

The Politics of Language and the Language of Political Regression

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Capitalism and its defenders maintain dominance through the 'material resources' at their command, especially the state apparatus, and their productive, financial and commercial enterprises, as well as through the manipulation of popular consciousness via ideologues, journalists, academics and publicists who fabricate the arguments and the language to frame the issues of the day.

Today *material* conditions for the vast majority of working people have sharply deteriorated as the capitalist class shifts the entire burden of the crisis and the recovery of their profits onto the backs of wage and salaried classes. One of the striking aspects of this sustained and on-going roll-back of living standards is the absence of a major social upheaval so far. Greece and Spain, with over 50% unemployment among its 16-24 year olds and nearly 25% general unemployment, have experienced a dozen general strikes and numerous multi-million person national protests; but these have failed to produce any real change in regime or policies. The mass firings and painful salary, wage, pension and social services cuts continue. In other countries, like Italy, France and England, protests and discontent find expression in the electoral arena, with incumbents voted out and replaced by the traditional opposition. Yet throughout the social turmoil and profound socio-economic erosion of living and working conditions, the *dominant ideology* informing the movements, trade unions and political opposition is *reformist*: Issuing calls to *defend existing* social benefits, *increase* public spending and investments and expand the role of the state where private sector activity has failed to invest or employ. In other words, the left proposes to *conserve* a past when capitalism was harnessed to the welfare state.

The problem is that this 'capitalism of the past' is gone and a new more virulent and intransigent capitalism has emerged forging a new worldwide framework and a powerful entrenched state apparatus immune to all calls for 'reform' and reorientation. The confusion, frustration and misdirection of mass popular opposition is, in part, due to the adoption by leftist writers, journalists and academics of the concepts and language espoused by its capitalist adversaries: language designed to obfuscate the true social relations of brutal exploitation, the central role of the ruling classes in reversing social gains and the profound links between the capitalist class and the state. Capitalist publicists, academics and journalists have elaborated a whole litany of concepts and terms which perpetuate capitalist rule and distract its critics and victims from the perpetrators of their steep slide toward mass impoverishment.

Even as they formulate their critiques and denunciations, the critics of capitalism use the language and concepts of its apologists. Insofar as the language of capitalism has entered the general parlance of the left, the capitalist class has established hegemony or dominance over its erstwhile adversaries. Worse, the left, by combining some of the basic concepts of capitalism with sharp criticism, creates illusions about the possibility of reforming 'the market' to serve popular ends. This fails to identify the *principle social forces* that must be ousted from the commanding heights of the economy and the imperative to dismantle the class-dominated state. While the left denounces the capitalist crisis and state bailouts, its own poverty of thought undermines the development of mass political action. In this context the 'language' of obfuscation becomes a 'material force' – a vehicle of capitalist power, whose primary use is to disorient and disarm its anti-capitalist and working class adversaries. It does so by co-opting its intellectual critics through the use of terms, conceptual framework and language which dominate the discussion of the capitalist crisis.

Key Euphemisms at the Service of the Capitalist Offensive

Euphemisms have a double meaning: What terms connote and what they really mean. Euphemistic conceptions under capitalism connote a favorable reality or acceptable behavior and activity totally dissociated from the aggrandizement of elite wealth and concentration of power and privilege. Euphemisms disguise the drive of power elites to impose class-specific measures and to repress without being *properly identified, held responsible* and opposed by mass popular action.

The most common euphemism is the term 'market', which is endowed with human characteristics and powers. As such, we are told 'the market demands wage cuts' disassociated from the capitalist class. Markets, the exchange of commodities or the buying and selling of goods, have existed for thousands of years in different social systems in highly differentiated contexts. These have been global, national, regional and local. They involve different socio-economic actors, and comprise very different economic units, which range from giant state-promoted trading-houses to semi-subsistence peasant villages and town squares. 'Markets' existed in all complex societies: slave, feudal, mercantile and early and late competitive, monopoly industrial and finance capitalist societies.

When discussing and analyzing 'markets' and to make sense of the transactions (who benefits and who loses), one must clearly identify the principle social classes dominating economic transactions. To write in general about 'markets' is deceptive because markets do not exist independent of the social relations defining what is produced and sold, how it is produced and what class configurations shape the behavior of producers, sellers and labor. Today's *market reality* is defined by giant multi-national banks and corporations, which dominate the labor and commodity *markets*. To write of 'markets' as if they operated in a sphere above and beyond brutal class inequalities is to hide the essence of contemporary class relations.

