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**RETHINKING MULTICULTURALISM:
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Keynote Speakers:

Prof. Krishna Sen (University of Western Australia)

Prof. Chua Beng Huat (National University of Singapore)



Reviewers:

Dr. Nik Norma Nik Hasan (Universiti Sains Malaysia)

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Tri Hastuti N.R, M. Si (Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta)

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Editors:

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Yeni Rosilawati, M. M. (Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta)

Wulan Widayarsi, M. A. (Universitas Muhammadiyah Yogyakarta)

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Understanding Labor's Existence (Intercultural Communication Perspective)

Turnomo Rahardjo

Communication Department, Universitas Diponegoro

Abstract

In every election, whether regional or national, running for parliamentary positions or executive offices, labors, farmers, and fishermen are the target groups of both political parties and the candidates to gain votes. They were treated as political commodity for political positions. With reasoning to improve and increase labors' social-economic welfare, political parties and the candidates through political messages that designed systematically create the situation that labors are empowered group.

This research was aimed to describe the experiences of politicians and labors, who have different class position, to understand both group's point of view of labor's existence. It is based on intercultural perspective with an emphasize on Standpoint Theory. This theory explains that individuals are active consumers of reality themselves, and that their experiences are the most significant information sources. The research found that different class position generates different perspective in understanding labors' existence. Politician produces symbolic engineering through political messages. In contrast, labor ignored those political messages and they believed that political messages are political propaganda that were one-way and monologue in nature.

Keywords: symbolic engineering, political propaganda, monologue.

Introduction

In every general election such as legislative election, presidential election, and local general election; labors as well as farmers and fishermen are all the target of other groups in order to gain political benefits. Political parties and their candidates treat labors as political commodity in their efforts to gain political positions. With reasoning to improve and increase labors' social-economic welfare, political parties and the candidates created a situation that confirms that labors are empowered group. Using

well designed political messages, they created a reality that is visible, though not exactly the same as the actual reality.

Politicians created pseudo-events through certain dramatization to attract the public, especially labors as the target group of political campaigns. They suddenly feel that they have no political distance and close to the labors. Yet, the fate of labors and underrepresented groups such as farmers and fishermen were never improved from their current life. They are still marginalized by the social, economic, and political structures that were unequal and unfair.

Labors and their problems are the real issue that until recently have not received proper solutions. Labors' need for the fulfillment of their basic rights such as decent wages, leave entitlements, health insurance, were just left unnoticed. The implementation of the contract system that is always happen the issue in any labor strike. In addition, migrant workers who work abroad face a very serious problem, namely the right to be protected from live threatening situations. Many cases of violence against Indonesian Workers (TKI) involve torture, sexual abuse, and rape.

This study emphasizes the relationship between politicians and labors. Based on intercultural communication perspective, material life or class position will shape and limit the understanding of social relations (Miller, 2005: 304; West & Turner, 2007: 502-503). Different areas within a social hierarchy will affect what is seen. People's experience, knowledge, and communication behavior are shaped by their social group. When the material life is structured in the opposite way for different groups, then the understanding of each group will be conflicting. When there are groups of dominant and subordinate, the dominant point of view will form a relationship in which all groups are forced to participate. In contrast, the group's point of view will represent the struggle of the oppressed. Point of view of marginalized groups will be more clarity in understanding the reality than those who have power.

In the context of class position (material life), the politicians are the ones that always take advantages from the labors and other underrepresented groups. In return, labors are marginalized by the interests of politicians. The research question is how the politicians as a group that has a "higher" position, understands the surrounding circumstances of labors, understands the position of labors as a "tool" of political struggle, and how labors as a "lower" group understands their own social positions.

In the conceptual level, the research was grounded in the interpretive worldview, basic belief system that used to help interpret and understand the reasons of social actors to the social action that they do, the way actors construct their lives and the meaning they give to life. Social action can not be observed, but rather a subjective meaning.

In line with the interpretive paradigm as the philosophical foundation, the theoretical idea that has relevance to interpretive paradigm is phenomenology. Conceptually, phenomenology is the study of knowledge derived from the consciousness, or how we arrive at an understanding of the objects or events that we experience consciously. Phenomenology sees objects and events from the perspective of a person as perceiver. A phenomenon is the appearance of an object, events or conditions in individual perception. Basic assumption of phenomenology is that people will actively interpret their experience by giving meaning to what they see. Interpretation or *verstehen* is an active process in giving meaning to something that is observed, such as a text, an act or a situation, all of which can be referred to as the experience. Because a message or other actions can mean many things, then the meaning can not simply discover. Interpretation, by definition, is an active process of mind, a creative act in search of various possible meanings.

