

NEWSPEAK AND ECONOMIC THEORY

HOW WE ARE BEING TALKED¹

Jean Paul Fitoussi *

This article seeks to show how the impoverishment of language has changed the course of economic theory, much as Newspeak changed the order of things and the political regime in George Orwell's *1984*. At the origin of such an evolution was a stratagem: to act as if neoclassical theory was subsequent to Keynesian theory. The inversion of time's arrow had far-reaching consequences for the development of economics. In great part, the development of a science depends on the scholars who practice it and on its teaching to the new researchers who will develop it further. Both depend on the history of language. The consequences for economic policies have been major, especially in Europe. With the cancelation of most Keynesian concepts from the Newspeak dictionary, the relative weights of market and state were changed, which could only lead to a preference for liberal market-oriented policies.

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Editor's note:

Jean-Paul Fitoussi died on April 15, 2022, just days after this text was finalized. The Center on Capitalism and Society mourns the loss of a dear friend and outstanding economist. A tribute by Edmund Phelps.

1. This article is based on my book *Comme on nous parle : Les liens qui libèrent* (2020).

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In the Beginning Was the Word

We often feel as if we are trapped in empty speech that does not allow us to express our thoughts, at least without great effort and attention on the part of the listener. It is speech geared towards marketing and persuading. The nightly news advertises a platform. In France, as in the US, if you don't like the product you can change the channel or find whatever brand you want by turning to the internet. You'll encounter speech that the philosopher Harry Frankfurt (2005) labeled "bullshit." The bullshitter, unlike the liar, has no concern for what is true or false but rather uses language to advance his cause. As Frankfurt explains, bullshit is more corrosive to our public dialogue than lying, because it undermines respect for truth.

The different instances of such speech are curiously alike. The same speech is made by all the people who have a platform to speak; it is provided to them by the media, politics, colleges, universities, or money. Its influence is great. We have unwittingly become witnesses to the creation of a new language, which we are striving to understand. We speak it without fully realizing how it imposes predigested thought, just like the Newspeak of George Orwell's *1984*.

The ongoing degradation of language and of democracy are linked. In the extreme, our public discourse degenerates into the knowing talking to the ignorant. The statements of politicians are, in Albert Camus's marvelous phrase, "ones that lead to reverie rather than to thought" (1968, 295). For instance, France during the first months of the era of Covid-19 had no masks. Instead of saying that France was not well prepared, the president, the prime minister, and the minister of health said that, according to "the science," it is much better not to wear masks: they have no utility and are difficult to wear! Some weeks later, they obviously made a U-turn.

In this paper, I use the words that the Newspeak has erased. In a sense, Newspeak is the precursor of cancel culture, which proceeds by erasing words and historical facts and theories, in short, anything that might shake today's political correctness. Erasing a word is like throwing away books and killing our ability to make ourselves understood. Nothing can justify it. It is violence to be deprived of a concept with which to express one's thoughts. At the end of the road, it is thought itself that shrinks. When the words to say it are lacking, we don't say it; or we say something other than what we wanted to say.

The great communicators understood this, in both fiction, Big Brother, and reality, Joseph Goebbels. The impoverishment of language allows thoughts to converge. This is how we can finally understand what *la pensée unique* (single thought) meant in Europe or what the Washington Consensus meant in the US and in the world. The work of a great communicator is to impose a brand, which is to be an intellectual product. This paper seeks to explain how, in a democratic regime, we succeeded in emptying the democratic debate of substance. The pejorative *pensée unique* was invented in the 1990s to describe the embrace of neoliberalism. Today, when democracy seems to be on the wane, the expression takes on its full meaning. Goebbels's project was not to force people to think like him but to impoverish language to such an extent that they could not help but think like him. Is there a better definition of *la pensée unique*?

It is through the mediation of language that everything passes and everything happens.

When Facts Clash with the Newspeak Dictionary

How to deal with a situation where facts contradict the Newspeak?

