

Impostor-Terms

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IN THE last essay, I ended my observations on free speech and plain language at the point where the name of Jeremy Bentham came up in my mind. I suspect that Bentham is not much read nowadays, in this country at least, although it would seem that we Americans ought to have a soft spot in our hearts for him, because he built a first-class philosophical defense-mechanism for the only moral standard we ever had. According to Bentham, the way to tell right from wrong is by applying the test of utility. Whatever is useful is right. Also, in order to decide this matter of usefulness in cases where there appears to be as much weight on one side of the question as on the other, you apply Bentham's famous test of "the greatest good to the greatest number." If you can assure yourself that a given action will produce the greatest good to the greatest number, you need not have any further doubt about its moral character. One may remark in passing that this doctrine is a great life-saver for a statesman's conscience; the New Deal, for example, would seem to be based on a kind of degenerate Benthamism. The trouble is, of course, that one can never be sure about what will actually produce the greatest good to the greatest number. All sorts of unforeseen factors keep turning up to make a mess of things, -- chiefly the "imponderabilia" which Prince de Bismarck held in such reverent dread, -- so that often the thing we have gambled on to produce the greatest good to the greatest number turns out to be extremely bad all round, and we discover that we have been matching our wits against a job which only omniscience can handle.

Bentham must have been one of the most interesting beings that ever lived. He had immense ability, endless curiosity, untiring diligence and no humour whatever; and this is just the combination of qualities that would make the student of civilization seek him out and follow him delightedly up and down the earth to see where he would break out next. His lack of humour made him an utterly unpredictable person. No one could tell from day to day what fantastic idea he would seize on, or what he would do with it. For example, one of his innumerable odd contrivances was a scheme for building prisons in circular or semicircular form, so that one guard stationed at the centre could watch all the cells. He spent three or four years on this scheme, pestering the British Government about it until he actually got them to put some money in it for an experiment. He called his circular prison a panopticon. To be fair with him, however, he did not originate this idea, but borrowed it from his brother Samuel, -- this sort of outlandish ingenuity seems to have run in the family, -- who was in the textile business, and had conceived the notion of building a mill on the principle of the panopticon, which should require but a single foreman or superintendent to watch all the hands. My impression is that he actually built one, but I am not sure.

Jeremy Bentham, however, had plenty of ideas of his own. He was rich, and lived at his ease for eighty-four years, with nothing to do but jump from one thing that interested him to another -- mainly things that no one else on earth would pause over -- and write about them with the most deadly seriousness. For example, his devotion to the utilitarian principle led him to consider what use the dead might best be put to in behalf of the living, and this gave rise to a disquisition of considerable length. In further pursuit of this thought he also wrote a pamphlet of some thirty pages, called Auto-Icon, in which he showed how, by a process of embalming which apparently amounted to petrification, a man might become his own statue, thus doing away with the inaccuracies, conventions and trivialities of sculpture. Now, really, what an inestimable thing it would be to know a man with a mind like that, which at the same time was a great mind, a mind that in every respect except humour was of the first order, or nearly so! Bentham bequeathed

his own body for dissection in the interest of science, as thereby promoting the greatest good to the greatest number. He also bequeathed his skeleton to University College, London, where, I understand, it is still kept according to his directions. I have never seen it, but I am told it is still there, seated in a chair in a commanding situation, and dressed in his best suit of clothes.

Nevertheless, anyone who takes Bentham for a man of pure vagary makes a great mistake. Nor is he to be passed over, as the fashion is nowadays, as no more than an uncommonly fantastic figure in a fantastic and outmoded period. In his writings on government and jurisprudence he is distinctly something to be reckoned with, and his influence has grown steadily throughout the century that has elapsed since his death in 1832. In many of his occasional and fragmentary writings also, Jeremy still has a good deal on the ball, as our phrase goes, even against the more scientific batting of these times. The boys do not knock him out of the box as handily as one might think they would. It is one of these odds-and-ends of Bentham's writing that occurred to me in connexion with my remarks on the use of plain language, and I shall now go on to speak of it.

