

Trump Speak and its Discontents

July 28, 2020



Trump bragged about how the U.S. has done a “beautiful job” because “only” upwards of 120,000 and counting had died of COVID-19 at the time. (As of this writing it is 138,000 and surging.) Although this particular example of Trump Speak had been widely commented on, because the commentators did not analyze its class politics the commentary itself was a diversion that served to normalize the prevailing cynicism of Americans toward politics so perfectly captured in Trump’s “mission accomplished” speech. To understand how such a comment could be so normalized that despite the “buzz” it generated it is treated as hardly worthy of serious analysis and critique requires an investigation into the cultural politics of interpretation.

Such an investigation, however, requires abstract concepts that in the mainstream commentary are widely taken to be irrelevant as well as elitist. A thoughtful approach to daily life that goes beyond its constructed obviousness is thought to be irrelevant because it speaks an alienating language that is out of touch with the people. It is this populist rule of ignorance that treats people as know nothing actors that goes some way in explaining why Trump Speak is so effective—it panders to a deep insecurity about abstract ideas that has been put into Americans by a steady consumerist diet that has taught them to regard ideas as foreign to pleasure and to embrace their spontaneous feelings as a sign of personal freedom and authenticity. It does not seem to bother them that what they take to be spontaneous and therefore true and authentic has been manufactured by corporations who use a sensationalized and relentlessly emotive language to construct a cultural obviousness that rejects analysis and self-reflection to the point that people are unable to question the underlying class relations in which they live, making them all the more easily exploitable. For this reason, although many will find my text abstract, alienating, and thereby irrelevant, such language is nevertheless unavoidable in order to penetrate the ideological purpose of Trump Speak to maintain the cultural obviousness and rule of ignorance that immunizes the existing social order from critique.

When Trump declares victory over the virus and minimizes the death toll it is not that anyone literally believes the deaths are to be celebrated, as the Liberal interpretation has it. The Liberal reading of Trump Speak is what the cultural critic Roland Barthes calls “readerly” as it takes the text to have an obvious transparent meaning. On this reading, Trump is the leader of a death cult

that all rational people find abhorrent. In the Liberal ideology, “ideology” is always for “those” dogmatic types, “we” are “open minded” and “clear thinking,” as in, “don’t those people know that rational governments like those of Western Europe have flattened the curve without massively increasing unemployment?” On this view America will “return to normal” when it elects an enlightened and responsible administration.

Another popular (mis)reading of Trump Speak is what Barthes calls the “writerly” interpretation, which is given by right-wingers who, in the words of cyber-libertarian Peter Thiel, “take Trump seriously but not literally.” On this interpretation, Trump Speak makes the pandemic seem like something Americans should be proud in “fighting,” as if it were a great patriotic war in which the dead sacrificed their lives to protect the homeland from a foreign invader. Like the old postmodernists, Right-wingers reject the readerly transparency of meaning as a totalitarian imposition on the pleasures of interpretation to be found in the performative aspect of Trump Speak, in “how” it says rather (more) than “what” it says. This is simply the obverse of the Liberal ideology except instead of “ideology” being defined “negatively” as “bad” ideas “those people” naively believe, it is defined as the “good ideas” we rightly “value,” as in religious discourses. On this view America will “return to normal” when it truly and sincerely believes in its founding beliefs.

There is an alternative writerly interpretation found in Left discourses that also understands ideology as performative speech but on this reading the meaning of Trump Speak is neither in its literally irrational content nor its affirmative tone, but in its political implication in justifying the “return to work” policies that benefit the elites while sacrificing the lives of the American people. Here the “return to normal” is the problem and America must learn to value the “other” America of the dispossessed and dehumanized.

In the Leftist interpretation, Trump Speak is what Foucault called an “event”: “the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who once used it.” Trump Speak is “event-al” because, as one *New York Times* commentator put it, he has “stolen philosophy’s critical tools” and deconstructed objective facts for the “post-truth era” (Williams, Opinion, April 17, 2017). On this view, “the Trumpian version of reality” conforms to the same theory of knowledge associated with celebrity postmodern academics like Derrida, Foucault, and Latour, who claim that “truth is not found, but made, and making truth means exercising power.” (Truth, however, is neither objectively found nor opportunistically made. It is an historical effect.)

The above are all localizing readings of Trump Speak that allow the readers to continue to believe that how one reads (the cultural politics of interpretation) matters more than why read (the outside of interpretation). Reading, however, is always the cultural effect of class.