It may happen that the great communicator is put in check by an unpredictable event, a radical innovation in the order of life. His language then suddenly becomes too poor to say anything audible. He must quickly draw on the words that have been erased in order to continue to be credible. But he will do so as if he were continuing the same discourse, based on the same doctrines. The coronavirus crisis is one such event. The communicator will pass in the same breath from the absolute necessity of budgetary rigor to the absolute necessity of debt, just as he passed in the same breath from the absolute uselessness of the mask to its absolute necessity. The leitmotif of governments was that they will do "whatever it costs," a French formula but of universal application. The advantage of the formula is that it looks to be new but was in fact referring to hydraulic Keynesianism.

The event was a test for the communicator who can be heard and seen, all the more so because he tries to cloak his speech in the garb of reason without even trying to justify the social massacre that his Newspeak doctrine had caused in previous episodes (think of Greece). It would have been enough for him to say that he was mistaken – he

would then be in good company – but he needs the Newspeak dictionary too much and wants to think of the crisis as transitory. It will be followed by a return to reason – the facts, too, have to obey reason – as was the case during the financial crisis. He absolutely needs to keep his keys to reading the world in their box.

The world has gone through violent turbulence in the last half century, with radically different events and crises, even if some of them were linked. There is nothing in common, apparently, between the oil shocks, the conservative revolution, mass unemployment, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the collapse of the Soviet system, German unification (these three events are in some ways different facets of the same phenomenon), the financial crisis, and the health crisis we are experiencing today. Yet it is the same key to reading that we continue to apply to the world – the same theories, the same language. So much so that I have the strong impression that our understanding of the world has diminished. Or else we would have discovered a universal explanation that could shed light on the past, present, and future. We cannot believe for a second in the fairy tale of science, a happy ending where everything would have been explained.

On the field of facts, the world, perplexed by problems that have not been solved, is going badly enough – socially, economically, politically.

To try to understand these enigmas, the great science fiction authors, Orwell in particular, are of great help. In *1984*, Orwell describes the process that Big Brother set up to make society converge towards official thought. The ministry of truth tracked down any contradiction from the party line, ensuring that past writings were consistent with it. They rewrote what needed to be rewritten. They worked on words themselves, creating the dictionary of the Newspeak.

We are no longer very far from this state of affairs in our democracies: without coercion of course but with methods of persuasion, media control, repetition (the famous elements of language), and social sanction that encourage self-censorship. This self-censorship is on its way to becoming a constrained but irresistible form of censorship; this is the basis of cancel culture. The atmosphere of courtship and the spirit of propaganda that characterize certain media bear witness to the road already traveled.

Political Economy

It is political economy that will serve as an illustration of my point. One of the stratagems used by the Newspeak in this field is to have flattened time, in order to create ambiguity about the chronology of theoretical contributions: neoclassical theory, Keynesian theory, neo-Keynesian theory, neo-neoclassical theory (or new classical school), and of course the new Keynesian school. It has been decided against the arrow of time that the oldest theory was the Keynesian one and that furthermore it was deprived of progress, as if the 1930s preceded the 1920s!

What is curious is that among this set of theories, only the Keynesian schools explain unemployment. The neoclassical schools either deny its existence or make it the consequence of everything that prevents the market from functioning freely. They thus remain pre-Keynesian, even if their form reached an unequaled technical level. But fundamentally, not only does their conclusion remain unchanged, but it is, in a sense, hardened.

What can be deduced from this? As far as its substance is concerned, neoclassical theory is pre-Keynesian and remains orthogonal to the phenomenon it is trying to explain. As far as decorum is concerned, its mathematical elegance has improved significantly. At the same time, Keynesian theory, despite its aesthetics, remains post-neoclassical, as it has always been. There will be much talk of Keynes in this paper, not because I am Keynesian, but because I consider that his theory, in the form it takes today, is the last state of political economy, the only one that can explain (imperfectly, of course) the world. Rationally, it – rather than neoclassical theory – should have been the point of departure of new development. I believe that the progress of a discipline does not go from one counterrevolution to another but is to know how to branch out to avoid denials of reality. Such bifurcations have not taken place in political economy; it is not the formally aesthetic theory but the theory that explains the world that has been erased from the dictionary of Newspeak. The flattening of time has made it possible to cast doubt on their dating, to make the classical approach modern and the modern theory archaic. This is not as innocuous as it may seem. It imposes an artificial bifurcation in the path of theory: it allows for the emergence only of theories of the “modern” family. The dominant economic framework in the future will be neoclassical. And the resulting economic policies will be market

