

**DYSPHEMISM: UNPOPULAR CULTURE
AND DISEMPOWERMENT IN A BRITISH BANK**

by

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Dysphemism: Unpopular Culture and Disempowerment in a British Bank

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Abstract

Euphemism is the use of a mild, comforting, or evasive expression in place of one that is taboo, negative, offensive or too direct (McArthur 1992: 387). It is a ritual of politeness, but it is no less important for that. Authors as diverse as novelist George Orwell (1949) and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) have described well the link between euphemism and social control. Dysphemism—euphemism’s opposite—is “the use of a negative or disparaging expression to describe something or someone, such as calling a Rolls-Royce a jalopy” (McArthur 1992: 328). Like its antonym, dysphemism is often a ritual of politeness: signaling modesty, for example, when a host refers to a carefully prepared meal as something he or she just threw together. And, continuing the similarity, I draw in this paper from a twelve-month ethnographic study of a large British retail bank to argue that dysphemism may complement euphemism as a means of legitimating the exercise of control by allowing it to be purposefully misrecognized by all parties involved.

“Everything is bad news. Otherwise they would have to pay us more.”

Introduction

Euphemism is the use of a mild, comforting, or evasive expression in place of one that is taboo, negative, offensive or too direct (McArthur 1992: 387). “I would like to powder my nose,” is an example of euphemism as is George’s response in Edward Albee’s (1962), *Who’s Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*: Martha, won’t you show her where we keep the euphemism?” Euphemism is a ritual of politeness, but it is no less important for that. Authors as diverse as novelist George Orwell (1949) and sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (1990) have described well the link between euphemism and social control. Orwell (1949: 8) nearly makes euphemism a dirty word by describing a dystopian *1984* overseen by the Ministries of *Truth* (which, we are told, concerns itself with education), *Peace* (which concerns itself with war), *Love* (which maintains law and order), and *Plenty* (which allocates scarce resources). Bourdieu is more measured and more explicit, describing situations where

the only way that relations of domination can be set up, maintained or restored, is through strategies which, if they are not to destroy themselves by revealing their true nature, must be disguised, transfigured, in a word, euphemized (Bourdieu 1990: 126).

Dysphemism—euphemism’s opposite—is “the use of a negative or disparaging expression to describe something or someone, such as calling a Rolls-Royce a jalopy”

(McArthur 1992: 328). Like its antonym, dysphemism is often a ritual of politeness: signaling modesty, for example, when a host refers to a carefully prepared meal as something he or she just threw together. And, continuing the similarity, I draw in this paper from a twelve-month ethnographic study of a large British retail bank¹ to argue that dysphemism may complement euphemism as a means of legitimating the exercise of control by allowing it to be purposefully misrecognized by all parties involved.

Euphemism and Control

Orwell is depicting a futuristic neverland and Bourdieu is theorizing from ethnographic data about pre-capitalist Algeria, but the continued popularity of euphemistic labels such as “downsizing” or “rightsizing” (not to mention the suddenly less euphemistic “layoff” and “redundancy”) in contemporary America and Britain suggests that the role of euphemism in legitimizing control cannot be dismissed as either a figment of imagination or a foreign curiosity. Bourdieu's description of the relationship between master and *khammes* (a kind of sharecropper who received only a very small share of the crop) in Kabylia is strikingly similar to Kunda's description of the relationship between manager and engineer in Tech (a pseudonymous American company). Compare Bourdieu's claim that, because overt violence was collectively disapproved of:

If the master wanted to persuade the *khammes* to devote himself over a long period to the pursuit of the master's interests, he had to associate him completely with those interests, masking the asymmetry of the relationship by symbolically denying it in all of his behavior. . . . The *khammes* “treated the land as if he owned it,” because there was nothing in his master's conduct to belie his claim (Bourdieu 1990: 127).

with Kunda's discussion of the following quote by a typical engineering manager in Tech:

“Power plays don't work. You can't make 'em do anything. They have to want to. So you have to work through the culture. The idea is to educate people without them knowing it. Have the religion and not know how they ever got it!...” In this view, the ability to elicit, channel, and direct the creative energies and activities of employees in profitable directions—to make them want to contribute—is based on designing a member role that employees are expected to incorporate as an integral part of their sense of self (1992: 5).