Bentham left an unfinished work, or rather the materials for one, on *Fallacies*; it is a mere set of notes. One section or chapter of this is devoted to a consideration of what he calls *impostor-terms*. He puts these in the general category of "fallacies of confusion," saying that their object is to perplex or confuse the hearer when discussion of their subject-matter can no longer be avoided. Thus, for example, it has long been a trick of politicians to speak of an opposing group or school as a *faction*, on account of the special implications of the word. Bentham's note on these fallacies, and particularly his note on the use of impostor-terms, should be carefully studied and prayerfully understood. If every American memorized Bentham's formulas and applied them steadily to the daily diet of impostor-terms with which the jargon of politics and journalism supplies him, it would do more to promote a revival of intellectual honesty than any other exercise that could be suggested.

In the first place, Bentham lays down the general rule that impostor-terms are applied "chiefly to the defense of things which under their proper name are manifestly indefensible; for example, persecutors have no such word as *persecution*, but *zeal*. It substitutes an object of approbation for an object of censure." Then he goes on to observe that in the employment of impostor-terms two things are required:

1. A fact or circumstance which, under its proper name and seen in its true colours, would be an object of censure, and which therefore it is necessary to disguise.
2. An appellative which the sophist employs to conceal what would be deemed offensive, or even to bespeak a degree of favour for it by the aid of some happier accessory.

To this may be added Bentham's further observation on terms which have a question-begging character. The object of their use, he says, is to cause, by means of the artifice, that to be taken for true which is not true. The proposition is not true and can not be proved, and the person by whom the fallacy is employed is conscious of its deceptive tendency.

By way of illustration, Bentham cites the use of terms like *honour*, *glory*, *dignity*, to extenuate flagitious political projects. When, for example, politicians determine on some freebooting enterprise, the regular thing is to pretend that national honour and dignity are somehow concerned, when in fact they are not concerned. Thus our national honour was not concerned in the Mexican War and the Spanish War, nor was British honour concerned in the Boer War; nor French honour in Morocco. All these were purely imperialist undertakings, or, in plain language,

sheer brigandage. But brigandage, "under its proper name and seen in its true colours, would be an object of censure"; and therefore the politician is obliged to find some appellative "to conceal what would be deemed offensive, or even to bespeak a degree of favour for it." One finds it hard to believe that so sharp-set a person as M. Mussolini actually takes any stock in the notion that Italian honour and dignity are at all concerned in his enterprise against Homer's "blameless Ethiopians," with whom Zeus himself condescended to make holiday; yet he propagates that absurdity diligently.

II

The three foregoing canons which Bentham laid down constitute a complete formula for detecting and identifying impostor-terms, wherever found. I now propose that we take a few of the terms most commonly used by our publicists, economists, journalists and politicians, and apply Bentham's canons to them in order to see how they stand up under critical examination. I make this proposal as a sort of corollary to my little effort in behalf of free speech and plain language, because it appears to me that the right to speak freely and plainly carries the correlative obligation to speak correctly; and therefore the use of impostor-terms is ruled out as well on grounds of simple integrity as on those of a decent respect for the merits of our native tongue. We will first take four terms out of the current glossary of economics, and then two out of the current glossary of politics. Space will not permit me to cite any more, but they will be enough for the purpose; the reader can extend the list indefinitely at his own pleasure.

Individualism

This is a question-begging term; its object is "to cause, by means of the artifice, that to be taken for true which is not true." When, for instance, one of our "sophists," as Bentham calls them, declares that an era of economic individualism is at an end, his use of the term implies that such an era did at one time exist. This is a proposition which, as Bentham says, "is not true and can not be proved," for no such era ever existed. One set of sophists ascribes the merits of our progress to a policy of economic individualism (usually adding the word rugged to enhance the imposition) , while another set ascribes its defects to the same policy; but both are alike employing a question-begging term in behalf of their several purposes.

