

Words Are Our Weapons

by Rebecca Solnit via sal - TomDispatch *Tuesday, Oct 30 2012, 10:51am*

international / prose / post

In ancient China, the arrival of a new dynasty was accompanied by “the rectification of names,” a ceremony in which the sloppiness and erosion of meaning that had taken place under the previous dynasty were cleared up and language and its subjects correlated again. It was like a debt jubilee, only for meaning rather than money.



This was part of what made Barack Obama’s first presidential campaign so electrifying: he seemed like a man who spoke our language and called many if not all things by their true names. Whatever caused that season of clarity, once elected, Obama promptly sank into the stale, muffled, parallel-universe language wielded by most politicians, and has remained there ever since. Meanwhile, the far right has gotten as far as it has by mislabeling just about everything in our world -- a phenomenon which went supernova in this year of “legitimate rape,” “the apology tour,” and “job creators.” Meanwhile, their fantasy version of economics keeps getting more fantastic. (Maybe there should be a rectification of numbers, too.)

Let’s rectify some names ourselves. We often speak as though the source of so many of our problems is complex and even mysterious. I’m not sure it is. You can blame it all on greed: the refusal to do anything about climate change, the attempts by the .01% to destroy our democracy, the constant robbing of the poor, the resultant starving children, the war against most of what is beautiful on this Earth.

Calling lies “lies” and theft “theft” and violence “violence,” loudly, clearly, and consistently, until truth becomes more than a bump in the road, is a powerful aspect of political activism. Much of the work around human rights begins with accurately and aggressively reframing the status quo as an outrage, whether it’s misogyny or racism or poisoning the environment. What protects an outrage are disguises, circumlocutions, and euphemisms -- “enhanced interrogation techniques” for torture, “collateral damage” for killing civilians, “the war on terror” for the war against you and me and our Bill of Rights.

Change the language and you’ve begun to change the reality or at least to open the status quo to question. Here is Confucius on the rectification of names:

“If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant; if what is said is not what is meant, then what must be done remains undone; if this remains undone, morals

and art will deteriorate; if justice goes astray, the people will stand about in helpless confusion. Hence there must be no arbitrariness in what is said. This matters above everything."

So let's start calling manifestations of greed by their true name. By greed, I mean the attempt of those who have plenty to get more, not the attempts of the rest of us to survive or lead a decent life. Look at the Waltons of Wal-Mart fame: the four main heirs are among the dozen richest people on the planet, each holding about \$24 billion. Their wealth is equivalent to that of the bottom 40% of Americans. The corporation Sam Walton founded now employs 2.2 million workers, two-thirds of them in the U.S., and the great majority are poorly paid, intimidated, often underemployed people who routinely depend on government benefits to survive. You could call that Walton Family welfare - a taxpayers' subsidy to their system. Strikes launched against Wal-Mart this summer and fall protested working conditions of astonishing barbarity -- warehouses that reach 120 degrees, a woman eight months pregnant forced to work at a brutal pace, commonplace exposure to pollutants, and the intimidation of those who attempted to organize or unionize.

You would think that \$24,000,000,000 apiece would be enough, but the Walton family sits atop a machine intent upon brutalizing tens of millions of people -- the suppliers of Wal-Mart notorious for their abysmal working conditions, as well as the employees of the stores -- only to add to piles of wealth already obscenely vast. Of course, what we call corporations are, in fact, perpetual motion machines, set up to endlessly extract wealth (and leave slagheaps of poverty behind) no matter what.

They are generally organized in such a way that the brutality that leads to wealth extraction is committed by subcontractors at a distance or described in euphemisms, so that the stockholders, board members, and senior executives never really have to know what's being done in their names. And yet it is their job to know -- just as it is each of our jobs to know what systems feed us and exploit or defend us, and the job of writers, historians, and journalists to rectify the names for all these things.

Groton to Moloch

The most terrifying passage in whistleblower Daniel Ellsberg's gripping book *Secrets: A Memoir of Vietnam and the Pentagon Papers* is not about his time in Vietnam, or his life as a fugitive after he released the Pentagon Papers. It's about a 1969 dinnertime conversation with a co-worker in a swanky house in Pacific Palisades, California. It took place right after Ellsberg and five of his colleagues had written a letter to the New York Times arguing for immediate withdrawal from the unwinnable, brutal war in Vietnam, and Ellsberg's host said, "If I were willing to give up all this... if I were willing to renege on... my commitment to send my son to Groton... I would have signed the letter."

