
Four-Letter Threats to Authority

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Four-Letter Threats *to* *Authority*

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Some of their slogans included obscenities but the group was otherwise orderly.

Associated Press¹

So long as I am in the White House, there will be no relaxation of the national effort to control and eliminate smut from our national life.

Richard M. Nixon²

THE PROLIFERATION OF THE USE OF OBSCENITY in current liberal democratic society has inspired much conflicting, impassioned, and muddled discourse. The Report of the President's Commission on Obscenity and Pornography places its emphasis on the social implications of the ready availability of pornography.³ Some scholars

¹ This quote is taken from a news story, describing an anti-war demonstration in Washington, D.C. by members of the Vietnam Veterans Against the War, in the *Roanoke World News*, April 22, 1971, 19.

² *Wall Street Journal*, Nov. 9, 1970, 14.

³ *The Report of the Commission on Obscenity and Pornography* (New York: Bantam Books, 1970).

have focused on the aesthetic desirability or undesirability of obscenity as employed in art. Many writers have been preoccupied with the establishment of definitions of obscenity and pornography.⁴ The most important recent work, Harry M. Clor's *Obscenity and Public Morality*, approaches the question from the standpoint of law and the judiciary, and treats the dilemma between free expression and censorship in terms of the public interest in public morality. Clor argues that "it must be a task of modern government and law to support and promote the public morality upon which a good social life depends. Censorship can serve this end in two ways: (1) by preventing or reducing some of the most corrupt influences and (2) by holding up an authoritative standard for guidance of opinions and judgment."⁵

Despite such widespread interest and concern, we have been unable to find significant inquiry into the political implications of the use of obscenity. Even those scholars who may recognize the public use of obscenity as a politically important act, merely announce their perception of this without venturing to explain precisely why it might be so.

We have been particularly intrigued by the disproportionality between the apparent insignificance of indecent four-letter words and the intensity of the opposition brought to bear against their public usage. Although we have not undertaken a systematic, quantitative analysis, we would hazard that there are fewer four-letter obscenities than there are words or phrases describing them. The latter would include base, bawdy, blasphemous, coarse, crude, decadent, degrading, disgusting, *double entendre*, expletive, filthy, foul, immoral, impolite, indecent, indecorous, lascivious, lecherous, lewd, loathsome, low, lurid, nasty, nauseous, obscene, odious, offensive, perverse, pornographic, profane, prurient, raunchy, revolting, risqué, rude, salacious, scatological, shameful, smut, swear-words, suggestive, tasteless,

⁴ An issue of *Law and Contemporary Problems* devoted to "Obscenity and the Arts," 20 (Autumn, 1955), combines these approaches in an interdisciplinary effort to treat the cultural, legal, and moral aspects of the use of obscenity. See also, Harry M. Clor, ed., *Censorship and Freedom of Expression* (Chicago: Rand McNally & Co., 1971).

⁵ *Obscenity and Public Morality* (University of Chicago Press, 1969), 194. We shall briefly return to Clor and the idea of public morality anon. Suffice it to observe at this point that Clor is following in the tradition of Book X of Plato's *Republic* and of Rousseau's *Politics and the Arts: Letter to M. D'Alembert on the Theatre*.

turpitude, uncouth, vile, vulgar, word-pollution, and so on, not to mention bad taste.

None of the literature seems able or even tries to explain the gap between the smallness of the words and the power of the reactions which they provoke and sustain from authority holders who may themselves be profligate with such words in private. Indeed, Allen Walker Read has observed that "the principal records in the seventeenth century of our 'nastiest' word are from the writings of members of the British peerage."⁶ More recently, a noted public figure took the opportunity to wax sententious on the subject:

One thing I've noted as I've traveled around the country are the tremendous number of children who come out to see the presidential candidates. I see mothers holding their babies up, so that they can see a man who might be president of the United States. . . . It makes you realize that whoever is president is going to be a man that all the children of America will either look up to, or will look down to. And I can only say that I'm very proud that President Eisenhower restored dignity and decency and, frankly, good language to the conduct of the presidency of the United States. And I only hope that, should I win this election, that I could approach President Eisenhower in maintaining the dignity of the office in seeing to it that whenever any mother or father talks to his child, he can look at the man in the White House and whatever he may think of his policies, he will say: 'Well, there is a man who maintains the kind of standards personally that I would want my child to follow.'⁷

President Eisenhower is known to have spiced his personal conversation, at least with male companions, with salty language. It is also rumored in Washington that one of former President Nixon's main concerns about release of the Watergate tapes was that his penchant for four-letter obscenities might be revealed, thus denigrating the office of the presidency and diminishing, even more, respect for its occupant. This article was written before release of the tapes. Because we are trying, not always successfully, to hew to a strictly non-partisan line, we should point out that Senator George McGovern's famous indecent retort to an airport crowd heckler just prior to the November 1972 presidential election, was taken by many people as evidence of his lack of fitness for the highest office in the land and by others as his informal concession of defeat.

⁶ "An Obscenity Symbol," *American Speech*, 9 (December, 1934), 266.

⁷ Then Vice-President and presidential candidate Richard M. Nixon in Sidney Kraus, ed., *The Great Debates* (Bloomington: Indiana University, 1962), 397 (the third debate).

The obscenity controversy is especially prevalent in college publications, which seem to exist midway between the underground or alternative press, where obscene words are so commonplace as to be taken for granted, and the conventional press where such words, if they are not banned altogether, are allowed only with the apology that their appearance is necessary for realistic representation.⁸ Obscenity is neither taken for granted in college publications, nor has it been effectively banned. The result has been considerable anger and dismay from some alumni and administrators, as well as vociferous outcry from the public and the conventional press.⁹

Limiting our scope to the use of four-letter words (although noting that on occasion such words have lengthier brethren), we shall discuss several instances of their usage in college publications as illustrative case studies to illuminate aspects of the phenomenon of the impetuous response to public obscenity on the part of those in authority. We regret, however, that the exigencies of time and space preclude us in this essay from discussing conscious and blatant attempts directly to challenge authority through obscene words. We omit the oral uses of obscenity in confrontations and thus, for example, neglect clashes at universities over the creation of Black Studies Programs (in which many faculty members were reportedly distraught over the use of obscenity to disrupt the universities'.

