

*Val Basilio*

# The Label of Things

1999

Journalists, politicians, economists, intellectuals, the great people of the world of the spectacle, all are in cooperate in showing the world in which we live as the best of all possible worlds. A world in which inhabitants live to work and are forced to work to live, where anyone who does not have a job feels deprived of his own life. And where demanding anything else is considered a tragic illusion refuted by history. Nothing must disturb this conviction that has been repeated so often that it has become a matter of fact, an established truth. Thus, the problem of abolishing everything that constitutes a threat to the peace that reigns in the market paradise is posed. Softening contrasts. Placating tensions. Moderating extremism. A difficult undertaking, but possible.

There is no objective, single-voiced reality. What we call reality is always a partial aspect of a totality never completed, a selection from it. Its consistency is limited not only by the means we use to grasp it, but above all by our ability to use it. We define reality not as the totality that surrounds us, of which we ourselves are a part, nor even as the part of this reality that we have managed to grasp, but only as that last little bit that we are able to keep, to make our own, to give any sort of meaning. The reality we speak to ourselves about is always just of our own making. It could be said that reality does not exist, that only our interpretations of things exist. Omitting at this time the question of pictures, the human being communicates her vision of reality through words. So it is through words that the human being has justified the conditions of life in which she has found himself, but has also incited to overthrowing them. All the actions that has committed to this end have always been preceded or followed by words: in order to express analysis, demands, comments, proposals.

We come to the world as speaking beings; language precedes us as structure and as social milieu. It is the expression of concrete social relationships and as such cannot be neutral. It is transformed as a consequence of social changes, it matters little whether these are of grand dimensions (in France, after the revolution of 1789, the new dictionary of the Academy incorporated about 11,000 new entries) or concern somewhat minor changes at the peak of politics. Thus, even a critical perception of reality possesses its vocabulary. Reducing this vocabulary means reducing the possibility of critically perceiving reality. And this reduction can occur in different ways. For example, causing a term to move from the vocabulary of criticism to that of consent through a mutation of meaning. Nobody will be afraid of the word revolution anymore when this indicates the advent of a new wave of technological instruments. Everyone will be suspicious of anarchy if it allows anyone to attack us on the street corner. But this critical vocabulary can lose its terms in other ways as well. Inventing new, apparently neutral definitions capable of replacing old, already discredited ones. If a thing corresponds to every word, the introduction of a new word to indicate an old thing would serve to

reconstitute its virginity. An ancient philosopher used to claim that words are “the label of illusive things”, while according to one writer, “expression is substitution”. It is decidedly not by chance that philosophers and poets have always found posts in the king’s court. So in order to modify reality while leaving it unchanged, i.e., not to modify its substance so much as perception, it is enough to replace the label. In this sense, the places where this technique is best put to the test are, not by chance, supermarkets in which each day damaged goods are as fresh as the day, because freshness is *guaranteed by a label*. Maybe now it is possible to better understand the origin of this noisy invasion of language by the activity of subjugated words, their race to remove and replace old words that have become inadequate not due to their effective old age, but due to their irreverence towards the requirements of the new social order.

One can find an infinite number of possible examples of the ability of the word to render the unpleasant pleasant. Such guile neglects nothing; it is used on great occasions as well as in tiny everyday activities. The street sweeper who gathers trash has become an “environmental technician”. The terminological innovation has not improved the air that one who carries out such a job breathes, nor has it called into question the consumerist lifestyle that produces tons of rubbish, but these aren’t the motivations that have led to the introduction of such a neologism. Quite simply, it is meant to make those who go through their life dealing with other people’s garbage feel good. The same concern for comforting those who carry out humble jobs has led, for example, to rebaptizing the cleaning woman as “domestic collaborator”. If it has not already done so, this sort of uniformed fantasy will have to satisfy its whim by finding a description that compensates for the fatigue and frustration of porters, waiters and waitresses, doorkeepers, miners and the list goes on.

The need to banish every outrage from the horizon of existence is pushed in the end to the suppression of physical differences between individuals. Waiting until genetic engineering finds the way to make us all Adonises and Venuses, the task of toning down the contrasts that can originate in the manifest reality of our bodies is handled through words. The blind have become “not seeing” and the deaf “not hearing”, the obese “fat bearers”, dwarves “vertically disadvantaged”. From behind the charitable aim of alleviating human despair, the objective of eroding space for occasions of “disturbance of the public peace” peeks out. The examples just related might even move one to smile. At bottom, it’s simply a matter of wordplay. But wordplay loses all its innocuousness when it is carried out on certain other themes. In spite of all the praises that are sung to the progress of civilization, wars continue. It is impossible to stop them since they serve economic, political and religious interests which cannot be ignored, considering the present social system. Nonetheless, it is necessary to obliterate the impression caused by all the dead,

the wounded, the sorrow. Easy. It is enough to call them “humanitarian missions”. After all, the missiles have already been baptized “peacemakers”. The roar of the planes will be likened to the providential siren of the ambulance. Military bases will appear to be hospitals. Generals become medical chiefs of staff to whom we entrust our lives. Not by chance, bombings are contrived with “surgical precision”. Here is how the horror of war, if opportunely sterilized, can find approval.

