

# ON THE FATAL IMPOSTURE AND FORCE OF WORDS

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Only a quarter of a century now stands between us and the nightmare-world of 1984, the age of totalitarian dictatorships that George Orwell saw us moving into — an age in which freedom of thought, so he augured, “will be at first a deadly sin and later on a meaningless abstraction.” “The autonomous individual,” he cried, “is going to be stamped out of existence.”

Is there any breeze from the world of tomorrow, from beyond our walls and moats, bearing such a presage of its climate? Or, was he simply another unlucky soothsayer and his book (as someone has said) only a “a political horror comic”?

One criterion is our present-day vocabulary — not the horde of technical or specialized neologies, nor yet the vulgarisms: they call for volumes to themselves; but rather, certain old familiar words whose meanings, within the lifetime of “senior citizens,” have changed in general usage; also certain new ones pressed into action for them.

To know the language of an age is to know its life-substance and its quality; for “Man’s speech,” in the old Greek adage, “is just like his life.” To know a language is also to know man’s credulities and impostures. “Such an encroachment is there in words,” proclaimed the Caroline Court-Chaplain Robert South, in a ringing High-Tory sermon (whence we take our title), “that the greatest affairs and most important interests of the world are carried on by things not as they are, but as they are called.”

According to Orwell, the official speech of Oceania — the scene of his famous excursion into the future — is Newspeak, devised to meet the ideological needs of the new order. Its purpose was to “provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits proper to the devotees of Ingsoc,” a collectivist society. It was intended “to make all other modes of thought impossible” and “to impose a desirable mental attitude” upon the person using it. No Newspeak word was “ideologically neutral.”

Is there any evidence today in our contemporary word-stock and usage of such a drift? Of words seeming to cry: “From the age of uniformity, from the age of solitude, from the age of Big Brother, from the age of doublethink — greetings!”

It is here submitted that, to anyone viewing usage in the perspective of years and on the alert for an authentic hint,

there *is* a beginning of such a vocabulary. Not, of course, Orwell's fantastic lingo, but words — either old ones with new connotation, or words quite new — significant of the vast revolution of our times and prophetic of the shape of things to come. Primarily cisatlantic though the words and usage are, it is curious that Orwell himself, so sensitive to shades of expression and shifts of meaning, did not call attention to them.

Such a word is "demonstration." In the not very distant past this meant "a public manifestation," as Murray has it, "by a number of persons, of interest in some public question or sympathy with some political or other cause." It still means that; but, for domestic use at least, "demonstration" has also well-nigh driven out the honest Oldspeak "riot"; and, as if to clinch this victory of verbal *bonhomie*, the Oldspeak "mob" is also making way for "mass-action." Indeed, "riot" and "mob" are part of a culture that is fading out before our eyes.

Then there is "anti-social." Once, in Oldspeak, this meant merely "averse from society;" but now, to all intents and purposes, it has assumed the place once held by such good, grey, reactionary terms as "dishonest," "vicious," or "immoral." Cheek by jowl with "anti-social" is "underprivileged," a parvenu redolent of the welfare state that has supplanted the "poor" and "ignorant" of the age of innocence.

"Service," unlike its mates, was born in slavery (*servitium*); but, after a long career of ups and downs — now crouching in abject duties, now in the proud service that is called "perfect freedom" — the social revolution of our century has freed it of all old-fashioned stigma. But alas, its glory, laud, and honour have vanished too; so now, as we know it, "service" has dwindled to an officious busybody, eager to be all things to all men.

Of all the Rotarian-like "organized lovey-dovey" words (as H. L. Mencken called them) in our latter-day language, the most unmistakable are the egregious four: "co-operate," "adjust," "communicate," and "integrate" — holy words of regeneration that not only lend purpose to every action of the natural man, but, like newfangled sacraments, bestow grace.