⁸ For a brief discussion of the problem see Lee H. Smith, "Is Anything Unprintable?" *Columbia Journalism Review*, (Spring, 1968), 19-23. Reticence sometimes creates anomalous situations. Thus the Winchester, Indiana, anti-pornography law may not take effect because Richard Wise, publisher of the only local newspaper, the *Winchester News Gazette and Journal Herald*, says its language is not in good taste. The ordinance must be printed in a Winchester general circulation newspaper before it can become effective. *New York Times*, December 30, 1973, 15.

⁹ The Supreme Court has treated this issue most recently in *Barbara Susan Papish v. The Board of Curators of the University of Missouri et al.*, 410 U.S. 667 (1973). The District Court had decided that Ms. Papish could be dismissed because 'freedom of expression' on a university campus could be subordinated to other interests such as decency in the use and display of language and pictures. The Supreme Court, however, without spelling out the obscenities, decided that the dismissal resulted from the content of the publication. Since this content was constitutionally protected, the District Court decision was overruled by a vote of 6-3. Had the content been obscene; or had its distribution resulted in interference with the rights of others on the campus or in disruptive activities, it is quite possible that the District Court would have been upheld.

civilizing mission and the tradition of civility and reasoned discourse vital to learning); and the famous (or infamous) Free Speech Movement at the University of California Berkeley campus with its slogan, "Freedom Under Clark Kerr." And we do not treat the bloody, obscenity-filled clashes between demonstrators and police which occurred in the streets of Chicago during the 1968 Democratic National Convention.

From the illustrative case studies, we shall advance a nexus of hypotheses to explain the phenomenon and pursue some of the broader political implications of our hypotheses. It must be emphasized that we are venturing into uncharted territory; our analysis is tentative, speculative, and abstract. No doubt we shall incur the political philosopher's contumely, the behavioralist's scorn, and the moralist's revenge. We probably deserve all three.¹⁰

CASE STUDIES

On December 3, 1968, a Duke University Publications Board member, the assistant to the director of Information Services (not a student), urged that the Board consider removing *The Duke Chronicle* editor-in-chief from his position for not exercising "the good taste, good judgment and sense of responsibility required in such an important and sensitive position."¹¹ The editor had printed a letter to the editor from a black student who referred to whites as "mother-fuckers." The official submitted a nine page document in which he said that after considerable research on the subject of obscenity in newspapers, "... I have been unable to find a single instance of the use of obscene language by a reputable newspaper."¹² He cited several authorities who advocated the use of circumlocution and euphemism in place of obscenity, in the name of good judgment and taste. For instance:

¹⁰ But perhaps there is something of the four-*lettrist* in all of us: according to political savant and prankster Dick Tuck, when he ran for a State Senate seat in Los Angeles several years ago, he filled the district with signs each repeating his name. He claims this became the most defaced political poster in American campaign history. In an interview with Tom Snyder, *The Tomorrow Show*, WRDU TV, Durham, N.C., October 26, 1973.

¹¹ *Minutes* of the Duke Publications Board, December 3, 1968, 1.

¹² Cletis Pride, unpublished presentation to the Publications Board, December 3, 1968, 1.

Richard Daw of Associated Press' Raleigh bureau has told me that he doubts that he will ever find such a word on the AP wire. There are too many ways to write around it, he explained. However, AP has no written rule on the use or non-use of obscene language.

"That isn't necessary," Daw said. "It is a matter of common sense."¹³

The official argued that it is the Publications Board which has freedom of the press and not the newspaper itself. "It should be clear," he wrote, "that such corrective action as we choose to take would not constitute censorship."¹⁴

A motion to prohibit profane or vulgar language in the *Chronicle* was defeated. Instead, the student-dominated Board adopted a motion which read, in part:

Profane or vulgar language is not to be used by the *Chronicle* gratuitously, nor in stories, editorials, columns, or reviews for mere shock value. Instances of this type should be edited out of letters to the editor to be published.

Profane or vulgar language is only to be used when it is absolutely necessary in order to understand or form an accurate judgment of an event.¹⁵

The following year, P. Huber Hanes, Jr., a Duke Trustee, announced his intention to resign his position on the Board of Trustees as a result of the 1970 Duke yearbook, which contained a blurred (deliberately) picture of a girl nude from the waist up, as well as a number of obscenities. A *Durham Sun* news article indicated that it was not so much obscenity, but *public* obscenity that Hanes objected to:

. . . Primarily Hanes objects to the language used in some of the articles. Most of the language consists of standard slang expletives dealing with assorted body functions.

In an interview at his home yesterday, Hanes used a few expletives of his own to show his disgust with the publication.

"When it comes to four-letter words, I can use a few myself," he said, "but they have no place in a university publication like this."

He said that this is only the last in a series of developments on campus that have made him concerned about the direction in which all the nation's universities are moving.¹⁶

The typical association of words with disruptive political action comes later in the story: "We cannot completely bow down to

¹³ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 6.

¹⁵ *Minutes* of the Duke Publications Board, December 3, 1968, 2.

¹⁶ *The Durham Sun*, May 26, 1970, 2. Durham has two newspapers, the *Herald* in the morning and the more "conservative" *Sun* at night.

every wish of the activists who want to overthrow every university. This is not just at Duke but at every university. We've got an organized minority trying to take over. And if it does take over the campus, we're in trouble,' Hanes said."¹⁷

In the article, the charge of minority insurgency springs solely and spontaneously from Hanes' complaints about obscenity in the yearbook.

A similar controversy arose again in 1971 when the yearbook printer refused to print an anti-draft photograph featuring the phrase "fuck the draft" without authorization from the university. The University Controller, a non-student member of the Publications Board, after failing to persuade a majority of Board members to reconsider publication of the photograph purportedly for artistic reasons, resigned from the Board. In his letter of resignation, he noted his disapproval of the photograph's "quasi-political overtones." The controller later said, "I am not advocating the abridgement of free speech—but I am advocating more self-discipline."¹⁸

The *Durham Sun* responded editorially with reference again to "the political and other views of a small group of students who do not necessarily represent the thinking of the campus at large."¹⁹ And the *Durham Morning Herald* centered on the issue of improper and immature language as it had the year before.

