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# Hollow Words, Shallow Politics

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By the end of Sophocles' *Antigone* both the daughters and sons of Oedipus by Jocasta are dead, their tragedy presented starkly as a grim reminder that human beings are but specks of dust in the hands of the gods and that the gods may impose curses from which there is no escape.<sup>[1]</sup> But the *Antigone* is also a play about politics. King Creon's motivation is political. He does not so much care about the gods as he wants his country to remain stable under his rule. This means that his enemies must be punished and discredited, even if that enemy should prove to be his own nephew.

Today, we no longer believe in the curses of the gods, but presumably many of us still believe in God, and therefore in the stability of concepts such as right and wrong. We believe that every area of our lives and human activity is open to divine scrutiny, and that this therefore includes our politics. However, if there is one segment of human activity from which the very mention of God—except perhaps in the most formulaic way—has been excised, it is politics.

The *Antigone* presents the struggle between those realities and laws that transcend man, and those that merely strive to preserve the well-being of society. The *gravitas* of the play resides in this tragic struggle. When compared to Sophocles' drama, our contemporary political debates look rather depthless. The radical absence of “metaphysical lining” in twenty-first-century politics leaves language weightless; words float around in a haphazard way. This weightlessness of political language means that anyone can twist the meaning of words to their liking, they can remove and add words, bury old meanings, and assign new meanings that are meant to deceive and confuse.

In the fictitious world of George Orwell's *1984*, people are forced to forget the old meaning of words and learn new ones. Those who resist are simply done away with. These new meanings of words are assigned by a small group of people who wield total power over the rest. In the

real world of today's America, where the First Amendment is the law of the land, such a course of events is obviously impossible, but there are still ways of forcing people into accepting new interpretations and thereby limiting citizens in their political choices. In both journalistic and academic parlance, there is now an expectation that one use a specific set of terms to describe societal and international affairs. Among this current set are "positive" terms such as "democracy," "reproductive rights," "diversity," "multiculturalism," "equality," "social justice," "LGBTQ+," and "Black Lives Matter."<sup>[2]</sup> The collection of "negative" terms is longer and includes words such as "fascism," "nationalism," "populism," "inequality," "racism," "autocracy," "white privilege," "discrimination," and, last but not least, "hate speech" and "hate crimes," with the latter carrying a whiff of Orwell's "thought crimes."

Few public persons dare to declare sympathy for any of the concepts in the "negative" group for fear of losing their position as professionals of good standing. Therefore, it has become a ritual to speak of governments that do not enthusiastically embrace or enact the first group of terms in society as "fascist," "racist," or "hateful." Actions and ideologies that promote the first and abhor the second are classified in public discourse as "good," while the opposites are, to borrow an Orwellian term, "ungood." Words such as "patriotism" and "liberty" are now seldom used, while Hitler and Victor Orban are equally called "fascists" even though Hitler was a National Socialist and his Nazi party was by no means a duplicate of General Francisco Franco's fascism or Orban's prime ministership of Hungary. Just as T.S. Eliot once wrote about "hollow men," one can also speak of "hollow words," words whose "updated" meanings have lost their ancient connection to anything permanent, and which now serve an ideological purpose rather than striving for accurate description.

Among the most seriously abused words in the contemporary discourse about politics is "democracy." In *Democracy in America* (1840), Alexis de Tocqueville foresaw the malleability of this term, warning that "democratic nations show a more ardent and enduring love of equality than of liberty." He feared that a love of equality could assume gigantic proportions and eventually destroy both democracy and liberty. In his time, "democracy" had a stable meaning because public discourse was still anchored in permanent things. But de Tocqueville foresaw the possibility of uncoupling language from transcendence, and rightly noted that "democracy" would be among the victims of such uncoupling. A quick example is that of **Guy Verhofstadt**, one of the chief ideologues of the European far left, who in August 2020 called the European Union a "full blown democracy." But the EU is administered by the European Commission, an unelected body, so how can one call this arrangement democratic?

The semantics of "democracy" has become wobbly, with the word being used to express a variety of views from neo-Marxist to conservative. Most frequently, it has been used by ideologues who pour their own new content into the term and hope that readers and listeners will not notice. "Democracy" is thus now associated with the suppression of nationhood and Christianity, and the promotion of sexual minorities and social diversity. Here are two significant examples.

In August 2020, the people of Belarus, a small nation sandwiched between Russia and Poland, went on strike over a contested presidential election. Belarus is the last bastion of *homo sovieticus* and the last surviving instance of the destructive subjugation of Eastern and Central

Europe by Moscow. The strike soon transformed into huge demonstrations in virtually every city, but what became increasingly clear was that the falsified election was only a pretext; in fact, Belarusians wanted freedom from Moscow's domination.