Not long ago, the first of these, "co-operate," denoted merely "to act jointly with another." To Ruskin, for example, it was the opposite of competition; but invariably now it insinuates something else: compliance or acquiescence, mutual toleration and a spirit of accommodation. "Don't offend the susceptibilities of others," it counsels. "Don't rock the boat," it warns, "or get out of line". . . Already a generation has come of age to whom co-operation in this sense is the recognized price of worldly security.

Exhaling the same atmosphere of *Gleichschaltung* (How one is almost driven to the Nazi idiom!) is its inseparable twin, "adjust." Within living memory this meant quaintly to "arrange" or "fit" or "put in order"; now it is a disarming word, owing not a little to the thrust of Freudian thought. It implies obedience to the social code, and suggests that to think and act in the same way is good for all of us. If the nineteenth century cherished individuality and a mind of one's own, the twentieth rewards conformity. "Freedom of thought," said Orwell, "will be at first a deadly sin and later on a meaningless abstraction."

"Communicate" once denoted "to impart" or "to make known." As heard on all sides today it hints — broadly if blandly — at persuasion: the control of an audience by the power of symbols. By general consent, moreover, communication is good; it could never, as Paul of Tarsus once alleged, be evil, and so "corrupt good manners."

Last on our roll is "integrate," meaning only yesterday "to form something into one whole," or the like. Today it has become, above all else, the watchword of a world-wide social process; and, if it drives for moral justice in race relations, legally it is none the less compatible with dictated, compulsory association, just as its antithesis, *apartheid*, has meant coercive separation.

## II

The list is small — a paltry decade, far short of a Newspeak; but, as Richard Trench, the archbishop-poet-scholar, said a century ago in *On the Study of Words*,

Often a people's use of some single word will afford a deeper insight into their real condition, their habits of thought and feeling, than whole volumes written expressly with the intention of imparting this insight.

In fact, for our purpose here, we might actually sustain our thesis not upon ten words but upon any one of them.

They meet all the requirements of Orwell's Newspeak. They are in common and widespread circulation: "*ubique, semper, et ab omnibus.*" Indeed, like this fifth-century formula of Vincentius of Lerins, they are the very test of orthodoxy — "intended," as Orwell wrote, "to make all other modes of thought impossible." If they were no more than euphemisms they would not merit serious notice. "It has always been the 'half-baked,' " as Eric Partridge points out, "who practice euphemisms the most." Neither are they mere prepossessive terms or simply verbal fashions. Instead, to borrow an apt simile from Orwell's

interpreter, John Alfred Atkins, our ten have, like totalitarian slogans, "become tribal calls on pavlovian stimuli": insistent, hypnotic words, "by which the mind is drummed into acceptance"; and their opposites put themselves beyond the pale, since they threaten society itself.

Though they are conscious and deliberate in origin, like Orwell's Newspeak, the ten are not state-inspired — like "selectee" for conscript, or "directive" for a military or bureaucratic fiat. Their currency seems to derive from the authority of professional uplifters and those who find salvation in the newer ologies; then, circulating obscurely after World War I and spreading in the era of the Great Depression and the New Deal, they were imposed by the innocent Jeffersonian principle, majority rule.

As long ago as 1922, in *Survey*, a professor of sociology was recommending "a limbo for cruel words," "Sin," "crime," "insanity" and "vagrancy," he wrote, "should be interned in the unconscious or should be paroled only on good behavior. A conscious recognition of behavior problems and social maladjustments should take control."

A few years later another savant, writing in *American Speech*, announced with some complacency that, as a result of the "rapid development of the general appreciation of social work. . . the terms of social workers carry more significant metaphors each year to a larger and larger public." Social workers "take themselves seriously," he averred, and in their nomenclature make "conscious, painstaking effort to think and speak in words both new and meaningful." Among these he put "co-operate" and "co-ordinate," as inseparable from social work.

