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LANGUAGE AS AN EXPRESSION OF IDEOLOGY:  
A CRITIQUE OF A NEO-MARXIST VIEW

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The role of language in human experience has been a central concern of most of the major thinkers in the history of Western thought. However, it is only recently that language has been examined in terms of its relation to the various dimensions of societal organization. But it can hardly be said that this concern has had a great impact on either social and political thinkers or social scientists in general, at least in the United States and in Great Britain. Rather, those who do concern themselves with language are influenced much more by the general orientation of what is known as the "ordinary-language analysis" school, rooted in the later work of Ludwig Wittgenstein. This concern is primarily philosophical, emphasizing that linguistic analysis and conceptual clarification are the key elements in understanding human action. While this orientation is not antithetical to approaches which assume a more structural or institutional point of departure, it has not led to any major contributions in the analysis of the structure of power. Thus, with a few exceptions, the role of language and communication has not been concerned of as primarily political nor linked to the structural dimensions of power.

In a recent book treating the United States, entitled *The Politics of Communication* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), Claus Mueller attempts to rectify this situation by placing his general discussion of the political role of language, its relationship to the political socialization process,

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and how both of these relate to the political structure within the context of the need for the political system to legitimize itself. Although Mueller's conception of legitimacy as an integrating factor does not differ in formal terms from the orthodox views of social scientists such as Talcott Parsons, Seymour Lypset and David Easton, he clearly evaluates this function quite differently. Whereas they see this function as providing for desirable stability, Mueller, while arguing that it provides stability, evaluates this function negatively because he is critical of the contemporary forms of the organization of power particularly in advanced capitalist societies. He argues that we need to study language, socialization, and the communication process as an integral part of the legitimating strategies which are used by the ruling class to maintain their power and the existing mode of domination. Thus, Mueller's work falls within the complex of concerns to which Antonio Armisci, Marcuse, Adorno, Horheimer and recently Jurgen Habermas have addressed themselves and which basically revolve about one question: why has the proletarian revolution which Marx predicted not come about? The general answer is that while the material conditions for a revolution may have existed historically, the level of political consciousness of the masters has not. Let me turn, then, to a review of Mueller's basic argument, and conclude by making some suggestions regarding the relevance of the work to the study of the Chicano within the context of advanced capitalist society.

Mueller contends that the primary problem in advanced capitalist societies is that of establishing and maintaining legitimacy, i.e., of engendering in the masses the belief that the institutions and processes which allocate the basic resources are acceptable and have the right to do so. What this effort requires to establish and maintain legitimacy is that all political systems have a structure of domination, which Mueller defines as "the control of a limited number of individuals over the material resources of society and over the access to positions of political power." Legitimacy, then, is a way of conferring authority on structures of domination, a way of trying to justify the unequal distribution of power, rewards and deprivations. Mueller further argues that this legitimacy process is clearly rooted in the conflicting needs and demands of different groups within the class structure: "By obfuscating the link between a system of domination and the class--or group--specific interests this system serves, any legitimacy rationale has an ideological foundation" (p. 130).

The legitimacy process, therefore, is a major source at the stability of the existing structure of domination. When the legitimacy of the system begins to break down, as Mueller contends has occurred in advanced capitalist societies, its stability is threatened. The elite who control the centers of power must attempt to reestablish legitimacy and ensure that

stability is reinforced. This means, of course, that dissent and demands which question the boundaries of legitimacy must somehow be negated or prevented from surfacing. The reaction can and has often been repression. But a much more effective and efficient means for preventing or diffusing these challenges to the power structure is to absorb them into the system. What Mueller is examining in his work, then, is the proposition that the structure of communication, sociolinguistic factors, and socialization patterns can be used to explain how a political system is capable of absorbing these types of demands and dissent before they become a threat to its stability. Contrary to the classical Marxist argument, Mueller argues that it is the middle and upper-middle classes, not the working class which are the source of these challenges. Again, the concern is one that continues to probe the problem of why the proletarian revolution has not materialized and why it appears that it is in fact the working class that is most supportive of the status quo.

Mueller is suggesting that the answer lies in the relationship between language, socialization patterns and political consciousness. Mueller is not arguing that it is not the working class which is most oppressed or has the most cause for revolting but is instead attempting to account for why it has not.

