatican II Documents” (pp. 773-777).

For all practical purposes, the Second Vatican Council (1962-1965) in the Roman Catholic Church and the papacies of Pope John-Paul II (1978-2005), Pope Benedict XVI (2005-2013), and Pope Francis (2013-) occurred during our contemporary secondary oral culture. I have profiled the doctrinally conservative Pope Francis in my widely read *OEN* article “Pope Francis on Evil and Satan” (dated March 24, 2019):

<https://www.opednews.com/articles/Pope-Francis-on-Evil-and-S-by-Thomas-Farrell-Abortion-Catholic-God-Homosexuality-190324-51.html>.

Even though Pope Francis is undoubtedly conservative doctrinally, he has provoked the wrath of certain conservative American Catholics. The Italian philosopher and papal biographer Massimo Borghesi discusses them in his book *Catholic Discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the Field Hospital Church of Pope Francis*, translated by Barry Hudock (2021; orig. Italian ed., 2021).

I reviewed Borghesi’s 2021 book in my *OEN* article “Massimo Borghesi’s New Book *Catholic Discordance*” (dated January 5, 2022):

<https://www.opednews.com/articles/Massimo-Borghesi-s-New-Boo-by-Thomas-Farrell-Biography-Book-Reviews-Catholic-Catholic-Church-220105-966.html>

Now, I will boldly suggest here that the outspoken anti-Francis American Catholics tend to prefer their nostalgic and idealized view of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1950s as a closed system.

Somehow, perhaps in many ways, the doctrinally conservative Pope Francis has prompted them to feel that their nostalgic and idealized view of the church in the 1950s as a closed system is under siege.

Now, I will also boldly suggest here that Trump’s most ardent MAGA supporters feel that their nostalgic and idealized view of postwar American culture in the 1950s as a closed system is under siege.

Of course, I hasten to add that I am here, in both cases, adding the specification “in the 1950s as a closed system.”

Now, what Ong refers to as our contemporary secondary oral culture engendered by the communications media that accentuate sound appears to be here for the foreseeable future. If I am correct in suggesting that what Ong refers to as open systems thinking is fostered by our secondary oral culture, then those conservative Americans who view the 1950s nostalgically are going to continue to feel under siege for the foreseeable future.

My sobering analysis brings me back to Gessen’s failure to suggest any prescriptions for “undertak[ing] the hard work of recovery” from the threat to our American democracy posed by Trump and his most ardent MAGA supporters.

My sobering analysis suggests that many of our fellow Americans will continue to feel under threat for the foreseeable future as long as they cling to their nostalgic views of the 1950s – which means that our fellow Americans who feel so threatened will continue to pose a threat of authoritarianism spring to full bloom in America in the foreseeable future.

References

Borghesi, M. (2021). *Catholic discordance: Neoconservatism vs. the field hospital church of Pope Francis* (B. Hudock, Trans.). Liturgical Press Academic. (Original work published

2021)

- Clifford, C. E., and M. Faggioli, eds. (2023). *The Oxford handbook of Vatican II*. Oxford University Press.
- Eliot, T. S. (2021). Tradition and the individual talent. *The complete prose of T.S. Eliot: The critical edition: Volume 2: 1919-1926* (pp. 105-114; A. Cuda and R. Schuchard, Eds.) John Hopkins University Press. (Original work published 1919)
- Farrell, T. J. (1991). Secondary orality and consciousness today. *Media, consciousness, and culture: Explorations of Walter Ong's thought* (pp. 194-209; B. E. Gronbeck, T. J. Farrell, and P. A. Soukup, Eds.). Sage Publishing.
- Farrell, T. J. (2019, March 24). Pope Francis on evil and Satan. www.opednews.com link in the above text.
- Farrell, T. J. (2022, January 5). Massimo Borghesi's new book *Catholic discordance*. www.opednews.com link in the above text.
- Farrell, T. J. (2024, July 13). Some reflections on President Joe Biden's aging. www.opednews.com link in the above text.
- Gessen, M. (2024, July 20). The seeds of this political disaster were sown decades ago. *New York Times* link in the above text.
- Goldberg, M. (2024, July 26). The unnerving changeability of JD Vance. *New York Times* link in the above text.
- Moore, R., and D. Gillette. (1990). *King, warrior, magician, lover: Rediscovering the archetypes of the mature masculine*. HarperSanFrancisco/ HarperCollins.
- O'Malley, J. W. (2008). *What happened at Vatican II*. Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Ong, W. J. (1958). *Ramus, method, and the decay of dialogue: From the art of discourse to the art of reason*. Harvard University Press.
- Ong, W. J. (1977). Voice and the opening of closed systems. *Interfaces of the word: Studies in the evolution of consciousness and culture* (pp. 305-341). Cornell University Press.
- Ong, W. J. (1982). *Orality and literacy: The technologizing of the word*. Methuen.
- Riesman, D., and N. Glazer and R. Denney. (1950). *The lonely crowd: the changing American character*. Yale University Press.
- Tanner, N. (2012). *Vatican II: The essential texts*. Image Books.
- Whitmont, E. C. (1982). *Return of the goddess*. Crossroad Publishing.