Indicative of the intensity surrounding the controversy over the use of obscenity, the *Goldsboro News-Argus* editorialized: "Those of us who must labor under the responsibility of 'freedom of the press' do not care to be associated under that banner with a bunch of young snots who could translate 'freedom' into a command performance of vulgarity."²⁰ And Jesse Helms, part-owner and editorialist of Raleigh television station WRAL, noted, "At Duke, an editor is said to be reaching into the sewer for the most offensive four-letter words he can find."²¹

During the controversy within the Publications Board, Duke President Terry Sanford stated in a letter to the Board: ". . . but certainly Duke University should avoid any appearance of support-

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *The Raleigh News and Observer*, March 12, 1971, 2.

¹⁹ *The Durham Sun*, March 13, 1971, 4.

²⁰ *The Goldsboro News-Argus*, March 24, 1971, 4.

²¹ Jesse Helms, "Viewpoint," No. 2546, March 22, 1971. In November 1972, Mr. Helms was elected to the U.S. Senate from North Carolina.

ing inconsequential things that are crude," though he added the qualification, "It is not for me to say that this particular item falls in this category. . . ."²² There was a rumor that if the Board did not prohibit the photograph, the President would. But no action against the publication of the photograph was taken.

Duke was not the only university which had obscenity controversy. East Carolina University President Leo Jenkins went so far as to suspend that university's newspaper editor for allowing a four-letter word referring to himself to be published.

The issue in another form even reached the North Carolina legislature when a State Senator proposed that student fees for state college publications be made voluntary. He also brandished a copy of the University newspaper, containing a cartoon captioned "How Many of Us Have Offended the Great One?" The cartoon depicted President Leo Jenkins "angrily striding away from a bathroom stall from which he has ripped the door which contains a four-letter slur directed against him."²³

The preceding brief survey of cases, combined with references to newspaper editorials, illustrates opposition to the use of four-letter words on three levels: (a) their political-subversive overtones, (b) their cultural-linguistic "poverty," and (c) their exploited "shock-value." From the reactions surveyed and a knowledge of their sources, the conclusion can be drawn that reaction in terms of rationale (a), (b), or (c) is, at least in part, a function of political stance. The conservative *Durham Sun*, Huber Hanes, the State Senator, and *Goldsboro News-Argus* react negatively to the use of obscenity on the grounds of its political-subversive overtones. The less conservative *Durham Morning Herald*, argues against its use since it undermines the convention of language and represents immature expression. Finally, the generally more liberal Duke Publications Board prohibits the use of obscenity for mere shock value: the vulgar words are only to be used in cases where they are necessary to the meaning of the sentence or for the accuracy of the expression of an event.

It seems to us that these three rationales for rejecting the unregulated use of obscenity in public are intricately related, and are in fact merely different aspects (varying in degree and in sophistica-

²² Letter from Terry Sanford to W. J. Griffith and the Publications Board, January 18, 1971, 2.

²³ *The Raleigh News and Observer*, May 26, 1971, 5.

tion of presentation) of the same central rationale: that the public use of obscenity undermines authority, whether that authority be political, moral-aesthetic, or linguistic.²⁴

ANALYSIS

Before venturing some possible explanations for the threatening nature of four-letter words, it is necessary briefly to discuss the relationships of some key concepts. In simplified diagrammatic form, these concepts are related as follows:

Political and Social Authority
(is based on)

Public Rationality and Morality
which embodies the processual flow of command
(and is based on)

The System of Language
which incorporates the values and conventions
of a social and political system, and provides
a model or a logic of action

Political and social authority stand at the apex of our schema. This authority is related to order and force. Order is conceived of as a state of self-sustaining harmony inherent in a system. When such is not the case—for it seldom is—authority is induced to provide for the harmony more artificially. Authority is geared toward the effectual mitigation of disruption and toward the maintenance of the system. System is defined in its general sense as the relation of parts subservient to a process, which in turn is based on their connectedness. Authority is somewhat removed from and objectified out of the mass of component parts, and it accrues power consensually or by its imposition. But in the latter case, if the power is to be considered authority, it must either develop consensus following its imposition or develop roots into the system so that it appears more indigenous.

²⁴ The uses and dangers of language for the polity have been of continuing concern to political philosophers. For two recent examples see Norman Jacobson, *Thomas Hobbes as Creator* (New York: General Learning Press, 1971), and Peter Winch, "Authority," in *Political Philosophy*, ed. Anthony Quinton (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967), 83-111.

The most significant attribute of authority is that it commands obedience by its use of words. Authority exerts power through the medium of words. Examples include an executive decree or a decision of the Supreme Court, but the example *par excellence* is found in the Biblical tradition in which God created the universe by speaking—and it is in the image of God that those in authority in the Western world rule by the communication of words. In contradistinction, force is external and its efficacy lies in the fact that it entails action, not words.

Two characteristics of the relationship of order, authority, and force are of interest here. The progression from one to the other is from the indigenous to the exogenous. Moreover, authority will supersede order and force will supplant authority as each of the last mentioned fails to maintain itself effectively against disruption and conflict.

Public rationality and morality link authority to the system of language. Without undue elaboration here, we point out that the concept of rationality—an essentially human and personal capacity—has been extended by Weber and Parsons to encompass the whole of government. Similarly, the concept of morality—again an essentially personal trait—has been extended to the political realm as “public morality” by such writers as Harry M. Clor.²⁵

It seems to us that what is most often actually meant by reference to “public morality” is a pattern of cues and responses established by convention in the interest of harmony, a pattern in which the ruler-ruled transactions are publicly carried out. Public order and public morality form the milieu in which (apparently) legitimate power relationships are acted.