oriented, while the role of the state will be reduced to a trickle. The rest follows from this. The word Keynesian has a pejorative connotation and refers to an economist insufficiently trained to understand complexity.

In "The Macroeconomist as Scientist and the Engineer," Gregory Mankiw (2006), president of the Council of Economic Advisors under George W. Bush from 2003 to 2005, shows that nothing has replaced Keynesianism as the matrix of economic policy in the United States. The scientist has not supplanted the engineer (a Keynesian for Mankiw); it is the latter who still defines and determines economic policy.

The question of language is essential. It is the scientist who won the intellectual battle, that is, the new classical school, whose founding father, Robert Lucas (1980), expressed himself in these terms: "At research seminars, people don't take Keynesian theorizing seriously anymore; the audience starts to whisper and giggle to one another." The new Keynesians wanted to respond to the challenge by using the very language of the new classical school, and the result is only a watered-down version of the conclusions of the Keynesian model of the 1960s. But aesthetics plays a fundamental role in the so-called dismal science.

The inversion of time's arrow had far-reaching consequences on the development of economics. In great part the development of a science depends on the scholars who practice it and on its teaching to the new researchers who will further develop it. It's why the grip of Newspeak is at its strongest in teacher training and the choice of thesis subjects. The new language will first take hold of the most malleable minds under the double effect of fashion and incentives. Here Keynesianism is a professional death certificate. A student studying disequilibrium is considered as if he were confessing that he doesn't understand mathematics. Why not join the poetry department? If he wants a job, he'd better churn out another footnote to the theory of real business cycles, that of dynamic stochastic general equilibrium, or the new neoclassical synthesis. The theory of real business cycles describes the behavior of Robinson Crusoe in terms of savings, investment, labor, and consumption and explains the business cycle as nothing more than a voluntary intertemporal exchange between work and leisure. Unemployment has no place, besides being another name for a job search. Demand plays no part and government intervention is only a source of instability. (Admittedly, the dynamic stochastic general equilibrium models allow

for some frictions such as menu rigidities, anticipation errors, etc. – but tacked on as an afterthought.)

How to have a contradictory thought without the words to express it? Our PhD student, if he knows what's good for him, will develop the theory of real business cycles, possibly introduce monetary policy, even seek internal contradictions. But beware of confronting Newspeak with an alternative theory: by definition, there is no alternative. Those that existed can only be visited at the Museum of Economics. Penicillin (Keynesianism) no longer has healing powers. It is extraordinary to note that this does not imply a partisan attitude – on the part of the partisan. He is not, literally, the follower of the new philosophy, but the language stops him from turning in any other direction.²

The burden of proof is therefore reversed: if you continue to speak Oldspeak, it is because you do not know Newspeak. Any resistance will struggle to express what could have been said more easily in the old language, some important words being missing (or out of fashion). Is such a feat even possible: Do we really say the same thing in both languages? Doesn't translation into an impoverished language reduce scope of thought? We would find ourselves, more than usually, lost in translation. Words that don't fit with the neoclassical paradigm became and remain taboo. We do not say *demand policy* but *risk sharing*. We do not say *monetary financing of public expenditure* but *quantitative easing* or *unconventional monetary policy*. When the grown-up economists abandon their responsibilities, kooks take the stage with fantastical theories under pretentious names (e.g., the government can print unlimited amounts of money with no risk of inflation or to financial stability).

The simplest message, whatever the complexity of theory, is what media and ultimately salesmanship demand. The pretext for this simplicity is to be better understood by listeners or readers. This recommendation, heard many times, seems to me contemptuous of the people.

