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ARTICLES

Language and Liberty: Leveling The Playing Field for Liberalism

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Classical liberals and libertarians engage in public debates that are often biased against them. Intentional changes in language with the goal of discrediting classical liberalism have occasionally been recognized by its intellectuals, most notably Ludwig von Mises, Friedrich A. Hayek, and Bruno Leoni. This article breaks down various linguistic transformations and proposes strategies to level the playing field in public debates and move liberals to a better rhetorical position from which to engage their intellectual rivals. These strategies can be grouped into three categories: (1) the rejection of concepts created with the goal of discrediting liberalism; (2) the vindication of classical liberal meanings of key philosophical ideas; and (3) the creation of new, "liberal-friendly" conceptualizations to advance liberalism with a focus on visual thinking.

Do the words used to debate matter? Can the form modify the substance of what is said? Is it possible to manipulate language to spread or repudiate ideas? Political discussion is necessarily framed in terms that are public and have relatively common meanings, so a study of the latter can contribute to the understanding of the former.

In the twenty-first century, despite the political and economic success of liberalism, classical liberal ideas do not seem popular. Indeed, even if the results of the global expansion of liberal democracy and free markets are indisputable in terms of expanding freedoms and reducing poverty, liberalism as an ideology is still relatively unpopular. (For the steady reduction of global poverty, see Hasell et al., n.d.; for the relationship between liberalism and progress, see McCloskey 2021; for data on both, see Vásquez et al. 2023, 21–31.) This is true not only of the developing world, but also of the advanced nations that have enjoyed the benefits of liberalism the most. So

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why do liberal ideas not have the success that their theoretical and practical soundness would predict? Is there a communication problem in the spread of liberalism? Does language play any role in the unpopularity of liberalism?

Although answering all these questions conclusively could represent a yearslong project, it is worth making at least an initial approach to the problem of language and freedom. In this regard, the goals of this article are to analyze the words and concepts that surround discussions on contemporary liberalism and to suggest alternatives to counteract their manipulation. First, the article presents a possible theoretical framework to understand the evolution of language. It then reviews studies on the relationship between liberalism, politics, and language. Third, it shows ways in which those who oppose liberal discourse frame public discussions so that liberalism is at a rhetorical disadvantage. Finally, it outlines a series of recommendations for liberals seeking to promote their ideas in hostile linguistic contexts.

The Evolution of Language

Human action, as Ludwig von Mises (1998, 11) recalls in his famous 1949 treatise of the same name, is "purposeful behavior." Unlike animals, people act deliberately. In this framework of deliberate action, a distinctive faculty of humans is the ability to think through language. Thought is governed by language, even though it is possible to think about actions that are not publicly expressed through speech, writing, or nonverbal communication (Hayek 1968, 19). As Ludwig Wittgenstein (2017) stated in 1921, the limits of language are effectively the limits of the world for human beings.

The elementary fact that all sophisticated intellectual action occurs thanks to language is obscured, in everyday life, by a context of increasing speed in the circulation of information and by the evolution of political and philosophical debates. In other words, the increasingly rapid change in which issues are part of the public agenda and the passion with which they are discussed make the terms of the debate seem relatively unimportant. But "one can never establish whether the hearer conceives [linguistic terms] in the same way as the speaker" (Mises 1998, 179). We each necessarily make our own interpretation of words, which are in no case "neutral," because they do not convey the exact same meaning to each person. Therein lies the importance of the study of the relationship between language and politics.

Language is a social product, but this does not imply that it is created deliberately. In fact, the historical failure of deliberately created languages (such as Esperanto) is resounding. On the contrary, it is widely recognized today that languages have evolved in a relatively spontaneous manner over time, and more specifically that there has been no "genius" who invented them.