Rationality and morality are both closely related to the concept of order. On the human level they conduce to orderliness from two different angles: rationality indicates the deliberate ordering of an individual's more or less external activities, and morality in its most basic sense refers to an individual's internal harmony with his own self. If morality involves the relationship of individual self to the personality system, then public morality probably deals analogously with the relationship of individual people to the social system. Morality and rationality, having been raised to the *public level*, therefore, conduce to political orderliness in the sense that morality

²⁵ *Obscenity and Public Morality*.

in the public sphere is a predisposition against violence and toward orderly action through the medium of rationality.

Thus public authority can be seen as the ostensibly ordered (i.e. rational) and legitimate (i.e. moral) flow of command through the system of language from the commanders to the commanded. Anything undermining public morality in the context of public rationality may therefore result in the decline of public authority.

The Disruptive Threat

On the most elementary level, the public use of four-letter words disrupts the aura in which authority is maintained. It makes for public insecurity in that it challenges the solemnity and respectability associated with the authority or its symbols.

Thus, Dean Burch, chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, referring to obscenities used by a Black Panther, is quoted in an Associated Press story:

The lines that I recall most distinctly were: "And as for President Nixon, that -----, we are going to ----- that -----," said the expurgated official transcript of Burch's remarks. That went out on the air. We did not interfere in that. . . . It is almost inconceivable to me to think of the President of the United States being referred to in those terms on radio or television.²⁶

And the *Goldsboro News-Argus* refers to a photograph in the 1971 Duke Yearbook: "It has a picture of a student holding an American flag. Using the ultimate in obscenity, the caption reads: '----- the Draft.'" The editorial proceeds to refer to the photograph as the "rawest of obscenity and degradation of the flag."²⁷

Powerful men or nations like to justify their power in terms of their morality—in the American illusion, power is supposed to be the reward for virtue. Obscenity publicly directed against the man

²⁶ The *Roanoke World-News*, June 23, 1971, 5. For those of us who find radio and television offensive only in their inoffensiveness, it is worth remembering that, according to the *National Observer*, the FCC "received 2,141 complaints last year [1972] about offensive language on the air." Cited in a letter from James V. Stanton (D. Ohio) to then FCC Chairman Dean Burch, U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, Subcommittee on Communications, Hearing, *Overview of the Federal Communications Commission*, 93rd Cong., 1st sess, 1973, 104. The Congressman was disturbed that the FCC had not yet achieved a court test—and therefore vindication—of its contention that it had the power to censor radio and TV broadcasts because obscenities convey no thought and therefore are not protected by the First Amendment.

²⁷ The *Goldsboro News-Argus*, March 24, 1971, 4.

or nation may shatter this cause-and-effect illusion. Its use may also revive the suspicion, often held by many members of the public, that underneath the moral cast of the authority holder, beneath his apparent devotion to traditional moral standards and decencies, there beats the heart of a philanderer and libertine; and in the privacy of his own domain the hypocrite engages in such activities. Obscene words remind us that politicians are not just like everyone else; they may be worse. They certainly have the power, wealth, and acclaim to be worse.

But there are more subtle, interrelated explanations for the impact of four-letter obscenities on authority. Three will be discussed here. The first is essentially psychological; the second, linguistic; and the third, semantic-symbolic. We shall consider each in turn.

The Psychological Threat

In his book Clor discusses the government brief filed during the Roth-Alberts case in 1956:

Arrayed against this [freedom of] expression are social interests in the preservation of moral standards. The brief argues at considerable length that these are important interests committed to the care of both the state and federal governments and that these interests may be harmed by the free circulation of obscenity in a number of ways. Some kinds of obscenity may incite some readers to harmful conduct. Continuous circulation of obscenity is likely to debase moral standards, weakening their influence upon conduct, and thus promote, in the long run, an increase in immoral conduct. Finally, the corruption of sexual morality is likely to affect ethical standards in other areas thus *weakening the whole moral and legal fabric*.²⁸

At first one may be inclined to think that the negative reactions predicted are the results of people merely connecting the use of obscenity with those who advocate subversion of established order; that is, they consider obscenity to be the trappings of disorder and subversion. These people would seem to reject the use of four-letter words simply because they associate them with a certain

²⁸ *Obscenity and Public Morality*, 25 (our emphasis). The case is *Roth v. United States*, 354 U.S. 476 (1957). It is interesting to note that Eduard Ascher, a psychiatrist at Johns Hopkins University, quoted in “#1¢*\$(*)_@#,” *Johns Hopkins Magazine* (October, 1970), says: “The user [of obscenity] is trying to convey aggression through language. . . . Nobody will listen to normal language. So the use of obscenities is an effective way to be heard. It is also a *very effective way to undermine established authority*, which is represented by the [university] administration” (our emphasis).

philosophy or group. However, the striking fact, we submit, is that obscenity may be regarded as disorder in itself, publicly expressed.

The question must be asked as to how this is so. It seems almost as if the entry of an obscene word or image into the public arena signals the dissipation of authority and the introduction of disorder.²⁹ This may be because the shouting of "fuck-you!", an inarticulate expression grounded in the secretive, private life, asserts the leader's private aspect and disrupts the leader's rational and official image when the public one is the more ominous and politically useful. But there is an important psychological dimension at work here also. The sight or hearing of public obscenity often generates chaotic emotions as J. D. Salinger's Holden illustrates in *Catcher in the Rye*. Neither the book nor this character have, until the section to be quoted, been prudish about the use of vulgar words. There is a near parallel here with Huber Hanes, who reacted so strongly when his daughter brought home her yearbook, though he reportedly did not object to his own personal use of the words when he considered them appropriate.

Holden, feeling sick at his old school, has paused to sit on the stairs. The reaction follows:

... I saw something that drove me crazy. Somebody'd written "Fuck you" on the wall. It drove me damn near crazy. I thought how Phoebe and all the other kids would see it, and how they'd wonder what the hell it meant, and then finally some dirty kid would tell them—all cockeyed, naturally—what it meant, and how they'd all *think* about it and maybe even *worry* about it for a couple of days. I kept wanting to kill whoever'd written it. I figured it was some pervery bum that'd sneaked in the school late at night to take a leak or something and then wrote it on the wall. I kept picturing myself catching him at it, and how I'd smash his head on the stone steps till he was good and god-dam dead and bloody. But I knew, too, I wouldn't have the guts to do it. I knew that. That made me even more depressed. I hardly even had the guts to rub it off the wall with my *hand*, if you want to know the truth. I was afraid some teacher would catch me rubbing it off and would think I'd written it. But I rubbed it out anyway, finally.³⁰

Sexual revulsion constitutes a basic paradigm of internal, personal

²⁹ For the brilliantly developed argument that dirt is essentially disorder, see Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966). This book was brought to our attention by our esteemed friend Professor J. Christopher Crocker who unfortunately persists in the delusion that anthropologists have pre-empted our research.

