

SYMBOL SECRECY AND SELF DENIAL: A CASE OF SOCIAL CONTROL

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We are concerned about an increasingly evident trend toward social and individual domination. The concomitant growth of technology, specialized language structures, and consumerism is replacing individual self-definition with external directives. These directives dictate self and social definition. As language becomes specialized the means whereby individuals can form self-definitions become limited.

The focus upon the dual process of technology and consumerism as delimiting language structures should not be construed to be exclusive. Several other variables function in a similar manner (Barnes, 1977; Ewen, 1976; Parenti, 1978, 1980; Scimecca, 1981). Further, persons have traditionally relied upon categorical demands to provide direction in self-definition. What is argued here is a matter of degree. External demands have come to dominate internal personal directives. Thus, serious delimitation of self and social reality results.

LANGUAGE AS A PARTIAL REFLECTION

Thought and action are not exclusively independent entities. A supposition that they are is akin to the mind/body split elaborated upon by Des Cartes. Thought and action sometimes overlap. This does not imply that the two exist isomorphically. Alternatively, thought and action are not indetical. This is not to say that they exist as a duality or in a polemic relation. The reflexive capability of our thinking may not result in overt action. Thought and action may exist independently or there may be a direct relation between them. It would seem that overt action is but a part of our thinking which, in turn, cannot be the sum total of our awareness. We have a tendency to equate action with awareness. Thus action is construed to be total, rather than a partial reflection.

Voeglin (1978) describes a "luminous tension" or "experiencing in time." He posits the existence of an everpresent tension between our perceptive capacity and our struggle to make sense of our surroundings. The tool commonly used as an interpretive mechanism

is language, or a logically related system of symbols. "Classification, a fundamental human act is the foundation of science, as well as the basis of everyday life...Classification creates pragmatic degrees of order and regularity as people seek to define the world about them as humanly meaningful and significant...By codifying the object of existence, mapping 'reality,' human communities use language to introduce and maintain order in everyday life experience; thus what would otherwise appear tenuous, problematic and transitory, becomes patterned, predictable, and precise." (Turner & Edgley, 1980:595).

Language, as so aptly stated here, is a manifestation of individual efforts to lend order to the surroundings. But our interpretation of "life" or the "tension" referred to by Voeglin (1978) is ultimately reductionistic on two accounts. We experience, via our sensory apparatus, only a small part of the possible range of environmental phenomena. Our vision is limited to certain distances, and our hearing to a certain range of decibels. Our interpretation arising out of the confusion is only a partial interpretation subject to the logical limitations of language. We assume that all aspects of the world are logical and that our linguistic system is directly applicable. We are determined to shape the world and the environment to conform to our limited, logically integrated linguistic system assuming a total, rather than a partial, reflection of reality. It is wrong to consider either language or action as total reflection.

KNOWLEDGE AND SOCIAL VALIDATION

At an elementary level, we organize a possible interpretation of what exists and validate our interpretation *socially*, either at a reflexive level or through the process of *social* interaction. The crucial element of this account is the *social* nature of this validation process. Chapman (1979) elaborates upon the consequences of mandated, non-social, bureaucratically dictated definitions of the situation. The process of definition that Thomas (1969) envisioned involves a *reciprocal* social relationship with inherent conflict between the indi-

vidual's spontaneous definition and the socially agreed upon definition of a particular situation. In interaction, whether it involves reflexivity or overt social communication, a suitable definition is agreed upon and continues to be further refined. Reciprocal social dialogue is essential if both of the persons' contributions to the development of a mutual understanding of the situation are to be considered. In the absence of reciprocal dialogue, the end product is a war between the imposition of a one-way, bureaucratic directive versus the ability of the individual to form an alternate view (Chapman, 1979). If our ability to structure our awareness and social definitions is contingent on linguistic tools, then limiting the number of socially valid constructs, and definitions, certainly limits our awareness.

We are concerned with the use of language as a weapon to limit and ultimately destroy the ability of people to form individual definitions of reality. Limited awareness is becoming further reduced without the benefit of social validation. This process is being accomplished under the guise of a rhetoric of "social" validation which, upon close examination, lacks a truly social component.

LANGUAGE OF TECHNOLOGY

There seems to be a direct relation between technological growth, particularly via specialization, and the growth of an accompanying system of language. New kinds of equipment and processes need new descriptive terms. This plethora of highly specialized new terms has led to a parade of specialists, including sociologists (Turner and Edgley, 1980), expounding upon a series of non-socially validated definitions of reality.

Horkheimer (1941) and Lukacs (1971) have extensively elaborated upon the presentation of modern industrial society as the world of facts. These facts turn people away from their own needs, speculation on the solution of these needs, and self-determination. Facts imply truth, and if the facts are supported by an imposing array of specialists using sophisticated means of communication, individual compliance, or a lack of alternative action may be misjudged to be synonymous with agreement.

Goffman (1959:66) asserts that impression management is an integral part of routine daily acts: "Whether an honest performer wishes to

convey the truth or whether a dishonest performer wishes to convey a falsehood, both must take care to enliven their performances with appropriate expressions, exclude from their performances expressions that might discredit the impression being fostered, and take care lest the audience impute unintended meanings."

Whether the intended impression is accepted by the audience as valid depends, in part, on the credibility of the performer. If a specialist is armed with indisputable facts, his credibility is certainly enhanced and the particular impression being managed may be accepted, apparently, without question. If the audience does not outwardly discredit the performance, the performer imputes agreement, which should more properly be termed compliance. Bauman (1976) refers to this artificial social agreement as "second nature" which is, in turn, elevated above social definitions legitimately formed in *reciprocal* social interaction.