Fundamental to any understanding, but left out of contemporary discussion, is the unchallenged power of the capitalist owners of the means of production and distribution, the capitalist ownership of advertising, the capitalist bankers who provide or deny credit and the capitalist-appointed state officials who 'regulate' or deregulate exchange relations. The outcomes of their policies are attributed to euphemistic 'market' demands which seem to be divorced from the brutal reality. Therefore, as the propagandists imply, to go against 'the market' is to oppose the exchange of goods: This is clearly nonsense. In contrast, to identify *capitalist* demands on labor, including reductions in wages, welfare and safety, is to confront a specific *exploitative form of market behavior* where capitalists seek to earn higher profits against the interests and welfare majority of wage and salaried workers.

By conflating exploitative market relations under capitalism with markets in general, the ideologues achieve several results: They disguise the principle role of capitalists while evoking an institution with positive connotations, that is, a 'market' where people purchase consumer goods and 'socialize' with friends and acquaintances. In other words, when 'the market', which is portrayed as a friend and benefactor of society, imposes painful policies presumably it is for the welfare of the community. At least that is what the business propagandists want the public to believe by marketing their virtuous image of the 'market'; they mask private capital's predatory behavior as it chases greater profits.

One of the most common euphemisms thrown about in the midst of this economic crisis is 'austerity', a term used to cover-up the harsh realities of draconian cutbacks in wages, salaries, pensions and public welfare and the sharp increase in regressive taxes (VAT). 'Austerity' measures mean policies to protect and even increase state subsidies to businesses, and create higher profits for capital and greater inequalities between the top 10% and the bottom 90%. 'Austerity' implies self-discipline, simplicity, thrift, saving, responsibility, limits on luxuries and spending, avoidance of immediate gratification for future security – a kind of collective Calvinism. It connotes shared sacrifice today for the future welfare of all.

However, in practice ‘austerity’ describes policies that are designed by the financial elite to implement class-specific reductions in the standard of living and social services (such as health and education) available for workers and salaried employees. It means public funds can be diverted to an even greater extent to pay high interest rates to wealthy bondholders while subjecting public policy to the dictates of the overlords of finance capital.

Rather than talking of ‘austerity’, with its connotation of stern self-discipline, leftist critics should clearly describe ruling class policies against the working and salaried classes, which increase inequalities and concentrate even more wealth and power at the top. ‘Austerity’ policies are therefore an expression of how the ruling classes use the state to shift the burden of the cost of their economic crisis onto labor.

The ideologues of the ruling classes co-opted concepts and terms, which the left originally used to advance improvements in living standards and turned them on their heads. Two of these euphemisms, co-opted from the left, are ‘reform’ and ‘structural adjustment’. ‘Reform’, for many centuries, referred to changes, which lessened inequalities and increased popular representation. ‘Reforms’ were positive changes enhancing public welfare and constraining the abuse of power by oligarchic or plutocratic regimes. Over the past three decades, however, leading academic economists, journalists and international banking officials have subverted the meaning of ‘reform’ into its opposite: it now refers to the elimination of labor rights, the end of public regulation of capital and the curtailment of public subsidies making food and fuel affordable to the poor. In today’s capitalist vocabulary ‘reform’ means reversing progressive changes and restoring the privileges of private monopolies. ‘Reform’ means ending job security and facilitating massive layoffs of workers by lowering or eliminating mandatory severance pay. ‘Reform’ no longer means positive social changes; it now means reversing those hard fought changes and restoring the unrestrained power of capital. It means a return to capital’s earlier and most brutal phase, before labor organizations existed and when class struggle was suppressed. Hence ‘reform’ now means restoring privileges, power and profit for the rich.

In a similar fashion, the linguistic courtesans of the economic profession have co-opted the term ‘structural’ as in ‘structural adjustment’ to service the unbridled power of capital. As late as the 1970’s ‘structural’ change referred to the redistribution of land from the big landlords to the landless; a shift in power from plutocrats to popular classes. ‘Structures’ referred to the organization of concentrated private power in the state and economy. Today, however, ‘structure’ refers to the public institutions and public policies, which grew out of labor and citizen struggles to provide social security, for protecting the welfare, health and retirement of workers. ‘Structural changes’ now are the euphemism for smashing those public institutions, ending the constraints on capital’s predatory behavior and destroying labor’s capacity to negotiate, struggle or preserve its social advances.

The term ‘adjustment’, as in ‘structural adjustment’ (SA), is itself a bland euphemism implying fine-tuning, the careful modulation of public institutions and policies back to health and balance. But, in reality, ‘structural adjustment’ represents a frontal attack on the public sector and a wholesale dismantling of protective legislation and public agencies organized to protect labor, the environment and consumers. ‘Structural adjustment’ masks a systematic assault on the people’s living standards for the benefit of the capitalist class.

The capitalist class has cultivated a crop of economists and journalists who peddle brutal policies in bland, evasive and deceptive language in order to neutralize popular opposition. Unfortunately, many of their ‘leftist’ critics tend to rely on the same terminology.

