Political Language and Political Reality

Murray Edelman
University of Wisconsin, Madison

The most incisive twentieth century students of language converge from different premises on the conclusion that language is the key creator of the social worlds people experience, and they agree as well that language cannot usefully be understood as a tool for describing an objective reality. For the later Wittgenstein there are no essences, only language games. Chomsky analyzes the sense in which grammar is generative. For Derrida all language is performative, a form of action that undermines its own presuppositions. Foucault sees language as antedating and constructing subjectivity. The "linguistic turn" in twentieth century philosophy, social psychology, and literary theory entails an intellectual ferment that raises fundamental questions about a great deal of mainstream political science, and especially about its logical positivist premises.

While the writers just mentioned analyze various senses in which language use is an aspect of creativity, those who focus upon specifically political language are chiefly concerned with its capacity to reflect ideology, mystify, and distort. The more perspicacious of them deny that an undistorting language is possible in a social world marked by inequalities in resources and status, though the notion of an undistorted language can be useful as an evocation of an ideal benchmark. The emphasis upon political language as distorting or mystifying is a key theme in Lasswell and Orwell, as it is in Habermas, Osgood, Ellul, Vygotsky, Enzensberger, Bennett, and Shapiro.

The critical element in political maneuver for advantage is the creation of meaning: the construction of beliefs about the significance of events, of problems, of crises, of policy changes, and of leaders. The strategic need is to immobilize opposition and mobilize support. While coercion and intimidation help to check resistance in all political systems, the key tactic must always be the evocation of meanings that legitimize favored courses of action and threaten or reassure people so as to encourage them to be supportive or to remain quiescent. Allocations of benefits must themselves be infused with meanings. Whose well-being does a policy threaten and whose does it enhance?

It is language about political events and developments that people experience; even events that are close by take their meaning from the language used to depict them. So political language *is* political reality; there is no other so far as the meaning of events to actor and spectators is concerned.

But that statement poses the problem rather than resolving it, for it challenges us to examine the complex link between language and meaning. Every sentence is ambiguous. Dictionaries cannot tell us what language means; only the social situation and the concerns of human beings who think and act define meanings. An increase in the defense budget signifies security for some and insecurity for others. The same is true of gun control, capital punishment, and most other governmental actions. Wider eligibility for welfare benefits means encouragement of laziness and incompetence to many, and it means safeguarding lives and dignity to many others. An action often carries different meanings to the same observer in different situations or when he or she has recently experienced something new. Language about politics is a clue to the speaker's view of reality at the time, just as an audience's interpretation of the same language is a clue to what may be a wholly different reality for them. If there are no conflicts over meaning, the issue is not political, by definition.

Political developments and the language that describes them are ambiguous because the aspects of events, leaders, and policies that most decisively affect current and future well-being are uncertain, unknowable, and the focus of disputed claims and competing symbols. Even when there is a reasonable consensus about what observably happened or was said, there are conflicting assumptions about the causes of events, the motives of officials and interest groups, and the consequences of courses of action. So it is not what can be

seen that shapes political action and support, but what must be supposed, assumed, or constructed. Do marines in Lebanon encourage peace or more intensive fighting in the Middle East; do they mean greater security or greater insecurity for the United States? Is Ronald Reagan a well-meaning and effective leader who represented the common people's aspirations against elitist liberals and intellectuals, or is he an articulate front for mean-spirited corporate executives and a menace to the poor?

There is no way to establish the validity of any of these positions to the satisfaction of those who have a material and moral reason to hold a different view. Reason and rationalization are inextricably intertwined. That intertwining and the impossibility of marshalling evidence that is persuasive to everyone are the hallmarks of political argument; they are not the occasional or the regrettable exceptional case. Ambiguity, contradiction, and evocations that reflect material situations are central and pervasive.

