Elitist Language

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The problem of elitist language often comes up when people from a middle-class, university-educated background attempt to communicate with 'the general public.' If those attempting the communication are engaged in a commercial venture, they can simply dumb their language down to the common denominator shared by the median target audience, perhaps appropriate some of that audience's slang and cultural symbols, and they are assured of a good sell.

However, if the motive is more altruistic, for instance that of middle-class activists attempting to communicate with activists from other backgrounds, or to share information, resources, and opinions with some General Public, the problem becomes more complicated. For good reason and with plenty of history, the language of academia, with which many middle-class activists are comfortable, can alienate or confound people who did not receive an advanced university education. Yet the problems of our world from patriarchy to imperialism are systemic pathologies that demand serious effort and attention to comprehend. And directly opposed to our comprehension of these problems is an unprecedentedly powerful cultural apparatus that manipulates our values, our ideology, our history, even our language in order to protect the status quo. How can we explain complex, obscure ideas in a simple language — which is already heavily controlled by the culture industry — conveyed in brief and easily digestible segments sensitive to The General Public's decreasing attention spans?

I think the obvious answer is that we can't. We need to recognize that language in our society is used as a tool of control, and the trend towards smaller vocabularies, simpler syntax, and shorter attention spans is one of the most effective forms of disempowerment ever devised. Resisting the dumbing down of language and developing our ability to think critically is as important a long term goal as winning community autonomy and economic self-sufficiency. Language needs to be a locus for revolution; it is a necessary weapon for all social struggles. Our duty as middle-class activists is to use our education to make complex language accessible, rather than passing off everything not immediately accessed with ease by the majority as inherently inaccessible.

But to return from the consideration of the theoretical long haul and face the present context, there is substantial validity to the criticisms about inaccessible language. These have all been stated elsewhere, and they generally involve recognizing that thorough education is a privilege retained by few (predominantly the white middle class), and that by speaking in the sophisticated language that accompanies our education we inhibit the comprehension and sympathy of those without that education, and intentionally or unintentionally preserve influence within radical organizations and movements in the hands of the educated elite. Turned into doctrine, this criticism is usually (mis)understood at the basic level that long words and complex sentences are indicative of privilege, and privilege is bad. Lacking from the popularized version of this criticism is the understanding that while the existence of privilege is wrong, there is a good kind of privilege: one that should be enjoyed by everyone. Education is one of these.

If the underlying goal of these criticisms were to challenge elitism in language, then we'd see a conscious combination of language of greater and lesser sophistication in radical literature, so every literate person would have material both within and beyond their level of

comfortable apprehension, to welcome them and challenge them. We would see privileged activists consciously using their language in a way that invites understanding. In reality, we either see educated radicals ignore the problem and ignore less educated segments of their potential audience, or attempting to avoid the problem through a knee-jerk avoidance of polysyllabic vocabulary, complex analysis, and thorough (read: lengthy) discourse. Education is anathematized as bourgeois, or in more current parlance, "exclusive", and instead of solving the problem, activists join sides with Fox News, USA Today, and public schooling, to contribute to the intellectual massacre of people they are supposed to be empowering.

To inform a tactical consideration of elitist language, we should consider some of the assumptions inhering in the criticism against such language. One of the most fundamental is the myth of the General Public. It goes like this: the General Public are uneducated, and using big words alienates them. But where exactly do we draw the line between what is elitist and what is not? Do "most people" use the word elitist? Oh gosh: is the word elitist itself elitist? What about writing? Granted, most people in the U.S. are literate, but many are not, through no fault of their own. Is writing things down elitist? Should activists not make up pamphlets and fliers any more? It certainly excludes people who can't read. In a very condescending way, educated activists are setting a level of acceptable stupidity; even as they reject academic language, they uphold the elitist morality by retaining a hierarchy of intelligence, and they will only go so far down the ladder in order to cater to the less educated. Anyone who is still excluded is simply left out of their conceptualization of "normal people."

