

*Pandora's Boxes*  
*How We Store Our Values*  
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Nobody would deny that we inherited the concept of abstractions, and therefore abstract nouns, from ancient Greece, whether religion, philosophy, or science was the original motor.<sup>1</sup> One of the most interesting markers of that inheritance is the myth of Pandora, itself a story of origins. Pandora for the Greeks was the first created woman, and she landed with luggage. Her famous box—originally a jar—contained, according to the poet Hesiod, all the evils that human beings experience, which she promptly released into the world, leaving inside only Hope, a detail that has its own large literature.<sup>2</sup> As annoying to women as the Hebrew account of the Fall, the story of Pandora differs from that of Eve in asking us to consider how experience can be packaged as a series of abstract nouns, the jar or box being the ur-container. A more optimistic version of the myth by the sixth-century Greek elegiac poet Theognis suggests that the qualities that escaped when Pandora opened the box were goods rather than evils. Theognis mentioned specifically the loss of Trust, Restraint, and respect for the Gods, but he too retained Hope (Elpis), and elsewhere stated that Justice was the chief of the positive values, though less valuable than Health. A sixteenth-century engraving by Giulio Bonasone shows positive values escaping into the upper air: Virtus, Fortitudo, Laetitia, Libertas, Felicitas, Pax, Clementia, Aequitas, Concordia, and Salus, while Spes is still only halfway out of the jar. In this case, the agent of their dispersal is unmistakably a Man.

These two lectures update the myth, purely at the level of playful metaphorical extension, by suggesting that when Pandora moved north and west from Greece through western Europe she brought with her, being a woman, not one but a vast array of boxes, each carefully labeled with the name of an abstraction, a value, good or bad for us. The idea of the box will reappear when I get to America in the second lecture, when Felicitas, Libertas, and Aequitas (Happiness, Liberty, and Equality) will acquire a new lease on life. Now, however, we will imagine Pandora

1. The argument for science is powerfully made in Bruno Snell, “The Origin of Scientific Thought,” in *The Discovery of the Mind*, translated by T. G. Rosenmeyer (Cambridge, Mass., 1953), chap. 10.

2. For this literature, see Dora Panofsky and Erwin Panofsky, *Pandora's Box: The Changing Aspects of a Mythical Symbol* (New York, 1962). The change from jar to box was accomplished by Erasmus in what looks like a slip of his Greek, from *pithos* to *pyxis*.

arriving in England during the Renaissance, shortly after Erasmus, in his translation of Hesiod, altered the shape of her luggage.

#### HOW WE DO THINGS WITH ABSTRACT NOUNS

My title for the first lecture is self-evidently a knockoff of J. L. Austin, whose famous little book, *How to Do Things with Words*, published in 1962, initiated the notion of speech acts or performatives; that is, sentences that are not just words on a page or parts of a conversation but in the appropriate social context themselves achieve a real social result. Austin, one of Britain's natural language philosophers, was in revolt against logical positivism, among other things. The success of his book was caused, I suspect, by its accessibility, its winning "How to" title ("How to" books are reliable sellers), and relief at the notion that language might once again have some effect in the real world. The concept of performatives spread like wildfire into other disciplines, but its value in sociolinguistics has, I believe, been overestimated. When the words "I marry you" (or, to be more truthful, "I do," in acquiescence to a question) are spoken between two presently unmarried persons, and backed up by paperwork, a marriage has occurred. But one marriage is a very different matter from *marriage*, the abstract noun that can subsume hundreds of years of marriages, as well as what follows the ceremony, not to mention the expansive territory of state regulation. These lectures will bring back into the discussion the abstract noun as, in English at least, the form of speech that does the most work in the world. Abstract nouns, I shall try to show, are the power words in our society today, the keywords, the megawords. How this happened—that is to say, by doing historical semantics—will be part of my story. Why we should care—a question that involves both moral philosophy and politics—will emerge primarily in the second lecture, when I will deal with abstract nouns that have emerged as megawords in American culture, among them *marriage*, *success*, and *democracy*.

Austin's social theory of language sidestepped the problem of how we do things with abstract nouns. He, like Steven Pinker, though perhaps neither would care for the comparison, was a verb man.<sup>3</sup> His book ends, significantly, with lists of verbs that are not inherently, that is, semantically,

3. Steven Pinker believes that we can learn how children learn language by going down the rabbit hole of verbs. "Why leap into the world of the mind through this particular opening? One reason, I confess, is personal: I simply find verbs fascinating. (A colleague once remarked, 'They really are your little friends, aren't they?')" (*The Stuff of Thought* [New York, 2007], 26). A few pages later, however, he admits that the "most memorable inhabitants" of the mind "are the silent and invisible ones we kept coming across as we looked under the verbs: the ethereal notions of space, time, causation, possession and goal that appear to make up the language of thought" (83).

powerful but can, in the right institutional context, bring about “illocutionary acts.” But Austin cannot define the different *categories* of speech acts in which society is continually engaged without himself using abstract nouns. Thus, he invents the category of “exercitives” to contain verbs like *sentence*, *pardon*, *reprieve*, *enact*, *veto*, and *appoint*, the definition of exercitives being that they are found in the typical contexts of judicature or government.

To jump-start my correction of Austin, Pinker, and some other linguists, I shall begin with several general propositions about abstract nouns, whose truth-value we can assess as things go forward.

1. Some abstract nouns are more abstract than others.
2. You cannot discern the abstraction quotient of a noun by its formal grammatical features. Despite its Greek phonemes, *Philosophy* is less abstract than *Truth*. The only way you can decide this is by thinking about it. Likewise, *Justice* is more abstract than *Penology*, though this is an easy one, because *Penology* is only a branch of applied *Justice*. And thus *Atheism* is more abstract than *Deism*, though their linguistic forms are equivalent.
3. It follows that this is an inexact science, which works by intuition and consensus on historical evidence, by no means all of which can be found in dictionaries.
4. The most powerful abstract nouns have long and complex biographies. This is not the same as merely being long-lived, since some have lived long merely by lying low, doing very little or only very specialized work in the world. Consider, for example, *putrefaction*.
5. Up to a certain point, the more abstract the noun, the more power it has in the world, but once we reach the level of the ineffable, as for example in the case of *Truth*, all work ceases.<sup>4</sup> Our approach to the word becomes merely gestural. The classic gesture of this kind appears as the first line of Francis Bacon's first essay, “Of Truth.” “*What is Truth*, said jesting Pilate; And would not stay for an Answer.” Actually there are two levels of the gestural here, Pilate's initial self-exculpation and Bacon's citation of it, an appropriate

4. Jerome Schneewind, assigned to comment on this lecture, complained bitterly that *Truth* is a busy and active word in certain legal settings: “I swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.” I would argue, however, that *truth* in this institutional usage is quite limited, referring to nothing but the specific knowledge this particular swearer may have, whereas *Truth*, thanks to hundreds of years of philosophical and religious dispute, floats high in the territory of abstraction. It is probably more abstract than *Justice*, for example, and certainly more abstract than *Beauty*, with which, or against which, it is often aligned

opening move for a collection of essays on social behavior, which increasingly took a skeptical view of received tradition.

So let us begin by turning to Bacon's *Essays*, as typical of one of the ways in which abstract nouns became functional and influential in society. Published in three different and gradually expanding editions, the last of which appeared in 1625, Bacon's *Essays* represents, or improves on, the commonplace tradition, which held sway in Europe for at least two hundred years and was an attempt to do ethics or politics rather informally, by way of note taking under certain conventional or deliberately challenging headings. The commonplace tradition began as a research and organizing tool, but it can be used to show which abstractions were thought important in early modern Europe, because they appear as headings or titles whose significance is assumed.

Here is the table of contents of Bacon's 1625 edition, in contrast to the much earlier edition of 1597:

Sir Francis Bacon: *Essaies* (1597)

- |                              |                            |
|------------------------------|----------------------------|
| 1. Of studie                 | 6. Of expence              |
| 2. Of Discourse              | 7. Of Regiment of health   |
| 3. Of ceremonies, & respects | 8. Of Honor and reputation |
| 4. Of followers and friends  | 9. Of Faction              |
| 5. Of Sutors                 | 10. Of Negotiating         |

*The Essayes or Counsels, Civill and Morall* (1625)

- |                                    |   |
|------------------------------------|---|
| 1. Of Truth                        | 12. Of Boldnesse                          |
| 2. Of Death                        | 13. Of Goodnesse, and Goodnesse of Nature |
| 3. Of Unitie in Religion           | 14. Of Nobilitie                          |
| 4. Of Revenge                      | 15. Of Seditions and Troubles             |
| 5. Of Adversitie                   | 16. Of Atheisme                           |
| 6. Of Simulation and Dissimulation | 17. Of Superstition                       |
| 7. Of Parents and Children         | 18. Of Travaile [Travel]                  |
| 8. Of Marriage and Single Life     | 19. Of Empire                             |
| 9. Of Envie                        | 20. Of Counsell                           |
| 10. Of Love                        | 21. Of Delaies                            |
| 11. Of Great Place                 | 22. Of Cunning                            |

- |  |                                |
|--|--------------------------------|
| 23. Of Wisdome for a Mans Selfe                        | 41. Of Usury                   |
| 24. Of Innovations                                     | 42. Of Youth and Age           |
| 25. Of Dispatch  | 43. Of Beautie                 |
| 26. Of Seeming Wise                                    | 44. Of Deformitie              |
| 27. Of Friendship                                      | 45. Of Building                |
| 28. Of Expence   | 46. Of Gardens                 |
| 29. Of the true Greatnesse of<br>Kingdomes and Estates | 47. Of Negotiating             |
| 30. Of Regiment of Health                              | 48. Of Followers & Friends     |
| 31. Of Suspicion                                       | 49. Of Sutours                 |
| 32. Of Discourse                                       | 50. Of Studies                 |
| 33. Of Plantations                                     | 51. Of Faction                 |
| 34. Of Riches  | 52. Of Ceremonies and Respects |
| 35. Of Propheisies                                     | 53. Of Praise                  |
| 36. Of Ambition  | 54. Of Vain-Glory              |
| 37. Of Maskes and Triumphs                             | 55. Of Honour & Reputation     |
| 38. Of Nature in Men                                   | 56. Of Judicature              |
| 39. Of Custome & Education                             | 57. Of Anger                   |
| 40. Of Fortune   | 58. Of Vicissitude of Things   |
|  | 59. [Of Fame]                  |

You can see that the 1597 edition, with a mere ten essays, was itself primarily a “How-to” book, designed to advise the Young Elizabethan Man how to survive at court. In the last edition, these rather local topics have been moved toward the end of the volume, which now opens with two unmistakably abstract topics, “Of Truth” and “Of Death,” placing the conduct-book aspect of the *Essays* in a graver framework. And most of Bacon’s new headings are either conventional abstract nouns (Beauty, Love, Envie, Fortune) or would become such if we dropped the final *s*: Sedition, Delay, Innovation, Prophecy, Study, Ceremony. “Riches,” by the way, is an abstract noun despite its plural appearance, and only seems plural because of its folk etymology. During the course of these lectures *Riches* will give way to *Wealth*, less confusing in its form but not in its history, and ultimately to *Success*. In my estimate, only five of these fifty-nine topics—the concepts that for Bacon were or should be the staples of early-seventeenth-century culture—can with any certainty be declared *not* to be abstract nouns.