And social inequalities? They don’t exist anymore; they have been abolished. A social revolution was not necessary: neither assaults on the Winter Palace, nor attacks at the heart of the state, no generalization of revolt. Exploitation has been erased in one stroke through a lexical revolution. Years ago — do you remember — the holders of wealth were “masters”. As was appropriate, they were considered enemies, because they reminded slaves of their own condition. But now that they have become “contractors”, everyone respects them. Not that, in the meantime, their wealth has at all diminished, it is understood. Nor their privileges. Nor their power. But all these characteristics oozed precisely from that word “master”. The one disappeared and so did the other. Today “contractors” respect the misery of their “employees” or those who aspire to be such, to the extent that the latter respect the wealth of the former. In this way, everyone manages to live happy and contented lives, or nearly so.

Of course, every now and then, the cosmetic of words isn’t able to cover all the ugliness to which it is applied. For example, a “smart bomb” happens to mistake the heart for a tumor and butchers civilians. Or else, a UN report publicizes that the personal fortune of just three men surpasses the wealth produced by more than forty countries in the world. There is more money in the bank accounts of these three people than in the combined pockets of several billion human beings. In the face of these facts, a certain discomfort continues to spread. But it is exhausted in a very short period of time, after everyone has hurled their sighs of disagreement or their curses of rage. For a few dozen hours those bombs will be seen as instruments of death and those three people who could buy half the world will be seen as masters. Then they will again be, respectively, “scalpels” and “employers”.

Besides, why be surprised? Capitalism has triumphed everywhere, its omnipotence is enough to make speaking about it superfluous. Not to pronounce its name in vain, this is the first commandment of its law, the law of profit and money. But capitalism is not only omnipotent. It is also omnipresent. There is not a corner of the world that has escaped its intervention. From Peru to Australia, a single colored shopping mall extends itself. One of the three lords mentioned above, Bill Gates, the richest man in the world, loves to repeat that “it is all a matter of *how*, not *if*.” In this way, the reasons of the Economy become the very reasons

of Humanity. Capitalism can thus even vanish from our lips that should learn to concern themselves exclusively with its effects, “neoliberalism” or “globalization”.

The power of words. When properly spurred, they are able to transform a tiger into a chick their anesthetic quality seems inexhaustible. Let’s take the Idea. What is an idea? It is an armed thought, a thought that moves one to action. One can live and one can die for an idea. The idea challenges its possibilities, seeks its realization. When suitably supported and accompanied, it is able to open a breach in history and transform it. The examples are not lacking. But it is dangerous to allow armed thoughts to circulate in the world. Therefore, it is necessary to get rid of the idea. For decades, human beings have been taught not to express ideas, but rather “opinions”, i.e., disarmed thoughts, thoughts that are somehow satisfied with mere oratory. Needless to say, no one would want to live or die for an opinion that, as such, does not refer to a practice. Of course, this substitution should still appear as a step forward, not as censorship or an act of obscurantism. It is enough to say then that opinion is the democratization of thought, its universal surrender. Possessing an idea requires an effort, of study, of understanding, of interpretation. And even greater effort is required to put the idea into practice. All that is needed to have an opinion, on the other hand, is to open one’s mouth. Simple, and within the capacity of all. All opinions are equal, because all people are equal. The end of the Idea has led to the disappearance of its products. The end of theories, the end of ideologies. The end as well of great ideals and of utopias. The end of struggle and the end of enemies against which to struggle. Too dangerous, it is necessary to lower the pitch, tone down the color, numb the senses. The weight of the past, the weight of a varied arsenal has been replaced by the lightness of inconsistency. Yesterday, ideas were rocks to launch against the enemy to demolish it; life, a barricade. Today, opinions are feathers to launch into the air in order to get lost in the contemplation of their somersaults; life, a sterile limbo. Let’s get this straight, nothing has changed. It’s just that nothing remains that can be criticized. At the most, the world we live in is open to opinion.

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