

God in Berlin, Newton in Brussels: On the Power of Linguistic Images in the Eurozone Crisis

blogs.lse.ac.uk/eurocrisispress/2015/08/07/god-in-berlin-newton-in-brussels-on-the-power-of-linguistic-images-in-the-eurozone-crisis/

Eurocrisis in the
Press

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8/7/2015

The limits of our language are the limits of our world, famously observed the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. For him, word and fact are in a representational relationship: a word is only an image of a fact, but we are only able to think this image and not the fact behind it. This is the archetypal source of failing communication.



These times of frantic disputes between Greece and the “institutions”, formerly known as the Troika, can be confusing:

Michael Thumann [argues](#) that soon nobody will know what has been accepted or rejected by whom, or even who is to blame. The present crisis questions the European motto “united in diversity” in many ways. One source of this diversity is language. Thus it is also a source of misunderstandings.

Therefore it is worth stepping back and examining which linguistic images are used and how those images create our understanding of the crisis by making it “thinkable”. For a German living in the United Kingdom, it is striking to see how the images differ between the languages and what persuasive power some of these images bear. Looking at German images helps to comprehend a specifically German understanding of the current situation.

Debt and guilt, creditor and believer

In the German language we can find a number of remarkable deviations when it comes to the vocabulary of economics. Most European languages distinguish between the moral term guilt or fault, and its economic distant relative, debt. In German however there is only *Schuld* and no clear distinction whether it is a moral or economical one. As a child when reciting the Lord’s Prayer, I used to think it meant “forgive us our debts”, because the German term is exactly the same.

The only difference between the moral *Schuld* and its economic sister is that the latter one is mostly used in the plural, *Schulden*. As if the economic one represented the multiplication of the moral *Schuld*. This is a specific characteristic of the German language. In Wittgenstein’s sense a German “sees” different images from an Englishman when talking about debt. Since images are the only tool we have when we talk about the underlying facts, their impact on our understanding of the world is profound. We need to be careful when using images or even better “whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent”, as the Austrian philosopher writes in “Tractatus logico-philosophicus”.

These images can develop a life of their own and can get out of hand for the speaker. *Spirits that I’ve cited my commands ignore*, as Goethe wrote.

Take, for example, the firm commitment by the German finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble, to produce a federal budget “without issuing any more debts”. The opposition has [accused](#) him of excessive doggedness, pointing out that such a budget is only possible by ransacking social security funds. Does Schäuble’s rock-hard commitment arise from the metaphysical gravity of *Schulden* (i.e. guilt/debt)? Who doesn’t want to be free of all guilt after all? But debt would be okay, wouldn’t it?

Besides this moral-theological component, the German image of *Schuld* suggests that he who has debt, is also the one to blame. *Schulden* obscures that in a debt crisis it takes two to tango: The one who receives payments and the one who thought it would be reasonable to issue these payments.

And Germans do not only speak about debts like a priest. The one who makes payments to a debtor, who is called creditor in English, is called *Gläubiger* in German. But a *Gläubiger* is also someone who goes to the mosque on a Friday or the church on a Sunday. Again the German language does not distinguish between the believer in a religious sense and the economical “believer”, who believes that his debt will be paid back one day. The German image for a creditor is the one of a believer. If debts (or *Schulden*) cannot be paid back, if they have to be canceled, what happens to our *Gläubiger*? In this image he turns into someone who had broken with his faith, an apostate. Guilt, forgiveness, apostasy. Apocalyptic clouds are gathering over the one who [speaks](#) of debt crisis in German. If one were to tell an Englishman that “The Believers should forgive guilt”, he would grin awkwardly as if the Jehovah’s Witness had been knocking at his door. “Creditors should write off debts”, sounds fundamentally different. However in German it is the same.

But not only in the sovereign debt crisis is the discourse in Germany heavily metaphysical. A thinker from the German city of Ulm, Karl Marx, pointed out a long time ago the “metaphysical subtleties and theological niceties” of economics.

The German Council of Economic Experts is referred to as the “Five Sages of the Economy”. A dark secret seems to bind this mysterious circle. What are the omens from which these five are reading the will of gods? Are they interpreting the flight of birds like the ancient augurs? Someone who is not a sage, of course, should not question the prophecies but believe what the sages are preaching. Philosophy means “love of wisdom”. Wisdom seems to be left to the economic experts.

And those experts often preach that the “stock exchanges are nervous”. Again a religious image. It is easy to imagine how the five sages are descending from the Oracle Mountain proclaiming in consternation: “The gods are turbulent, present them sacrifices”.

In the German theological language of economics this idea is particularly strong. That the single mothers or trainees are nervous, this is not a coherent picture. And therefore we never hear about them.

