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# THE NEW SPEAK AND ECONOMIC THEORY OR HOW WE ARE BEING TALKED TO

Jean-Paul Fitoussi

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SCIENCES PO ECONOMICS DISCUSSION PAPER

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**The new speak and economic theory\***  
**Or How We are Being Talked To**

Jean-Paul Fitoussi<sup>1</sup>

Summary

*This article seeks to show how the impoverishment of language has changed the course of the evolution of economic theory, much as in 1984 the Newspeak changed the order of things and the course of the political regime. At the origin of such an evolution was the stratagem to act as if neoclassical theory was subsequent to Keynesian theory. The inversion of the time arrow had far reaching consequences on the development of economics. In great part the development of a science depends of the scholars who practice it and of its teaching to the new*

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\* This paper is based on my book , *Comme on nous parle, Les Liens qui libèrent, 2020*

I am particularly grateful to Richard Robb, without whom this article would not have existed. He has provided me with invaluable help on the content, as well as on the form, and made my broken English almost elegant.

Still, it is a first draft of a paper to be published *in Capitalism and Society: The Journal of The Centre on Capitalism and Society*, Columbia University; I benefited a lot from the discussion which took place at the conference organized at the occasion of the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Center.

<sup>1</sup> Emeritus Professor of Economics, sciences-po, Paris and LUISS, Rome

*researchers who will further develop it. Both depend on the history of thought.*

*The consequences on economic policies have been major, especially in Europe. By cancelling most of the Keynesian concepts from the Newspeak dictionary, the relative weights of the market and the state were changed, which could only lead to a preference for liberal, market-oriented, policies.*

### ***In the beginning was the word***

We often feel like we are trapped in empty speech that does not allow us to express our thoughts, at least without great effort and attention on the part of the listener. It is speech geared towards marketing, persuading. The nightly news advertises a platform. In France, as in the US, if you don't like the product you can change the channel or find whatever brand you want by turning to the internet. You'll encounter speech that the philosopher, Harry Frankfurt labeled "bullshit." The bullshitter, unlike the liar, has no concern for what is true or false, but rather uses language to advance his cause. As Frankfurt says, bullshit is more corrosive to our public dialogue than lying, because it undermines respect for truth.

In addition, the different speeches are curiously alike. The same speech is made by all the people who have a platform to speak, that it is provided to them by the media, politics, college or money. Its

influence is great. We have unwittingly become witnesses of the creation of a new language, which we are striving for to understand. We speak it without fully realizing how it imposes predigested thought, a bit like the Newspeak of 1984.

The ongoing degradation of language and of democracy are linked. In the extreme, our public discourse degenerates to the knowing who talk to the ignorant. The statements of politicians in Camus' marvelous phrase, are "ones that lead to reverie rather than to thought."<sup>2</sup> It would be unfair perhaps to single out any one of them as an example, since the condition is nearly universal.

I use in this paper the words that the New Speak (Orwell) has erased. In a sense, new speak is the precursor of Cancel Culture, which proceeds by erasing words, historical facts and theories, in short, anything that might shake today's political correctness. Erasing a word is like throwing away books and amputating our ability to make ourselves understood with millions of combinations. Nothing can justify it. It is a violence to be deprived of a concept to express one's thoughts. At the end of the road, it is the thought itself that shrinks. When the words to say it are lacking, well, we don't say it, or we say something other than what we wanted to say.

The great communicators had understood this, Goebbels as Big Brother. The impoverishment of language allows thoughts to converge. This is how we can finally understand what single thought (*la pensée unique*) meant in Europe, or what the Washington

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<sup>2</sup> "On the Future of Tragedy," Lecture delivered in Athens, 1955.

Consensus meant in the US and in the world. A work of great communicator to impose a brand, which may as well be that of an intellectual product. This paper seeks to explain how, in a democratic regime, we succeeded to empty of substance...the democratic debate. The expression pensée unique is an oxymoron, without any breath of poetry, which was only given importance in the 1990s to accentuate its pejorative connotation. Today, when democracy seems to be on the wane, the expression takes on its full meaning. Goebbels was basically saying that his project was not to have people think like him, but to impoverish language to such an extent that they could not help but think like him. Is there a better definition of “pensée unique”? It is through the mediation of language that everything passes and happens.