Now it is no secret that words advance their frontiers of meaning; but when change seems to follow a definite pattern so that words, like straws in the wind, all lean in the same direction, only one conclusion is possible — they represent a *parti pris*. Clearly, none of our ten words is, in Orwell's phrase, ideologically neutral. They seem to have been (to repeat his language) deliberately constructed with the intention of imposing "a desirable mental attitude upon the person using them," to "provide a medium of expression for the world-view and mental habits" proper to a collectivist society.

Even if evidence to the same effect did not lie abundantly about us in plain view, portentous of the direction in which we are moving, this fragment of verbal evidence alone would be a social phenomenon of the first importance. It is like the single

bone from which, it is said, the great naturalist Cuvier claimed to infer an entire reconstruction.

### III

Historical parallels involving the relation between social and linguistic change abound; and, in their own day, must have provided food for speculations such as ours. Times of social disturbance or of rapid transformation were especially prolific in new words to match, or in variants upon old meanings.

Perhaps the earliest example of perversion of words goes back to the sixth century B.C. — to the social revolution in Athens that led to the reforms of Solon. Long afterward Plutarch, in his *Life of Solon*, was to comment on the novel precedent:

The ancient Athenians used to cover up the ugliness of things with auspicious and kindly terms, giving them polite and endearing names. Thus they called whores "companions," taxes "contributions," the garrison of a city its "guard," and a prison a "chamber."

Twenty-five centuries later, in 1984, it is instructive to note, bureaucracy was still running true to form, according to Orwell, and would turn "forced-labour camp" into "joy-camp." "But," continues Plutarch, "Solon was the first to use this device, when he called his cancelling of debts a 'disburdenment.' "

A century and more after Solon the Hellenic world was locked in the Peloponnesian War. Like Orwell's Oceania, Hellas was grim with "power-hunger, sadism, and hardness"; and Thucydides, in a famous passage describing the convulsive class-struggle of oligarch and democrat, reports that "the ordinary acceptation of words in their relation to things was changed as men saw fit."

The no-less-savage Roman revolution, which transferred power from a corrupt patriciate divided against itself to an efficient despotism, also followed the same verbal course. To out-manoeuvre their rivals and justify their own violence, the aristocratic advocates of change appealed to the Roman past, to the "ancestral customs," "popular liberty," "class-harmony," or "consensus of Italy" — words and phrases beloved of Cicero which had once stood for freedom and law and orderly rule, but now were pressed into the ideological service of the new order. As in 1984, "liberty" in effect meant "slavery."

Under the Empire, in the imperial endeavour to win men's minds and impose a desirable mental attitude, the same technique was followed. Again, as in 1984 where the Eurasian enemies of Oceania are always crushed in every battle, so the Roman World

of the coins — the propaganda-medium of antiquity — was too, as Professor Chester Starr declares, “one of incessant victory and prosperity.”

However successful the imperial cant was among the *plebs urbana* (the Orwellian “proles”), to an aloof aristocrat like Tacitus such Newspeak was transparent enough; and in his *Agricola* he puts lines in the mouth of a barbarian rebel that have come ringing out of the forest and down the centuries: “To plunder, butcher, steal; these things the Romans misname empire: they make a wilderness and they call it ‘peace’.”

But the richest crop of new connotations in antiquity sprang from the Christian revolution, with its new mental habits and fresh world-view — meanings imposed, so to speak, by the imprimatur of the Church. Any number of such new senses thrown off in the classical tongues will come to mind. The Greek *logos*, for example (Latin *verbum*), once meaning “word,” to the Christian meant the incarnate Word; *hamartia* (Latin *peccatum*), a “miss” or a “fault,” now meant sin; *elpis* (Latin *spes*) meant to look forward no longer with uncertain prospects, but to salvation; *sacramentum*, a solemn oath, was now a Christian rite; *caritas*, from meaning only “dearness,” meant Christian love; and *gratia*, a favor of any kind, to the Christian meant divine favour — that is to say, “grace.”