In Tech, as in Kabylia, overt control of engineer's behavior was collectively disapproved of as being inappropriate and counterproductive. Control existed, Kunda claimed, but it was masked and purposefully misrecognized by all parties (p.: 7-8, 173). Despite the fact that employees were “‘wise’ to what is ‘really’ going on” (p.: 178), control nevertheless had to be symbolically denied, euphemized as coaching, cheer-leading, or cajoling, to be effective. It was, as Bourdieu (p.: 114) puts it: “the best-kept and worst-kept of secrets (since everyone kept it),... the complicity of collective bad faith in the economy of “good faith.”

The point, then, is more subtle than a Marxist false consciousness argument about subservient dupes and their blind embrace of the ideas of the ruling class. The *khammes* and the engineers are subservient, but they are not dupes. To say that they are wise to the disguise, though, is not to say that the use of euphemism is therefore irrelevant cultural window dressing. Bourdieu (p.: 128) and Kunda (p.: 21) each make the point that we can no more reduce the situation to its “objective” truth—seeing the *khammes* as a slave, or Tech engineers as subjects of a tyranny—than we can accept its official truth—the *khammes* is a trusted associate, Tech engineers are beneficiaries of a benign environment. Instead, Bourdieu argues, we must ensure that

our “analysis holds together what holds together in the object, namely the double reality of intrinsically equivocal, ambiguous practices” (p.: 118). The disguise provided by euphemism may not make the exercise of control by master or manager invisible, but it makes control gentle, and it makes it legitimate. These are not trivial matters. Kunda’s (p.: 8) evidence suggests that the successful euphemization of control is the defining cultural element of Tech. New engineers are quickly socialized to it both formally (when they learn the official truth (p.: 6)) and informally (when they are made wise (p.: 52)), and senior engineers attribute to it the fact that Tech is special and “something else” (p.: 8). We cannot understand Tech, or Kabylia, or settings like them, without understanding the role of euphemism.

What’s more, there is a cost associated with the use of euphemism. Bourdieu focuses on the cost to the master or manager who “is forced to devote almost as much energy and ingenuity to disguising the truth of economic acts as [he or she] expends in performing them” (p.: 114). Kunda, on the other hand, (invoking, incidentally, Heller’s *Catch-22* rather than Orwell’s *1984* as a literary foil) emphasizes the price paid in the form of “heavy claims against the self—the thoughts, feelings, and experiences of members of work organizations” (p.: 13). The claims arise from the fact that the *comforting expression* in this case of euphemism is that the interests of company and individual engineer are perfectly aligned. Engineers are expected to act as though the locus of corporate decision-making lies within themselves. They are to accept that they must not only do what’s right,² but want to do it. Kunda quotes William Whyte’s *Organization Man*:

No one wants to see the old authoritarian return, but at least it could be said of him that what he wanted primarily from you was your sweat. The new man wants your soul (Whyte 1956: 397).

And he closes *Engineering Culture* with the worry that, “deprived of an autonomous self or a sense of ‘authentic’ experience,” the engineers he studied may come to “lack the foundations of a moral framework that would enable them to evaluate corporate activities” (p.: 226).

Dysphemism and Control

Dysphemism is central to our understanding the culture of British Armstrong Bank (or BritArm). There are various costs associated with its use, including those of energy and ingenuity, but there are no claims made on the selves or souls of those involved. It is true that dysphemism may be used to disguise an act of direct control to make it more polite. As with euphemism, dysphemism allows all parties to deny conflicts of interest and purposefully misrecognize the locus of control in their relationship. But whereas euphemism moves the focus from the dominant to the dominated and proclaims everyone to be equally dominant, dysphemism moves the focus from the dominant to a third-party and proclaims everyone to be equally dominated. If euphemism invokes a sort of empowering of the employee (“Do what’s right!”), dysphemism invokes a disempowering of the employer (“If it were up to me...”). As a tactic of legitimation, dysphemism poses no threat to privacy or self-identity; instead, it offers a potential challenge to—but, curiously, may serve also to protect—pride and self-worth.

An Example

Consider the following example from which the paper's epigraph was drawn. Wednesday mornings in BritArm are reserved for communication meetings. All across England, the Bank's 2,200 branches open a half-hour late at 9:30 so that managers and staff can convene without the worry of customer interference. Likewise, back offices and head office departments stop work for the half-hour and gather together to discuss issues that have arisen in the past week and to reflect on the challenges of the week ahead. A time-out from the hectic and fragmented work week, the communication meeting is a welcome opportunity for the whole branch, office, or department to share ideas, air grievances, and compare notes. It is a chance to bond together.