### ***When facts clash with the newspeak dictionary***

How to deal with a situation where facts contradicts the Newspeak? It may happen that the great communicator is put in check by an unpredictable event, a radical innovation in the order of life. His or her language then suddenly becomes too poor to say anything audible. He must quickly draw on the words that have been erased in order to continue to be credible. But he will do so as if he were continuing the same discourse, based on the same doctrines. The crisis of the Corona virus is one such event. The communicator will pass in the same breath from the absolute necessity of budgetary rigor to the absolute necessity of debt, just as he passed in the same breath from the

absolute uselessness of the mask to its absolute necessity. The leitmotiv of the governments were that they will do “whatever it costs”, a French formula but of universal application. The advantage of the formula is that it looks to be new, but it was indeed referring to hydraulic Keynesianism.

The event was a test for the communicator that can be heard and seen, all the more so because he tries to hide it in the appearances of reason, without even trying to justify the social massacre that his newspeak doctrine had caused in previous episodes (think of Greece). It would have been enough for him to say that he was mistaken - he would then be in good company - but he needs the New speak dictionary too much and wants to think of the episode of the crisis as transitory. It will be followed by a return to reason – the facts too have to obey reason --, as was the case during the financial crisis. He absolutely needs to keep his keys to reading the world in their box.

The world has gone through violent turbulence in the last half-century, with radically different events and crises, even if some of them were linked. There is nothing in common, apparently, between the oil shocks, the conservative revolution, mass unemployment, the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet system, German unification (these three last events are in some ways, different facets of the same phenomena), the financial crisis, and the health crisis we are experiencing today. Yet it is the same key to reading that we continue to apply to the world, the same theories, the same language. So much so that I have the strong impression that our understanding of the world has diminished. Or else we would have discovered the universal explanation that could shed light on the past, present and

future. We cannot believe for a second in the fairy tale of the (i.0possible) outcome of science. On the field of facts, the world, perplexed by problems that have not been solved, is going badly enough, socially, economically, politically.

To try to understand these enigmas, the great science-fiction authors and, in particular, George Orwell are of great help. In *1984*, the latter describes the process that Big Brother had set up to make society converge towards official thought. A Commissariat of Records defined the party line, ensuring that past writings were consistent with it. The Ministry of Truth tracked down any contradictions, between the news contained in newspapers and other writings of the past and those announced in the present. They then rewrote what needed to be rewritten. A work on words, the creation of the dictionary of the New speak.

We are no longer very far from this state of affairs in our democracies, without coercion of course, but through methods of persuasion, media control, repetition (the famous elements of language), and social sanctions that encourage self-censorship, at the point that the latter is on its way to become a constrained censorship in the cancel culture. The atmosphere of courtesanship and the spirit of propaganda that characterizes certain media bear witness to the road already traveled.

### ***Political economy***

It is political economy that will serve as an illustration of my point. One of the stratagems used by the New speak in this field is to have flattened time, in order to create from the outset an ambiguity about



the chronology of theoretical contributions: neo-classical theory; keynesian theory; neo neo-keynesian theory; neo neo-neoclassical theory (or new classical school) and of course the new Keynesian school. etc. It has been decided against the time arrow that the oldest theory was the Keynesian one, and that furthermore it was deprived of progress as if the 30's did precede the 20's!

The curiosum is that among this set of theories, only the Keynesian schools explain unemployment. The neoclassical schools either deny its existence or make it the consequence of everything that prevents the market from functioning freely. They thus remained on the pre-Keynesian background, even if their form reached an unequalled technical level. But fundamentally, not only does their conclusion remain unchanged, but it is, in a sense, hardened.

What can be deduced from this? As far as its substance is concerned, the neoclassical theory is pre-Keynesian and remains orthogonal to the phenomenon it is trying to explain. As far as decorum is concerned, its mathematical elegance has improved significantly. Nevertheless, despite its aesthetics, Keynesian theory remains post-neoclassical, as it has always been.

