

Our Heads Cut Off

by Harold O.J. Brown

“Language is the armory of the human mind; and at once contains the trophies of its past, and the weapons of its future conquests.”

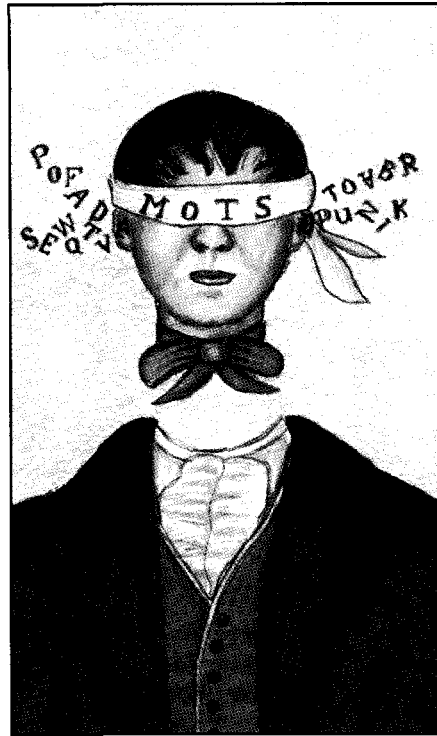
—Samuel Taylor Coleridge

La Tête coupée: Le Secret du pouvoir
by Arnaud-Aaron Upinsky
Paris: Le Bec; 522 pp., 149 francs

This remarkable French mathematician has written extensively on what he considers the fundamental spiritual problem of our day, the perversion of language, which he believes is related to the perversion of mathematics, a topic that he explored in an earlier book. In the present work, Upinsky's thesis is simple: Since the days of the Greek philosophers, Western intellectual history has been marked by a clash of two different languages, “true language” and “strong language.” True language is the language of the real or—in Upinsky's terminology—of realism, the goal of which is to impart a truthful view of reality. Strong language is the language of nominalism, a language in which words are merely *nomina*—names or symbols designed to influence belief and behavior.

While the conflict between true and strong language is age-old, in our era strong language is being effectively honed so that its dominance becomes ev-

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er more complete. The result is that we who listen have “our heads cut off”: That is, we are unable to use them for the purpose to which they were designed—namely, to think. Upinsky's insight is kin to that expressed by George Orwell in the imagined totalitarian society of 1984, in which the official language, Newspeak, is made mandatory in order to prevent people from resorting to Oldthink.

Something similar has already been accomplished in Sweden and Norway, where old language forms have been changed, as it were, by government decree in order to simplify the language, or (in the latter case) to distinguish it for nationalistic purposes from the heavily Danish-tinged Norwegian of the old literary classes. In the Scandinavian countries, it is not apparent that any goal other

than “modernization” is in view.

The largest Germanic country has given us a prime example of the use of strong language to manipulate public opinion and make people willing to endure the otherwise unendurable. In *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, Hannah Arendt described the imposition of Newspeak, or *Neudeutsch*, as we might call it, under the Nazis. She called it “language rules.” Shipment to an extermination camp, for example, was called “resettlement in the East,” while the buses that transported the sick and handicapped to the institution where they would be euthanized bore the identifying inscriptions, “Charitable Association for the Transport of the Sick.”

A wonderful example of the imposition of strong language in our own time is the mental climate that legalized abortion has created, in which the reality of the act has faded from view behind the word “choice.” It is not impossible to use true language to speak of abortion: The Germans, following their experience with *Neudeutsch* under Hitler, have dared to do it. In a 1975 decision, the German Federal Constitutional Court wrote, “The usual language, termination of pregnancy, cannot conceal the fact that abortion is a homicidal act.” That is the undeniable truth, but such real language is hardly acceptable today in the United States, where “homicide” has been replaced by “choice,” a neutral term with great popular appeal. (Even

anti-abortionists have submitted to behavior modification to the extent that they regularly refer to their pro-abortion opponents as “pro-choice.”) “Strong” language—replacing a true word, abortion, with a manipulative word, choice—conceals the reality of prenatal homicide and induces masses of people who actually detest abortion to accept it, for the reason that opposing it would be to oppose “choice.” The language of choice, however, is used in our society only where it serves the purposes of power: In today’s America, smoking is not a matter for “choice,” nor is gun ownership.