In the intermediate edition of 1612, the *Essays* were already on the way to being a serious engagement with ethics and politics. The first essay was then “Of Religion.” But in 1625 even this was demoted in favor of “Of Truth,” which not only rendered the exercise more abstract,

philosophically speaking, but also framed it in skepticism. "Religion" now gets expanded and reorganized as "Of Unity in Religion." I have come to think that one abstraction, when limited by another like this, proves its superiority in abstraction at the cost of its efficacy in the world. By 1625 one would be hard-pressed to define what the unmodified word *Religion* did in the world, except draw attention to massive disagreements.

Indeed, by 1625 the method of Bacon's *Essays* is to unpack or disaggregate most of the titular concepts by providing a wide range of practical, in-the-world examples, some of which are so self-contradictory as to make the title less clearly graspable, more debatable. It is assumed that we should have an attitude toward all these titles, positive or negative, and learn to behave accordingly, if society is to function. But it is not always clear that our first response to the concept, conventional or intuitive, is correct. *Atheism* is clearly bad, as is *Revenge*, defined as a sort of "wild justice." But *Simulation and Dissimulation* turn out to have great advantages. *Usury* has its uses. *Riches*, to our surprise, are *Impedimenta*. "Of great Riches, there is no Reall Use, except it be in the *Distribution*." In "Of Marriage and Single Life" Bacon challenges the broad assumption of his Protestant culture by seeing marriage as, at best, a very mixed blessing. Wives and children, like riches, are called "Impediments," an ironic echo of the English marriage service, which from 1559 onward charged the couple at the altar: "If either of you doe knowe any impedymt, why ye may not be lawfully joined together in Matrimony, that ye confesse it." When Bacon first published this essay, in 1612, he was an incredibly brilliant and ambitious lawyer who had just, after many disappointments, been made solicitor General. Six years earlier he had married, at age forty-five, a handsome alderman's daughter, aged fourteen. That last sentence is just to remind us that wordsmiths, as well as their words, have complex biographies.

Bacon was obviously highly alert to the capacity of certain abstract nouns to demand a response from us. Long before the word *ideology* was invented, he could see that some of the older abstractions were ideologically inflected by what they had been through. A test case is how he dealt with the most abstract noun of his profession. Instead of a merely gestural essay on Justice, he wrote, in 1612, a great one on Judicature, which, coming from England's most eminent lawyer, is brilliantly concrete advice as to how a well-run, sensitive courtroom might hope to approximate the greater abstraction. By 1625, Bacon had been impeached for taking bribes and lost his job as attorney general. He reprinted "Of Judicature" nevertheless, almost in pride of last place, its moving exhortations, of which

there ought to be a copy in every judge's chambers, unsullied by his own experience.

Having started in medias res, with the Renaissance commonplace tradition, we now need to double back to the original source of most English abstract nouns, Greek and Roman culture, to which I have gestured by invoking Pandora. It is clear that if science was one of the motors of ancient abstraction, religion was another—the whole murky realm of the gods of antiquity and the personifications of abstract qualities that they spawned, spiraling out from the central notions of Zeus as the embodiment of Justice, Athene of Wisdom, Aphrodite of Sex, and Ares of War. I use the word *murky* to suggest how little we really know. One of the most interesting books I read was by a classicist, Emma Stafford, *Worshipping Virtues: Personification and the Divine in Ancient Greece*, not because I care whether lesser personifications, such as Health (*Hygeia*), Peace (*Eirene*), or Pity (*Ploutos*), were themselves really the subject of cults but because Stafford summarizes the state of opinion among classicists as to what caused the explosion of abstractions in antiquity. They just don't know. Cicero, in *On the Nature of the Gods*, staged a debate on this question, between Stoic doctrine, articulated by Balbus, who was in favor of the deification of powerful abstract ideas in order to support the state religion and piety generally, and Academic doctrine, represented by Cotta, who argued that abstractions like “Mind, Faith, Hope, Virtue, Honour, Victory, Safety, Harmony” are merely “either human qualities within our own characters or objects of our desire.”<sup>5</sup> One modern approach cited by Stafford suggests that cults of personified ideas were a response to the need for an ethical element otherwise lacking in Greek and Roman religion, another sees deified abstractions as a rationalizing compromise between religion and philosophy, and still another sees certain cults as reflecting the themes of the moment—political ideas like Concord—which “people doubtless thought to consolidate . . . by making them sacred.”<sup>6</sup> One of the most telling pieces of information is about the emergence of *Clementia*, a Roman adaptation of Ploutos, who had once been one of the very few male gods. *Clementia* was a product of the Caesarian and imperial periods,

5. Emma Stafford, *Worshipping Virtues: Personification and the Divine in Ancient Greece* (Swansea, 2000); Cicero, *The Nature of the Gods*, composed 45–44 BC, translated by P. G. Walsh (Oxford, 1997), 129.

6. Stafford, *Worshipping Virtues*, 24, 25. According to O. Alexandri-Tzachou, “Each generation personified the concepts of greatest significance to its age” (“Personifications of Democracy,” in *The Birth of Democracy*, edited by J. Ober and C. W. Hedrick [Athens, 1993], 149–59). Thus, fourth-century Greece personified Democracy and made it the center of a cult.

strategically associated with the ruler. “In 44 BC,” Stafford tells us, “the Senate decreed an altar to ‘Caesar’s Mercy,’ [and] set up statues representing Caesar and *Clementia* standing hand in hand.”<sup>7</sup> We can recognize this as an early example of the abstract noun in the role of state propagandist.

After proliferation came codification. The plethora of abstractions produced in ancient Greece were sorted by Aristotle into categories according to the *kind* of work they did in the world, the most important for our purposes being the terms he deployed in the *Ethics* and the *Politics*, respectively. By Bacon’s time this practice had been both leaned on by Edmund Spenser, in his vast allegorical poem *The Faerie Queene*, and deeply destabilized. Bacon’s “Of Unity in Religion” was explored in fantastic terms in the first book of the poem, “The Legend of Holiness,” with a figure called *Una* as its female representative. That she was also called *Truth* is both confusing and enlightening. Spenser was explicitly bringing Aristotle’s ethics up to date for a Christian culture, but Aristotle’s *Justice*, the term that Bacon seems deliberately to avoid, had been turned in Spenser’s fifth book, “The Legend of Justice,” into a monstrous and confusing narrative that seemed to be mostly about violent punishment and aggression.

By the end of the sixteenth century, then, abstract nouns were no longer to be simply worshiped, placated, or even relied on for clear guidance. Bacon carried the process of desacralization further than Spenser, and replaced the power of the mysterious with that of social management. It is typical of Bacon that he does not write an essay on *Health* but “Of Regiment of Health,” by oneself. “So shall Nature be cherished, and yet taught Masteries.” And one could write a whole lecture on how he attempts to demystify and naturalize *Death*, a worthy project that was also one of the goals of Milton in *Paradise Lost*. Nevertheless, the *Essays* must be recognized as assuming, as their starting point, a single traditional moral code, updated with a soupçon of Machiavellian realism.

Personification as a literary device would be left to plod its weary way through poem after eighteenth-century poem, but it was only the detritus of habit. The next stage in how we got abstract nouns—or, more accurately, how we came to pay them attention—was the late-seventeenth-century rise of the empirical philosophy of mind. John Locke was the first person, so far as I can tell, to consider the process of abstraction itself, as a central issue in epistemology. Of course, Locke did not know he was doing epistemology when he sat down to write the *Essay concerning Human*

7. Stafford, *Worshipping Virtues*, 206.

*Understanding*, published in 1689. The Greek word was not adopted until 1856. What he thought he was doing was investigating how we know what we know, and what, if anything, are the grounds of certainty. I think it matters that he called the results an *essay*, since by the end he concludes we can know very little for sure, and all that we know about abstract nouns is that they are man-made, a product of mental processes. They are the names we give to complex ideas, arrived at by combining simple ideas (cold, hot, white, black) derived from sense perception. Among Locke's goals was to banish the Platonic theory of universals.

This greatly oversimplifies Locke's theory of abstraction, which caused no end of a ruckus, first by Bishop Berkeley and then among modern epistemologists. Much of the problem could have been avoided if Locke had used the word *triangularity* instead of *triangle* as one of his major examples. But Locke, for my purposes, is more useful as a linguist than as an epistemologist. He added a whole third book on the subject of language, its abuses, and the resulting lack of clear thinking. Locke believed that the language of educated discourse was clogged with abstractions on whose meaning no two persons could agree. He seems to have envisaged a kind of colonic cleansing, though he never explained how this was to be achieved.

Although Locke does have a definition of *abstraction* itself,<sup>8</sup> his example there of the process is how we derive the idea of *whiteness* from observing chalk, milk, and snow. This is not a particularly instructive example either of the abstractness of an idea nor of its importance,<sup>9</sup> nor would it become so until Melville had written his extraordinary chapter "The Whiteness of the Whale" in *Moby-Dick*. Locke's most frequent example of an abstract idea is *Man*, with a capital *M*, which reappears almost to fatuity, not least because, in Aristotle, it had functioned as the test case of the problems of definition. But when he turns his attention to language, his account of abstraction sharpens. Two far more interesting examples occur later in the *Essay*. This is Locke on the subject of *Justice*:

*Justice* is a word in every Man's Mouth, but most commonly with a very undetermined loose signification: Which will always be so, unless a Man has in his Mind a distinct comprehension of the component parts, that complex *Idea* consists of; and if it be decomposed, must

8. I cite the essay from Peter Nidditch's edition (Oxford, 1975), bk. 2, chap. 11.

9. Whiteness does not appear to have a racial component in Locke's thought, though he does have an extraordinary passage maintaining that it would be possible for an English child, whose complex idea of *Man* included "White or Flesh-colour," to reason that "*A Negro is not a Man*" (ibid., bk. 4, chap. 7).

be able to resolve it still on, till he at last comes to the simple *Ideas*, that make it up. . . . If one, who makes his complex *Idea of Justice*, to be such a treatment of the Person or Goods of another, as is according to Law, hath not a clear and distinct *Idea* what *Law* is, . . . 'tis plain, his *Idea* of Justice itself, will be confused and imperfect.<sup>10</sup>

Even more interesting, to a twenty-first-century reader, is a passage from the previous chapter, “Abuse of Words”:

*Life* is a Term, none more familiar. Any one almost would take it for an Affront to be asked what he meant by it. And yet if it comes in Question, whether a plant that lies ready formed in the Seed have life; whether the Embrio in an Egg before Incubation, or a Man in a Swound without Sense or Motion, be alive, or no; it is easy to perceive, that a clear, distinct, settled *Idea* does not always accompany the Use of so known a Word, as that of *Life* is.<sup>11</sup>

Had Locke had the benefit of our abortion debates, or as a medical man witnessed the case of Terri Schiavo, he might have dwelt longer on this example.

