

# LANGUAGE, IDENTITY AND LIBERATION: A CRITIQUE OF THE TERM AND CONCEPT "PEOPLE OF COLOR"

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By Elizam Escobar\*

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Any critical discussion on the question of identity must remind us that the process of liberation is not only a process of self-determination and power but also an internal process of self-examination. This internal process is valid and important in and of itself, but when it is present in the political/ideological struggle for liberation, it becomes crucial and qualitatively determinant.

Perhaps from a perspective of the excluded (*los excluidos*) and their "experience with the law," it would be beneficial to us all to comment on the implications of the term/concept "people of color." At issue in this case is their experience with the authority, "the law" of the

"dominant language" and discourse. This is an experience that also reminds us of the complex relationship between tongue,<sup>1</sup> language, discourse, and ideology.<sup>2</sup>

In this essay, I use the term *language* in a broad sense. I do not conceive of it as a mere political-direct instrumentality or as an "object of study" that belongs exclusively to linguistics or any other academic discipline. Language must be something alive — not a closed (dead) system of signs. It is not equivalent to ideology either. But even when tongue and language in themselves do not belong to a specific class or sector of society, these classes or sectors — through oral and written discourse — affect such matters as rhythm, meaning, terminology, function or decisions on what is "correct" or "incorrect," "derogatory" or "affirmative."

When I talk about "the language of Power" or "dominant language," I do so in a rather metaphorical, non-linguistic sense; in the sense of what Power reveals to us through its various discourses. On the other hand, "the power of language" can either unveil to us or hide from us that relationship that exists between ideological or lin-

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1. A specific spoken language, such as English or Spanish, as compared to language as a general system of signs.

2. Meschonnic, *El lenguaje, el poder*, 6 CUADERNOS DE POETICA (Santo Domingo, 1985); Meschonnic, *El marxismo excluido del lenguaje*, 7 CUADERNOS DE POETICA (Santo Domingo, 1985).

guistic sign and the real. We can either feel language as prison or as liberation, or we can recognize that both aspects of language are dialectically inseparable. We, the periphery and excluded<sup>3</sup> from dominant culture, must resort to the power of language and discourse — but in the most creative and radical way.

The power to name or to be named is also a part of the class and ideological struggle. The former is, of course, a highly political act, but as in any politics the power of decision is not to be located in language itself but in the people who use that language through their discourses. It is, then, in the collective and individual subject and through the multiplicity of discourses that class and ideological struggle takes place. Though this struggle between signs and discourses has a very abstract nature, it also has a very concrete side when it deals with one's collective or individual identity or self-esteem.

It is no surprise then that any attempt to reconceptualize any old/new aspects of our reality, or to criticize/problematicize those "deep-rooted" class or individual prejudices that pass often as unquestionable scientific truths or laws, will meet the most hostile resistance not only from dominant ideology but from our own ranks as well. This "intolerance" for difference in our own ranks is many times unconscious. That is, it is so internalized that we often do not realize how much we reproduce dominant processes of ideology among ourselves. We function, therefore, like terminals in a circulatory system of values, beliefs, representations sent to us through all kinds of signs and electronic/synthetic images. It is thus the task of a radical discourse to *always* (the struggle never ends) make these contradictions visible in order to resolve antagonisms or to achieve a harmonious non-antagonist co-existence among equals but with the right to be different, the right to alteration and dissent.

However, difference can become a superficial pose, an opportunistic way of taking advantage of one's "accidental" features when there is no danger and when conditions are in one's favor. The exploitation of one's race, nationality, gender or culture for personal (moral or material) profit and prestige — this is difference as mere status, difference for difference's sake.

