

How Once Dangerous Signs and Slogans Become Appropriated to Mean Their Opposite or Nothing

Walker Lane (Peter Werbe)

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The dominant culture's appropriation and enfeeblement of language that was once angrily thrust against it is nothing new.

Even the word "revolution," which once sent shivers down the spines of a fragile bourgeoisie until their rule was assured, has been recuperated. After its brief resurrection in the 1960s, the phrase was quickly adopted by the advertising industry to mean anything new and exciting, as in "Breck's revolutionary new hair coloring."

Although it's irritating to galling to witness this process, it only happens when what the original incendiary word or phrase represents doesn't become real; then it can be picked like a fruit from the etymological tree for common or commercial usage.

For instance, rebellious dress and hair styles of the 60s, once hated by the parents of rebellious hippies and activists, are now almost universally worn. Jeans, which were often banned, now, when strategically and artistically "distressed," can sell for preposterous sums.

Other examples include the peace sign, originally designed in the 1950s for the British Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND), and based on semaphore flag signals for the initials of the group, was seen as a traitorous display in the U.S. when it came into fashion among anti-Vietnam war activists. However, it became so ubiquitous that even GIs wore it on their helmets while going into battle against the Vietcong.

It's unclear what has caused the peace sign's sudden reappearance ("Back by popular demand," as some pins state?), but now it's seen everywhere—on kids' lunch buckets, \$175 peace bracelets from Barney's in New York City, in Gap ads. Hopefully, it represents a generalized disgust with a world of war, but it's hard to tell.

Some recuperations are funny enough if you can wipe away the tears. Earth First (without the "!" of the radical environmental group) is a web site that features ecologically sound practices including a garbage truck that runs on the trash it collects. The radical site is dot org; these guys are dot com and are quick to disassociate themselves from the group whose name they stole.

And, like the word revolution, anarchy is being used and abused in the oddest places.

We're all about anarchy, but Anarchy Detroit doesn't refer to our comrades in the Motor City. It's a fashion site (add dot com) which has some stylin' garb, but their t-shirts run upwards to \$30. One design even features the dictionary definition of anarchy on the back.

There are also Anarchy sunglasses and even Anarchy Championship Wrestling on line and a Sailing Anarchy Yacht Club! Someone call the Anarchist Anti-Defamation League.

The Detroit Metro Times, in an ad for a food bank benefit recently, featured the classic clenched fist, red star and background, with the slogan, "Refuse, Resist (and, then not, "Revolt," which completes the revolutionary triad), but 'DRINK." Oh, well, it was for a good cause.

However, this goes back to the earlier point above. If we were in a period of sharp contestation with the power of the state, this slogan would define what is happening in the streets, and not have the capacity for trendy alteration.

But, damn, even the right wing is messing with our slogans.

Teabaggers were marching in Washington DC during the Congressional debates about Obama's so-called health care reform bill. Although a good portion of them receive the dreaded single-payer, universal health insurance in the form of Medicare, they were hysterically opposed to such a program being extended to the entire population.

Signs reading, "Keep Your Hands Off My Body," and similar chants could be seen and heard from them without the slightest realization that this was a key slogan of the 1970s movement to legalize abortion.

Also, shouts from the proto-fascists of, "Take Our Country Back," (one can assume they mean from the black guy), ring out at Teabagger rallies, and, this, they probably do realize, was the angry slogan of progressive liberals after the theft of two successive elections by the Bush gang.

Equally egregious, but probably unknown to the frenzied hordes of the petit bourgeoisie, was the origin of their ecological nihilist chant of "Drill, Baby, Drill." This one goes back to the 1965 Watts riot when residents, watching the LA fire department helplessly attempting to extinguish a city in flames, chanted, "Burn, Baby, Burn."

Since it's now, "Spill, Baby, Spill," don't expect to hear the call for more drilling from the righties, at least for a while, although some of them are so crazy, it's like the BP spill never happened.

So, new slogans will come, be reviled, and either become reality or wind up as an ad slogan or twisted beyond recognition.

It's up to us.



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