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When Names No Longer Mean: Political Language, Truth, and the Philosophy of Denomination

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Abstract

Background: Political language has historically mediated between philosophical traditions and public life, enabling structured ideological debate. In late modernity, however, this function has weakened due to increasing semantic instability.

Objective: This article analyzes the growing disjunction between political denominations and their underlying philosophical content, and examines its implications from both philosophical and theological perspectives.

Methods: A historical-conceptual methodology is employed, integrating political philosophy, conceptual history, and theological reflections on truth and language. Classical and contemporary sources are critically examined.

Results: The study identifies a process of denominational displacement, in which political labels persist while their meanings are altered or strategically redefined. This undermines the conditions for rational critique and facilitates ideological masking.

Conclusion: The restoration of correspondence between naming and conceptual substance is a necessary condition for authentic philosophical discourse. This task requires both analytical rigor and an ethical commitment to truth.

Keyword: Political philosophy, Political language, Ideology, Truth, Theology, Conceptual history, Propaganda, Semantics, Ethics of language

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction: The Crisis of Meaning in Political Language

Contemporary political discourse is marked by a paradox: the proliferation of ideological labels coincides with the erosion of their meaning. Terms such as “liberal,” “socialist,” “democratic,” or “progressive” are widely used, yet their semantic content is increasingly unstable, contested, and often strategically manipulated.

This transformation reflects not merely linguistic drift but a deeper epistemological and ethical crisis. As Hannah Arendt argued, the erosion of truth in public life leads to a condition in which the distinction between fact and interpretation becomes blurred (Arendt, 1967) ^[1]. In such a context, language ceases to disclose reality and instead becomes a tool for its construction.

This article advances a central claim: contemporary political discourse is characterized by a crisis of denomination, defined as the growing disjunction between political names

and their actual philosophical content. This disjunction undermines the possibility of genuine critique and transforms political language into a domain of strategic self-identification.

2. Historical Foundations: When Political Language Had Conceptual Integrity

The emergence of modern political language is inseparable from the transformation of European thought between the late medieval period and the Enlightenment. The shift from a theocentric order to an anthropocentric worldview established the conditions for autonomous political philosophy.

Within this framework, John Locke grounded political legitimacy in natural rights (Locke, 1689/1988) ^[9], while John Stuart Mill articulated a defense of individual liberty (Mill, 1859/2003) ^[13]. These ideas formed the conceptual basis of liberalism.

In contrast, Karl Marx developed a materialist critique of capitalism, emphasizing the limitations of formal equality in the absence of material justice (Marx, 1867/1976) ^[12]. Despite internal divergences, socialist traditions maintained a recognizable conceptual core.

As Reinhart Koselleck (2004) ^[8] demonstrated, modern political language functioned as a structured semantic field in which terms corresponded to identifiable philosophical positions. This correspondence enabled meaningful disagreement and rational critique.

3. From Semantic Stability to Strategic Language

The contemporary situation reflects a significant departure from this earlier condition. Political terms are increasingly used independently of their historical meanings, often serving as instruments of persuasion rather than as descriptors of philosophical commitments.

This phenomenon resonates with Ludwig Wittgenstein's insight that meaning depends on use (Wittgenstein, 1953/2009) ^[19]. However, when use becomes primarily strategic, meaning itself becomes unstable.

Recent scholarship reinforces this diagnosis. Freedman (2013) ^[6] has shown that ideologies are flexible configurations of concepts, while Müller (2016) ^[14] has analyzed how contemporary movements reshape political language to construct new forms of legitimacy. In late modernity, this flexibility has evolved into **semantic opportunism**, in which words are detached from their conceptual foundations and repurposed for rhetorical effect.

4. Case Studies in Denominational Displacement

The crisis of political language becomes particularly visible in concrete cases where denominational labels obscure rather than clarify ideological content.

A historically paradigmatic example is National Socialism. Despite its name, this regime did not reflect the core principles of socialist thought as articulated by Karl Marx. Instead, it combined authoritarian governance with racially defined nationalism. The term "socialism" functioned as a strategic appropriation rather than a conceptual descriptor. Moreover, "socialism" by definition mean internationalism ("workers of the world be united") which is in opposition to nationalism

Another instructive case is Christian democracy. While rooted in Christian ethical traditions, its political expressions have often incorporated elements more closely aligned with

liberal economic frameworks. This illustrates not outright contradiction but progressive semantic dilution.

