



**THE BLOG** 07/05/2010 03:08 pm ET | Updated May 25, 2011

# Springtime for Schmucks



By Marty Kaplan

If I hadn't seen the word plastered on a billboard on La Brea Avenue, I would never have remotely considered using it in print myself. But there it is, in a five-foot font, just a few miles from the West Hollywood club where Lenny Bruce was arrested for saying it in 1963. Soon, no doubt, promoting a movie that will open on July 30, it will be seen on buses and benches and 30-second television ads airing in family-friendly prime time, and on the robotic lips of Mr. Moviefone: "Please confirm your order! You have purchased TWO tickets for the 7:20 showing of DINNER FOR SCHMUCKS."

Whether this constitutes a deeply troubling milestone in the coarsening of American culture depends on two things.

The first is whether the word really is obscene. It is arguable that its original meaning - a Yiddish profanity for penis, often part of an insult beginning with "You are such a - " and ending with an exclamation point - has been so diluted by widespread usage that nowadays it's no more offensive than any other common synonym for "jerk." This would explain why, at High Holy Day services at my synagogue last year, the associate rabbi, a lovely mother of three young children, could innocently say the word from the pulpit without imagining for a moment that it would cause the shocked sharp intake of breath among half the congregants that followed.

Languages are living organisms. They evolve. A generation or two ago, network censors wouldn't let shows use words like "pregnant" or "abortion" during prime time. For a long time, words like "suck" and "crap" were beyond the public pale. Presidents once used "ass" and its compound variants only when they thought the microphone was off, or in off-the-record trash-talk designed to macho up their images. Until quite recently, elected officials wouldn't dream of saying on television the synonym for turd that George Carlin included among the "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television." But today — from Barack Obama and Joe Biden, to senators Jim Bunning, Clair McCaskill and Carl Levin — the boundaries of acceptable discourse have been remapped.

Is a pushback against profanity-creep as laughable as King Canute telling the tide to stop? Is it pretty much inevitable that dirty words will migrate from the mouths of radio shock-jocks to the mouths of babes and the billboards of La Brea? After all, if the definition of dirty is socially constructed, there's no reason it can't be socially reconstructed, and that includes the judges and watchdogs who map and patrol these borders. I don't think we've suddenly found ourselves on a linguistic slippery slope. That's where language always is, and it's up to the perennial culture wars - in which everyone, not just the puritans, has the right to play a part - to ceaselessly keep sorting this stuff out.

The second issue here is how much any of this matters. Is civilization really imperiled if bad words - that is, somebody's idea of bad words, words that kids and parents hear and use every day — are tolerated or glamorized in pop culture and the public sphere?

I'm inclined to argue the counter to that. Some nights, on shows like *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* and *South Park*, it seems as though every fourth word has four letters beginning with f. (They're bleeped out, but that hardly matters; if anything, the faux-censorship only adds to their punch.) Those shows provide some of the most caustic and devastating satire that the media offer these days. Reining in their language would only further prove their point about the hypocrisy of the cultural arbiters and correctness nannies on both left and right.

Saying this doesn't commit me to defending hate speech. Speech can be misogynist, homophobic or anti-Semitic whether or not it's potty-mouthed. Nor am I dismissing the intent of parents who want to raise their kids in a culturally safe harbor, though it strikes me that the filtering necessary to accomplish that these days amounts to the renunciation of electricity, travel, news, entertainment and every other risk of secular contamination.

In 2007, *The Onion* reported that Mel Brooks was starting a foundation to save the word schmuck. He revealed some startling poll results: "Only 23 percent of men know what schmuck means, and only 1.2 percent of these men are under the age of 78. If such trends continue, ... by 2011, such lesser-used terms as 'imbecile,' 'dummy,' 'schlub,' and 'contemptible ne'er-do-well' will all surpass schmuck, which is projected to completely disappear by the year 2020." The Facebook page supporting his campaign, it must be admitted, has at this writing attracted only 64 members.

The Mel Brooks-*Onion* "Schmucks for Schmucks" crusade makes me laugh. So why was I startled to see the word on a billboard and hesitant about repeating it in print? Probably because - like a lot of people, I suspect - I don't like confronting the fact that most of the strictures hammered into me when I was a kid turn out to be cultural and political, rather than natural and eternal. It's so much more comforting to believe that our rules are transcendent instead of tribal, that our morals aren't just mores. Life would be so much easier if the social contract didn't have to be renegotiated every 20 minutes, if the sanctions said to be written in stone weren't actually written on earth.

It's perfectly appropriate for me, or anyone, to declaim the moving of the profanity goalposts, and to try to push them back. That's what being in the cultural and political fray is all about. The key is not to confuse dismay with righteousness, not to equate satire with sinfulness, not to criminalize boundary-testing, not to

mistake nostalgia for a simpler time with signs that the apocalypse is nigh. After all, it's much more appealing to imagine you're protecting civilization as we know it than to acknowledge that you're actually being - to use another Yiddish word - a bit of an *altacocker*.

UPDATE: Thanks to a reader, amended to note the "Schmucks for Schmucks" campaign's origin in *The Onion*.

*This is my column from The Jewish Journal of Greater Los Angeles. You can read more of my columns here, and e-mail me there if you'd like.*

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