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## A Survey on the Semantic Field of ‘Vagabond’

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### Abstract

How we perceive a certain concept is grounded in the ‘language game’: the values, prejudices, dispositions, and cultural baggage among its interpretive communities. In other words, there is no ‘true meaning’ inherent in a word per se; rather the meaning is derived out of what Derrida (1993) calls the ‘chain’ of signification: the context, history, contingency, and often semantic contradictions that render a word polysemic. Taking off from here, this paper seeks to unpack the social ‘constructivism’ immanent in the *a priori* assumptions that cloak the idea of the ‘vagabond’. While invoking the contingency in the genesis and semantic history of ‘vagabond’ as a case study, this paper illustrates how meanings of certain heuristic concepts – in this case, ‘vagabond’, without a fixed referent – are often (re)configured, not because of reasons entirely linguistic, but rather due to changes in the prevailing epistemic paradigms.

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### 1. Introduction

“The skeptics, a kind of nomads despising all settled culture of the land”, writes Kant ([1781] 1929, 8), “broke up from time to time all civil society”. How Kant sees nomadism – as oppositional to civility and threatening to settledness – characterizes how vagabonds are ordinarily perceived. The ‘skeptics’ Kant refers to are advocates of (Humian) skepticism – skepticism as a branch of knowledge in analytic philosophy – and, therefore, his chief adversary. On the other hand, Kant’s life was ‘wholly uneventful’, and legend goes that he himself “was a man of such regular habit that people used to set their watches by him” (Russell 1999, 677–678). Given Kant’s routinophilic habits, one can understand his sympathy for settledness. The analogy between the ‘skeptic’ and the ‘nomad’, therefore, renders the ‘nomad’ as the complete Other. The imagination of nomadism, as a voice of dissent always to be refuted, and the tendency to counterpose the ‘nomad’ against the ‘social’, however, is not trans-historical.

It would have sounded cogent if the historicist idea of ‘progress’ embedded in the transition from the nomadic to the agrarian mode of society, notionally speaking, had placed vagabonds in diametrical opposition to civility. But, it is not until the 14<sup>th</sup> century that we find evidence of the word being used pejoratively. For that matter, the birth of the ‘vagabond’ only dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

What this paper does is a brief survey on the semantic history of the term *vagabond* in the English context. The paper studies the genesis and emergence of the category ‘vagabond’ and demonstrates how it accrues the negative connotation that the articulation of vagrancy – both its lexical component and conceptual apparatus – is generally associated with.

How we perceive a certain concept, according to Wittgenstein (2009), is grounded in systems of the ‘language game’: the values, prejudices, dispositions and cultural baggage among its interpretive communities<sup>1</sup>. In other words, there is no ‘true meaning’ inherent in a word per se; rather the meaning is derived out of what Derrida (1993) calls the ‘chain of signification’: the context, history, contingency, and often semantic contradictions that render a word polysemic. Taking off from here, this paper seeks to unpack the social ‘constructivism’ of the *a priori* assumptions that cloak the idea of the vagabond. Dictionary entries tend to ‘purify’ a concept, delimit its meaning. On the contrary, this paper genealogizes the contingency in the semantic history of ‘vagabond’, while invoking the “different immediate values or different kinds of valuation, or that we are aware, often intangibly, of different formations and distributions of energy and interest” (Williams 1983, 11) that inform its meaning(s). The concerns here “are not only about meaning; ... [but also] inevitably, they are about meanings” (Williams 1983, 16), and more importantly, the “extension, variation and transfer” (Williams 1983, 21) that undercut the process of signification.

## 2. The semantic trajectory

The tendency to criminalize and marginalize the vagabond started in 14<sup>th</sup> century England, with the passage of the *First Statute of Labourers*<sup>2</sup>, which restricted the movement of persons who did not own any land, or were unemployed. Apparently, this was done to prevent the collapse of the feudal structure, in other words, to ensure an adequate supply of cheap labor in the aftermath of the Black Plague. Going back to Kant’s observation where he points to an implicit association between skepticism and nomadicity, it seems that the construction of the category ‘vagabond’ as a functional, but nebulous umbrella started *only* when itinerancy was perceived as ‘skeptical’, more precisely, resistant to the prevailing relations of power and orderliness in the society.