There will be much talk of Keynes in this paper , not because I am Keynesian, but because I consider that his theory, in the form it takes today, is the last state of political economy, the only one that can explain (imperfectly, of course) the world. Rationnally it should have been, rather than neoclassoical theory, the point of departure of new development. I believe that the progress of a discipline is not to go from one counter-revolution to another, but to know how to branch

out to avoid denials of reality. This bifurcation has not taken place, and it is not the formally aesthetic theory, but the theory that explains the world, that has been erased from the dictionary of New speak. The flattening of time has made it possible to cast doubt on their dating, to make the classical approach, modern, and the modern theory, archaic. This is not as innocuous as it may seem. It imposes an artificial bifurcation in the path of theory: it allows for the emergence only of theories of the “modern” family. The dominant economic framework in the future will be neoclassical. And the resulting economic policies will be market-oriented, while the role of the state will be reduced to a trickle.

The rest follows from this. The Keynesian word has a pejorative connotation and refers to a retarded teenager or an economist insufficiently trained to understand complexity.

Gregory Mankiw, President of the Council of Economic Advisors of George Bush from 2003 to 2005, in an article entitled *The Scientist and the Engineer*<sup>3</sup>, shows on the contrary that nothing has replaced Keynesianism as the matrix of economic policy in the United States. The scientist has not supplanted the engineer (Keynesian), and it is the latter who defines and determines economic policy. If it is needed that is a proof that the time arrow has been inverted in, say, the 60s.

The question of language is essential. It is the scientist who won the intellectual battle, that is, the new classical school whose founding father, Robert Lucas, expressed himself in these terms: "people will no longer take Keynesian theory seriously in the future". The New

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<sup>3</sup> Gregory Mankiw: "The Macroeconomists as a scientist and Eginer", *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, Autumn 2000

Keynesians wanted to respond to the challenge, when they had no need of it, by using the very language of the classical school, and the result is only a watered-down version of the conclusions of the Keynesian model of the 1960s. But aesthetics plays a fundamental role in the so-called gloomy science.

The inversion of the time arrow had far reaching consequences on the development of economics. In great part the development of a science depends of the scholars who practice it and of its teaching to the new researchers who will further develop it.

It's why the grip of Newspeak reaches its height in teacher training and choice of thesis subjects. The new language will first take hold of the most malleable minds under the double effect of fashion and incentives. Here, Keynesianism is a professional death certificate. A student studying disequilibrium is considered as if it were confessing that he doesn't understand mathematics. Why not join the poetry department? If he wants a job, he'd better churn out another footnote to the theory of real cycles (Real Business Cycles, or RBC), general equilibrium Dynamic Stochastic General Equilibrium, or DSGE), or on the new neoclassical synthesis. RBC describes the behavior of Robinson Crusoe in terms of savings, investment, labor and consumption, explains the business cycle as nothing more than a voluntary intertemporal exchange between work and leisure. Unemployment has no place, besides another name for "job search." Demand plays no part role and the government intervention is only a source of instability. (Admittedly, the DSGE models allow for some frictions such as menu rigidities, anticipation errors, etc.—but tacked on as an afterthought.)

How to have a contradictory thought without the words to express it? Our PhD student, if he knows what's good for him, will develop the theory of real cycles, possibly introduce monetary policy, even seek internal contradictions. But beware of confronting it with an alternative theory: by definition, there is no alternative. Those that existed can only be visited at the Museum of Economics. Penicillin (Keynesianism) no longer has healing powers. It is extraordinary to note that this does not imply a partisan attitude... on the part of the partisan. He is not, literally, the follower of the new philosophy, but the language fails him to turn in any other direction<sup>4</sup>.

