

Neoliberal Newspeak II

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OVERVIEW:

Additional ways to deconstruct Neoliberal Newspeak involve exposing the ersatz virtues that are often touted in right-wing polemic. Each is used as an excuse to promote corporatist economic policies. What follows are nine of the most common examples.

Even as they promote neuroses about the dangers of highly-concentrated government power, the glorification of highly-concentrated private power has become a pathology amongst the more obstinate right wing ideologues. Apologetics for HCP as private power have become an art-form. Neoliberal polemic has proven very seductive and highly effective. Free enterprise fetishists like to use nine buzz-terms in their repertoire. The meaning behind each term should be noted each time we hear it.

1)SELF-RELIANCE:

THEIR conception amounts to self-absorption, greed, or narcissism. Ralph Waldo Emerson would cringe if he encountered this twisted and contorted use of this term. The Neoliberal sense of “self reliance” is based on the queer notion that if we leave everyone to fend for themselves, a Shangri La of meritocracy and widespread prosperity will result. This is predicated on the theory that humans should be treated as isolatable agents of self-interest—atomize-able utility maximizers operating in a world without structural inequalities and without information asymmetries. Not only does such a world not exist, but to caricature humans as largely rational, self-interested atoms is to degrade the very concept, “human”. Humans are far more than maximizers of utility: they are social creatures. Democracy is not merely about prerogative to do whatever one can to “get ahead”; it operates on civic-mindedness, social responsibility, and human solidarity.

“Self reliance” in the sense of individual autonomy (being sovereign over one’s own life) has nothing to do with the Neoliberals’ vulgar conception of this term. (The other buzz-word commonly invoked here is “individualism”.) In order to subscribe to the Neoliberal sense of “self-reliance”, one must ignore neighborhood effects, the dangers of highly-concentrated private power, and the fact that, with certain things like public health and public education and public safety, *we’re all in this together*. To treat citizens as merely benefit-maximizing atoms is to completely miss the point of how such societal conditions work.

The nominal conception of “self-reliance” is having a good work ethic—a meaning that does not support the Neoliberal polemic.

2)RESPONSIBILITY:

THEIR conception amounts to, “You’re on your own, buddy. If you’re left out in the cold due to circumstance, that’s your problem, not mine. Tough luck.” This sounds harsh and crass, so instead of spelling out what it actually entails, they use the euphemism “responsibility” in their polemic.

The nominal conception of the term involves accountability. It doesn’t just pertain to responsibility to oneself, but CIVIC responsibility—a notion that is anathema to the free market fetishist.

3)ENTREPRENEURSHIP:

This does not mean the ability to finagle ways to hoard as much money for oneself as possible. Yet that is essentially what their queer use of the term amounts to.

The nominal conception of the term is industriousness—personal industry involving innovation, creative activity, and noble productivity based on the merit of one’s achievements. That is: Civically-responsible endeavor that entails productivity conducive to the general weal of society. THIS conception doesn’t abet Neoliberal sophistry, so Neoliberals employ the mutant form of it instead.

Regarding the role this ubiquitous term plays, we are wise to keep it in perspective. We should ask: “What portion of the general populace earns a living via individual entrepreneurial operations (their own small enterprise) as opposed to being employed by a company?” Indeed, entrepreneurship is only one small element in the existence of the rank and file—and thus accounts for only a small portion of the workforce. We must be concerned with the mode of existence of ALL people in general populace—not just the small portion that happen to have sufficient capital and interest to engage in their own for-profit business.

For those who fixate on this single portion of the total workforce, we must ask: “What about everyone else?” (The only response we get from anarcho-capitalists is: “Tough luck. Too bad for them. Not my problem.”) Free enterprise is ONE ASPECT of a healthy economy—but not the entire picture. As we’ve seen with every economic catastrophe in U.S. history, we disregard the other aspects at our peril.

Some may respond to this point, a la Rand: “But it is the business owners who provide the jobs! If it weren’t for the entrepreneurs, the economy wouldn’t work.” Indeed. The retort to this statement is simple: “But it is ALL THE OTHER people in the workforce who actually DO the jobs. If it weren’t for the laborers (the proletariat), the economy wouldn’t work. And THEY are the vast majority of the citizenry. No democratic system would marginalize them for the sake of favoring the few ‘entrepreneurs’.”

Moreover, we find that many business owners are the real parasites and free-riders of society—the one’s who mooch off of the productive activity and creative input of the rank and file...whilst themselves producing absolutely nothing. The hedge fund managers, private equity firm titans and investment banking executives don’t personally contribute anything to society; they finagle ways to accumulate money for themselves—based on the productive activity of those who are actually making a pro-social contribution. If we are to talk about parasitism and free-riders, it is THEY—the quintessence of anarcho-capitalism—to whom we should look first...not the poor and disenfranchised.

4)INDIVIDUAL LIBERTY:

For those who fetishize free enterprise, we are all atomize-able, utility-maximizing agents—isolatable narcissists in an “every man for himself” struggle to get on-top. This entails putting property rights over human rights. This is social Darwinism on steroids. But this vision can’t be explicitly stipulated. “Individual liberty” sound so much better.

The nominal conception of the term involves Kantian autonomy—an inconvenient definition for those promoting anarcho-capitalism. This is commensurate with civic responsibility, civil rights and the

upholding of basic human rights. This does NOT mean putting property rights over human rights.

5)CHOICE

Here, the Neoliberal apologist utterly disregards a fundamental distinction: where “choice” is a virtue (the marketplace) as opposed to where it is a moot point (UAHQPE). The Orwellian appropriation of enticing, catchy terms seems to never end. Would he have us shop around as consumers of justice, choosing which peddler of justice is the best in a market place of justice? Why, then, public health or public education? The inconsistency of principle here is glaring.

