

Maintaining Domination through Language

Njabulo S Ndebele

The deliberate use of language to give legitimacy to the social and political reality of apartheid has been one of the most observable features of the system. The power divide between rulers and the ruled, the oppressors and the oppressed, played itself out even within the domain of language in which we had the namers and the named. If the success of the namer in naming is a function of the namer's power, then ultimate success in challenging the manifestation of apartheid in linguistic dominance will be a function of the success of the liberation struggle. The new social reality of liberation will produce an appropriate language with which to describe it. There will be new words or new meanings for old words.

A sense of what may happen can be gleaned from the example of how the Black Consciousness Movement successfully transformed the meaning of the word 'non-white' from its dehumanising description of black people as a negation of white people, into a term that referred to blacks who collaborated with the system. In the process the negative political connotations of the word 'black' were subverted. It became a term of pride and affirmation. In the same way, gender awareness has resulted in a heightened awareness of the capacity of language to reinforce relations of domination.

The relationship between the 'First World' and the 'Third World' is self-evidently a hierarchical one, embedded in numerical sequence. It puts on the shoulders of the 'Third Worlders' a considerable historical burden: they have a long way to go! This situation prompted Hoyt Fuller, the African-American founder and editor of the magazine *First World* to resort to Ancient Egypt, at a time when the debate was in full swing concerning the racial identity of the ancient Egyptians. If the ancient Egyptians were black, then the 'First World' was black and African, not white and caucasian. Whatever the case might be, we see how the power of terminology can fix in our minds a certain conception of the world as self-evident. The power of such a conception to incapacitate is similar to the claim that capitalism is natural to the human condition.

The examples above further illustrate the point already made that the capacity of the liberation movement to effect fundamental change may derive added legitimacy from deliberate acts of naming and renaming. In the same way though, some residual aspects of a discredited past may ingeniously simulate change through convenient linguistic adjustments by controlling discourse in a manner that subtly reinforces old power relations.

When I first came across the expressions 'students from disadvantaged backgrounds' or 'disadvantaged communities', 'under-prepared students', I recall experiencing an instinctive revulsion. The context was a discussion of academic exclusions which also touched on the role of the academic support programme at the University of the Witwatersrand. The terminology underscores a major criticism of the ASP: how black students with a Department of Education and Training background are identified, set apart from the rest of the students, in the main white, and made ready to join the rest of the student community once they have been sufficiently 'prepared'. (The association with the act of 'preparing food' is hard to resist.) The namer isolates the named, explains them, contains them, and controls them. In this way, a numerical minority can, in part through linguistic manipulation, simulate a majoritarian character by assuming the role of a standard political and psychological majority exercising considerable epistemological power.

Now, it is true that blacks are 'disadvantaged'. But 'disadvantage' in the current South African context implies that there is an accepted, normal, advantaged, standard world outside of which is the minority of marginalised, disadvantaged people: the unfortunate victims of social progress. The concept of disadvantage typifies the epistemology of the illusory psychological majority just referred to. Seen in this way, the 'disadvantaged people' become a sociological phenomenon requiring a professional, humanitarian, and curative intervention. The method is to manipulate context by substituting sociology for politics. The notion of 'disadvantage' enables us to avoid such 'embarrassing' expression as 'black student', 'the oppressed'. That way, the issue is depoliticised through a deft avoidance of race and all it implies in South Africa. Beyond that, the minority deals with the ever-present threat of the majority by reducing the threat linguistically, thus rendering it a problem of smaller, controllable dimensions.

The sociological emphasis is, of course, entirely relevant, but under the circumstances resort to it impacts on the nature of the solution to be sought. The fact is what we have been faced with in South Africa is more than simply 'disadvantage'; we have been dealing with oppression. Millions of black people were oppressed, not simply disadvantaged. From this perspective, the search for a solution to this problem appropriately takes on the scale of a national liberation. A decontextualised notion of 'disadvantage' may limit our ability to visualise a solution that requires a massive restructuring of society as a concrete manifestation of liberation. What is required is national development.

How terms such as 'ill-prepared students', 'under-prepared students', or 'students from disadvantaged backgrounds' can actually affect people so described is worth highlighting. The terms place heavy psychological burdens on them. They start off the journey of post-secondary intellectual life with a terrible 'deficit'. That way, the horrible effects of the past are seen as some debilitating baggage, to be constantly reminded of and then carried into the future. A genuine majoritarian approach would be that, while oppression was a terrible thing, its burdens, at the dawn of liberation, should be seen as a developmental challenge with immediate implications for the restructuring of post-secondary education. That way, the named can experience the advent of freedom, while appreciating its difficult challenges.

It has also been argued that in any case, the notion of 'disadvantage' is a relative one. For example, the namer is the product of a society and an education that prepared them for a life of privilege. That kind of life can no longer be sustained in South Africa. A process of re-education is now essential. This need for re-education is premised on the understanding that the namer is ill-equipped to deal with the new human reality. This is important, for it is a characteristic feature of the namer not to see themselves as a problem. The problem is the 'other'. The 'black problem' is seldom seen as a factor of the 'problem' of a dominant class. From this perspective, the problem of 'disadvantage' as a universal phenomenon, enables us to equally distribute oppression by revealing the various forms it can take, and under-scores the universal and humanitarian character of the quest for liberation.

The solution? If we accept the implications of the foregoing discussion, then we have to abandon the expressions in question: they are offensive, oppressive, and politically manipulative terms. By what names should we call these hundreds of thousands of students? Here we may fall into trap. (Enter the politics of South African tertiary education!) there is no need to mechanically search for a name.

Our approach at UWC has enabled us to deal simply with students because we have assumed and accepted the majoritarian character of 'disadvantage' as an historic, rather than a purely sociological, phenomenon. Appropriate naming therefore, may not really be our problem, nor is it the problem of the oppressed majority. It is the problem of those institutions that have coined the offensive terms in an effort to avoid the implications of historic change. The pressure on them to abandon an unpalatable linguistic device may yet force them to grapple with those implications. They would not, under the circumstances, resort to inventing new names. It would be embarrassing.

It is tempting at this point to assert that we need only name the namer rather than the named, since the namer's situation is not the appropriate standard for assessing the extent of the national problem. If we did this, we would end up, for example, with 'students' and 'students from privileged backgrounds'. An unpalatable solution which proves the point! That would certainly not be a satisfactory way of dealing with the problem, particularly if we accept that all South Africans have suffered from some form of historic disadvantage. The latter understanding is a levelling principle consistent with the need for universal restructuring.

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