So how did international media and politicians respond to this event? The media declared that the Belarusians were demonstrating for “democracy.” On August 5, 2020, the Atlantic Council posted an article titled “[From Dictatorship to Democracy](#),” from which we learn that the current president, Alexander Lukashenko, is an authoritarian “strongman” opposed to the “democratic awakening” taking place in the country. We are further told that Svetlana Tikhanovskaya, the main opposition leader, and her supporters want “a peaceful transition to democracy” and that her rallies have become a “focal point for the country’s democratic opposition.” Similarly, CBS News put out the title “Pro-democracy Protests Grow in Belarus After Disputed Election,” while social media displayed videos titled “Meet the Women who Lead the Fight for Democracy in Belarus.” An [Associated Press](#) article (reprinted in the New York Times on August 19, 2020) announced that “EU Backs Belarus Pro-democracy Rallies, Rejects Poll Results.” Meanwhile, [Carl Bildt](#), co-chair of the European Council on Foreign Relations, said in his statement to the press: “The turnout in Minsk today for the manifestation for democracy looks absolutely massive.”

But the Belarusians were not asking for “democracy,” they were calling for “freedom.” What the invocation of “democracy” leaves untouched is the elephant in the room: the military occupation of Belarus by Russia. “Belarus will be free,” said noted Belarusian journalist [Franak Viačorka](#), just as Lithuanian president Dalia Grybauskaitė spoke of “freedom for Belarus.” On October 12, 2020 a demonstration of [Belarusian retirees](#) demanded “Freedom for our children!” while previous protest [banners created by Belarusian women](#) featured the words “liberty” and “freedom,” rather than democracy. All of this is not because Belarusians are anti-democratic, but because their principal goal is the liberation of their nation from Moscow’s tutelage. They assume that everything else, including democracy, will follow. Ever since the USSR’s subjugation of Eastern Europe, Western journalists and politicians have pretended not to hear this language, they prefer not to hear the word “liberty.” Much safer is the word “democracy,” a term whose meaning can be tweaked according to the *Weltanschauung* of the speaker.

A similar situation existed forty years ago, when the Solidarity labor union in Poland transformed itself into a movement for freedom from Soviet-imposed communism. At that time, Adam Michnik, a prominent neo-Marxist, attempted to persuade Polish society and the West that Solidarity was fighting not for freedom, but democracy. He convinced many in the West that Solidarity wanted diversity and social change, rather than liberty and Christian morality. His books and articles promoted “democracy” as the alleged goal of the workers’ union, and as one of the few Poles who had access to the *New York Times*, his views—presented as those of the Solidarity movement—gained widespread circulation among left-leaning intellectuals in the United States. In an article published on March 25, 2007, Michnik described the then priorities of the Solidarity movement thus:

*Democracy instead of dictatorship, pluralism instead of monopoly, law instead of lawlessness, freedom of the press instead of censorship, diversity instead of conformity, open borders instead of barbed wire, tolerance instead of a reigning ideology.*

This is why Solidarity was first met with sympathetic approval by the American media and intellectual establishment. But when it became clear that the Polish people valued Catholicism and liberty more than social change, Solidarity's heirs began to be criticized, until they were finally declared unacceptable and even "on the road to fascism." Michnik's efforts are a classic example of mixing apples and oranges and misleading the reader. Once the then-ruling coalition in Poland was understood as holding conservative views similar to those Solidarity had advanced in the 1980s, Michnik was quick to call it "populist" saying that even "populism can assume the shape of nostalgic post-Communism or anti-Communism with a Bolshevik face."

Neo-Marxists were among the first to start manipulating the language of politics, throwing invectives such as "populist," "fascist," and "Bolshevik" at conservatives whose adherence to tradition they despised, and applying the word "democracy" to political entities that promoted social change, diversity, and exorbitant concentration on sexuality. The entire process of freeing East Central Europe from communism was mendaciously presented in many Western texts as an example of what the neo-Marxists wanted to see. Then, when it became clear that what people wanted was personal liberty and freedom for their respective nations, neo-Marxists began to claim that the people and their leaders were not "democratic" and were instead embracing populism and fascism. Alongside Polish Solidarity, the treatment of Hungary's Fidesz party is an example of how freedom-loving Hungarians were first cheered for their efforts to defeat communism, and then scolded for their alleged adherence to fascism. This battle is now going on in the European Parliament and EU administration in Brussels.

The appropriation of the word "democracy" to promote the goals of neo-Marxism is important because virtually all peoples who have tried, successfully or not, to free themselves from another country's military occupation define themselves as fighting for freedom and liberty. For them, democracy is an attribute of freedom, a self-understood attribute of a society where everyone has the right to vote in elections that are not rigged. Freedom is the goal; democracy is a byproduct. But the left-leaning intellectuals have long unhinged the word "democracy" from its Tocquevillian definition. This free-floating word has been invoked by tyrants and statesmen, by free people and by those enslaved. After World War II nearly every country has chosen to describe itself as democratic. One of the most oppressive countries in Europe was called the "*Deutsche Demokratische Republik*."

