

# **Greimas and Levinas – Residents of Kaunas. War and Semiotic Theory in the Twentieth Century**

*A commentary on the 13<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the International Association of Semiotic Studies, 23-26 June 2017, Kaunas, Lithuania*

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## **Abstract**

This paper is the first in a series that will inquire about the status of semiotic theory in the twentieth century. It will address the tacit or unacknowledged influences of war, economics and mass migration, that shape the theory as narrative, and limits claims to its scientific or objective status. This part will focus on the prominent French semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas, with reference to the IASS 2017 Congress, held at Kaunas Lithuania. It will also mention the eminent thinker Emmanuel Levinas.

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Behind the flexible plethora of applied studies using semiotic methodology, there are regular claims to theoretical status. Key concepts, like that of sign itself, are given an abstract necessity, or in philosophical terms, a priori meaning, that permits inquiry to cross and transcend a remarkably wide field of inquiry, and also to articulate and respond to “meta” questions about language, human identity and being, consciousness, logic, body and mind, and culture, which previously have been the domain of philosophy. Key thinkers, such as Deleuze and Peirce, regard semiotics as an extension or embodiment of philosophy, or even as a substitute for philosophy to the extent it could address and resolve long standing problems.

The assumption of philosophical accreditation is what underpins the various associations, conferences, congresses, journals and even degrees and tertiary organisations that have evolved in the past five decades. A casual visitor to such events might mistake them even as zealous in their determined and bold quest to unlock meanings – such an impression was offered by my guest at the Congress of the International Association of Semiotic Studies, in Kaunas, Lithuania, June 2017.

Other academic humanities associations, in politics, sociology, visual arts or history, can be distinguished by their topical subject matter, but this cannot be the case with semiotics as there is such diversity and breath of subject matter of research and applied study. Interdisciplinarity can be a highlight but also a source of frustration in the field of semiotics. The cross section of subjects, ranging from medieval literature to modern

architecture, for instance, can be present in one journal edition or conference session. The methods and concepts are also broad, and provide the real skeleton for research.

The problem is that the repetition of familiar terms can disguise differences in their meaning. Signifier, signified, signification, discourse, denotation, connotation, relational, logic, paradigm, and the ubiquitous term sign – key concepts can have diverging and even ambiguous etymologies in different approaches and thinkers. There is some consensus on the philosophical side, at least in terms of questions or topics, if not necessarily preferred models or solution. There is much consensus when it comes to the arbitrary nature of language, even if the trope of modern semiotics can overrule inquiry into the motivational qualities of language. The multiform nature of language, including verbal and non-verbal sign system; the transcultural (synchronic) nature of narrative; the origins and nature of culture, and indeed human nature; perception; mind; the expressive nature of body; the pan semiotic qualities of nature and universe: questions such as these, often displacing traditional philosophical inquiry, are frequent, even if solutions vary. They shift inquiry from epistemology to ontology.

This abstract dimension of semiotics seems to qualify it as a form of theoretical modernism, that has endured throughout the twentieth century long after other forms of modernism (architectural, literary, social) have been questioned, and made it apparently immune to the upheavals of world wars, mass migration and the cold war. Sign theories seem to transcend and largely ignore the catastrophic world that gave them birth. In some European traditions semiotics indeed became known as a science, seeking objectivity not commonly associated with the humanities.

For much of the century an unwieldy spread of theoretical topics, terms and approaches arose, which can in part reflect the fragmentation of existing traditions, in part caused by the disruption of the world order with the First World War, and the emergent quality of semiotic inquiry as a nascent, new approach to knowledge and language. After one hundred years of emergence, one might suggest it is time to prune the overgrowth, and prioritise a coherent approach. This paper is in fact part of such a process – to retrospectively revise some now ‘classical’ modern approaches that have assumed often undeserved canonical authority in the last century, and indirectly point towards a preferred contemporary synthesis.