³⁰ J. D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye* (Boston: Little, Brown and Co., 1951), 260-261.

chaos and disorder. It is significant that merely seeing the obscenity publicly displayed, where, unless it were "erased," there would be no controlling its impact, arouses in the boy concurrent feelings of guilt and shame, self-deprecation and fear of blame, aggressiveness and anger, protectiveness and weakness. There are simultaneous feelings of self-implication and outrage against another's perversion.

When obscenity is given public circulation, in the political arena, this paradigm of utter internal chaos may be projected onto the external political or social system. Thus Herbert Marcuse refers to sexuality as the "most disorderly of all instincts."³¹ And to many, he says, "the main sphere of civilization appears as a sphere of *sublimation*. But sublimation involves *desexualization*."³²

Therefore, obscenity can be seen as dissonance in a system. Obscenity is in opposition to consensus, harmony and order in that it is a symbol of the conflict (the sexual conflict of aggression and love) which is ingrained and then sublimated in a society, as in individuals. Sandor Ferenczi has illustrated such conflict in his discussion of the psychoanalytical roots of obscenity. Based on patients he had treated psychoanalytically, Ferenczi argued that "obscene words remain 'infantile' as the result of inhibited development, and on this account have an abnormal motor and regressive character."³³ Thus, he observed:

Obsessive ideas of obscene words, and especially of words denoting the most despised excretions and excretory organs in a coarse way, frequently appear in men after the death of their father, in men, indeed, who adoringly loved and honoured their father. Analysis then shows that on the death, in addition to the frightful pain at the loss, the unconscious triumph at being freed at last from all constraint comes to expression, and the contempt for the 'tyrant' who has now become harmless displays itself in words that were most strictly forbidden to the child.³⁴

To this we would add that it may be that obscene words often not only serve the psychological needs of those using them but can also provoke in authority-holding recipients a similar regression by resurrecting infantile urges long since repressed or canalized. Such a

³¹ Herbert Marcuse, *Eros and Civilization* (New York: Random House, Vintage Books, 1962), 181.

³² *Ibid.*, 75.

³³ *Sex in Psychoanalysis* (New York: Basic Books, 1950), 153.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

result may be especially common in public officials in whom neuroses often abound and whose urge to power is often equaled only by their need, at least in public, to repress both it and many other libidinal inclinations. Thus, Allan Walter Read points out that obscenities frequently occur in the language of people under stress such as soldiers in battle, or in the speech of individuals not fully in control of their faculties, such as respectable patients in a psychopathic research hospital.³⁵

The use of obscenity evokes man's sexual conflict, an uncomfortable dissonance within himself—but more than this, the cause for revulsion is in the irresolution and irresolvability of this conflict. It is primordial and absolute—and this is cause for even greater discomfort and challenge to harmony. Since society is by many conceived ideally as an harmonious system which absorbs or sublimates conflict, the imposition of obscenity (as a symbol of uncontrollable conflict) on the public realm may evoke fearfulness of insecurity and instability there. Hence many would ban it from the public realm in the name of preserving society.

The imposition of obscenity onto the political arena therefore entails conflicts: private versus public, and rational versus irrational, which imply the conflict of personal values and consensually authoritative values, as well as the clash between the supposedly rational political process and irrational sexuality.³⁶ In such a context, Pope's

³⁵ "An Obscenity Symbol," *American Speech* 9 (December, 1934), 275.

³⁶ The link between sexuality and politics depicted by such disparate individuals as Aristophanes, Sigmund Freud, D. H. Lawrence, and film director Dusan Makavejev (perhaps not so disparate after all), is a rich lode that contemporary political scientists seem content to leave to our less scientific and more humanistic brethren; see, for example, Richard Schechner, "Speculations on Radicalism, Sexuality, and Performance," *The Drama Review*, 13 (Summer 1969), 89-110. Note also Arnold A. Rogow's comments regarding books by Theodore Adorno, Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, and "the sex-and-politics graffiti that in recent years youthful revolutionaries have scribbled on German, French, and American walls. The messages of most of these books and graffiti was that capitalism and war promoted and thrived on sexual repression, whereas socialism and peace were both cause and effect of good healthy orgasms. It followed from these assumptions that efforts to restrict sexual freedom, whether emanating from religion, law, conventional morality, or the institution of marriage itself were, in a word, counter-revolutionary. . . . Most young radicals . . . continue to regard the sexual revolution as an indispensable accompaniment of economic and political revolution." These comments appear in a review of Reimut Reiche, *Sexuality and Class Struggle* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1971) in the *American Political Science Review* 67 (September, 1973), 995.

couplet becomes perfectly clear: "Immodest words admit of no defence, / For want of decency is want of sense."

The Linguistic Threat

We have already mentioned the importance of language to the rational dialogue and power transactions that take place publicly in the political arena. Language is also the medium by which one cognitively orders the universe. And it is the medium in which the commands of authority are transmitted. While it is the public morality which determines the aura in which authority seems legitimate and right, it is the logic of the sentence that determines the model of authoritative action. Cause, effect, and process are embodied in the logic or grammar of a sentence, as are subject, object, and action itself. The incorporation of authority into the system of the sentence is illustrated in Nietzsche's statement, "We cannot get rid of God because we still believe in grammar."³⁷

Several writers have noted this attribute of language. James Joyce, for instance, tried to abolish the "tyranny of the sentence" by replacing time with values in his later novels. And E. M. Forster thought that "words and sentences themselves have an order in time and once that is abolished, literature ceases."³⁸

Moreover, Wilhelm Dilthey held that our model of meaning derived from the relation of part to whole is inherent in the relation of words in a sentence.³⁹ The analogue of the relationship of people to the state is readily apparent. And Murray Edelman writes that "many students of cultural anthropology, logic, and social psychology have demonstrated that this function of language [as the key to the universe of speaker and audience] is no ephemeral influence, but the central factor in social relations and action."⁴⁰ In two chapters devoted to political language, Edelman discusses the forms of language that deal with authority, argument, and participation.

³⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *Gesammelte Werke*, Vol. 17 (Munich, 1922-29), 73, quoted in Henry S. Kariel, *Open Systems* (Itasca, Illinois: F. E. Peacock Publisher, 1969), n. 12.

³⁸ H. J. Oliver, *The Art of E. M. Forster* (Melbourne, Australia: Melbourne University Press, 1960), 14.

³⁹ Wilhelm Dilthey, *Pattern and Meaning in History* (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), 108.

⁴⁰ Murray Edelman, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics* (Urbana: The University of Illinois Press, 1967), 131.

As noted, a culture's sense of time is contained within its system of language. And Joost A. Meerloo points out that a maturing individual's "assimilation of self-time and tradition means the acceptance of authority."⁴¹

Language is *directly* linked to political authority by way of law. Most modern political systems have accepted Max Weber's notion that the most sophisticated kind of authority is the "legal-rational" form. The written word is the medium and the pattern for law, decree, and contract in modern systems; each of these is an important part of institutionalized, impersonal authority. Language sets the pattern for authoritative action, which must flow logically and irrevocably from subject to object and from ruler to ruled. And patterned action, with established channels and sequences of movement, supposedly is the hallmark of the legal-rational system, the ultimate embodiment of authority in law.

Language, with its different levels of expression (formal, colloquial, and intimate) provides a model for the high and low in life. Sentences, as the metaphor for comprehensive authority, provide for the allocation of time, action, and being. How, then, does obscenity affect the preeminence of language as a pattern and a medium? It has to do with the use of words for shock value, *with the effect of force*.

It is the shock value of a word that is of interest at the level of the relationship of obscenity to language. It is at this usage that the Publications Board's 1968 resolution was aimed. Part of this power of obscene words may be understood in terms of what could be called their "red light effect." That is, the shock effect of obscenity to some readers is such that it is as if a red light flashes in their minds every time they come across an obscene word in a sentence. And after this flash, the flow of thought is lost and the reader must re-read the sentence, returning to the beginning. Thus it might be said that obscenity breaks up the "system" of language, or of a sentence. But it also breaks up the sentence in a different way. An example of this second usage comes from an unedited interview from the 1971 Duke Yearbook: "I feel that everyone should do whatever they fucking feel like doing—no holds barred. . . ." The interview is with a Duke fraternity man and related to college athletics and the

⁴¹ *The Two Faces of Man* (New York: International Universities Press, 1954), 108.

use of drugs. In the final copy the obscene word was edited out, using the Publications Board rationale that it was not necessary to convey the meaning of the sentence. But what is significant about the placement and use of obscenity in this case is that it is anti-grammatical. In most cases, the closest a four-letter word or obscene phrase comes to being subsumed under the grammatical system of a sentence is when it is used as an interjection, which itself is not an integral part of the pattern of action and process embodied in a sentence.

Thus, obscenity may also be considered rebellion because of its use as force against the logical construct of conventional action, as a disruptor of grammatical system.

On a more practical level, one should note that communication in the style of the obscene, because of its unequivocalness, mitigates against two of the attributes Edelman considers most conducive to effective political language—flexibility and ambiguity.

Another explanation of obscenity's effect on the political system through the medium of language lies in its use as a counter-chant against the sanctity of authority granted by the ritual of political language. Edelman writes:

... every culture discloses and guides its system of values and its general perceptions in its language. . . . The magical associations permeating language are important for political behavior because they lend authoritativeness to conventional perceptions and value premises and make it difficult or impossible to perceive alternative possibilities.⁴²

In attacking the conventional linguistic system, the user of obscene language, therefore, is attacking the value system inherent in it which legitimizes authority and makes it exclusive in its realm. Perhaps obscenities have the effect of magic, too.

The Semantic-Symbolic Threat

The linguistic discussion leads to a consideration of four-letter obscenities in terms of their semantic-symbolic qualities. For such words also have a code value, an enduring symbolic meaning.

To undertake this analysis, it is first necessary to expand the usual two values of a word (its connotation and its denotation) into three: (a) its meaning when it stands apart from context; (b) its meaning in context; and (c) its code value. Using the four-letter word

⁴² *Symbolic Uses of Politics*, 120, 121.

“fuck,” the following scheme of distinctions appears: Under value (a), the word “fuck” was described in a letter to the Duke University Publications Board during its 1971 obscenity controversy as “the most beautiful word in the English language,” for it (realistically) depicted the intimate physical act of love.⁴³ Under value (b), the epithet “fuck you” in a public situation may be taken as quite a severe negative exhortation. And under value (c), the word comes to mean something beyond the physical act or the incidental verbal harassment, which is usually limited in effect largely to the time required for it to be said and heard. The third level is its enduring, symbolic level. At this level the word has the capacity of explosiveness: once released into public consumption (to be heard or read) it expands in a given mental context to include whole ideas and large-scale cognitions quite inappropriate to the expected cognitive or affective load of the word. It is on this level that four-letter words may most involve authority. It is on this level that newspaper editors ruminate on the words and decry those who shout “obscenities and violent slogans, trying to rally support” at peaceful demonstrations as “professional anarchists” who are “interested in destroying our entire social structure.”⁴⁴

Such cries, incidentally, do not always come from the same side. The critics of government also appreciate the mystical effect these words have at their symbolic level when they are invoked against what the critics cherish. Thus, journalist I. F. Stone expostulates against President Nixon’s Supreme Court nominees:

Nixon really reveals himself in these first choices [Poff and Byrd], as he did when he—the perfect square—used a four letter word about the ABA after it had turned thumbs down on his next two choices; Friday and Judge Lillie. Billy Graham’s foremost acolyte so shocked his normally discreet White House staff that the obscenity reverberated through Washington in 24 hours. All this should not be brushed under the rug as if accidental aberrations. They make up the self-portrait of a man passionately intent on dragging down the level of our highest court.⁴⁵

The qualities of reverberation and duration are important ones to consider in regard to obscenity on the symbolic level, for as it rever-

⁴³ The statement is taken from a letter of release to the editor of the Duke Yearbook (*The Chanticleer*) sent by the subject of the photograph and granting permission for it to be reprinted.

