

Communication and Power in Organizations: Discourse, Ideology and Domination

Dennis K. Mumby

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Published in the new Ablex series, "People, Communication, Organization" edited by Lee Thayer, Mumby's book presents a pathbreaking and accessible synthesis of interest to several disciplines and subfields: communications theory, cultural studies, organization theory, critical theory. Though the empirical focus of the study is on the cultures of complex organizations, it is also much more than that because it provides "an appropriate and convenient vehicle for examining the communication-domination relationship" (p. xiv).

Chapter One introduces an analytical framework based on the interpretive paradigm of the organizational cultures literature, but breaks with its uncritical assumptions by connecting reality construction with social reproduction, i.e., organizational meaning is always related back to the power interests which become "potential sides of cultural deformation" (p. 166). Chapter Two applies Habermas's theory of knowledge interests, ideology, communicative competence and legitimation as the basis—with some important qualifications and modifications—for a critical theory of organizational cultures. Chapter Three develops a theory of power-as-domination appropriate for complex organizations, a theme complemented in Chapter Four by a theory of ideology conceived as discursive practices through which particular interests are presented as universal. In Chapter Five a novel approach to organizational analysis is applied in a case study of the ways in which organizational narrative (as exemplified in "stories" in organizational cultures) come to function ideologically.

The final two chapters take up epistemological and methodological issues. Chapter Six follows Rorty and Gadamer's critique of foundationalist epistemologies, but couples this with the recognition that anti-foundationalism runs the risk of abandoning consideration of the effects of domination. Chapter Seven elaborates a notion of "deconstruction" which, drawing upon examples from literary and feminist theory, links the validity of interpretation to its transformative potential rather than its verifiability. In the context of organizational analysis this justifies the conception of a radical methodology as participatory research.

Here only a few of the more provocative aspects of Mumby's study can be singled out to illustrate its rich implications, along with some residual problems: (1) the treatment of Habermas; (2) the conception of ideology; (3) the method of analyzing organizational narrative; and (4) participatory research as a critical methodology analogous to deconstructive praxis.

The critique of Habermas suffers from lack of access to his more recent writings (*The Theory of Communicative Action*, 1984; 1987; *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 1987) which move in directions which would require modifications of the criticisms developed by Mumby: lack of attention to material as opposed to knowledge interests; the weaknesses of the psychoanalytic model as the basis for a critique of

ideology; the limitations of defining ideology as distorted communication; and the problematic implications of the notion of an ideal speech situation, especially the implications of the possibility of a position "outside of ideology" (pp. 39–47).

The analysis of organizational ideology deftly cuts a path between what Stuart Hall has referred to as the "two paradigms" of cultural studies: the culturalist and the structuralist. Of particular interest is the use of Clegg's work on selection rules in organizations and Giddens' theory of structuration and ideology for incorporating a theory of subjectivity into the analysis of organizational reproduction (pp. 82–93).

The account of organizational symbolism as narrative effectively exploits the methodological possibilities of narrative analysis as a technique for overcoming the uncritical bias of traditional reality construction approaches which neglect the way meanings can mask repression (p. 97). Hence, organizational narrative comes to have a strategic significance: "Better than any other symbolic structure, narrative is able to provide the crucial connection between signification and legitimation" (pp. 105).

Finally, Mumby confronts directly some of the problems of an anti-foundational critical theory which still aspires to transform social reality despite the absence of an Archimedian epistemological reference point. If "truth" is not beyond or outside of ideology, if all social science is a type of "conversation", how does it remain possible to justify one approach over another? To avoid relativism, he turns to a conception of "radical conversation" (p. 138ff.) which accepts Habermas's critique of hermeneutics, but rejects his separation of truth and power by drawing upon Giddens's formulation of the "dialectic of control" as a process of enablement, as well as constraint. This culminates in a version of critical theory *qua* "radical methodology" which breaks down the divisions between experts and clients, power and truth. Unlike "action research", which tends to formulate the problem of change from a managerial perspective within the existing context of power relations, "participatory research" is designed to challenge those power relations.

The problematic "scientific" status of such an approach is confronted indirectly in the concluding discussion of deconstruction as praxis. The abandonment of a foundationalist view of knowledge culminates in the claim that validity derives from "the ability of individuals to engage in critical self-reflection, creating a situation under which conditions of domination and repression can be subject to alteration" (p. 158). But what becomes of empirical-analytic and hermeneutic-historical sciences under these conditions? A purely deconstructive conception of knowledge as praxis as proposed by Mumby must answer this question. In short, his discussion here needs to be confronted with Habermas's more recent efforts to ground critical theory in a theory of argumentation and critique of post-structuralism.

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