Of course the modernist status of semiotics has been subject to questioning. While the epistemic utility of its concepts can be appreciated, appropriated or assumed – albeit with reservations on occasion for any apparent obtuseness – it is the abstract ontology that receives tacit or explicit resistance, and arguably comprises a main obstacle to limits to the expansion of semiotic teaching and research, knowledge of its varied traditions and fulfilment of its status as a fully-fledged discipline. This theoretical contention was most explicit in the mid-20th century, in the so called structural/post structural debate between Michel Foucault and Claude Lévi-Strauss . Despite his left wing affiliation, the important structuralist anthropology of Lévi-Strauss involved a form of cognitive idealism, or a priori unconscious knowledge of structural forms. Foucault demanded that

structural theory be affiliated with the explicit analysis of social structure – if not emerging from power relation at least applicable to the analysis of class, race, and gender in society.

It can be questioned to what extent Foucault reflexively subjected his own theoretical development semiotically derived discourse analysis to a form an analysis, of its political and social motivations. However, despite the left wing persuasion of the younger Lévi-Strauss, his adaptation of structuralism to social science and anthropology relied on Freud as much as it did on Marx, and invited critique for its static, synchronic account of indigenous societies, by which he significantly failed to address the mass social changes and political upheavals of post World War Two Europe.

The treatise will try to fill in the lack of political affiliation in semiotic theory that Foucault discovered and exploited in Lévi-Strauss. In subsequent sections, the paper will return to Foucault and Strauss, along with individual scholars associated with affiliations such as Russian formalism, the Moscow-Tartu school, Prague School, and structuralism. The general shaping and motivation of theory will be seen in terms of the influence of major, cataclysmic political and social upheavals of the twentieth century – the rise of totalitarian governments (Nazi and Soviet), Two major world wars, a world depression and the Cold War. The argument might extend to Charles Peirce, in which case the reference would be to events in the nineteenth century. The effect of such analysis will mitigate against the formalist, theoretical status of theory, whereby theory becomes a form of myth narrative embodied in macro changes in the real world.

In the first instance argument will focus on the Parisian based Algirdas Julien Greimas, who, at the same time as Foucault was dismantling one form of semiotic, was developing unimpeded his own theory and school. It is argued that the theory of Greimas has escaped political contestation of the kind targeted at Lévi-Strauss– and indeed it is precisely the aim of its development that it be immunised from such analysis, not only by left wing activists in Paris, but also from the effects of World War Two, especially as experienced by Greimas in his homeland of Lithuania. It is the respect and status, that he sought and gained in Paris, as an East European émigré, one deeply committed to the culture and education of an independent Lithuania, that kept Greimas protected from the skirmishes that affected native French intellectuals.

At a time of liberation struggles in the West, there must have been sympathy for an émigré from Soviet occupation of the Baltic states, a proud nationalist seeking independence for his country (Brodén). Greimas was a different political animal from Lévi-Strauss – his semiotic theory extended to contemporary social discourse, and in some ways associated with social change in Europe. At different times he fought both Soviet and Nazi occupations, sometimes joining armed partisan resistance and putting himself at great personal risk. The observation has been made that this youthful training in independent entrepreneurial and risky activities provided a basis for the remarkable initiative and success he had building a semiotic edifice in France.

In fact, this picture of the nationalist independent from or subverting the neo colonising geopolitics that had destroyed Eastern Europe was misleading. “In terms of the four corners of his semiotic square, the full truth is that he was pro-Soviet and pro-Nazi before he became anti-Soviet and anti-Nazi” (Kulikauskas). The nature of his direct affiliation with Nazi as opposed to Soviet occupiers will be discussed later in this paper, and will be the basis for a retrospective critique of aspects of his semiotic theory.

First, let us acknowledge several ways in which links between world affairs and the emergence of semiotic theory, especially in relation to a figure like Greimas, was not necessarily a bad thing. In its short history, semiotics has in part served as a pan cultural structural approach to broad themes of culture and language that seemed to overcome the intellectual fractures of European history in the early twentieth century, and sought a more dispassionate, universal account of language and literature liberated from social change. This may have been a motivation for de Saussure– to create the broadest account of culture at a time when European cultures were beginning to descend into militarism. De Saussure’s theoretical linguistics assumes a stable Proto-Indo-European language and social system. Oppositional and connotative relations were linguistic phenomena based on stable, recurrent cultural norms. While de Saussure developed and taught his systems before his death in 1913, and therefore before the start of World War One, they were published and promulgated in the form of retrospective assemblage of student notes in the middle of the war. One can sense a double appeal in the mid European state of Switzerland of a language system that reinforces a notion of a stable coherent Europe, rooted in ancient practices that could continue after the temporary disorder of the war.