It excludes the archaic vocabulary, because who can understand it? Few know much history anymore, whatever their affiliation.³ And ignorance acts as a Newspeak multiplier.

2. In the top five economics journals (*American Economic Review*, *Econometrica*, *Journal of Political Economy*, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*, and *Review of Economic Studies*), Keynes's *The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money* was mentioned precisely twice in 2015 (the most recent year that JSTOR includes all five).

Beautiful language is often simple. But to go from complexity to simplicity requires a real understanding of the phenomenon that we want to distill. When this is not understood, it is served to listeners and readers as incomprehensible. It's not the people who resist complexity, but those who speak to them. Perhaps they sense the disrespect. The disastrous presidential campaign of Hilary Clinton provides many examples.⁴

Today's Newspeak is more sophisticated, sneakier and richer than the one Orwell invented. It was not manufactured by dictators but within a democracy, necessarily decentralized. It governs not only vertical relations with power but also those horizontal relations between people. Its goal is to constrain thought without offending or upsetting anyone. To do this, we must learn not to judge: this objective is impossible to achieve unless debates are prohibited along with the free expression of beliefs. Indeed, can we say something that has meaning without displeasing anyone? The language of good feelings and political correctness is the oil with which we grease the cogs of politics to keep it from appearing violent. For example, the last reform proposal for the pension system in France is based on the principle that each euro contributed should have the same return. Because of this strict equality, the reform is considered to be particularly just. But it is not, because it does not account for inequalities in life expectancy.

Smoothed of rough edges, Newspeak knows how to constrain policy while making believe its policies are chosen on their merits. It also knows how to dress in a certain style to hide its emptiness.

Newspeak is constructed through repetition. We analyze problems, often with care. The analysis reaches its conclusion, is repeated, and reaches the same conclusion, but each time more worn down and robbed of its power to convince. The resulting actions are homeopathic, mere window dressing. Homeopathy has been discredited. I don't know if this is pharmacologically justified, but I am sure it is in the field of economic policy. It never achieves results.

3. Half of Americans say at least one of the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation, or the War of 1812 occurred before the American Revolution. More than half attributed Karl Marx's slogan "From each according to his ability to each according to his needs" to Thomas Paine, George Washington, or Barack Obama. Only 34% of millennials could identify Auschwitz as the site of a Nazi concentration camp (Brownfeld 2018).

4. Implicitly, this statement must exclude the sort of unemployment that truly is a short-term job search, as is common in the US, say when an employee quits to move to different state and spends a month finding a job.

The most resounding example, but also the most cynical, is the repetition of the claim that involuntary unemployment is unacceptable. This statement is absolutely true. Unemployment is unacceptable.⁵ How could it not be? Its existence is not contemplated by pure neoclassical theory. It is there for real only in Keynesian theory. But Keynesian theory is rejected as “false.” Is this a slip of language that consists in denying a phenomenon that exists in the theory that we reject (or pretend to reject)? But, if the intolerance of unemployment is sincere, how do we explain that, after all this time, we have failed to reduce it? The paradox is that we say precariousness (going by the name of structural protections) is key to improving job growth. At the same time, we say that precariousness (going by its own name) is unacceptable. The repetition devalues the words, as much as we have repeatedly heard that we have tried everything to combat unemployment. It robs words of meaning and credibility. Worse yet, it anchors the idea in people's minds that the situation is normal as it is. So this is what we call the new normal: end up resigned to live badly or, worse, in despair.

European Specificities

In Europe the scientist has won every battle, intellectual and factual. Many words have been erased from the dictionary of Newspeak—full employment, demand, fiscal stimulus, industrial policy, public investment, wage increases, and so on; many others have been highlighted—competitiveness, structural reform, fiscal rule, fiscal compact, competition, public debt, creditors and debtors, supply, and so on. There is an almost perfect correspondence between the precepts of the new classical school, the institutions, and European policies. Imagine that the former French president François Hollande, in order not to use the Oldspeak, defined his plans as a supply-side socialist policy—a socialist policy without purchasing power? The European dictionary seems to have fewer words than its American counterpart.

