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“Talking Trash”: War, Economic Crisis and the Lies of History

By John Kozy

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“The secret is to know how to lie and to know when someone’s lying to you”. Nicholas Sparks

People who were alive during the Vietnamese War remember General Westmorland’s saying, “There’s light at the end of the tunnel.” They interpreted that sentence to mean that the war was coming to a victorious end. But the sentence doesn’t say that; it doesn’t say anything at all about war, no less the Vietnamese War. The interpretation of the sentence was made not because of what it said but because of who was saying it. The general in command of the US forces was expected to know what the condition of the war was and say something about it. But he didn’t know or wasn’t willing to reveal what the condition of the war was, so he uttered a statement that had no meaning. He didn’t lie. since during daylight hours there’s always light at the end of every tunnel. He spoke figuratively rather than literally. Speaking figuratively is the preferred way of talking by officials who want to appear to be saying something substantive when they have nothing substantive to say. In many cases, it is meaningless trash talk, a hidden way of lying.

President Obama is a master of it. His speeches routinely contain figurative statements. For instance, he has often said we need to get the economy “on the right track” but never says what the right track is. Literally a train can be on the right track while standing still or going backward. Trains don’t always go forward. But the metaphor and the President’s use of it

obscures that. Without knowing what the right track it, he wants people to believe that he knows how to make things better.

Economists are great pretenders, too. They talk and write in figurative language and prefer to use abstract nouns in sentences that are only meaningful when they contain concrete nouns. Although few recognize it, these practices render most claims of economists meaningless. Expressing oneself meaninglessly is just another way of lying.

Take, for instance, “the economy is expanding.” Just what does it say is expanding? The word *economy* does not denote a person or a place. It doesn’t even denote a thing in any normal sense. We can meaningfully say that a person’s waist is expanding or the hedges are expanding or the balloon is expanding. One can identify the person’s waist or the hedges or the balloon. But no one can identify the *economy*. The noun does not denote anything.

Economy is an abstract noun. But it differs from abstractions like *automobile*. One can point to specific examples of automobiles but not specific examples of *economy*. If the word points to anything at all, it points to specific practices that are said to be economic, as for instance, buying or selling or working for a wage. A large number of these practices exist, but they are not all dealt with by economists.

GDP, for instance, is often touted as a statistical description of *the economy*’s size, but the monetary value of all economic activity is not counted as domestic product (DP). Burglary is, after all, an economic activity. But the money gotten from stealing is not counted as DP. Neither is the amount spent buying an illegal drug or a stolen item from an *underground* vendor or an item from a yard sale. GDP is merely the market value of all *officially recognized* economic practices. Who was the official who recognized them and why them and not others?

GDP is not *the economy*; it is merely one of many statistical measures. Is the collection of measures *the economy* or do they merely describe it? If they merely describe it, which economic activities are officially recognized and which are not? You see, *the economy* has no specific meaning; economists regularly confuse *the economy* with descriptions (or partial descriptions) of it. There is no list of those things that make up the collection of activities that comprise *the economy*. As an undefined term, it denotes nothing specific.

To be sure, someone is sure to say that what the sentence means is that GDP is getting larger. Sure! But GDP is a statistic; it is not *the economy*. Saying the economy is growing is one thing; saying the amount of money spent on consumption is rising is something else.

One might say that the unemployment rate is getting smaller but does that mean that fewer people are jobless? Depends on how the rate is calculated and in the US, there are at least six different ways of calculating it, each providing a different result and five of which most people never hear or read about. See [How Bad Data Warped Everything We Thought We Knew About the Jobs Recovery](#) to see just how bad things are.

So what does the unemployment rate describe? You can look at the way the six are calculated, except that part of the calculations is the result of a telephone survey and it’s impossible to know

whether the people being surveyed are telling the truth. So again, what does the number really describe? The number of people who are jobless or something else economists want to use for some purpose? All of the economic indicators are subject to the same criticism. They are nothing but estimates of something economists are interested in. The economic indicators are not the *economy*; collectively they might describe it, but even if they do, what is the *it*? The pronoun has no referent.

