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Breaking the Code

Rhetoric to Watch Out For

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2006, Fall-Winter

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Caveat: these words are occasionally used by people in good faith. Most of the time though, they are used by people who are looking to win arguments and perhaps to bond along certain simplistic lines — not to understand things better or to have different kinds of conversations. Be particularly wary when you hear (or use!) two or more of these words in close proximity to each other.

These terms can be categorized into three themes — action (vs. theory), safety and identity. In practice these themes are closely connected because of the underlying assumptions of the people who most commonly use them. These assumptions are that answers are clear (therefore don't require particularly deep thought or especially complicated challenges to anyone), that the necessary actions might be hard, but they're obvious, that the person who can make a good case for being the most victimized should have the most attention paid to them. The connecting motivation for these themes is guilt — guilt about having power, guilt about not having power (both are sins in this culture), and perhaps a confusion about the difference between privilege and power. If power is seen as the capacity to get things done, to make change, then having it implies

that we are responsible for things continuing the way that they are. Not having power both absolves us of that responsibility and also makes us anathema in a society that emphasizes a myth of autonomy and boundless personal (isolated) potential. Privilege is being able to benefit from the way things are, and power is the capacity to change the way things are. They are sometimes connected, but definitely not the same thing.

Abuse

used for a wide range of situations, from blatantly physical, painful, and coercive interactions to the more subtle emotional, political, and social; frequently used as part of a Safe Space argument, to encourage the dangerous people to take the claimant seriously; strongly alludes to extremely polarized power dynamics (of the helpless victim/dastardly villain variety).¹

¹ The point of noting when words have multiple definitions that are widely divergent in their emotional impact, is to point out that using those words calls into play the strongest of the emotional meanings.

Take for example, Clarence Thomas's use of the word "lynching." While the word might have had some relevance to him personally — perhaps he felt at that point like his life was about to be over, and that the emotional impact of having to defend his actions was as bad as being kidnapped, tortured and hung — but most people would not see his experience as that. The history of lynching is that it happens to people who are socially disenfranchised. Thomas's political stance, the reason he was nominated for the Supreme Court in the first place, was because he was denying the relevance of that disenfranchisement. By using that word he benefits from an identity that he has gotten money and power for rejecting, and he calls up emotions and social context that may be a way to understand his feelings (if we give him the benefit of the doubt) but have little to do with understanding the complexities of the external situation.

Rape is another word that describes a physical event, but also is used to describe an emotional impact.

The case for this kind of usage is that it demystifies these words by connecting them to experiences that are more common to all of us. But the stronger impact is to further mystify the experience of the person who is using the word.

Struggle

what we are all supposed to engage in at all times (except, perhaps, when we are in Safe Space); apparently an end in itself.

Taking the Next Step

doing the same thing harder, in the hope that more of it will have dramatically different effects. (As Einstein put it, “Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.”)

Taking It to the Next/Another Level

see Taking the Next Step.

Unity

lack of perceived significant disagreement; perception being much of the point, Unity is used frequently to encourage people to shut up. See Getting Shit Done.

Accountability

blame

Ally

what someone calls themselves (or is called) to express a strong commitment to Someone Else’s struggle, when Someone Else is seen to be more authentic than the ally. This status gives vicarious legitimacy to the statements of the ally, particularly when the ally is confirmed by a representative Someone Else.

Authentic

very common in tacit usage, usually implying that a certain group understands more about how the world works due to a particular social (oppressed) status, leading members of this group (and their allies) to believe that members of this group are more relevant to significant social change than others.

Co, Zee, etc.

gender-neutral pronoun(s) replacing he, she, him, her, an indication that the code user is more hip, more conscientious, more accountable than the non-code user, and more likely to use the words “abusive,” “safe space,” and “ally.” Co is derived from the word comrade.

Community

1. the basis of validity, the font of Authenticity, from which all organizer and activist legitimacy flows.

On some level, someone claiming raped status is claiming to be beyond reproach, an ultimate innocent victim.

2. paradise, an amorphous phenomenon that is all things to all people and represents everything good that we lack; a form of utopia that we could find or create if we tried really hard; frequently sensed in far off places; frequently confused with the practice of liking everyone or having everyone like us.

Empowerment

this word has two mutually exclusive definitions, one of which involves people higher in a hierarchy permitting more control and autonomy to people lower in that hierarchy; the other describes people taking more autonomy and control in their own lives. Frequently used in radical circles with some confusion as to which definition they are applying.

Feeling Silenced

one of a variety of terms referring to feelings as something that other people must take care of; this is closely related to Safe Space.

Getting Shit Done

a demand that people stop talking about whatever concerns, questions or disagreements they have (in fact preferably that they pretend to have no concerns, questions, or disagreements) and work harder to get more people involved in whatever the expected task is; classic example of this attitude: "Too much theory is a byproduct of having not enough to do."

Having an Impact

see Getting Shit Done.

Justice

refers to the ultimate good (in keeping with its biblical base), involves various implications and assumptions including that it is always obvious what is just in any given situation, that the speakers (or at least the important speakers) share the same understanding of what is just, and that justice is always relevant. Also implies some level of punishment.

Making a Difference/Making Things Happen

see Getting Shit Done.

Oppression

another catch-all word, means anything from cross-cultural historic tendencies to how your mother treated you, or, more relevantly, how someone is feeling treated badly in a meeting or interaction that is supposed to be Safe Space.²

Safe/Safer Space

usually used by people to blame others for their discomfort, with the expectation that someone else is responsible for them feeling better, especially around huge issues like racism, sexism, and classism; less commonly refers to safety from physical harm; is frequently used in mediated scenarios like meetings, email lists, or online forums.

Speaking Truth (esp. To Power)

engaging in feel-good rhetorical activities.

² See previous note