Depoliticizing urban discourse: How "we" write

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A B S T R A C T

The language in which policy discussions take place can have a real impact on the policies that result, a subliminal impact that resides in what the words imply. What is a "crisis" and what "normality" is to be restored, who is the "we" that is often called on to act, who or what is "a city," what are the goals of "resiliency, are questions obscured by the very fact that their meaning is so often taken for granted. This paper argues that many words become one-dimensional in their frequent usage, suppressing alternate meanings and implicitly endorsing the status quo. Interrogating the language used in policy analysis should be a high priority in effective and socially aware public policy research.

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Introduction

Standard urban research and writing have a problem. It is widely present, but rarely confronted, in discussions of issues such as power and policy. It uses a language replete with slippery words, phrases and formulations taken at face value and unquestioned, but in a language that, if examined, suppresses critical questions. Such language is frequent in the mass media, but also appears in otherwise respectable and even well-intentioned academic writing and research. Typical of this language is the unexamined use of terms such as "crisis," "inequality," "discrimination," "productive," "growth," "resilience," or "new." Some are discussed in some detail below.

The concern here is not with the important set of issues George Lakoff raises in his discussion of the uses of framing to set the meaning of words, although that concept is also very relevant to how language is used. The frame provided a given phrase is intentional, if not conscious. I am here concerned rather with the use of language that has an unintended and often subliminal meaning. The examples cited below are all of unintended meanings, which seem to me more harmful than if they were intended and overt.

Likewise the concern here is related to but different from George Orwell's attack on political speech. Orwell exposes bad writing as such, and exposes political writing as consisting "largely of euphemism, question-begging and sheer cloudy vagueness," stemming from the insincerity of the user. But the problem raised here is when words and language is used in all sincerity, innocently, but with implications not intended by its user but effectively having important political implications supporting the legitimacy of the status quo.

Nor is the concern here with openly debated definitions of terms where alternate definitions are out in the open and each have clear political implications, such as "gentrification," "participation," sustainable," or even some border-line terms, where meanings are generally understood to be debatable even though often thoughtlessly used, such as "democracy" or "fair". The concern here is where the language has accepted and takes as obvious and uncontroversial a one-dimensional term, which in fact harbors suppressed critical dimensions, such as those discussed below.

And the concern here is not with abuses of language undertaken deliberately to cover actions that if clearly named would jar many people: "enhanced interrogation" for torture, "legacy assets" for fraudulent mortgages, "pacification" for forcible repression, "ethnic pride" for racism, "not our kind" for black or poor. Such euphemisms are well-known results of public relations efforts intended by their users to avoid criticism and preempt discussion; that George Orwell exposed so eloquently.[1] The concern here is rather with the unintentional and usually thoughtless use of language that carries a meaning or suppresses a meaning that would be critical if explicitly presented.

Finally, It will be obvious that, at least in the use of phrases such as "one-dimensional language," that I am deeply indebted to my father's One-Dimensional Man, which in fact contains a deeper discussion of the politics of language than is attempted here. There is in fact a broader discussion of the role of language as part of the establishment of social order, a linguistic turn in the social sciences, which is not pursued here.

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[1] Orwell (1946).

A note then on who is being addressed in this 'viewpoint' paper: The depoliticized words whose use is criticized here are in our every-day vocabulary. They have become depoliticized not by a conspiracy of those whose interests they serve, but rather by their quiet acceptance in established discourse. They cannot be avoided, but their implications should be recognized and interrogated if their implications do not accord with their users' intent. Yet they are slippery terms; they are mostly used as if their one apparently obvious meaning were their only meaning, as if they had no other dimension needing to be elucidated, yet often without their one-dimensional meaning being intended, or even being recognized. Where the one-dimensional meaning is intended, its users should take responsibility for its policy implications. Where it is not intended, its users should make it clear the way in which it is being used.

Thus, the concern here is not lack of clarity or disagreement as to meaning, but the innocent, not conscious and not deliberate, use of commonly accepted terms that are implicitly assumed to be "neutral," not to have a political function, but that in reality are complex and, if used without examination, implicitly suppress alternate dimensions of meaning from what may be intended, dimensions carrying with them alternate and critical understandings of how the world works. Planning for "growth" assumes growth is always good, and generally relates it to GNP or equivalent. "The public interest" is used as if it is one single thing, not full of contradictory interests. "Free elections" are so denominated if residents can cast ballots unimpeded and have them fairly counted. "Peace" exists if there is no war. It is the concealed, even often subconscious, acceptance of terms in analyses that are starkly conservative in their underpinnings and would be understood as such if brought to light. It is a one-dimensional language that closes off examination of critical questions as to what is really going on in the world. Its political content is wiped out.