Or that is the idea. In practice, that idea has too little structure to suit the tastes of many in the Bank. Senior executives, nervous that the time might be wasted, have weekly briefing packets sent to managers describing what they are to communicate to their units. Unit managers—many of them unsure of how best to use the time and culturally unable to take (read "waste") a valuable half-hour each week for unstructured discussion and reflection—are only too happy to receive the instructions. They are even more happy to receive the videotapes that periodically accompany the briefing packets. These give senior executives a chance to speak directly to all staff and relieve managers of the responsibility for filling all but a handful of the 30 minutes. They subvert entirely the espoused intent of the meetings.

Uniformly of high polish, the briefings and videos are routinely derided by management and staff alike. Any feelings of pride or gratitude in seeing CEO Michael Cole expound the Bank's vision or hearing BBC news reader Michael Burke announce improvements to the Bank's systems are either absent or kept to oneself. Instead,

mannerisms are mocked, clothing critiqued, errors highlighted, managerial claims loudly disbelieved, and executive waffle snorted at. Those managers who choose to read the briefing notes verbatim rather than use them as guidelines for improvisation often have a hard time doing so with a straight face. Managers regularly preface the meetings with apologies for the material and typically join in the good-natured fun that follows.

Communication meetings do serve a bonding function. They bring the people of an office or branch together in a traditional way practiced by the English since the Hundred Years War: by identifying a common enemy. The common enemy in this case is not France, or even a competitor, but BritArm itself. Each Wednesday morning, and countless other times throughout the week, local loyalties are strengthened through shared affirmation of gentle contempt for the Bank.

I was only dimly aware of this on the morning of Wednesday, August 3, 1994. Two months into my fieldwork in BritArm UK, I was in the participation phase of my participant-observation. I was acting as a Doer 1 at one of the Bank's Securities Centres, a regional back office processing center. Along with the more senior Doers 2, we Doers 1 processed the paperwork necessary to perfect guarantees, mortgages, and mortgage debentures taken by the Bank to secure lending. We checked that charge forms and title documents were in order, that insurance and ground rent were paid up to date, that property valuations had been obtained, and so on. In turn, the assistant managers checked every aspect of our work: perfection is the operative word when perfecting securities. In the unlikely event that the Bank had to rely on a piece of security in court, I was told repeatedly, every "i" must be dotted, every "t" crossed.

With over 100 staff, the Securities Centre was deemed by its manager, Tom, to be too big for one single communication meeting. Instead, he held the meeting in four shifts. Besides castrating the idea of communication meetings, this left the Centre short-staffed for much of the morning, an inconvenience that—along with his dislike of public speaking—led Tom to cancel the meetings as often as possible. But there was little chance of this meeting being canceled. The Bank had announced its interim results the afternoon before, and the meeting would be the Bank's chance to put its spin on the numbers. Tom had received his briefing packet. As instructed, he had filled a flip-chart with columns of numbers comparing the 1994 year-to-date figures with 1993. He stood at the front of the basement staff room and joked around as those of us in the 10 o'clock group filed in for the third communications meeting of the morning.

To the untrained eye, the results seemed exceptionally good. Pre-tax profits for the first six months of the year had risen to £767m, an 83% increase on the £419m figure the year before. Bad debt provisions had fallen by 47%, and the Bank was reporting a 14% increase in its dividend. The trained observers of the British press, however, responded to the results with a cacophony of criticism. Some newspapers, including the left-leaning tabloid, *The Daily Mirror* were furious. *The Daily Mirror*, in its editorial entitled "Piggy Banks," had this to say:

This is the season when the banks report their profits and we can see where the money they rip off from their customers is going.

Yesterday it was the turn of BritArm, which has made 82 per cent more than a year ago. While still planning to shed 4,200 jobs as it axes branches around the country.

So customers will get an even worse service for their money. There is little we can do about it. One bank is as bad as another.

They are no longer interested in helping private customers or small businesses. They just want to transfer our cash into their profits.

If it happened to them, they would call it robbery (Daily Mirror 1994: 6).