These images have a lot of power in our discourse by determining our “German” handling of debts. In Germany only 18% of all transactions are paid by credit card, in the [United States](#) it is 54%. This overly moralized [image](#) of debts might also be a reason why 85% of Germans reject any further concessions to Greece, including 68% of the voters of the left-wing party “Die Linke”, which is twinned with Syriza.

The dear Lord and the dear Money

When searching for the roots of these dark religious images we find traces in various episodes of German history. One trace brings us in the city of Weimar in Thuringia of the 1920s to the financial trauma, which preceded the rise of the Nazis.

The theological framing leads us again to Thuringia. To a sociologist from the city of Erfurt, Max Weber, and his studies about the relationship between “Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism”. The Philosopher Georg Simmel, from Berlin, described how Money was psychologically replacing the traditional role of a god.

The economist Tomas Sedlacek shows that the theological roots of economics are even deeper: economics is not only a science with its roots in Enlightenment Europe, but at the heart of every religion since the first civilizations. The oldest literary work, the epic of Gilgamesh, involves the extraction of resources, the benefits offered by a sophisticated infrastructure and the building of new trade routes. Not to mention the first macroeconomic prognosis given by biblical Joseph to the Pharaoh:

Let Pharaoh appoint commissioners over the land to take a fifth of the harvest of Egypt during the seven years of abundance ... This should be held in reserve for the country, to be used during the seven years of famine.

Here we see the first argument for an anti-cyclical fiscal policy in the Keynesian sense, with a proposal for a fiscal stabilization with an income tax of 20% (Sedlacek, *Economics of Good and Evil*, p.64). The theological roots of economics are evident, especially in the German language.

God in Berlin, Newton in Brussels, or: an image is an image is an image

The financial crisis of Weimar, protestant Ethics, prophecies from the Old Testament. All of these images are at work in us, though not always consciously, when we speak about Greece. Some images are common for all Europeans, others are strictly German.

Archaic images are a proof for the power of language in our discourse on the sovereign debt crisis. Language constitutes rules. Debts are sins, economic advisors have a divine inspiration, and markets are gods. We need a sensibility for language not only when it comes to gender issues but also when it comes to the Eurozone crisis. If Europe should be “united in diversity”, then we have to be aware of the images we are using in our discourse. Contradictory images collide in a Babylonian manner. Communication fails if we do not use images responsibly.

It is important to take images for what they are: just images and not facts. We must admit to ourselves that there are friction losses between world and word. Language and facts are not adequate. If we take the jungle of images for facts, then we are getting tangled up in it.

We can witness this in a political crisis that must not be political: when Alexis Tsipras rejected the offers from Brussels and announced the referendum instead, Martin Schulz [said](#) of this decision that it “defies rational explanation and is at best understood as plain ideology”. EU-Commissioner Pierre Moscovici, [called](#) for “logical not ideological” steps. By accusing Tsipras of being ideological, it questions his ability to see the rational truth, because he is blinded by dogmas, as Frederike Kalthener [argues](#). Moscovici and Schulz position the image of a pure logical science against Tsipras: why should we debate natural laws?

By taking images for an objective truth, the debate around the Eurozone crisis is depoliticized: It suggests that rational steps and not a set of ideas (i.e. ideology) are the order of the day. Similar to the theological charge of sages and god-like markets, which need to be calmed, in a scientific charge the political element is removed. It is either the gods or formal logic who are competent but not people and not their ideas. In both cases communication is prevented. An open discussion in the sense of Habermas makes no sense where science or the will of gods apply. Both are irrefutable. Those that use those images, without recognizing them as mostly inadequate visualizations, are getting confused. In the end they might end up thinking that there is really a logical solution for a political problem. Or is this an attempt to stifle debate from the start?

Developing a logical symbolic language, objective and free from distracting images, was the aim of the so called “Vienna Circle”, a group which was inspired by Wittgenstein. By analysing language this group of logical positivists tried to find a demarcation criterion, which separates pseudo-concepts from objective concepts. They failed to find such a criterion even for the most basic set of observations. Therefore also, the Brussels positivists will not be able to develop a logical language for the Eurozone crisis.

We have to be content with images of our languages and use them responsibly, in populist “ideological” Athens, scientific Brussels or theological Berlin. That those images are further charged in the debate not only by tabloids but also by senior policymakers shows a general lack of caution. We need to ask ourselves if a chosen image is adequate to portray a political situation, what it suggests and what discursive damage it possibly causes. An image is an image is an image. Only if we realise this, we can develop fruitful communication despite the linguistic and

cultural diversity in Europe.

Note: This article gives the views of the author, and not the position of the Euro Crisis in the Press blog nor of the London School of Economics.

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