A policy of economic individualism, rugged or otherwise, can not exist where the State makes any positive interventions upon the individual in his economic capacity. It can exist only where the State confines itself to purely negative interventions, such as punishing fraud, enforcing the obligations of contract, and the like. In this country the State has made positive interventions upon the individual from the beginning, in rapidly increasing number and variety. The instance that will perhaps most readily come to mind is furnished by the State's system of tariffs. Without regard to the specific merits or demerits of this system, one may observe that it constitutes an arbitrary and positive interference with the free self-direction of commerce and industry; such, indeed, being its express and recognized intention, as is shown by the eagerness with which tariffs are sought. There is great truth in the bitter remark of some Western Congressman, that the biggest hog-calling contest in the world begins when a Congressional committee forms on the steps of the Capitol, and cries, "Tariff, tariff, tariff!"

Other forms of positive intervention appear in concessions, land-grants, subsidies. All these have existed here from the beginning; and as far as one can see, the most that rugged economic individualism has done to distinguish itself was to run to the State to wangle the benefit of them, by hook or crook. One set of our sophists points to our railway-systems as

monuments to the spirit of rugged individualism. The fact is, however, that precious few of our railways came into being as other than speculative enterprises, furthered by State intervention in the shape of land-grants and one-or-another form of subsidy.¹ Indeed, in their inception, our transcontinental companies were hardly to be called railway-companies, save by courtesy, since transportation was so purely incidental to their main business, which was that of land-jobbing and subsidy-hunting. A few years ago I saw the statement -- I do not vouch for it, but it can not be far off the fact -- that the current cash value of the State's interventions in behalf of the Northern Pacific Railway would enable it to build four transcontinental lines, and, in addition, to build a fleet of steamships and maintain it in an around-the-world service. If this be rugged individualism, let future lexicographers make the most of it.

The sum of the matter is that when our sophists speak of economic individualism, whether by way of praise or blame, they are using an impostor-term. In either case it is a term applied, as Bentham says, to the defense of something which under its proper name is manifestly indefensible. We all know, for example, that the true reason for seeking a tariff is that it licenses the beneficiary to extort from the domestic consumer the difference between the price of his product in a competitive and a noncompetitive market; in other words, to rob him of that difference -- and robbery, under its proper name, is manifestly indefensible. All the State's positive interventions for the distribution of economic advantage can be shown, by a similar process of analysis, to come to the same thing. Now, the point is that neither set of sophists who hawk the term *individualism* wishes those interventions to cease. The only difference between them is that one set wishes the incidence of those interventions shifted from one group or class of beneficiaries to another, while the other set does not. The very last thing that either set wishes, however, is that the State's distribution of economic advantage should be "seen in its true colours," and exhibited under its proper name. Therefore both sets of sophists agree in employing the same impostor-term, the one by way of commendation, and the other by way of disparagement.

Laissez-faire

When Colbert asked some merchants what they thought the French State might best do to help business, one of them replied, "Let us alone." This term, like *individualism*, has been taken over into the vernacular of journalists, publicists and politicians, who have made up a question-begging character for it out of whole cloth. No such regime ever existed in this country; American business never followed a policy of *laissez-faire*, never wished to follow it, never wished the State to let it alone.

On the contrary, it has sought State intervention at every tack and turn of its affairs, often -- in fact, quite regularly -- employing most disreputable measures to obtain it. We all remember the cynical remark of one of our representative industrialists, that it was cheaper to buy legislatures than to buy voters. When the State made some primary intervention to confer an economic advantage, -- as in the case of our railways, for instance, -- and its beneficiaries got into a tangle with one another over the use of it, the regular thing has been to run to the State for another intervention to straighten the tangle out. Then another tangle, another agonized plea to the State, another intervention which piled complication upon complication, particularity upon particularity, -- the text of the Senate's proposed banking bill, published on the first of July, covered almost exactly four pages of the *Wall Street Journal*! -- and then the same sequences, with ever-multiplying complications and ever-increasing particularity, repeated again and again.

