

WHERE IS THE LANGUAGE OF LIBERTY?

CHRISTIAN SCHNEIDER*

Fecha de recepción: **26 de marzo de 2019**

Fecha de aceptación: **9 de octubre de 2019**

In George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, the state of Oceania is devising a new language out of the old, pre-revolutionary English: *Newspeak*. "When Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten," explains Orwell ([1949] 2008, 312), "a heretical thought . . . should be literally unthinkable." Modern cognitive science provides fascinating evidence for the influence of our language on our thinking (Boroditsky 2017). Unlike Oceania's Newspeak, our English is *not* the result of malicious (re-)design. But does it serve us well in thinking clearly and critically about matters of ethics, politics and economics?

I

LANGUAGE, CULTURE AND CRITICAL THINKING

The compilers of the Newspeak dictionary in Oceania's "Ministry of Truth" first and foremost purge the old language of words for undesirable ideas (Orwell [1949] 2008, 312). Indeed, it is difficult to think about ideas for which we lack words. Even today, there are Amazonian tribes that do not have words for numbers. The speakers of an *anumeric* language fail even most simple arithmetical tasks (Caleb 2017). However, it seems that what they lack is not innate mathematical ability but a mathematical language—and culture—that we just take for granted (*ibid.*)

* Christian Schneider holds a PhD in economics from King Juan Carlos University, Madrid, and a master's-level law degree from Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich.

Economic thinking needs cultivation no less than mathematical thinking. This means not only developing an adequate terminology but also avoiding a misleading one. Not only is it difficult to think without suitable words, but it is also difficult to think clearly and coolly with ambiguous and emotionally loaded words (Jevons [1888] 2010, 27; Salmon [1963] 1984, sec. 32). Most of all, it is difficult to think critically with words that carry hidden assumptions into our reasoning. Calling a substance “medicine” means taking for granted that its effects are beneficial, without explicitly stating and specifying this crucial premise. Thus, we may not only fail to properly investigate the question, but to ask it in the first place.

II ORDER VS. REGULATION

This is exactly the case with the term “regulation.” Traffic lights, signs, markings, curbs and bollards “regulate” the traffic, right? That’s what they’re supposed to do. But what if they don’t? There is ample evidence about the effects of their removal, as part of the *shared space* concept of urban design: fewer accidents and better traffic flow (Wargo and Garrick 2016). The real effects of such traffic “regulations” are more congestion and accidents. Calling them “regulations” is like calling a poisonous substance “medicine.” It is a bad habit bred of ignorance before we have found out about its real effects. It turns into negligence or even fraud after we have.

A red light hinders people when it would be perfectly safe to go, and a green light entitles them where consideration would be more appropriate.¹ Without the lights, traffic is regulated by criminal and tort law, but most of all by people’s desire to get on but also to avoid accidents, and by a thousandfold individual on-spot knowledge of how to do so best. More information is put to use than could be collected and processed in any centrally planned system of traffic constraints and commands. Only the *absence* of

¹ For a concise introduction to the urban design concept of *shared space*, see Tulloch 2012.

such “regulation” allows safe and fluid traffic to emerge as an unanticipated and unintended order—a *spontaneous* order.

III THE FALLACY OF CREATIONISM

The same is possible for all kinds of state decrees. Calling them “regulations” presupposes the answer to the very question the economist—and any critical mind—has to ask: What are their effects on the wealth of society? That is to say: the actual effects, not just the intended or declared ones, and all effects, not just the obvious ones, but also those that remain unseen—as Frédéric Bastiat ([1850] 2011) has taught us. In particular, what spontaneous orders do the state decrees prevent from emerging? That which remains unseen is all the harder to imagine if it goes against our gut feeling. But if the task of science is to gain and convey insights that run counter to our gut feelings, its language must not confirm them at the outset of inquiry and instruction.

