

STUART HALL AND IDEOLOGY

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That the Marxist concept of ideology has been the center of theoretical discussion is hardly news to anyone, and to discuss 'ideology' in a short space of time is not an easy task. In order to examine Hall's formulation of 'ideology' as far as time permits, I'll try to show the similarities, and differences it bears with the concept of 'ideology' as defined by Marx and 2 other thinkers in the Marxist tradition, Althusser, and Gramsci.

. In 'marxism without guarantees', Hall defines ideology as 'the mental frameworks, the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation – which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works.'¹ and in 'the whites of their eyes' as 'those images, concepts and premises which provide the frameworks through which we represent, interpret, understand and "make sense" of some aspects of social existence'.² This definition of ideology seems to me much closer to a post-modern theory of the formation of identity rather than the Marxist concept of ideology. It is according to Lacan's theory that the fiction of the self comes into existence when the infant makes his first shocking discovery of self from an image in the mirror. From this image, a sense of self is formed. Identity arrives from the imaginary, from mis-recognition and the child starts acting as a signifier and making sense of pre-existing social structures. However this is not surprising, considering the fact that Hall's theory of ideology is a mixture of Gramscian concept of hegemony and Althusser's idea of interpellation of individual subject into the society through ideology.

¹ 'The problems of ideology: marxism without guarantee' in Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies, London and New York, 2001, p26

² 'The whites of their eyes: racist ideologies and the media', in G. Bridges and R. Brunt (eds) Silver Linings, London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1981, p31

The concept of ideology used by Marx and Engels is always negative referring to the bourgeois ideas and it does not mean images, or concepts used by man to make sense of life. The term 'ideology' as used by Marx refers to 'distortion'. This distortion of 'ideology' is rooted in reality and has its sources in the production process and where capital and labor encounter. However for Marx the objective reality which either naturally, or socially exists outside human beings and is not produced or projected by man's consciousness, does not represent a totally external element. Not only is this reality changed by man's practice, but man himself changes as a result of his activities. This is where historical materialism diverges from mechanical materialism which sees man's consciousness as a mere reflection of the material world. The business of philosophy is not only to relate the results of the scientific studies and provide a unified view of the world based on the facts verified by science, but also to bring changes to this reality in order to free man from any relation of dominance. This constant dialectics between man and his environment, which results in changing man through his own productive activities, increases his necessities. The increase of necessities leads to the division of labor which although is born out of necessity, is not done consciously and results in the emergence of so many varieties of proprietorship and conditions of labor which leaves man incapable of control and finds an independent existence. For Marx this reification of man's productive activity as an outcome of necessity does not in itself cause the emergence of contradictions in reality, but the contradictions are born out of the disability of man to master the situation. The emergence of contradictions in consciousness always takes place before man is capable of solving them in practice. Therefore the insoluble contradictions are projected in ideological form in consciousness. The function of ideology is to hide and negate social contradictions. The issue of the relation between ideology and class raises only in relation to the reality that the conditions of productive activities are controlled by the ruling class, therefore ideology with its function of hiding the contradictory

reality remains at the service of this class as a matter of course. The explanation can be sought in the intriguing relationship between capital and labor. The existence of each of these two opposites depends on the existence of the other.³ Labor produces capital and capital produces labor. This means the transformation of live capital, labor, into dead capital, money. In the process of reproduction in a capitalist system capital, which is past or dead labor, dominates live capital, which is living labor. Surplus value comes into existence and is appropriated and converted into capital in the process of production. But capital and labor first encounter each other in the market, where what rules is exchange value and not use value. This inversion of capital and labor takes place in the real world which is the world of production, while the two poles, capital and labor, first come together as, separated, distinct elements with no necessary connection in the world of appearances, the market. The market is the world of appearances, because there every party of the exchange process seems to be free. The buyer is taken there to buy by his own free will, the seller presents his product freely and the laborer is there on his own accord to sell his labor force. The whole process of the production of surplus value and accumulation of capital is mystified and hidden, without the need for any pre-designed plan or conspiracy and the capitalists themselves are as much deceived by it as are the workers and the exploited. The inversion which takes place in the materialistically real process of production, appears as distorted ideas of freedom and equality, which are by no means created as illusionary ideas by human mind. And they are so real that the poor worker attributes his misery to his own poverty, and the wealthy his success to his ability to produce.