The burden of proof is therefore reversed: if you continue to speak Old speak, it is because you do not know Newspeak. Any resistance will struggle to express what could have been said with more easily in the old language, some important words being missing (or out of fashion). Is such a feat even possible: do we really say the same thing in both languages? Doesn't translation into an impoverished language reduce scope of thought? We would find ourselves, more than usually, lost in translation. Words that don't fit with the neoclassical paradigm became and remain taboo. We do not say demand policy, but risk sharing. We do not say monetary financing of public expenditure, but quantitative easing or unconventional monetary policy. When the

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<sup>4</sup> In the top five economics journals (*The American Economic Review*, *Econometrica*, *Journal of Political Economy*, *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, and *The Review of Economic Studies*) Keynes' *The General Theory of Employment Interest and Money* was mentioned precisely twice in 2015, the most recent year that JSTOR includes all five.

grown-up economists abandon their responsibilities, kooks take the stage with fantastical theories under pretentious names (e.g., the government can print unlimited amounts of money with no risk to inflation or financial stability).

The simplest message, whatever the complexity of theory, is what media and ultimately salesmanship demand. The pretext is to be better understood by listeners or readers. This recommendation, heard many times, seems to me contemptuous of the "people." It excludes the archaic vocabulary, because who can understand it? Few know much history anymore, whatever their affiliation.<sup>5</sup> And ignorance acts like a Newspeak multiplier.

Beautiful language is often simple. But to go from complexity to simplicity requires a real understanding of the phenomenon that we want to distill. When this is not understood, it is served to listeners and readers as incomprehensible. It's not the people who resist complexity, but those who speak to them. Perhaps they sense the disrespect. The disastrous presidential campaign of Hilary Clinton provides many examples.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Half of Americans say at least one of the Civil War, the Emancipation Proclamation or the War of 1812 occurred before the American Revolution. More than half attributed Karl Marx's slogan, "From each according to his ability to each according to his needs," to Thomas Paine, George Washington or Barack Obama. Only 34% of Millennials could identify Auschwitz as the site of a Nazi concentration camp. <https://www.goacta.org/news-item/the-danger-ignorance-of-history-poses-to-the-future-of-a-free-society/>

<sup>6</sup> Consider this from her "stump speech": "Think of all the small businesses that take a big chance – my dad was a small businessman. I know what a chance it is. He

Today's Newspeak is much more sophisticated, sneakier and richer than the one Orwell invented. It was not manufactured by dictators, but within a democracy, necessarily decentralized. It governs not only vertical relations with power, but also those, horizontal, between people. Its goal is to constrain thought without offending or upsetting anyone. To do this, we must learn not to judge: This objective is impossible to achieve unless debates are prohibited along with the free expression of beliefs. Can we indeed say something that has meaning without displeasing anyone? The language of good feelings and political correctness is the oil we put in the cogs of politics to keep it from appearing violent. For example, the last reform proposal for the pension system in France is based on the principle that each euro contributed should have the same return. Because of this strict equality, the reform is considered to be particularly just. But it is not, because it does not account for inequalities in life expectancy.

Smoothed of rough edges, Newspeak knows how to constrain policy while making believe its policies are chosen on their merits. It also knows how to dress in a certain style to hide its emptiness.

Newspeak is constructed through repetition. We analyze problems, often with care. The analysis reaches its conclusion, repeated, reaches the same conclusion, but each time more worn down and robbed of its power to convince. The resulting actions are homeopathic, mere

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couldn't do it alone. He needed customers. He needed suppliers. He needed workers. Americans don't say, 'I alone can fix it.' We say, 'We'll fix it together, just watch us – nobody, nobody can solve problems better than we can.'"

“window dressing.” Homeopathy has been discredited; I don't know if this is pharmacologically justified, but I am sure it is in the field of economic policy. It never achieves results.

The most resounding example, but also the most cynical, is the repetition of the claim that (involuntary  
B) unemployment is unacceptable. This statement is absolutely true. Unemployment is unacceptable.<sup>7</sup> How could it not be? Its existence is not contemplated by the pure neoclassical theory. It is there for real only in Keynesian theory. But Keynesian theory is rejected as “false.” Is this a slip of the tongue which consists in denying a phenomenon that exists in the theory that we reject (or pretend to reject)? But, if the intolerance of unemployment is sincere, how do we explain, that after all this time, we have failed to reduce it? The paradox is that we say precariousness (going by the name of “structural protections”) is key to improving job growth. At the same time, we say that precariousness (going by its own name) is unacceptable. The repetition devalues the words, as much as we have repeatedly heard that we have tried everything to combat unemployment. It robs words of meaning and credibility. Worse yet, it anchors the idea in people’s minds that the situation as it is, is normal. So this is what we call the new normal, end up resigned to live badly or, worse, in despair.