Other papers, such as the more staid *Financial Times*, expressed disappointment with the results:

Yesterday's figures leave room for doubt about BritArm's grip on costs. This is [especially] true of UK retail banking where trading profits fell by 5 per cent and the bank itself admits that further cost cutting is needed.... Presumably BritArm is happy to let costs rise as the business grows. But it urgently needs to show that its investment can earn a decent return (Financial Times 1994: 16).

Depending how you looked at them, the results were either too good or not good enough. Either way, they were bad news. The Bank's response to this, not uncharacteristic, bit of bad press? Agreement.

Reading from his briefing notes, Tom laboriously explained why, despite superficial appearances to the contrary, the results were troubling. Here we see one tactic of dysphemism. Though the technical discussion glazed the eyes of many in the audience, the argument echoes the analysis of the *Financial Times* and can be summarized as follows. The results announced were for BritArm Group as a whole, and not just BritArm UK Branch Banking (UKBB). Much of the increase in profits derived from the Group's international banking and investment banking businesses rather than branch banking. Within UKBB, the increase in profits was attributable to a decrease in bad debt provisions. Operating income actually declined slightly (£3.45bn versus £3.47bn the year before) and had been flat or falling for some time. Advances (lending) had fallen to £81.7bn from £85.7bn.

What's more, the Bank was facing heightened competition from other banks and building societies (thrifts) and from new competitors such as Marks and Spencer (a department store selling everything from ladies underwear to frozen dinners and,

now, financial services) and General Motors (who were heavily advertising their new credit card). Given this, and given the state of the British economy, an increase in operating income was unlikely in the foreseeable future. Therefore, redoubled efforts to squeeze costs were necessary to improve the cost-income ratio which is studied carefully by shareholders and City analysts. Without further—admittedly painful—cost-cutting, the cost-income ratio would rise, the share price would drop, and the Bank would be taken over as one competitor recently had been.

It took Tom 25 minutes to get through this material. He got tangled up in some of the math and had to take time to explain to staff what concepts like “operating income” and “cost-income ratio” meant. That left a few minutes for questions. A woman in the front row, Sally, raised her hand and waved it back and forth. There was a collective groan among the people I was sitting near, and Tom pretended to not see her hand as he asked if there were any questions. After enduring a minute of this teasing, Sally stood up and said that she wanted to say a few words on behalf of the Staff Association. The Staff Association is one of two competing unions—the other being the Banking, Insurance and Finance Union (BIFU)—that have organized employees in the Bank. Fewer than 25% of staff belong to either the Staff Association or BIFU, but both enter into collective bargaining with the Bank over contracts that cover all clerical staff.

“This is not a membership pitch,” Sally said several times, “but if more of us belonged to the Staff Association, we would have a greater chance of influencing things.” Sarcastic comments from Tom (“But it’s not a membership pitch!”) and jeering from her colleagues grew each time she insisted that she was not canvassing for members, but the room quieted quickly when she moved on to describe the Staff Association’s

response to the Bank's results. "The Staff Association wants these profits to be reinvested in the people," she said. "Many parts of the Bank are operating short-staffed, many of us have not received the raises and promotions we have earned, and it isn't fair." Glaring at Tom, she said accusingly, "the Securities Centre is a perfect example. We need money for more staff, we need more PCs, we need to improve TecSec [the definitively imperfect computer software used to track the progress of security perfection], we need more training so that we can learn new jobs, too many people have been stuck in the same job too long." Grumbles of assent were audible from the audience.

Looking chastened, Tom stammered that he agreed with her. More money did need to be invested in the people, he said. Staffing and technology were, he agreed, a problem and not only the Securities Centre but in all parts of the Bank. He complimented the group on all they had done to keep the place running despite those shortfalls. But, he said, the reality was that the Bank was focused on cost-cutting now. There was nothing he could do about that. He consented, though, to read the statement from the Staff Association to the 10:30 group and to let Sally distribute copies of it.

