

# DANGER: A Lesson from Language

**dān'-ger:** *n.* Liability or exposure to harm, risk, or peril. [Earlier sense *power* from Old French *dangier*, from Latin *dominus*, lord.]

—*The Concise Oxford Dictionary*

SOCIAL SCIENTISTS are concerned with explaining the regularities and patterns that occur in the tapestry of human events. Physicists and chemists also look for patterns and regularities, but unlike the social scientist, the natural scientist is concerned with molecules and magnetism, electrons and elements, not social structures.

The social scientist can also be distinguished from the psychologist because the latter observes the behavioral patterns of an individual, while the former studies regularities for which no individual is solely responsible. Indeed, the regularities which interest the social scientist arise from the interaction of countless men and women.

The social patterns which arise unintended from the behavior of

millions of individuals have been described by F.A. Hayek as constituting a “spontaneous order.” Language is a prime example of spontaneous order. It is not the work of any one individual. Nobody invented language, and no one controls its destiny. Language, in all its complexity, arose from the social interaction of individuals creating a pattern of sound and meaning. To quote Professor Hayek, “language shows a definite order which is not the result of any conscious design.”<sup>1</sup>

Just as language arose without conscious intent, so may it change without individual decision. Such alterations can reflect changing attitudes within the speech community, and so etymology may give us a clue to the discoveries and intuitions of numberless individuals over the centuries. The etymology of the word “danger” provides such a hint.

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Today, the word “danger” refers to risk or peril. But this has not always been so. A thousand years ago, “danger” meant “power.” The word crept into English from the Old French “dangier.” In its turn, Old French acquired “dangier” from the Latin “dominus,” meaning lord or ruler. Thus, there is a chain of sound and semantics from ruler to power to danger.

The metamorphosis of “ruler” to “danger” is a telling one. It tells us that over the centuries people have realized that rulers and power are dangerous, and it tells us that today we must be vigilant of our lords. Danger emanates from rulers and creeps down the corridors of power.

I have selected three dangers which confront us today. Other pressing dangers could be cited, but those I have chosen are familiar and so underline my thesis clearly.

### **Economic Disorder**

One major danger of the 1980s is economic disorder. We are beset by unyielding deficits, massive unemployment, falling savings, and low investment. The statist spells of the Washington magicians have failed to exorcize these ills. This is hardly surprising as government is the devil, not the holy water.

Language is one example of spon-

<sup>1</sup>F. A. Hayek, *The Counter-Revolution of Science*, 2nd ed. (Indianapolis: Liberty Press, 1979), p. 69

aneous order. The market is another. In the market, the self-interested individual sets out to earn a profit by administering to the needs of others. Unintentionally, the search for profit creates a pattern of employment and productivity.

Just as language is not the result of conscious decision, neither is the market. No one individual can claim responsibility for the pattern of prosperity which the market generates. Even armed with the most powerful computer, no ruler could coordinate the means and ends of the countless individuals who make up the economy. There is too much information dispersed in too many individuals' minds for any political group to master. To compound the matter, needs and desires, techniques and methods, are always changing. Ours is a dynamic world.

Only the market, with its entrepreneurs driven by hope of profit and fear of loss, can cope with the vast quantities of information dispersed throughout the economy. Subtle changes in price convey facts about availability and desirability between consumers and producers. But governments insist on interfering with the market. They arrogantly claim to have access to the minds of millions of people, and enforce their values upon us all.

The consequences of this presumptuous meddling are all about

us—idle resources and broken dreams.

## War

A second obvious danger that faces us in the latter part of the twentieth century is war—be it nuclear or conventional. There is bloodshed in Central America, Africa, the Middle East, and Afghanistan. There is mounting tension between the major powers, and distrust among the minor ones.

Let us make it clear once and for all: individuals do not wage war—States do. As Proudhon noted: “War is the health of the State.” Wars are unleashed by rulers and arise from the abuse of power. But this is not to question that governments should raise armies. I am not advocating unilateral disarmament. Far from it. The sole legitimate function of government is to protect the individual from force, theft, and fraud. Armed forces are necessary if the individual is to be defended from aggression by foreign powers. But the key term is “defended.” Armies must be defensive, not aggressive.