### ***European specificities***

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<sup>7</sup> Implicitly, this statement must exclude the sort of unemployment that truly is short-term job search, as is common in the US, say when an employee quits to move to different state and spends month finding a job.

In Europe the scientist has won every battle, intellectual and factual. Many words have been erased from the dictionary of the New speak - full employment, demand, fiscal stimulus, industrial policy, public investment, wage increases, etc., and many others have been highlighted: competitiveness, structural reform, fiscal rule, fiscal compact, competition, public debt, creditors and debtors, supply etc. There is an almost perfect correspondence between the precepts of the new classical school, the institutions, and European policies. Can you imagine that the French President François Hollande, in order not to use the ancilang (the old language, or rather the language that is being purified), defines his action as a supply side socialist policy ... a socialist policy without purchasing power? The European dictionary seems to have far fewer words than its American counterpart.

It is therefore with an impoverished language, stripped of its diversity, that we describe the European universe. As this language does not solve any relevant problem, it is well suited to Europe where rules freeze the handling of economic policy instruments, and in fact prevent their use. Only European federal institutions have more freedom.

Thus armed, the New speak will deploy its power in two directions. The first is to convince us that everything has been done to solve the haunting problems we face: unemployment, precariousness, inequalities. Unfortunately, nothing has been successful. By dint of repeating this, we become convinced that nothing will do anything about it. It is unfortunate, but we must mourn the impossible.

The second direction is more concrete and leads to the implementation of effective measures. We would be (collectively)



responsible for the situation in which we find ourselves, because our behavior – or rather the behavior of the majority -- is selfish and we are resistant to any reform. Neither the unemployed nor the poor "move" themselves sufficiently to alleviate the burden they place on society. We reject wage cuts, pension reform, unemployment compensation reform, labor law reform, in short, all the changes where we leave feathers. The time has come to ask ourselves what we can do for our country. After a thousand reforms, we are still here. It can always be said that this result is a testimony to the fact that we have not been as good as the people of country X or Y. One more small effort.

It is in this context that the Newspeak expression "the end of work" seems to sound the death knell for the remuneration of work, leaving only the respite that structural reform would allow. It may also be thought that its evocation only serves to make the above-mentioned reforms more acceptable, all of which have the effect of reducing the bargaining power of wage earners and thus wages. But the end of work is a strange hypothesis, probably prompted by our ancestral fear of technical progress, since it could just as well herald an economy of abundance, and, as Keynes said, the end of the economic problem.

I take the expression "structural reform" to be emblematic of Newspeak. It claims to mean both everything and nothing. All we know for sure about structural reform is that it is good. Any government worth its salt must proceed with structural reforms. The government's credibility is at stake as well as its reputation among its peers. Malfunction of the current economic situation is deemed to stem from the absence of past structural reforms: the lack of dynamism

throughout Europe, slow growth in France, high government borrowing cost in Italy, and more generally public sector deficits, foreign trade deficits, slow labor productivity growth, de-industrialization, etc.

Without further details, the expression “structural reform” does not mean anything intelligible, just like the expression economic policy. No one could imagine a political candidate promising to lead an economic policy. He would be asked immediately: which ones? But he’d be off the hook if he called for structural reform without further details. He could declare that the country suffered from not having realized structural reforms in the past and listeners would quietly nod their heads.

Now what does this term mean? In reality, everyone knows it, but no politician wants to go into the details. Just point to what the structural reform heroes accomplished: Thatcher, Reagan, Schröder, Monti, Macron. Never mind the legions who have tried and failed (e.g., Balladur, Villepin, Holland), because as soon as they have to explain what it is, the opposition rises up. There are several versions, but all involve a transfer of power from employees to companies via labor law reform that reduces protections both at work and in unemployment. Social protections are reduced both directly, say by increasing the unreimbursed portion of health care spending and indirectly such as by cutting hospital budgets. Another is reform of pension systems with the aim of reducing share of GDP devoted to pensions (or to ensure that it is growing less quickly than the number of retirees). And so on.