In his attempt to demonstrate the dynamics underlying the integration of the working class into the supportive structure of society, Mueller develops a model of what he calls distorted communication, which "designates all forms of restructured and prejudicial communication that by their nature inhibit a full discussion of problems, issues, and ideas that have public relevance" (p. 19). Three basic forms of distorted communication are identified: directed, arrested, and constrained. The first, directed communication, results when governmental policy is directed at structuring language and communication. It is the direct attempt to influence the use of language and interpretational schemes by means of overt governmental intervention in the mass media and the schooling system. Examples of this type of control, Mueller argues, can be found in fascist Germany under Hitler. The second type, arrested communication, refers "to the limited capacity of individuals and groups to engage in political communication because of the nature of their linguistic environment (a restricted speech code) and not because of any apparent political intervention" (p. 19). Constrained communication "denotes successful attempts by private and governmental groups to structure and limit public communication in order that their interests prevail" (p. 19). It is with the latter two forms that Mueller is primarily concerned, devoting separate lengthy chapters to an analysis of each. It is the chapter on arrested communication, where he investigates the political function of linguistic codes and socialization patterns, however, that contains the basic argument.

The basic concern in the analysis of arrested communication is an attempt to relate language, linguistic ability, and socialization patterns to class structure. Mueller adapts Basil Bernstein's distinction between an "elaborated" language code and a "restricted" code. The restricted code designates a basic language form which reflects primarily descriptive thinking patterns and a greatly diminished ability to engage in abstract reasoning and analysis. It is distinguished by a high degree of predictability and repetitiveness, with a very low level of verbal alternatives available to the speaker. "This mode of speech is marked by grammatical simplicity, uniform vocabulary, short and often redundant sentences, a scarcity of adjectives and adverbs, repetitive use of conjunctions, and comparatively little verbal differentiation or symbolism. The capacity to formulate generalizations is therefore restricted" (p. 56). The elaborated language code, on the other hand, allows for analytic perception and discrimination and for widely varied expression of meaning. In comparison to the qualities of the restricted code, the elaborated code has such features as more precise use of grammar and syntax, higher complexity of sentence structure and of qualifying conjunctions, relative clauses and prepositions, careful use of adjectives and adverbs. The restricted code, Mueller argues, leads to arrested communication since the resources available for conceiving of and expressing ideas are underdeveloped. The individual or group characterized by a restricted code will find it extremely difficult to perceive perceptual and cognitive alternatives to that supplied by the code and therefore their ability to generalize and to use an abstract mode of understanding will be limited. The political significance of this, Mueller suggests, is that they will be unable to exceed cognitively those social relationships from which the code develops. Those who rely on an elaborated code can make use of its analytic function and have a great potential for perceiving distinctions and grasping generalizations. Mueller attempts to demonstrate that these different linguistic codes are rooted in the class structure. These codes, which are "separated by lexical, syntactic, and conceptual boundaries--reinforce the social structure by shaping the speaker's personal and social identity" (p. 58). The argument is that most of the factors which underlie "the acquisition of a restricted code are a product of socioeconomic deprivation characterized of lower-class groups" (p. 59). The conclusion is that the reliance of the working class on a restricted language code prevents them from developing or accepting an analysis of the roots of their exploitation, which would require the ability to conceptualize abstractly and make generalizations and which Mueller argues is the first step in transcending their social context.

In addition to his review of empirical studies which attempt to identify the variables which link language to class, Mueller

also reviews the general literature on political socialization which has established that the lower class pattern of socialization is characterized by rigid role structures, a high degree of conformity, authoritarian value structures, etc. Mueller argues that in most cases the restricted language code co-exists with this particular socialization pattern, whereas the elaborated language code seems to co-exist with much more flexible role structures and socialization strategies. This simply reinforces, Mueller contends, the impact of the restricted code on the working class. Their ability to analyze their situation and to offer resistance and/or alternatives to the given legitimacy rationale is thus severely constrained and in all likelihood, the existing structure of domination in which the working class occupies a subordinate position, is accepted by them.

Marx, of course, initially formulated the basic parameters of the problem to which Mueller has addressed himself. Marx argued that a radical critique of capitalist society had to precede the revolution and in developing his position, he stated, the classic formulation of the relationship between theory (or analysis) and practice which he referred to as "praxis." In his "critique of Hegels' *Philosophy of Right*," Marx stated:

It is clear that the arm of criticism cannot replace the criticism of arms. Material force can only be overthrown by material force; but theory itself becomes a material force when it has seized the masses. Theory is capable of seizing the masses when it demonstrates *ad hominem*, and it demonstrates *ad hominem* as soon as it becomes radical. To be radical is to grasp things by the root. But for man the root is man himself.

