

Séminaire d'étude doctorale

"Les expressions idéologiques dans les medias américaines contemporaines"

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Notes on Patrick Litsangaou's Research

Ideology:

- 1) Any system of ideas underlying and informing social and political action.
- 2) More particularly, any system of ideas which justifies or legitimates the subordination of one group by another.
- 3) An all-embracing encyclopaedic knowledge, capable of breaking down prejudice and of use in social reform. This sense would appear to be the original usage, when the term was coined by Antoine Destutt de Tracy in the period of social optimism in the French Enlightenment.

Thus, between sense 3 and sense 2 there has occurred a full reversal of meaning. It is senses **1** and 2 which are now of prime interest.

In the work of Marx and Engels, which has had most influence in the development of the theory of ideology, the term had several connotations. In *The German Ideology*, Marx and Engels emphasized two points. The first was that ideologies presented a picture of the world from the point of view of a Ruling Class. The second was that this picture was necessarily a distorted one because the interests of the ruling class are, by definition, partial and because they do not represent the interests of humanity in general. In later criticisms and developments, ideology is presented in terms of a social Class representing its particular sectional interests as 'natural' and universal (as the 'national interest', for example).

Many later writers have used the term in something like sense 2, but in a more general way, to refer, for example, to *Gender Ideology*, to *Race Ideologies*, and to *Generational Ideologies*. Such uses of the term involve the idea that all power relationships include doctrines of justification. For example, in the imperial era the subordination of black people was justified by ideas which emphasized the 'natural' superiority of white people and the enlightenment that imperialism could bring.

One significant challenge to Marx's view is provided by Mannheim's "Sociology of Knowledge". Mannheim argued that it was a mistake to see one class's viewpoint as wrong

and another's as right. Sociologically, it was more valuable to see all belief systems as representing the interests of particular groups, including communist and socialist ideas, along with conservative ones. Mannheim followed Marx's usage in calling ideas which support the powerful 'ideologies', and ideas which opposed a given system or sought to justify a different one, Utopias.

Modern Marxists have contributed to developments of Marx's theory of ideology, prompted especially by the failure of a revolutionary working class to emerge in Western capitalist societies, a fact which they have sought to explain, at least in part, as the outcome of ideology. Important examples of these approaches include : (a)The Frankfurt School of *Critical Theory*, (b) Gramsci's account of *Hegemony*, which in turn has also influenced work on the mass media and mass culture, and (c) Althusser's conception of *Ideological State Apparatus*.

All these theories, however, have attracted criticism for exaggerating the significance of cultural ideas and values in the maintenance of 'consensus' compared with economic and political power or everyday 'routines'.

Ideological State Apparatus:

The institutions of the state which assist in the reproducing of conditions of production of Capitalism. This is a term coined by the French Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser to describe the way institutions like schools, churches, and the media function to support the state ideology. Althusser (1971) recognized that this reproduction was ensured not only by ideological state apparatuses, but also by the repressive state apparatus (army and police) which functioned principally by the use of threat of violence. However, no Ruling Class could maintain state power over a long period if it lost Hegemony over the ideological apparatuses. Althusser has been criticized for giving too little importance to ideologies of resistance against the capitalist state in his formulation.

Dominant Ideology:

The thesis that working-class subordination in capitalist societies is largely the outcome of the cultural dominance achieved by the capitalist ruling class. A strong criticism of the thesis has been mounted by Nicholas Abercrombie et al. (1980) who argue that proponents of the thesis tend to overestimate the importance of cultural integration in modern societies, and to underestimate the extent to which subordinate groups are capable of generating belief and values which run counter to prevailing ideologies. In this, the dominant ideology thesis can be seen as an analogue of structural-functionalist theories, which are widely regarded as overemphasizing the importance of shared values.

Ruling Class:

1) (Marxist) Within any society or social formation, that class which enjoys cultural, political as well as economic ascendancy (class domination) by virtue of its ownership and control of the Means of Production.

2) (Non-Marxist political sociology) The minority which, in any society, always forms the political governing class.