More recently, the term "progressive" has expanded to encompass a wide range of positions, some of which exhibit affinities with forms of cultural or political conservatism. Contemporary ideological configurations frequently produce unexpected alliances, challenging traditional conceptual boundaries.

These examples illustrate a broader phenomenon: denominational displacement, in which political names persist while their meanings are transformed or emptied. In such conditions, language no longer serves as a reliable guide to understanding but as a mechanism of symbolic positioning.

5. A Theological Perspective: Truth, Language, and Responsibility

The crisis of political language can be further illuminated through theological reflection. In religious traditions, language is intrinsically linked to truth and moral responsibility.

In the Gospel of John (8:32), truth is presented as liberating. Augustine of Hippo understood false speech as a disorder of the soul, a rupture between word and reality (Augustine, 2008) ^[2]. Similarly, Maimonides emphasized the ethical responsibility inherent in correct understanding and naming (Maimonides, 1963) ^[11].

The Hebrew concept of *emet* (truth) implies not only factual accuracy but fidelity and consistency—an alignment between word, intention, and reality. From this perspective, the distortion of political language can be interpreted as a failure of fidelity. Modern theology reinforces this view. Paul Tillich (1951) ^[16] argued that language participates in truth only when it authentically expresses ultimate concern, while Rowan Williams (2014) ^[18] emphasizes the ethical accountability of speech. Thus, the misnaming of political realities is not merely a conceptual error but an ethical failure, approaching what may be described as conceptual idolatry.

6. Technocracy and the Hollowing of Political Meaning

The rise of technocratic governance has further contributed to the erosion of political language. As Jürgen Habermas (1984) ^[7] observed, communicative rationality is increasingly displaced by instrumental rationality.

Contemporary analyses confirm this trend. Brown (2015) ^[3] describes how neoliberal rationality reduces political life to economic calculation, while Michel Foucault (1972) ^[4] highlights the role of discourse as an instrument of power.

In this context, political terms persist but are emptied of philosophical depth. They function as administrative or symbolic tools rather than as vehicles of meaning.

7. Denominational Integrity as a Philosophical Imperative

The central normative claim of this article is that political discourse requires the restoration of denominational integrity: the alignment between political labels and their underlying philosophical content. Without such alignment, critique becomes ineffective. As Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) ^[10] argues, moral reasoning depends on shared conceptual frameworks. When these collapse, discourse degenerates into fragmentation.

Recent philosophical contributions reinforce this concern. Williams (2002) ^[17] emphasizes truthfulness as an ethical

virtue, while Frankfurt (2005) ^[5] identifies indifference to truth as a defining feature of contemporary discourse.

8. Against Propagandistic Self-Identification in Political Philosophy

A decisive conclusion follows: contemporary political discourse is deeply affected by propagandistic self-identification.

Political actors frequently adopt historically meaningful labels while diverging from their philosophical content. This practice produces conceptual confusion, obstructs critique, and allows for the appropriation of legitimacy without accountability.

As George Orwell observed, political language can be used to make falsehood appear truthful (Orwell, 1946/2004) ^[15]. In the present context, this tendency has become structural rather than exceptional.

A minimal ethical requirement must therefore be affirmed: political denominations should correspond to actual philosophical commitments. This does not imply rigid orthodoxy but demands intellectual honesty.

When names cease to correspond to realities, political language no longer mediates understanding—it obstructs it.

9. Conclusion

The erosion of political language reflects a deeper crisis of truth in modernity. The disjunction between naming and being undermines both philosophical clarity and ethical responsibility.

Restoring meaningful discourse requires a renewed commitment to truth, understood not only as accuracy but as fidelity between language and reality. This commitment, shared by philosophical and theological traditions, is essential for the recovery of political thought as a domain of rational and ethical inquiry.

“When names cease to correspond to realities, political language no longer mediates understanding—it obstructs it.”

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