The chaos and pandemonium that followed the Black Plague, one of the greatest human disasters in Europe’s history, left millions crippled and homeless on the streets. As Boccaccio (trans. Hooker 1996) records in the introduction to his *The Decameron* composed during 1350–1353, this is when

there was no better or more effective medicine against the disease than to run away from it; convinced by this argument, and caring for no-one but themselves, huge

numbers of men and women abandoned their rightful city, their rightful homes, their relatives and their parents and their things.

The massive unforeseen and forced migration, back and forth between the city and the countryside, predictably led to lawlessness and these figures were readily looked down upon as rogues and social outcasts. The birth of the 'vagabond', both as a lexical phrase and a new category of itinerant figure, dates back to here. The word *vagabond* owes its origin to Old French *vagabond* with first recorded usage, to be noted, also in the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Its Latin counterpart *vagābundus* comes from *vagārī*, which means 'to wander'. It is hard not to take sight of the amazing parallel between the historical source of 'vagabond' being traceable to Old French and France being one among the first-hit provinces by the Black Plague immediately after it struck Mediterranean Europe – Turkey, Greece, Italy – before making its way further north and south<sup>3</sup>. It is not at all a coincidence that both the reception of the word *vagabond* and infection by the epidemic in Northern Europe had come from France, but the former is actually a corollary of the latter. The *Oxford English Dictionary* (henceforth *OED*) records the first use of *vagabond* in Middle English in 1426, which establishes that the 'trace' of the word apparently chased the trail of the plague barely by a margin of three quarters of a century.

The aforesaid dictionary defines the 'vagabond' as "[r]oaming or wandering from place to place *without* settled habitation or home; leading a wandering life; nomadic". So right from the onset the vagabond is conceptualized on the basis of 'lack'. It is a reductive definition right from the beginning. According to the *Middle English Dictionary* (henceforth *MED*), the noun was used with two (slightly overlapping) senses: (a) "[a] person without a fixed home or occupation, wanderer, vagabond", (which is difficult to distinguish from) (b) "an idle or a shiftless person, a good-for-nothing; also, a criminal". However, the *MED* also mentions that sometimes an itinerant knight would also be referred to as 'vagabond'. At this point, a detour into the semantic history of the word 'vagabond' across centuries would bring out how it went about accumulating an irremovable stigma. In 1426, John Lydgate translates Guillaume's *De Guileville's* into (Middle) English. The *OED* records that the word *vagabond* first appears here: "O thow blyssed Lady, hyde hem that flen vnto the for helpe, and they that be vagabonde, dyscoure hem nat". Here, *vagabond* stands only for a wandering person, still pretty much neutral. The word reappears in Lydgate's *Minor Poems* (ed. [1430] 1841, 256) still without any value-judgement, but simply to convey vagueness: "My poort, my pas, my foot alwey unstable, / My look, myn eyen, unswre and vagabounde". In 1489, *vagabond* is uttered in the same breath with *wanton* and meant to invoke similitude of what in Middle English has been called a *bor*, i.e. a boar: "Man... is hardy as a lyon... profytabyl as a bee, wantoun and vagabounde [L. *vagabundus*] as a bor, ontame as a bole"<sup>4</sup> (cited in the *MED*). Abraham Fleming,

in 1576, translates Erasmus's *Panoplie Epist.* as *A Panoplie of Epistles*, where the vagabond possibly for the first time has been criminalized and imagined as an entity worth being suspicious about: "The dogge... defend[s] our houses from theeues, vagaboundes, lewde fellows" (cited in *OED*). Milton, in 1644, in the preface to *The Doctrine and Discipline of Divorce* writes:

What through the brood of Belial, the draffe of men, to whom no liberty is pleasing, but unbridl'd and *vagabond lust* without pale or partition, will laugh broad perhaps, to see so great a strength of Scripture mustering up in favour, as they suppose, of their debaucheries (ed. 1851, 6; italics mine).