It is therefore with an impoverished language, stripped of its diversity, that we describe the European universe. As this language does not

5. Consider this from Clinton's stump speech: “Think of all the small businesses that take a big chance—my dad was a small businessman. I know what a chance it is. He couldn't do it alone. He needed customers. He needed suppliers. He needed workers. Americans don't say, ‘I alone can fix it.’ We say, ‘We'll fix it together, just watch us—nobody, nobody can solve problems better than we can’” (transcribed in Keith 2016).

solve any relevant problem, it is well suited to Europe, where rules freeze the handling of economic-policy instruments and in fact prevent their use. Only European federal institutions have more freedom.

Thus armed, the Newspeak will deploy its power in two directions. The first is to convince us that everything has been done to solve the haunting problems we face: unemployment, precariousness, and inequalities. Unfortunately, nothing has been successful. By dint of repeating this, we become convinced that no one will do anything about it. It is unfortunate, but we must mourn the impossible.

The second direction is more concrete and leads to the implementation of effective measures. We would be (collectively) responsible for the situation in which we find ourselves, because our behavior—or rather the behavior of the majority—is selfish and we resist any reform. Neither the unemployed nor the poor “move” themselves sufficiently to alleviate the burden they place on society. They don't move with sufficient energy to find work and they don't relocate to where the jobs are. We reject wage cuts, pension reform, unemployment-compensation reform, and labor-law reform, in short, all the changes where we leave blood on the floor. The time has come to ask ourselves what we can do for our countries. After a thousand reforms, we are still here. It can always be said that this result is testimony to the fact that we have not been as good as the people of country X or Y. One more small effort, *s'il vous plaît*.

It is in this context that the Newspeak expression *the end of work* seems to sound the death knell for the remuneration of work, leaving only the respite that structural reform would allow. It may also be thought that its evocation only serves to make the above-mentioned reforms more acceptable, all of which have the effect of reducing the bargaining power of wage earners. But the end of work is a strange hypothesis, probably prompted by our ancestral fear of technical progress, since it could just as well herald an economy of abundance and, as Keynes said, the end of the economic problem.

I take the expression *structural reform* to be emblematic of Newspeak. It claims to mean both everything and nothing. All we know for sure about structural reform is that it is good. Any government worth its salt must proceed with structural reforms. The government's credibility is at stake as well as its reputation among its peers. Malfunction of the current economic situation is deemed to stem from the absence of past structural reforms: the lack of dynamism throughout

Europe, slow growth in France, and high government-borrowing costs in Italy, as well as, more generally, public sector deficits, foreign-trade deficits, slow labor-productivity growth, deindustrialization, and so on.

Without further details, the expression *structural reform* does not mean anything intelligible, just like the expression *economic policy*. No one could imagine a political candidate promising to lead an economic policy. He would be asked immediately: Which one? But he'd be off the hook if he called for structural reform without further details. He could declare that the country suffered from not having realized structural reforms in the past and listeners would quietly nod their heads.

Now what does this term mean? In reality, everyone knows it, but no politician wants to go into the details. Just point to what the structural-reform heroes accomplished: Thatcher, Reagan, Schröder, Monti, Macron. Never mind the legions who have tried and failed (e.g., Balladur, Villepin, Hollande), because as soon as they have to explain what it is, the opposition rises up. There are several versions, but all involve a transfer of power from employees to companies via labor-law reform that reduces protections both at work and in unemployment. Social protections are reduced both directly, say by increasing the unreimbursed portion of health-care spending, and indirectly, such as by cutting hospital budgets. Another is reform of pension systems with the aim of reducing the share of GDP devoted to pensions (or to ensure that it is growing less quickly than the number of retirees). And so on.

