

STATE YOUR TERMS! ON THE MIS-USE OF LANGUAGE TO CONVEY SUBTLE COLLECTIVIST MESSAGES

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A well-known lover of freedom, writing about the causes of the atrocities of September 11, 2001, used a phrase which jarred on me: “*our* meddling in Middle East politics”. What he really meant was “the US government’s meddling in Middle East politics”. My friend, living in the USA, had found it natural to use “we” or “our” to refer to the US government. The effect was to give the reader a very subtle statist message, namely that everyone, particularly US citizens, and including my friend, must accept a portion of the responsibility for the US government’s meddling in Middle East politics.

This small, unintentional slip showed one way in which language can be used to convey subtle collectivist, anti-individual and anti-freedom messages. Those that hate individual freedom – I will call them lovers of tyranny – are masters of this particular art. I decided to write this paper to alert lovers of freedom to (or to remind them of) a few of these deceptions, and to suggest how they might try to avoid these traps in their own writing.

“WE”

The misuse of the word “we”, and its derivatives “us” or “our”, is very common. Many people, when they beat their breasts and say “we must do something about this”, mean “I want the government to force people to do something about this”. But, by using the word “we”, they are fraudulently claiming to speak for large numbers of people, many of whom if asked might well disagree entirely with what they say.

The key to detecting the fraud in this case is the simple one of asking: “Who’s we?” If a speaker or writer uses “we” in a way which is not clearly defined, you may perhaps have caught a lover of tyranny in the act.

Another misuse of “we”, often perpetrated by religionists and environmentalists, is to project guilt onto the entire human race. “Ever since *we* were given the Ten Commandments, we’ve ignored them”, moan religious fanatics. “*We* are polluting the atmosphere – *We* can’t go on like this”, scream enviros. The key here is to apply their own arguments to themselves. Have *they*, as individuals, ignored – for example – “Thou shalt not steal?” Are *they* polluting the atmosphere – the mental environment – with lies, and falsely trying to make people feel guilty? There are two lessons to be learned. First, never accept any guilt for anything other than your own actions, or the actions of someone under your direct control. Second, if those that use “we” in this way genuinely believe what they are saying, they are damning themselves out of their own mouths.

Related to both these misuses is the making of statements which bundle people together according to nationality, or according to some characteristic beyond their control, such as race. The motivation for this collectivist “bundling” is often to rouse emotions, either for or against those people. One should be suspicious of any sweeping statement, either positive or negative, about (to give two examples) “Americans” or “blacks”. Apart from the difficulty of determining just who exactly is “American” or who exactly is “black” (and who not), such blanket statements obscure the fact that human beings are all different.

PERSONALISING PLACES

Another misuse of language is the personalisation of nation-states, as in, “France wants X extradited” – or, when already speaking of France, “*She* wants X extradited”. In reality, a nation-state is not a person, and should never be given the pronoun “he” or “she”. The example above would have been better expressed as, “French leaders want X extradited”, or even as “French government officials have said they want X extradited”. France, indeed, is a piece of land; France cannot *want* anything (except, possibly, rain).

There is often similar misuse of the names of cities, particularly capital cities. For example, “London says such-and-such” or “Washington has confirmed so-and-so”. Even buildings are sometimes personalised: “The White House wants to tell the American public that ...”

In English, capital letters are not normally used for nouns, except for proper names and for the first word of a sentence. However, it is conventional to use capital letters for the names of establishment institutions and personages. Examples of such words are government, king, parliament, president, state, church, pope. To dignify these words with capital letters – Government, President, State, Church, for

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FOR LIFE, LIBERTY AND PROPERTY

example – gives to the reader an almost subliminal message of power, respect and even reverence. But, as historians and lovers of freedom know, many of these organisations and individuals have shown, by their actions, that they are not worthy of any such respect or reverence.

“PUBLIC”

Those that hate freedom – statist, collectivists, lovers of tyranny, call them what you will – have two words, which they very often pervert. These are “public” and “people”.

The adjective “public”, in its true meaning, means “for the benefit of all”. No less a thinker than John Locke, in his *First Treatise of Government*, defined the “public good”, which must be the objective of every government, as “the good of every particular member of that society, as far as by common rules, it can be provided for”. (In other words, if even one non-criminal individual in a society suffers net harm from government, that government is not acting according to the public good, and so is not doing its job).