While, in Old speak, social insurance was considered a hallmark of development, it is, in Newspeak, an evil that reduces competitiveness. For certain categories of workers in Germany, these protections have almost disappeared. Is this human, social or even economic progress? The structural reformers may respond that we need not go that far, the problem is that the money spent on protection is excessive and we just need to lower them. How? And how do we know they are excessive?

Once, we could classify unemployment due to insufficient demand and unemployment based on excessive wages. If the word “demand” is banished, we are left with the default explanation: wages are too high. One solution is engineering monetary policy to bring back inflation, allowing real wages to fall before workers notice. It’s like the nursery rhyme we tell children in France: Peter and Paul are in a boat. Paul falls into the water. Who is left? Perhaps no one, if Peter jumped in to rescue Paul. The children, less Manicheans than the men, imagine more possibilities than the obvious one.

Why do we substitute the term “structural reform” for measures that reduce people’s assurance of having a worthy life? There were magnificent structural reforms: those recommended by the National Council of Resistance, the implementation of the Welfare State, labor protection, the birth of the ECSC, followed by the construction of the European Union and the euro. Other positive reforms could have followed, such as adoption of a real constitution for the European

Union or the end of fiscal<sup>8</sup> and social competition among member state. I propose that we call “positive structural reforms” those intended to improve the well-being of populations and the others are “negative structural reforms.” Then we’ll know what we're talking about.

If European governments inscribed their policies in great stories, they would be likely to be better understood. The politician can tell a story that resonates with people’s experiences. We need such stories to understand who we are, where we come from and where we are going. People do not respond to abstractions. If the stories were just cynical fables, they would have no power to convince and discredit governments. This is the process that we see at work almost everywhere.

Behind these considerations lies something more serious, more diffuse, and not only at the level of speech. The facts that we have found no solution to unemployment in Europe after more than fifty years of research, while it has been repeated ad nauseam that the mass unemployment is unacceptable, can be interpreted in three ways. The first is that of the French comedian, Jacques Rouxel: “if there is no solution there is no problem.” Despite that absurd dimension, he comes close to the thesis of real business cycle theorists—unemployment is a necessary investment in searching for a new match between worker and firm.

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<sup>8</sup> Recently, President Biden proposed to other G20 countries to tax corporate profits at a minimum rate of 15% to limit tax competition. It’s a very good start.

The second is to say that society sees unemployment not as a problem but as a solution. Insiders seek to maintain the border that separates them from outsiders, while businesses safeguard social peace. Insiders are part of the system and set the rules, while outsiders are the one who follow. It is revives the classic unemployment thesis: protections granted to those who work, especially unemployment insurance, create unemployment by increasing labor costs. Taken to the extreme, we should eliminate all safety nets to reach full employment. But that would be to ignore (as many are quick to do) that protecting employees is, itself, a conditions for full employment, because this balances the bargaining power between employees and firms. The pure theory of liberal capitalism does not accommodate power imbalances between agents or the rents they support.

There is however a third, more disturbing interpretation. Our governments have achieved many of the goals they pursued: disinflation, reduction of budget deficits, and structural reform I. So, why haven't we solved the problem we declare to be our priority? I put forward an answer that seems to me intuitive, but which could offend many. I borrow it from Paul Samuelson, extending his theory of revealed preferences to the public sector. In consumer theory, everyone has their own preferences, which remain unknown to all. We infer those preferences from actual choice, i.e., from what the person bought. Applying this theory, perhaps the failure to achieve the goal of full employment reveals the true preference of governments.