The effect of the General Public myth is that when we leave our bubbles, most activists talk down to people they assume don't have a university education, and in practice the easiest cue is if the audience is poor, or not white. I think many activists aren't even aware of how condescending they usually are, and how obvious it is when they attempt to speak a language that clearly isn't their own. Then they turn around and talk about elitism?

A prohibition on what is understood as elitist language also assumes that people from poorer backgrounds with fewer opportunities for quality education either cannot or do not want to learn. In reality, attaining a good education is seen as a form of empowerment in many poorer communities, yet few activists attempt to diffuse that education when communicating with less privileged people. By avoiding academic language and analysis outside of their own circles, privileged activists maintain a relationship of dependency, in which they act as gatekeepers to knowledge, forever necessary to translate law, scientific studies, political analysis, et cetera, into "plain language."

The other assumption inherent in the criticism is the idea that certain types of language are inherently elitist. Larger vocabularies and more complex syntax are in fact very helpful tools, though people require more education to be able to use them. It is not the language, but this country's capitalist, racist education system that is elitist. The job of educated activists is to make that education accessible, and hand that language over as a popular tool. We don't want made-for-the-masses Orwellian newspeak, we want languages that are liberated and demystified.

Unfortunately, educated activists continue to romanticize "plain language", and they also continue to complain when The Masses are fooled yet again into support for the latest war or draconian policy shift by the most transparent, even clichéd tautology and sophistry commu-

nicated by politicians and relayed by the media. Removing the many forms of language from the current hierarchy of privilege, and placing them in the appropriate landscape of diverse and equal cultures is a crucial act (one that first requires allowing the different cultures in our society to enjoy equality). But recognizing the validity of non-academic languages, the language of east coast urban blacks or Appalachian whites, does not mean putting them in a museum. Revolutionary empowerment will cause these languages to change, to develop much of the complexity heretofore monopolized by white academia, because that complexity itself is empowerment. Skeptical? Just compare the lyrics of Puffy to those of Mr. Lif. Compare the Indian Chief of white supremacist cinema, who only said "How?", to American Indian Movement activist and professor Ward Churchill, who talks about pathological pseudopraxis[1]. While other communities exist in economic subservience, while other cultures lack autonomy, while other forms of language lack an unshackled, empowered complexity, revolutionaries from those communities will appropriate what tools they need to build language that is a stepping stone to an autonomous culture.

In effect, many existing criticisms against elitist language are themselves elitist, because they serve to preserve the monopoly on analytical discourse in the hands of the institutionally educated (who are themselves generally institutionalized, rather than radical, hence not on our side). Educated radicals disavowal of language that smacks of sophistication serves to dumb down radicals themselves. Uneducated radicals are not more proletarian, or more inclusive. They are simply more ineffective[2].

Wouldn't it be more effective to subvert education, and educate subversion? To expose and overcome the patriarchal norm that makes an intellectual crime of asking: "What does that mean?" We should use the forms of language we're comfortable with, academic or otherwise, as long as we do it lucidly, in a way that invites learning and sharing of that knowledge. Those around us would be better off for it. Similarly, we can benefit from learning the different types of language that other people use. Recognize the variety of languages, but upset the economic, racial, and gendered hierarchy in which these languages have been placed.

Footnotes

[1] In each example, the first element represents an essentialized form of an oppressed group's language, either marketed or created by white supremacist cultural institutions, Hollywood or the major record labels. The second element of each example does not necessarily represent the language of an oppressed group, but is meant to demonstrate a trend of revolutionaries from oppressed communities adopting "educated" language, either as a whole or incorporated into their own language.

[2] No, this is not to say that radicals from poorer backgrounds are less effective than privileged radicals. On the contrary, note that lower-class radicals typically educate themselves, and are more intelligent for it. E.g. George Jackson was in prison when middle-class activists are usually in college, but still a major part of Jackson's intellectual stature came from reading Marx, Malcolm X, Fanon?

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