Other telling examples, also carefully highlighted by italicization, are *Religion* and *Conscience*, *Church* and *Faith*, *Power* and *Right*, which in the last book, in the chapter titled “Of Truth in General,” are cited as words used habitually to refer to only “confused and obscure notions,” with which “Men so often confound others, and not seldom themselves also.”<sup>12</sup> These choices remind us that the origin of the *Essay*, back in 1668, was a discussion between Locke and his friends about the principles of morality and revealed religion, which had bogged down on the question of “what objects our understandings were,” and so led to the project that would make him famous. I have argued elsewhere that the *Essay*’s conclusions served Locke’s deepening interest in religious toleration, which turns uncertainty into a new social value.<sup>13</sup> But Locke’s chief contribution here is to explain how and why we come to create complex, abstract ideas in the first place. His theory is as anti-idealist as it could possibly be, and entirely ahistorical, though it may be vaguely anthropological: “The end of Language . . . being to mark, or communicate Men’s Thoughts to one another, with all the dispatch that may be, they usually make such Collections of *Ideas* into

10. John Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, bk. 3, chap. 11.

11. *Ibid.*, bk. 3, chap. 10, p. 503.

12. *Ibid.*, 575.

13. Annabel Patterson, *Early Modern Liberalism* (Cambridge, 1997), 255–60.

complex Modes, and affix names to them, as they have frequent use of in their way of Living and Conversation, leaving others, which they have but seldom an occasion to mention, loose and without names, that tie them together.”<sup>14</sup> Thus, the cause of abstraction is speed and convenience, a completely utilitarian proposal. This allows Locke to understand why not all languages have equivalent abstract nouns, because not all countries have the same immediate concerns; as well as to explain new coinages: “Because change of Customs and Opinions bringing with it new Combinations of *Ideas*, which it is necessary frequently to think on, and talk about, new names, to avoid long descriptions, are annexed to them. . . . [H]ow much of our Time and Breath is thereby saved, any one will see, who will but take the pains to enumerate all the *Ideas*, that either *Reprieve* or *Appeal* stand for; and instead of either of those Names use a Periphrasis, to make any one understand their meaning.”<sup>15</sup> Locke makes no attempt to specify what have been the major needs for which abstract words had to be invented by different cultures, but the examples he chooses tell us a good deal about what was on his mind in England in the later seventeenth century. When added to *Justice, Religion and Conscience, Church and Faith, Power and Right*, and for that matter *Life, Reprieve and Appeal* seem not casually selected. They suggest contexts, and contests, in which disagreements about the meaning of words could be actually life-threatening. They point back to his dangerous era, and remind us that Locke completed the *Essay* in political exile in the Netherlands, and that some of his friends believed he would need a royal pardon before he could safely return.

Note that *reprieve*, as a verb, along with *sentence* and *pardon*, also as verbs, showed up in J. L. Austin’s category of exercitives, but here in Locke they are surely complex nouns, whose complexity is evidenced by the fact that one of the meanings of *reprieve* was, in Locke’s day, to send *back* to prison, one of the meanings of *appeal* was to accuse of treason. For all Locke’s insistence that abstract nouns were merely the names we give to

14. Locke, *Essay concerning Human Understanding*, bk. 2, chap. 22, p. 290.

15. *Ibid.*, 291. It is interesting to find Steven Pinker, whose field is cognitive science, calmly assuming, without attempting to prove, that “the human mind comes equipped with an ability to penetrate the cladding of sensory appearance, and discern the abstract construction underneath” (*The Stuff of Thought*, 276). More striking still, despite his strong anti-Whorfianism, Pinker shares Locke’s instrumental theory of how abstractions are created: “If a language provides a label for a complex concept, that could make it easier to think about the concept, because the mind can handle it as a single package when juggling a set of ideas, rather than having to keep each of its components in the air separately. It can also give a concept an additional label in long-term memory, making it more easily retrievable than ineffable concepts or those without roundabout verbal descriptions” (129).

compound ideas, his selection of instances to brood upon conveys instead the intuition that words like these controlled his world, which, as the *Two Treatises of Government* anonymously claimed, was under the last two Stuart kings verging on tyranny.<sup>16</sup> They were, in fact, keywords in England in the later seventeenth century.

How far Locke was conventional in his morality can be debated. It depends on whether one reads these strategies as naive or ironic, and what one makes of his self-contradictions. In book 4, he protects himself against the charge of materialism, citing Plato as a guide to those who “look beyond this spot of earth,” and mocking the Stoics who took the ether or the sun to be gods. But what shall we do with this sentence: “He that, with Archelaus, shall lay it down as a Principle, That Right and Wrong, Honest and Dishonest, are defined only by Laws, and not by Nature, will have other measures of moral Rectitude and Pravity, than those who take it for granted, that we are under Obligations antecedent to all humane Constitutions”?<sup>17</sup> That sentence, in all its canniness, might well have been written by Bacon.

We will now take a leap into the middle of the twentieth century, to consider the contribution of Raymond Williams, yet another British philosopher of language. In the interim, however, it is to be noted that, especially during the nineteenth century, English-speaking cultures discovered the need for a vast range of new abstract nouns, many of which signified that the old ethical and political traditions had been fractured into rival camps. The most obvious sign of this is the plethora of new words ending with the Greek suffix *-ism*, to indicate sectarian belief, either religious, political, or economic. Bacon listed and analyzed only one *-ism*, *atheism*. *Protestantism* is not listed in the *Oxford English Dictionary* until 1649. By 1801 *liberalism* had been invented; by 1812 *humanism*; by 1828 *protectionism*; by 1835 *conservativism*; by 1839 *socialism*; by 1843 *communism*; by 1844 *nationalism*; by 1850 *feminism*; by 1854 *capitalism* and *positivism*; by 1857 *baconianism*, which had two distinct meanings; by 1870 *agnosticism*; and by 1930 *Nazism*. The form of these words accomplishes several

16. Elsewhere Locke seems to deny that abstract nouns are just names. In “Reality of Knowledge” he declares that the abstraction *Justice* has real content, which would remain intelligible even if it were renamed “Injustice,” or vice versa. “Let a Man have the *Idea* of taking from others, without their Consent, what their honest Industry has possessed them of, and call this *Justice*, if he please. . . . [T]he same Things will agree to it, as if you call’d it *Injustice*” (*Essay concerning Human Understanding*, 567).

17. *Ibid.*, 642. Archelaus was one of the teachers of Plato, and this doctrine of the relativity of morals was attributed to him on the basis of remarks in Diogenes Laertes.

things. First, it establishes their kinship as abstractions of a certain kind; second, and gradually, by the changing history of ideas that it records, it shows why the new words, in Lockean terms, were needed; third, by this very kinship, by accumulation, it depreciates each new term as merely one more in a series, and hence presumptuous, contingent, time bound, quarrelsome, the opposite of Bacon's "Of Truth."

There is a short essay on *-isms* in Raymond Williams's *Keywords*, first published in 1975, a book that will entertain us for the rest of this lecture. His essay on *-isms* takes a slightly different tack from what I have just said, but it too distinguishes between earlier *-isms*, like *Platonism* or *Judaism*, by suggesting that nineteenth-century usages were soon available for derogatory purposes, by indicating the breakdown of common assumptions. And there is also a brilliant article on *-isms* by H. M. Höpfl, in the *British Journal of Political Science*, to which Geoffrey Nunberg drew my attention, and which seems to support my argument, not least by observing that "the linguistic habit of using the *-ism* suffix to denote doctrines or the complex of a doctrine and its partisans" has been "almost entirely unnoticed and unexplained."<sup>18</sup>

If *isms* push us apart, if they create *schism* (another word whose defiance of the rule just stated is actually a witticism), the point of Williams's *Keywords* is the possibility of at least *linguistic* consensus and communality. In that brilliant little book, Williams completed an intellectual task that he had found necessary for his own cultural survival in Britain after World War II; that is to say, relating his grasp of the rapidly evolving world to which he returned after military service to his understanding of the difficult words deployed in and by that society; their history *as* words, or philological evolution; their history as words in social time, whose meanings had changed because the world around them changed; and their political history, a subject in which Williams was particularly invested.

It is essential for the understanding of Williams's project to remember that he came from a working-class family. A state scholarship took him to Trinity College, Cambridge, but his further education was interrupted by World War II, where he fought in the Normandy campaign. After the war he finished his undergraduate degree with Firsts, but instead of embarking on a D.Litt., decided to go into extramural adult education. The D.Litt.

18. H. M. Höpfl, "Isms," *British Journal of Political Science* 13 (1983): 1–17. Höpfl, however, regards the practice as having two stages, the one political, in the nineteenth century, and the other religious, needed for the early modern period (sixteenth and seventeenth centuries) but going out of fashion thereafter.

came much later, after he was famous. By making that first choice, Williams showed himself an educational socialist. By the late 1960s, he might have become a little too much of a Marxist for his own theoretical longevity, though he consistently critiqued vulgar Marxism for its overemphasis on mere economic causation. By 1975, Williams had arrived at the doctrine that it was important to know how to do things with words: language itself is causative, and capable of being a social force. His concern, therefore, was not like Locke's, the achievement of philosophical precision in language, but the achievement of mastery of it, or its most tendentious terms, for the ordinary person. What he wanted to do was arm his readers with the postwar tools they needed for their own advanced conversational skills or perhaps higher education.

In his disarmingly modest introduction, Williams told his audience in 1975 that it all began with his dissatisfaction with the big word *culture*, with the way in which it bore several quite distinct meanings in ordinary conversation, meanings that didn't seem to be cognate with each other. The first was likely to be used in "teashops and places like that," a very English environment, where it "seemed the preferred word for a kind of social superiority." The second had to do with the arts, and people who knew about or practiced them. The third was a specialized use of the term imported from anthropology, meaning a distinctive (and usually preindustrial) set of customs, a sense that was gradually spreading, as he puts it, under American influence, gradually defeating the other two senses, of gentility and artistic cognizance, to become a general term for a Way of Life, a modern way of life, its signs immediately recognizable by non-scientists, and often connected to national stereotypes: French culture, American culture, bourgeois culture, college culture, and so forth. Then one day, says Williams demurely, "I looked up *culture*, almost casually, in . . . the OED. . . . It was like a shock of recognition. The changes of sense I had been trying to understand had begun in English . . . in the early nineteenth century . . . [and hence] took on, in the language, not only an intellectual but an historical shape." From that moment of recognition came not only *Culture and Society* in 1956, but the later *Keywords*, which had originally been intended as an appendix to the more argumentative work, but under the duress of the publisher's word limits had been dropped into a file drawer, there to remain for twenty years.