Europe's future and happy globalization have also entered the New speak dictionary. Europe-future because it allows us to confront the

other great powers of the planet on equal terms (How can we imagine that countries of such "means" can make their voices heard if they do not work together?). Globalization is good because it allows us to seize new opportunities and take advantage of them. What is curious is that Europe seems to prefer to disarm itself. It does not want to be a federation, let alone a power. Defining itself as a Federation of nation-states increases the ambiguity of its identity, which reduces its weight in the concert of Nations. Depriving itself of many of the instruments of power - fiscal policy, exchange rate policy, industrial policy - it cannot devise any strategy to deal with globalization, of which it is becoming the soft underbelly.

The impoverishment of language is like a shrinking of space that constantly brings us up against its limits<sup>9</sup>. It narrows the field of solutions and makes life as it is appearing as if it were not so bad after all. In this way, it produces resignation that pushes us to accept our fate. It is therefore very useful to the powers that be. The politically correct language reinforces it because it is a method that encourages the softening of debates and the erasing of their rough edges. We can find a thousand examples of this resignation in the period of confinement, the ultimate means of fighting the Coronas virus before the vaccine.

The nascent economic crisis, which is still in its infancy, could be destructive. Could, because the extent of our ignorance is large: regntarding the virus, but also regarding the "technology" of expansionary fiscal policy through investment . Somewhere in the 70s we have, in effect, lost the knowledge of this technology. The

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<sup>9</sup> « reality is when you hit yourself "said Lakan, the famous French (Freudian) psycho-analyst.

shrinking of the role of the State – say, in Europe the suppression of national planning bureau – is radically reducing the scope for an intelligent public investment policy.

We will not be able to accommodate ourselves to the words of the New speak if we want to avoid the wave of the crisis sweeping away everything in its path. Now, precisely, the vocabulary has been impoverished to prevent us from thinking otherwise. But we need to think differently if we do not want the bad reflexes acquired in previous crises to take us into unknown territories, socially, economically and politically, territories where freedom is far from guaranteed.

Eppure si muove. In the long run, the poorer the language is, the less correspondence it finds in our feelings, and the more it appears to be false. There will then be only two outcomes, either the slide towards tyranny, or the restitution of erased words.

## **As a Conclusion: From Charybdis to Scylla**

People know when words are just lyrics, like in the song. It is said that this is not the case for the crowds that follow populist speakers. I don't believe it, they know it, but they want to hear them, so much they are bruised by the harshness of the dominant discourses and their dissonance with their daily life. When a sick person hears that he is well, it is not surprising that he goes to the healer, even if he doesn't

believe in it. One has to hold on to a hope in order to continue to live. The result of the European elections of May 26, 2019 illustrates my point, as do many national elections.

In a way, it is the people themselves who are blowing the "populist elites" their speech: give us hope, tell us that we are not responsible for our own misfortune and that the community can do something for us. Give us a scapegoat, if necessary. We are exhausted from having to carry alone our precariousness, our difficulties of life. We are revolted to be held responsible for our misfortune," says the new speak", when we thought we were protected by governments whose job was to do so.

I have tried to show in this paper to what extent the evolution of language has contributed to impoverishing our perception of reality, and to limiting ourselves in the actions we can undertake. We, that is to say, those who govern us. And to what extent this self-limitation prefigured autocratic political regimes, so much so that it was to the detriment of the majority of the populations of most of our countries. For the moment we are not there yet, although there are many facts that suggest that we are heading there. The response to the crisis that we are experiencing will allow us to know how fast we are going.

But in continuing to say that the princes and institutions that govern us are doing the best, that their decisions are always good, and to exclude or despise those who think otherwise, we expose ourselves more and more to unpleasant surprises. To perceive them, we must not close our eyes to the world. It seems, however, that we have closed them wide.



The European elections of 2014 were worse than those of 2009 and better than those of 2019, "but is it so important"? The Brexit is throwing Europe into turmoil, "but the British you know... Some European countries have almost become dictatorships (pronounce illiberal democracies in New speak), "but finally universal suffrage seems not to have been abolished yet. "Our societies are becoming more and more brutal, because of the violence they are subjected to (economic insecurity, unemployment, inequalities, etc.) and the revolts they provoke. "But you have a short memory" (In quotation marks are the most common answers in the new speak to the presentation of each of the facts).