Laissez-faire, indeed! It is one of the few amusing things in our rather stodgy world that those who to-day are behaving most tremendously about collectivism and the Red menace are the very ones who have cajoled, bribed, flattered and bedeviled the State into taking each and every one of the successive steps that lead straight to collectivism -- steps that must lead there, that can not possibly lead anywhere else, and can not possibly be retraced. Who hectored the State into the shipping business, and plumped for setting up the Shipping Board? Who pestered the State into setting up the Interstate Commerce Commission and the Federal Farm Board? Who got the State to go into the transportation business on our inland waterways? Who is always urging the State to "regulate" and "supervise" this, that and the other routine process of financial, industrial and commercial enterprise? Who took off his coat two years ago, rolled up his sleeves, and sweat blood hour after hour over helping the State construct the codes of the late lamented National Recovery Act? None but the same Peter Schlemihl who is now half out of his mind about the approaching spectre of collectivism, bureaucracy, pink Socialism, personal government and all the rest of it. One would almost think he might catch sight of this roaring anomaly sooner or later and enjoy a wholesome laugh at himself, but as yet he seems not to have done so.

Laissez-faire, however, is a useful impostor-term, serving the same purpose as *individualism*. Its use causes that to be taken for true which is not true, and the object of its use is to disguise that which, under its proper name and seen in its true colours, would be an object of censure -- that is, the distribution of economic advantage by the State. Therefore, since both sets of sophists are equally interested in keeping up this disguise, both sets use this term as more or less synonymous with *individualism*.

Free Competition

The use of this term implies the existence of an economic regime which has never existed. The American enterpriser has always operated behind the screen of a tariff which he himself, in a burst of candour, has so well named "protective." He has never faced the world on terms set by free competition, but always on terms set by handicap. In the domestic market also, his terms of operation, especially in the so-called "basic" industries, such as agriculture, have largely been set by other modes of State intervention. The fact or circumstance thus indicated is usefully disguised by a question-begging term like *free competition* or *the competitive system*, and therefore both sets of sophists employ it. No such system exists in the United States, or has ever existed.

Capitalism

The implication of this term is that the use of capital is a distinguishing mark of our economic system, a characteristic by which it may be identified; and this is not the case. Use of the term therefore causes that to be taken for true which is not true. No economic system which is not capitalist ever existed anywhere in the world, or can be conceived of as existing. The extreme of collectivism is as purely capitalist as our present system or any other system; the difference being only that collectivism transfers the ownership and management of capital from private hands to the hands of the State. By definition, capital is that portion of wealth which is applied to the production of more wealth; and an economic system which does not contemplate this segregation and employment of capital is unimaginable.

The term seems to have been foisted into our economic glossary by collectivism, in the first instance, and it is therefore rather strange that those who most abhor collectivism should not be

above using it, as they habitually do. The collectivist's idea of capital, as well as one can make it out, appears to be that capital is not capital until it is put to some predatory or oppressive use; somewhat as one might say that dynamite is not dynamite until it goes off. The term is useful, however, as a disguise for the actual characteristic mark of our system, which is the private monopoly of rental values in natural resources. "The monopolist system" would have a bad sound, and therefore the term *capitalist* is substituted, according to Bentham's second canon of impostor-terms.

III

One set of sophists -- the set which seems of late to have rather the best of it in getting the public ear -- often lump three of the foregoing impostor-terms together as a sort of blanket formula to serve their purpose of shifting the incidence of State intervention from one class of beneficiaries to another. They put it that "a policy of economic individualism, free competition and *laissez-faire*" is responsible for most of our society's economic ills. This is, of course, a mere multiplication of absurdity, but it deserves a moment's notice because our sophists usually take the condition of England in the early part of the last century as a horrible example of what this three-decker policy brings about when allowed to run unchecked. The story is so monstrous and shocking that their contention gains a great deal of *prima facie* plausibility which is nevertheless misleading; and therefore it is worth while to examine their assertions briefly, in order to see what precisely they amount to.

