

Nobody Outruns The Trickster

A Brief Note On The Meaning Of The Word “Valorization”

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Wolf Wolfensberger's deeply reaching work gives even a mediocre student an appreciation of the importance of positive imagery, an eye for contradictions between intention and effect, and a disposition to look past explanations about why something is in order to focus concern on the potential effects of what is. And, even superficial reading of his recent work reveals that he names the root system of many dangerous trends as “modernism,” one constituent of which is disbelief in objective truth.

In re-defining the principle of normalization, Wolfensberger chose the participial form, valorization, to identify the action required by the principle. A look at the dictionary suggests that, whatever its merits, the choice of the word “valorization” imports some subtly negative baggage into the work of assisting socially devalued people to establish and maintain socially valued lives.

In English, valorization means “The act or fact of fixing the value or price of some commercial commodity. Also gen., evaluation, giving validity to, making valid.” (Oxford English Dictionary (Second Edition) (OED2)). The definition of the verb form adds the sense that this action is carried out “by a centrally organized scheme;”

The word is a modern one, whose first recorded use in 1907 refers to a government backed scheme to inflate the price of coffee. Interestingly, this sense of the word echoes a late 15th century adoption of the Medieval Latin word *valor* (“to be strong”) to mean “the amount in money, etc., that a thing is worth.” This spelling distinguishes the initial commercial meaning of “valor” from “valour” which initially came into English from French in the 14th century to mean “worth or importance due to personal qualities or to rank.” Within a generation, each spelling acquired the sense of the other, though commercial meanings predominate in the usage of “valor” well into this century.

In the 1970s the word valorization came into some use among literary theorists. OED2 offers, among others, this example from the Times Literary Supplement, “The new structuralist model, with its valorization of the synchronic system over the older, historic, diachronic modes of understanding” This usage, which pre-dates Wolfensberger's by several years and which has been encoded in the dictionary (as Wolfensberger's has not, as yet), is of more than trivial interest. This usage promotes a view of texts, and perhaps of life, that holds that meaning is a matter of subjective choice, and not conformity to objective truth. Those who use it in this sense grasp the historic sense of the word: the assertion that value, and, in their metaphor, truth is determined externally and subjectively by the workings of market-like mechanisms.

The choice of the word ‘valorization, then, seems unfortunate for at least three reasons.

It images socially devalued people as commodities and equates action to improve their lot with price fixing in a market. This says that we are not confirming the intrinsic, and fundamentally un-economic, worth of persons but scheming to coercively determine what value (price) we can impose upon things. Even in the context of empirical social science, this denotation and its connotations are unfortunate. It denotes the action of central government to artificially shore up prices which are falling due to the “natural” acts of the market (cf. also definitions in *The Oxford American Dictionary* (1979) and *The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, Second Edition, Unabridged* (1987)). This taints the meaning of SRV with two more negative suggestions: (1) that upholding the value of people who are

socially devalued requires government authority, because their devalued social status is “natural,” and (2) that changing this status is both “artificial” and intentionally protective of some economic interest. For those morally opposed to modernism, the word is further damaged connotatively by its contemporary association with a relativistic position on truth which clearly exemplifies modernism. It might be objected that Wolfensberger borrowed the word back from those who adopted it in order to translate “normalization” into French, and so it does not carry the meaning ascribed in English dictionaries. This argument seems perilously close to substituting explanations about why something is rather than raising consciousness about what is. Imagine how a PASSING team would dispose of the defensive argument that a negative service program name has a different, possibly better, definition in another language.

It might be further objected that the word has a technical meaning within the context of Wolfensberger's work and that this idiosyncratic meaning suffices to communicate to his students, especially those who do not browse in unabridged dictionaries for amusement. This objection has great merit, though it must be asserted with due humility about the contradictions created by the pervasive trickiness of negative imagery. Nobody outruns the trickster.

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