In other words, his unnamed co-worker had weighed trying to prevent the violent deaths of hundreds of thousands of people against the upper-middle-class perk of having his kid in a fancy prep school, and chosen the latter. The man who opted for Groton was, at least, someone who worked for what he had and who could imagine having painfully less. This is not true of the ultra-rich shaping the future of our planet.

They could send tens of thousands to Groton, buy more Renoirs and ranches, and still not exploit the poor or destroy the environment, but they're as insatiable as they are ruthless. They are often celebrated in their aesthetic side effects: imposing mansions, cultural patronage, jewels, yachts. But in many, maybe most, cases they got rich through something a lot uglier, and that ugliness is still ongoing. Rectifying the names would mean revealing the ugliness of the sources of their fortunes

and the grotesque scale on which they contrive to amass them, rather than the gaudiness of the trinkets they buy with them. It would mean seeing and naming the destruction that is the corollary of most of this wealth creation.

A Storm Surge of Selfishness

Where this matters most is climate change. Why have we done almost nothing over the past 25 years about what was then a terrifying threat and is now a present catastrophe? Because it was bad for quarterly returns and fossil-fuel portfolios. When posterity indicts our era, this will be the feeble answer for why we did so little -- that the rich and powerful with ties to the carbon-emitting industries have done everything in their power to prevent action on, or even recognition of, the problem. In this country in particular, they spent a fortune sowing doubt about the science of climate change and punishing politicians who brought the subject up. In this way have we gone through four "debates" and nearly a full election cycle with climate change unmentioned and unmentionable.

These three decades of refusing to respond have wasted crucial time. It's as though you were prevented from putting out a fire until it was raging: now the tundra is thawing and Greenland's ice shield is melting and nearly every natural system is disrupted, from the acidifying oceans to the erratic seasons to droughts, floods, heat waves, and wildfires, and the failure of crops. We can still respond, but the climate is changed; the damage we all spoke of, only a few years ago, as being in the future is here, now.

You can look at the chief executive officers of the oil corporations -- Chevron's John Watson, for example, who received almost \$25 million (\$1.57 million in salary and the rest in "compensation") in 2011 -- or their major shareholders. They can want for nothing. They're so rich they could quit the game at any moment. When it comes to climate change, some of the wealthiest people in the world have weighed the fate of the Earth and every living thing on it for untold generations to come, the seasons and the harvests, this whole exquisite planet we evolved on, and they have come down on the side of more profit for themselves, the least needy people the world has ever seen.

Take those billionaire energy tycoons Charles and David Koch, who are all over American politics these days. They are spending tens of millions of dollars to defeat Obama, partly because he offends their conservative sensibilities, but also because he is less likely to be a completely devoted servant of their profit margins. He might, if we shout loud enough, rectify a few names. Under pressure, he might even listen to the public or environmental groups, while Romney poses no such problem (and under a Romney administration they will probably make more back in tax cuts than they are gambling on his election).

Two years ago, the Koch brothers spent \$1 million on California's Proposition 23, an initiative written and put on the ballot by out-of-state oil companies to overturn our 2006 Global Warming Solutions Act. It lost by a landslide, but the Koch brothers have also invested a small fortune in spreading climate-change denial and sponsoring the Tea Party (which they can count on to oppose climate change regulation as big government or interference with free enterprise). This year they're backing a California initiative to silence unions. They want nothing to stand in the way of corporate power and the exploitation of fossil fuels. Think of it as another kind of war, and consider the early casualties.

As the Irish Times put it in an editorial this summer:

"Across Africa, Asia, and Latin America, hundreds of millions are struggling to adapt to

their changing climate. In the last three years, we have seen 10 million people displaced by floods in Pakistan, 13 million face hunger in east Africa, and over 10 million in the Sahel region of Africa face starvation. Even those figures only scrape the surface. According to the Global Humanitarian Forum, headed up by former U.N. secretary general Kofi Annan, climate change is responsible for 300,000 deaths a year and affects 300 million people annually. By 2030, the annual death toll related to climate change is expected to rise to 500,000 and the economic cost to rocket to \$600 billion.”

This coming year may see a dramatic increase in hunger due to rising food prices from crop failures, including this summer’s in the U.S. Midwest after a scorching drought in which the Mississippi River nearly ran dry and crops withered.

