

Macros and PC's:
A Last-Ditch Attempt to Salvage Ideological Critique

by
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I am one of those dinosaurs who still use Wordstar as a word processing program. In the Wordstar program there is a utility that permits a user to define a macro - that is to say, a series of characters associated with a single one or two stroke command. When I have finished writing a letter, for example, I simply press "Escape-C." On the screen appears "tab, tab, tab, Sincerely yours, comma, return, return, return, tab, tab, tab, Robert Paul Wolff." Another macro command prints out "tab, tab, tab, Professor of Afro-American Studies and Philosophy," and yet a third produces "tab, tab, tab, University of Massachusetts, Amherst."

This Macro utility is a great convenience to me. It permits me to produce a standardized bit of text without mistakes and without much thought. I have ten or twelve such macros stored somewhere in the Wordstar program. I often think that George Orwell would have been quite delighted by the phenomenon of the macro, had he lived long enough to see it. In his great essay, "Politics and the English Language," written in 1946, Orwell, you will recall, talks about the corruption of political thought and language that is manifested in the mindless repetition of standardized phrases. He gives lots of examples, such as "a consideration which we should do well to bear in mind," and "bloodstained tyranny," and "achieve a radical transformation," and "leaves much to be desired." Had he written the essay only a few years later, he could have added "the free world," and "communist dictatorship," and perhaps "tax and spend liberal." He would have enjoyed the idea of politicians - or their speech writers - programming these and other phrases into their computers

as macros, so that they could be produced by a single keystroke or two with no thought whatsoever. We Kant scholars have some rather specialist cant phrases for which macros might be appropriate - my favorite is "conditions of the possibility of experience in general."

These reflections were prompted, several semesters ago, by an incident in a seminar I was teaching on ideological critique. The participants were a group of extremely intelligent and widely read graduate students - all impeccably radical. Despite my heroic efforts to focus their attention on particular, concrete examples, such as the controversy that has developed among ethnographers of the northern Kalahari desert, the students persisted in speaking and writing in the most suffocatingly abstract and stereotypical fashion. Things finally blew up when one member of the class, making a class presentation, referred in passing to "racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia." The phrase rolled off his tongue as though the individual words were simply syllables of one great polysyllable - stuck together by some sort of syntactical glue. Everyone in the class was quite comfortable with the phrase. It seemed to me that they found it reassuring, rather in the way little children snuggle down in bed when they hear "Once upon a time." All except a rather abrasive German student who interrupted to protest that she, for one, had nothing against classism. Indeed, she said, she regularly judged people according to their economic class, and thought it quite the right way to go about things.

The class came to a dead halt, and no one knew what to say. None of the students had ever heard anyone question the appropriateness of the phrase "racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia," used as a term of opprobrium. It was as though, in the middle of a class preparing little Catholic boys and girls for First Communion, a smart-mouthed trouble maker had piped up and said, "I can take the Father and the Son, but you can keep the Holy Ghost."

I pounced on the intervention - as the French have taught us to call it when a student says something in class - and did everything I could to make it the occasion for a searching

examination of unacknowledged ideological presuppositions. That was, after all, the subject matter of the course. But it was a total flop. I simply couldn't get the students to see how mind-numbingly banal, how drained of all genuine thought, that phrase had become. I could not even get them to attune their ears to the ugliness of it as language.

Freud says somewhere, talking about the dynamics of psychoanalytic therapy, that if there is a single topic that it is not permitted to examine in an analysis, sooner or later the entire analysis comes to be about that topic. I have always found this a profound insight into what happens in the classroom as well. A classroom in which it is socially or pedagogically unacceptable to question the appropriateness of the phrase "racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia" is a classroom in which neither real teaching nor real learning can take place. It is like a classroom at a Catholic university in which teachers are free to explore every conceivable subject - except the legitimacy of abortion. It is like the huge introduction to neo-classical economics at Harvard, presided over by former Chairman of the President's Council of Economic Advisors Martin Feldstein, who announced, when he returned from his duties in Washington, that the purpose of the course was to teach *that* the market works - not *how* it works, mind you, but *that* it works.