⁴⁴ *The Durham Sun*, May 28, 1970, 4.

⁴⁵ *I. F. Stone’s Bi-Weekly*, November 1, 1971, 1.

berates, obscenity may call up images of anarchy, license, and many of the contraries to accepted liberal values—e.g., lovelessness and depersonalization, both of which are associated with the use of pornography and prurience. A single word may conjure up these images if it is considered to be part of the same style of communication (e.g., an obscene-pornographic style). Thus, an obscene word is to political or social dialogue as the pornographic picture is to art, or lascivious description is to literature—a defilement of the medium.

At the same time when, in relation to prevailing liberal political ideologies, obscenity may conjure up images of lovelessness and depersonalization of a very fundamental nature on the level of communication or “reasoning” (i.e., persuasion, the competition for the loyalties of men’s minds, the symbolic gaining of consensus, and the alienation of potentially impure friends), obscenity also represents inarticulateness. Consequently, many persons consider obscene language a cover-up for an inability to express oneself powerfully and a childish reversion to expression with predictable effect, predetermined response, and appeal to primitive irrational emotions. And as such, obscenity is a threat to the “rationality” which is supposed to imbue liberal men’s discourse as they vie for support. The syndrome is such that the use of obscenity contraverts (the need for) persuasion and discourse itself. With obscene language as a means of communication, there is little room for the subtlety heralded in the myth of “rational discourse,” whose rules are then avoided or ravaged.⁴⁶

Thus, the editorialist of the *Durham Morning Herald* holds that the use of obscenity “reveals immaturity and linguistic poverty” and compares the user to a little boy “who has first learned ‘dirty’ words and feels obliged to show how ‘grown up’ he is by writing them on toilet walls.”⁴⁷ A year later the *Herald* refers to the same subject.

We can see no necessity for the use of vulgarity or obscenity to convey any opinion or message. Such usage is offensive to refined, cultivated tastes and can do much to alienate and antagonize. If the purpose is to convince and to per-

⁴⁶ One might complain that the terms “rational” and “irrational” are not defined here. But the words are used in this paper as they are “coded” in the popular acceptance of them. It suffices to say that government is supposed to be rational and that sexuality is *considered* irrational. It is the contrast between these two words that is of interest to this inquiry and not precise definitions.

⁴⁷ The *Durham Morning Herald*, May 29, 1970, 4.

suade, then the purpose is defeated at the very onset. If the purpose is to express contempt, contempt may be more forcefully expressed in decent and polished style.⁴⁸

One is either simply engaged or alienated by the use of obscenity. In accepting or rejecting the use of these words, one often accepts or rejects a style of life and a style of communication (of thinking or reasoning). The last thing a society bent on holding to its security in the midst of change and turbulence gives up is its alleged rationality, the ritual of set thinking and perceptual patterns. One may also accept or reject a style of action (for outside the bedroom, and deprived of intimacy and closure, the image of expressed sexuality is hardly ever perceived to be other than violent). On the symbolic level, then, the words also serve as demarcation devices for separating persons or groups with differing ideologies, life styles, or systems of morality, while coalescing others who hold compatible views. Argument by symbols calls for a positive or negative response with little receptivity to compromise and rational discourse. Such argument, then, represents rigidity and intransigence. Hence it may be a threat to existing authority. For rationality and reasonableness form the context in which government and politics are supposed to operate, whether through the apparent public rationality of command (the law) or the "expression" of the "will" of the commanded (campaigns and elections). And the rational process is the arena in which authority is evidently legitimate and in which the process of ruling is visible and ordered publicly to satisfy the citizens' need to feel secure.

IMPLICATIONS

Obscenity as the chanting, magical agent of political and social heresy, therefore, undermines public morality, the ostensible official rationality of discourse and process (what Marcuse calls the "rationality of dominion"), and the conventional system of values coded into the system of language. Political and social authority rests on these vulnerable underpinnings and acts in accordance with these challenged patterns. The state's authority depends on such appearances for its aura of sacredness and its purported embodiment and solemn symbolization of the decency and worth which the civilization ascribes to itself. Obscenity introduces embarrassing personal

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, March 14, 1971, 4.

intimacy and conflictual irrationality into the political system and it jolts the prevailing mystique of words with a counter-ritual.

What are the implications of this nexus of hypotheses? The first point to be stressed is that the reaching down on the part of public authority into the private lives of individuals by means of censorship and regulation of expression is sometimes countered by the reaching up into the public realm on the part of those who speak or write vulgar private words. Thus demonstrators yell obscenities during a Washington rally. With their use of "fighting words" in the verbal political arena, people remind the state that they will impose private values and the private will upon the public conduct of government, rather than the other way around. The implication of the public yelling of sexual obscenity against authority is generally, "You don't control this aspect of me yet."

But the most significant of all of the implications of the force obscene words have against authority relates to the findings of Stanley Milgram, that when ostensibly good and decent people were placed in experimental authoritarian situations, they usually obeyed orders by an authority figure progressively to increase the electrical voltage shocking a "victim" beyond a recognized endurance point. Milgram noted that these people seem to be "seduced by the trappings of authority"⁴⁹ and that these findings "raise the possibility that human nature, or more specifically the kind of character produced in American democratic society, cannot be counted on to insulate its citizens from brutality and inhumane treatment at the direction of malevolent authority."⁵⁰ He observed that "many subjects could not find the specific verbal formula that would enable them to reject the role assigned to them. Perhaps our culture does not provide adequate models for disobedience."⁵¹

It is the central contention of this paper that the public expression of obscenity may provide us with the closest thing we have to a paradigm of defiance against authority's command to obey, when otherwise we may not know how to *say* we don't want to. Indeed, obscenity may seem to be an inarticulate, primitive chant precisely because of the primordial need for the alternative of defiance or

⁴⁹ "Some Conditions of Obedience and Disobedience to Authority," in *Current Studies in Social Psychology*, ed. I. D. Steiner and M. Fishbein (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1965), 261.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 262.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 254.

disobedience which it serves and which has been socialized out of us in the name of social cohesiveness.