In this dialectic of difference/sameness within our ranks, sometimes one aspect demands the sacrifices of the other. That is to say, individuality is sacrificed for collectivity, or vice versa. Ideologism, which is the reduction of everything to ideology, demands one or the other. For example, if my discourse becomes problematic and "difficult" among my ranks (my "equals," my "peers") I might become suspect, stigmatized, alienated. In order to correct this "deviation" one has to adjust to the limits of the collectivity even when one might be ready to tran-

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3. In "negative" terms, not only those who form part of colonial and ex- neo- post- colonial histories in relation to European colonial powers and United States imperialism (a.k.a. First World, Occidental culture/civilization); but, today, also those Third World peoples living in the First World ("internal colonies"), and those groups or individuals who because of race, nationality, culture, gender, sexual preferences or/and ethical, political, artistic or ideological positions find themselves "exiled" from mainstream society and culture.

scend those limits. Further, this means that liberation (or freedom) stops where the dominant *conception* of "liberation" within my ranks stops. The same thing can be said about any dominated group or "minority" in relation to the society (system) of which it forms part. Somehow, this process is a "mimic," a duplication of the process of consensus of dominant ideology, but it is always — here and there — the powerless subject who suffers.

When a discourse springs from this lack of power and abundance of pain, this discourse can end up in plain personal or ideological resentment. But also, in the measure of its ethical and political commitment, and its significance, it can become a discourse of liberation *in spite* of the limits of tongue, language and ideology. When passion and concept find their dynamic unity there is a possibility that a discourse might be able to express that which language itself cannot express; or that which the thinking of a certain moment has not yet been able to think.

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Bearing this challenge and risk in mind, I approach critically the term/concept "people of color" as it is currently used in the United States. In the United States, dominant values, beliefs and representations of reality (i.e. ideology) are those of the capitalist class, which, along with the majority of the U.S. population,<sup>4</sup> is composed almost exclusively of the so-called "white" race. The rest of the population, the so-called "minorities," are referred to as "non-whites." Only when matters get complicated, or there are some political interests involved, do the dominant agencies divide and subdivide "racial groups" to the absurd. Sometimes it is difficult — if not impossible — to know to which group one belongs.

The single most important feature used to classify people in the United States is "color." People are classified by the "color" of their skin: Black, Brown, Red, Yellow, etc. This is axiomatic, you may think, because we all know this. But having this knowledge has not made any difference in how the excluded ones and radical/progressive people approach the question of identity and race most of the time. This approach never moves beyond the "color/skin" fixation. This fixation has a long tradition, and therefore, is difficult to break away from, to the point that most terms used to generalize the amalgam of "minorities" within the United States only reflect their dependence on dominant ideology. As a result, the evolution of the old term "colored people" to the "new" term "people of color" remains within the "color/skin" perspective. It seems to me, though, that before, "colored people" referred mostly to "black" people; today, "people

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4. Recent studies estimate that at the beginning of the twenty-first century the "minorities" within the U.S. will become the "majority."

of color" refers to all those who do not belong to the "white" race. Still, this "new" form of the concept can neither vindicate the new content within it (all the "minorities" within the U.S.) nor the "old" term ("colored people") simply because the new content overflows the form of this reworded term/concept. Why? Because within the Third World "minorities" in the U.S., the racial spectrum (or "color" spectrum) includes all races and their mixtures, all "colors," "shades," and "tones," including "white" and "black" as "colors."

In this sense, "people of color" is a provincial term. Not just because it is only used within the United States<sup>5</sup> but because it could only have come into being in a society like this. First, because "race" is still looked at from a puritan Anglo-Saxon point of view: "blood purity" is fetishized and "mixing" is taboo.<sup>6</sup> And second, because the United States is a modern Rome, it is the imperial(ist) center where all kinds of displaced peoples (from this hemisphere and other continents) usually end up. (It is obvious that this is due not to a magical attraction, but to a fatal one.) So, for better or worse, it is here where the meeting of all racial, cultural, ethnic and national groups takes place under the most antagonistic and ironic of ways. This reunion of "differences" in relation to the mainstream demands a new analysis and re-conceptualization of the relations of forces. It also demands an effective economy of words, terms that can provide an easier way of grasping this new agglomeration of peculiarities and similarities. Hence, the "color/skin" fixation which is part of the ideological circulatory system (which affects *all of us*) "nationalizes" this otherwise extranational phenomenon.

