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CONFUSING THE VOCABULARY

An Examination of Some Big Words

AT a big international conference such as San Francisco or the current London Council of Foreign Ministers, the interpreters are busy day and night. Every delegate is careful to accept their help over the manifest barrier of language; serious falls are therefore few and far between. But there is another kind of language barrier which has no interpreters and is much more dangerous on that account. This is the problem of differing definitions. People believe they speak the same language merely because they use the same words. Sometimes they do and sometimes they do not.

For example, when the Russians use the words "democracy" and "fascism" they do not mean the same thing as the average American means. This has been growing more obvious since Hitler's fall. In Bulgaria the Communists profess "democracy," but they cry "fascist" at anyone who won't vote with the Fatherland Front. In a dispatch from Moscow recently, a correspondent of the New York Times said he had been trying for some time to get an official definition of democracy "as the Russians understand the word—so far without success." Yet the Russians are themselves aware of the difficulty. The journalist A. Sokolov tried last April to formulate a definition which would express the greatest common denominator between Western and Russian meanings. His definition: "A democrat is one who resolutely and relentlessly fights fascism." Not much help.

"Sadly Confused"

Lenin, prescribing agitational methods, once told his Bolsheviks to "confuse the vocabulary." We need not suspect Stalin's foreign office of primitive Leninist tricks. The fact is, however, that the political vocabulary of bourgeois America is sadly confused. American Marxists, by appropriating to themselves words like "liberal," have certainly contributed to the confusion; just as the more easily scared conservatives have adulterated the words "communist" and "socialist" by applying them indiscriminately to things they don't like. Edgar Ansel Mowrer recently defined fascism as "streamlined nationalism," which, as James Warburg pointed out, would make Teddy Roosevelt a fascist. In Hollywood they speak of "fascist" studios, meaning studios that are less fun to work for than others. Before Americans can contribute much to international clarity, perhaps we had best scrub up a few definitions among ourselves.

What Fascism Is and Isn't

Fascism is a political system of quite definite attributes, described in detail by both Mussolini and Hitler. Some of these attributes can be defended as serious attempts at reform. The idea of Mussolini's "corporative state," for example, with its "functional" parliament, can be traced to Catholic and syndicalist thought. It is probably a bad idea, but

it is not in itself an evil idea and it is not the essence of fascism.

Another attribute of fascism is government by an élite, in Musso's words, "the intuitiveness of rare great minds." But Plato, Aristotle, the Runnymede barons, Voltaire, Burke, Hamilton, Goethe, Lenin and a host of other competent political figures have also believed in an élite and distrusted the masses in greater or less degree. If all such beliefs are fascist, political history had better be entirely rewritten.

Mussolini and Hitler did not distrust the masses; they exploited them. "The masses," wrote Hitler, "prefer him who comes to them as a master"; they don't notice "the shocking abuse of their human freedom, and the inner incoherence of the whole doctrine escapes them."

"The Evil Essence"

That phrase of Hitler's, "inner incoherence," is the evil essence of fascism. It is not so much a political theory as a formula for overthrowing democratic government and gaining power. Its weapons are myths, brute force, calculated hysteria, and opportunism. As Silone said, "The last thing a fascist leader must appeal to is the critical faculty." Fascism is essentially a denial of the obligation to be reasonable.

In the Marxist view, fascism is also the attempt of a dying capitalist class to freeze on to its privileges by seizing the government by force. This definition, though narrow, is not without meaning. It was expressed better by de Tocqueville when Marx was a youth. Much as he admired American democracy, de Tocqueville feared a possible "tyranny of the majority" (he wrote in Andrew Jackson's time) and wondered whether a tyrannizing minority would some day resort to unconstitutional means to protect itself, thus bringing our democracy to an end.

In other words, a man whom the communists call a fascist might appear to de Tocqueville as one loving liberty more than the safety of his state. Many a dissident Pole, Rumanian, and Bulgarian is in that position to-day.

Liberalism

Said Clement Attlee the other day, "Democracy is not just majority rule, but majority rule with respect for the rights of minorities. Wherever you find suppression of all minority opinion, there is no real democracy." That's what Americans mean by the word, too.

Whether or not we can all agree about democracy, we can at least try to stop calling conservatives fascists. Since they are usually reasonable and have no taste for violence, American conservatives are unlikely ever to deserve the term. They have as deep a stake in civil liberties, constitutionalism, and the democratic process as any class, if not a deeper one.

"I'm a liberal" is the standard opening for a political argument between any two Americans nowadays. Next comes,

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