There is no doubt that a pre twentieth century enlightenment approach to society was in itself a response to international hegemony. After both World Wars there is almost a romantic nostalgia in the emergence of structural semiotics as a global organisation for peace and understanding, in a century of anarchy, and destruction – as if research could harken to a fin de siecle of traditional stable Europe of the late nineteenth century, where progress might seem inevitable. The notion that culture or language could be fundamentally disrupted, or even exterminated, seems unaccounted for. In Saussure’s legacy, as in Greimas’, we see a structuralist or formalist turn in language that went against the grain of other intellectual movements of the time – such as Dada and literary modernism – that sought to reflect the fragmentation of social order, and disinherit the orthodoxies of pre-war society, orthodoxies that might have contributed in some way to the outbreak of war. Throughout the twentieth century, in Europe and particularly Eastern Europe and Russia, semiotics differed from other intellectual movements in eliding and overlooking its context of social upheavals. In doing so, it served to normalise understanding of language and society.

The disclaimer could also hypothetically be made, that while de Saussure taught his studies before the War, his students compiled and distributed their reports of his classes during it. It would be difficult to prove that his students were finding more in his oppositional logic, during the course of military conflicts, than de Saussure intended. On

the other hand, it is possible de Saussure himself felt the pressure of colonial tensions and the build up to war, during the last years of his life, and represented the pressures of a new dialectic of international discourse and codes, in his own theory.

Once the window to real world influences on semiotic theory has been opened, we will find it allows a range of understandings about the nature of that theory - some more hypothetical than others, but all parts of a social and political contextualisation often omitted from histories of semiotic ideas and traditions. Other forms of narrative mythologising – such as television and Hollywood after World War Two – sought to normalise and society, in part as a balm to the shock traumatic effects of war. But such productions was self-consciously fiction – but East European formalisms were claimed as objective theories.

There is a mitigating content that explains, in part, the omission of direct commentary of social conflict in many semiotic – a search through pan-European internationalist vision that redress the intestinal nationalism of Europe in the twentieth century. After all, the 2017 Congress was conducted by the well established “International Association of Semiotic Studies”, along with the fledging and grandly named “International Semiotic Institute”. We will address the international dimension of Greimas’ work later. However we can quickly ask how well multiple semiotic traditions have served advance international understanding, almost as an Esperanto of critical thought, and how much they have exacerbated and clouded that horizon.

However it is explained or justified, the pan cultural universal approach to society does not excuse the omission of politics and social disarray at the core of theory. Social normalisation turns out to be a limitation of European semiotics – the argument by Foucault can be put again, in more refined terms, and expanded. Foucault had it all over other prominent social linguists – his notion of power, albeit simplified, could well explain social disruption and war.

Nevertheless, if that is all that can be concluded about a Greimasian version of structuralism – that it represented a turning aside or idealisation of his dire experiences in Lithuania as a young man during the second world war – then the criticism is not that strong. In view of the potentially traumatic nature of his experiences, he might well resume the intellectual narrative philology that he was exposed to in Grenoble before the war when he was training in the French language prior to resuming secondary teaching in his homeland. Structural philology was a pathway of stepping stones that allowed him leave the wretched pond of war behind, just as he had left behind his homeland in emigration to France – at war’s end. On the other hands structural semiotics allowed him to work on the myths and heritage of Lithuania – work that had strong political implications for national liberation from Soviet control.

However the case about and against Greimas, it turns out, is a little more complicated than that. It can be said that the effects of war were not so much transformed but consciously and directly instilled and subtended in several ways to become the core

content of his theory. To find out what are the implications of revisionist criticism in terms of contemporary evaluation of his project, one needs to probe a little into his biography, especially into his first twenty four years lived mainly in Lithuania. It was inevitable that such probing would occur to anyone attending the Congress at Kaunas – it turns out that that might not have been to the best venue for a celebration of his centenary of his birth.