At that period, our sophists say, England's industry and commerce were operating under an unqualified policy of economic individualism, free competition and *laissez-faire*. This policy issued in the most appalling social conditions that can be imagined, the conditions which Dickens, Carlyle, Kingsley and Ruskin described so vividly in their impassioned preachments. It produced great hordes of miserable beings who lived in squalor and destitution, working in the mills and mines under a regime of starvation wages, killing hours, vicious industrial hazards. It harnessed children and women underground to cars loaded with coal or ore. It sent men to sea in coffin-ships officered by ruffians. It brought forth the huge and hideous industrial centres which William Cobbett called *Hell-holes*. It produced industrialists like Mr. Plugson of Undershot, Mr. Bounderby and Mr. Bottles. You ask what this policy will come to in America -- well, there you see what it came to in England.

Just so. The story is a familiar one, we all know it, and we all agree that its horror and hideousness can not be overdrawn. There is, however, not one word of truth in our sophist's assertion that these horrors were due to "a policy of individualism, free competition, and *laissez-faire*," for the very good reason that no such policy ever existed in England. They were due to State intervention. When the factory system came in, those hordes of miserable beings were already on hand in full force; they were there because State intervention had expropriated them from the land;³ and they went into the factories for whatever Mr. Bounderby or Mr. Bottles chose to give them, because it was either that or else to beg, steal or starve. Following this primary intervention, the State made one secondary intervention after another in a long series, all in behalf of Mr. Bounderby and Mr. Bottles. It is the acme of absurdity to pretend, as our sophists do, that Adam Smith's economics are the economics of individualism and free competition. They are nothing of the kind; they are the economics of landowners and mill-owners; and the incidence of State intervention invariably followed the line of direction that those economics set.

In such circumstances, the sane and logical thing, as some Englishmen indeed perceived, would be to do away with positive State intervention. Very few were interested in that way of approach to the problem, however. As in the case of our sophists, the only idea of reform that interested anybody was that of urging the State to go on multiplying its interventions still further, and merely shift their incidence of benefit from Mr. Bounderby to Stephen Blackpool, and from Mr. Bottles to Zephaniah Diggs.⁴ This being the case, the three-in-one impostor-term became useful, and it accordingly went into currency for the purposes set forth in Bentham's second canon.

IV

Passing from economics to politics, we choose two terms in most common use.

Democracy, democratic

At the time when our political system was formed, these were terms of great opprobrium, as *communist*, *bolshevist*, are now. The writings of our earlier statesmen, even those who had a general leaning towards the liberal side, show that they understood it in this sense exclusively; as when Morris, Gerry, Madison, Randolph, speak of the "turbulence," "dangers," "excesses," of democracy. Those whom we now would call left-wing statesmen, like Samuel Adams and Thomas Paine, seldom use it. I do not at the moment recall a single instance where Mr. Jefferson applies it to a political system, though there may be some. The satirical literature of the period presents "democrats" as an order of beings almost subhuman, uniformly low, ignorant, vicious, and above all, venal.

Presently, however, when the "party-system" came into being, and the scuffle for office became intensified, the term rapidly gained respectability. This was a purely natural development. The rationale of the party-system, as Mr. Jefferson said, is that "the nest of office being too small for them all to cuddle into at once, they divide into two parties, the Ins and the Outs." The former wish to stay in, and the latter wish to turn them out and get in; and therefore there is lively competition in buttering up "the sovereign people," and inflating their self-esteem. Hence, under this intensive cultivation, the term soon passed into the bud of respectability, and from that into the full bloom of honour and dignity. There is a certain grim humour in wondering how our earlier statesmen -- for example, John Adams, Washington, Alexander Hamilton -- would take it if they could hear some electioneering adventurer praise them for founding "our great and glorious democracy."

To show how far remote from anything like democracy our political system is, one need only cite the Judiciary Act of 1789, which established judicial control over legislation. It vested the supreme political authority in a small oligarchy. The members of this oligarchy are not elected; they are appointed; the people have no semblance of choice in the matter. They are, moreover, appointed for life, and are wholly irresponsible; their acts can not be brought under any kind of review.⁵ Excellent as this system may be, it is manifestly a long way from democratic. The exigencies of practical politics, however, make it advisable to disguise this fact, or even, as Bentham says, "to bespeak a degree of favour for it by the aid of some happier accessory"; and therefore the terms *democracy*, *democratic*, have been pressed into service as impostor-terms.