Historically, we have created a social and intellectual climate favorable to a pragmatic, rational definition of reality, and less favorably inclined toward individual, "non-rational" definitions of reality. What is "socially right" is professed in the absence of social validation through the effective use of language.

Control, previously guaranteed by ideological dictates (ie. the awesome will of the gods) is now grounded in "free choice" pursued for the sake of well understood and rationally assessed goals and personally assessed interests. *Second nature*, then, is a mysterious, artificial "social" reality lacking social validation but none-the-less obeyed via the dictates of reason and rationality. Through an emphasis upon a market place self definition couched in a rhetoric of social acceptability people are led to believe that they will present an image which is approved of by others. The term, social, is elevated to a level of abstraction far removed from individual actors, to a Durkheimian notion of "social" or "society." This process is divorced from the individual level of self definition and awareness which is arrived at through reciprocal and reflexive interaction with others.

If individual knowing is equated with an impersonal, abstracted "knowing," then not to possess these "social" ideations is to be an individual without knowledge. The essence of

this subtle control and domination becomes a question of language control and manipulation. An individual who accepts a mandated self definition, without the recourse of social validation, is inviting a gradual movement toward a non-social world.

THE CASE OF ADVERTISING

If individual production is to increase at accelerated levels, there must also be an increase in consumption and/or consumers. Advertising, directed toward increased consumption, represents a particular method of creating limited language structures as discussed above. Mass advertising transmits fictitious social knowledge through the use of a specialized language. The basis of advertising is to undermine individual identity and simultaneously provide a "product" solution to this apparent personal inadequacy. Ewen (1976:162) describes the technique used by advertisers to persuade potential consumers that their brand is superior. The knowledge of the person must be negated in order to offer a viable substitute. This is accomplished, again, in a subtle fashion but the result — the elimination of the possibility for alternative definitions — is every bit as devastating. Mander (1978:5) actively opposes a "neutral" interpretation of technological growth.

In the case of television advertising, the millions spent on the technological advancement of a communication mode and the development of specialized language patterns, have ensured an inability of people to distinguish between image reality and reality as experienced. Our particular brand of technological advancement requires consumption. We are led to believe that life is to be consumed, not experienced. We are presented with absolutes such as "cheese adds a slice of life" without metaphorical modification. There is no room for choice. Is cheese life the only possible life? We can rest assured that if we are not happy with cheese life we can easily obtain a coke life. Apparently "Coke adds life" when cheese life does not quite make it.

Technology serves us well as a buffer between ourselves and our environment. Ellul (1971:389) describes the effect of a coming monolithic technical world. The "new order," an intermediary between man and nature, has evolved autonomously in such a way that man

has lost all contact with his natural framework and has to do only with the organized technical intermediary ... man finds that there is 'no exit'; that he cannot pierce the shell of technology to find again the ancient milieu to which he was adapted for hundreds of thousands of years."

The problem is that we are divorced from experiencing life to the extent that we purchase the limited version of "socially approved" product life. This brand of life is offered via a highly specialized mode of communication complete with "close-ups," special effects, and volume control designed to capture our attention as well as our consciousness. We are offered a new self, directly obtainable through product consumption. With "Oil of Olay" we can be younger in a society which holds youth in such esteem that it has become both an industrial ideal and a cult.

Mass media advertising is but a single example of the growth of a specialized language used to effectively limit consciousness. Medicine represents another field characterized by rapid technological advancement, particularly in the subarea speciality of oncology, or cancer treatment.

THE CASE OF ONCOLOGY

We have turned the responsibility for caring for our bodies over to health care specialists. Consequently, we become unable to monitor our bodily functions. Sontag (1977) graphically describes the preponderance of metaphorical language used to describe cancer as an illness. This particular disease is often referred to as a "thing" foreign from the body to be attacked in a warlike metaphorical sense through radiation bombardment. The medical community, through the use of language fostering a separation from the body, has effectively irradiated individual responsibility for the awareness and treatment of the disease. A diagnosis of cancer is akin to a death sentence. The possibility of cancer in the body, entirely random in occurrence, engenders terror and uncertainty.

Oncologists such as Kissen (1967), Klopfer (1957) and Simonton (1978) question the efficacy of divorcing cancer from the body and are attempting to restore a measure of patient responsibility for its treatment. It appears that there may be a link between stress and both the occurrence of cancer and the proliferation

of cancerous cells in the body. Apparently, under conditions of extended stress or "confusion," the body's ability to defend itself against the growth of masses of mutant cells is retarded. Perhaps cancer should be viewed as a result as inhibited bodily function rather than "attack" by uncontrollable mutant cells. A more positive prognosis may lead to more positive metaphorical descriptors and, ultimately, a lower stress level in cancer patients.

This relatively new perspective in cancer research has received little medical attention — perhaps because it is divorced from the prominent physiological emphasis and disease model of the clinical mentality (Freidson, 1970). It is tragic, that ideological difference in disease causation that deny deviation from the dominant clinical definition of cancer has led to ignorance of a treatment method potentially promising results. Certainly a treatment method advocating restoration of individual competence in marshalling natural immunological resources varies considerably from the currently unsuccessful emphasis upon radical intervention: drug and radiation therapy. The refusal to deal with cancer as being a part of an individual alienates the person from his own treatment. The result is a lack of personal knowledge of and responsibility for health care.

CONCLUSION

We have two choices: first, an effort to restore personal and social knowledge, and second, acquiescence to "second nature" and conventional "social knowledge." The former runs contrary to our current ideological commitments. Optimistically, as thought and action may exist independently, individual thinking may lead to alternative actions that challenge restrictive views of reality. Alternatively, linguistic tools will continue to become limited to those conducive to an imputed non-social self. We should be warned that scientific facts, social facts, and facts in general implicitly lead to the conclusion that no further dialogue is necessary.

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