Standing in the back, Liz, one of the assistant managers, said that she had a question: "What is the performance related pay pot going to be?" Tom said that he had wondered that too since that figure should have been sent down with the results. It wasn't. "You know the Bank," he said, rolling his eyes and laughing. This is another tactic of dysphemism. Cutler, my Doer 2 mentor, leaned over to me and whispered that their Christmas bonus had been cut to one-quarter of one percent (0.0025) of salary because of the new performance related pay (PRP) scheme, so he was pretty

curious too about the size of the pot. “Not that it’s likely to be much,” he frowned. “They’re probably holding the numbers back because they’re embarrassed at how small they are.” Someone within earshot chuckled in solidarity. On the other side of the room, Liz continued to complain that it was not right that the numbers hadn’t been released. “I just read what they send me,” Tom said defensively. He agreed to call right away to find out why the PRP figures hadn’t been sent out yet.

Our group filed out as the 10:30 group showed up at the door. Jokes were exchanged and, as we walked up the stairs, I asked Cutler whether he was surprised that the results were presented as bad news even though they seemed so good. “No,” he said. Overhearing us, Max—another Doer 2—said to me “You’re studying the culture, right? That’s the culture. Everything is bad news. Otherwise they would have to pay us more.” His comment provoked a few laughs. “Still,” Cutler said, “I don’t suppose it’s worse here than anywhere else.” Max nodded in agreement.

Unpopular Culture

Taking self-deprecation to an extreme, even by British standards, the managers and staff I studied in BritArm have virtually nothing but bad things to say about “the Bank.” I put “the Bank” in quotation marks because while it denotes all of the 50,000 employees, over £100bn in assets, and extensive codified policies and procedures of the company, “the Bank” connotes not so much an organization or legal entity as a culture, a pattern of how things are done in BritArm. Managers and clerks come and go, assets are acquired and disposed of, the organization is periodically restructured, jobs re-defined, processes redesigned, but—the common wisdom holds—“the Bank hasn’t really changed in 300 years.” And, strikingly, the cultural connotation of “the

Bank” is overwhelmingly negative. Indeed, never once in the eight months of full-time participant-observation I conducted in BritArm did I hear a positive word about the culture, and seldom did I hear anything positive about any other aspect of the organization. Complaints, on the other hand, were common. I was told repeatedly that the Bank is too bureaucratic, too rules-driven, not customer-focused enough, not entrepreneurial enough, too inflexible, too prone to navel-gazing, too centralized. And, it was added, too negative. BritArm is an example of a negative, but strong, culture that nobody admits to liking and everybody feels helpless to change. It is what I have described elsewhere as an “unpopular culture” (Weeks 1997). And despite the almost exclusive attention paid in the literature to cultures that are, in the words of sociologist William Foote Whyte (1955: 299), “interesting and pleasant” for members, there is no reason to believe that BritArm is unique in the unpopularity of its culture.

Sometimes the negativity in the Bank takes the form of complaints expressing an earnest desire for some sort of redress. Comments in the preceding example by Sally (about profits not being reinvested in people) and by Liz (about the tardy release of bonus figures) are instances of this. Other times it takes the form of conversational ice-breakers. BritArm employees complain about the Bank in the same way that the British public complains about the weather: incessantly and with good humor. And, as with gripes about the weather, these little jibes about the Bank prompt quick agreement but do not by themselves signal malcontent. For example, towards the end of my time in BritArm UK, I met Ben, a pseudonymous Senior Manager in the London head office. As he led me into the stuffy conference room where we were to have our discussion, he walked over to open the window. It promptly fell shut. He

fiddled with the mechanism, but he could not get the window to stay open. “BritArm technology,” he said with a smile as he gave up and sat down. “Now, let me tell you a little bit about myself.” He went on to give a résumé of his career with the bank, but with his small joke he had already told something about himself: not about his aggravation with the Bank’s technology, but of his affinity and agility with its culture. In the mouths of the culturally competent, such derogations—the mild mockery of the Bank videos mentioned above provides another example—draw people together with their allusion to shared experience. They put people at ease with one another through the comforting routine of their recital.