Reading, in other words, is not an isolated act of interpretation (discovering “the truth”), nor is it an ethical performance (making “my truth”). Reading is a social process that is needed to train the workforce to submit to being exploited by capital. Truth, historically, is that which is socially necessary to believe in order to reproduce the class relations. In other words, language is neither an object of “readerly” transparency or “writerly” performativity, as discourse theorists claim, but a “speecherly” medium, what Marx and Engels call “practical consciousness” (*The German Ideology*), that ideologically mediates the class relations in such a way as to re-secure them at a time of crisis when they are being called into question by newer and more advanced forms of socially productive labor. This is why Marx, in *The Eighteenth Brumaire*, calls counter-revolutionary speech “farcical” and proletarian revolution the “poetry of the future.”

None of the “interpretations” of Trump’s bragging about the U.S.’s failure to contain the pandemic are able to uncover the “speecherly” dimension of Trump Speak as an ideological reflection of what Marx called the contradiction between the “forces of production” (science and technology) and

“relations of production” (private ownership and class inequality). What is rarely commented on and never focused on in any sustained way is the fact that the U.S. should be in the forefront of fighting COVID-19 given its historic accumulation of wealth and advanced scientific knowledges and the only reason it is not is because its ruling class regressively prioritizes what is profitable for the owners as the sole measure of the social good and, therefore, considers market forces the only mechanism of real solutions.

The result is that whatever is seen as necessary for the production and accumulation of private wealth, such as corporate bailouts, tax cuts on the wealthy, and reopening the economy, is made into the standard of “liberty” and freedom while everything that stands to cut into the private appropriation of social wealth, such as government health care, socialized public utilities like education and housing, and a federal jobs guarantee, is made to seem “un-American” and tyrannical.

But the sideshow of who or what is or is not American is itself a diversion because none of the proposed “socialist” reforms will change the underlying class relations which explain why in a capitalist system the needs of workers for nutritious food, adequate housing, easily accessible health care, an advanced and worldly education, a meaningful cultural life, and so on, cannot be met despite the material and technical capability of doing so, which the workers have themselves produced, being abundantly available. Instead we get the ritualized outrage over Trump Speak. The circus without the bread.

The “speecherly” meaning of Trump Speak, the fact that what he is saying by bragging about the criminal U.S. response to the pandemic is that Americans must be proud to sacrifice their lives on the altar of Capital, is a reflection of the brutal reality of high-tech multinational capitalism in which the workers of the world have no alternative but to submit to having their labor exploited to make profit for the owners or die.

But Trump understands, as all good managers do, that to be an effective boss requires not only authority but respect for authority, and to instill such respect it is necessary to speak to working people in an obsequious and patronizing way to make it easier for them to accept the reality of what is required by the law of profit. This explains the jokey “upbeat” tone and child-like cadence of Trump Speak as well as the diversionary Liberal focus on its arrogant stupidity. Both, in different idioms directed to different audiences, are ways of making the brutal abject misery of capitalism more emotionally tolerable.

The “writerly” meaning of Trump Speak, its boorish smugness and goofy out of touch tone, reflects the ideological subjectivity required of the workforce so as to reproduce the class relations of production. His Liberal readers simply find his performance ineffective for doing the job of being the boss of America. They want a “real” (no malarkey!) boss that makes them feel like he’s really listening. What they fear is the loss of respect for the boss. They fear the boss being a joke because they require a rational public sphere to institute their “reasonable” and “realistic” proposals to “save” capitalism. Meanwhile, the rural and suburban so-called “middle class” Americans who sacrificed their educations to their careers in serving the bosses feel less insecure about their life choice when the boss acts the fool, so long as he threatens the others who don’t see the funny in the fascism.

The fact that Trump can brag about the necronomics of the U.S. so openly and it is not exposed for what it is at bottom—the failure of capitalism—is a testament to the underlying consensus between Trump Speak and his American audience. Beyond whatever surface differences that exist, all are already in agreement that there is no alternative to capitalism and we must learn to live with it by making its brutalities more tolerable. This explains why despite the fact that no one can take Trump seriously or believe anything he says, there is no real interest in contesting the class ideology Trump

Speak represents. It is this underlying class consensus that gives American “culture” its perverse medieval backwardness that is shunned by modern democratic people to the point that Americans are now banned from travel to most parts of the world. Outside the backwater playground of American politics Trump Speak is neither funny nor stupid—it is capitalist barbarism.