Upinsky offers a number of examples from French history and contemporary France in proof of his thesis. “The great systems of our day function in fact on the reverse of language: the majority is only a minority; equality implies disparity; the ‘will of the people’ is only that of one party; the presumption of the innocence of an accused person is only a myth; representative government is only a fiction, etc.” If, moving beyond France, we look at the U.S. presidential election of 1996, we see what Upinsky means: Fewer than half of the eligible voters voted, and slightly fewer than half of those voted for Bill Clinton, who won the presidency thanks to the support of a minority of a minority, of less than 25 percent. He became president, and he rules. Articles of impeachment were passed by a majority of the House of Representatives and one article was approved, albeit with fear and trembling, by over half of the Senate, where a two-thirds majority is required: There, too, minority ruled. President Clinton has named two justices to the Supreme Court, five out of nine members of which suffice to void the laws of 50 states; in *Roe v. Wade*, decided seven to two, the will of seven old men prevailed over a nation of 200 million.

Upinsky wants us to see things as they are. Then it may be possible to wake from our slumber and deal realistically with reality. He contends that:

it is indispensable to develop our powers of observation, our visual acuity and our hearing. We have to train ourselves to disconnect our eye—which has to follow the facts—and our ear—which has to follow the discussion. Thus we shall succeed in distinguishing the movement of facts from the movement of words, and in seeing that

today there are two systems that operate in opposite ways. This was the central contradiction of the [French] Revolution: the coexistence of the speculative discourse on the Rights of Man with the operational discourse of the Terror.

Upinsky considers Jean Jacques Rousseau, whose thinking influenced the French Revolution, a major architect of the perversion of language. It was Rousseau who frankly stated that the proclaimed goal of liberty actually destroys the bonds that tie individuals to one another and to small groups and puts them entirely at the disposal of the state. The goal of every system of government, Rousseau wrote, must be the greatest common good, reducible to two principal objects, liberty and equality: “Liberty, because every particular dependency is that much power taken by force from the body of the State, and equality, because liberty cannot exist without it.” Were we paying attention when he told us what these noble-sounding words really meant?

What Upinsky calls the “Jacobin Bible” makes it plain that the promises of liberty and equality can be used as tools to establish the absolute totalitarian state, i.e., the state that recognizes no legitimate bonds outside of itself. In the United States today, “security” and “safety” serve as strong language to give our state ever greater power.

The state that claims to enforce only the *volonté générale*, the “general will,” can place demands on every citizen which the absolutist monarchs were unable to achieve on the basis of their royal will. What Louis XIV (the “Sun King” who said, “*L’état, c’est moi*”) could not do—namely, establish universal military conscription in France—the Republic, expressing the *volonté générale*, quickly did. What the French people would not permit the king to do to them because it would violate their traditional rights, they promptly did to themselves—a strange result of the quest for “liberty” and “equality.”

(Speaking of the French Revolution, Upinsky notes the power of the impersonal word *on*, or “one.” “One saw the monarchy impotent . . . one grew indignant . . . and one overthrew it.” Six months later, “one grew uneasy,” “one feared that the Girondins lacked the necessary energy,” “one outlawed them.” In American English, we do not use the

word “one” like this, but in place of the impersonal “one,” we have the anonymous opinion poll, in which the opinion of some chosen small sample of several hundred people sways the votes of the 100 senators who chart the destiny of 260 million Americans.)

La tête coupée is an extremely thorough and complex book, reaching back to the experience of Greece and Rome and examining French history from the beginning of the monarchy down to the present day. It may well be described as “thrilling,” as *Le Figaro* called it, yet the extremely detailed symbolic analysis of French history and institutions would be hard to translate into English. An abridged translation, if widely read, could be tremendously valuable in helping Americans understand the extent to which we, too, have *la tête coupée*. Strong language defeats true language, in which majority does not mean minority. If this awful fact could penetrate American consciousness at every level—the political, the educational, the journalistic, and the judicial—there might be a chance for us yet to defeat the forces behind linguistic manipulation and to recover a measure of our former freedom and dignity.

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Terms of Revilement

by David B. Kopel

**Making a Killing:
The Business of Guns in America**

by Tom Diaz
New York: New Press;
258 pp., \$25.00



Making a Killing, which may be the most influential anti-gun book ever written, could not have been better timed to the current wave of lawsuits against gun companies, since many of the legal claims closely resemble the charges that Tom Diaz makes against the gun industry. Moreover, the book will likely help shape public opinion regarding the gun issue in general and gun companies in particular, thereby reducing the prospect that state legislatures or Congress will enact legislation to prohibit the lawsuits.

