

POLITICAL LANGUAGE

by
Roberta Kimmel

While much social science research of the past few decades has focused on policy formation aimed at reducing economic and social inequalities, surprisingly little effort has been devoted to questioning why such a large number of unsuccessful policies have come into being, and how these dramatic inequalities have been so steadfastly perpetuated. *Political Language: Words that Succeed and Policies that Fail*, a new Institute for Research on Poverty Monograph by Murray Edelman, offers an original and provocative analysis of these issues.

Language and the Formation of Beliefs

"Chronic social problems, recurring beliefs about them, and recurring language forms that justify their acceptance reinforce each other. Only rarely can there be direct observations of events, and even then language forms shape that meaning of what the general public and government officials see."

The study is founded on a broad epistemological base that explores how patterns of beliefs are formed. It examines the evocation of perceptions about poverty and related social problems that are nonempirically based, through the language employed in everyday discussion and analysis of these problems. The reliance of elites and nonelites alike on what the author describes as symbolically engendered cognitive structures has profound consequences for public policy.

Author Murray Edelman, a professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, has had a longstanding interest in political symbolism. In *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (1964) he examined the way in which elites structure the expectations mass publics have of them and contribute significantly to the accepting relationship of people to authority itself. In *Politics as Symbolic Language* (1971) symbolic elements engendering rebellion and escalation of conflict were scrutinized. The present study utilizes a similar approach: that is, analysis of the role of symbols by examining their recurring and persisting links to observable political behaviors that vary with social situations and with changes in significant symbols, rather than with empirically based observations.

The data for the analysis consist of (1) common terms, metaphors, and other everyday figures of speech as they appear in the statements of public officials, of government agencies, in media accounts and interest group literature, (2) terms employed in relevant professional articles and economic analyses, and (3) public actions and reactions to them that commonly recur.

The Language of the Helping Professions

It is, Edelman maintains, through linguistic devices and public gestures that complex and unfounded assumptions

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regarding social issues are evoked in people's minds. The challenge resides in discovering the process by which language and gestures are transformed into these myths. His method is to examine everyday reactions to chronic social problems by analyzing the explanations and actions used to cope with them. He concentrates on public officials and on the authority, language, and ideology of the "helping professions"—psychiatry, social work, and teaching—because of their obvious influence on beliefs and political actions relevant to poverty and related ills, and also because they "exemplify the tie between language and cognition in a way that is readily accessible to observation and analysis." These professions are particularly revealing in the terms they use to categorize events and justify restrictive courses of action in order to define and defend hierarchies of power.

Consider how the most common of activities—exercising, talking, and even reading, are labelled as "therapy"—dance therapy, recreation therapy, group therapy, bibliotherapy. When constraining acts are brought under the rubrics of education, therapy, or rehabilitation they are thereby converted into altruistic ones.

"To label a common activity as though it were a medical one is to establish superior and subordinate roles, to make it clear who gives orders and who takes them, and to justify in advance the inhibitions placed upon the subordinate class."

Besides defining and maintaining status and power hierarchies, according to Edelman, the language of the helping professions can also serve to enlarge authority. As attention is diverted from the economic and social roots of a problem, their own base of power can be broadened. Just one of the forms this takes is construing the absence of deviant behavior as a precursor of it. In psychiatric literature one reads of the "prepsychotic"; social work literature makes reference to the "predelinquent." "Attention is hence focused on prevention and control, and diverted from the link between poverty and delinquency." Such terminology also instills confidence in the professional's ability to predict those who will exhibit antisocial behavior in the future and those who will not.

The use of a special symbolic language to effect social conformity and discourage criticism is not, however,

unique to this group. It is also characteristic of much bureaucratic language.

The Language of Bureaucracy

The language of bureaucracy often serves to perpetuate basically ineffective organizations. The survival of administrative agencies seems, on occasion, to depend more on public anxiety about the problems they are dealing with than on their performance.

“Language shapes what administrators and the public take for granted, whose expectations they accept as legitimate and whose they ignore, how they define their functions, and what meanings they read into the outcomes of their policies.”

Because of conflicting goals or ambiguous language, evaluations of controversial organizations often reveal nothing about those organizations’ effectiveness. Vague objectives—“national security,” “decent housing”—can produce evaluations that exaggerate both utility of services and results. The more concrete the terms that are used to describe their objectives, the greater the conflict and more ineffective they are likely to appear.

Social Adjustment through Contradictory Beliefs

The flavor of Edelman’s style of argumentation can be illustrated by what he describes as social adjustment through contradictory beliefs.

The most common cognitive reactions to poverty fall into one of two alternative patterns. The first pattern sees the poor as responsible for their predicament and in need of control “to compensate for their [alleged] inadequacies, greed, lack of self-discipline, immorality. . . .” This view is often espoused by legislators and administrators who oppose increases in welfare benefits, and by traditional psychiatrists and social workers, among others.

The alternative view sees the poor as victims, deprived through social, political, and economic exploitation rather than personal defects. Liberal politicians and helping professionals are the likely proponents of this pattern.

While most people will choose one of these two as the dominant theory, they learn to perceive both, in Edelman’s view, utilizing each as it suits a particular purpose. This not only expresses individual ambivalence, but also fosters contradictions in political rhetoric and in public policy. The language in which both explanations are couched encourages quiescent public acceptance of poverty as a fact of life. To perceive poverty in terms of the inadequacies of the poor is to treat its symptoms, while the categories used to define it in terms of the functioning of economic, social, and political institutions—the “system” and “economic law”—make the battle appear futile.

Political Constraint through Symbolic Reassurance

How is it, Edelman asks, that governments can pursue policies that are unsuccessful, and even at times contradictory to the values those very policies are supposed to

support? How is it that rhetoric on peace and disarmament is abundant, for instance; yet disarmament conferences do not make significant headway and the defense budget continues to take a major portion of the national coffer?

“It is *language* about political events rather than the events themselves that everyone experiences; the unintended consequences of actions and language are often more important than the intended ones; and conventional observation and conventional research methods (notably opinion and attitude research) chiefly tell us which symbols are currently powerful, not what ‘reality’ is.”

Why, in the area of consumer protection, have many measures proven to have far greater symbolic than substantive value; and how is it that regulatory agencies and public utility commissions end up serving, at least in part, the ends of the business groups they “regulate”? Once these bodies have become cued as being benevolent, or their specific officials have become cued as consumer advocates, their ineffective actions or counterproductive results often fade into obscurity.

People want to believe in the integrity and efficacy of their government, says Edelman. So they accept a degree of ambivalence that permits continuation of the policies that engender the ambivalence. To do otherwise would mean a political life filled with protest and resistance, a strain few wish to accept.

“The overwhelming majority want to believe that their own roles are meaningful contributions to a greater good, and so have good reason to accept the reassuring perspective on public affairs, rather than one that upsets both their belief in institutions they have supported and their belief in themselves.”

Conclusion

The most serious issues for Edelman are not the ones that involve conscious deception, although such cases are certainly significant for their public policy implications and interesting from the standpoint of scientific analysis. Rather, he is most deeply concerned about authorities who are as involved in their symbolism as the nonelites under their dominance. The kinds of linguistic symbolism explored in *Political Language* both perpetuate inequalities that would not otherwise be tolerated and ensure mass acceptance of ineffective or harmful political policies. The economic, social, and psychological consequences of governmental measures to deal with poverty are sometimes themselves major contributors to poverty and related problems. Recent history has shown that, for relatively powerless groups, resistance can and frequently has brought benefits. The mythical perceptions that our political language engenders present potent (although not insurmountable) deterrents to such resistance.

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