Shortcut

The Ugly, the Bad, and the Good

Bullshit as Discourse, Accursed Share, and Lubricant⁴⁵

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Ugly Bullshit: Discursive Faeces

*Bullshit is unavoidable whenever
circumstances require someone to talk
without knowing what he is talking about.*
(Harry G. Frankfurt)

Public discourse on issues such as economy, policy, or sustainability is full of bullshit. Indeed, it seems to be infected by it and everybody knows it. It's like rain, albeit of a less liquid consistency: one does not need to define rain in order to be able to tell when it's raining. The same goes for bullshit: one instantly knows when somebody is bullshitting. Even if some prefer the phrase 'buzzword bingo' to what it really is – namely, bullshit bingo, they all deep down recognize its true name. For example, the term 'innovation', although a term of some theoretical dignity, it is frequently used by people who bullshit their way through intricate sustainability-problems that demand far more actual effort than the cheap resort to this bullshit term.

But why do we then need any more contemplation on bullshit? Well, when we talk about shit in the early 21st century, it is not only impossible but also inappropriate to leave bullshit aside. The present text attempts to make sense of the omnipresence of bullshit and suggests a new approach to the topic – one that does not only describe and bemoan the phenomenon, but also one that does not shy away from the potentially productive purpose of bullshit.

Bad Bullshit: the Classical Case

*The notion of carefully wrought bullshit
involves (...) a certain inner strain.*
(Harry G. Frankfurt)

Bullshit is widely produced and circulated in all kinds of discourses. Words are thrown around, quotes cited, concepts explained – very often without a clear meaning or reference to real world problems. Serving as it does as a rhetorical weapon of mass

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destruction, bullshit certainly does not have a good reputation. The opposite is the case: bullshit is seen as *the* bad stuff. It is considered to be beyond reason, imprecise, irrational. Bullshit often consists of what Uwe Pörksen (1988) calls ‘plastic words’ – crucial devices for the production of bullshit. One can do anything with such words, they are flexible and they can mean all kinds of things – one simply cannot get it wrong when using them. If one desires to acquire a diverse vocabulary of ‘plastic words’, regular visits to congresses on innovation and ‘education for sustainable development’, award ceremonies for corporate social responsibility or political events dealing with environmental protection, diversity issues or development co-operation, will do the trick. One could even conceive of these as ritualistic bullshit bingo championships. When one thinks of it, this may indicate that many gatherings of highly educated people – such as scientific conferences – are often not (only) events of public debate, but rituals where the formal act of gathering itself is the key, rather than necessarily the content.

Below you can find a sample playing card you can use at any of the aforementioned events and once advanced, can proceed to creating your own, depending on your disciplinary and the particular manifestations of bullshit (I hear that for anthropologists for instance: ‘entanglements’, ‘negotiation’, ‘assemblage’ might be the starters). It is not only really easy to play, but may also relieve you from taking the bullshit accidentally all too seriously: as soon you hear one of the words on the card, you tick it off. As soon as a row, a column or a diagonal is completed, you stand up and shout ‘bingo’ or, even better: ‘bullshit’. Enjoy!

Adaptability	Excellence	Learning	Quality	Transparency
Benchmark	Gender	Metrics	Resilience	Vision
Best practice	Globalization	Network	Responsibility	Wisdom
Change	Innovation	Optimization	Stakeholder	Web
Diversity	ICT	Participation	Sustainability	Xenophobia

Harry G. Frankfurt famously dedicated a whole book to bullshit. For Frankfurt, it is a *‘lack of connection to a concern with truth’* – this indifference to how things really are’ that he regards as the ‘essence of bullshit’ (Frankfurt 2005, 33–34, emphasis mine). For Frankfurt, however, the problem lies primarily in certain forms of social constructivism, which he deems flawed and destructive. But even if Frankfurt’s understanding of bullshit is somewhat at odds with

bullshit *à la* bullshit bingo: his emphasis on the indifference concerning the relation to the truthfulness of statements is also relevant for us, who are not naïve realists. When one looks at discourses on sustainability, globalization, or other societal issues, it is not so much conscious lying but the utter confusion and imprecision of many terms, sentences