In short, it is not "reality" in any testable or observable sense that matters in shaping political consciousness and behavior, but rather the beliefs that language helps evoke about the causes of discontents and satisfactions, about policies that will bring about a future closer to the heart's desire, and about other unobservables. Their material situations make people sensitive to some political news, promises, and threats and insensitive to other communications.

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Language is only one aspect of the material situation; but a critical one: the aspect that most directly interprets developments by fitting them into a narrative account that provides a meaning for the past, the present, and the future compatible with an audience's ideology. Such accounts are vulnerable to criticism; but they succeed repeatedly in suspending disbelief, in retaining political support, or in marshalling opposition regardless of consequences that might call the accounts into question. Military interventions in the third world that bolster corrupt oligarchies and stifle peasant demands, for example, have been rationalized for many years on the ground that they support democracy by preventing a communist takeover engineered in Moscow or Havana. Neither experience nor repeated failures to bring democracy or peace diminish the potency of linguistic accounts that mesh with anticommunist ideology; or, in other societies, with communist ideology.

The political language that generates and reinforces beliefs about who are allies and who are enemies is an especially striking instance of the projection of divergent assumptions into words and sentences. For some people a reference to "niggers," "kikes," or "spics" depicts blacks, Jews, or Hispanics as an enemy; for others, these same terms define their users as an enemy. Language often evokes a belief that particular groups are evil or harmful even though the language of history, analysis, and science suggests that they are scapegoats rather than enemies. Jews under the Third Reich, accused heretics under the Inquisition, liberals in the fifties, and countless other victims of discrimination testify to the power of language in particular situations to evoke a political world in which persecution is justified, even while the same words signify gross injustice to people in other situations. Language that rationalizes deprivations for people who do no harm is applied very largely to those who are already disadvantaged. It highlights a critical linguistic function in politics: to help maintain established inequalities in resources, status, and power, as suggested earlier.

Perhaps the most striking way in which political language detracts from people's ability to

pursue their own interests effectively is the irrelevance of most political news and debate to the quality of people's lives. We are inundated with accounts and discussions of election campaigns, legislative debates, and the statements of high officials, but none of these means anything at all for how well people live until they are implemented; and the forms of eventual implementation, or whether it will occur at all, cannot be known from the publicized language.

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The spectacle that widely publicized political language constructs is highly dynamic: concerned with problems, crises, challenges, and differences of opinion over how to deal with them; with new laws and new executive actions and high court decisions. It bemuses people's minds and places them in a social world marked by constant threats and constant reassurances. But the continuous bombardment of news about a changing political spectacle contrasts sharply with the static pattern of value allocations: the persistence of substantial class, racial, gender, national, and other inequalities in resources, status, and hardships regardless of short run fluctuations or news about political actions. For the observer of politics who focuses upon historical change rather than the kaleidoscope of publicized events, there is far less in the most widely publicized political language than meets the ear or the eye, another point on which Orwell was insightful. While most political language has little to do with how well people live, it has a great deal to do with the legitimation of regimes and the acquiescence of publics in actions they had no part in initiating.

Language consists of sound waves or of marks on paper that become meaningful only because people project some significance into them, not because of anything inherent in the sounds or the marks. It takes on meaning and enables human beings to think symbolically because it is social in character. We make something of phonemes, grammar, and syntax by contemplating them from the perspective of other people who are important to us. In George Herbert Mead's formulation this is taking the role of the significant other. In Lev Vygotsky's formulation it is using "inner speech": an imagined conversation with others that also constitutes "thought." Meaning springs from interactions with others, not from inside an isolated individual's head. Even if Chomsky is right in his conjecture that human beings are genetically endowed with a universal grammar, the *content* of propositions is socially structured and constructed, as Chomsky recognizes. It follows that the economic and social conditions in which people find themselves are decisive influences upon their interpretations of language, and especially of political language. The transformation of situations into meanings is a complex process and plainly takes different forms, ranging from simple expression of class, gender or other interests to rationalizations of disadvantages or privileges. Both the disadvantaged who passively accept their lot because they experience the world as a place where people get what they deserve and the rebels who struggle against a world in which they experience injustice as rampant illustrate the intimate link between social conditions and meaning construction.