If the evolution of languages is interpreted as just another instance of spontaneous order, and the functioning of a language is equated with that of a market in which words are exchanged for various goals (including that of obtaining understanding), one could say that public demand maintains or modifies a language. Therefore, different languages tend to express the preferences of their speakers. In practice, this happens even more naturally than in any market: there is no government that can intervene in the language with the same force with which it can do so in the economy, or that can "own" a percentage of what is said in the same way that it can be the owner of a portion of all of the goods and services that exist.

However, in the case of language, as well as in any other field in which there is constant interaction between human beings, there can be not only spontaneous (or inorganic) order but also specific (or organic) pressures from groups which seek to impose their own preferences. Even when such actions are not carried out by a government and/or lack visibility, languages can change and specific meanings can be generated through deliberate efforts. Language constrains, but agents retain room for maneuvers to modify it. And politics is one of the areas where this fact is most visible.

The Relationship between Language and Politics: Liberty, Liberals, and Libertarians

There is a long, interdisciplinary tradition of studies on language and politics—a tradition so old that it can actually be traced back to ancient Greece: Back then, Aristotle (particularly in his *Rhetoric*) and Plato sought to formulate a language-based theory of legitimate persuasion in public debates. Famously, they later opposed the Sophists, whom they accused of manipulating emotions through speech. However, the history of the relationship between language and politics is outside the scope of this article.

If we stick to the contemporary world, George Orwell's famous essay "Politics and the English Language" is perhaps the most famous and forceful denunciation in the twentieth century of the way in which "political language . . . is designed to make lies seem true" (Orwell 1946). But beyond critical analyses, the academy does not lack forums for empirical discussion of the relationship between language and politics, particularly through the intervention of the media: these discussions appear in outlets created for this purpose (such as the *Journal of Language and Politics*) but also in journals that specialize in specific disciplines (such as the *American Economic Review*). For example, a recent contribution to linguistics from an economist argues that the elimination of the term "illegal immigrant" in AP news wires has led to a decrease in support for immigration restrictions (Djourelova 2023).

In the context of the relationship between language and politics, academics with different political preferences have turned their attention to the relationship between various languages and the concept of freedom. On

the left, Noam Chomsky (1972), for example, dedicates an article to this issue where he equates "freedom" with "liberation" and maintains that any analysis of language and freedom must have "social justice" as its objective.[1] (Hayek 1982, chap. 7, on the contrary, describes the concept of social justice as "empty" and "meaningless"; see also the next section of this article.) In the Spanish-speaking world and also from the left, the philosopher Arturo Rico Bovio (1982) denounces the "complicity of the predominant word [liberty] . . . with a colonialism that nullifies the questioning conscience."

Within circles where the concepts of freedom and liberty are usually vindicated rather than criticized or condemned, a brief mention of contemporary disputes can begin with Isaiah Berlin (1969) and his well-known differentiation between the ideas of "negative" and "positive" freedom, which takes up the classic dichotomy between the *liberté des modernes* and the *liberté des anciens* introduced by Benjamin Constant (1988) in the nineteenth century. Intellectuals who in the twenty-first century recognize themselves as "classical liberals," based for example on the tradition of John Locke or Adam Smith, generally appeal to the negative, or "modern," meaning of the term, which is equivalent to the absence of coercion. However, there is an intellectual dispute between "negative" liberals and those who—based, for example, on Jean-Jacques Rousseau (2017) or the Greek tradition that Constant cited—adhere to the positive, or "ancient," conception of freedom. The latter do not think, like the former, that freedom is a safeguard against undue interference. Instead, they think of freedom as a social capacity rather than an individual one, and they believe that pursuing it involves some sort of action that goes beyond the mere protection of themselves from the actions of others.

Ironically, those who adhere to the positive conception of liberty often refer to the term itself in a negative way: For example, Joseph Stiglitz (2024) has criticized what he calls the "freedom for companies to pollute," thus implying that if everyone were free to do as they pleased, an environmental catastrophe would ensue. This view ignores the many ways in which classical liberals have shown that this problem arises out of ill-defined property rights (e.g., see Rothbard 1982), the promotion of property rights being key to proponents of negative liberty. To classical liberals, the term "freedom" can itself never be bad as long as property rights are correctly defined.