Yet Diaz's work will also be of interest to persons who are not much interested in the gun issue. *Making a Killing*, for one thing, is the first book to analyze the American firearms industry, previous ones having concentrated on a single company (e.g., Winchester), its products, and the evolution of firearms design, rather than on the business decisions faced by company leaders. For another, this book should be of interest to political scientists as an example of changing styles of political rhetoric and, in particular, for the important step forward that *Making a Killing* represents in the tactics of gun-control advocates. In the past, the debate has been over "gun control"—a term which resonates very negatively with a large segment of the voting public. (Americans do not like being "controlled.") The gun-control debate has been about restrictions on gun possession by law-abiding citizens, and about whether these restrictions can reduce misuse of guns both by law-abiding citizens and by criminals. Yet the very terms of the debate, serving as they do to remind the public that gun crime is caused by criminals with guns, put gun-prohibition advocates such as Diaz at a disadvantage. Moreover, the fundamental prem-

ise of the gun-control movement—that the average American citizen lacks the maturity, intelligence, and emotional stability to possess a handgun and to use it for personal protection—has not proved very popular. Thus, in recent years, advocates of gun prohibition have begun to shift the emphasis of the debate away from avoiding gun crimes toward "protecting the children": a rhetorical device intended to provide a gentler basis from which to promote the same controls they advocated previously. And when a loaded phrase like "the children" is coupled rhetorically with "gun safety" (people who react badly to "control" may respond favorably to "safety"), the tactical advantage becomes all the greater.

Diaz's book seeks to change the moral thrust of the anti-gun argument: "Gun manufacturers are evil and therefore the government should regulate their products." *Making a Killing* presents what Diaz considers an exposé of the sins of the firearms business—among them its profit motivation in wanting to sell more and more guns. If, however, firearms are a legitimate consumer product (and American law very clearly says they are), then making a profit by manufacturing guns is no more immoral than making a living selling books. Diaz asserts that the American firearms industry enjoys "incredible profitability," but he neglects to provide serious evidence. Instead, he shows that Bill Ruger, the founder of one of America's most successful gun companies, is personally wealthy and belongs to some fancy clubs, and repeats—three times!—Ruger's 1959 remark, "We have a little moneymaking machine here."

The implication is that the rest of the American gun business is as profitable as Ruger, which simply is not the case. Ruger is the only firearms company which is publicly traded, from which we might infer that other firearms companies did not believe themselves profitable enough to be taken public. Indeed, as anyone who knows anything about the industry knows, gun companies as financially healthy as Ruger are few and far between. Colt, the most venerable name in American firearms, has survived bankruptcy only because of corporate welfare payments from the state of Connecticut and the U.S. government (in the form of federal research grants to invent a "smart gun" which can only be fired by

its owner). Significantly, lawsuits filed against handgun companies are predicated on the common knowledge that hardly any of the companies has enough money to pay the costs of legal defense in over two dozen courtrooms.

The heart of *Making a Killing* is an analysis of changes in the handgun market over recent decades. As of 1974, the majority of handguns sold in the United States were revolvers; today, the majority are self-loading pistols. Indignantly, Diaz describes how the American firearms industry, in recent decades, has attempted to deal with the problem of market saturation (i.e., most men who want to own a gun already have one) in the way any rational industry would—by trying to sell its product to those who do not currently own it and to sell new products to people who already do. Gun manufacturers have implemented the first strategy by pitching firearms to women and by promoting youth interest in the shooting sports. This program for market expansion is heartily disapproved of by Diaz, who appears not to like anything that people do with guns. He bashes not only ownership of handguns for self-defense, but sports such as Cowboy Action Shooting. He criticizes American shooting ranges which cater to foreign tourists for seeking to satisfy something he calls "gun lust."

Diaz regards the shift from revolvers to self-loaders as a result of pernicious advertising touting "firepower" as the dubious advantage of the new pistols. He overestimates the role of advertising. Ads obviously affect consumer decisions; otherwise, companies would not bother to advertise. Whether advertising can create and sustain demand for a product type which, in the absence of advertising, consumers would not want is questionable. To acknowledge this point, however, would be to put the blame for increased firepower on the consumer, rather than on the gun manufacturer. And this in turn would move the gun debate back a step to the "gun control" paradigm, with its associated political perils of offending tens of millions of consumers rather than a few dozen handgun companies.

Despite what Diaz implies, for many decades gun companies have offered consumers a choice between revolvers and self-loading pistols. The self-loading