and statements that transforms language into (bull)shit. The problem with bullshitting is hence not that it is outright lying – it is rather a complete indifference to the quality of verbal utterances. Often, the impact and effect of these statements is more important to those who utter them than their relation to reality, and yet, it is precisely such bullshit-infested discourses that seem very powerful at transforming our societies and having real (and often detrimental) effects. Grandiose phrasings, plastic words, misplaced metaphors – all these have become indispensable to any discussion of sustainability or globalization. For instance, consider the term ‘delinking’ or ‘decoupling’, which refers to the relationship between economic performance and environmental pressure (Luks 2005). In debates about the limits and potentials for growth in a finite world, ‘delinking’ is frequently used as a substitute for critical thinking about the nature of the problem. (It may be noteworthy that for Frankfurt, highfaluting utterances are not characteristic for bullshit, but are their *motive*. Bullshit is made, then, because one wants to come across as highfaluting.)

This begs the question of why is bullshitting so widely accepted. What kind of society accepts bullshit in public discourses, even in scientific discussions? Does the omnipresence of bullshit point to processes of denial in society? Could it be that bullshitting serves the disavowal of unpleasant realities? In her analysis of ‘neoliberal subjectivity’, Lynne Layton writes:

The capacity to hallucinate a way out of painful tension and inevitable environmental disappointments (...) can be a source of creativity, to be sure. But when that capacity becomes a regularly practiced disavowal of the truth of dependence, interdependence and vulnerability, we have the makings of a perverse situation. And this is precisely the situation created by the triumph of neoliberalism, and, more recently, in the United States, the triumph of neoconservatism (Layton 2010, 306).

While I am not very fond of the term ‘neoliberalism’, for it is an example *par excellence* for bullshitting in (pseudo)economic discourses – ‘market fundamentalism’ being a term much more appropriate, Layton’s point is obviously relevant for an analysis of bullshit’s role in society and the ‘perversion of truth’ that can be a consequence of bullshitting.

This brings us to the aforementioned aspect of quality. Shit can have very different colors, consistencies and odors – and this is also true for bullshit. The whole business of sustainability, responsibility, and so on has suffered from – economically speaking – an oversupply of bullshit. The rough, approximate, nonbinding, sometimes incorrect, have substantially reduced the quality of public and scientific discourses on these topics: precisely because bullshit is regularly detached from any concern with reality. A bullshitter can even use a wider range of statements than liars can. Frankfurt writes:

The liar is inescapably concerned with truth-values. In order to invent a lie at all, he must think he knows what is true. And in order to invent an effective lie, he must design his falsehood under the guidance of that truth. On the other hand, a person who undertakes to bullshit his way through has much more freedom. His focus is panoramic rather than particular (Frankfurt 2005, 51–2).

Full of Shit by the art photographer Lill-Ann Chepstow-Lusty, 2017.

So it is. The bullshitter is not sincere, but s/he is not a liar either; s/he is, well – bullshitting:

When an honest man speaks he says only what he believes to be true; and for the liar, it is correspondingly indispensable that he considers his statements to be false. For the bullshitter, however, all these bets are off: he is neither on the side of the truth nor on the side of the false. (...) He does not care whether things he says describe reality correctly. He just picks them out, or makes them up, to suit his purpose (Frankfurt 2005, 56).

Moreover, bullshit inhibits an appropriate understanding of societal problems and solutions. This is what makes it so popular among populists on all sides (Luks 2014). When anything means everything, in the end everything means nothing – and can thus be used for any purpose: such as disavowal of unpleasant facts. Bullshit, it could be said without much exaggeration, is part of the business model of many activists in fields such as sustainability, responsibility, and so forth – the very part that on one hand undermines their efforts, but on the other keeps them effectively in business, as it reproduces the very problem it pretends to aim to ameliorate.

Good Bullshit: the Accursed Share as Lubricant

*Perhaps it is for making death to intimate
that we find excrement to repulsive.*
(Harry G. Frankfurt)

Bullshit is not only omnipresent, it may also be, surprisingly, a *sine quo non* for all kinds of discourse. Since bullshit is always present, we may consider the possibility that it does in fact have some vital function. We do not speak here about the digestive products of male cattle. Bullshit is, of course, a *metaphor*. At the same time, the activity of bullshitting is itself shaped by its use of metaphors.