It is interesting to note that there is little reference to the figure of a wandering person as such, but the word *vagabond* has been used as an attributive referent to *lust* that is *vagabond-ly* in nature. In order for a word to qualify as a qualitative attribute it must have a fixed set of referents among its 'interpretive community'; and, by 1644, it is not inconceivable for Milton to have known that the grid had already been laid in order for 'vagabond' to act as a metaphor of unrestraint, to be precise, unrestrained lust. In 1726, Defoe invokes the vagabond as the embodiment of Satan: "Satan, being thus confined to a vagabond, wandering, unsettled condition, is without any certain abode; (...) this is certainly part of his punishment, (...) without any fixed place, or space, allowed him to rest the sole of his foot upon"<sup>5</sup> (ed. 1843, 22). The pejorative slant accentuates in a 1785 poem by William Cowper (ed. 1825, 24): "A vagabond and useless tribe there eat / Their miserable meal (...)". The vagabond is not only "useless" but purportedly a "tribe", another ambiguous, discriminatory 'social construct' to crystallize again in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in contrast to the ostensibly arcadian Romantic ideals. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, medical pedagogy had institutionally acknowledged vagabondage to be a (curable) *dis-ease* still with some feuds in the medical front over its taxonomy<sup>6</sup>.

### 3. The legal subject(ion)

The notion of the vagabond in the Western context is intrinsically tied to the idea of a run-away serf, not only feared as a potential criminal but also a 'masterless man' who symbolically heralded the beginning of the end to feudalism. With the authority of the feudal lords collapsing, the Tudor legislation by the Statute of 1351 – the earliest known government intervention – attempted to monitor wages, labor contracts and capture fleeing serfs. After the Peasants' Revolt of 1381<sup>7</sup>, legal personnel authorized to apprehend vagabonds were appointed by an Act of 1383 and yet another Act of 1388 insisted that anyone leaving his abode or service must carry letters patent explaining the purpose of his journey. The *Vagabonds and Beggars Act of 1494* stated: "Vagabonds, idle and suspected persons shall be set

in the stocks for three days and three nights and have none other sustenance but bread and water, and then shall be put out of the town" (*The Oriental Herald* 4, 25). In 1535, *The Poor Law* announced that "every sturdy Vagabond should be kept in continual labor", and a part of his right ear be chopped off on a second offence, and on a third be hanged. In 1547, branding and slavery as a punishment for persistent vagrancy was officially legalized. In 1553, influenced by Bishop Nicolas Ridley, the Tudor monarch Edward VI set the example – soon to be followed elsewhere – of founding 'correctional parishes' to 'discipline' the vagrants. The "theatre of the spectacle", to borrow an oft-quoted Foucauldian phrase, involving corporal punishment (such as chopping off a part of the offender's body or hanging him) henceforth would give way, even hastened by the severe flood of 1586, to a new and more effective form of socially engineered disciplinary mechanism, that Foucault (1995; 2013) calls the 'Great Confinement': to imprison the unreasonable, the 'unproductive', and, needless to say, eventually in the context of the English statutes of 1576, 1597, 1610, all with forced labor.

#### 4. Intervention of the medical gaze

In 1689, Dr. Hugh Chamberlen takes it upon himself to submit a *Proposal for the Better Securing of Health* recommending facilitation of medical treatment for "all sick, poor or rich (...) for a small yearly certain sum assessed upon each house"; by "house" he means the 'correctional parishes', and

that the laws already in being may be revised, which provide against the sale of unwholesome food; that bread may be well baked; beer well brewed, and houses and streets well cleaned from dirt and filth; all these being common causes of diseases and death' (Chamberlen, cited by Warren 2000).

At a time when the sick and the poor were increasingly being considered 'unproductive', the predicament of poverty becomes a concern for Dr. Chamberlen. It is indeed anomalous for this salutary act of philanthropy to have come from the court physician that Dr. Chamberlen was at that point of time. However, in bringing the 'unproductive' under what Foucault (2012) calls the "medical gaze", Dr. Chamberlen heralds a structural change in perceiving those that are 'unproductive': integrated into an 'enumerable space' they render themselves to optimized surveillance and demographic mapping. Societies reinforce 'regimes of truth' as historically validated discourses within particular times and places based on the power-knowledge nexus and the one in question here was in transit from a system based on notions of ethico-legal conformity to the law to one based on psycho-pathological conformity to medical institutions (Foucault 1972). As a result, the 'gaze' towards the vagabond changes: vagabondage from now onward would be seen more as a pathological *dis-ease* to be medically cured

than as a legal deviance to be punished. Vagabonds would now be seen as docile agents of demographic control: if and when ‘cured’, a potentially mobilizable work-force, a significantly important dividend in the light of the germinating Industrial Revolution. The underpinnings of the state-endorsed welfare programs for the vagabonds – as Chamberlen’s initiative illustrates – point to the implementation of optimized techniques of disciplinary control envisaged as remedial to the vagabond’s abstinence from productive labor.

