

What Orwell Saw

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IT HAS LONG BEEN recognized that political language forms a linguistic category of its own, one in which words serve not as exact descriptive symbols but as empty formulae designed to push specific emotional buttons in the guileless listener.

The best description of this process is still George Orwell's essay, "Politics and the English Language," written 60 years ago, in which he argued that any number of words used with easy profligacy by politicians had become essentially meaningless.

"The words *democracy, socialism, freedom, patriotic, realistic, justice,*" he wrote, "have each of them several different meanings which cannot be reconciled with one another."

The word "fascism," he said, had no meaning "except insofar as it signifies 'something not desirable.'" Other words Orwell said were generally used dishonestly included "*class, totalitarian, science, progressive, reactionary, bourgeois, equality.*"

"Statements like 'Marshal Petain was a true patriot,' 'The Soviet press is the freest in the world,' 'The Catholic Church is opposed to persecution,' are almost always made with intent to deceive," he wrote.

The list hasn't changed much over the decades, except that today we don't hear the word "bourgeois" as often as we once did. There are a few new ones, though: heartland, terror, rogue state, liberal media, elitist, pork-barrel, entitlement programs. Both left and right have hypocritically sweetened their roles in the abortion debate with coy formulations: pro-choice and pro-life.

And what about supporting our troops? Just what is meant by "support" in the context of this phrase, anyway?

My own favorite is one that is still shamelessly bandied about as though it had any meaning whatsoever: "tax-and-spend Democrat." This is as opposed to what, one would like to know -- a borrow-and-spend Republican?

The list could be supplemented almost indefinitely, but two words in particular have become so adulterated, so completely dissociated from their original meanings, that they should really be outlawed from all serious discourse: conservative and liberal.

"Conservative" derives from the Latin *conservare*: to keep, guard, preserve. It became a political term in the late 18th century as a description of Edmund Burke's opposition to the French Revolution, and it was applied officially as a new, non-pejorative name to the former Tory Party in the 1840s.

Burke's own definition of conservatism was "a disposition to preserve, and an ability to improve." Although social change was inevitable, he thought, it should ideally be carried out in an organic rather than a revolutionary fashion.

"Liberal" derives from the Latin *liberalis*: noble, generous, pertaining to or befitting a free man, ultimately going back to *liber*, or free. To be liberal, traditionally, was to be generous and open-minded, concerned with the liberties of others.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, "liberality" and "liberalism" began to be associated with being a little too free in thought and deed, but with the Enlightenment the word regained its purely positive sense: to be liberal was to be tolerant and free from prejudice.

In 1790, for instance, George Washington expressed an optimistic belief: "As mankind becomes more liberal, they will be more apt to allow, that all those who conduct themselves as worthy

members of the community are equally entitled to the protection of civil government. I hope ever to see America among the foremost nations in examples of justice and liberality."

Both words, then, have essentially positive connotations. All of us have certain things -- social structures, family ties, customs, mores, natural settings, neighborhoods, architecture -- that we would like to see conserved. All of us, in other words, are at least to some degree conservatives.

Equally, most of us would like to think of ourselves as liberal in at least the original sense of the word: tolerant, generous, acting as befits a free man (or woman). How then could "liberal" and "conservative" have accrued such layers of onus that both words are now regularly used, and understood, as terms of abuse?

As Orwell pointed out, language corrupts thought. The "invasion of one's mind by ready-made phrases ... can only be prevented if one is constantly on guard against them, and every such phrase anaesthetizes a portion of one's brain."

Certainly the loose use of the words "liberal" and "conservative" have anaesthetized the collective American brain and rendered it incapable of clear judgment. Too many people of a generally conservative temperament, people who value traditions, customs and institutions, have been fooled by the current cynical use of the word "conservative" into identifying their own interests with those of the political right, which today, far from being genuinely conservative, actually espouses a program of radical change.

Other people of an essentially liberal temperament are put off by current associations with the word "liberal," which has been used interchangeably and cynically with "radical" by the right since the 1960s.

The resulting confusions are legion. Take the issue of suburban sprawl, something one would think that most Americans could agree on. Few of us like the miles and miles of ugly, unplanned, semi-urban wasteland clogged with traffic that has sprung up around every U.S. city. To fight sprawl is and should be a conservative issue -- the point being to conserve large tracts of open and residential land -- but few seem to recognize it as such. The same goes for the preservation of national parks and forests.

And what about the word "freedom," which Americans of every political stripe have turned into an absolute fetish? True, it was already on Orwell's list of essentially meaningless words way back in 1946, but I think we all have some personal idea of freedom and some sense of what it means to us. How can anyone elevate freedom as an ideal while simultaneously excoriating liberalism -- that which befits a free man?

Today, just as in Orwell's day, the political chaos "is connected with the decay of language," and we can "probably bring about some improvement by starting at the verbal end." Let us start, then, by rejecting the treacherous, deceptive, worn-out terms "liberal" and "conservative" -- words that are useless to everyone except the cynical politicians who exploit them in order to manipulate our worst instincts and prejudices.

If we are unable to omit these words from our vocabularies, we should at least use them only after careful reflection, so that they might once again begin to accrue some real significance.