After all, his semiotic work was entirely done in Paris, a locality that would have provided a trove of associations and sites for considering his centenary achievement. Further, Greimas was not actually born in Kaunas (he was born in Russia where his parents lived escaping the effects of World War One on their homeland), and on their return he spent most of his life up until his exile in other places – in several regional cities, where he received early education and worked as a secondary teacher and published, and in Grenoble France where he trained in French (Broden). He did complete a degree at the Law School of Vytautas Magnus University in Kaunas, then the capital of Lithuania, and lived in the city from 1942-44 during the Nazi occupation, working with the library of the Internal Affairs Unit. During this time he joined the clandestine Lithuanian Freedom Fighters.

Any question about commemorating his life and intellectual achievement extends further than the actual prominence or longevity of his stay in Kaunas or in any other location in Lithuania. If his life in Paris was relatively non explicitly political, and Greimas seemed distant from upheavals of the 1960's that so affected other thinkers including semiotic hued work then and later of Derrida and Deleuze, his life in Lithuania was immersed in politics. Indeed in his homeland he saw himself, and was seen as, an aspiring leader in public life, and at various times was active in underground resistance movements, armed and unarmed, in prominent regional newspaper, in Silesia. He is depicted in retrospect as first of all an commanding leader as a teacher and activist – a friend Vytautas, years later, remembered his colleague as “as a leader with dictatorial discipline,” an evaluation with which apparently Greimas agreed. “I was somewhat fascistically and socialistically inclined” (Broden). Certainly the rigorous, meticulous construction of his theory, and the dedication by which he promoted it, and the leadership he showed in academic circles, after the War, was assisted, quite essentially, by his upbringing in the 1930's and life during the War.

Greimas excused his personal evaluation in terms of the invidious choice young people of his generation faced confronted by two conflicting international ideologies. “Today, it is impossible to grasp that intoxication, that craze which in the third decade of the Twentieth Century embraced all the youth of Europe. It was as if they were responding to an unholy need to take action, which haunted everyone and urged them to action by any means, to do something, no matter what, to break something at any price... A young person would become a Fascist or a Communist solely due to their environment or circumstances” (Kulikauskas). There is certainly a lineage of major ideologies, both built on strong leadership cults, and competing internationalist ideas, that exceed any singular

nationalism and were arguably the basis for the pan-semiotics that Greimas advocated after the war.

It is true that however he acquitted himself, or simply survived, his experience of living through World War Two, caught between the power blocs of Germany and Russia, was invidious. For Lithuanian citizens, moderate or activist, independent national identity was fought and defined in relation to a seemingly intractable opposition of greater powers.

At the AISS 2017 Congress a mid-career Canadian scholar, Jamin Pelkey, raised the issue of the context of a main feature of Greimasian theory, developed after a few years of his exile in Paris, the so called semiotic square. He sought to counter the ultra modern persuasion of Greimas' thought, through reference to the realm of embodied cognition, in particular a phenomenology of movement based on the chiasmus or spread eagle expression. "Asymmetrical specialization of our upper and lower limbs ... all working together across the anatomical planes in complex, interdependent relationships" were exemplified by Michelangelo's anatomical image (Pelkey). Greimasian scholars were unsure of their responses.

For one thing, this context for embodied theory was not evidenced in Greimas' own writing or experience. Greimas was not a medical student, or sportsman – whereas he did experience five years of confrontation and occupation in his own country that continued with the Cold War and the Soviet occupation of Lithuania. His logic was one of narratives, and it seems quite plausible that war, including the mythologies and ideologies of war of his homeland, was nascent in his theory, and comprises the embodiment of theory Pelkey sought in anatomy.

However, the identification of this rather obvious and plausible influence is not necessarily a negative – in explaining or grounding its theory it also extends its significance even if the extended theory that significance and language follows from intractable permanent states of warfare is not necessarily an enlightened or productive one. It is indeed quite possible that Greimas consciously drew on this context at the same time that he omitted it.

If it is possible that Greimas subsumed the experience of narrativised opposition from his wartime experience, and indeed from the history of his homeland generally, the question remains why he did not expound on this influence? Why was Greimas so apolitical during his second, life in exile, in Paris. If has had been claimed he saw himself as a left winger in the 1930's, why didn't he affiliate with the substantial communist and left wing parties that were in France immediately after the war? He did to be sure, he did maintain an active interest advocacy of Lithuania as an independent nation, but this was also expressed opposition to the hegemony of Soviet occupation after the war.