This provincial term — captive by dominant ideology — reduces this phenomenon to only one of its components: that of "race." It does not have the same political immediacy and sense of other terms like "racial" or "national minorities," "oppressed nationalities" and "Third

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5. In Puerto Rico, "person of color" refers, euphemistically, to a person whose dominant facial features are "black"-African (Western and Central Africa). This euphemism is characteristic of our "psychological" form of racial prejudice, used by many instead of "negro" to avoid "offense," though, paradoxically, in Puerto Rico, as in other Latin American countries, "negro" also means "dear" and "loved one." It would be interesting to find out the origin of "persona de color" in Puerto Rico, though I am almost certain it came about under U.S. colonial domination.

6. Compared to the Anglo-Saxons and other North European colonizers, the Spanish colonizers had a different "attitude" toward the mixing between the races. The roots of these different racial/color/skin attitudes can be found in the different historical development of these European peoples prior to the colonization period of the Western Hemisphere, *i.e.* prior to the fifteenth century.

This is not to say that the Spanish attitude toward race and race mixing was "better." It was different. Maybe more "flexible," subtle, hypocritical and psychological, and therefore less visible; but the fact remains that the new socio-economic-political orientations and ideologies brought by all European colonizers were the beginning of developed "anachronistic" slavery, and later on, of ideological and structural racism in this hemisphere.

World peoples," which emerged in times of more militancy.<sup>7</sup>

For one, this term "people of color" has this fastidious "picturesque" element so familiar to the vocabulary of tourism. It sounds like a color Polaroid photograph of "nice" and "cute" people; innocent, inoffensive and domesticated people, where everyone is homogenized with this attribute of color. And who is this photographer who has so carefully taken this picture? A "white" tourist with "good intentions?" Or, in fact, is no one to be blamed but ideology itself?

Furthermore, though it may seem inappropriate in this essay to use the term *color* out of the racial context, this might be helpful in order to unveil this intrinsic relationship between *concept* and *term*, and how, for example, terms like "people of color" unconsciously reinforce prejudiced and distorted concepts to classify people.

Rigorously speaking, color is something that depends on light. Indeed, color itself is within light. It exists and it does not exist. Can we say the same thing about races? One thing is for sure: for most important matters, we do not exist for mainstream society unless it is in the form of a political token, a marketing product or domesticated folklorization. Puerto Ricans only exist as "people of color" to Anglo-America. Black is only that which proves whiteness. And all dominated racial and national groups exist first of all as "color," not as people. On the other hand, it seems that the important question is not even color *per se* but *where* color is located. That is, if "yellow" is located in the hair, it is good, very good; but if it is located in the skin, then it is not as good.

But what if we use instead the term "colorless people" to express our concept of the "white" dominant class? I fear that this term would be considered "reverse racism" or "anti-white." So a better solution would be to say that all peoples are "people of color," that there are no colorless people. In such a case, "color" is neither a privilege nor a stigma, but a commonality.

Let us consider another perspective. While "people of color" could be used with good or bad intentions, and it could also be transformed from derogatory to affirmative, as other terms have been, whose original intention was insult, epithet, etc. (*e.g.* mulatto, Black, Chicano),<sup>8</sup> it is also true that we cannot advance our process of liberation (today we are more self-conscious than previous

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7. The term/concept "Third World" seems to have developed from the term "the third front," used by communists to refer to colonial countries in relation to the struggle against capitalism and imperialism.

