

Richard Dyer reflects on the struggle to change the world of words

Magic Words

Many people put a great deal of energy into cleansing language. A colleague of mine is tireless in her use of 'chairperson' in the face of almost everyone else's implacable use of 'chairman'. Jesse Jackson has headed a campaign to make everyone use 'African-American', a campaign that seems to be working, at least as far as the liberal press in the States is concerned. It is one of the more astonishing achievements of 70s politics that queers now find themselves called by a term they themselves nominated, 'gay'.

Struggling over words is one of the most practical day-to-day activities of what may be broadly characterised as cultural politics. They are at one end of the continuum that includes attention to presentation across the board: Neil Kinnock's suits, magazine covers, the centrality of identity as a basis for activity, and the increased stress on the role of consciousness and culture in our general understanding of why and how things are as they are, and how to change them.

The term 'cultural politics' is itself inadequate to cover all that. In some ways the venerable socialist reference to 'the struggle for hearts and minds' is better because more concrete and inclusive, but it had its own drawbacks. It tended to imply that there was a 'real politics' that was separate from the hearts and minds. But 'culture' is not just the vehicle whereby you win people over to something else that is not culture - culture is politics, politics is culture. The problem with cultural politics is well illustrated by the problem of the struggle over words.

Insisting on the use of the words 'chairperson', 'African-American', 'gay', is a drip-drip-drip of political pressure that we have to sustain. But there's something unsatisfactory about it too. It's not so much its slowness and the seeming inertia of language, but the way there nearly always turns out to be something 'off' about the words and terms we want to get

established. We may succeed in some measure in bringing about the change in vocabulary, but how about the meanings and feelings, the minds and the hearts?

One of the things that set me thinking about this is the fact that I have never liked the word 'gay'. It's still the word I would use and wish to have used to describe myself and those like myself, but all the same it embarrasses me. I'm not giving ground to those who always said that the gay movement had 'spoiled' the word 'gay', had 'deprived the language of a very useful word' by associating it with sexual peculiarity. Those people are welcome to have back 'queer', 'bent', 'pervert' and all the other very useful words that were in danger of going out of all but homophobic commission.

Nor am I going along with the likes of Richard Ingrams, who opined in a recent Sunday newspaper that most of the gays he knew were not 'gay' but miserable (as well any gay man knowing him might be). It's just that to me, 'gay' is a rather trivial word, too much suggesting only fun-fun-fun, not adequate to the complexities and variedness of being... gay. No word could ever do that, but 'gay' feels like a delimitation, an insistence on one aspect.

The alternatives are no better, of course. The 'homo' words, quite apart from the learned feel where one wants a comfortable colloquial term, each have their problems. 'Homosexual' is too emphatically sexual, with no affective or social ring; 'homo-erotic' is too broad, too widely (and usefully) applied to any libidinally-charged contact between people of the same sex (such as fathers and sons, contact sports, men at urinals); 'homophile' is too namby-pamby, not sexual enough, and anyway never caught on.

'Gay' has another problem too. Some people use it to apply to both women and men, but feminist lesbians have generally resisted this. 'Lesbian' instead is not a straightforward issue, however.

I remember a meeting



Magritte's language: A mirror for change

at the Birmingham Gay Centre about changing its name to the Lesbian and Gay Centre. The strongest voices raised against it came from women, for whom 'lesbian' was the term 'they', the doctors and psychologists, had always used against women such as themselves. One said that she'd rather be called 'bent' than 'lesbian'. A word with such a positive ring for one group of women sounded very negative to another.

This example suggests that there is only a limited extent to which we can make words feel to everyone how we want them to feel. Words come trailing clouds of connotation that are hard to shake off. Take the history of progressive terms to describe US Americans of African descent. Each new term introduced seemed to break through the hatred and prejudice enshrined in the prevalent vocabulary, yet each term itself was revealed to be oppressive.

'Negro', for instance, drew

from an aspirantly objective description of differences between peoples and was adopted, notably by the Harlem Renaissance. It was the way in which one was positive about African-Americans at that time, yet it was founded on biological notions of race that seem the epitome of reaction now, especially considering where racial pride can lead in Aryan hands.

'Coloured' at first sight seemed to avoid this - no longer conjuring up notions of blood ancestry - yet not only did it still focus on a biological difference, it also has the effect of suggesting that there were normal people and 'coloured' ones, as if all people do not share the quality of being one colour or another. 'Black', by ineluctably suggesting the counter term 'white', avoided this by insisting that black people are this colour; it stood against the associations of blackness with evil, insisting that black people

take pride in their colour.

Yet it seems that 'black' too may have run its course, perhaps because 'black' is still so widely used in connection with the bad, perhaps because it too still focuses on skin. 'African-American' is the first genuinely cultural label, but, apart from being such a mouthful, may run aground on old problems about the 'Africanness' of African-Americans in which many Africans do not recognise themselves and which many African-Americans do not in fact relate to.

The histories of political word change seem always to be this fraught. In part this is a problem of having a word at all. White people, heterosexuals, the able-bodied, do not generally go around worrying over what to call themselves and have themselves called. Having a word for oneself and one's group, making a politics out of what that word should be, draws attention to and also reproduces one's marginality, confirms one's place outside of power and thus outside of the mechanisms of change.

Having a word also contains and fixes identity. It is significant to most aspects of who I am that I am gay, but all the same it is only *part* of who I am. Yet the label, and the very real need to make a song and dance about it, is liable to suggest that it is *all* that I am, that it explains everything about me. It has the effect of suggesting that sexuality is fixed, that it consists of clear, unchanging categories, which is untrue both for individuals and for the historical constructions of sexuality.

Similarly, 'disabled' lumps together all forms of departure from the physical norm, as if these all form one common experience which determines what needs to be known by and about disabled people. We will always feel frustrated by having to have words to express our social identity, even while that identity means that we do indeed have to have words for it.

The frustration means that we will almost certainly get fed up with the words that we

use and see the negative associations creep back in. This has also to do, however, with the fact that words do not necessarily change reality. *The Sun* now uses the word 'gay', but with just the same hatred as it would have used 'queer' or 'pervert'. No amount of changing the terms to describe African-Americans will change attitudes, as long as material conditions keep African-Americans overwhelmingly in the jobs, housing and conditions fit for 'niggers'.

The limitations of word politics are of a piece with those of the intellectual fashions at the other end of the continuum of cultural politics. Just as left practical politics has taken on the importance of words, of presentation and rhetoric, so much radical intellectual work in recent years has focused its attention on 'discourse', on the way reality is perceived through and shaped by socially constructed ways of making sense of reality.

This intellectual work was much needed; it has broken with tendencies to think of reality as out there, separate from consciousness and culture. Though often thought of as anti-humanist in its rejection of moralising about human destiny, it is in fact profoundly humanist in its stress on the fact of the cultural construction of our lives. It is a political and intellectual stance that should stand us in good stead against any revival of 'scientific' politics with their well-documented inhuman consequences.

Yet 'word politics' runs the risk of thinking that words and discourse are all there is, of forgetting that they are attempts to make sense of what are not themselves words and discourse: bodies, feelings, and things. What we are called and what we call ourselves matters, has material and emotional consequences, but we can expect too much of words. Changing them is a necessary but not a sufficient part of politics. We change the world through words, but not through words - or, it's true, bread - alone. It has to be both.#