Perhaps the central intellectual obstacle to recognition of language as a facet of the social situation and no more is our language about language: our categorization of it as a separate entity, as something distinct from interaction with others. Such reification of a perspective as a separate entity encourages the attribution to words and sentences of independent power and independent existence, even of praiseworthiness and blameworthiness, with the result that observation, analysis and interpretation are aborted.

If the thesis that language is a key bulwark of established institutions is valid, then the language we conventionally label nonpolitical should also serve that function. Some years ago I analyzed the language of the helping professions to show how effectively it functions as a form of political action. The language of social science does so as well, especially

when it purports to be nonpolitical and objective. A reader of the American politics textbooks and journals finds in them a great deal of attention to elections, rational choice, leadership, participation, and regulation: i.e., to the reassuring procedures, and little attention to the inequalities, forms of social control, and social pathologies that are the outcomes of the procedures. The language that purges consciousness of the disturbing consequences of established institutions is defined and ordinarily accepted as objective and scientific, while language that calls attention to such consequences is defined and ordinarily accepted as ideological and polemical. Clearly, the terms "objective," "ideology," and "polemical" as used in academic writing and speech are themselves political.

Because the potency of political language does not stem from its descriptions of a "real" world but rather from its reconstructions of the past and its evocation of unobservables in the present and of potentialities in the future, language usage is strategic. It is always part of a course of action to enable people to live with themselves and with what they do and to marshall support for causes. Several corollaries follow from that perspective.

The reasons people offer for their political actions and preferences are also rationalizations, as Freud recognized; there is no way for a speaker or an audience to distinguish between the two. To make the distinction is itself a strategy, whether or not it is self-conscious. The human mind readily rationalizes any political position in a way that will be persuasive for an audience that wants to be convinced. That is what political discussion mainly consists of. The cogency and the appeal of a political argument depends far more on how sensitively it rationalizes the social situation of its audience than on any inherent rationality in its language; for rationality is itself a construction.

A popular school of thought holds that encouragement to give "good reasons" for political preferences assures at least a modicum of "rationality" in political choice.[1] The lesson of history is clear, unfortunately, that good reasons have been offered for every course of political action ever undertaken, that they have indeed often won wide public support, but that the consequences have all too often been experienced as disastrous, immoral, or the fruit of inexcusable stupidity. "Good reasons," like all political language, can be strategically effective, but they cannot assure a rational choice if, indeed, that term itself has any meaning other than a strategic or rationalizing one. How good a reason is depends upon its premise; the premise is crucial, but in politics it is typically controversial and not susceptible of verification, as already noted.

Habermas offers a thoughtful variation of the "good reasons" position that takes account of a critical pitfall: the constraints that hierarchical differences in status, authority, or other means of influence or coercion impose upon discourse. In Habermas's "ideal speech situation" there are no such differences and hence no constraints.[2] He seems to believe, moreover, that people can in some measure presuppose the ideal speech situation even when it does not exist. Perhaps an individual can occasionally achieve that kind of emancipation from social constraints, but the historical record is clear that group discussion and governmental policy formation do not achieve it. The Habermasian ideal speech situation offers an optimistic view, that may be warranted, of how discourse might become emancipatory in a society without capitalism or governmental or corporate or military hierarchies; but it seems to me to provide little hope that political language in the world we inhabit can become something more than a sequence of strategies and rationalizations. The Supreme Court has justified the preventive detention of children in prison as a form of therapy for the children[3] and the president has called the MX missile a "peacekeeper" even while conceding that it has little military use. These arguments and countless others like them in all countries and all eras have proven persuasive to large numbers of people because they reflect their fears or their hopes while other people regard

[1]Brian Barry, *Political Argument* (New York: Humanities Press, 1966).