Tactics of Dysphemism

A third form of negativity, dysphemism, combines elements of the previous two. Like complaint, it is oriented to action. At the same time, though, like derogation, it is oriented to the relationship between the speaker and his or her audience. In the context of legitimacy and control, it is a means of explaining unpopular action—or, for that matter, unpopular inaction—as if no decision-making had gone on. It explains the action taken (or, again, not taken) as inevitable given the objective, external constraints faced by both parties together. The speaker thus may avoid being blamed for the action and the audience may avoid the action reflecting badly on them. In the above example, the Bank’s executives dysphemize the Bank’s results, and the external reactions to them, to present their decision to undertake unpopular cost-cutting measures such as closing branches and imposing a hiring freeze as objective necessities created by “global competition” and short-termist “City analysts.” I observed similar usage in discussions of managerial decisions to restructure, to

redesign core processes, and to alter Bank policy. In recent years, examples could be found in nearly every *Wall Street Journal* or *Financial Times* article about company downsizing. A more illustrative comment on its ubiquity, though, comes from Erving Goffman's description of one of the few places in society where this sort of dysphemism does not occur: the mental hospital. Goffman locates the asylum as a site of the mortification of patients' selves.

And this is not merely due to their uniquely degraded living levels, but also to the unique way in which significance for self is made explicit to the patient, piercingly, persistently, and thoroughly. Once lodged on a given ward, the patient is firmly instructed that the restrictions and deprivations he encounters are not due to such blind forces as tradition or economy—and hence dissociable from the self—but are intentional parts of his treatment, part of his needs at the time, and henceforth an expression of the state that his self has fallen to (Goffman 1961: 149).

Dysphemism, then, is a tactic of depersonalizing (or moving to an absent, and often vague, third person) the exercise of control to soften it and make it seem more gentle.

I hasten to distinguish dysphemism from deceit. The official truth about the Bank's results was not a fabrication. Rather, it was a legitimate, factual interpretation of an equivocal reality. In other cultural contexts, and with other ends in mind, other interpretations of the results would also have been possible. And, importantly, everyone in the Bank knew of the possibility of such alternative interpretations. *The Daily Mirror* and other tabloids are more widely read in the Bank than *The Financial Times*. News of BritArm's 83% jump in profits to £767m for the first six months of the year was widely reported on British radio and television. Few reports went into detail about the difference between Group profits and UK Branch Banking profits. Few considered what the cost-income ratio or the operating income figure might reveal. By all accounts, most Bank staff found—from family, friends, and customer-

s—reinforcement for the interpretation that BritArm was making embarrassingly fat profits. Most found it intuitively appealing. Still, almost all the employees I spoke to also expressed at least a grudging acceptance of the Bank's official, and more dismal, interpretation. Few found it as intuitive as the fat profits story, but then nobody expected it to be intuitive: after all, careful speaking notes were prepared to guide managers delivering a complex argument. Many found its precision and subtle accuracy appealing. It is equivocality, not dishonesty, that lies at the heart of dysphemism.

Goffman mentions two blind forces often used as dysphemism's fodder: tradition and economy. So far, we have been discussing the latter. But the unpopular culture of BritArm makes the dysphemism of tradition, or culture, or just "the Bank," straightforward. As a fungible placeholder for everything outside the shared contexts of the speakers, "the Bank" serves as a ready third party, easily malignable in any situation. In explaining the lack of bonus figures, Tom's comment of "You know the Bank," complete with a rolling of the eyes, is an example of this. Liz, and the rest of us in the audience, were not to take the omission as significant or the fault of Tom or anyone else. Instead, we were to come together in shared suffering of the Bank's well-known inadequacies. We were to think of the unusual tardiness of the bonus announcement as the result of generic incompetence rather than a particular decision.

If the economy is the bogey favored in legitimating macro-level decisions such as the imposition of cost-cutting measures, "the Bank" plays that role in accounting for micro-level decisions. It is legitimate in BritArm to say that the views of City analysts necessitate several branch closures and much destaffing of branches, for

example. But something else is needed to answer the “Why Me?” question: why was it decided to close *this* branch? Managers know the cost-income ratios of their own branches or units³ and, because of the way overhead costs are allocated, inevitably find it to be less than that reported by the Bank overall. Their typical conclusion? Cuts need to be made, but there is no economic justification for *their* branch to be targeted. I heard this time and time again. So how is it explained to them and how do they explain to their staff that their branch must make do with fewer employees? By dysphemizing the Bank, or Regional Office, or the Centre, or Head Office as being, once again, ignorant and foolish.