While, in Oldspeak, social insurance was considered a hallmark of development, it is, in Newspeak, an evil that reduces competitiveness. For certain categories of workers in Germany, such protections have almost disappeared. Is this human, social, or even economic progress? The structural reformers may respond that we need not go that far, that the problem is that the money spent on protection is excessive, and we just need to lower it. But how? And how do we know they are excessive?

Once, we could classify unemployment due to insufficient demand and unemployment based on excessive wages. If the word *demand* is banished, we are left with a default explanation: wages are too high. One solution is engineering monetary policy to bring back inflation, allowing real wages to fall before workers notice. It's like the nursery rhyme we recite to children in France: Peter and Paul are in a boat. Paul falls into the water. Who is left? Perhaps no one, if Peter jumped in to

rescue Paul. The children, less Manichean than adults, imagine more possibilities than the obvious one.

Why do we substitute the term *structural reform* for measures that reduce people's assurance of having a worthy life? There were magnificent structural reforms: those recommended by the French National Council of the Resistance, the implementation of the welfare state, the advent of labor protection, and the birth of the European Coal and Steel Community, followed by the construction of the European Union and the euro. Other positive reforms could have followed, such as the adoption of a real constitution for the European Union or the end of fiscal and social competition among member states.⁶ I propose that we call *positive structural reforms* those intended to improve the well-being of populations. The others are *negative structural reforms*. Then we'll know what we're talking about.

If European governments inscribed their policies in great stories, they would likely be better understood. The politician can tell a story that resonates with people's experiences. We need such stories to understand who we are, where we come from, and where we are going. People do not respond readily to abstractions. If the stories are just cynical fables, they will have no power to convince and discredit governments. This is the process that we see at work almost everywhere.

Behind these considerations lies something more serious, more diffuse, and not only at the level of speech. The fact that we have found no solution to unemployment in Europe after more than 50 years of research – even as it has been repeated ad nauseam that mass unemployment is unacceptable – can be interpreted in three ways. The first is that of the French animator Jacques Rouxel, from his satirical TV series *Les Shadoks*: “If there is no solution, there is no problem.” Despite the absurdist aspect, he comes close to the thesis of real business cycle theorists: unemployment is a necessary investment in searching for a new match between worker and firm. The second is to say that society sees unemployment not as a problem but as a solution. Insiders seek to maintain the border that separates them from outsiders, while businesses safeguard social peace. Insiders are part of the system and set the rules, while outsiders are the ones who follow.

6. Relatedly, President Biden recently proposed to other G20 countries to tax corporate profits at a minimum rate of 15% in order to limit tax competition. It's a very good start.

This interpretation revives the classic unemployment thesis: protections granted to those who work, especially unemployment insurance, create unemployment by increasing labor costs. Taken to the extreme, we should eliminate all safety nets to reach full employment. But that would be to ignore the fact (as many are quick to do) that protecting employees is itself a condition for full employment because it balances the bargaining power between employees and firms. The pure theory of liberal capitalism does not accommodate power imbalances between agents or the rents they support.

There is, however, a more disturbing third interpretation. Our governments have achieved many of the goals they pursued: disinflation, reduction of budget deficits, and structural reform. So, why haven't we solved the problem we declare to be our priority? I put forward an answer that seems to me intuitive, but which could offend many. I borrow it from Paul Samuelson, extending his theory of revealed preferences to the public sector. In consumer theory, everyone has his own preferences, which remain unknown to all. We infer those preferences from actual choice, that is, from what the person bought. Applying this theory, perhaps the failure to achieve the goal of full employment reveals the true preference of governments.

Europe's future and *happy globalization* have also entered the Newspeak dictionary. Europe's future allows us to confront the other great powers of the planet on equal terms. (How can we imagine that countries of such means can make their voices heard if they do not work together?) Globalization is good because it allows us to seize new opportunities and take advantage of them. What is curious is that Europe seems to prefer to disarm itself. It does not want to be a federation, let alone a power. Defining itself as a federation of nation – states increases the ambiguity of its identity, which reduces its weight in the concert of nations. Depriving itself of many of the instruments of power – fiscal policy, exchange rate policy, and industrial policy – it cannot devise any strategy to deal with globalization, of which it is becoming the soft underbelly.

