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Who Are The Guys Of Goodness, Earthling?

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Want to be polite when talking about others? Avoid demeaning them? Then check yourself when referring to a collection of people. Don't use a word or phrase beginning with "The." For example, steer clear of "The French." It's positively dehumanizing.

That was the advice of the Associated Press, which in late January tweeted an addition to its venerable and influential style book:

We recommend avoiding general and often dehumanizing 'the' labels such as the poor, the mentally ill, the French, the disabled, the college-educated. Instead, use wording such as people with mental illnesses. And use these descriptions only when clearly relevant.

The mockery began almost immediately. The French ambassador to the United States responded that he was toying with changing the name of his workplace in Washington to “the Embassy of Frenchness in the US.” A Huffington Post headline summed up the reaction: “Associated Press steps in The Merde.”

The Sensibles executed a quick about face—for “The French,” that is, exempting the people of France from the advisory. Lauren Easton, AP’s VP of corporate communications, offered this explanation to *Le Monde*, the leading French newspaper: “The reference to ‘the French,’ as well as the reference to ‘the college educated’ is an effort to show that labels shouldn’t be used for anyone, whether they are traditionally or stereotypically viewed as positive, negative or neutral.”

The explanation may strike you as a bit mystifying. Don’t use labels? Then how are we to adjudicate between the good guys and the bad? I offer to be known henceforth as a Guy of Goodness, but I doubt my coinage will find its way into The Readily Accepted or The Quickly Acknowledged. I’m not likely to sneak in the guys of goodness under the guise of goodness.

Don’t use labels even if they are viewed as positive or at least neutral? The Heroic may reject you. The Dubious may doubt you. And what will The Public Intellectual do without The Social Imaginary?

Okay, I shouldn’t be cute. Or misleading. Despite what she said, Ms. Easton was not really talking about all labels that might be applied to a person. What about all those high school trophies and plaques: Outstanding Athlete; Most Creative Writer? She was talking about the AP recommendation not to use adjectives masquerading as nouns

following the word “the.” That’s a narrower category. So why not?

Because it makes no sense, as you will find if you spend any time at all webbling around. To take but one obvious example, see Edward Pearson’s new book from the University of Pennsylvania Press: *The Enslaved and Their Enslavers*. Would it really make a difference to a reader were an AP story to refer instead to the “enslaved people and those who enslaved them.” Is it dehumanizing to refer to “the physically fit”? Does saying “people who are physically fit” help? Or “the well-rested” or “the well-traveled”?

In a third tweet on the subject, the AP managed this: “Writing French people, French citizens, etc., is good. But ‘the’ terms for any people can sound dehumanizing and imply a monolith rather than diverse individuals.”

There are two different claims here. The first is false on its face. The second gets at a different problem that may or may not be solved by the AP’s rule.

Joshua Katz, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, succinctly pointed to the falsity of the first argument:

The grandees at the AP seem to believe that if you replace “the French” with “French people,” without “the,” you are somehow humanizing them. This is sophistry: No one fails to think of French people when confronted with “the French love camembert.”

The second problem is more perplexing. The AP casts it as an issue of hiding the diversity that exists among any human population. It seems to me more sensible to understand it as a claim that the terser phrase (“the French”) is not necessarily accurate when the predicate gets attached. “The poor suffer from malnutrition.” Some, perhaps many, do—but not all. “The college-educated get good jobs.” Likewise. But the substitute phrase “poor people” does not bring to the fore any diversity that should rightly be voiced, whatever the sentence asserts. “Poor people suffer from malnutrition” does not change a reader’s understanding one whit. The problem is not that the reader will fail to see those minority of poor people who are well fed, or somehow be led to think of peasants in a far-off land and ignore starving neighbors of whatever ethnicity. The problem, as Katz notes, is one of overgeneralization. The poor do not all starve; the college-educated do not all get jobs; the mentally ill do not all suffer from the same malady or act in response to it in the same way. Then say that: “Many poor people suffer from malnutrition.” “Most college-educated people find jobs.”

But wait: the French aren’t the only people who love camembert. Are we ignoring, disparaging, dehumanizing all these others when we use too specific a phrase? Are we missing the diversity that abounds both in France (“some people in France loathe camembert”) and beyond its shores (“many people throughout the world adore camembert”)? Should we not be saying, instead, this: “People everywhere throughout the world dote on camembert, especially most people in France (or who are indigenous to France even though living beyond its borders at the moment, or permanently).” To shorten some of the phrases, since such sentences would be awkward repeated too often, we are really talking about “Earthlings.” So say:

“Earthlings, especially many clustering in France, love camembert.” An added advantage to the word is that it is never coupled with “the.” We say “earthlings” do so and so, not “the earthlings.” Unless, of course, we’re extraterrestrials, pointing to a specific specimen: “the earthling there.” It gets complicated.

Over to you, AP.