The question is raised: why is this best understood as dysphemism and not simply disdain? In part it is because of the ambiguity of derogated entities such as “the Bank” or “the Centre.” When I pushed for more specificity from dysphemizing informants, it was never forthcoming. “The Centre” (roughly signifying the entire hierarchy above the speaker), I was told, is made up of generally bright and well-meaning people. Indeed, my questioning was typically unwelcome and led to disavowal and backtracking. These derogations were meant as comforting clichés: the dysphemism was meant to close questioning, not to open it. Dysphemism not only softens control, it serves to mystify it and make it undiscussible.⁴ The broader reason, though, can be seen in the Cutler’s closing comment, “I don’t suppose it is worse here than anywhere else.” This is a not untypically understated version of the expressions of loyalty, gratitude, and affection for BritArm with which I was confronted by its employees. In my interviews with managers, for example, there was a pattern where a manager would carry on with a number of derogations about the Bank, but would then tell me that I had to put the complaints in the context of how grateful they were

to the Bank. For example, “This place has problems,” a Business Manager told me after having just spent the better part of a day telling me of them:

But I want to finish my career here [in BritArm] and if that means staying in this job until I retire then so be it. Does that surprise you? [I shrugged.] I owe a lot to BritArm. I’ve only got 3 O-levels [meaning that he had left school at 16]. [He stared at me to gauge my reaction.] My father was a miner. And now I’m a bloody fucking bank manager. [Laughs.] I’m meeting with company directors and such like. So when I complain about my job, understand that the Bank has given me more than I had a right to expect.

The Bank’s social calendar is full of pub lunches, ritual suppers, intramural sports, and Christmas parties with elaborate pantomimes that staff rehearse on their own time.⁵ Voluntary turnover is low; the intracompany marriage rate is high. All of this is indicative of the cultural combination of love and negativity that I found in BritArm. But perhaps nothing speaks louder of this equivocality than the strong, defensive reaction of Bank insiders when an outsider (I speak from experience) attempts to join uninvited into the chorus of negativity. Matters are not cut and dried, however: the distinction between dysphemism and disdain is always in play in the Bank and the successful use of dysphemism as a legitimating tactic requires substantial cultural competence.

Conclusion

BritArm is, by all accounts, not an empowering environment. The Bank is described by employees and managers alike as a centralized, command and control environment. It is, then, in this sense, the opposite of Kunda’s Tech. And yet the direct exercise of control is hardly more legitimate in BritArm than in Tech. In both cases, disguised control is more common than direct control. In neither case does the ethno-

graphic evidence allow for a definitive statement that, to use Bourdieu's terms, the relations of domination must be misrecognized to be recognized as legitimate—we can speak here only of sufficiency, never of necessity. But just as euphemized control is central to Tech's culture, so is dysphemized control to BritArm's. It is an important element of the tact that Bank informants told me again and again characterized their organization and, indeed, British banks more generally. It was a point that people in BritArm suggested I might miss because of my being an American. And the Bank considers itself to be—and criticizes itself for being—stereotypically British. More British, as I noted when discussing the extremities of self-deprecation practiced in the organization, than Britain. Kunda's evidence suggests that Tech employees may hold a similar view of their organization's Americanness. Yet euphemized control is far from unknown in Britain, and likely few American readers can fail to find alienating Goffman's depiction of the cruel rawness of the fully undysphemized control in St. Elizabeth's Hospital.

The similarities, then, between the two organizations, BritArm and Tech, are suggestive. They raise the question of whether the identity and authenticity issues Kunda raises are valid also in an analysis of BritArm. Interestingly authors writing about emotion control have showed much less concern for situations requiring negative affect than those requiring positive affect. There seems to be an assumption—perhaps reflecting the preconceptions of organizational sociologists as much as the character of capitalism or human nature—that negative affect towards one's organization and its customers is more authentic and healthy than its positive counterpart. Hochschild (1983) is illustrative. In contrast to the “false self” and “emotional numbness” she describes flight attendants as facing (pp.: 187-188), she describes

the job of bill collecting as giving employees “permission to puff themselves up, to take the upper hand and exercise a certain license in dealing with others” (p.: 144).

Even collectors who avoid rudeness or aggression know that such behavior is approved of in others. Indeed, what would be a dreaded “onion letter” for the flight attendant wins a congratulatory slap on the back in many collection agencies. As the collector in the piano rental case [a case where the collector aggressively assumed the debtor was a liar] remarked: “So today I came in and the boss was laughing and said, ‘We had a complaint on you today.’ I guess that woman called the piano company and screamed about me for twenty minutes. That’s what’s nice about this business. They’ll just laugh and pat me on the back. Now in what other business would I have it like that? (Hochschild 1983: 145–146).