[2]Jurgen Habermas, "Toward a Theory of Communicative Competence," *Inquiry*, Vol. 13 (1970).

[3]Schall v. Martin, 81 L. Ed. 2d 207 (1984).

them as the epitome of false logic and immorality. What is accepted as a "good reason" tells nothing about the cogency of its argument but *is* a sensitive index to the problems, aspirations, and social situation of its audience.

But problems, aspirations, and social conditions are also subject to interpretation; they are constructions of language as well. It begins to grow clear that political language, like all texts, can be understood as creating an endless chain of ambiguous associations and constructions that offer wide potentialities for interpretation and for manipulation. I consider this point more carefully later.

It should follow that people in the same social situations use similar language to cope with the problems they face; and that kind of predictability is characteristic of a great deal of political language. Most of it is banal, precisely because it reassures speaker and audience that whatever they think will serve their interests is justifiable. The language in which heads of large states justify larger arms budgets, police chiefs justify restrictions on the procedural rights of suspects, agriculture secretaries justify protections of the income of agribusiness enterprises, or liberals justify regulation of business to protect consumers is highly stylized and predictable most of the time, though its users may experience it as the epitome of creative and rational argument. The exchange of claims and assertions that have been made in similar situations many times before is the classic obligato that accompanies the political spectacle, and, as George Orwell suggested in making a similar point, it has the same lulling effect on the mental faculties as responsive reading in church.[4] Like

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the focus of attention upon political developments that are dramatic but have no effect upon well-being, banal political discourse brings assurance that people are involved in fateful or significant events.

The largely technical and specialized language that directly activates resource allocations as part of the implementing actions of governments and corporations is inevitably responsive to established social inequalities, for this form of policy making minimizes public attention and maximizes bargaining among directly interested groups that come to know each other's resources well.[5] In the making of such decisions there is direct, though unequal, participation by those who can bargain while the publicized activities of government amount to a ritual of vicarious participation that is a necessary prelude to public acquiescence in implementing decisions.

To examine the stylized utterances of public officials, interest group spokespersons, and concerned citizens as they interact respecting a topic of common concern is to be impressed with the cogency of Michel Foucault's insight that there is an important sense in which language constructs the people who use it,[6] a view manifestly in contrast with the commonsensical assumption that people construct the language they use.

[4]George Orwell, "Politics and the English Language," in *A Collection of Essays* (Garden City: Doubleday-Anchor, 1954), p. 172.

[5]Hugh Heclo, "Issue Networks and the Executive Establishment," in Anthony King (ed.), *The New American Political System* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute, 1978), pp. 87-124.

[6]*Cf.* Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971); *The Archeology of Knowledge* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976). A similar idea appears in the works of other twentieth-century European social theorists, notably in Heidegger, Lacan, Derrida, and Ricoeur.

For every political problem and ideological dilemma there is a set of statements and expressions constantly in use. In accepting one or another of these a person becomes a particular kind of subject with a particular ideology, role, and self conception: a liberal or a conservative, a victim of authority or a supporter of authority, an activist or a spectator, and so on. But the choice among available language forms is itself constrained rather than free. The Secretary of Agriculture is not free to declare that wages should be higher in relation to farm income. Police chiefs are expected to focus on the importance of maintaining law and order rather than on the anarchic virtues of disorder. Employers whose plants are being picketed in labor disputes do not express their enthusiasm for strong unions.

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The public interested in an issue is able to choose among a small set of stock texts that everyone who grows up in a particular culture learns early: poverty as the fault of the poor or of social institutions; abortion as a form of freedom or a form of murder; and so on. For people in a particular social situation there is sometimes only one socially viable option. In every such situation the appropriate and inappropriate forms of expression are clear to all who are involved, even while their choice of the appropriate form defines those who use it as particular kinds of people.