There are a number of ways in which an orthodoxy can be imposed on a classroom. The most obvious, and hence the least dangerous, is by administrative fiat. Considerably more dangerous, because harder to spot and to confront, is the quiet, tacit social pressure that enshrines certain ways of thinking as correct, stigmatizing deviations as morally reprehensible and unworthy of serious consideration.

I have come to think of this as macro-thinking. By one of the ironies of modern discourse, this pre-programming of thought masquerades as ideological critique, when in fact it is the precise opposite.

Ideological critique is the demonstration that a putatively value-neutral and objective description of the world actually conceals a thoroughly interested distortion of reality

in the service of some powerful social or economic group. As Karl Mannheim shows us in *Ideology and Utopia*, the critique of a text as *ideological* is a hostile and aggressive attempt not merely to refute the thesis advanced by the text but also to discredit the author of the text as dishonest, disingenuous, covertly exploitative and manipulative. In the polite world of intellectual combat, where ink rather than blood is spilled, the accusation of ideology is the verbal equivalent of a shotgun blast. Deployed by the weak against the strong, it can be an equalizer, righting somewhat the force imbalance that characterizes unjust societies.

Ever since Karl Marx introduced it in his early essay, "On The Jewish Question," ideological critique has been the rhetorical weapon of choice of the left. Marx himself went on, in his mature writings, to expose the covert interests at the heart of classical economic theory, managing, in *Capital*, to discover ideological bias even in the mathematics of Smith, Ricardo, Nassau Senior, and their fellow rationalizers of capitalism.

When I was young, I was awed by the depth with which left critics could penetrate the surface of social and economic relations to expose the exploitation, inequality, privilege, and self-justification that lay beneath. By comparison, even the most superficially quick-witted and mathematically adept apologists for capitalism were shallow, one-dimensional, and utterly lacking in self-awareness.

Now, to my dismay, I find that those with whom I am allied on the left all too often exhibit precisely these defects of intellect, insight, self-understanding, and language.

In high school Biology, we studied the autonomic nervous system by means of a particularly brutal bit of by-play with frogs. It seems that if you stick a sharp pointed object into a frog's eye and grind it around until the frog's brain is utterly destroyed, certain of its reflex responses continue to function. This is called "pithing" a frog. After the frog has been pithed, you can produce a contraction of the frog's leg by dropping a bit of acid on it. The response shows that the contraction of the leg is governed by the autonomic nervous system, centered, as I recall, in the spinal column somewhere, rather than in the brain.

When I listen to speakers putatively on the left these days, I sometimes think they have been pithed, and that their speech is actually a function of their autonomic nervous system.

I hope no one will be so foolish as to suppose that these remarks constitute a brief for right-wing discourse. Anyone who listens for even a short while to the mindless repetition of incantations to free markets, democracy, and the dangers of political extremism - by which is meant anything even slightly to the left of Bill Clinton - will know that ideological rationalizations of the established order are alive, well, and awaiting a devastating ideological critique. But that critique cannot possibly be mounted by those who have lost all sensitivity to the ritual and unreflective character of their own discourse.

One of the lessons Marx teaches us in *Capital* is that when we wish to anatomize some practice or social formation with which we are confronted, it is invaluable to remind ourselves of its history. In an effort to understand, and thereby perhaps to counteract, the triviality and shallowness of so much contemporary left discourse, I shall try in a very few words to recapitulate the sequence of steps by which, like the powerful wizard Saruman in *The Lord of the Rings*, Marx has been reduced from a world-shattering necromancer to a sideshow conjuror doing cheap dialectical tricks to scare intellectual children.

The central fact of social life is the appropriation, by a ruling class, of a surplus of goods they have not produced, both for their own enjoyment and in order to reinforce their ability to continue the appropriation. This appropriation takes many institutional forms - kingship, slavery, conquest, taxation, serfdom - but always it is backed by force, and always it consists in the taking by one group of men and women of the food, clothing, shelter, and other goods that the labor of another group of men and women has produced. In a capitalist economy, appropriation takes the specific form of the exploitation of legally free wage-labor by capital.