Given the widespread corruption of language so pervasive in contemporary discussions about the crisis of capitalism the left should stop relying on this deceptive set of euphemisms co-opted by the ruling class. It is frustrating to see how easily the following terms enter our discourse:

Market discipline – The euphemism ‘discipline’ connotes serious, conscientious strength of character in the face of challenges as opposed to irresponsible, escapist behavior. In reality, when paired with ‘market’, it refers to capitalists taking advantage of unemployed workers and using their political influence and power lay-off masses workers and intimidate those remaining employees into greater exploitation and overwork, thereby producing more profit for less pay. It also covers the capacity of capitalist overlords to raise their rate of profit by slashing the social costs of production, such as worker and environmental protection, health coverage and pensions.

‘Market shock’ – This refers to capitalists engaging in brutal massive, abrupt firings, cuts in wages and slashing of health plans and pensions in order to improve stock quotations, augment profits and secure bigger bonuses for the bosses. By linking the bland, neutral term, ‘market’ to ‘shock’, the apologists of capital disguise the identity of those responsible for these measures, their brutal consequences and the immense benefits enjoyed by the elite.

‘Market Demands’ – This euphemistic phrase is designed to anthropomorphize an economic category, to diffuse criticism away from real flesh and blood power-holders, their class interests and their despotic strangle-hold over labor. Instead of ‘market demands’, the phrase should read: *‘the capitalist class commands the workers to sacrifice their own wages and health to secure more profit for the multi-national corporations’* – a clear concept more likely to arouse the ire of those adversely affected.

‘Free Enterprise’ – An euphemism spliced together from two real concepts: private enterprise for private profit and free competition. By eliminating the underlying image of private gain for the few against the interests of the many, the apologists of capital have invented a concept that emphasizes individual virtues of ‘enterprise’ and ‘freedom’ as opposed to the real economic vices of greed and exploitation.

‘Free Market’ – A euphemism implying free, fair and equal competition in unregulated markets glossing over the reality of market domination by monopolies and oligopolies dependent on massive state bailouts in times of capitalist crisis. ‘Free’ refers specifically to the *absence of public regulations* and state intervention to defend workers safety as well as consumer and environmental protection. In other words, ‘freedom’ masks the wanton destruction of the civic order by private capitalists through their unbridled exercise of economic and political power. ‘Free market’ is the euphemism for the *absolute rule of capitalists over the rights and livelihood of millions of citizens, in essence, a true denial of freedom.*

‘Economic Recovery’ – This euphemistic phrase means the *recovery of profits* by the major corporations. It disguises the total absence of recovery of living standards for the working and middle classes, the reversal of social benefits and the economic losses of mortgage holders, debtors, the long-term unemployed and bankrupted small business owners. What is glossed over in the term ‘economic recovery’ is how mass immiseration became a key condition for the recovery of corporate profits.

‘Privatization’ – This describes the transfer of public enterprises, usually the profitable ones, to well-connected, large scale private capitalists at prices well below their real value, leading to the loss of public services, stable public employment and higher costs to consumers as the new private owners jack up prices and lay-off workers – all in the name of another euphemism, ‘efficiency’.

‘Efficiency’ – Efficiency here refers only to the balance sheets of an enterprise; it does not reflect the heavy costs of ‘privatization’ borne by related sectors of the economy. For example, ‘privatization’ of transport adds costs to upstream and downstream businesses by making them less competitive compared with competitors in other countries; ‘privatization’ eliminates services in regions that are less profitable, leading to local economic collapse and isolation from national markets. Frequently, public officials, who are aligned with private capitalists, will deliberately disinvest in public enterprises and appoint incompetent political cronies as part of patronage politics, in order to degrade services and foment public discontent. This creates a public opinion favorable to ‘privatizing’ the enterprise. In other words ‘privatization’ is not a result of the inherent inefficiencies of public enterprises, as the capitalist ideologues like to argue, but a deliberate political act designed to enhance private capital gain at the cost of public welfare.

Conclusion

Language, concepts and euphemisms are important weapons in the class struggle ‘from above’ designed by capitalist journalists and economists to maximize the wealth and power of capital. To the degree that progressive and leftist critics adopt these euphemisms and their frame of reference, their own critiques and the alternatives they propose are limited by the rhetoric of capital. Putting ‘quotation marks’ around the euphemisms may be a mark of disapproval but this does nothing to advance a different analytical framework necessary for successful class struggle ‘from below’. Equally important, it side-steps the need for a fundamental break with the capitalist system including its corrupted language and deceptive concepts. Capitalists have overturned the most fundamental gains of the working class and we are falling back toward the absolute rule of capital. This must raise anew the issue of a socialist transformation of the state, economy and class structure. An integral part of that process must be the complete rejection of the euphemisms used by capitalist ideologues and their systematic replacement by terms and concepts that truly reflect the harsh reality, that clearly identify the perpetrators of this decline and that define the social agencies for political transformation.

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