In the arts, by contrast, the range of discourses appropriate for use is wide, and inventiveness is socially encouraged by influential clients of the arts. Idiosyncrasy and avant garde forms become controversial, but there are linguistic and social bases for their survival and, occasionally, their ultimate general acceptance; such supportive texts are an inherent part of what "art" means. In politics, however, the condition essential for success is support or acquiescence of a substantial part of the public rather than only an avant garde minority. The endorsement of a minority that symbolizes extremism, an avant garde, or an original perspective that defies conventional ideologies becomes a kiss of death rather than a signal of creativity. To maintain adequate support and acquiescence aspirants for political leadership and for social acceptance must choose from a circumscribed set of banal texts.

The more successful aspirants may find felicitous phrases or nonverbal postures in which to express their positions, and their stylistic inventiveness is easily confused with substantive creativity. I suspect that a sensitive catalogue of the stylistic felicities of William Jennings Bryan, Franklin Roosevelt, Churchill, Kennedy, Hitler, Reagan, and other political leaders celebrated for their language skills would also reveal a small pattern of forms that appeal to large audiences. Their most celebrated phrases become banal when paraphrased in ordinary language. When Franklin Roosevelt offered hope to a despairing country in the depths of the Great Depression with the phrase, "All we have to fear is fear itself," he was taking the role any president is constrained to take in such a situation and paraphrasing the Pollyannaish optimism of Herbert Hoover's phrase, "Prosperity is just around the corner." Both of them were wrong, it turned out, though that is incidental to my point. The leader of a country in imminent danger of aggression from a foreign enemy is expected to assure the population that resistance will be resolute, and Churchill did that in 1940 in his "We will fight them on the beaches . . ." speech. It is not creativity that wins an audience in such cases, but rather telling people what they want to hear in a context that makes the message credible. Hoover undermined the credibility of his optimism by denying that the depression was serious or that the federal government needed to act. FDR

affirmed both these propositions while offering the same optimism. The political reality that language helps evoke depends heavily upon context, but has no necessary bearing on the realities constructed in other contexts or at later times. It has even less bearing on the creativity of speakers or audiences.

The language of promises that desired political goals will be reached similarly illustrates the sense in which language constructs what people experience as their subjectivity. Political language consists very largely of promises about the future benefits that will flow from whatever cause, policy, or candidate the writer or speaker favors. Promises of peace, prosperity, and other inversions of current fears win support for actions portrayed as the avenues to this brighter future. These "means" consist very largely of unequal sacrifices in the present: cuts in social benefits, restrictions on civil liberties, unemployment, taxes, military drafts, and wars.

The promises are bits of language always available for use; they create subjects who are bemused with a stock "other": a leader on earth or in heaven; a vision of a utopia or a dystopia; a devotion or an antipathy to a cause; an attachment to a form of rationality. To take the role of such an "other" constructed by language is to shape the meanings of observations and of other language in a determinate way. Observations become relevant and significant in the light of the self-definition of the subject. For followers and admirers of the current president, a decline in inflation rates is due to his beneficent policies. For his antagonists, the same drop is attributable to economic policies that brought on a recession. It is not facts or observations that are critical, but rather language that constructs observers in various social situations as particular kinds of subjects.

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The definition of a particular claim or a statement as meaningful reflects and reinforces an ideology, a subject, and a reality. Those who accept electoral contests between Republicans and Democrats as the paramount influence upon value allocations, for example, construct a world in which class, race, sex and other inequalities are not paramount and in which electoral promises are descriptions of the future rather than rationalizations of current inequalities. Those who see a profound distinction between the terms "authoritarian" and "totalitarian" as characterizations of contemporary regimes construct a world in which some deprivations of human rights are therapeutic and others are evil and in which subjects who fail to accept this distinction are dupes while those who accept it are insightful and patriotic. To name the leaders (or "ringleaders") in an uprising, refer to forced recruitment by either side in a third world civil war, or take a survey of voting intentions is to help legitimize one moral posture and implicitly help refute a contrary one. Language, subjectivity, and realities define one another; and this performative function of language is all the more potent in politics when it is masked, presenting itself as a tool for objective description. Ideological argument through a dramaturgy of objective description may be the most common gambit in political language usage.