There are thousands of words like *economy*—ill defined abstract collective nouns. None of them denote anything. *Inflation* is about the exchange value of the dollar. One could talk about it without ever mentioning inflation. *The American People* is another. When a Congressman says he's listening to the American People, s/he's lying. *The international community* usually means a few unspecified Western nations. *Our interests* doesn't mean ours. Most of us have no interests in, say, Pakistan. I'd like to know which of us do, but no one ever says. *Human rights* are never specified. Why not? I could go on and on.

Furthermore, economists are fond of expressing themselves figuratively. Take “Consumer confidence is shrinking,” for instance. Figurative language is not indicative, not factual, and science is supposed to be about facts. If economics is not about facts, what is it about? We act as though we know what “consumer confidence is shrinking” means. But do we? Numbers don't shrink. Reported consumer confidence is a statistic about human attitudes. Statements about attitudes are about people, not *the economy*. So what does the sentence mean? Something like “the number of consumers in a survey who say they are likely to purchase a high priced item is smaller than it was the last time they were surveyed.” Does that mean people will buy the items? Not at all! So what does that economic indicator tell us about *the economy*? Nothing at all! It's a claim about people. All so called “confidence measures” are about people. What people? The people being surveyed. Nobody else!

Similar claims obscure the subjects of their sentences. For instance, “(NBER says) the recession is over.” This sentence which looks like its subject is the recession is really only about GDP. A smaller or larger GDP is a recession or not merely by definition. NBER can define it any way it wants; it has nothing to do with reality. Any statistical number that falls could be called a “recession.” For instance, there's also an income recession, an employment recession, and many others. They all equally describe some aspect of economic activity. None describes the economy.

Then there are notions like the Doctrine of Comparative Advantage.

The original idea of comparative advantage dates to the early part of the 19th century. It can be found in an *Essay on the External Corn Trade* by Torrens, in the *Principles of Political Economy and Taxation* by Ricardo, in *Elements of Political Economy* by James Mill, and in *Principles of Political Economy* by John Stuart Mill. Each of these tracts was written before what we know as economics came into existence. They do not constitute a model. The authors had no conception of an economic model. And contrary to what most economists say, the doctrine is easily understood and easily shown to be unworkable both in its original and emended forms.

In his example, Ricardo postulates two countries, England and Portugal, producing two goods, cloth and wine. He uses the time it takes a worker to produce one unit of product. If a Portuguese

worker could produce one unit of wine in less time than an Englishman could and if an English worker could produce one unit of cloth in less time than a Portuguese worker could, it would be advantageous to Portugal to stop producing cloth and convert its cloth making resources (including its workers) to wine making, and it would be advantageous to England to stop producing wine and convert its wine making resources (including its workers) to cloth making. Both countries could then import wine and cloth from each other more cheaply than they could manufacture the products themselves. But how could one ever determine how long it takes a worker to produce a pint or a quart of wine or a square inch or foot or yard of cloth? And would every worker take the same amount of time (which is an assumption the doctrine makes)?

The example rests upon assumptions which are unrealistic as has often been pointed out, but it also depends upon a comparison of how many man-hours it takes workers in each country to produce products. That data was unavailable in the early 19th century and is unavailable today. Even if it were available, it would be old data, data for some prior year. So the necessary comparison can never be made. The doctrine, like the law of supply and demand, rests on no empirical data whatsoever. It is merely a hypothetical illustration that is easy to concoct if all of the “data” on which it rests is selected properly. Economists are claiming that Ricardo and the others were saying something they never said.