In most Marxist usages, but not all, the two terms 'ruling class' and 'dominant class' are virtually synonymous. In *The Communist Manifesto*, Marx and Engels did write that in the modern

representative state 'the bourgeoisie' will often hold 'exclusive political sway', that the state would be 'the executive committee of the bourgeoisie'. For most Marxists, however, even where such a 'ruling' or 'dominant class' does not govern directly (e.g. where, as in modern liberal democracies, government is in the hands of persons drawn from several different classes), this does not mean that the economically 'dominant class' is not the 'ruling class', since it may still 'rule' by virtue of its control over Ideologies, over dominant ideas, etc., stemming from its economic influence. As Marx and Engels wrote in *The German Ideology*: "The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas; i.e. the class which is the dominant material force in society is at the same time its dominant intellectual force." Thus, in this sense a 'ruling' or 'dominant' class may 'rule' even though it does not 'govern'. In some political circumstances, it is argued that it is to the clear advantage of an economically 'dominant class' that it does not rule or govern directly, for example when a sharing of central political power with other groups allows control to be exerted over diverse forces which are seen as 'condensed' as the political center (as with 'Bonapartism'). In such circumstances, however, it can also be argued that the lack of class capacity preventing any one class from ruling directly can reflect a state of affairs in which there exists no economically and politically dominant class.

There are today many Marxists (i.e. Poulantzas, 1973) who also emphasize that a tendency always exists for the state to possess a 'relative autonomy'—or even on occasions an absolute autonomy—form underlying economic forces. In this context, a distinction between the political 'ruling Elite(s)' and the economically dominant class is one that usually needs to be made. A final problem for Marxism is that empirically there often exist many difficulties in any actual identification of the ruling or the dominant class, especially in the study of historical forms of society (e.g. in Absolutism or Asiatic mode of production or Asiatic society).

For the uses of the term 'ruling class' in sense 2, the predominant concern has been different from that of most Marxists. Their goal has been to expose the pretensions of most modern claims to *Democracy*, including the claims of Marxists that true democracy might one day be achieved. According to Mosca, the rulers will always be drawn from an 'organized minority'. Using abstract political justification—which Mosca called *political formula*—rulers everywhere seek to legitimize their political rule. In some cases the 'principles' which operate in the selection of political leaders and the social origins of such leaders may merit the 'empirical use of such terms as 'representative democracy'. But even in these circumstances the 'ruling class' will always consist of, and be drawn from, a cultural and psychological minority of the population equipped to rule.

False Consciousness:

Any form of class consciousness, ideology or social imagery which is held to be inappropriate to the 'real' or 'objective' class situation of class interests of the actor. The concept, although not used as such by Marx, is developed from his theory. In particular, it derives from the argument that ideologies and consciousness, generally, are products of social structure and represent real relationships of domination and oppression. It followed that, in time, the Proletariat would come to realize its position as an oppressed and exploited class and put that realization to political use through revolutionary struggle.

A major problem facing Marxists has been that a widespread revolutionary consciousness has never emerged among the proletariat. Thus, after the extension of the vote to nearly all adult males, Engels wrote to Marx complaining about how the working class had 'disgraced itself' by giving political support to the Liberal Party at election time. In the period up to the 1950s the concept of 'false consciousness' was frequently referred to in accounting for the failure of a revolutionary working class to develop.

One persistent theme, established by Lenin, was that, unaided, the proletariat would develop only a 'reformist', 'economistic' or trade union consciousness. It required the organization of

a revolutionary vanguard party to transform the working class's limited awareness into a truly progressive 'political' consciousness based on the reality of the working-class situation. Other explanations included the ideas that the formation of a revolutionary proletariat was impeded by factors such as Nationalism or Imperialism, or even that sport and non-political diversions, in effect, sublimate the revolutionary impulse.

Theoretically, the concept has also been important in revising central perspectives within Marxism. George Lukacs (1971), for example, writing in the 1920s, argued for the need for much more attention to be paid to the issue of consciousness than had been paid by the 'vulgar' Marxists who assumed an inevitable move to worldwide revolution. These themes have continued as interest in the study of Mass Culture, in the work of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, and more recently, in the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

For sociologists generally, the idea of 'false consciousness' has posed a number of problems. It has been criticized for the 'elitist' implication that 'we know what the working class needs better than the working class does'. More pertinently, it may be seen to divert attention away from the need to research the actual ideas and consciousness of working-class groups and the social sources. It also requires that one accepts the Marxist theory of Class and embraces the idea that revolution is a logical necessity and inevitable consequence of social class relations. Although in recent times the notion of 'false consciousness' has tended to fall into disuse, in both Marxism and Marxist sociology the idea of Hegemony has replaced it as a popular conceptual tool in the discussion of working-class consciousness (for example in the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies). However, it can be argued that 'hegemony' has at least some of the same drawback of the earlier concept.