We need to talk about climate change as a war against nature, against the poor (especially the poor of Africa), and against the rest of us. There are casualties, there are deaths, and there is destruction, and it’s all mounting. Rectify the name, call it war. While we’re at it, take back the term “pro-life” to talk about those who are trying to save the lives of all the creatures suffering from the collapse of the complex systems on which plant and animal as well as human lives depend. The other side: “pro-death.”

The complex array of effects from climate change and their global distribution, as well as their scale and the science behind them makes it harder to talk about than almost anything else on Earth, but we should talk about it all the more because of that. And yes, the rest of us should do more, but what is the great obstacle those who have already tried to do so much invariably come up against? The oil corporations, the coal companies, the energy industry, its staggering financial clout, its swarms of lobbyists, and the politicians in its clutches. Those who benefit most from the status quo, I learned in studying disasters, are always the least willing to change.

The Doublespeak on Taxes

I’m a Californian so I faced the current version of American greed early. Proposition 13, the initiative that froze property taxes and made it nearly impossible to raise taxes in our state, went into effect in 1978, two years before California’s former governor Ronald Reagan won the presidency, in part by catering to greed. Prop 13, as it came to be known, went into effect when California was still an affluent state with the best educational system in the world, including some of the top universities around, nearly free to in-staters all the way through graduate school. Tax cuts have trashed the state and that education system, and they are now doing the same to our country. The public sphere is to society what the biosphere is to life on earth: the space we live in together, and the attacks on them have parallels.

What are taxes? They are that portion of your income that you contribute to the common good. Most of us are unhappy with how they’re allocated -- though few outside the left talk about the fact that more than half of federal discretionary expenditures go to our gargantuan military, more money than is spent on the next 14 militaries combined. Ever since Reagan, the right has complained unceasingly about fantasy expenditures -- from that president’s “welfare queens” to Mitt Romney’s attack on Big Bird and PBS (which consumes .001% of federal expenditures).

As part of its religion of greed, the right invented a series of myths about where those taxes went, how paying them was the ultimate form of oppression, and what boons tax cuts were to bring us. They then delivered the biggest tax cuts of all to those who already had a superfluity of money and weren’t going to pump the extra they got back into the economy. What they really were saying was that they wanted to hang onto every nickel, no matter how the public sphere was devastated, and

that they really served the ultra-rich, over and over again, not the suckers who voted them into office.

Despite decades of cutting to the bone, they continue to promote tax cuts as if they had yet to happen. Their constant refrain is that we are too poor to feed the poor or educate the young or heal the sick, but the poverty isn't monetary: it's moral and emotional. Let's rectify some more language: even at this moment, the United States remains the richest nation the world has ever seen, and California -- with the richest agricultural regions on the planet and a colossal high-tech boom still ongoing in Silicon Valley -- is loaded, too. Whatever its problems, the U.S. is still swimming in abundance, even if that abundance is divided up ever more unequally.

Really, there's more than enough to feed every child well, to treat every sick person, to educate everyone well without saddling them with hideous debt, to support the arts, to protect the environment -- to produce, in short, a glorious society. The obstacle is greed. We could still make the sorts of changes climate change requires of us and become a very different nation without overwhelming pain. We would then lead somewhat different lives -- richer, not poorer, for most of us (in meaning, community, power, and hope). Because this culture of greed impoverishes all of us, it is, to call it by its true name, destruction.

Occupy the Names

One of the great accomplishments of Occupy Wall Street was this rectification of names. Those who came together under that rubric named the greed, inequality, and injustice in our system; they made the brutality of debt and the subjugation of the debtors visible; they called out Wall Street's crimes; they labeled the wealthiest among us the "1%," those who have made a profession out of pumping great sums of our wealth upwards (quite a different kind of tax). It was a label that made instant sense across much of the political spectrum. It was a good beginning. But there's so much more to do.

Naming is only part of the work, but it's a crucial first step. A doctor initially diagnoses, then treats; an activist or citizen must begin by describing what is wrong before acting. To do that well is to call things by their true names. Merely calling out these names is a beam of light powerful enough to send the destroyers it shines upon scurrying for cover like roaches. After that, you still need to name your vision, your plan, your hope, your dream of something better.

Names matter; language matters; truth matters. In this era when the mainstream media serve obfuscation and evasion more than anything else (except distraction), alternative media, social media, demonstrations in the streets, and conversations between friends are the refuges of truth, the places where we can begin to rectify the names. So start talking.

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