When it was eventually published in its own right, *Keywords* was, Williams also tells us, difficult to define, a headache for library catalogers. It has been classified as cultural history, historical semantics, intellectual

history, social criticism, literary history, and sociology. That is to say, it cannot itself be securely claimed by or for any specialized discipline, and to a certain extent, a point that Williams does not make, it celebrates the permeability of disciplinary boundaries. But, significantly, Williams's introduction distinguishes between two *kinds* of keywords, quite different, in fact, in the terrain in which they operate. Keywords, Sense 1: "strong, difficult and persuasive words in everyday usage"; Keywords, Sense 2: "words which, beginning in particular specialized contexts, have become quite common in descriptions of wider areas of thought and experience," but are still by no means used by the man on the street. In his final version of *Keywords*, Williams included 131 words, most of which, it seems to me, fall into the second category—words like *aesthetic*, *alienation*, and *anarchism*, to take three of the five *As*, or *hegemony*, *history*, and *humanity*, to take all of the *Hs*. Few of these words are likely to be used in the British tea shop or the American coffee equivalent, unless it is sited on a college campus. None of them is a strong, difficult, and *persuasive* word, that is, a word that carries with it automatically a certain clout, a social, moral, or political pressure to which we may or may not wish to defer. Thus, the primary audience for Williams's *Keywords* must have been college students or teachers wishing to get up to speed on some of the more fashionable words in academic conversation and writing, and persons, in particular, of a left-wing persuasion. In his first category, however, of "strong, difficult and persuasive words in everyday usage," I can find only the following: *capitalism*, *career*, *class*, *country*, *democracy*, *family*, *industry*, *labor*, *liberal*, *monopoly*, *racial*, *reform*, *revolution*, *science*, *unemployment*, *wealth*, and *welfare*, and, for somewhat different reasons, *sex*, a word that Williams felt he had to add for the second edition of 1983. All of these words might be used by the man on the street, and all of them carry some argument with them. Those who use them have an attitude toward them, positive or negative or confused, as the case may be. They are persuasive simply by being uttered. They are to some extent normative. They are, to use an over-used academic word (and already overused by me), ideologically inflected, though Williams would not use that word to describe them. Williams has a long and splendid essay on *ideology*, which insists that most of its uses are pejorative. I think that is no longer true, or at least that we cannot afford it to be.

But perhaps we need a closer analysis of the choices that Raymond Williams, like Francis Bacon, made when he *selected* the vocabulary that educated people like himself (*educated* is one of his keywords) should

think about more carefully. In his Introduction he explained their arrangement in alphabetical order to *avoid* persuasive groupings. But it is surprising what happens when you sort them into categories. Here is his list of contents:

Williams's Keywords: Edited toward abstraction

Aesthetic[s]	Educate[ion]*	Management
Alienation	Elite	Materialism
Anarchism	Evolution*	Mechanical
Anthropology	Existential[ism]	Mediation
Art	Experience*	Medieval[ism]
Behaviour	Expert[ise]	Modern[ism]
Bourgeois[ie]	Exploitation	Monopoly
Bureaucracy	Family*	Myth
Capitalism*	Fiction	Nationalis[m]
Career[ism]	Folk	Nativ[ism]
Charity	Formal[ism]	Nature*
City	Generation	Ordinary
Class*	Genius	Organic[ism]
Collective	Hegemony	Originality
Commercialism	History	Peasant
Common	Humanity	Philosophy
Communication	Idealism	Popular[ity]*
Communism*	Ideology	Pragmati[sm]
Community	Image	Priva[cy]*
Consensus	Imperialism	Progressiv[ism]
Consumer[ism]	vb. Improve[ment]	Psychology
Country*	Individual[ism]	Racial[ism]*
Creativ[ity]	Industry*	Radical[ism]
Criticism	Institution	Rational[ism]
Culture	Intellectual[ism]	Reactionary
Democracy*	Interest	Realism
Determin[ism]	Jargon	Reform*
Development	Labour*	Regional[ism]
Dialect	Liberal[ism]*	Representative
Doctrinair[ism]	Liberation	Revolution*
Dram[a]	Literature	Romantic[ism]
Ecology	Man	Science*

Sensibility	Subjectiv[ism]	Utilitarian[ism]
Sex*	Taste	Violence*
Socialis[m]	Technology	Wealth*
Society	Theory	Welfare*
Sociology	Tradition	Western
Standards	Unconscious [the]	Work*
Status	Underprivileged	
Structural[ism]	Unemployment*	

\*indicates keywords in first sense

Of these 131 words, 20 might be said to belong to the second sense of culture as having to do with knowledge of the arts, or aesthetics, including the word *aesthetics* itself: thus *art, creative, criticism, dramatic, fiction, formalist, genius, idealism, image, literature, media, myth, naturalism, originality, realism, Romantic* (with a capital R), *sensibility*, perhaps *structural*, and definitely *taste*. The man, woman, or child on the street can mostly live without these words altogether. Approximately 40 of Williams's keywords are big words in another sense, the largely abstract words we need to operate an advanced structural approach to knowledge: *anthropology, bureaucracy, civilization, commercialism, consensus, consumer, development, dialect, doctinaire, ecology, empirical, evolution, existential, generation, genetic, hegemony, institution, intellectual, management, mechanical, medieval, modern, organic, philosophy, positivist, pragmatic, progressive, psychological, rational, regional, representative, socialist, society, sociology, status, subjective, technology, theory, utilitarian, and Western*. You can find most of these words in most college catalogs. And then there is another category, words that carry special meaning in left-wing politics: *alienation, bourgeois, capitalism, class, collective, communism, dialectic, elite, exploitation, hegemony, ideology, labor, liberal, liberation, masses, materialism, mediation, monopoly, peasant, popular, radical, reactionary, revolution, socialist, unconscious, underprivileged, unemployment, wealth, welfare*, and the highly interesting if seemingly innocuous *work*. Only one-third of these words that share a certain localized Marxist frisson, especially when grouped like this, make it onto the very short list of keywords that, I argue, fulfill the first of Williams's own principles of selection: strong, difficult, and persuasive words in everyday usage.

Now, the point of the preceding analysis is definitely not to be critical of Raymond Williams, who knew exactly what he was doing and to whom it would be useful. The point is partly to show that anyone deeply

interested in the work that words do in our society is likely to have certain biases. It is also to show that language is always in flux, and certain words that were once keywords—*charity*, for instance, which Williams includes—gradually lose their keyword status and become archaeological relics. Others thrust themselves forward. If Williams were alive to revise his book once more for the new millennium he would have to add *gender* alongside *sex*, poor man, *globalization*, and even *political correctness*. All of these were in fact added in *New Keywords*, a revision embarked on by a consortium of Williams's admirers and published in 2005.

None of Williams's keywords—and this is really striking—is a verb, with one exception, *improve*, by which he really meant *improvement*. He is thus at the opposite end of the grammatical scale from J. L. Austin. By far the majority of them are abstract nouns, and those that are not, such as *educated*, are really abstract nouns pretending for the moment to be merely adjectival. Williams clearly did not care in what grammatical form his keywords registered themselves on his consciousness, but the pressure toward abstraction is inevitable, though increased by my editorial interventions.

But when we consider the question of whether some of Williams's abstract nouns are more abstract than others, it becomes startlingly clear that at or near the top we would place Locke's great example, *Man*, closely followed by *Nature*, *Culture*, *Family*, and perhaps *Class* and *Democracy*. By the same token, the 40 words I have identified as academic are limited precisely by their role—to specify a branch of something—to only a weak degree of abstract power. This is particularly true of the compounds formed by the suffix *-ology*, from Greek *ologia*, study of something, a specialization. As for the 30 words that, I submit, would not have been chosen as keywords were Williams not deeply embroiled in, or loyal to, the discourse of academic Marxism, several of them, such as *Masses*, are already showing signs of obsolescence, which is another way of losing power in the world. (*Masses*, by the way, is, like *Riches*, an interesting exception to my suggestion that abstraction does not like plural forms. The word *Mass* has entirely different connotations.) And if we think back to Bacon, we can also see some striking omissions: if not *Truth*, as not much used in modern conversation, then surely *Justice*, *Religion*, *Death*, and *Marriage*. Williams does have a fine essay on *Wealth*, the descendant of Bacon's *Riches*, and the ancestor of *Success*, and notes that it has always had "a strong subsidiary deprecatory sense." But in general Williams's key terms have moved a long way from Bacon's, leaving behind the old moral imperatives or social-survival techniques, and replacing them, despite part of his own inten-

tions, with impedimenta, the baggage or armature of scholarly controversy.

Williams's goal was to explain and define his keywords, so that we substitute for the power they might have over us the power we should have over them. The effect of his choices, however, is overall to reduce the ideological clout of the keyword as social engine—and this in defiance of his other goal, to clarify and consolidate left-wing theory. So many abstractions, so few manifest verities.

In the second lecture we will reconsider “How we do things with abstract nouns,” and ask an overdue question, “Who exactly are *We*?” This lecture has limited itself to British historical semantics and British philosophers. Now we move to the United States, the move that I myself have made in more senses than one, and investigate American keywords, or megawords. If we compile a list of strong, persuasive, and difficult words in common usage in America (that is, stick firmly to Williams's first definition of a keyword) and insist that they be understood in McDonald's (a test that Michael Wood told me was far too stringent), what will they be? Will they be more or less abstract than Williams's keywords? Will they be more or less inflected with ideology? Will their number be larger or smaller, their clout stronger or weaker? I leave you with these questions as homework.

## AMERICAN KEYWORDS

In 1939, in Frank Capra's film *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, the innocent and idealistic hero, played by James Stewart, moved as a pawn into the seat of a suddenly deceased senator, takes a tour of Washington, D.C., and is filled with awe. The first thing he sees through the windows of the tourist bus are the words *Equal Justice*, carved on the west side of the Supreme Court. Capra carefully did not show the whole motto, *Equal Justice under Law*, which might have caused the viewer to wonder what this arrangement said about *Justice*, which has always been one of the highest abstractions. Was not *Law* under it? In fact, the phrase was the invention of the architectural firm that designed the building, a contraction, as the space required, of a comment by Chief Justice Melville Fuller in 1891, commenting on the Fourteenth Amendment: "No State can deprive particular persons or classes of persons of equal and impartial justice under the law." Trimmed to fit the twentieth-century pediment, it subsequently entered legal decision making. Such are the accidents that give cultural power to abstract nouns in America.

But Smith also visits the Jefferson and Lincoln memorials, where the importance of abstract nouns continues to be stressed. At the Jefferson Memorial a montage superimposes the words *Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness*, Thomas Jefferson's definition of the goals of the new republic as enunciated way back in 1776. But Capra gives more veneration to the Lincoln Memorial, and shows us a child reading, for his grandfather's approval, the engraved words of the Gettysburg Address. There are several shots of a ringing bell inscribed with the single word *LIBERTY*, a prop inserted by the filmmaker. Why this splendor of abstract nouns, apparently doing the work of citizen building?

This question quickly becomes obsolete in view of the rampant political corruption that gradually reveals itself to this new boy in town, where nobody pretends to believe in such slogans. Eventually, since this is only a fiction, the Washingtonian sludge is temporarily shamed into defeat by Smith's incorruptibility and personal courage, expressed in a filibuster speech that lasts for twenty-three hours. Needless to say, his first name is Jefferson.