In one of her passages from *Illustrations of Political Economy* (1833), Martineau recounts reportage of a criminal trial, possibly from some contemporary daily<sup>8</sup>, and then goes on to share what seems like her extemporaneous reactions to it. This piece shall provide a number of important reference points for our discussion:

Yesterday morning, Andrew Wilson underwent the sentence of the law, (...) Though only twenty years of age, he was old in guilt, having been committed for his first offence, – throwing stones at the police, – when he was in his thirteenth year. he is supposed to have been for some time connected with a gang of desperate offenders; but nothing could be extracted from his relative to his former associates, though the reverend chaplain of the jail devoted the most unremitting attention to the spiritual concerns of the unhappy man.

So this is the way we tend the sick children of the great social family, because, forsooth, with all our palaces, we cannot afford a proper *infirmery*! As soon as *symptoms of sickness* appear, we thrust all our *patients* together, to make one another as much worse as possible, (...) [H]onest poor are taxed to pay for the transportation of the guilty, and for the idleness of all: while the incessant regeneration of crime through our prison methods affords but a *melancholy* prospect of augmented burdens on their children’s children for similar purposes. In this view alone, how dearly has the public paid for the destruction of this Andrew Wilson, and for the offences of the gang he belongs to! Committed in his childhood for the childish fault of throwing stones, *kept in the state of expensive idleness for want of an apparatus of labour*, thrown into an atmosphere of corruption for the want of room to insulate him, issuing forth as a *vagabond* to spread the *infection of idleness and vice*, and being brought back to be tried and hanged at the nation’s expense, after he had successfully qualified others for claiming from the public the expense of transportation, – would not the injured wretch have been more profitably maintained through a long life at the public expense? (...) Every complainant who commits a young offender to certain of our jails knows, or may know, that he thereby burdens the public with a malefactor for life, and with all who will become criminals by his means (Martineau 1833, 93–95; italics mine).

The ‘criminal’ in question threw stones at the police when he was thirteen years old. This was his first offence, following which he had been rehabilitated, then released, only to end up committing more ‘crimes’. And, finally this career ‘criminal’ was sentenced to death in his twentieth year. The rehabilitation, possibly over numerous times for Martineau presents us with the chronicle of him going

'astray' during the course of these seven years, and the judiciary process involved in the trial was carried out with tax-payers' money. Apprehending that this might have antagonized the public and turned their sentiment against the 'criminal', Martineau herself engages in a polemical inquiry to determine whether impunity or lack thereof leads to escalation of criminal activities. I am not as much interested in the righteousness of her argumentation as I am with her rhetoric. In the first instance, it appears striking that not only 'the spiritual concerns of the unhappy man' eventually to be hanged had been paid attention to, but this was also deemed reportable in the media, the premise being those at the receiving end of the media would likely to have some amount of curiosity towards his "spiritual concerns".

Second, the plethora of medical terminologies in Martineau's response can actually be read as a metaphor of the 'gaze' perceiving crimino-legal deviance as (mental) dis-ease. There are five of those in total: infirmary, symptoms of sickness, patients, melancholy, and infection – all directly provocative of pathogenic references. Martineau's narrative medicalizes crime, wherein the 'criminal' is thought of as a 'patient'. She diagnoses the dis-ease as "the state of expensive idleness", its cause to be "want of an apparatus of labour", and its nature 'infectious'. What is revealed in this exposition is that Martineau's is the tip of an iceberg: the prevailing tendency to medicalize criminality. Foucault (1982) digs up the archival documents – medical, legal, police records – concerning an 1835-incident of some Pierre Rivière excruciatingly chopping his mother, teenage sister, and a seven-year-old brother to death; and reveals "the interaction of those discourses as weapons of attack and defense in the relations of power and knowledge" (ed. 1982, xi). Using Rivière's memoirs as "the zero benchmark to gauge the distance between the other discourses and the relations arising among them" (ed. 1982, xiii), Foucault reveals how the medico-psychiatric discourses of knowledge contended to overpower the crimino-legal discourses in questions of authority and credibility. The 19<sup>th</sup> century interventionist anatomo-clinical gaze thus pathologized all 'deviances': Rivière's in terms of symptomatizing 'monomania' – a 'disease' no wonder to appear in the medical field around the 1810 only to disappear in the 1850s – while the vagabond's in terms of symptomatizing idleness.