Mass Media:

The techniques and institutions through which centralized providers broadcast or distribute information and other forms of symbolic communication to large heterogeneous and geographically dispersed audiences. The first medium of mass communication arrived with the invention of moveable type in the mid 15th century, but costs, government restrictions and low levels of literacy kept readerships both small and relatively specialized until the second half of the 19th century, when the technologies and organizational forms devised to produce and sell goods were applied to the marketing and distribution of information and entertainment. First, the production of books and newspapers was transformed, and then in the 20th century, came the invention of the gramophone, radio, the cinema, and Television and video. Today, the mass media are highly important economic, political and social institutions, in developed as well as developing societies. They are often large-scale organizations whose ownership is concentrated in the hands of the state or in the hands of a relatively small number of proprietors and shareholders, often with financial interests in several media. They make a significant contribution to the Gross National Product and exert a central influence on cultural forms. The occupational culture of media workers stresses the role they play in providing entertainment, information, and upholding the principles of free speech and the right to know, all of which are depicted as cornerstones of democratic societies. Critics, however, argue that the media do not operate simply as neutral channels of communication, but are actors in the cultural and political process and structurally allied to the powerful on whose behalf they can sometimes be seen as engineering consent. In reality, the influence of the mass media is complex and many-sided.

Sociology of Mass Communications:

The central theoretical problem is the conceptualization of the relationship between the mass media and society. This has been undertaken through research into mass communication and power and influence, and the study of the mass media as institutions, the occupational cultures and practices of media workers, the audiences for mass communications, and the role of the mass media in the overall reproduction of culture. Three general perspectives have guided study: 1) studies informed especially by social psychology, which has focused on the processes and effects of mass communications (e.g. advertising); 2) the studies that have focused on mass communications institutions as Organizations and their social Context; and 3) studies that have been influenced by the structuralist perspective that was developed in the 1960s, in which the focus is upon analysis of the messages, images and meanings conveyed by the mass media (e.g. semiology).

Bertell Ollman:

On abstractions: 1) Extensions (time and space); 2) Vantage points (past/ future, production/consumption, wages/profits, etc., etc....); 3) Levels of generality (**L-1**=whatever is unique about a person or situation; **L-2**=what is general to people --their activities and products-- because they live in the modern capitalist world of the past 20-to-50 years; **L-3**=what is peculiar to people --their activities and products-- due to the fact that they live in capitalist relationships which have existed over the past 500 years. [Joe Smith has a set of unique characteristics (**L-1**), but he is also typically modern teacher (**L-2**), and he is a wage-earner in a capitalist economy (**L-3**).] **L-4**=bring into focus characteristics that are due to class society, as it has existed for the past 5-to-10 thousand years --under slavery, feudalism, and capitalism; **L-5**=characteristics that are shared by the human species in the entire history of human societies; **L-6**=characteristics which are shared by the animal world --life functions, instincts, and energies shared with other animals; and **L-7**=the most general level of all, which brings into focus the qualities that are shared as a material part of nature --including weight, size, shape, color, texture, etc., etc....)

Notes on Ollman:

Bourgeois thought focuses mostly on Levels 1 & 5.

Marxist thought focuses largely on Levels 2, 3, & 4.

Bourgeois ideology usually views from the *Vantage points* of prices, profits, the Past, and commodities, social status. It usually abstracts in narrow *Extensions* in time and space.

Working class ideologies usually views from the *Vantage points* of wages, working conditions, the future, and competence through education/acquired skills. It usually abstracts in broad *Extensions* in time and space.

Science is the use of abstractions at all Levels, from many different Vantage Points, and defining the boundaries of Extensions (in time and space) that produce the most explanatory power.