

# Reclaiming language

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Recently a series of events was hosted at Stanford University entitled “Our Jihad to Reform: The Struggle to Define Our Faith”; the idea being to confront problems facing the Muslim community in a way that is true to Islam, rather than reacting to right wing bigotry. There was some lively argument as to whether this reinforced an Islam-terrorism connotation, or by confronting it and discussing the question on its own terms, humanised it.

It’s true that language is hopeless, debased, and defaced by propaganda we hear every day. In using certain words, we activate connotations and thoughts that can be horrendously reactionary, regressive, jingoist, and so on. Indeed, this is precisely how the manipulations of jingoistic patriotism and fundamentalist religion work — by appealing to deeply held, long-inculcated, sub-rational emotions with various symbols and words. The point is to explode the sub-rational prejudice and retrain it so that our snap reactions are in line with a fully humane, fully rational, fully sensitive judgment.

These words abused so often — patriotism, democracy, jihad, socialism, feminism, libertarianism, whatever — have original meanings which can be very progressive, and which have been lost to manipulative, regressive elements. Sometimes it is worth the struggle to reclaim them. Whether it is better to abandon the word, or to fight to reclaim it, is a question of tactics and strategy every time. For instance, seems to me a good idea to reclaim the word democracy from the farce we see of it in many places today. Similarly, seems to me a good idea to reclaim the word socialism for its original promise of equality and justice, rather than oppressive systems which have taken that name. Similarly for libertarianism and anarchism — quite arguably, originally part of the socialist movement, though this is controversial. I am not so sure about trying to reclaim words like communism or patriotism, but these are just tactical judgments, and reasonable minds may differ.

In any case, I am intrigued by this attempt to reclaim the word jihad. I hope it one day reclaims the meaning of spiritual struggle for betterment, development, and growth. I hope one day that fundamentalists who invoke jihad for violent ends sound as empty to their followers as Rumsfeld invoking patriotism for censorship, Lenin invoking socialism for authoritarianism, colonialists

invoking the white man's burden for barbarity, and Bush invoking democracy for war. To be useful citizens, we need this sort of intellectual self-defence.