There are, however, three interrelated ways in which the effective employment of such words against authority is being undermined. First, traditional four-letter obscenities are increasingly fashionable in books and films, in everyday conversation by persons of both sexes, and in public discourse. They are beginning to be assimilated into acceptable public language. They are losing their shock value and therefore their political potency.⁵² Their occasional use in the *Duke Chronicle*, for example, is no longer a *cause célèbre*. Indeed, the uproar described in the case studies may in part have been a function of the University's location in the South—a region famous for, among other things, its gentility (at least with respect to language before ladies), and its social and cultural conservatism.

In any event, the supply of four-letter and longer obscenities does not appear inexhaustible, and it seems to take a considerable period for new, potent words to develop.⁵³

Most important, although four-letter words are increasingly banded about, they are often not used in the political ways and with the force we have described. Pauline Kael nicely catches the distinction:

When I was a sophomore, a group of us went on a trip to Los Angeles, and our car broke down in Oxnard; we were huddled there in the garage at night when two garage mechanics got into an argument and started swearing at each other. As the rhythm of their fury and venom built up, those words that I had been so free with sounded hideous. I hadn't understood their functions as swear-words—hadn't understood that they were meant to insult the person receiving them, that they were a way of degrading another person. That night at Oxnard came back when I saw Frederick Wiseman's *Law and Order* on NET: the police

⁵² For the authors, this essay is almost a no-win proposition. If it fails to achieve publication, we shall be depressed. If published, it will contribute to the demystification of the obscenity-authority interaction and the devaluation of the words and make us melancholy. Given a choice, we opt for melancholy.

⁵³ According to Read, "An Obscenity Symbol," 276, the word ornery once had a considerable sting; and to occupy "was once one of the most obscene words in the language." How harmless it seems now—unless used in a military sense. Read illuminatingly traces the lexical adventures of a particularly notorious four-letter word (without ever mentioning it), including its omission from most dictionaries, and the decline of its synonyms, two of which, to jape and to sard, have been virtually obsolete for over 250 years (276). Also see Steven Marcus, *The Other Victorians* (New York: Basic Books, 1964), esp. 285-286 for a discussion of changing sexual mores and social attitudes.

were cursed constantly by thieves and drunks. I had assumed that the police, coming from stricter and more religious backgrounds, didn't understand that college kids use the words in that liberated way that empties them of degradation or any real power; I hadn't considered that they hear that kind of talk so much they probably just can't stand it anymore. They're drowning in obscenity. College students are sometimes contemptuous of the cops for fearing words, but in the film those words really *are* weapons—often the only weapons of angry, frustrated people—and they're directed against the police all the time.⁵⁴

It is not university students, then, but the working class which could most effectively use four-letter words as a challenge to those in authority. The problem, of course, is not only that this class lacks the media outlets available to students and members of the other classes, it is that the public-political use of obscenity still violates conventional morality. The working class, we submit, nearly always tends to be tied more closely to a society's conventional morality than the upper class. Thus the construct of obscenity directed towards those in authority is so overlaid with opprobrium that its most potent users dismiss it out of hand, on its face. Note in this regard that in the film *Law and Order* referred to by Kael, obscenity is the weapon of thieves and drunks (lower-class drop-outs) and it is directed against the police. The function of the police, as Lenny Bruce once observed in one of his routines, is to insulate the rest of us from society's dregs.⁵⁵ The obscenity rarely reaches higher levels of authority.

Blacks may be the one exception to this situation. Obscenities have often been an intrinsic component of the demands made by lower class blacks on universities and on local and national political leaders.

We would speculate that this use of four-letter words by some blacks diminished the level of conflict and violence. For it may be that in some circumstances merely shouting or printing an obscene word absorbs the impulse of defiance and consequently prevents the *act* of rebellion. Given the primacy of the medium of language for the transactions of politics with an aura of order or authority without resorting to the uncertainties of the use of force, the politi-

⁵⁴ *Deeper into Movies* (Boston: Little, Brown & Co., 1972), 9-10.

⁵⁵ To this point, see the most instructive essay by Allan Silver, "The Demand for Order in Civil Society: A Review of Some Themes in the History of Urban Crime, Police, and Riot," in *The Police*, ed. David J. Bordua (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1967), 1-24.

cal system may yield to the threat inherent in the expressed impulse of defiance without the need for the outright act of rebellion. In this context, the word may be the sufficient act. Short of the use of force by those in authority and the act of rebellion by the ruled, merely saying "no" with four letters may suffice to contravene undesired coercion by authority. Therefore, the style of disobedience grounded in the use of four-letter words may be seen as conducive to the maintenance and resilience of the political system.

Thus it may be worthwhile to study in greater depth this somewhat primitive phenomenon as it now functions, to derive a more enduring, operative model, or some characteristics of such a model, for facilitating civilized, benign,⁵⁶ and selective disobedience—personal and collective—amidst the compelling insistence of authority,⁵⁷ and for the strategic reversal of authority once it has been perceived to be malevolent.

⁵⁶ Compare Ascher, "#jg*\$(*!@#" who correlates the use of obscenity with a desire among educated college students to reduce physical aggression by the use of words which, however, convey aggressiveness (symbolically, one surmises).

⁵⁷ We should not ignore the opportunity provided for shrewd, perhaps unscrupulous public officials to capitalize on obscenities directed at them. Former White House Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman is reported to have expressed enthusiasm over the prospects that a North Carolina rally featuring President Nixon and native son evangelist Billy Graham would include violence and the display of obscene signs from opponents of the President. *Durham Morning Herald*, August 2, 1973, 6, report of the Watergate Hearings.