The hollowing-out of the word "democracy" goes hand in hand with the contemporary use of the word "fascism." Neo-Marxists and their non-Marxist followers promote social change, but the proletariat is no longer viewed as the engine of this change. This has switched places with sexual and racial minorities. Workers are now blue-collar "white supremacists." Anyone who opposes this new meaning of "democracy" (as a system where sexual and racial minorities are foregrounded) is a "fascist" or "nationalist." Cambridge professor Priyamvada Gopal thus called

British conservatives celebrating victory over German Nazism as “right-wingers” and “fascists,” even though it was fascism they were condemning.[3] After a man was killed during the riots in Portland on August 2020, a woman speaker said “we are not sad that a fascist is dead.” Needless to say, the use of the word has little to do with the phenomenon of fascism in Italy or Spain before World War II.[4]

In the same vein, Polish Catholic attempts to oppose premature introduction of sexuality lessons in elementary schools are described by neo-Marxist media as “nationalistic.” On the very same day that Professor Gopal accused fellow Britishers of being fascists, *Yahoo News* announced that “Polish Nationalists and LGBT Activists Face Off in Warsaw.” It seems that in the opinion of the neo-Marxist commentators, opposition to premature sexualization of children means that one is a nationalist.

The use of such words as “hate speech” and “hate crime” in today’s political and social exchanges goes hand in hand with the hollowness of the words described above. It is remarkable how many terms of our public discourse came from Orwell’s *1984*: “thought police,” “hate crime,” “thought crime,” “newspeak,” “memory hole,” “reproductive freedom.” In *1984*, those in power regularly organize “hate weeks,” during which citizens are ordered to express hate of the enemies of their country. The left-leaning ideologues have reversed this and accused those who oppose their agenda of “hate crimes.” This has even forced its way into U.S. legislation, which now contains the previously unknown category of “hate crime.” The assumption that the motivation of an action can be so irrevocably pinpointed cannot but infuriate those concerned, and thus the very mention of “hate crime” usually generates hate rather than assuaging it.

The imposition of new meanings on certain words is connected with the process of pushing aside other words, not in the radical way practiced in *1984*, but rather by making them appear in print less and less often. This is elimination in slow motion. Words and phrases like “patriotism,” “killing” the unborn, marital “fidelity,” “providence,” adherence to Christian “tradition” now seldom appear in academic and journalistic texts—and when they do, they are often given ironic undertones, as if being patriotic or faithful to one’s spouse was something a serious and mature human being should not entertain. On the other hand, we repeatedly hear words such as “transgender,” “bisexual,” or “reproductive rights,” and social imagination tends to follow printed and spoken suggestions.

The views of a good percentage of the population are now formed by the media rather than by religion, the study of philosophy, or conversations with wise grandmothers and grandfathers. In fact, it was the media who first succeeded to convince many that the meaning of words can and should be decided by those who write for the media.

Yet we occasionally read the ancients, and Sophocles’ *Antigone* remains one of the signposts of the civilization we claim to be a part of. The words pronounced by characters in this play are replete with stable meanings, there is no attempt to cheat the interlocutor by making them mean something invented by the speakers. While comparing the profound language of the *Antigone* to the language of today’s politics, one realizes that some degree of accommodation with transcendent values is necessary for politics to regain its dignity and truthfulness. The

*Antigone* reminds us how far we have departed from what made Western political systems last for millennia: a trust that words refer to stable meanings, and that discourse, rather than dazzling with new usages, strives for communicative clarity.

The meaning of words used to accrue gradually, their fullness depended on how long they had been in use and by whom. And all words had metaphysical lining. Expurgation of that lining from politics has resulted in a deterioration of public discourse. Now key words are thrown around by people who cannot tell fascism from Nazism, democracy from freedom, or adherence to the Ten Commandments from hate. It is not a question of a particular ideology taking over all interpretation and commentary. The lack of acknowledgment of a reality transcending the political order and unwillingness to find some kind of accommodation with that reality creates newspeak and robs high seriousness from the language of politics.

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[1] This article is a continuation of “The Great Amputation: Language in the Postmodern Era,” *Modern Age* 60.4 (Fall 2018): 40–51. Polish philosopher Dariusz Karłowicz (*Thebes-Smolensk-Warsaw* [Warsaw: Teologia Polityczna Press, 2020]) gave me the idea of using *Antigone* as a starting point in discussing politics.

[2] As a slogan, “Black Lives Matter” is of course acceptable, but not as a **global foundation** whose goal is to violently “build local power” and fight “white supremacy.”

[3] Priyamvada Gopal on Twitter, 16 August 2020: “British right-wingers are not anti-fascist, no matter how much they celebrate war victories. They are fascists.”

[4] Paul Gottfried, *Fascism: The Career of a Concept* (Northern Illinois University Press, 2017).

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