The unequal allocation of the social product is immediately obvious to anyone with

eyes to see: some people live in hovels, others in castles, or condominiums. Some people eat rice and beans, others eat meat and fish. Some die unattended of diseases that medicine can cure, others are ushered out of this life as comfortably as armies of doctors and nurses can manage.

Contrary to the mythology of celebratory historiography, those whose labor is being appropriated almost always know perfectly well what is happening to them, even in that most mystified of all social formations, capitalism. But the rationalizations by which rulers justify their appropriations do, nevertheless, play some role in sustaining the structure of inequality. The task of ideological critique is to expose the self-interest that lurks below the surface of those rationalizations, and in that way to cripple the rationalizers. So it is that Marx devoted endless pages to attacks on the major and minor theorists of classical political economy, even though he believed that the assault on the central keep of the capitalist fortress would be led by organized workers, not their allies from the left intelligentsia.

In the early part of this century, it was still possible to hope that the working class of the industrialized world would replace capitalist irrationality and injustice with the rationality and justice of socialism, but three world-historical events - the First World War, the Bolshevik Revolution, and the Great Depression - put paid to that happy optimism. The willingness of the several national components of the international working class to take up arms against one another, the appearance of a pre-capitalist dictatorship masquerading as socialism, and the success of capitalism in surviving the great crash that Marx had predicted, together sank the hopes that had buoyed the early revolutionary movement.

In response to these reverses and disappointments, radical intellectuals elaborated ever more subtle theories of hegemony, ideology, mass communication, and the mysteries of discourse, all in a desperate attempt to explain why their generous offers of leadership elicited so few followers.

Eventually, the discourse of radicals lost all relation to the material base of social

theory, to the fundamental facts of exploitation, appropriation, and inequality, so that we were left with an empty rhetoric of rebellion and revolution into which literary and aesthetic concerns could be poured. In the wonderful phrase of Alexander Pope, referring in the *Dunciad* to his rivals among the Augustan poets, the discourses of our contemporary radicals have become "shit to airy fineness spun."

With no conception of the material basis of exploitation and inequality, with no way of making that fundamental distinction between appearance and reality on which all true ideological critique rests, the invocation of such phrases as "racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia" is little more than a shibboleth, a test of politically correct pronunciation, passage of which admits one to a clique of uncritically one-dimensional flatlanders.

The subject of these remarks is power and discourse - not how to control the power of discourse, or undermine the power of discourse, or apologize for the power of discourse, but how to recover the power of radical discourse, to make such discourse once again a weapon in the struggle against inequality and exploitation.

The prerequisite to that recovery, I suggest, is a refusal to invoke the macros of speech without thought. "Racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia" is to the 1990's what "running dogs of imperialism" and "capitalist lackeys" were to the 1930's. Now, there really were, in the 30's, nasty, unprincipled underlings who did the dirty work of the imperial capitalist nations, just as there are today. When first coined, the metaphors "running dogs" and "lackeys" captured rather vividly both the function and the moral degradation of those despicable people [assuming, for the moment, that one accepts the rather unjustifiably negative view of the dog.] But after endless, and eventually mindless, repetition, they lost their capacity to enlighten, and instead became obstacles to thought.

In like manner, racism is an integral component of American society, sexism is a structural feature of almost all societies, disdain for the poor [which, I assume, is what is meant by "classism"] has been endemic among the wealthy and privileged of European and

American society for centuries, and homophobia is manifestly a widespread pathology. But "racism, sexism, classism, and homophobia," like so many other unreflective utterances of the putatively progressive, is an impediment to thought, not a tool of ideological critique. It is as devoid of critical content as that right-wing oxymoron, "the free market."

Perhaps this is merely the crotchety complaint of a sixty-year old radical who finds that, as usual, the young are listening to a different music and singing a different song. But I am convinced that we have never had a greater need for the destructive unmasking of entrenched and rationalized interests, for ideological critique as Marx first conceived and practiced it. Perhaps the next generation of PC's will come with a resident program that responds to stereotyped, one-dimensional language with the error message, "Warning: words without meaning; please pause and reflect."