One school of thought that formed the basis of theoretical thinking in this study was Standpoint Theory of Nancy CM Hartsock (West & Turner, 2007: 499). Standpoint can be understood as the position of a person based on social location. This theory provides a framework for understanding the power system. The framework is built on the basis of knowledge resulting from the daily life of people, recognizing that individuals are active consumers of their own reality, and that the individuals themselves are the most important source of information about their experience. Standpoint Theory gives authority to the individual's voice, asserts that the experience, knowledge, and communication behavior largely shaped by the social groups they join. Standpoint Theory illustrates the centrality of communication in shaping and channeling the attitude and point to the usefulness of communication as a tool to change the status quo and produce change (West & Turner, 2007: 508-509).

Another theoretical thinking was Co-cultural Theory of Mark Orbe et. Al. (Gudykunst in Gudykunst & Mody (ed), 2002 : 190-191). Co-cultural explains the need for cultural equality. Mark Orbe and his colleagues chose the word co-cultural rather than sub-cultural, subordinate, and

minority, because the term co-cultural want to show that none of the culture in a society that is superior to other cultures. Co-cultural Theory is based on the theoretical ideas of Muted Group (Cheris Kramarae) and Standpoint. Muted Group Theory (Miller, 2005: 306; West & Turner, 2007: 515) explains that language gives to its creators (and those who have the same group as its creator) more favorable conditions than those of other groups who must learn to use language as best they can. Muted group created their own language to compensate for their problems.

According to Orbe and his friends, co-cultural communication refers to interaction among members of underrepresented groups with the dominant group. The focus of Co-cultural Theory is to provide a framework in which the members of the co-cultural negotiating efforts to convey their silent voice in the structure of the dominant society. Co-cultural Theory has two premises; 1) the co-cultural members are marginalized in the structure of the dominant society, and 2) the members of the co-cultural use of certain communication styles to achieve success when dealing with the "structures of the dominant oppressive". In general, co-cultural members have one of three goals when interacting with members of dominant groups: assimilation (being part of the dominant culture), accommodation (trying to be the dominant group members may receive the members of the co-cultural), and separation (reject the possibility of a common bond with members of the dominant group).

Method

This is study descriptive in nature, which explain the interpretation or meaning which were made politicians and labors. The research subjects were the politicians who are members of the Semarang city council in charge for the Commission of Welfare, Labor Organizations, and Labor Representatives.

The data were obtained from in-depth interviews with informants, and further analyzed with phenomenological techniques. The research quality (goodness criteria) were measured the value of authenticity. In summary, this study measured the quality of how far the findings are an authentic reflection of the reality lived by social actors (politicians and labors).

Research Findings

Politicians' experience in understanding labors:

The politicians said that labors are groups of people that need to be empowered, because their poor conditions. Income (wages) received by the labors is still limited to meet their basic needs, not include the non-economic needs such as health and education. Labors also facing problems related to their positions in connection to the implementation of the contract system. Concerning the problems faced by labors, they said that they had fought for change in the council to facilitate the communication between labors, employers and employment agencies, though not much can be done.

Politicians' experience in understanding labors as political commodity:

In politicians' point of view, making labor as a political commodity is common, because the voice of labors is real. The practice of "selling" labors and other community groups such as farmers and fishermen is prevalent not only by political parties, but also by presidential candidates during elections.

However, the politicians believed that it was difficult to measure the success of making labor as a political commodity, because the political parties that focus on fighting for the labor did not usually get significant votes. In addition, voters, as well as labors, tend to be pragmatic in using their voting rights. Pragmatism in the sense of give (their vote) -and take (the economic benefits such as money or goods provided by the political parties).

Communication between politicians and labors:

Communication between politicians and labors did not take place on regular basis that was specifically designed to discuss the labor issues. Politicians admit that all they did was as far as facilitating labors, employers, and the employment office to search for solutions to problems faced by labors.

According to a politician, intensive communication with the labors actually took place in his party (Partai Keadilan Sejahtera/PKS Kota Semarang). He explained that his party has some kind of collaboration with the National Labor Union (Serikat Pekerja Nasional) of Semarang which

began in a political contract for the 2004 election. The communication stressed on the support provided by PKS to activities (advocacy, protest), coordinated by the National Labor Union of Semarang.

Labors' experience of their conditions:

According to labors and activists, labor conditions in Semarang had never changed significantly. They are still facing complications to realize their normative rights in accordance with their expectations. In addition, they are also facing the issue of uncertainty of their status. The applications of contract system in many enterprises have always hurt labors, for their weak and vulnerable position to layoffs (PHK).

Labor union has been unable to perform its role because it has no bargaining power to deal with. The existing power relations are not equal. The union exists only to serve the regulation, all they did was giving or proposing suggestion, but the decision remains in the hands of business enterprises. The board was also likely to play safe, so that their existence as part of the company is maintained. They eventually prefer to stay silent and not particularly defending the labors' interests.