As Lakoff and Johnson (1980) have shown in their book *Metaphors We Live by*, our lives are structured by metaphors often in unsuspecting ways, in particular by spatial metaphors. Metaphors, Lakoff and Johnson argue, are very closely linked to our physical experiences (regarding the content of this volume of JEA, one is lead to think of defecating as an example). Our everyday lives, our interactions with the world, especially with fellow human beings, critically depend on the metaphors we use. The same, as Deidre (formerly Donald) McCloskey (1985, 1994) has shown in several brilliant contributions, is even true for economics, a discipline with a distinctive positivist self-image. Economics, of course, is a discourse that uses metaphors such as the invisible hand, equilibrium, green GDP or human capital (see also Luks 1998).

Apropos economics: like money, bullshit as language is a very fluid medium of symbolic communication. But very unlike money, bullshit as shit is worthless. In terms of value, (bull)shit as a physical substance can be viewed as the ultimate opposite of money. While money is a symbol, measure, and storage of wealth, shit is nothing like that. Indeed, shit is the ultimate *part maudite* – the accursed share (exceptions like artist's shit sold in cans just prove the rule). This is of course a central term of Bataille's (1991) theory of the 'general economy'. His theory is the opposite of what economists would call economics – for Bataille is concerned with what is, at first sight, without value, utility, productivity: it is accursed. That's why Bataille appropriately speaks of 'anti-economy'.

Hence it is not surprising that shit is indeed one of the materials Bataille deals with in his writings. Semen is another. Well, not semen as such. Semen used for making a child is obviously of the highest 'value' one could think of – and not of interest to Bataille whatsoever. Not so with sperm used *only* for fun. From another, say, some religious viewpoint, every cumshot is a waste by definition, because it is not used for its god-given purpose: instead of contributing to the reproduction of the human race, it is merely shown to a camera – and then wiped away: it in an accursed share *par excellence*.

Is all that also true for the shitty subcategory of lingual bull-shit? Yes and no. Yes, because shit is, as described above, the ultimate use-less matter, made for nothing and valueless by definition. No, because bullshit serves a certain function. One does not stretch the bullshit metaphor too far when one says that the physical attributes of shit (in this case: bull-shit), namely its high viscosity, make it a candidate for *lubricating* discourse: being not itself very meaningful, it serves to make discourse on meaning and interpretations of terms such as success, reform and sustainability fluid and functioning. It turns out that *we need bullshit*. It adds the slack and the redundancy that are vital for

any creative process. Bullshit is highly inefficient, and that makes it serve the efficacy of debates. When discussions slow down or even stall, bullshitting their way through can enable the discussants to continue. At most social science departments, for example, uttering works like ‘discourse’, ‘deconstruction’ or ‘diversity’ will do the job nicely. (Note that even shit, although considered highly unproductive, can, put on a garden or field, increase the productivity of the soil.)

On a closer inspection, then, bullshit might as well be a *sine qua non* for a discourse that produces not only bullshit but also meaning, value and transformational power: *without bullshit, there may be no discourse at all*. Bullshit serves as an instrument, a tool, a device that enables communication.

Conclusion: the Need for a New Theory of Bullshit

*However studiously and conscientiously
the bullshitter proceeds, it remains true that
he is also trying to get away with something*
(Harry G. Frankfurt)

The frequency of – implicitly or explicitly – playing ‘bullshit bingo’ in meetings and at conferences can serve as an empirical hint for the aforementioned theoretical considerations. Without this shitty device, debates about important contemporary economic and political topics may lead to the loo. Bullshitting turns out to be – albeit crabwise – a productive activity that utilizes totally un-economic, filthy matter to produce innovative and sometimes even elegant meaning.

But then, to do one more turn – maybe this is too much of an optimistic view. Considering, for example, the ‘bubbles’ many bullshit-ridden discourses appear to produce (e.g. the ‘sustainability bubble’), bullshit may be used to create a certain mood, a sense of belonging, a discursive community – is this the very ideological function of this kind of shit? Moreover, does bullshitting contribute to the disavowal of unpleasant realities? Is, then, bullshit really a *part maudite* which, in Bataille’s theory, contributes to something good – or is it merely unpleasant stuff that should be eliminated? Many questions arise that are beyond the scope of this paper. Hence, further research on the matter is urgently needed. You have to decide for yourself whether this idea is good, bad, or ugly – or just bullshit.

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