*Mr. Smith Goes to Washington* must be understood in its own historical moment, toward the end of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and just after the declaration of World War II. This conjunction produced in Frank Capra an elusively complex political stance, explicated for us today by a

clever article in *Representations* in 2003. Its authors, Michael Rogin and Kathleen Moran, show what many in the film's original audience would have missed, Capra's critique of certain aspects of the New Deal and his substitution of old-fashioned homeland innocence for "progressive" government intervention.<sup>1</sup> What I want to focus on here, however, is the film's manifest interest in abstractions—and their limitations. Later Capra makes his point overtly, by having Smith, when he returns to the Lincoln Memorial ready to leave Washington forever, renounce "all those words and monuments and the whole rotten show." Of course, he does not actually leave. Jean Arthur, as his once cynical secretary now converted to his ideals, persuades him to go back to his Senate seat and engage in the famous filibuster. During this speech, which lasts improbably for twenty-three hours, he recites, to take up time, the Declaration of Independence and the whole of the Constitution. We hear H. V. Kaltenborn, the most famous radio commentator of the day, declaring the filibuster "democracy in action," a much more important statement than Rogin and Moran allow, though admittedly one that many audience members might miss, since it is only spoken. Capra's point, presumably, is that Jefferson Smith, having lost his awe of graven images, comes in his own person to *represent*—to act out—the values before which he has previously only genuflected. The film enacts a complex negotiation between old words and reenactments, famous documents and their recall, abstractions and our attempts to explain what they mean and how, if at all, we should honor them.

Ever since the War of Independence America had evinced a fondness for abstractions. How could it be otherwise? A new nation with a written constitution was bound to revere the words by which it defined its New World values. To do so was to stand apart from the decadent and cynical anciens régimes. France, of course, had had its own Revolution and created its own set of abstract nouns, its own triad of values, *Liberté, Egalité, Fraternité*, slightly tidier and more rigorous than *Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness*, as derived from John Locke via Thomas Paine. And France's gift to America of the Statue of Liberty, more accurately *La Liberté*

1. Michael P. Rogin and Kathleen Moran, "Mr. Capra Goes to Washington," *Representations* 81 (2001): 213–48. They argue that the film can be read as both pro- and anti-New Deal: "To be sure, Jefferson Smith sits on the majority side of the aisle, which places him in Roosevelt's and [Burton K.] Wheeler's Democratic Party [and] Jeff's boys' camp invoked the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC), the New Deal's most popular program." But, on the other side of the argument, "No New Deal senator would have filibustered against a relief bill that promised to feed the starving and construct public works," and "standing against . . . big government, the welfare state, and that quintessential New Deal project, the federal dam, Senator Smith sounds more like Reagan than Roosevelt" (219).

*eclairant le monde*, was offered in the belief that an abstract value could be definitively represented in metallic form. That this was uncertain was demonstrated when in 1989 the young Chinese protesters in Tiananmen Square erected a plaster statue of the Goddess of Democracy *based* on the Statue of Liberty, lamp and all, thereby reminding us that such embodiments tend to look very much alike, and usually need props to identify them.

The person who did most to give living form to the word *democracy*, the word celebrated by Kaltenborn, was, of course, Alexis de Tocqueville. It is worth noting that Tocqueville not only observed an American predilection for abstract nouns but suggested a cause. In the second volume of *Democracy in America*, published in 1840, he included a chapter titled "How American Democracy Has Modified the English Language." And here we note the reappearance of Pandora's boxes, at a yet more sophisticated stage:

These abstract words that fill democratic languages, and of which use is made at every turn without linking them to any particular fact, enlarge *and veil* a thought; they render the expression more rapid and the idea less clear. But in the case of language, democratic peoples prefer obscurity to workmanship. . . .

Furthermore, . . . as they never know if the idea they are expressing today will suit the new situation they will have tomorrow, they naturally conceive a taste for abstract terms. An abstract word is like a box with a false bottom: one puts in it the ideas one desires and one takes them out without anyone's seeing it.<sup>2</sup>

This is an approach to abstraction that somewhat resembles Locke's utilitarian one. Abstract words "render the expression more rapid and the idea less clear." It is a little more sinister than Locke's, however, because it implies deception, and it has the advantage of being a description of American speech habits by a nonnative speaker, whose analysis was sharpened by the factor of estrangement. I am suggesting that Frank Capra, the immigrant, had noticed something similar.<sup>3</sup>

2. Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 2:457.

3. It is interesting to note (in parenthesis) that Ludwig Wittgenstein, another nonnative speaker, philosophically engaged in analysis of the speech habits of the British, also came up with the heuristic device of the box. In the case of Wittgenstein, however, each person holds a box in which he believes there is a beetle, but since nobody can peek, nobody can be sure that his neighbor's idea of a beetle is the same as his own. It could be a Volkswagen. This was an attack on the idea of private language. I believe this metaphor works in almost precisely

This lecture will attend to specifically American habits of concept formation and dissemination, but it will hark back to Raymond Williams's theory of keywords. I am much indebted to the theory of keywords, but here I want to up the ante, so to speak, by talking instead of megawords—American megawords. In the first lecture, you remember, Williams gave two definitions of a keyword in post–world war Britain, the second kind including all manner of academic and technical terms that he thought his audience needed to understand but that, usually, the man or woman in the street could pretty much do without. It is Williams's first and more demanding definition of a keyword that I shall be relying on today. It must be “a strong, difficult and persuasive word in everyday usage.” Every unit of this definition is crucial. The word must be strong, that is, nontrivial. It must imply values. It is that which makes it persuasive. Whenever we hear or read it, we know that something is at stake. On the other hand, it is *difficult*. Its meaning is tendentious, debatable. It is ideologically powerful but unstable, and all the more powerful for being unstable. And third, it must be in everyday usage. It cannot be a word of the schools and the academies. It must be intelligible, sort of, on the street, in the bayou, in middle school, and in McDonald's. It is this idea of the keyword that allows me to graft Raymond Williams onto Geoffrey Nunberg, one of the commentators on this lecture when delivered, for Nunberg's *Going Nuclear* and *The Way We Talk* now have revived the ideals of natural language philosophy and sociolinguistics for a broad American public.

For heuristic purposes, I have selected only three American keywords, all highly abstract nouns, though a grammarian could not prove that from their form: *marriage*, *success*, and *democracy*. *Democracy*, to be sure, carries its Greek origins on its face, and the *-cracy* suffix, from *kratos*, rule, sovereign power, places it in opposition to *aristocracy*, as it was so placed in Aristotle's highly influential scheme of possible forms of government. In this case the suffix, which itself *means* power, rule, makes its own semantic claim, rather than merely indicating a degree of grammatical abstractness, as in *republicanism*. One of my reasons for choosing these three, and only these, is that they have long and complex biographies, as in the fourth of my propositions, or new ways of thinking, about abstract nouns. All three of these megawords do more social and political work in America than they do elsewhere. And all three—the most complicated part of my

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the opposite direction from Tocqueville's conjuring boxes, since Tocqueville believes that the box labeled *Justice* ideally does contain an agreed-upon societal concept of Justice, which can, however, be adulterated.

argument—have come to serve as master abstractions, gathering around them clusters of other values for mutual support and collaboration, other values (abstract nouns) that we intuitively grasp are *lesser*. What the megawords mean depends in part on what they are agreed to subsume.

American keywords, megawords, are never inert, even when not actively spoken, written, or trumpeted. Just by their existence in the cultural vocabulary, in the cultural memory, they have power over us; they organize us into groups or political parties (*democracy*), they couple us as sexual beings (*marriage*), they tell us when to get up in the morning, and what to wear (*success*). *Democracy* as a name governs our domestic polity, but even more strikingly our foreign policy. It arranges other countries in a hierarchy of the less and more acceptable. It is mouthed as a motive whenever the United States wishes to intervene in somebody else's "regime," another term, as Nunberg has wittily said, that has recently become an American keyword, specifically in contrast to *democracy*, as in the phrase *regime change*.<sup>4</sup> But do we know what *democracy* means, or what it entails? We do not even agree as to what are the minimal conditions for a democracy to be recognized as such (More than one party? More than one peaceful transfer of power? Elections? Universal franchise? Secret balloting? Freedom of the media? Economic equality?),<sup>5</sup> but we use the word as the *Good Housekeeping* seal of approval no matter what conditions are or are not met. One might think of other words or phrases in the same register that would qualify as American keywords from the past: *independence, liberty, freedom, justice, equality, human rights, civil rights*. But these are all by now subsumed under and trumped by *democracy*, whose triumph as a word is in inverse relation to its definability.

*Marriage* at some stage of his or her life governs the thinking of every American, of whatever religion or political persuasion, because it is the word we use to regulate sexual relations. It is probably more universally at work in the public consciousness than is *Democracy*, about which a large proportion of the population, alas, may never actively concern themselves. *Marriage* as a word has always been tricky, and has now, in the twenty-first century, become in America a public battleground. It subsumes procre-

4. Geoffrey Nunberg, "Begin the Régime," in *Going Nuclear* (New York, 2004), 88–91.

5. The elephant in the living room here is Joseph Schumpeter, Austrian-born but later an American citizen, who developed a minimalist version of democracy in *Capitalism, Socialism, and Democracy*, first published in 1942. Heavily influenced by the development of the party system in America, his model was that of competitive elitism, in which governing factions—those in control of the market—take turns to run the country. "The People" are merely the passive instrument by which this alternation takes place.

ation, parenting, intimacy, family (an important keyword for Raymond Williams), possibly love, and certainly “family values,” whatever the Christian Right declares those to be. But what it actually means continues to be subject to state and federal litigation.

If we move away from politics and private life, what other aspects of our society affect us directly, organize our responses? Next in importance, you will probably say, is the economy, the whole exciting or merely grim business of making a living. The keyword that governs this territory is, unquestionably, *success*, probably best written with a capital letter. This too, like *democracy*, was recognized more than a century ago as having been given a specifically American valence: the pursuit of material gain. In a frequently misquoted aphorism, philosopher William James complained, in a letter to H. G. Wells of September 11, 1906, of the “moral flabbiness born of the exclusive worship of the bitch-goddess Success.” This is an interesting turn of phrase in light of the ancient Greek tendency to actually set up altars to abstractions. And, James continued, “the squalid cash interpretation put on the word *Success* is our national disease.” We know that Thomas Jefferson, in the Declaration of Independence, originally wrote “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Property,” a phrase that he lifted from Locke, by way of Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*. And when Jefferson substituted “the pursuit of happiness” for Paine’s “pursuit of property,” he could not have really believed he was referring to *eudaimonia*, that ineffable goal of the good life that nobody could quarrel with as long as it remained undefined. He was just being high-minded.<sup>6</sup> By comparison with the central motivating force of *Success*, other words we might think of as key—*capitalism*, *savings*, *insurance*, *Social Security*, *the market*, *free enterprise*—recede in importance as merely means to an end we all think we desire. But do we really desire it? It is revealing to discover that the literature on Success in America is filled with doubt, moral ambiguity, self-contradictions, and fear.