The mere word “regulation” irresistibly carries the *creationist fallacy* into our thinking: the notion that there cannot be order without design.² Life, language, customary law, money, and many more natural and social phenomena are all clear evidence to the contrary. The economist who criticizes “too much regulation” uses an anti-scientific language and makes himself sound self-contradictory. Who could be against “more regulation”—against a more regular, orderly state of affairs? With the mere word “regulation,” the creationist premise is not only conceded but at once embraced and veiled from scrutiny.

IV SUPPRESSING THE ETHICS OF LIBERTY

Price decrees are a classic example of state interference that defies its real or declared intention. When selling a good above a certain price

² For the classic formulation of the fallacious creationist conclusion, see Paley 1809, 11.

becomes punishable, the main effect is to prevent and discourage its production. Greater scarcity, longer waiting lines and even higher prices on the “black market” are the results, from the Pharaohs’ Egypt over Nixon’s America to Chavez’ Venezuela (Schuettinger and Butler 1978, 9-10; 109-110; Webb-Vidal 2006). However, calling such state decreed punishments “price controls”, “ceilings,” “floors” or “regulations” not only blinds us of these economic consequences, but also of important ethical and legal implications.

Contrary to popular belief, the absence of state legislation by no means implies an absence of rules. In the absence of threats of punishment by state decree, prices are regulated by the rules of self-ownership and freedom of contract.³ These rules provide an extensive and strict legal regime. In particular, they criminalize all sorts of force and fraud. Nobody has the privilege to make offers that cannot be refused. Historical evidence and economic reason⁴ suggest that by this legal principle, we get the best offers humanly possible.

V

LAWS AND MARKETS

On these utilitarian grounds, many libertarians advocate “free markets.” But this choice of wording is unfortunate, too. There are markets for stolen goods, slaves, contract killings, and for the decisions of politicians and bureaucrats. What libertarians really advocate are the rules of self-ownership and individual property. The dynamic process of trial and error, discovery, and cooperation that emerges from the observance of these rules contains much more than what is conveyed by the image of a traditional marketplace. Nor is it helpful to speak of “the market” as an acting being, paralleling the equally delusional image of “society” as some sort of higher collectivist creature, like the giant king composed of hundreds of individuals in the famous frontispiece of Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*.

³ For a concise explanation of the concept of self-ownership in the context of common law, see Epstein 2017.

⁴ For an excellent presentation see Mises (1949) 1998, chap. 15.

There are many more instances of loaded and misleading language that is nonetheless accepted across the political map, including the libertarian corner. Consider the term “minimum wage law.” Not only does it obscure the use of force and punishment and falsely suggest that its effects will equal its declared intentions.⁵ The noble and authoritative word of “law” has also experienced an outright perversion of its original meaning when generally applied to state legislation, not just in the extreme cases of the racist Jim Crow “laws” in the racially segregated Southern United States or the anti-Semitic Nuremberg “laws” in National Socialist Germany.⁶

VI FROM ARSENIC TO SCIENTIFIC LANGUAGE

We are warned by the philologist Victor Klemperer, the crown witness of the corruption of the German language under National Socialism:

“Language dictates my feelings and governs my entire spiritual being the more unquestioningly and unconsciously I abandon myself to it. And what happens if the cultivated language is made up of poisonous elements or has been made the bearer of poisons? Words can be like tiny doses of arsenic: they are swallowed unnoticed, appear to have no effect, and then after a little time the toxic reaction sets in after all.” (Klemperer [1947] 2013, 15)

What does this warning mean for us today? By liberty, libertarians understand a domain of individual sovereignty defined by the rules of self-ownership and individual property. They hold that if people act, cooperate, and trade on these ethical and legal premises, the results will by far surpass all forms of coercive central planning, whether under paternalist-authoritarian or

⁵ For a brilliant refutation of this fallacy see Mises (1949) 1998, chap. 30, sec. 3.

⁶ For a thorough explanation of the distinction between law and legislation, see Boudreaux 2014, chap. 5.

democratic-egalitarian justifications, and by standards of wealth for which most people would vote for with their feet.