The answer can be forthcoming by probing his biography in Lithuania a little further. Such probing would not have happened except with the occasion of international visitors to Kaunas. He returned to Lithuania from France to join a call-up following the Russian-

Soviet Non Aggression Pact of 1939. Russia left Lithuania alone for a while, signing a separate agreement with Lithuania as an independent state. Greimas was eventually coopted into Red Army, even after Russia sought to directly control the country. For some time he actively resisted Soviet rule putting military training to work. In 1941, before the June declaration of war between Russia and Germany, Greimas joined the other side, the right wing pro German National Liberation Party (Broden). Members of the Lituianian Activist Front were already in Germany in exile from Russian occupation from 1939. They re-entered their homeland during the first Soviet occupation, organising resistance. The LAF played a substantial role in facilitating German occupation of the country, helped **form** the Lithuanian Provisional Government, and in July 1941 staged a coup to control the civilian government. It might be that Greimas did not fully understand the LAF when he joined, but it is equally true to say he did not chose to sit out the war quietly as a secondary teacher in Šiauliai. He saw himself as a leader in politics, and appears to have had various editorial and journalist roles in publications in Šiauliai and Kaunas (Kulikauskas).

Like the Russians before them, the Nazis promised independence. They returned Polish controlled Vilnius to the state of Lithuania and as it capital. However like the Russians the Germans squibbed on their promise of an independent state, and when the SS took over direct control of running the country Greimas, like many of his nationalist colleagues, began to have second thoughts about the Nazi regime. He began publication and underground roles in Kaunas, and for a while was involved in partisan resistance.

He was largely silent about aspects of his wartime political affiliation after the war, when in France. To the extent they amount to any form of armed resistance to Soviet rule of 1939-1941 he had every reason to remain cautious of Russian influence in the years after the war. He also denied knowledge of the uprising of right wing partisans and the establishment of the national pro German government in 1941 – something that seems impossible to allege. He does not explain why he felt compelled to leave in advance of the Russian occupation in 1944 – through Germany. Would he be targeted by Russians for collaboration?

This paper does not wish to pursue world history or his biography in very much detail. The latter would it believes remain incomplete or ambiguous owing to the loss of time, witnesses and evidence. Further, his activities in the war, whatever or not their complexion, do not necessarily need to invalidate his later work. The paper does not seek to attribute moral responsibility arising from the War or prevent ongoing use of his theory in research. The problem it addresses is more theoretical: that his semiotic theory and endeavours need to be qualified at a conceptual or philosophical level because of their tacit embodiment intractable and deep human conflict. Further, this vision of a posteriori fear and abjection is at odds at any pan semiotic role semiotics had in establishing universal human qualities or 'civilization' freed from the effects of intestinal warfare. If there is to be linkage between theory and a vision or example of human society, one can argue that it should be one where differentiation and multiplicity is not tied to

necessary or deep opposition, but can be explained through some qualities of human society as a whole which retains a fundamental pacifist quality.

The ambiguities of accounts of Greimas' activities during the war raise yet one further, and very telling, critique of his theory, and that was his apparent agreement with policies and actions of the right wing side of LAF, and the Germans, regarding Jews. In his role of platoon commander in the Lithuanian army – he was trained by Russians – Greimas did display displeasure at his instructions from Germans to give Jews menial street cleaning jobs. Yet he seems to have remained silent during and after the war on the much greater problem of the initial killings of the Holocaust, which occurred in Lithuania while he was resident.

The facts are that Lithuania saw some of the earliest indiscriminate killings of Jewish men, women and children – in open air pits and in jails, in major cities and towns, in the summer of 1941 (Zuroff). Eventually 250,000 Jews were killed, including almost 30% of the population of the newly declared capital of the country, Vilnius. Whereas Germans at first ordered killings of Jewish communist leaders by the national provisional government, some activist paramilitary groups of LAF, especially those returning from Germany, and imbued with Nazi anti-Jewish propaganda, took matters further in order to curry favour with Germans for an independent state. Anti-Jewish propaganda was circulated in the months prior to the war. This got progressively more inflammatory in months up to June 1941.”(Kulikauskas)

Much worse were early unprecedented mass killings that arguably commenced the Jewish holocaust. Kaunas was a site for two of the first such killing events following the outbreak of the Nazi war on the USSR on 22 June 1941. The first was the infamous Lietūkis Garage Massacre on 27 June 1941, which was undertaken by Lithuanian “patriots” wearing white armbands of the LAF. Dozens of Jewish pedestrians were killed using atrocious violence. A large crowd including women and children watched and cheered.