Let us start with *marriage*, because its pedigree will link us back to Francis Bacon, though Raymond Williams overlooked it. But first, a famous quotation: “Let me not to the marriage of true minds / Admit

6. It is interesting to see that George Lakoff and Mark Johnson cite Jefferson’s phrase in defense of their concept of human values as originating in basic toddler feelings and the metaphors we use to describe them: “Correspondingly, abstract rights are conceptualized as (1) property rights, (2) freedom of action . . . and (3) freedom from harm. . . . Locke’s rights to ‘life, liberty, and the pursuit of property’ are versions of these abstract rights. Thomas Jefferson’s substitution of ‘happiness’ for ‘property’ is based on the common metaphor Achieving a Purpose Is Acquiring A Desired Object” (*Philosophy in the Flesh: The Embodied Mind and Its Challenge to Western Thought* [New York, 1999], 329).

impediments.” This is William Shakespeare, in Sonnet 116, writing, as few wish to know, about a same-sex relationship, and quoting the same word from the 1559 marriage service—*impediment*—that Francis Bacon used to describe wives and children. What I want you to focus on, however, is the way those three abstractions, *marriage*, *mind*, and *impediment* negotiate with each other and defy the conventional notions of marriage codified in that same service. In what follows I will demonstrate that *marriage* is more often propped up by other abstractions than challenged by them; that either can be the case is extraordinarily interesting.

*Marriage* has been a keyword in the United States of America since the founding. It moved to the center of the national consciousness in the late nineteenth century, when American divorce law seemed to be a runaway train. In 1904, novelist Henry James, who never married, wrote a series of sharp little essays on the American idea of *marriage* in his great novel *The Golden Bowl*, which uses the word no fewer than eighty-eight times. It seems fair to call these essays on American marriage, because, although *The Golden Bowl* is set in London, all of the protagonists are American except one, and he, a penniless Italian prince, is named Amerigo!<sup>7</sup> Considering the sophistication of this and other literary interrogations of *marriage* subsequently, it is amazing to see how naively written is the federal Defense of Marriage Act, passed by Congress in 1996. But since DOMA has stated the right of government to *define* the word for Americans, the time for critical and historical analysis has surely come.

*Marriage* as a word entered the English language comparatively late, and it was much later before it became recognizably an abstraction. The Latin word embedded in canon law was *conjugium*, which had the unfortunate connotation of yoking together for the purpose of plowing! *Marriage* was imported from French only in the fourteenth century. The previous English words, Germanic in origin, were *wedding* and *wedlock*. *Wedding* has now graduated downward in the scale of significance from

7. Amerigo has an arranged marriage, in the European tradition, with Maggie Verver, an innocent little American millionairess, and then proceeds to have an adulterous affair with Charlotte Stant, a more sophisticated American girl who has no money, and is also Maggie's best friend. Maggie's father, Adam Verver, a longtime widower, is himself innocent enough to see this as the very essence, the abstract idea, of marriage: "What surrounded him now *was* exactly consent vivified, marriage demonstrated. . . . He had supposed himself, above all he had supposed his wife, *as* married as any one could be, and yet he wondered if their state had deserved the name, or the union worn the beauty, in the degree to which the couple now before him carried the matter. Especially since the birth of their boy in New York—the grand climax of their recent American period, brought to so right an issue—the happy pair struck him as having carried it higher, deeper, further" (bk. 2, chap. 2). Stacked on top of the arch language is the dramatic irony that Adam Verver is 100 percent mistaken.

being the name of the institution to the name of a festive or sacral event. *Wedlock*, deriving from Anglo-Saxon *wedd* (pledge) and *lac* (taking action), also graduated downward, to the point where it is now defined by the *OED* as only in literary use, as an archaism or a joke, and in legal use as the most commonly understood term to define illegitimacy, the phrase “out of wedlock” long surviving the word in its positive form. On November 9, 1999, the U.S. Census Bureau reported that “First Births conceived Out of Wedlock Nearly Triple Since 1930s.” Recently I discovered the existence of a video game titled *Wedlock*. Here is its premise: “Incarcerated in a futuristic prison, the players have been collared with an explosive neck collar. Their collar is electronically tied to the collar of one of their fellow prisoners, only . . . they don’t know who. . . . Your aims in this mission are: find your wedlock partner, defuse your collars, and break the wedlock before the timer runs out.”

As for *matrimony*, possibly because of its upsetting phonemic similarity to *patrimony*, with which it has nothing semantic to do, it too has been consigned to the past. The linguistic victory of *marriage* has been a matter of chance. So when legislators cling to its sanctity, and claim to be able to define it, they cling to something for which other countries—Germany, for instance—have an entirely different vocabulary; even in France, from which we borrowed our word, they have always had a different attitude to it. For the French, *le mariage* is a more amusing part of the social fabric, especially among its political leaders. What the word contains is what we put into it.

What is *marriage*? Is it a duty? A right? A Darwinian strategy for the survival of the race? It is certainly now an institution, whose name is an abstract noun. When did the coupling of men and women become regulated by others? And by whom? There were plenty of motives for coupling, including love, but for hundreds of years the laws of Europe, to which those of the United States of America are related in complex ways, had taken no account of love whatsoever in their regulation of marriage. Usually it was a business proposition, with noble words referring to the good of society eventually added as the legislation became self-conscious. When Roman law was codified under the emperor Justinian in the sixth century, creating the *Corpus Juris Civilis*, there came into existence a coherent code of law that included marriage, focused on regulating women’s sexuality and the legitimacy of children. After the eleventh century, the *Corpus Juris Civilis* became the basis for the development of canon law in the Roman Catholic Church, and for civil law in most countries except England.

Reinvigorated by Napoleon I, it remained the basis of the legal system of most of Europe, as well as Louisiana and Quebec. Marriage, however, came increasingly under the control of canon law—that is to say, the Roman Catholic Church. It was only in the twelfth century that marriages first began to be conducted by clergy, and the arrangement was declared a sacrament in 1215, a position reaffirmed at the Council of Trent in 1563. By becoming a sacrament, supposedly authorized and sanctified by God, marriage also became, in the thought of the church, indissoluble. Or, as some would joke, not a word but a sentence.

Protestant reformers included in their challenges to the Roman church a denial that marriage was a sacrament. This began the long journey of *marriage* out of the hands of the church back to its status as merely one aspect of civil law. But by the time this was accomplished—and the United States was foremost in this accomplishment—its temporary association with the church had sunk so deep in the cultural consciousness that couples, even if not religiously observant, often choose to have their weddings celebrated in some kind of clerical environment. And, as social historian Nancy Cott has argued, in *Public Vows: A History of Marriage in the Nation*, “A commitment to monogamous marriage on a Christian model lodged deep in American political theory.”<sup>8</sup>

This residual religious coloring does not sit well with the bizarre facts of state regulation. There is something peculiarly arbitrary about that, especially when states disagree. Even today, the legal age of marriage with parental control is lower for girls in some states: whereas sixteen is the norm, it is fourteen in Alabama, Kansas, South Carolina, Texas, and Utah, and, amazingly, twelve in Massachusetts. On August 30, 2005, the *New York Times* reported that the Nebraska attorney general was prosecuting for statutory rape a twenty-two-year-old man who married a fourteen year old, despite the fact that the couple had parental permission, and a new baby girl. They had to cross into Kansas to marry.

Not everyone *could* marry, however, even if of age. Anti-miscegenation laws persisted into the twentieth century, and it was thanks to their absurdity that Earl Warren, for the Supreme Court, eventually articulated the belief that marriage was a human right. “There can be no doubt,” he wrote in 1967, deciding the aptly named case of *Loving v. The Commonwealth of Virginia*, “that restricting the freedom to marry solely because of racial

8. Nancy Cott, *Public Vows: A History of Marriage in the Nation* (Cambridge, Mass., 2000), 23.

classification violates the central meaning of the Equal Protection Clause. . . . The freedom to marry has long been recognized as one of the vital personal rights essential to the orderly pursuit of happiness by free men. Marriage is one of the 'basic civil rights' of man, fundamental to our very existence and survival." Notice how many other abstract nouns, sanctified by American tradition, have been brought to bear on *Marriage: freedom, equal protection, rights*, the *pursuit of happiness*, with the aura of the Declaration of Independence behind it, and now carefully glossed by *orderly*. Also informed by that founding text are *existence* and *survival* as glosses on *Life*, the word that Locke had designated dangerously obscure. The only abstract noun standing against them is *racial classification*, a latecomer, 1790 to be precise, from the world of social science. But note also what words are missing from Justice Warren's marshaling of values: *God* and *religion*. The question now is whether the states will eventually extend this civil right to men wishing to marry men and women wishing to marry women, using the vexed keyword *marriage* to define the relationship. In 1991 there began a nine-year battle to introduce same-sex marriages in Hawaii, and this was raised to a matter of federal concern by DOMA, which specifically cited fears that other states would be expected to recognize Hawaiian same-sex marriages within their boundaries. Technically, then, DOMA was a recognition of states' rights, but it included a lexicographical section, "Definition of 'marriage' and 'spouse,'" that was really quite extraordinary in both its naïveté and its disingenuity. The statute is designed "to make explicit what has been understood under federal law for over 200 years; that a marriage is the legal union of a man and woman as husband and wife, and a spouse is a husband or wife of the opposite sex. The DOMA definition of marriage is derived most immediately from a Washington state case from 1974 (*Singer v. Hara*). . . . More than a century ago, the U.S. Supreme Court spoke of the 'union for life of one man and one woman in the holy estate of matrimony.'" In fact, there is no relationship between the relatively recent case *Singer v. Hara*, in which a male gay couple argued their right to marry under the Equal Rights Amendment, and the century-old case only alluded to here, one a group of cases where Mormons who engaged in polygamy protested their denial, under a federal statute of March 2, 1882, of the right to vote. (As I write, the right of the State of Texas to separate polygamous families has once more been calmly asserted.)

The ancient rationale given for denying the vote to polygamists was rather longer than DOMA's citation revealed: "For, certainly, no

legislation can be supposed more wholesome and necessary in the founding of a free, self-governing commonwealth . . . than that which seeks to establish it on the basis of the idea of the family, as consisting in and springing from the union for life of one man and one woman in the holy estate of matrimony; the sure foundation of all that is stable and noble in our civilization; the best guarantee of that reverent morality which is the source of all beneficent progress in social and political improvement.” *Family, union, life, matrimony, foundation, civilization, morality, progress, improvement*: nine abstractions hauled in to support the idea of *marriage*, in addition to a rack of ideologically slanted adjectives, *wholesome, free, holy, sure, stable, noble, and beneficent*.

As resurrected in 1996, this was reactionary language frozen in time, and, in its talk of “union for life,” sabotaged by the statistics of divorce. It is also a fine working example of how we stuff our nouns with values they did not originally bear.