.In order to see what Hall has borrowed from Althusser to formulate his theory of ideology a quick look at Althusser's concept of ideology will prove helpful. Althusser's formulation of

³ here I draw heavily on Jorge Larrain, 'Stuart Hall and the marxist concept of ideology' in Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies, London and New York, 2001

ideology neither defines it as isolated ‘images’ as we saw in Hall’s definition, nor is free from contradictions. Althusser’s first formulation of ideology, which appeared in his work called ‘Theory, theoretical practice, and theoretical formation. Ideology and ideological struggle’, is an attempt to efface Marx’s concept of ideology from the notion of false consciousness which seemed to be “speculative”. In this work ideology appears objectively as a system of representation of the real world. In order to eradicate the speculative concept of false consciousness Althusser had to get rid of the subject and historicism, which emphasized the role of the subject. Ideology before anything else is a system of structures which is imposed upon men without their conscious knowledge. The constituents of ideology are not images or concepts, but the way these images and concepts are structured and related. In other words the determining factor in the formation of ideology is its structure. As for how this system of representation functions Althusser has shown fluctuations. In *For Marx* he says:

In ideology men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but *the way* they live the relation between them and their conditions of existence. This presupposes both a real relation and an ‘*imaginary*’ ‘lived’ relation.⁴

There is no clarification for this contradiction between the representation of the real and later the ‘imaginary’ relation, and moreover he believes that this representation plays a vital role enabling men to relate to their world to which they have come to an already existing relation. It is from here that Hall draws his formula of ‘interpellation’ of subject to the society and the function of ideology as structural framework of any society, even classless societies. However Hall disagrees with Althusser first in the importance he attributes to the ideological level:

⁴ Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, (trans.), Verso, London, 1996, p233

‘It does not follow that because all practices are *in* ideology, or inscribed by ideology, all practices are *nothing but* ideology.’⁵

And while Althusser keeps the notion of distortion of ideology, Hall protests to its function and discards it. Althusser’s formulation of ideology in ‘Lenin and Philosophy’ affirms it as a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real conditions of existence.⁶ And finally in ISA he makes a distinction between the general theory of ideology and the theory of particular ideologies. Ideology as general has no history and is a structure encompassing everything and everyone. It is here, through the general theory of ideology, which was set forward to free Marxism from “speculative” false consciousness, that an abstract idea of a domineering, essential force of “ideology”, ignoring the birth place of it as the contradictory class relations in the society enters through the back door. Hall, as mentioned, keeps the idea of “interpellation” and does away with the negative concept of ideology presented by Althusser.

Among the thinkers who pioneered the wave of the revival of the concept of ideology, and specifically the positive notion of ideology Gramsci has a prominent place and Hall has been more influenced by him than by Althusser. The reason could be sought in perfect coherence between Hall’s rejection of economism and the issue of class as interpreted by what he calls ‘orthodox version of marxism’ and Gramsci’s formulation of ideology which does not leave room for reductionism. Hall clearly demonstrate the reason for his choice of Gramsci’s idea of hegemony in his writing:

I begin with the issue which, in some ways, for the chronological student of Gramsci’s work, comes more towards the end of his life: the question of his

⁵ Stuart Hall, ‘Signification, representation, ideology: Althusser and the post-structuralist debates’ in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication*, 2 p91

⁶ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and other Essays*, B. Brewster, (trans.) New Left Books, 1971, p.151

rigorous attack on all vestiges of 'economism' and 'reductionism' within classical marxism.⁷