This event followed a “great uprising” of 23 June 1941 against retreating Russians. A concentration camp was set up by the government at Kaunas VII fort, where 3000 Jews and Communists were machine gunned on July 4-6. LAF was prominent in killings, and there is limited evidence of opposition or protection of Jews in the general population.

While Greimas was not in Kaunas at the time, it is hard to believe he was not aware of the killings that took place in 40 localities prior to German fully occupying the country. About 1000 Jews were murdered in Šiauliai where he lived (Broden). It has been asserted that in June-July 1941 he worked with *Tėvynė* newspaper in Šiauliai, and had either authorised, witnessed or edited headlines and articles calling for the deportation of Jews, amongst other inflammatory cartoons and written articles, which no doubt helped exacerbate the outbreaks of killings throughout the country through the Summer of 1941. Further, it is alleged he worked alongside the notorious Vladas Pauža who recruited him into the LAF and actively promoted genocide, through a Kaunas paper, when it was still

not widely promoted as a solution to the Jewish problem, and wrote some of the most extreme propaganda (Kulikauskas).

When front pages of newspapers on which apparently Greimas worked were displayed by an interlocutory speaker at a Greimas seminar at the 2017 congress, scholars present were quite disinterested. Yet this revelation of his possible anti-Semitism is arguably pertinent to his theory. Did they know of controversy about his past in Lithuania? Why had they authorised the congress to be held in a place where it was likely such detail would emerge? Were they not aware of general process of whitewashing Nazi collaboration that occurred in many East European countries, in particular Lithuania, right up to the present times (Zuroff)?

Again, let us ask clearly to what extent does this matter? Someone serving jail for a serious crime can write a celebrated piece of literature. It would be different of course if the literature in some way validated the crime or somehow further implicated the criminal. It can be argued that this seems in some way to be the case with Greimas.

The logic of oppositions we have alleged is less an a priori theory than it is an a posteriori generalisation, with tacit reference to World War Two and possibly to the Holocaust in Europe. This shift in theoretical status of Greimasian structuralism is problematic for the validation of the theory because it involves implicit reference to wartime conflict. Further, the inevitability of this conflict seems driven by WW2 German history and also a fascist philosophy, of a hard-core dialectic and permanent war, of victors and losers, that very much seems to exemplify the practice and ideology of Hitler.

The latter tacit aspect of Greimasian theory must cause serious latter day re-evaluation. Although there have been other examples of genocide since World War Two, and the propaganda of Lithuanian nationalist and Germans included Poles, not only Jews, this was the first time in modern history of such explicit racial and cultural genocide. Greimasian theory, the critique goes, is arguably grounded in dualist dialectic of history or race that must be questioned.

If Kaunas was the beginning for a cultural aporia in World War Two, then could it be a profitable locality, in 2017, for questioning exaggerated claims to the theoretical-ultra modernist status of variety of semiotic traditions of twentieth century. Unlike the actual genocide, the loss of ideas can be real dialectic to a contemporary complete understanding.

Another prominent Lithuanian quasi semiotic Jewish scholar, Emmanuel Levinas, was born in Kaunas (Steinfels). Like Greimas his family migrated (to Ukraine) to avoid the worse effects of World War One, but they returned and he spent 14 years of his youth, until finally migrating to France, in the city. He deserves publicity in the annals of that city. It seems strange the Levinas association with the Jewish past of the city was not celebrated more at the Congress. Both men had families who suffered under foreign occupiers – Emmanuel's father and brothers were killed by the SS in Kaunas. Greimas lost

his parent during Soviet deportations. Both men did their mature work in France. The men were virtual peers. Here the similarities end. Levinas sought to understand and remediate the experience of otherness which Greimas seemed to assume. The radical difference between their philosophies and inquiry about language and identity can be traced to common but dissimilar pasts. Based on the a posteriori context of respective theories, it is possible to make evaluation and judgment about respective merits of their thinking in particular terms if any of their necessary integration – something to be done in a later stage of this inquiry. Levinas will be the bridge from Lithuania to a more general perspective on theory in Europe, in the next stage of this

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