In the Spanish-speaking world and part of the English-speaking one, most of those who claim for themselves the term "liberal" value its negative, or modern, connotation. This is for two main reasons: At a minimum, they understand that the positive conception contradicts the liberal principle of individual autonomy by imposing restrictions on the freedom of some people

1 All translations from Spanish are my own.

to ensure that of others. And ultimately, they believe that this initial deviation is likely to lead to the justification of tyrannies. Freedom for Rousseau, for example, implied the existence of a "general will" that required the subjection of individualities to it. But this could lead to totalitarianism, as has been highlighted by critics, most notably Karl Popper in *The Open Society and Its Enemies*.

There is, then, a seminal problem in the history of political ideas because the interpretation of the concept of freedom seems especially conflictive. In addition to this problem, as Leoni (1972) explains in his 1961 book, there is another that is inherent to linguistics and increasingly common in a globalized world: translation. Indeed, not only is the definition of immaterial concepts difficult, but differences between languages on apparently equivalent words cannot be ignored either: Leoni (1972, 35) provides, correctly, the example that "free" in English does not necessarily mean *libero* in Italian. The circulation of ideas about freedom and liberalism, therefore, is also framed by this drawback.

In this context, and as stated above, it must be remembered that the evolution of different languages is not always spontaneous, or inorganic. In the 1960s, Leoni (1972, 42) pointed out in *Freedom and the Law* that at the time of writing there was an organic "semantic revolution" promoted by propaganda groups that sought to impose the positive meaning of the term "freedom" in everyday language, changing the sense originally implicit in the founding documents of the Western republics.

In the US, the results of all kinds of ideological pressures can be seen today: the meaning of the word "liberal" has radically changed in the last century as "statist academics and intellectuals appropriated [it] to themselves," as Rothbard (2006, 13) recalls. Self-named "progressives" gradually turned liberalism into a left-wing ideology: early intellectuals like John Dewey, with his *Liberalism and Social Action*, offered the philosophical cornerstones on which proponents of more state intervention could base their demands, which paved the way for other influential intellectuals who legitimized the semantic change, such as John Rawls. The case of the latter is revealing, as the meaning of his *Political Liberalism* should have been restricted to its title but has sometimes been construed to encompass liberalism as a whole. In the end, the result of this journey is what was once simply a liberal in the United States is now known as a "classical liberal." What is more, referring to a person as a "liberal" in American English implies that he is economically *illiberal* in the classical sense.

More recently, both in English and in Spanish, there have also been disputes about the meaning of the term "libertarian" that again originate in long-standing semantic conflicts. For much of the twentieth century, libertarians were considered people inspired by socialist and anarchist ideals who sought to overthrow existing political regimes, whether the nondemocratic orders of

that time in Latin America or the established democracies of Western Europe. However, part of the intellectual current that reacted against the prevailing statist ideas in the mid-twentieth century acquired the term "libertarian" for itself, particularly after the publication of *Anarchy, State, and Utopia* by Robert Nozick in 1973. Only after this reaction in the English-speaking world was the term "libertarian" also "imported" into Latin America, as José Antonio Aguilar Rivera (2012) points out. Peter Boettke (2018, 264), in this sense, observes a causal relationship between the decline of liberalism and the rise of libertarianism: "Libertarian, to many of us, is just a term invented after WWII due to the corruption of the meaning of true liberalism."

The recently published *The Individualists: Radicals, Reactionaries, and the Struggle for the Soul of Libertarianism*, by John Tomasi and Matt Zwolinski (2023), studies the semantic evolution of "libertarianism," but the book also includes current events. In this regard, the meaning of the word "libertarian" has been questioned again in recent years to the extent that conservative individuals have adopted the term under different conditions than those who did so in the 1970s. Even though "liberal" libertarians continue to exist, there is also a rising "libertarian right" that reacts against claims for individual rights, particularly of traditionally repressed sexual minorities. The very idea of a libertarian right in this sense seems controversial, but the fact that it exists shows to what extent it is possible to misrepresent ideas through words.