To investigate the evidence both for and against the libertarian case, we need a language of precision and clarity in matters of ethics, politics and economics; a language that does not already in its vocabulary confuse intentions and results, embrace the fallacies of creationism, and obscure the use of force and punishment. We must not unquestioningly and unconsciously abandon ourselves to a poisonous language that strangles our doubts and numbs our judgment, as if it were devised by Oceania's Ministry of Truth.

VII CONCLUSION

Orwell himself encourages us to not tolerate the decay of our language as inevitable:

It becomes ugly and inaccurate because our thoughts are foolish, but the slovenliness of our language makes it easier for us to have foolish thoughts. The point is that the process is reversible. Modern English, especially written English, is full of bad habits which spread by imitation and which can be avoided if one is willing to take the necessary trouble. (Orwell [1946] 1981, 156)

Thus, we can and must consciously cultivate a language that, in its precision and clarity, inspires fundamental doubt and unterrified inquiry. If the case for liberty is sound, then its language is in an economic and social science worthy of the name. For the sake of truth and liberty, let us start speaking that language.

REFERENCES

Bastiat, Frédéric [(1850) 2011]: *That Which is Seen, and That Which is Not Seen*. In *The Bastiat Collection*, 2nd ed., 1-48. Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute. Adobe PDF eBook.

- Boroditsky, Lera (2017): “How Language Shapes the Way We Think” (video). Lecture at TEDWomen 2017, New Orleans, November 1-3. https://www.ted.com/talks/lera_boroditsky_how_language_shapes_the_way_we_think.
- Boudreaux, Donald J. (2014): *The Essential Hayek*. Vancouver: Fraser Institute. Adobe PDF eBook.
- Epstein, Richard (2017): “What is Self-Ownership?” (video). *Federalist Society for Law and Public Policy Studies*. <https://fedsoc.org/commentary/videos/what-is-self-ownership-introduction-to-common-law>.
- Everett, Caleb (2017): “‘Anumeric’ people: What happens when a language has no words for numbers?” *The Conversation*, April 26. <https://theconversation.com/anumeric-people-what-happens-when-a-language-has-no-words-for-numbers-75828>.
- Jevons, W. Stanley [(1888) 2010]: *Elementary Lessons in Logic: Deductive and Inductive*. Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute. Adobe PDF eBook.
- Klemperer, Victor [(1947) 2013]: *The Language of the Third Reich*. London: Bloomsbury.
- Mises, Ludwig v. [(1949) 1998]: *Human Action: A Treatise On Economics*. Auburn, AL: Ludwig von Mises Institute. Adobe PDF eBook.
- Orwell, George [(1946) 1981]: “Politics and the English Language” In *A Collection of Essays*, 156-170. New York: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt.
- [(1949) 2008]: “The Principles of Newspeak.” Appendix in *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, London: Penguin Book.
- Paley, William (1809): *Natural Theology: or, Evidences of the Existence and Attributes of the Deity*. London: Printed for J. Faulder.
- Salmon, Wesley [(1963) 1984]: *Logic*. 3rd ed. New Jersey: Prentice Hall.
- Schuettinger, Robert L. and Eamonn F. Butler (1978): *Forty Centuries of Wage and Price Controls: How Not to Fight Inflation*. Washington: The Heritage Foundation.
- Tulloch, James (2012): “Why Making Streets Risky Improves Road Safety.” *Allianz Press*, April 16. [ril 16. https://www.allianz.com/en/press/extra/knowledge/mobility/120416-why-making-streets-risky-improves-road-safety.html](https://www.allianz.com/en/press/extra/knowledge/mobility/120416-why-making-streets-risky-improves-road-safety.html).

- Wargo, Benjamin, and Norman Garrick (2016): “Shared Space: Could Less Formal Streets be Better for Both Pedestrians and Vehicles?” *Journal of Transport & Health* 3, no. 2, supplement (June): 74. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jth.2016.05.023>.
- Webb-Vidal, Andy (2006): “Venezuelan price controls lead to food shortages.” *Financial Times*, January 6. <https://www.ft.com/content/e0d7320e-7e39-11da-8ef9-0000779e2340>.