Of course emotion work towards customers is not identical to emotion work towards the organization. And it is possible that bill collecting offers so much less in the way of extrinsic reward than flight attending that self-selection has a more powerful influence. But I found it striking that Hochschild gives no examples of role-distancing by bill collectors to complement the examples she gives for flight attendants. Like Kunda with Tech engineers (1992: 178), I found striking the appropriate role distance—“being wise” to the use of negativity by oneself and others—to be extremely important for BritArm employees. This was an organization, recall, where the excess of negativity was considered to be one of its most negative aspects (and a reputation for immodest negativity was a known career impediment).

This brings me to my final point. It is true that the use of dysphemism saves the face and feelings of the subservient in the Bank by allowing them to not take decisions personally. It allows decision-makers to avoid uncomfortable acceptance of responsibility for their actions. It may be the case that dysphemism is more natural, more authentic, than euphemism—perhaps especially in Britain, if stereotypes hold any wisdom. But the use of dysphemism to legitimate control also facilitates

the atmosphere of cynicism and buck-passing that people at every level of the Bank claim not to like. It is an integral, reinforcing part of the unpopular culture. The point of this paper is not to judge whether it is better to have a Ministry of Dearth than a Ministry of Plenty or a Ministry of the Economy. My point here is more modest and it echoes Bourdieu: to understand how control operates in organizations such as BritArm we must be willing to accept at face-value neither the official nor the “objective” truth of the situation. The equivocal reality is more interesting and more useful.

Notes

1 More specifically, over the course of 18 months, I spent 8 months full-time in BritArm UK and 4 months full-time in the Bank’s US subsidiary. In each case, the research was designed as a “T” where a long period of time was spent in a single part of the Bank followed by shorter periods of time in many other parts. In England—the focus of this paper—I spent three months in a back office processing center called the Securities Centre. Following my time there, I spent two weeks shadowing a chief manager (in charge of ten branches and of the lending to larger business customers), two weeks each in three branches of different sizes (large, medium, and small—each of which is said in the Bank to have a different feel to it), a week each in another Securities Centre and three other back office units, a week in another branch, and a week in a Regional Office. I also spent a scattered 5 days at the Bank’s training college attending a course and a number of end-of-course dinners where I had the opportunity to meet managers and staff from all over the Bank. I spent three days with managers I met this way, then three weeks in various part of Head Office in London and, finally, a week-long visit after my time in the US bank to meet again with many of my informants.

In the UK in particular and to a lesser extent in the US, I attended many private dinner parties, pub lunches, one beer breakfast, and every Bank party I could get myself invited to. In the early stages of the fieldwork, I tried taking notes while in the Bank but found that, except in formal interview situations, this attracted too much attention and even suspicion. Outside of interviews, therefore, I kept a small notebook in my coat pocket and jotted down what reminders I could to be fleshed out that evening either on my laptop or into a Dictaphone on my commute home. In addition, as insecure fieldworkers are wont to do, I picked up all manner of paperwork. There wasn’t a brochure or report too insignificant to escape my collection. I did, however, sign a confidentiality agreement with the Bank as a condition of my access and this restricted the documents I could take away. Despite this, I was able to amass a large filing cupboard of materials to accompany my roughly 1500 pages of notes.

2 “Do What’s Right!” is Tech’s corporate slogan (Kunda 1992: 6).

3 Managers are informed of their units’ cost-income ratio, and partially evaluated on it, as part of the Bank’s balanced business scorecard management accounting.

4 A small example: In the Securities Centres, documents are not stored in file folders but rather in A4-sized envelopes slit open across the top. These are called “pods” and on the way to retrieve the files one day while I was learning the Doer 2 trade from Cutler, I asked him why they were called that. “I don’t know,” he told me with a little laugh. “Stupid, isn’t it?” And he wouldn’t be drawn further.

5 In England, a “pantomime” is a children’s comic play, typically a parody of a well-known story of fairy tale, usually involving cross-dressing and political and social satire, and typically performed at Christmas time. Unlike during an American pantomime, neither the actors nor the members of the audience (who are encouraged to cheer, boo, and sing along) are expected to remain silent during the performance.

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