If characterizations like "liberal" or "libertarian" can be (nobly) disputed or (ignobly) misrepresented, no concept is safe.

Liberalism and the Uneven Playing Field

The inorganic evolution of language is not the subject of this article, since it would be useless to oppose it: complaining about spontaneous linguistic change would have the same effect as opposing the law of gravity in physics or the law of supply and demand in economics. However, what Leoni (1972, 42) described as an organic "semantic revolution" is of interest because it implies a deliberate effort on the part of specific individuals or groups to impose their ideas.

The semantic problems for liberalism are deep and long-standing. In 1949, Mises described the linguistic threat from the left in this way: "They reversed the meaning of words. They call true or genuine liberty the condition of the individuals under a system in which they have no right other than to obey orders. They call themselves true *liberals* because they strive after such a social order. They call democracy the Russian methods of dictatorial government. They call the labor union methods of violence and coercion 'industrial democracy.' . . . In their eyes government omnipotence means full liberty" (Mises 1998, 281–82; italics in the original). Compared to 1949, the world

has certainly changed, but perhaps not as much as would be desirable for liberals. Although historical circumstances have changed, deliberate attempts by the Left to appropriate language for themselves persist.

There is a key element in Mises's quote that exemplifies the problems for contemporary liberalism: the dispute around the concept of democracy. Indeed, and even though the history of the concept is extensive, the emergence and the expansion of democracy have always been related to the *liberation* of those who were previously left to the whim of others in monarchies or tyrannies of various types. In fact, it was with the aim of protecting individual rights that political regimes in the West evolved into liberal democracies. But collectivists today purposefully detach the idea of democracy from that primary goal and, by likening it to the positive meaning of freedom discussed in the previous section, argue that governments must intervene omnipresently in public life in the name of democracy. This introduces confusion among citizens about what democracy is and what it ought to be.

In this sense, Hayek (1968, 31) explains in "The Confusion of Language in Political Thought" that "democracy" actually refers to a method of majority rule and not to the extension of said rule. However, the misuse of the word has caused the concept of democracy to be widened in scope in a way that is incompatible with liberalism: it is only because of this phenomenon that it is even possible to conceive of a term like "industrial democracy," which not only does not favor freedom but also restricts it in the economic sphere. Indeed, industrial democracy does not mean that whoever owns an industry decides to manage it democratically (whatever that means), but rather that people who do *not* own it will suddenly be authorized to make decisions about it.

Similarly, recent years have also seen attempts by individuals on the left to label as "democratic" ideas that are not only illiberal, but also undemocratic. If Mises complained during the twentieth century about the Soviet interpretation of the concept of a democracy, the current situation is more alarming because it is in the West itself that confusion has set in. Boettke (2021, 296), for example, warns about the growing use in the United States of the adjective "democratic" in conjunction with the noun "socialism," as if creating the term "democratic socialism" made it possible to eliminate the foundational characteristics of socialism that make it incompatible with life in a liberal democracy (i.e., the collective ownership of the means of production).

Worryingly, the change in meaning of the word "democracy" has been furthered by some liberals too. Portraying democracy as "government by discussion," as Frank Knight did (see Emmett 2020), adds to the confusion identified by Hayek by hiding the defining rule of the majority. It is essential to distinguish the defining elements of democracy and freedom to understand

when they are combined and when they are not. Otherwise, classical liberals risk conflating the two terms, which can cause great damage to freedom when the liberal elements of democracies are absent.