Labors' experience to understand politicians:

Informants realized that the politicians were on their side, only ahead of elections. They are familiar to promises, but they did not trust the political messages conveyed. One informant explained that the decisions of political parties to "defend" labors were just treating labors as "commodity" in a competitive "political market". The practice of treating labors as political commodity is always recurrent in every election, so it has been a gradually growing distrust of labors to political parties and politicians.

Communication between labors and politicians:

According to informants, there is no such medium of communication for labors and politicians to converse regularly. Interaction occurs incidentally only when there were problems faced by labors. Communication between labors and politicians are monologue in nature. Labors were posited as the complained part, while the politicians were mentoring to find solutions to problems faced by labors. Informants felt that the communication were not sincere, because the politicians simply

exploited labors to get their votes. In this kind of communication situation, labors could no longer trust the political messages conveyed, and might not get their hopes up with messages of "change" promised by politicians.

Discussion

Politicians and labors' experiences of understanding labors:

It appears that there was an agreement among politicians and labors, although with different emphasis. Politicians find it in the higher social positions of their experiences about the labors, while labors sense it in the lower social positions of experiencing of their existences.

The politicians insisted that labor is a group of people that need to be empowered, because of their poor condition that has never changed. Labors were still faced with the problem of low wages, the right to leave that cannot be implemented properly, and the uncertainty of their status due to the contract system. A similar view about the issues surrounding the labors also addressed by labor activists and labors. They assert that labor conditions have not changed significantly, because of their basic rights had not been fulfilled as expected. Based on Standpoint Theory (Miller, 2005; West & Turner, 2007), the same view of two groups that are in different social positions actually pointed out that individuals who are in different places in a social hierarchy, trying to understand the social situation, based on the advantageous' point of view. Because individuals are active consumers of their own reality, and are the sources of the most important information about their experiences.

Based on the advantageous' point of view, it could be explained that the politicians who are on the high social position sought to establish material relations where all groups are forced to participate. Through the assertion that labors need to be empowered, politicians actually tried to force the other parties such as business enterprises and government agencies that deal with employment to participate in the handling of labor issues. On the other hand, labors who are in the low social position seek to represent actions as an expression of struggle. Through advocacy, demonstrations, strikes, they try to influence the policies of the "ruler" (government, businesses) that are not on their side. This shaped the struggle by labors, for that they felt marginalized, treated unequally and unfair, politically, economically, and socially. Labors' point of view was more clearly in understanding the "world" (reality) than those who have power.

Labor, based on Co-cultural Theory (Gudykunst & Mody Gudykunst (eds), 2002) are underrepresented groups due to the social, economic, and social injustice. The focus of Co-cultural Theory is to provide a framework in which the members of the co-cultural negotiate efforts to convey their silent voice in the structure of the dominant society. Co-cultural communication refers to interaction between members of underrepresented and the dominant group. The struggle of labors in communication practices such as advocacy, demonstrations, strikes and so forth are part of their efforts when faced with what so called "the oppressive dominant structures". The oppressive dominant structures are established in labor policies that were not favoring the labor's interests. Business owners emphasized more on economic relations rather than human relations. Labors expressed their silent voices to the oppressive dominant structures that were willing to accommodate their interests.

Accommodation is one of the strategies used by the underrepresented group (labor) when communicating with the dominant group. Another communication strategy is assimilation. It occurs when an underrepresented group in the end is a part of the culture of the dominant group. The other choice of communication strategy is separation. It occurs when underrepresented group reject ties with the dominant group. In this study, the communication strategy of assimilation is more prominent. It appears from the powerlessness of unions and labors when dealing with business owners. It should take some times for change to occur.

In this situation of unequal communication, a relation between the superior and the subordinate, there was an absence of dialogue. The expression that was more prominent is monologue. Based on Martin Buber (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005), monologue is a form of relationship of I - It. We treat others as objects used. On the other hand, dialogue is understood as I - Thou relationship. We respect the other person as the subject and treat it as valuable.

Politicians and labors' experience of understanding labors as political commodity:

Why labors were so appealing to the politicians? To the politicians, the labors' votes were real. Labor is the potential segment of gaining vote, so it becomes very natural when politicians took advantages of them. Almost all political parties, struggling to draw up pro-labor political programs. On the other hand, labors understand that they are "used" as

"tool" for politicians to gain support. Referring to Muted Group Theory (West & Turner, 2007), labors is a group that was silenced, because the "language" (policies of labor) was created by "the men" (the government, legislators, businesses, and owners of the companies) as the dominant party. "Language" or the voice of labors is less articulated in the public domain, so labors as a muted group tries to create their own language to compensate their problems with the "language" of the dominant group.