Furthermore, the increases in production that result are the result of abolishing one of the industries in each country and converting their workers to workers in the remaining industry. Each country gains from using its workers more efficiently, not from using fewer workers. But in modern trade theory, workers do not get converted; the conversion of labor is not costless; laborers simply go unemployed. Modern trade theory does not depend on comparative advantages, and as a result, workers in the industries that survive are exploited and workers in the industries that are abolished go unemployed. Comparative advantage is unworkable. The data for any comparison is missing, and trying to instantiate it has resulted in much hardship—exploitation and unemployment. This sloppy use of language is indicative of sloppy thinking which leads economists astray and has dire consequences. Free trade agreements are not costless; they do not rely on comparative advantages. They are merely exploitative, and reality has borne this out.

Economists claim that Torrens, Ricardo, James Mill, and John Stuart Mill are saying something they never said. Justices of the Supreme Court are masterful at saying the Constitution says what it never did. See my pieces on the Court. Supreme Court Opinions are replete with trash talk.

So economists are not the only miscreants; the misuse of language is epidemic in all societies and that circumstance marks a society’s intellectual decline and seems to be irreversible.

In 400 BCE, Athens was a place of all kinds of intellectual and literary activity. Classical Greek, the language in which that activity was carried on, is a highly inflected, precise language which its users had to understand well. When Christianity became prevalent, literary Koiné became the medium of much of post-classical Greek literary and scholarly writing. (Koiné is the language of the Christian New Testament, of the Septuagint, and of most early Christian theological writing. The language is basically the language of the common people of Ancient Athens.) Intellectual

activity of all kinds markedly declined in the Ancient World when Koiné became the language of intellectuals. Koiné, like modern day English is very ambiguous and easily misused.

Of course, the reasons for that decline are impossible to find. It could have been the rise of religious thinking or the decline of linguistic precision. Possibly each contributed to the other. Language is, after all, the medium of human thinking and imprecise thinking is often the result of imprecise language. Ambiguous or meaningless claims cannot be used to produce valid arguments.

Religious people have a need to “believe the absurd” (Tertullian’s *Credo quia absurdum*), but so do others. English, especially American English, has declined in precision noticeably, chiefly because of its use in political discourse and marketing. Here are some more examples:

The President claims that attacking Syria would “punish the regime.” But punishment is applicable only to individual sentient beings. One can punish a dog or a person but not a fly or a tree. The sentence, “I will punish the regime” is really meaningless. In attempting to punish “the regime,” only the innocent will be killed.

The President and others, in an attempt to demean “terrorists,” calls suicide bombers “cowards”; yet ordinarily those who are willing to sacrifice their lives for their causes are called “brave.” This practice, meant only to demean, only results in destroying the meaning of “brave.” Now “the brave” are those who shirk death. Now we call an ordinary combat veteran a “hero,” but we award him/her no medals. How, then, do we distinguish heroes who get medals from those who don’t?

Then there are those who say one can “save while spending.” Yet “spend” is the antonym of “save.” Or have you ever bought something that was “new and improved”? Well, if it really was new, it cannot be improved and if it really was improved, it cannot be new. And what of all the medications being sold that do nothing but “help” something unnamed do something? A snake oil salesman’s motto or more trash talk!

Those who misuse language so do so either out of ignorance of how language works or in an attempt to mislead. Trash talk is the easiest way of telling lies. It gave us a “triune God,” “a first among equals, (first is an ordinal number)” and “salvation after death” when those about to be killed beg to be saved. Trash talk is the best way known to express nonsense. Economists and marketers, clerics and theologians, and politicians and frauds are masters of it.

People, think about what you see in print or hear. Most of it is nonsense uttered to mislead you. Lying is made out to be a virtue, and murder is made out to be justice. Truth is turned inside out. Today, the seven deadly sins are the seven virtues to live by. Humanity is on a downward slope to perdition.

So many ways to lie exist that lying is easy. To tell the truth is more difficult. Collecting or collected information is not “intelligence.” Intelligence is a mental attribute that information (data) doesn’t possess. Knowing facts, where someone is or what s/he is planning to do does not

make one intelligent. As a matter of fact, all of these ways of misusing language makes people dumber.