6)GROWTH

Any time we hear this term used in Neoliberal polemic, we must ask: Growth FOR WHOM? Neoliberals don’t specify because the answer to this simple question is unappealing: For only the well-positioned few. They like to say: “Adhere to our dogma and the ‘economy’ will GROW. WHAT, exactly, is doing the growing in this scenario? Again, an inconvenient answer: Corporate profits, the coffers of executives, the bank accounts of the richest. “But the economy is growing!” they declare when their policies are enacted. “Growing for whom?” Not for the rank and file, not for the rabble, not for the common man. This is the part they tend to omit from their perorations. Even as bull markets happen, real wages for the general populace stagnate. “But it’s a booming economy,” the Neoliberal insists, pointing to aggregates and averages, Wall Street numbers and corporate profits.

7)COMPETITION

This is another favorite gem. Here, the free enterprise fetishist posits some purely meritocratic, perfectly fair arena of *creators* vying for some noble superiority. In this romantic vision, huge factors are utterly disregarded—such as power/information asymmetries, barriers to entry, and structural inequality...not to mention the obvious fact that market-share and objective merit rarely correlate.

Those taken in by the Neoliberal vision have been seduced by a very enticing depiction of the world. Here, we have a romantic view of the “producer” (a.k.a. the “creator”) as CAPITALIST. In this Valhalla of creators and producers, this Galt’s Gulch, the cream rises to the “top” (where the “top” ends up simply being those who manage to accumulate the most money for themselves). Thus, material riches are correlated with merit. This is not only a queer caricature, but a comically inaccurate depiction of how things actually happen.

(We should recall a quote from another person who had this mentality: “All the worldly goods we possess we owe to the struggle of a select few.” Hitler.)

8) ENTERPRISE

In fetishizing the term “enterprise”, Neoliberal ideologues seem to forget what the word actually means: An undertaking of significant scope, often involving some risk; industrious, systematic activity directed toward a goal. This involves three primary ingredients: endeavor (i.e. aspiration), a work ethic (i.e. dedication to a project), and savvy (i.e. instrumental competence). The *freedom* to engage in such activity requires certain conditions—namely absence of systems of exploitation and domination. The irony, of course, is that such systems are themselves generally the result of “enterprise” in the technical sense of the term.

In a genuine democracy, the only praiseworthy “enterprise” is pro-social enterprise: that which is socially responsible and conducive to the weal of society, with minimal negative externalities. This *actual* meaning of “enterprise” in no way abets the rhetoric employed by the right wing libertarian. (If anything, it reveals why its ideology is woefully defective.) Consequently, corporatists—unconcerned about socially responsible ventures in their pursuit of maximum profits—must twist and contort the word “enterprise” to fit

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their aims. They must customize our notion of “enterprise” to suit their agenda. Tailoring this otherwise noble word to accommodate their vision requires ignoring all the things that make enterprise good for society: creation of things that are amenable to the general welfare. Thus, “enterprise” comes to mean “the act of making as much money for oneself as possible via whatever means are legally available, regardless of the negative impact that activity may have on everyone else.”

Those who fetishize (nay, glorify) “free enterprise” enjoy invoking the word “freedom”. Yet they use a queer conception of the word—a conception not in keeping with democratic principles. For them, “freedom” is primarily a function of PRIVATE PROPERTY (as opposed to civil liberties and basic human rights). In other words, for them, “freedom” entails COMMERCIAL freedom above all: freedom to hoard as much as one can for oneself, to make as much of a profit for oneself as possible, and to consume what one wants. Indeed, such freedoms are vital elements of a free society. But they are secondary freedoms predicated on the primary freedoms: civil liberties and human rights.

What of “enterprise” as “BUSINESS enterprise”? Such projects are, of course, an important part of any free society. But they are certainly not its foundation. For-profit business (i.e. capitalism) plays a crucial role in the economy of any healthy, vibrant democratic society...but we must be careful not to glorify such activities at the expense of more fundamental principles. We must ensure that these things operate within acceptable boundary conditions—and within their appropriate (delimited) domain. This means, in part, not interfering with or undermining PSI. It requires taking into account neighborhood effects and negative externalities.

9)FISCAL RESPONSIBILITY

We hear talk of being “fiscally responsible” ad nauseum by the same people who endorse the military-industrial complex, tax-breaks for the rich, funding of Zionist policy and other Neoconservative foreign policy ventures, tax loop-holes for corporate power, and dubious State subsidies to Big Business. In other words, there is a glaring irony regarding a Neoliberal apologist talking about “government waste” and “hand-outs”...as Neoliberal policy is the by far the biggest culprit in this score.

Moreover, Neoliberals who invoke this trite catch-phrase fail to recognize (or openly admit) that genuine fiscal responsibility not only involves ABSTAINING FROM spending (in the wrong ways), but taking care TO SPEND (in the right ways). In other words, “fiscal responsibility” is invoked as a euphemism for “NOT SPENDING”. When one is fiscally responsible, one abstains from allocating money in imprudent ways WHILE ensuring he DOES invest money in prudent ways. One without the other doesn’t qualify as being responsible.

CONCLUSION:

These snazzy and appealing terms are the primary catch-phrases in the corporatist’s arsenal of sophistry. Each term is ready to be invoked should an alluring rhetorical flourish be warranted. The bold claims of the Neoliberal ideologues have been proven wrong over and over and over again. The linguistic slights-of-hand employed in order to contrive rationalizations for their agenda become quite clear once we subject their language games to scrutiny. What is revealed is disingenuous semantic acrobatics and misleading linguistic chicanery. Exposing the Orwellian nature of corporatist vernacular is key to debunking right-wing sophistry.