The idea of a "right" has also acquired an illiberal connotation due to the organic action of specific groups on the left. In the same way that Berlin distinguished negative from positive freedom, the concept of a right was also traditionally understood in the first way before organized pressures caused confusion by introducing the second meaning. Thus, for example, the United Nations' *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* currently proclaims the "right to a standard of living [that is] adequate," but not in the sense that a person is free to live according to his own standards but in the sense that medical care, food, clothing, and housing, among other goods and services, be provided for "himself and . . . his family."[2]

The fact that there is a new, illiberal interpretation of the concept of a right becomes evident if one notices that, in Spanish, the Left calls positive rights *derechos adquiridos*, or "conquered rights." Indeed, they do not emerge inorganically but are conquered due to political pressure. However, these rights imply a zero-sum game: where some have something provided for them, others must necessarily pay the expenses that this provision incurs. This is not how liberals used to understand rights, but as the Left has popularized the positive connotation over the negative one, the playing field for liberalism in public debates has become increasingly uneven.

Another basic, but no less problematic, term for liberals in ideological discussions is the concept of the "public." When the adjective "public" is used as a synonym for "state-owned" or "state-provided," the problem is twofold. First, this terminology hides state intervention in the area discussed. Second, by establishing itself in opposition to "private," the term "public" generates a kind of artificial empathy toward the latter that predisposes the audience against the former. The most obvious example of these effects is in education: "public education" is an idea against which very few would dare to rise despite the fact that, as Alberto Benegas Lynch Jr. (1993) points out, private education is just as "public" as state-provided education because all schools appeal to the public and seek to have as many students as possible. What is known as public education is nothing but state-provided education. But who talks about "state-run education"?

When Mises denounced those who distorted language to impose illiberal ideas, the expression "welfare state" had not yet become popular, but this is another term that has inflicted great damage on liberalism. As Benegas Lynch (1993, 76) points out, the idea of a welfare state is a contradiction in terms

2 UN General Assembly, Resolution 217 A, Universal Declaration of Human Rights, ¶ 25 (Dec. 10, 1948), https://www.un.org/en/about-us/universal-declaration-of-human-rights.

because the resources it uses to generate well-being necessarily accrue through coercion. Therefore, even before any potential benefits it may provide, its origin is already highly questionable for any liberal. Regardless of the welfare state's results, the extent to which the collectivist left and right have embraced the welfare state as a concept has resulted in the tripling of the proportion of government spending over the total gross domestic product (GDP) during the twentieth century (Tanzi and Schuknecht 2000). Today, the idea of the welfare state continues to permeate public discussions in such a way that liberals, on certain occasions, simply limit themselves to wondering how its expenses should be covered instead of demanding its elimination on moral grounds.

Finally, there is a linguistic problem for liberals that was succinctly described by Hayek in *Law, Legislation and Liberty*, which is that of *anthropomorphism*. This "primitive attitude which *personifies* such entities as society by ascribing to them possession of a mind" is common, but some take advantage of this tendency to individualize the actions of the people who constitute those entities and attribute them "to the *design* of some distinct agency, . . . which is better described as . . . *constructivism*" (Hayek 1982, 27; italics in the original). Thus it is possible to hear, for example, government officials refer to the "economy" as if it were a subject that has been built and could be controlled or directed by decree.

Liberals have failed to explain to the public that mental constructs like the "economy" are in fact collections of people and that one cannot assume that everyone in them will act and feel in exactly the same way. As a result, liberals begin economic discussions at a disadvantage, because the way those discussion are framed implies that it is possible for state officials to act and obtain specific and immediate results in a way that is not truly possible. Talking about abstract "measures for the economy" hides the infinite number of unexpected effects that these will have on individuals, or, following Frédéric Bastiat's (2016) terminology from 1850, prevents everyone from distinguishing between "what is seen and what is not seen."

Additionally, anthropomorphism facilitates attacks on minorities by both the Left and the Right. Attributing the possession of a unified mind to a group is what allows some to attack "business," for example, and thus restrict businesses' economic freedoms. The same tactic allows others to attack sexual minorities and thus, in the name of the "fight" against the "LGBT lobby," resist the recognition of their individual rights.