True. Gramsci's formulation of 'ideology' does not leave room for 'reductionism'. Although Gramsci used a positive concept of ideology he was aware of the existence of a negative concept of ideology and repudiated this concept consciously. But the formulation of this negative concept leaves no shadow of doubt that he did not know Marx's concept of ideology.⁸ Gramsci recognizes two classes of ideologies. Here the use of the word in plural clearly distinguishes the concept from Marx's notion of 'ideology', which was always used in singular. In an article called 'Cultural Studies and the Center: Some problematics and problems' Hall discusses that Gramsci repudiates the idea of 'ideologies' being class ascribed. True, Gramsci never stated that 'ideologies' were exclusively determined by the class factor or the direct outcome of a class. But the direct consequence of the usage of the neutral concept of ideology and therefore the plural use of the word 'ideologies' establishes a class relation. It is from this usage that references such as bourgeois ideology, or feudal ideology can be made, since this version of ideology refers to a world view. The two classes recognized by Gramsci, are 'willed', and organic ideologies. 'Willed ideologies' refer to individual speculations and belong to the realm of superstructure and in themselves a manifestation of a life full of contradictions. What gives rise to ideology is necessity, therefore with the disappearance of necessity in real life ideology will disappear too. This concept which Gramsci recognizes as 'arbitrary ideologies' and discards has nothing to do with the concept of 'ideology' as defined by Marx, and as mentioned before is of no surprise since Gramsci had not read *The German*

⁷ Stuart Hall, 'Gramsci's Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity', in Davis Morely and H. K. Chen, Stuart Hall: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies London Routledge, 2001, p434

⁸ Jorge Larraín, Marxism and Ideology, Gregg Revivals, Hampshire, 1991, p78-80

Ideology. What is of interest to him is the organic kind of ideologies, which he defines as a world view and relates this world view to the concept of hegemony. In this way he theorizes the mechanism through which the ruling class by the usage of the hegemonic quality of ideology and its material force acquires the consent of the masses. Through this formulation Gramsci achieves a certain form of unity between ideology as a form to express the material forces found in the society and blocks any possibility of reductionism. Here the relevance between Hall's choice of Gramsci's concept of ideology and his protest against reductionism becomes clear. Hall is absolutely right when he says about Gramsci:

he argued, one must understand the fundamental structure – the objective relations – within society or 'the degree of development of the productive forces', for these set the most fundamental limits and conditions for the whole shape of historical development. From here arise some of the major lines of tendency which *might* be favourable to this or that line of development. The error of reductionism is then to translate these tendencies and constraints *immediately* into their absolutely determined political and ideological effects⁹

For Gramsci the existing 'tendencies' in the structure are not necessarily carried to the superstructure.

The second class of 'ideology' which he calls organic and which he keeps in his formulation of the concept refers to a system of ideas or world view which gives origin to a series of codes of behavior or conduct without which human being cannot live. It is here when Gramsci refers to the solidity of the popular belief and the deep penetration of religious ideas

⁹ Stuart Hall 'Gramsci's relevance for the study of race and ethnicity' in *Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies*, Routledge, London and New York, 2001, p421

among the masses. In fact what Gramsci's creative theory aimed at was popularization of philosophy which Hall has found irresistible.

The idea that hegemony of the ruling class is obtained by consent of the subalterns through ideology, in itself raises the question of why not use the same mechanism to awaken the oppressed to consciousness of their state for anyone interested in social issues, let alone a party man and political activist such as Gramsci. Hall as far as I know does not count on a party for the dissemination of ideological hegemony, but his position as the head of CCCS as the material force, provided the ideological 'tendencies' to follow Gramsci's hope of the formation of organic intellectuals, belonging to the class to change the oppressive hegemony, even though slowly and not completely. As the question about the degree of its success is something only he himself can answer to.