The problem with one-dimensional usage

Because the problem is precisely that the problem is so little recognized within mainstream usage, it may be well to start with some widely used terms,

We must learn. A piece by Paul Krugman, a Nobel-prize-winning economist,[2] illustrates how easy it is for a respected academic to use every-day terms without recognizing the slipperiness of their usage.

Krugman's headline is, "Why don't **we** learn from financial crises?" He asks, about the current Indonesian currency crisis, "…should **we** be worried about Asia all over again?" The crises show "low little **we** learned from that crisis 16 years ago. **We** didn't reform the financial industry…"

But who "**we**?" Sometimes he's quite clear: He cites the Time magazine cover with Robert Rubin, then Treasury secretary, Larry Summers, his deputy, under the caption "The Committee to Saves the World." Clearly it's the 1%, saving "the World", that is, all the rest of us included, from disaster. Krugman is quite clear on his analysis about who's responsible: he later, for instance, refers to the policy makers, talking of the International Monetary Fund. But the language he uses is slippery, and has subliminal meaning he doesn't intend. When he asks why don't "**we**" learn from the last crisis, who does he mean? Larry Summers and Robert Rubin are doing quite well in this crisis also; who didn't learn? The 1% or the 99%?

When Krugman writes: "…**we're** actually doing much worse this time around" he means the 99%; the 1% are doing quite well, looking at the profits of the banks, the stock market, the growing share of the national income the 1% are receiving. Using the "**we**" serves to implicitly avoid the question of responsibility, who has benefited

² Krugman (August 30, 2013).

and who lost, who made the decisions and who was subject to them. "**We**" didn't reform the financial industry. "**We** didn't"? You and me? No. The financial industry fought off the regulation. But the "**we**" makes it seem: "**We're**" all in this together, one (1%) for all, and all (99%) for one. Implicitly and I believe unintentionally, the language used blames the victims as much as the perpetrators.

This failure to identify actors, to clarify who is doing what to whom, to highlight the conflicts of interest that underlie policy, ultimately to point out who's on what side and what must politically be done, comes about just from the habit of using conventional terms without thinking about them, to accept dominant modes of speaking and describing without realizing the content they convey in ordinary discourse.

The same is true when the subjects of actions are not identified: "the more austerity fails, the more bloodletting is demanded." It's a policy that's failing, not some particular persons nor groups who have the power to make policy that are failing – and failing whom? Not themselves. The 1% who make the policy are doing quite well by it, by and large they are hardly "failing." "Deregulation went full speed ahead." Krugman writes of the past. By itself? Or did it get pushed, and if so, by whom, how? "… huge inflows of foreign money [go] mainly to the private sector." By themselves, like water running downhill? Who's sending it, who's benefiting from the flow, who suffering, are questions not deliberately concealed; they just doesn't rise to the surface, from the language.

Who "we" is, is perhaps the central political question in urban policy. It ought not to be ignored.

When the slippery "**we**" is coupled with "**learn**," the political implications become even clearer. "Why don't '**we**' '**learn**' from financial crises?" "We" here might in fact mean everybody, although that's actually not what Krugman means. But, whoever it is, is learning what's required? If everyone accepted Krugman's perceptive analysis of the crisis, would all of us be better off? Isn't it rather that some, the 1%, understand very well, and mold the response to their own interests, and the rest, the 99%, even if they understood (and many certainly do, including most of Krugman's readers, but are powerless to put their understanding into practice? Using the language of learning to describe the problem implicitly makes it one not of political conflict and conflict of interests, but one of education. Well, Krugman is a teacher; if your tool is a hammer, every problem is a nail; if your tool is teaching, every problem is one of learning. Krugman certainly knows better, but the language doesn't reveal that.

This is not just stylistic nit-picking. It is language that depoliticizes what goes on in the world; it has to do with a political worldview. On the one side, one may see policy differences and conflicts of interest as parts of a learning process, in which all citizens participate in an effort to achieve a just result for all – a process where there is a real and all-inclusive "we." Or one may see the world, or at least that is made up of different nations different classes, different genders, different interests, as one in which conflicts of interest are pervasive, in which power is widely sought, unevenly gained, constantly exercised by and on behalf of specific groups and individuals and at the expense of other specific groups of individuals. To the extent that language plays a role, consciously or not, the "we"-ing and references to actor-less actions implicitly supports the first world view, rather than the second. And that necessarily has implications for political thinking and action. In this case, it's likely unintended, but unclear.

For two other terms is wide = spread current use:

Crisis, in its conventional usage means something unusual, an exception, a deviation from what is normal. But when used in the context of "the present economic crisis" or similar, it prejudices the discussion from the outset. As pointed out in the Premise of this issue, that is exactly the question that needs to be addressed; the answer sold may not already be implicit in the word. Is what is