Republic, republican

Republican political theory is based upon the right of individual self-expression in politics. When the Constitutional Convention met in 1787, its members were beset by a wholesome dread of what Locke called "a numerous democracy," and their main purpose was to devise a system which should have the appearance of recognizing this right of individual self-expression, without the reality. Madison defined this purpose with great clearness and candour. It was, he said, to safeguard the public welfare and private rights from the dangers of democracy,⁶ and at the same time to retain "the spirit and form of popular government." Their task was the same, in short, as that which has confronted all modern pseudo-republican system-builders; it was the task of devising a system which should be formally republican, but not actually such. They accomplished this task by erecting that most ingenious mechanism of "checks and balances," with the practical workings of which we are all well acquainted. However meritorious such a political mechanism may be, its model is obviously imperial rather than republican; imperial, one might say, with the difference that professional politicians are put in the place and function of the praetorian guards. They meet periodically, decide what is to be done, and by whom, and then submit their decisions *pro forma* to the voting public on election-day. This being the case, the reasons for using *republic*, *republican*, as impostor-terms are sufficiently clear.

So one might go on at length with minor impostor-terms in our political glossary, such as *sanctions*, *reparations*, *mandates*, and the like. I should especially enjoy making a few observations on the way our sophists have weaseled the term *liberal* into a cloak for the most illiberal of men and the most illiberal of policies. All our job-holders parade themselves as liberals nowadays, and their policies as liberal policies. But I have not space to comment on this, which is perhaps as well, for an appropriate comment would perhaps be more vigorous than edifying.

V

Thoreau would not read newspapers; he said that one fire was like another, one murder was like another, and "when you have once established a principle, what is the use of endlessly multiplying illustrations?" So the reader may feel that his excursion into Benthamism might have been considerably shortened, with no loss to speak of. This would be true, perhaps, but for the fact that impostor-terms, like counterfeit coins, are circulated chiefly by innocent persons who have not taken the trouble to examine them, and do not know their character. It was with this fact in mind that I could hardly bring myself either to cut down my list of examples or to take examples that are less striking and can be disposed of in fewer words.

The moral of all this, however, if one may call it that, -- can be set forth quite briefly. Mr. William F. Russell came out lately with a vigorous and excellent plea for free speech. I ventured to second it, adding a few words in praise of plain language. Now, the assertion of every right -- sometimes perhaps unfortunately -- implies the acceptance of a corresponding responsibility. If therefore we assert the right to free and plain speech, it would appear that we should also give some thought to the responsibility for clear and correct speech. As much as anything, if not more, it is the vast currency of impostor-terms -- circulated for the most part, I repeat, in all innocence -- that interferes with the perception of that responsibility; and my treatment of the subject has been made with the deliberate view of showing, as vividly as possible, how great and how unsuspected that interference may be.

Dinant, July, 1935.

1 Our great coal-carriers and ore-carriers, built by "private enterprise," are no exception, because their existence is due to the State's primary intervention in granting monopoly-rights to the rental value of the coal-fields and ore-fields they tap. The "private enterprise" that in one way or another got the economic advantage of this State-created monopoly is certainly no very impressive exhibit of rugged individualism.

2 Readers who are interested in this statement might look up the history of the Enclosures Acts and the Statute of Frauds.

3 Even Marx was aware that economic exploitation is impossible until expropriation from the land has taken place. See his chapter on colonization.

4 The virtues and excellences of Mr. Bottles are most sympathetically set forth in Matthew Arnold's *Friendship's Garland*. There too the reader will find an account of the "social problem" presented by the public activities and private character of Zephaniah Diggs.

5 Nullification by the Executive, which has taken place in two instances, merely changed quoad hoc the form of our political structure from an oligarchy into an autocracy, thus giving it even more of an undemocratic character.

6 His words are "the dangers of such a faction." He uses the question-begging term faction in precisely the way that we have noticed.