#### SUCCESS

*Success* became an American keyword during the nineteenth century, and it has arguably had more effect on more people’s lives in the United States even than *Marriage*. *Success* has changed a great deal over its long lexical history. Indeed, the etymology of the term, from Latin *succedere*, to follow, meant that for hundreds of years the primary meaning of the term was just that, that which follows, an event, such as the result of a military campaign, and as like or not *success* was frequently used to refer to a *failure*. Thus, in *Paradise Lost* John Milton describes the defeated rebel angels as still “insatiate to pursue Vain Warr with Heav’n and by success untaught” (2:9). One usually had to preface the term with *good* to ensure its positive meaning. By 1885, however, Oliver Wendell Holmes, in writing about Emerson, was making an important distinction: “‘Success’ in its vulgar sense,—the gaining of money and position—is not to be reached by following the rules of an instructor.” And in 1944 *Time* could refer to “the society that invented the success ethic.”<sup>9</sup> That society is, obviously, our own; and it is Holmes’s vulgar sense that has ousted the term’s other connotations.

To understand what makes *Success* historically an American keyword, however, we need an (abbreviated) version of the standard genealogical

9. Oliver Wendell Holmes, *Ralph Waldo Emerson* (Boston, 1885), 260–61; *Oxford English Dictionary*.

history of the American success ethic, as sociologists and philosophers have marked out its milestones and anthologized its canonical texts. First, of course, comes Benjamin Franklin, whose mid-eighteenth-century *Way to Wealth* (1758), published on his own press, set out the goals of Industry, Care, Frugality, and Knowledge, worthy abstractions all, that had stood him personally in such good stead. That he is still using *wealth* instead of *success* is appropriate for his era. Franklin, however, had no intellectual difficulty in distinguishing between *wealth* and *worth*, and his model was followed by the pre-Civil War success writers Hunt Freeman and Edwin Freedley.<sup>10</sup> They were attempting, as were the hundreds of success-manual writers later reacting to the Gilded Age, if not to restrain, at least to temper this peculiarly American form of ambition.

After the Civil War, the great legendary fortunes were made by what are now famous names, John D. Rockefeller, Andrew Carnegie, Jay Gould, J. P. Morgan, Thomas Mellon, George Pullman, Leland Stanford, and Collis P. Huntington. It is true that some of these famous names live on in part because they or their extremely wealthy descendants were philanthropists who endowed educational institutions. But this was the age of the American millionaire, as ours is of the American billionaire, and philanthropy was the trickle-down of guilt. As Celeste MacLeod observed in her 1980 study of American migrants, the cult of the millionaire was supported by the British philosopher Herbert Spencer, who was extremely fashionable during the two decades after the war. "Spencer, expanding upon Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection, assured his gratified readers that the men who rose to the top in any age were inherently superior beings."<sup>11</sup> In fact, the new millionaires often rose to the top by unscrupulous methods, by forcing their competitors out of business. This was also the era of *laissez-faire* economics. There was no income tax, and no legislative controls on business methods or monopolies. In ten years, John D. Rockefeller forced seventy-six competitors out of business in Ohio, Pennsylvania, and New York; by 1880 he controlled 95 percent of the nation's oil.

It was in hopeless protest against such an ethos that Horatio Alger, whose name has become as famous as those just listed, wrote his 135 stories for boys. His protest consisted in redefining the self-made man in

10. Hunt Freeman published *Worth and Wealth*, a collection of maxims, morals, and miscellanies for merchants and men of business (1856); Freedley published *A Practical Treatise on Business; or, How to Get, Save, Spend, Give, Lend, and Bequeath Money*, with an inquiry into the chances of success and causes of failure in Business (1852).

11. Celeste MacLeod, *Horatio Alger, Farewell: The End of the American Dream* (New York, 1980), 12–13.

old-fashioned, nostalgic, moral terms. Alger went both to Harvard and to Harvard Divinity School, and his personal myth had a strong religious undercurrent. Ironically, his name is now more likely to signify rags-to-riches as an American goal rather than protest against the brute materialism of the Gilded Age, and indeed his stories, virtually unread today, are somewhat ethically confused, since although his heroes are always virtuous and hardworking (and poor), they get their upward start by luck, by finding a rich benefactor. But the Vanderbilts and Rockefellers of his world would have been among his villains, not his heroes, and he never mentions a millionaire. Modest middle-class fortunes were what his readers might look forward to.

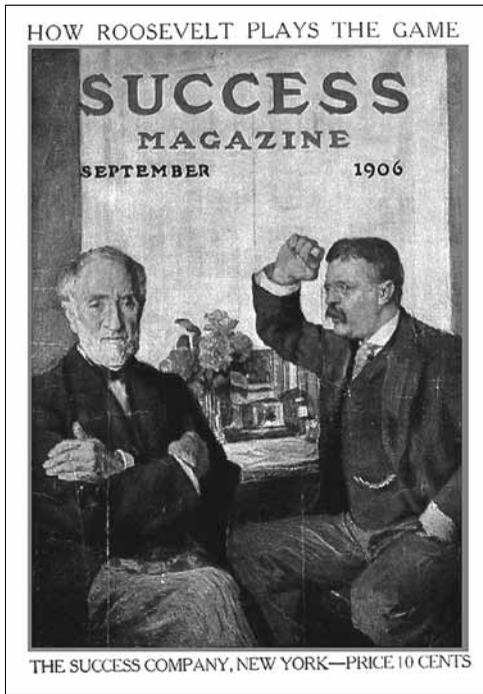
We have now come to the turn of the nineteenth into the twentieth century, and it is time to mention Andrew Carnegie, who complicates the picture. Carnegie was someone about whom Horatio Alger might have written one of his true success stories. He was born in Scotland in 1835, the son of a weaver, emigrated with his family to the United States in 1848, and settled in Pennsylvania. Starting as a bobbin boy in a cotton mill, he moved rapidly up through a series of jobs with Western Union and the Pennsylvania Railroad. Eventually, he created the Carnegie Steel Company, which established the steel industry in Pittsburgh. At sixty-five, he sold it to J. P. Morgan for \$480 million, becoming, as was said at the time, “the richest man in the world.” What Carnegie did for the American gospel of success was to link it irrevocably with the ideal of philanthropy as the duty of the very rich, rather than as a tax dodge. His *Gospel of Wealth* (published in 1889) must have alluded to Benjamin Franklin’s *Way of Wealth*, but calling it a “gospel” was a brilliant way of updating and secularizing Christianity’s concept of charity: “This, then, is held to be the duty of the man of wealth: first, to set an example of modest unostentatious living, shunning display; to provide moderately for the legitimate wants of those dependent upon him; and after doing so, to consider all surplus revenues which come to him simply as trust funds which he is strictly bound as a matter of duty to administer in the manner which, in his judgment, is best calculated to produce the most beneficial results for the community.”<sup>12</sup> Francis Bacon would have approved. “Of great Riches,” he had written four hundred years earlier, “there is no Reall Use, except it be in the Distribution; the rest is but Conceit.” During his lifetime Carnegie gave away to education and the cause of peace more than \$350 million, more than 90 percent of what he

12. <http://www.swarthmore.edu/SocSci/bannis>.

owned. He was particularly committed to the cause of free public libraries and was responsible for the building of more than twenty-five hundred libraries throughout the English-speaking world. The library at Pittsburgh, his home city, carries over the door his own words, "Free to the People."

Andrew Carnegie managed to resolve the contradictions in the success literature that had preceded him, uniting much of the advice of Benjamin Franklin's *Poor Richard* and the slew of writers who tried to moderate the Gilded Age with a rationale, finally, for making a great deal of money—that it can and should be used primarily to enrich society. We now call this "return philanthropy," as evidenced, for example, by Bill and Melinda Gates. But we cannot leave *Success* as a keyword until we consider the impact on American readers of *Success Magazine*. Founded by Orison Swett Marden in 1897, it was read by two to three million people. After a short break in publication, it was reestablished in 1918. It gave advice, largely through advertising, on everything that might lead to success: what to wear, what to buy, how to improve your family life. It contained economic analysis and critique. Here is a sample of its personal advice, published in the issue for March 1902, in "Personal Appearance and Success": "Thousands of worthy young people have failed to obtain situations simply because they have not learned the art of carrying themselves properly, of appearing to advantage. A youth who drags his feet when he walks, who slouches, whose arms, lacking energy, dangle like strings from his shoulders, does not make a favorable impression upon a proprietor or manager. . . . A slouchy appearance, dull dawdling, or dragging of the feet, often indicates slouchy morals and slipshod habits." Notice the residual moralism, inserted into otherwise practical advice about





what used to be called *deportment*.

*Success Magazine* also featured brilliantly imaginative cover designs, in high color, from which a collector might well constitute a cultural history of the era. The issue for September 1902 might have been, but importantly was not, titled “The American Dream.” A wistful young man, bored with his studies in, perhaps, a law office, turns away toward the mercantile skyline behind him. The issue for September 1906, the year in which Theodore Roosevelt began

to regulate industry and the railroads, features the president at his desk waving his arms not at but beside a calm industrial magnate, who may in fact be Andrew Carnegie. The two portraits have clearly been sutured together, delivering a message that is far from obvious. The issue for May 1923 shows a beautiful flapper checking her watch, with the unintentionally comic title “How Eytinge Learned to Write Sales Letters in Prison.” One thinks irresistibly of Martha Stewart. The original *Success Magazine* has spawned dozens of offspring with the same title, some of which unabashedly encourage greed, while others plaintively urge their readers to consider higher values.

All true megawords, because of their importance, are moving targets. I have noticed that *Success* has, in the last lap of the Bush presidency, been losing some of its financial specificity and reacquiring military connotations. By the time these lectures are published the direction in which the word is moving, socially and politically, will surely be clear, but not, I suspect, for long.

And now *Democracy*, possibly the strongest, most difficult, and most persuasive word in everyday usage in the United States today. Like *Success*, it too has endured striking semantic alteration. Although the citizens

of fourth-century BC Athens made *demokratia* one of their minor goddesses, for most of its life as a word *democracy* was definitely not a name to which positive values were attached. On the contrary, its use was almost invariably pejorative, especially in England, where the term was for centuries shorthand for expressing fear and resentment of the underclasses. Bertlinde Laniel, who has written a large and impressive monograph, *Le mot "democracy" et*



*son histoire aux États-Unis de 1780 à 1856*, devotes an entire chapter to rude remarks—actually, vitriolic insults—about *democracy* made in America during the Revolutionary era.<sup>13</sup> James Madison rather sanitized the standard view in No. 10 of *The Federalist Papers* (1787). “Democracies,” Madison wrote, “have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention; have ever been found incompatible with personal security or the rights of property, and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.” His chosen term for the new political entity that emerged by necessity out of the American Revolution was *republic*. But this would not do for Alexis de Tocqueville, a French aristocrat, who in the 1830s visited the United States and described what he saw as enviable, imitable, and inevitable. His now classic work, *De la démocratie en Amérique*, changed the value of the ancient Greek term from largely negative to warily positive. In addition, he expanded it, filling it with other already appreciated values and abstractions, so that it became more capacious than *republic*, more lofty, an idea that, as chapter by chapter he demonstrated, could subsume

13. Bertlinde Laniel, *Le mot "democracy" et son histoire aux États-Unis de 1780 à 1856* (Saint-Étienne, 1995), 64–71.

other ideals like *freedom, equality, law, rights, patriotism, the arts* (including poetry), *affectionate marriage*, and, necessarily, individual *success*. His chapters on the family, and on the education and independence of women, are a marvelous surprise, and his chapter on rights is unbeatable.