But no, I am told, to belabor the point, "it is only temporary turbulence, and we have known so much of it in the past. Europe is our future, and we have no choice but to continue obstinately along the path we have traced. Those who think otherwise are backward looking, nostalgic for the illusion that it was better to live a few decades ago. Don't they realize that we have never been as rich as we are today. Look how high the GDP per capita is, how long life expectancy is. Neither of them had reached such a level in the past. With a few exceptions this is undeniably true, but the argument is a masterpiece of new speak.

When people's lives are the opposite of this idyllic description, however arithmetically correct it may be, we cannot pretend it is not so. In our research on the measurement of well-being and social progress, Joseph Stiglitz, Martine Durand and I asked the question: who do you believe, us or what you see with your own eyes? The answer is obvious and in a sense revolutionary.

Society no longer recognizes its image in the mirror that is held up to it by speeches and statistics. The yellow vests (“les gilets jaunes”) should have made us understand this.

The same level of GDP can reflect radically different situations, where very few people earn a lot, but really a lot, and many others are poor or very poor. That's because GDP is an average, and no one can identify with an average. The discourse (so popular in the new speak, to the point of applying it to the unemployed) that everyone must take their share of the common effort becomes inaudible. Inequalities are made into a spectacle, and have never been so visible: some people have the lives of dogs and others the lives of moguls! The answer in new speak to this charge is well known: why don't you like the rich, the successful ones? Many falls into the trap and try to legitimize their reticence towards wealth. But that is not the point, our societies have always been characterized by significant differences in income and wealth: the very rich, the rich, the average, the poor and the very poor have always been part of our environment. We used to talk about social classes, social categories, proletariat, words that today have taken on an obsolete connotation. Only their blurred imprint persists in the dictionary of the new speak.

What all statistical institutes document is that things have changed. As if under a magnifying glass, in a large majority of countries the gap has widened considerably between an increasingly small minority of the very rich (1% or 1°%), a rapidly shrinking middle class and a large minority of poors.

The assertion that we are much richer today than in the past becomes thus empty of substance, because we no longer know what "we"

means. It is also singularly "apsychological": those to whom I compare myself are not those who lived thirty years ago, but my contemporaries.

The other dimension of the phenomenon that makes the present unbearable is the absence of perspectives that characterize it: not only does the future appear indecipherable, but the (subjective) probability that it will be worse than the present seems to become higher and higher. And how could it not be when the dictionary of the new speak seems to have replaced the expression "wage increase" by "increase in competitiveness" and "welfare state" by "assisted society". It is difficult under these conditions to think of the possibility of social progress. And besides, the disenchantment with Europe that we see growing election after election is nourished by this renunciation of progress that the European construction seems to require: everything is too much -- pensions, salaries, unemployment benefits, family allowances, housing assistance, -- to speak only of what has been under permanent debate for several years in our European democracies.

If we were cruel, we could talk about the spectacle that the Corona virus pandemic is giving us: everything is not enough -- hospital beds, Covid tests, masks, hospitals, vaccines, doctors and others medical workers, their salaries etc...

We can see that only half of our brain worked, the one that made the people responsible, while the other half, the one that emphasized the responsibility of governments and ruling elites, was as if paralyzed. This should not be surprising, the words to say it were lacking because they were erased from the new dictionary. Otherwise, why else would

they have believed the discourse that the budget deficit was the result of excess spending, when all it took was an event to show that the country was suffering from insufficient spending, as well long term that short term? It could be shown that this is the case for many other public services, like education for example? Is it then austerity that leads to an increase in public debt and a decrease in competitiveness in our (still) European democracies or a persistent too low level of activity.

The naive might say, but why, since we are richer, can't we afford what we could do when we were poor, and why do we take as a marker of progress the decrease in wage costs, rather than the increase in well-being? Finally, how can we imagine that under these conditions the future will be bright?

Doctrinal dogmatism inscribed in the new speak, as much as extremism represent dangers to democracy. And we must do everything to prevent the circumstances to lead us from one to the other. Europe is not the problem, but the cynical path that politicians have followed there. We urgently need to put back into the dictionary the words that have been erased from it.