The impoverishment of language is like a shrinking of space that constantly brings us up against its limits.⁷ It narrows the field of solutions and makes life appear as if it were not so bad after all. In this way,

7. "The real, or what is perceived as such, is what resists symbolisation absolutely," said Jacques Lacan (1988, 66), the French psychoanalyst.

it produces resignation that pushes us to accept our fate. It is therefore very useful to the governments in place. Politically correct language reinforces resignation because it encourages the softening of debates and the erasing of their rough edges. We can find a thousand examples of this resignation in the period of lockdown, the ultimate means of fighting Covid-19 before the vaccine.

The nascent economic crisis, which is still in its infancy, could be destructive. The extent of our ignorance is large: regarding the virus, but also regarding the technology of expansionary fiscal policy through investment. Somewhere in the 1970s, we in effect lost the knowledge of this technology. The shrinking of the role of the state – say in Europe the suppression of national planning bureaus and other similar institutions – is radically reducing the scope for an intelligent public investment policy.

We will not be able to accommodate ourselves to the words of Newspeak if we want to avoid the wave of the crisis sweeping away everything in its path. Now, precisely, the vocabulary has been impoverished to prevent us from thinking otherwise. But we need to think differently if we do not want the bad reflexes acquired in previous crises to take us into unknown territories, socially, economically, and politically – territories where freedom is far from guaranteed.

Eppur si muove. And yet it moves. In the long run, the poorer the language is, the less correspondence it finds in our feelings, and the more it appears to be false. There can then be only two outcomes: either the slide toward tyranny or the restitution of erased words.

As a Conclusion: From Charybdis to Scylla

People know when words are just lyrics, like in a song. It is said that this is not the case for the crowds that follow populist speakers. They know it, but they want to hear them, so bruised are they by the harshness of the dominant discourses and their dissonance with daily life. When a sick person hears that he is well, it is not surprising that he goes to the healer, even if he doesn't believe in the diagnosis. One has to hold on to hope in order to continue to live. The result of the European elections of May 26, 2019 – the rise of extremist parties almost everywhere – illustrates my point, as do many national elections.

In a way, it is the people themselves who are encouraging the “populist elites” in their speech: Give us hope; tell us that we are not responsible for our own misfortune and that the community can do something for us. Give us a scapegoat, if necessary. We are exhausted from having to carry our own precariousness, our difficulties of life. We are revolted by being held responsible for our misfortune when we thought we were protected by governments whose job was to do so.

I have tried to show in this paper to what extent the evolution of language has contributed to impoverishing our perception of reality and to limiting ourselves in the actions we can undertake – *we*, that is to say, those who govern us. I have further shown to what extent this self-limitation prefigured autocratic political regimes, so much so that it was to the detriment of the majority of the populations of most of our countries.

We are not there yet, although there are many facts that suggest that we are heading there. The response to the Covid-19 crisis will allow us to know how fast we are going.

But if we continue to say that the princes and institutions that govern us are doing their best and that their decisions are always good and to exclude or despise those who think otherwise, we expose ourselves more and more to unpleasant surprises. To perceive them, we must not close our eyes to the world. It seems, however, that we have closed them tightly.

The European elections of 2014 were worse than those of 2009 and better than those of 2019. “But are these so important?” The dialogue between critics and experts of Newspeaks may be summarized as follows. In quotation marks are the answers in Newspeak.

Brexit has thrown Europe into turmoil; “but the British you know... .” Some European countries have almost become dictatorships (called illiberal democracies in Newspeak); “but universal suffrage seems not to have been abolished yet.” Our societies are becoming more and more brutal because of the violence they are subjected to (economic insecurity, unemployment, inequalities, etc.) and the revolts they provoke; “but you have a short memory.”