Tocqueville published the first part of his monumental definition of American democracy in 1835, halfway through the presidency of Andrew Jackson, an auspicious moment for democratic theory; in the preceding forty-odd years, however, American self-government, created first as a rejection of colonialism, was far from a clear positive alternative. By the turn of the nineteenth century the Federalists had developed a virulent hatred of *democracy* that they then associated with Jeffersonianism, and the Jacksonians had to rebuild the term, which they did in part by demonizing the other Aristotelian option, *aristocracy*. *Aristocracy* was defined by James F. Cooper in *The American Democrat* in 1838 as “a combination of many powerful men, for the purposes of maintaining and advancing their own particular interests.”<sup>14</sup> Democracy was redefined as antielitist, essentially egalitarian, the sovereignty of *all* the people, majority rule. It is possible that because Alexis de Tocqueville was unquestionably himself an aristocrat that his positive response to what he found in America was so persuasive. Perhaps I am overstating his influence. Laniel mentions him only in passing,<sup>15</sup> and Raymond Williams, who has a fine essay on *Democracy* as a keyword, not at all.

Tocqueville declared that democracy was the wave of the future and aristocracy, even if republican, the wake of the past. In his introduction, Tocqueville wrote that, as he looked at the Eastern Hemisphere, he saw American-style democracy “advancing rapidly toward power in Europe.” “A great democratic revolution is taking place among us: all see it, but all do not judge it in the same manner. Some consider it a new thing, and taking it for an accident, they still hope to be able to stop it; whereas others judge it irresistible because to them it seems the most continuous, the oldest, and most permanent face in history.” Tocqueville therefore decided to write *Democracy in America* in order to make the inevitable more appealing: “To instruct democracy, if possible to reanimate its beliefs, to purify its mores, to regulate its movements, to substitute little by little the science of affairs for its inexperience, and knowledge of its true interests for its

14. *Ibid.*, 247.

15. Yet Denis Lacorne’s preface to Laniel’s book nicely compliments her thus: “Un Tocqueville-lexicographe n’aurait pas mieux fait.”

blind instincts. . . . A new political science is needed for a world altogether new.”<sup>16</sup>

For Tocqueville, the most striking feature of American democracy was the economic equality of its citizens, the leveling of wealth to a certain general standard, achieved initially by abolishing the system of primogeniture, and then by letting each citizen rise as he wished. Economic equality is precisely what some modern theorists of democracy, such as John Dunn, have decided can no longer be a criterion.<sup>17</sup> But Tocqueville also had another primary condition. “When one wants to speak of the political laws of the United States, it is always with the dogma of the sovereignty of the people that one must begin.” For Tocqueville, in America this principle is not merely given lip service: “It is recognized by mores, proclaimed by laws, and saturates every process: The people participate in the drafting of laws by the choice of the legislators, in their application, by the election of the agents of the executive power; one can say that they govern themselves, so weak and restricted is the part left to the administration, so much does the latter feel its popular origin and obey the power from which it emanates. The people reign over the American political world as God does over the universe.”<sup>18</sup> The result is a much higher degree of political participation and education than pertained in post-Revolutionary France.

On the vexed question of longevity, Tocqueville distinguishes between the Union, or the federal constitution, which he can see will be continuously threatened, and what it set in place, “the tranquil reign of the majority,” which distinguishes America from both France and England. But “the majority itself is not all powerful. Above it in the moral world are humanity, justice, and reason; in the political world, acquired rights.”<sup>19</sup> What will ensure longevity is the cluster of long-admired values that *democracy*, as the master abstraction he has made it, now entails, and, once enunciated, will always be available for correction of the system if the majority seems to have forgotten its principles. I see this as the insight that we do intuitively arrange our abstractions in a hierarchy, or a series of ascending courts of appeal, while the notion that rights, once acquired in

16. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1:3, 7.

17. See John Dunn, *Democracy: A History* (New York, 2006); and, more concisely, “Capitalist Democracy: Elective Affinity or Beguiling Illusion?” *Daedalus* (Summer 2000): 5–13. Dunn believes that the order of equality has been utterly vanquished by the order of egoism, except, possibly and occasionally, in the opportunities for political deliberation.

18. Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1:55.

19. *Ibid.*, 1:379–80.

the political world, are permanent, and can serve to regulate majoritarian impulses, is astonishingly prescient of later American history.

As I'm sure you know, there are darker parts of Tocqueville's analysis, and not only his much discussed theory of the tyranny of the majority, or his rather satirical account of American political oratory! In his second volume, which inevitably contained second thoughts, Tocqueville examines some of the downside of the American obsession with money and commerce that equality of opportunity and the end of primogeniture give rise to. Agriculture is slighted. Industrial or fiscal crises affect the whole population, rather than just the few rich men of aristocratic regimes. People are continually discontented. However rich they are, they want to be richer. There are no great ambitions, only a myriad of small ones. Equality of opportunity itself creates barriers: "By hatred of privilege and embarrassment over choosing, one comes to compel all men, whatever their stature might be, to pass through the same filter, and soon subjects them all indiscriminately to a multitude of little preliminary exercises in the midst of which their youth is lost and their imagination extinguished."<sup>20</sup> Exams, exams, exams. And, as he draws to the end of his second volume, Tocqueville exercises his imagination in describing a great democracy turned dystopia by following its own principles to one of their logical conclusions. Democracies can invent new forms of oppression, for which the old words *despotism* and *tyranny* are not suitable. "I want to imagine," he writes, "with what new features despotism could be produced in the world":

I see an innumerable crowd of like and equal men who revolve on themselves without repose, procuring the small and vulgar pleasures with which they fill their souls. Each of them, withdrawn and apart, is like a stranger to the destiny of all the others: his children and his particular friends form the whole human species for him. . . . Above these an immense tutelary power is elevated, which alone takes charge of assuring their enjoyments and watching over their fate. It is absolute, detailed, regular, far-seeing, and mild. It would resemble paternal power, if like that, it had for its object to prepare men for manhood; but on the contrary, it seeks only to keep them irrevocably in childhood; it likes citizens to enjoy themselves provided that they think only of enjoying themselves.

20. *Ibid.*, 2:602.

This *it*, which Tocqueville does not call the state, but does, ironically, call the *sovereign* (*le souverain*), “does not break wills, but it softens them, bends them, and directs them. . . . [I]t does not tyrannize, it hinders, compromises, enervates, extinguishes, dazes, and finally reduces each nation to being nothing more than a herd of timid and industrious animals of which the government is the shepherd.” Tocqueville concludes his dark fantasy, his own version of George Orwell’s *1984*, thus: “I have always believed that this sort of regulated, mild, and peaceful servitude, whose picture I have just painted, could be combined better than one imagines with some of the external forms of freedom, and that it would not be impossible for it to be established in the very shadow of the sovereignty of the people.”<sup>21</sup> Now *that’s* a picture we can recognize.

It is far more sophisticated than the satire on corruption in Washington politics that Henry Adams, scion of the famous founding family, produced in the form of an anonymous novel titled, with heavy irony, *Democracy*. This was in 1880, not long after Tocqueville’s great book had set out the standards for better things. Adams had begun as a disciple of Tocqueville,<sup>22</sup> but from seeing too much of Washington his idealism withered. And Tocqueville’s dark prophecy is far closer to our own bone than the heroic climax of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*, where the little guy becomes the symbol of *Democracy* in person, with the filibuster as his weapon. But I want to say, in almost closing, that Tocqueville’s gift to us lies more in his optimism than his pessimism. Harvey Mansfield and Delba Winthrop, who produced the splendid new translation of *Democracy in America*, began their introduction with a huge claim. It is “at once the best book ever written on democracy and the best book ever written on America.” It is common practice for modern philosophers, social scientists, and political theorists to point to its naïvetés, its failure to understand the workings of Congress or elections, its being overinfluenced by New England and the town meeting. But Tocqueville was not only a political sociologist but also a theorist of values in the modern world. It

21. *Ibid.*, 662–64.

22. Adams wrote to his brother, while still a young idealist: “I have learned to think de Tocqueville my model and I study his life and works as the Gospel of my private religion. The great principle of democracy is still capable of rewarding a conscientious servant” (cited in Ernest Samuels, *The Young Henry Adams* [Cambridge, Mass., 1948], 140). But in *Democracy* he gives the Tocquevillian defense of democracy, as “the only direction that society can take that is worth its taking,” to a nonnormative spokesman, Nathan Gore, who is selfish, egoistic, and vain (40). His heroine, however, survives by leaving Washington and its masquerade “to return to the true democracy of life, her paupers and her prisons, her schools and her hospitals” (169), that is, to private philanthropy.

seems to me that Tocqueville's grasp of the expansiveness of *democracy* as a keyword, not only geographically but conceptually, was his greatest contribution. Since then, and especially in the first few years of the twenty-first century, we have been steadily emptying out the word, making it, if not an insult, merely an empty shell.

Political cynicism is one of the most efficient eroders of *democracy's* semantic plenty, but another is what I call yoking, *conjugium*, the pairing of the masterword with a lesser abstraction, as if the lesser were an entry code to the greater. In a large online catalog, if you call up titles that begin with the word *democracy*, there will be more than three hundred entries that approach the multivalency of *democracy* by bracketing it with another, more manageable, abstraction. Thus, we have *Democracy* and *capitalism*, and *constitutionalism*, and *deliberation*, and *diplomacy*, and *free enterprise*, and *human rights*, and the *arts*. As we continue the *Ds*, the list begins to sound like a passage from Milton's *Paradise Lost* after the Fall, as *democracy* is set in apposition to *disagreement*, *discontent*, *disobedience*, *disorder*, *dissent*, and *distrust*. *Democracy* and *ecology*, *education*, *empire*, *equality*, *global warming*, *green political thought*, *inequality*, *oil* (is *oil* now an abstract noun?), *peace*, *poverty*, *power*, *religion*, *socialism*, *terrorism*, *totalitarianism*. And there, incompletely, we must pause. The word *terrorism* has passed my lips.

Of all the abstract nouns mentioned in these lectures, *terrorism* is, I believe, the only one we could inarguably call a negative value, though *death*, in some understandings, is close. It too has a long biography, derived from the French Revolution. It too is an *-ism*. It too organizes our lives and our political responses—even more effectively when the *-ism* is removed and we are asked to contemplate the far more abstract notion of *Terror*, as in “the War on.” It too demands obeisance, a new god of the underworld whose indefiniteness resembles Milton's notorious personification of *Death* in *Paradise Lost*: “If shape it might be called that shape had none.” To its altars we sacrifice our children, as do they, on the other side of the world. Geoffrey Nunberg has a shrewd article on it in *Going Nuclear*, in which he cites Robespierre making a very keyword move: “Terror is nothing but justice, prompt, severe and inflexible.”<sup>23</sup> Alternatively, it is nothing but conjurer's equipment, a box with a false bottom.

23. Nunberg, *Going Nuclear*, 51.