A particularly relevant aspect of the discussion on anthropomorphism is that, according to Hayek, this tendency is in fact responsible for the problem that the "social" label poses for liberals in relation to the concept of justice. Hayek argues that the concept of social justice refers to society rather than to specific individuals, but since there are actually no identifiable "social" actions the idea is a "mirage" (1982, chap. 9). Indeed, the demand that justice be "social"

is meaningless: only individual acts can be classified as just or unjust, which means that "social justice" is a contradiction in terms. What is sought with this term is, in reality, to justify the intervention of the state in the economy to guarantee the "positive" and "conquered" rights mentioned above.

But what is "social" justice opposed to? "Natural" justice? And if natural justice were understood to be the result of the free cooperation of people without redistribution, why would it be less "social" than government orders on taxes or regulations to undo the results of said cooperation? "Social," by the way, is an adjective that intellectuals do not limit to the concept of justice: in chapter 7 of *The Fatal Conceit*, Hayek (1988) lists 160 nouns that are modified by this adjective, in many cases with serious linguistic-ideological consequences (among others, the very ideology of "social democracy").

When traditional anthropomorphist tendencies are combined with recent developments in philosophy such as ontological posthumanism, illiberal conclusions follow. Indeed, depriving human beings of their individuality allows for all sorts of rights violations, since according to classical liberals it is individuals who possess rights. Individualism and liberalism go hand in hand just as collectivism and illiberalism do.

"Politics," "democracy," "law," "justice," "economy," the "public": it is not just the term "freedom" which is compromised. The list of problematic terms could be endless and could even include "capitalism," a term that is typically associated with liberalism and "in the vocabularies of all languages . . . [signifies] all that is shameful, degrading, and infamous" (Mises 1998, 268). But "capitalism" is not the same as "liberal democracy," as the rise of authoritarian capitalism in part of the world shows. Capitalism cannot even be equated with "free markets," as there are countless examples of "crony" capitalist or closed-markets systems that go against liberal principles. In economics, the term "capitalism" may be useful. In political philosophy, its usefulness is doubtful.

In any case, attempts to discredit liberalism through semantic strategies are as trendy today as they were in the past. The question that remains, then, is: What can liberals do to counteract them?

Avoiding Traps, Vindicating Old Meanings, Creating New Concepts: A Language for Liberalism

Faced with this outlook of ever-increasing government intervention in daily life and the popularization of linguistic strategies that justify it, liberals have barely reacted. Semantic problems are ignored so much that it is even common for liberals to adopt collectivist frameworks in their own responses to criticism. But a language represents a spontaneous order like any other and is still "massively path-dependent," in the words of David Schmidtz

(2016, 223). This means that semantic success on the part of collectivist propagandists could imply a long path of misunderstandings that harm liberal ideas, but also that these misunderstandings can be reversed.

Language matters because the way in which a debate is presented influences individuals' assumptions and therefore the ideas they support. In *The Fatal Conceit*, Hayek (1988, 106) attributes the saying that "when words lose their meaning, people lose their freedom" to Confucius, and there certainly is a concrete danger: dystopias like Orwell's *1984* are not foreign to the political reality of many countries, particularly developing ones. In Latin America, the authoritarian government of Venezuela created the "Vice Ministry for Supreme Social Happiness" in 2013, but the more democratic Argentina also had an office called the "Secretariat for Strategic Coordination of National Thought" until only a few years ago. Attempts to transform concepts are not always so crude, but linguistic manipulation still exists.