It is when the masses (and in this case, this clearly means the working class) come to understand their condition in terms of the Marxist analysis of the structure of domination, complete with the approximate material conditions of existence, that the proletarian revolution is possible. Anything that prevents the development of this political consciousness, thus also prevents the working class from realizing its revolutionary potential. It is clear, then, that Mueller's argument seeks to shed light on this issue. But whereas Marx believed that the false consciousness of the working class could be overcome, Mueller concludes that it is extremely unlikely that this can come about. Rather, he contends that the middle and upper-middle class are more likely to provide, understand, and accept the radical critique of capitalism advanced by Marxism. But what Mueller fails to ask is if they are more likely to do so, is there any real reason to expect that they will?

Since the majority of Chicanos are in the working class, Mueller's analysis should obviously be of interest to those who are concerned with the potential for basic change that exists in the Chicano community. In addition to this, the fact that an analysis of language is central to Mueller's argument makes it seem clearer that it should be examined since the Chicano community is still largely bilingual. Now the apparent implication of the central proposition which runs through the analysis is that since Chicanos fit into the category of the working-class, then Mueller's analysis of language codes and socialization patterns should apply to this group. In other words, one should expect that the Chicano's language code be restricted rather than elaborated, and that the socialization process be characterized by inflexible role structures and values. It is fair to say that Mueller would expect this to be the case. However, Mueller seriously overlooks some of the implications of his own argument that those groups that have available alternative language codes and set of symbols are much more likely to provide the basic challenge to the system's legitimacy. By virtue of having a bilingual structure, the Chicano community has a readily available alternative code and thus it seems that Mueller would be forced by the logic of his argument, to conclude that a group which should not, according to his analysis, be a potential catalyst to social change possesses the most crucial characteristic (again, according to Mueller) for challenging the status quo. Mueller apparently believes he has adequately addressed the issue by virtually dismissing the role of minority groups in the process of social and political change in one sentence.

But the political status and the economic position of these (minority) groups in the process of production are marginal and render them secondary in an analysis of system stability (p. 6).

This may or may not be the case, but Mueller must certainly be faulted for dismissing the whole issue of minority dissent in such a casual way especially since it is his stated objective to analyze how such dissent is absorbed into the system.

Another aspect which Mueller has overlooked and needs some elaboration is the fact that the language of the "middle-class" norm (or the elaborated code) in many cases will not reflect the actual analytic ability which is claimed to be a corresponding characteristic but rather will simply reflect the learning of a language "fashion" or style. This is more an element of form than content and indicates that the relation between the theory Mueller adopts and the reality he tries to account for is a tenuous one. What this means for those who are studying the Chicano is that the straight application of the type of approach found in Mueller's analysis to that

population would already bias the types of findings that would result. As already pointed out, what would more than likely be concluded is that Chicanos rely on a restricted code, that the language they use reflects an "impoverished" environment. To be sure this would warm the heart of the liberal (and even some "progressive") "educators." What would be overlooked, however, is exactly the relation between the Chicano's sound economic and political reality and the language relied on to interpret and understand it, the relationship which is ostensibly the prime focus. The use of Mueller's framework is quite likely to increase the probability that the researcher will depend on the woefully inadequate and for the most part distorted "ethnographic" material on the Chicano for the data to fill out the image they adopt of Chicano reality, and consequently distort the nature of the relationship between that "reality" and the language used to comprehend and express it. At least it has to be considered that the "impoverished" Chicano environment that may be seen by the researcher is in fact simply a "different" environment, requiring no less, and perhaps in some instances greater, analytic and expressive abilities. The work of Labov on Black-children and language variability stands as one of the few contributions that suspends the presupposition of the minority culture's inferiority and concludes that given their own environment and context, the differences in linguistic ability between Blacks and Anglos is not decisive at all.

It should be emphasized again that the assumption made here is that any serious study of the Chicano must deal with the issue of *and* role of language as the mediating factor between the Chicano's objective conditions of existence and the subjective perception and understanding of those conditions. While Mueller does not, in my opinion, provide an adequate framework for doing this, he nevertheless does stress the crucial point that without an appropriate perception and awareness at the subjective level of the nature and roots of their deprivation, oppressed groups such as Chicanos will not develop into the catalyst and, eventually, agents of social change necessary to overcome these conditions.