Based on labors' perspective, political messages or promises are common, especially during the election campaign. They do not trust the political messages conveyed, because of the commitment to defend and fight for the labors' interests was only submitted to the election. From a theoretical perspective, political messages (or political language) could not be understood as a neutral medium that was used to describe the socio-political realities. When language was used for political interests, as it was done by the politicians ahead of elections, then the language was not objective, because the language had been submerged by the interests of an ideology. Language had led an alignment, a form a symbolic engineering relating to the issue of power. Mochtar Pabottingi, a political scientist, said that language is not merely seen as a tool, but also as a paradigm. Understanding language as a paradigm provided a description that was not a man who wore a language, but rather the use of human language, a language that define us.

Political messages about a more prosperous condition of labors conveyed in elections could no longer be understood as an expression of interest-free to gain power, because political promises are a reflection of the language of power, self-disclosure are not based on the presence of sincere communication. In a study of political communication (Nimmo in Hamad: "Memahami Komunikasi Pemasaran Politik", Journal of Communication Mediator Vol. 9 No. 1, June 2008), a political message can be conveyed with the use political symbols. These political symbols are political talks that can be sorted into three types: power talk, authority talk, and influence talk.

Power talk articulated by threatening or gave political promises, while authority talk insisted on the activity of giving orders and prohibitions, and influence talk related to the activity of giving advice, encouragement, demand, and warning. Political messages of partisanship to the labor could conceptually be understood as power talk. Regarding this research, the political promises made by politicians should be better understood as

a political propaganda rather than a political marketing communication. Propaganda is an attempt to influence others in the direction of the use of group norms sentiment. While political marketing communication is understood as activities of persuasion, which is trying to influence perception and impression of people by exploring feelings, personality, conceptual framework, and so forth. Persuasion has an important opportunity for dialogue and negotiation between the parties involved in political communication.

Communication between labors and politicians:

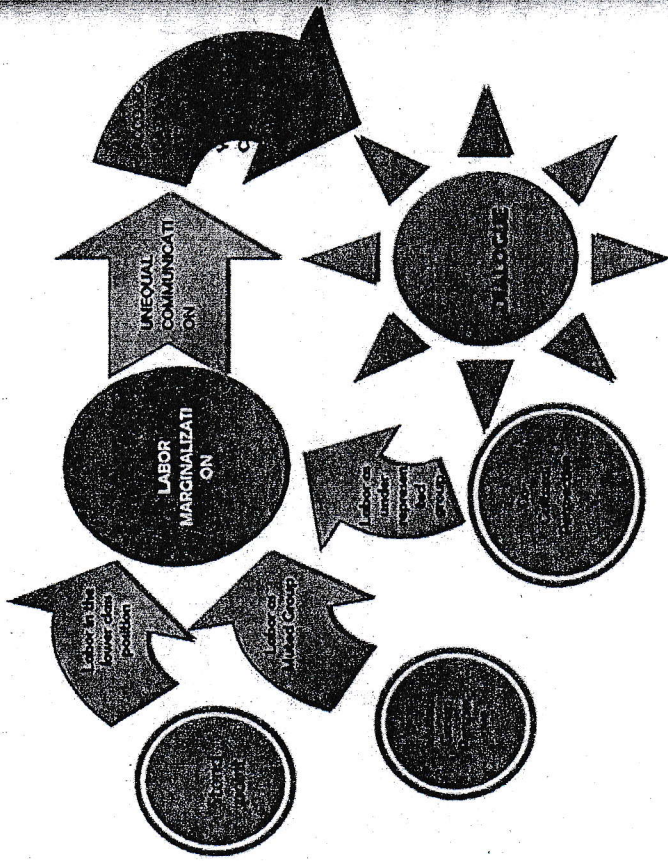
There was a different experience of communication that takes place between labors and politicians. Politicians said that they established a communication with labors, although not on regular basis. In their capacity as members of parliament, they serve as facilitators that bring together labors with businesses and stakeholders to find solutions to labors' problems.

From a different perspective, activists and labors assert that there only artificial communication between politicians and labors, if any. They said that communication between politicians and labors had never solved the problem faced by labors completely. In fact, one informant said that lawmakers (legislators) accommodate more to the interests of the businesses. There was never any dialogue between labor and politicians, because politicians did not really fight for the labors.

One of the basic principles of communication is that we communicate with others rather than communicate to others. This basic principle is to affirm that communication needs to be understood within the scope of equality, because every party involved in the communication have the same contribution to achieving the purpose of communication, the mutual understanding or commonness. In the communication between politicians and labors, it appeared that there were unequal relations, and even inhuman. Politicians shaped artificial communication (made-up), just to express that they concerned for the labors' problems. This kind of communication practices could potentially harm labors as a marginalized group.

Dialogue, eventually is the keyword in the relationship between politicians and labors. Dialogue is not only accommodate the equality between the communicating parties, but more important is that dialogue allows the birth of *heteroglossia* (many voices), so that the labor topics discussed were not being dogmatic. Dialogue is mutual enrichment on labor topics discussed

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