Unfortunately, rulers tend to be covetous of others’ property, be it within their territory, or beyond their borders. The danger of war tends to wax as individual rights wane. Hence, to no small extent, citizens can protect their safety, not by advocating interference with other States that are potentially aggres-

sive, but by concerning themselves with their own government’s activities. Safety is maximized by individuals insisting on their government maintaining a defensive posture, and being able to back that posture with force. Ironically, peace comes out of the barrel of a gun.

## The Growth of Crime

The final danger I will mention is the danger inherent in the growth of crime. Many crimes—the so-called “victimless” ones—aren’t crimes at all. They are merely unusual forms of behavior which happen to be illegal. An activity can only be accurately described as criminal if it interferes with an individual’s right to dispose of his or her property as that person sees fit. Hence, fraud, theft, robbery, assault, rape, and murder are all clearly crimes. They all involve one individual or group of individuals transgressing against another individual or group of individuals.

Such activities as prostitution, the sale and use of drugs, and gambling, are not crimes. They are often socially unacceptable, and almost invariably illegal, but they interfere with no one other than those people who freely agree to be involved. One may not personally approve of these activities, but one must—if one is to remain civilized—approve of the right to be involved by those who see fit.

The danger that faces us stems not from an increase in victimless crimes, but from an upsurge in crimes of violence against others. The State is failing everywhere to prevent the rise in these activities. I suggest that there are two reasons for this. First, the State has lost its will to protect the individual. The ideology of the State is increasingly couched, not in terms of the individual, but in terms of abstractions such as "class" and "society." Thus, the energy of the State is not directed toward real individuals' problems, but toward such non-issues as the "class struggle" and "social justice."

Secondly, what energy the State does apportion to crime prevention and detection is largely spent on harassing the non-criminals men-

tioned earlier: prostitutes, drug addicts, and back yard gamblers. If this energy were directed toward the prevention of real crimes, our streets and homes would be safer.

This short survey of the dangers we face today is, I think, sufficient to support the link between rulers, power, and danger which etymology suggested. We are confronted by dangers that are due either to rulers exercising their power in illegitimate domains, or due to rulers failing to exercise their power in the only legitimate direction: defense of the individual.

We need to reaffirm just what the State ought and ought not be doing. And we need to do this in terms of the rights of the individual—the inalienable rights to Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness. ☉

### The Role of Government

In the free society government keeps the peace, protects private property, and enforces contracts. Government must do these things effectively, and it must do nothing else; otherwise, the conditions absolutely necessary to genuine personal freedom in society are absent. Whether or not a genuinely free society is attainable no mortal man can know; the limits of our knowledge are too narrow. But one thing we do know: that until at least the advocates of the free society are fully aware of the conditions necessary to its existence, it can never come about. For they must ever be on guard against new movements, ideas, and principles which would endanger its realization. And on the other hand, they must be sharply aware of existing impediments so that they may direct their energies intelligently to the removal of the causes of current imperfections.

IDEAS ON

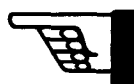


LIBERTY

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# CONCESSIONS and GIVEBACKS



WHEN AFL-CIO officials meet they pass resolutions, hold press conferences, listen to speeches by political hopefuls, and condemn the administration. They give ringing endorsement to higher minimum wages, any and all jobs bills, more “dislocated” workers and youth programs, accelerated public works, public housing construction and rehabilitation, and the like. They call for Federal spending that is many times the amount spendthrift administrations could actually spend.

In their public pronouncements, labor leaders are as forceful and intransigent as ever. But in their contract bargaining with employers many are settling for smaller pay raises than at any other time in recent years. Some even consent to

givebacks, that is, voluntary forfeitures of previously won benefits. Even in the citadels of unionism, the steel and auto industries, unions for the first time in history have agreed to reductions in hourly wages and fringe benefits. What may be even more significant, some unions are acquiescing in concessions on working conditions. A leading business journal called it a “quiet revolution in the nation’s industrial sector, as labor and management agree to eliminate many long-standing and costly work rules in an effort to raise productivity and profits.”<sup>1</sup>

Revolutions of any kind are the work of ideas and principles, and are achieved in the realm of thought before they are translated into action. A revolution of unionism must be visible first of all in the sphere of thought about unions, in publications and public pronouncements, in newspapers, journals, and books.

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