

Weaponizing Language  
Posted On: December 31, 1969

We all teach our children: "Sticks and stones may break my bones but words can never hurt me." It is unfortunate that this well-intentioned admonition is no longer true. Words have become weapons, and they have a long history of weaponization.

How language is used has traditionally separated the educated from the uneducated, the powerful from the masses. From the fall of literate Rome to the Dark and Middle Ages, only monks, priests, and kings and nobles could read and write. They mastered not only Latin, but the common speech that had evolved from it: French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese, and Romanian, all of them dialects of Latin.

If one wanted to arouse the ignorant to join the Crusades or attack a perceived enemy (Jews, women "witches, or religious rebels), educated Latin was not used. The ordinary lower-class language was used instead, to great effect.

The French Revolution (1789) ushered in populist revenge against their former lords, priests, and the rising middle-class literate (the Bourgeoisie), and mob leaders used common language.

In America, Benjamin Franklin introduced a plain-style of English: easy to understand and not loaded with the word choices of the Greek and Latin-educated elites. We have always valued plain speaking, which means understandable by ordinary Americans. But plain speech did not embrace violent and vulgar speech, the language of the most ignorant.

After World War I, when empires collapsed and new idealistic democracies emerged, language soon became weaponized. New Fascist dictators (Mussolini and Hitler) appealed to the lesser educated mobs, the "common men," and used language appealing to them. Listening to the harsh violent rants of Hitler, one can hear the difference from the elegant speech of the educated. The vulgarity and violence, complaints of victimization, and targets of hatreds worked. New parties bullied their way into power and democracies fell.

After World War II, in revolutions that swept countries newly freed from their imperial masters, ambitious leaders learned how to endear themselves to the mobs. In Egypt, for example, Gamal Nasser gave a public speech in "people's Egyptian," not in the classical Arabic that would have marked an educated man. The mobs went wild and readily followed him.

Communism weaponized language a different way: they created an entire way of intellectualizing the complex thoughts of Marx and Lenin and true believers were compelled to learn the terms. But this language, too, had teeth. Failure to use the right terminology could land one in a Siberian prison.

In our country, the word "Communist" became a code word for anything politicians wanted to destroy. Demagogue Senator Joseph McCarthy used the language of the vulgar and uneducated to persecute as "Commies" intellectuals, writers, and people who were once taken in by the 1930s Communists, but had long since left them.

In the aftermath of the 1960s Voting Rights movement that finally enfranchised Black voters (long overdue), a whole new sort of language wars broke out. The first (and continuing) was what to call Black people: "Negro" and its vulgar form, were culled out. Black and African-American alternated, on and off, even now. But I like best what actor Sidney Poitier called himself: a man. No adjective needed.

Left-wing intellectuals attempted to say that Black street language should be recognized as valid, not just slang English. Happily, this "Ebonics" movement died. Educated Black citizens speak as all educated Americans speak today.

But we have had another run at Fascist language: our former President Donald Trump took heed of the entire fascist handbook to embrace vulgarity, violence, dog-whistles, and outright racism and misogyny. Women were called "dogs, pigs, bitches" and other scornful terms. His language about and to political rival Hillary Clinton delighted his "base," who are indeed "base."

Trump's language caper is also used by other proto-fascists in the Philippines, Brazil, Hungary, and Poland. Words have become red flags for those on the watch for emerging authoritarians, men who want to rule for life.

Yes, sticks and stones have joined with words as today's thuggish weaponry. Watch the taped January 6 attack on the Capitol and listen to those words. Words can kill.

681 words

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