8. One way of dealing with this is *irony*, especially in literature, but also in the way an essay makes use of humor to ironize or ridicule terms, concepts, values, beliefs, etc. that mis-represent others. By doing this we make of the epithet a "boomerang" or make *the namer* look at it in a mirror as his/her own projection. Nevertheless, this is a weapon to dismantle. As far as I can tell, "people of color" is not used in an ironic way. Nor is its intention "metaphorical," but, to the contrary, it is a very *literal* term/concept rooted in the way dominant ideology in the U.S. perceives and understands "racial identity." Finally, and more importantly, even when this term is not used in an ironic way, it paradoxically becomes ironic in the sense that we ourselves help to reinforce what palpitates behind it.

generations about the importance of names, about who exerts the power to name and why) if we do not simultaneously liberate our thought and our praxis from those terms that have ceased to truly articulate or describe our situation and understanding of our historical, cultural and quotidian reality.

It is very self-defeating; both in the short and in the long term, to depend on these masters' "original" terms. We must be *original* too, but in the true sense. Our capacity to survive, resist and finally win depends on our capacity to be *inventive*. Originality is not to be understood exclusively as mode, fashion or "the new." It is also *the necessary*.

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Our dependency on our "masters'" terminology has ontological implications. The term "people of color" has a dependent idiomatic discharge, *i.e.*, its identity, its meaning, depends on another referent: "white" people. And within this context, "white" becomes a code word for "superior" or "original." We may resolve to explain this as the nature of things when it comes to the human condition, but what we may not realize is that by perpetuating the use of such terms we are ironically reinforcing the other term, "whiteness." We are saying: my race, my nationality, my identity, my being, can only be defined in relation to the "white" race. My "racial" being is a gift from the other, the master. So in the same way that I am a creature of social relations and the relations between ideological and linguistic signs, I am also a creature of the dominant racial vision.

Thus, if we want to transform the predominant relations and world visions, we must also transform this creature condition, this reduction of people to "color." We must become *creators*, and cease to be subjected to the other's fantasies and myths. We must become *the dreamers* and cease to be the dreamed ones, because in fact transformation is a question not of "color" but of *vision* and *sensibility*, both how we *see* and *feel* the world. It is

our (political, philosophical, ethical, aesthetic) vision/sensibility searching for its realization.

If we understand that the aspect of "color" is the aspect imposed by the dominant vision to classify and identify people, and we emphasize instead the cultural-socio-economic-political aspects, which are the real vectors conditioning our views on identity and race, what we are saying is that we are forming a different criterion that can better grasp our similarities but that can also simultaneously maintain our differences. A criterion that needs and wants to "exorcise" itself from the old criterion; a criterion that will make us recognize the objective, concrete fact that we are now beyond "color/skin" aberrations. This will be a criterion that unequivocally points toward the roots of the problem: that Third World people are discriminated against not only in terms of race, but also in terms of class, gender, culture, and nationality. Besides, when it comes to exclusion, hate, humiliation, etc., of "minority" groups in the United States, the dominant class, its institutions and repressive apparatuses do not "discriminate."

For all these reasons, we must rethink this term/concept "people of color" if we want to overcome this subjection to mummified language. The quality of our political action is determined by the quality of our political vision and sensibility. To *politicize* our concepts and terms inherited from the past, we must correct them with the notions obtained through our irreducible experience of reality and the political/social praxes. Of course, we can only do this if we recognize that it is necessary, not in order to please ourselves with "new" morphologies or plastic surgeries trying to merely resolve real contradictions through the means of language, but to make of language a force capable of infusing energy and blood into our discourse and movement.

The codes and language of Power, which otherwise want to conquer my heart and yours, must be defetishized by a language and discourse of liberation. That is, we must do a lot of scraping, scratching and scrapping to do away with this incantation.

To construct or re-construct our identity in terms of difference we do not have to keep resorting to such innocent and picturesque terms like "people of color." It is preferable, in my opinion, to use the term "Third World people" or "the excluded." We are in fact quasi-phantasmagorical people reaching for our political being, in spite of "color" and independently of nationality. Different, not because of superficial features deeply rooted in the dominant classes' prejudices, but because we have a *different experience* of reality.