In this sense, liberals must build their own linguistic strategies for freedom. In the Spanish-speaking world, the very concept of a cultural battle is controversial among liberals because there are those who believe that culture can only evolve spontaneously and that it is not appropriate to confront anyone in a warlike fashion, even metaphorically, but only to promote good ideas in themselves: this is, essentially, the position of Ricardo Rojas (2020). But what should liberals do? Stand by and admit that a person is "free" to occupy someone else's property just because he needs it? Accept that the privileges a union obtains through extortionate practices become a "right"? Continue listening about the wonders of a "welfare" state that is imposed at the expense of everyone and without asking permission? Liberals need to actively reshape language to defend their ideas.

To be sure, liberals would be wrong to confront people who have never reflected about the terms they use, having simply learned them from collectivist intellectuals. It is the latter whom it is essential for liberals to confront in order to enable at least the possibility of a cultural change. It is difficult to believe that organic alterations to language can be counteracted by language's mere inorganic evolution.

So how can liberals act to level the playing field of public debate and discuss ideas without providing collectivists an initial advantage? Openly questioning concepts produced or modified by collectivists that have the effect of discrediting liberalism should be a linguistic priority. Indeed, it must be explained that there cannot be a concept of freedom that implies the subjugation of some people's liberties to those of others. It must be explained that "democracy" is a method that is not concerned with any particular outcome, which means that democracy does not necessarily encompass all human activities by default. It must be explained that the "economy" cannot be controlled at will.

In the same way, collectivists should not be allowed to monopolize "the public," and even less so when the privatization of assets generates better effects for the public than their nationalization. The public, liberals should argue, is all of us. And the private sector can serve the public just as well as the state, potentially even much better.

It is essential for liberals to avoid these linguistic traps not just because of the immediate potential damage that falling into one may cause, but also because doing so opens the door to future problems. Accepting at one point that a person's freedom depends upon the resources of others implies that this may be the case at any given moment, a scenario in which nobody's life and property will be safe. If someone's "freedom" entitles him to receive 5 percent of other people's income, why not 50 or 100 percent? If industries need to be "democratic," why not hospitals or any other business? The only way to avoid these problems is by avoiding the start of the slippery slope altogether.

Specifically, popular collectivist terms like "social justice" and "welfare state" must be rejected and replaced. The Left should not be able to promote without opposition "welfare states" built on the basis of extortion: a state that spends a high proportion of its country's GDP is not a welfare state, but simply a particularly spendthrift state based on violence. Similarly, any debates about social justice should expose the injustices suffered by people whose property is confiscated in the name of redistribution. This way, people's instinctive views on justice will resurface, and this may change the way they think about the whole concept.

In addition to rejecting the terms that nonliberals seek to impose and the meanings they seek to change, liberals must go a step further and vindicate the original meaning of key philosophical ideas that are still part of public debates. This does not imply rejection of change, which is part of the natural evolution of languages, nor does it imply yearning for a lost past to which society should return. What it means is that, when necessary, liberals should bring back specific meanings that will help them advance their positions in the contemporary world.

The negative connotation of "freedom" must be upheld at all times so that otherwise hidden rights violations become clear: freedom is not, for example, freedom to coerce, but this is not obvious to everyone. Indeed, it is Leoni (1972, 55), not Orwell, who recalls the case of trade unions that were made "free" by legislation from the "constraint" of court orders as they attempted to coerce employers (see also Falcone 2023). Such understandings of freedom must be rejected outright in favor of original, liberal interpretations. In this regard, liberals must explicitly pronounce that many of the "rights" that the Left cherishes are actually *subsidies* and *privileges*.

An example of how to promote the original meanings of key philosophical concepts comes from Argentina. If we take the case of labor rights, which many on the left seek to confuse with positive regulations and privileges for some that necessarily exclude others, liberals must insist on the negative, original right of not being prevented from working as one pleases. In a parliamentary debate in the 1990s with the aim of deregulating the labor market in Argentina, then National Deputy Álvaro Alsogaray said that he considered it "a euphemism to talk about labor *flexibility*, because in reality we would have to say that this is a market *liberation* [liberación] initiative" (R. M. Rojas and Guido 2021, 149; italics added). It is in this way that liberals must express themselves: they must publicly oppose the assumptions implicit in collectivist statements and state the effects of their ideas through clear language.