Third, as an analyst of Political Economy, Martineau envisions taxation as a function of idleness. Idleness is as though a vice, the direct impact of which is upon public taxation; and which when 'cured' will bring an end to all social crimes, albeit there is no known empirical correlation between idleness and throwing stones at the cops. Fourth, and the most important of all, Martineau accuses the 'criminal' to have spread the 'infection' of 'vicious idleness' as a vagabond. This pathologization of crime comes as a conduit for criminalizing the 'vagabond'. In other words, the 'clinical gaze' renders the 'vagabond' *diseased*: a clinical subject that functions as the common point of reference from which all aspects of 'infection of idleness and vice', all sorts of 'social unproductivity' must be



spoken of. Speaking of which, in the context of 19<sup>th</sup> century France, Hacking (1998, 68–69) reminds

After 1870 vagrancy – vagabondage – became important, and by 1885 tramps were deemed to be a critical social problem... [T]he vagrant signified racial degeneracy, no reproduction, or reproduction of those very features that the French race ought to get rid of.

This clinical gaze is reflective of an ‘epistemic shift’ away from the legal to the medical discourse on the ‘vagabond’ in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Immanent in the medical rhetoric is a fervent obsession to ‘cure’ the vagabond lest she infects the rest of the docile citizen-subjects.

## 5. Conclusion

The narratorial tropes – in the juridico-legal and the medico-scientific discourse – concerning the ‘vagabond’ over the time point to one central problematic: the concept of the ‘vagabond’ has no fixed referent, and hence functions as a ‘floating signifier’. This is why the paper has avoided probing into a purely semantic history of the ‘vagabond’. Likewise, the analysis in the paper is not based on any semantic-linguistic model either. At the best, models may explain how a word means what it means. Words, however, do not exist discretely, they form semantic *fields*, they are interrelated. Therefore, this paper, far from what the modularity of any diachronic semantic study could ever achieve, has worked on an interstitial field, where discourses of semantics, law and medicine concurrently meet. The transience in the semantics and its subjection to the discourses of law and medicine reflect how meanings of heuristic concepts – in this case, the ‘vagabond’ – have to be (re)configured, not because of reasons entirely linguistic, but rather due to changes in the prevailing epistemic paradigms.

## Notes

- 1 Wittgenstein formulated this in the first half of the twentieth century. I am using a 2009-edition of his writing.
- 2 This comes as a precedent to Vagrancy Acts and interestingly enough, the nomenclature alludes to ‘labourers’, bearing a Benthamite hint toward the friction between vagabondage and productive labor, which I shall take up in detail later.
- 3 For a quick understanding of the spatio-temporal trajectory of the Black Plague in terms of the European continent, see the animated map available with Wikipedia:

<<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Blackdeath2.gif>>. Website last visited on 3 March 2017.

- 4 It is interesting to note how animals or animality becomes a cultural trope acting as the core of distillation of the human(e) from non-human, or at least a bad human. There is an enormous body of literary and iconic representations – think of the seven deadly sins in context to the Catholic values – where viciousness is essentially portrayed as ‘animal instincts’. Boar here stands for slothfulness; and surprisingly we still say *boring as a pig* in the common parlance.
- 5 The *Bible* makes quite a few references to the vagabond (*Proverbs* 6:11; *Genesis* 4:12; *Psalms* 109:10; *Acts* 19:13). It would be a productive exercise to inquire how vagabondage has been invoked in these passages, though not any in positive light, and delve into the semantic variations translations. There are also some parallel in Indian myths where vagabondage symbolizes being accursed. This is a vast topic and needs separate attention.
- 6 Detailed discussion on the aspect of medicalization of vagrancy follows a few paragraphs later.
- 7 The significance of the Revolt lay in the fact that it came to be seen in retrospect as bringing an official end to serfdom in medieval Europe.
- 8 Martineau does not mention the source she cites from. The citation appears within parenthesis and in italics in the original, while the italics within her response is mine.

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