There are many common uses of the word “public”, in which it has its true meaning of “for the benefit of all” or “open to all”. For example: public footpath, public house, public transport. But statist often pervert this word into a meaning more like “of or pertaining to the state”. For example: public purse, public sector, public works. And when any politician talks about something being in the “public interest”, you can be sure that this is no more than an excuse to “justify” the particular policies of that politician.

“PEOPLE”

The word “people”, in English, has two quite different meanings. People (plural) are human beings. The word “people” (singular) is used to mean a nation, or a sub-group within a nation. And statist often use “people” (singular), when they want those receiving the message to think that they are talking about people (plural). The key here is to ask, if you replace the word “people” by “persons”, does the sentence still mean the same? For example, when Abraham Lincoln spoke of “government of the people, by the people, for the people”, did he mean a society in which individual human beings run their own lives, or did he mean something else?

DEMOCRACY

Which leads to one of the most misunderstood words of all, “democracy”. Western politicians, especially US presidents, love to extol how wonderful democracy is, how no social or political system could possibly be better. This is hardly surprising, as democracy is, after all, the system through which they obtained power. This paper is not the place to discuss in detail why democracy today doesn’t work, and why so many individuals feel disempowered. Here, I will only address one reason why democracy fails; namely, that the word *democracy* doesn’t mean what people have been led to believe it does.

Democracy, says conventional wisdom, means “power to the people” – power to you and me. But this is not so. The word consists of two parts, both from the ancient Greek. The “cracy” bit, as with other -cracy words like aristocracy, means power. (In modern Greek, the root word “kratos” has come to mean “the state”!) The “demo” bit is more interesting. Democracy means power to the “demos”. “Demos” means people. But as you will have already seen if you know Greek, the word “demos” is singular! Indeed, this very

word “demos”, in modern Greek, has taken on the meaning of “municipality” or “borough”. So, the real meaning of *democracy* has nothing to do with empowering individuals. It really means something more like “power to the municipality”, or even “power to the state”!

WAR

Lastly, lovers of tyranny often show themselves for what they are, by their liking for military expressions. Politicians *fight* election *campaigns*, from which they want *victory*. And the word they like best of all is *war*. War on poverty, war on waste, war on litter, war on drugs, war on crime, war on terrorism – their list is long, and their wars are never-ending.

There are on planet Earth two conflicting world-views. The world-view of the lovers of freedom is, in essence, that human beings are individuals, naturally good, peaceful, productive and constructive. That human beings must take full responsibility for their own voluntary actions, but are not guilty for anything done by others outside their control. That all laws should ultimately boil down to just one kernel, namely, respect for others’ rights. That all the problems in the world are due to a minority of “bad apples” or, as John Locke called them, “noxious creatures”, and to the rot caused in others by their words and their activities. That good human beings, left to themselves, will create order out of chaos, and so make the planet a fit place for the human race to live.

The world-view of the lovers of tyranny, on the other hand, is that human beings are naturally bad, warlike and no more than cogs in a social machine. That all humans must accept a collective responsibility or guilt, which extends even to things outside their control. That, left to themselves, humans will destroy the planet. That humans must be controlled and regulated, and order imposed on them, either through force or through manipulating their beliefs. (And, that they themselves, the lovers of tyranny, are best equipped to do this controlling and regulating!)

Each individual shows his or her world-view in the way he or she uses language. And we (that is to say, lovers of freedom) are too prone to slip into our rivals’ way of speaking and writing. When we use “we”, for example, we should try to make it clear just who we mean. We should be alert to other misuses of “we”, for example to represent statist institutions, or to project false guilt. We should avoid implying that individuals must accept responsibility for things outside their control, particularly for actions carried out by politicians. We should try to avoid “bundling” people together into groups and making sweeping statements about them. We should reject the personalization of nation-states or cities. We should not dignify with capital letters personages or institutions that do not deserve them. We should not misuse words like “people” and “public”, and we should avoid warlike metaphors, such as calling our rivals “the enemy”. In short, we need to “state” our case in *our* terms, not our rivals’.

We lovers of freedom are usually strong on facts and logic. But facts and logic alone will never persuade those very many people, whose minds have been poisoned towards our rivals’ world-view by their long-term, persistent propaganda. We will never roll back the power of the state, still less heal the damage done by nation-states and politicians, unless we strive to make our use of language reinforce, rather than dilute, our uncompromisingly individual, peaceful and optimistic message.