Political Language as Deconstruction

The clearest understanding of political language as social interaction emerges from an examination of the ways such language systematically undermines its own premises. In the last several decades such poststructuralist writers as Jacques Derrida and Paul de Man have sensitized us to the lessons that can be learned from the deconstruction

of literary texts and critical writing. The deconstruction of political language is revealing because contradiction, ambivalence, and an endless horizon of signs that evoke each other are integral to political action and are typically displayed more blatantly in political texts than in more sophisticated writing.

Deconstructive analysis reveals in the starkest way the truth of Kenneth Burke's observation that political rhetoric serves to "sharpen up the pointless and blunt the too sharply pointed."[7] Political language acts very largely to win or maintain public support or acquiescence in the face of other actions that violate moral qualms and typically does so by denying the premises on which such actions are based while retaining traces of the premises.

The most compelling way, then, in which political language undermines itself is through its inversions of the value hierarchies implicit in the actions and in the other language with which it is associated. To wage war is to foster peace. Capital punishment is a means to curb violence. The grant of rate increases and monopolies to public utilities is regulation. Inhibition of the autonomy of the poor, the young, and the distressed is "helping." Denial of benefits to the indigent is promotion of self-reliance and independence. And so on. Both liberal and conservative policies and rhetoric are replete with such inversions in naming what governmental action accomplishes.

The language in which public officials, aspirants to office, and interest groups appeal for support, the preambles to statutes, court *obiter dicta*, and popular discussions of public issues can be understood as affirmations waiting to be ignored, qualified, or accepted according to the unknowable situations in which people find themselves at later times. While this feature is self-evident in the language of everyone's political opponents, it masks its own presence in the language of politicians one likes, thereby performing still another inversion.

Such value inversions do not necessarily signal hypocrisy. They reveal, rather, the openness of language to accommodation to varying situations and to the range of interests of speakers and audiences, regardless of conventional logic or the postulation that people are rational actors. After Derrida it is hard to take "logocentrism" seriously. The inversions may signify hypocrisy; they may reflect the imperatives of new situations; and they may be evidence that life and politics are absurd. Which of these alternative "realities" any of us sees in them hinges upon our own social situations, not upon a world we observe.

Political language deconstructs itself in other ways as well, though each form of undermining contributes to the fundamental value inversion just noted. My paper has already alluded to some of these other forms of contradiction, so a listing of them here can serve in part as a resume.

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Political actions that, from one perspective, are self-serving or based upon the exploitation of vulnerable groups of people are invariably justified in appeals to reason, objectivity and detachment; and there is always a sense in which both positions are valid and can be demonstrated "rationally."

Deconstruction proceeds as well through the use of adverbial or adjectival qualifiers that purport at one level of meaning to intensify an affirmation while they negate it at another level. The most general qualifiers are synonyms of "essential," or "true," as modifiers of

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[7]Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1945), p. 393.

words like "freedom," "democracy," "justice," or "communism." The speaker who advocates "true" freedom is invariably arguing for restraints on some group's freedom, just as the insertion of the word "true" before "equality" is a sign that some inequality is being rationalized. The lyncher sees vigilante violence as true justice. The liberal sees a choice between two ambiguous candidates as true participation while a radical sees the same procedure as self-deception. In these and similar cases language offers a logic to defend any position regardless of contradictions, and it does so subtly. In the domain of political language there are many mansions, and they often defy the laws of physics by occupying the same semantic space.

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There are constant claims that policies to deal with the social problems that are never solved (poverty, crime, inflation, unemployment, emotional disturbance, et cetera) are failures and also that they are successes; each claim is a necessary supplement to the contradictory one and is made because the other is made. Each such problem, moreover, is regularly defined in different statements both as personal pathology and as social pathology, contradictory premises that are also closely linked to the conflicting claims about success and failure. Language about the most persistent problems governments face may be experienced as analysis or as description, but can also be recognized as a proliferating chain of texts that are grafted onto each other, providing supplementary and contradictory rationalizations for courses of action.