Might not a thoughtful pagan of the early Empire, pondering such mutability, have predicted the eclipse of Hellenism and the triumph of Eastern mysticism and emotion?

#### IV

Modern times offer still other instructive parallels. Leaping the years to later seventeenth-century France, we find a new *fable convenue*, afterward called the Enlightenment, spreading among the intelligentsia; and words were following suit. Descartes and Pascal were already using “nature” in the “enlightened” sense personifying the ensemble of natural laws. At the same period, “progress” was coming to imply euthenics and perfectibility; and in the next century a “philosopher” was no mere devotee of “adversity’s sweet milk” but a Voltaire or a Condorcet, subversive of the existing order.

In Locke’s England, about the same time, “liberty,” “property,” and “the rights of the subject” — these “rattling words, . . . these rabble-charming words,” as Robert South railed — had taken on new “enlightened” meaning for “the generality of mankind, wholly governed by words and names, having neither

the judgment to discern nor leisure to inquire into the right application and drift of them."

What followed upon such heady revelations was what might have been foreseen: the Spirit of '89 and its intoxicated sequel. Springing from the eighteenth-century dream of a new order of the world (still promised on American dollar bills), the Revolution became the instrument of liberal and nationalist doctrines — of political myths—and so loosed upon the world a fresh spate of meanings that always signalize a new dispensation. Such, for example, drawn at random from Max Frey's study of the French Revolutionary vocabulary, were "citizen" (no longer a mere townsman), "class" (no longer meaning simply rank in a *métier*, "subversive" (the adjective), "mass" (meaning the crowd), "democracy" (attachment to the Revolution), and "patriot" (a supporter of whichever régime happened to be in power). Voltaire's protégé La Harpe, having turned Catholic, denounced such language as fanatical and perverse. In the light of events, is it hard to disagree?

If the Enlightenment blueprinted schemes of social suggestion and social manipulation, Napoleon experimented with both. The coining and circulation of new meanings, as well as of "impostor words," as Bentham called them, such as "plebiscite" (a rigged election), were no longer left to the chance-medley of oratory or journalistic haphazard; this now became the business of the state propaganda-mill. In fact, Napoleon was the first modern ruler consciously to endeavour to affect the attitudes of his subjects toward definite doctrines by verbal means. His propaganda, however, as Professor Holtman believes, had a fatal defect: it failed "to adapt its messages and mediums to whom it was designed to influence."

We live in an age in which, like Sganarelle, "we have changed all that." Propaganda is now incomparably better-organized, more subtle and adroit, than ever before in history; moreover, its potential ambit is the great globe itself. The reality of this seemed to give verisimilitude to Orwell's grisly prophecy. Its warning seemed plausible. When 1984 appeared, the centralized manipulation of words was — in 1949, not 1984 — already here.

During the first World War, a fumbling facility had been acquired by the policy makers as a means of persuasion at home and of weakening the enemy's will to fight; but the New Deal may be said to have brought the art nearer mastery. A similar interest on the part of businessmen was aroused by the Depression, so that at one and the same time the technique of words, as Stanley Kelley has well expressed it lately, became "not only a

tool for promotion but a way of governing." Franklin Roosevelt practised that way beyond all precedent in his well-contrived, exhibitionist "fireside chats," so called — now to soothe, now to inflame. Since then, those who aim at power have come more and more to recognize in mass-persuasion their paramount concern, and the influence of the word-artist — alias the "public-relations expert" — has increased and is still increasing.

His role is what Edward L. Bernays, the New York "Counsel on Public Relations," has called "the engineering of consent," defined as the application of "thorough knowledge of the situation, scientific principles, and tried practices to the task of getting people to support ideas and programs." This activity, mass-persuasion, he declares has already taken its place in an expanded Bill of Rights, which now includes "the right of persuasion." The key to engineering consent for social action, he concluded in the *Annals of the Academy of Political and Social Science* some years ago, is (of course!) communication:

But. . . words, sounds, and pictures accomplish little unless they are the tools of a soundly thought-out plan and carefully organized methods. If the plans are well formulated and the proper use is made of them, the ideas conveyed by the words will become part and parcel of the people themselves.