Speakers of various languages could make use of strategies that have already been adopted in other languages to improve the prestige of liberal ideas. To continue with the issue of labor rights, American classical liberals have been campaigning for the "right to work" in recent years to confront regulations that unions want to impose which effectively restrict the right to contract and establish labor relations. The concept is not really new: John Locke and Adam Smith already pointed out centuries ago that this right is incontestable and that the ownership of one's own labor constitutes, in fact, the basis of any other type of property. But in an era of increased labor regulations throughout the world, the strategy of demanding this right produces good results in the US: although unions remain popular, an overwhelming majority of the public supports the idea of gaining freedom to work (Jones 2014). This strategy, which as of 2024 remains exclusive to the English language, could be useful in other languages as well, particularly as the impossibility of unions' being democratic vis-à-vis their members becomes more evident (Kroncke 2018).

The creation of new, "liberal-friendly" conceptualizations to advance liberalism should have a focus on visual thinking. A great example of this is provided by Deirdre McCloskey's (2024) idea of "equality of permission," which is what she asserts distinguishes liberalism from other ideologies. Liberals faced with calls for equality of opportunity or even of outcomes as desirable goals for individuals can usually supply arguments as to why these may not be great ideas. But if they supplement these arguments with the idea of advancing equality of permission, it becomes more clear what liberals are for and not just what they are against. McCloskey (2021, 15) recalls that one of the meanings of the word "liberty" in English is the "freedom to do a specified thing; permission, leave." What could be more important to fulfilling one's goals (and easier to grasp) than to be allowed to try?

In this regard, the role of ideas in bringing about change cannot be overestimated, a topic that is covered extensively by McCloskey (2016). James Buchanan (2000) calls for saving the soul of classical liberalism precisely on the grounds that not only evidence or results can sustain an ideology, but also ideas. Just as solely rejecting failed ideologies is not enough to cause liberal ideas to prevail, neither is repeating fact after fact without offering ideas, long-term visions of what a liberal future looks like. "Equality of permission," in this context, is a powerful image that can help create such a vision.

In light of the recent COVID-19 pandemic and the extraordinary expansion of government power that ensued, it may also be a good idea for liberals to reflect on Michel Foucault's work and the way he discusses government interventions in the name of "public health." Indeed, his concepts of *biopolitique* (biopolitics) and *biopouvoir* (biopower) can be useful for understanding the motivations of collectivists to control populations (Foucault 2008). Power relations can also be made clearer simply by putting a name to them, which can then help liberals denounce them. During the pandemic, there were barely any attempts at naming government excesses (a noteworthy exception in Spanish was the concept of *infectadura*, a combination of *infectólogo*, or "infectious disease specialist," and *dictadura*, or "dictatorship"). There may be many other examples of concepts that can be used to advance liberal ideas in one way or another.

Depending on the context, it may be a good idea for liberals to test these strategies to level the ideological playing field to see which are more effective. There may be places or situations where it is more important to correct misleading interpretations of certain words, whereas in other contexts it may be a better idea to proactively press ahead with new presentations of old ideas. The strategies could also be combined, something that may even be necessary in particularly unfavorable scenarios.

There are, then, various actions that can be carried out to counteract the subtle, linguistically illiberal changes that have taken place in recent decades. Just as Austrians have insisted on countless occasions that money as a means of economic exchange is not neutral, liberals of all schools must recognize that language as a means of linguistic exchange is not neutral either. The playing field is currently uneven: liberals are at a disadvantage because they start ideological debates by accepting assumptions that they should refute and use concepts whose meaning has been altered.

It is essential that liberals act to propagate their ideas more effectively before a public that, today, is often hostile to them. It will not be enough to simply reflect on (and change) concepts to advance freedom. Further progress will become more and more difficult if words condemn liberal ideas before even being uttered.

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