Underlying all the forms of deconstruction that political language exhibits is play upon the various associations of terms, thereby reassuring the speaker of her or his own integrity and attracting support from people who would not otherwise be concerned with the issue. This device, which is sometimes deliberate but more often employed unconsciously, relies upon the characteristics of language that Derrida calls the "trace" and the "graft." To speak or hear a term, he suggests, is to experience the spoor of other terms while not necessarily recognizing them as present. Language therefore entails a wide range of resonances that are both present and absent, available for recognition and also for denial. Like much of Derrida's work, this perspective challenges conventional logic and the conventional centering of thought in the subject (rather than in the text), yet it recognizes what we know to be the case and encourages us to analyze language incisively.

The traces of political terms make it easy to link issues in dubious and challengeable ways, and such grafting is endemic in political discourse. A racist or sexist practice can be linked to the issue of states rights. Protection of the health of workers bears the aura of bureaucratic intervention in a private matter. The possibilities are limitless, and so, therefore, are the practices, the responses, and the controversial exchange of terms. Because the conventional analysis of such debates turns on claims about the validity of the problematic linkages, we conventionally fail to notice that it is the characteristics of language as aspects of specific social situations that constitute the issues and the arguments and that make it likely that they will not be resolved.

The failure to resolve or solve political problems is a paramount characteristic of government, though regimes have an obvious interest in claiming successes and everyone has a strong interest in denying an observation that fundamentally challenges the conventional assumptions that political beliefs are rational and that governmental actions in some sense reflect the public will.

It might be claimed that governments have solved some social problems and therefore can be expected to continue to do so. Slavery has been abolished, for example, and universal education has been established in the United States, ending two major pro-

blems that dominated political debate in the first half of the nineteenth century. These examples do not demonstrate that major problems have been solved, but rather that the terms in which they are named have been transformed. In these cases formal governmental action changed the legal terms applied to the problems, abolishing slavery and requiring attendance at school; but the deprivations, inequalities, and moral questions that made them issues in the first place have remained as major items on the political agenda, with no resolution in sight. The problem of black slavery has become the problem of race and minority relations. The problem of inadequate education for the masses has remained an incorrigible one, though the terms in which it is discussed are now social and economic rather than legal. The point could be made about other social problems as well that the language in which they are debated has been transformed while the deprivations that constitute the problem persist, another way of claiming that contradictory language persists.

The occasions for such transformations in social problems and language can be specified more precisely: they are responses to economic and social developments that give a powerful group an incentive to make the change. The industrial revolution and the growth of capitalist industry in America in the first half of the nineteenth century made wage labor more economical than slave labor (workers could be fired when not needed and did not have to be supported in old age), and also created a need for a 'literate and disciplined labor force, so that public schooling that taught literacy, conformity, and discipline became a necessity, especially as it was supported by regressive taxation rather than by the employers who benefited from it. The rhetoric of freedom from involuntary servitude and of universal free education enjoyed a certain validity as heralding greater democracy while also legitimizing a major benefit for the owners of large amounts of capital.

It is important to recognize that these deconstructions of political language are not evidence that such language is corrupt or nonsensical. On the contrary, they are evidence that both social life and the human brain are far more subtle and meaningful than either common sense or conventional social science analysis suggest. Every term and every entity in the environment is a signifier, and signifiers evoke a range of meanings that continues to widen endlessly. It is evident that the dominant meanings rationalize existing social inequalities, but always in ways that subvert those values and premises as well.

While language, consciousness, and social conditions are replete with contradictions, they shape each other so as to make it possible for people to live with themselves, with their moral dilemmas, and with chronic failure to resolve the dilemmas and the contradictions.