“But no,” I am told, to belabor the point, “it is only temporary turbulence, and we have known so much of it in the past. Europe is our future, and we have no choice but to continue obstinately along the path we have traced. Those who think otherwise are backward-

looking, nostalgic for the illusion that it was better to live a few decades ago. Don't they realize that we have never been as rich as we are today. Look how high the GDP per capita is, how long the life expectancy."

Neither of them reached such a level in the past. With a few exceptions this is undeniably true, but the argument is a masterpiece of Newspeak.

When people's lives are the opposite of this idyllic description, however arithmetically correct it may be, we cannot pretend it is so. In our research on the measurement of well-being and social progress, Joseph Stiglitz, Martine Durand, and I asked the question: Whom do you believe: us or what you see with your own eyes? The answer is obvious yet in a sense revolutionary.

Society no longer recognizes its image in the mirror that is held up to it by speeches and statistics. *Les gilets jaunes* (the yellow vests) should have made us understand this.

The same level of GDP can reflect radically different situations, where very few people earn a lot – really quite a lot – and many others are poor or very poor. That's because GDP per capita is an average, and no one can identify with an average. The discourse (so popular in the Newspeak, to the point of applying it to the unemployed) that everyone must take his share of the common effort becomes inaudible. Inequalities are made into a spectacle and have never been so visible: some people have the lives of dogs and others the lives of moguls! The answer in Newspeak to this charge is well-known: Why don't you like the rich, the successful ones? Many fall into the trap and try to legitimize their reticence towards wealth. But that is not the point; our societies have always been characterized by significant differences in income and wealth: the very rich, the rich, the average, the poor, and the very poor have always been part of our environment. We used to talk about social classes and categories (e.g., proletariat); words that today are obsolete. Only their blurred imprint lingers in the dictionary of the Newspeak.

The assertion that we are much richer today than in the past thus becomes empty of substance, because we no longer know what we (the average) means. It is also singularly apysychological: those to whom I compare myself are not those who lived 30 years ago but my contemporaries.

The other dimension of the phenomenon that makes the present unbearable is the absence of perspectives that characterize it: not only does the future appear indecipherable, but the subjective probability that it will be worse than the present seems to become higher and higher. And how could it not be when the dictionary of the Newspeak seems to have replaced the expression *wage increase* by *increase in competitiveness* and *welfare state* by *inclusive society*. It is difficult under these conditions to think of the possibility of social progress. And besides, the disenchantment with Europe that we see growing election after election is nourished by this renunciation of progress that the European construction seems to require: everything is *too much* – pensions, salaries, unemployment benefits, family allowances, housing assistance – to speak only of what has been under perpetual debate for several years in our European democracies.

What is at stake here is the care for future generations. If the idea of progress is so significant, it is because its absence would mean that children would be worse off than their parents. It is the present generation that cares about the sustainability of the system – that the future generation will do at least as well as the present one.

If we were cruel, we could talk about the spectacle that the pandemic has given us: everything is not enough – hospital beds, Covid tests, masks, hospitals, vaccines, doctors and others medical workers, their salaries, and so on.

We can see that only half of our brain worked, the one that made the people responsible, while the other half, the one that emphasized the responsibility of governments and ruling elites, was as if paralyzed. This should not be surprising; the words to say it were lacking because they were erased from the new dictionary. Otherwise, why else would they have believed the discourse that the budget deficit was the result of excess spending, when all it took was an event to show that our countries were suffering from insufficient spending, long-term as well as short-term? It could be shown that this is the case for many other public services, like education. So is it austerity that leads to an increase in public debt and a decrease in competitiveness in our European democracies or is it activity stuck at levels that are too low?

The naive might say, But why, since we are richer, can't we afford what we could do when we were poor? And why do we take as a marker of progress the decrease in wage costs rather than the increase in well-being? Finally, how can we imagine that under these conditions the future will be bright?

Doctrinal dogmatism inscribed in Newspeak represents a danger to democracy, as much as extremism does. And we must do everything to prevent our circumstances leading us from doctrinal dogmatism to extremism. Europe is not the problem; but the cynical path that politicians have followed there is. We urgently need to put back into the dictionary the words that have been erased from it.

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