How John Locke and Thomas Jefferson would have gasped at this startling version of their "determination of the majority" and "consent of the governed!" How Tully and Napoleon, those skilled artificers of "bafflegab," would have envied — and applauded! How suited the concept and the technique alike to a collectivist society!

But, although the new methods of persuasion are thoroughly in rapport with our ten words, they did not engender them. Both reflect unmistakably their common origin in the confused revolution of our times: the disintegration of the historic middle class and the rise of the wage-workers; the new egalitarian status of the colonial and coloured peoples; the transformation of nineteenth-century liberal democracy into a mass-democracy that has little connection with folk consulting and consenting together; and the slow accommodation of our whole way of life to the stupendous advance of technology.

Given these circumstances, the process of social adjustment by persuasion and suggestion — not to speak of the mutual dependence of government and the masses, the straining for harmony between private and public interests, or the devaluation of the individual — follows naturally, as a matter of course. May we not, then, expect words like our ten to be fashioned or



metamorphosed in gross? Even now the "manipulation of symbols" has become an indispensable mechanism of social integration. Already, without our ten vocables and the spirit behind them, it is hard to see how our social system — that vertiginous monster — could be brought to function.

Whether our ten words really herald a human termitarium such as Georges Duhamel foresaw a generation since,\* or, on the contrary, whether they betoken a far wider relatedness and community to come, is anybody's guess. This much is certain: for the first time in all history the injunction "Compel them to come in" — or the gloss upon it, rather — can be given practical effect. Public opinion really can be manoeuvred in any direction now desired. It is no wonder, then, that Orwell's *1984* — his "piercing shriek, amplified by the mass-media of our time," as Isaac Deutscher calls it — frightened millions at the prospect of invisible manipulation and regimentation, with no one knows what chamber of horrors at the end.

The grave danger of the engineering of consent, as Bernays himself agrees, is not in its functioning as an ancillary but in its superseding our traditional educational system and our traditionally independent-minded press. If and when only such knowledge is purveyed as experts in sophistry and power-hungry "planners" may see fit, and our news is fed us more and still more from "publicity releases," the world that Orwell scented from afar will indeed be upon us.

The liability is made the more immediate by preparing the young, above all else, for membership in the community. Service to society, real or so-called, is everywhere made the highest of all goods, regardless of whether a given society, or a given service, can truly justify its claim — as Pericles once justified the claim of Athens — by making individual wholeness and not devaluation its goal. Given the circumstances of our time as we have sketched them, this relentless conditioning is perhaps inevitable. More alarming still, it is mostly anonymous and innocent of guile; but the end-product, uniform and undifferentiated, will not be unlike that of the assembly line.

## V

In the final volume of his *Study of History*, Arnold Toynbee refers to the "patently increasing defeatism and submissiveness" of mankind. Whether at work or at leisure, the great majority

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\*And now, in his age, finds realized in large measure. See his address read at the 1955 *Rencontres Internationales de Genève*.

lives for the most part greyly, in a vast dim-out becoming more and more machine-tooled and mechanized. What, then, may not be made of this susceptible material through the manipulation and the suggestive-power of words — not singly or in tens, but in battalions. It may be, as Orwell wrote a decade before his reconnaissance of the future,

just as possible to produce a breed of men who don't wish for liberty as to produce a breed of hornless cows. The Inquisition failed, but then the Inquisition had not all the resources of the modern state. The radio, press-censorship, standardised education, and the secret police have altered everything. Mass-suggestion is a science of the last twenty years, and we do not yet know how successful it will be.

That, until now, seems to be the final word.