

## The rediscovery of 'ideology': return of the repressed in media studies

Stuart Hall

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Mass communications research has had, to put it mildly, a somewhat chequered career. Since its inception as a specialist area of scientific inquiry and research – roughly, the early decades of the twentieth century – we can identify at least three distinct phases. The most dramatic break is that which occurred between the second and third phases. This marks off the massive period of research conducted within the sociological approaches of 'mainstream' American behavioural science, beginning in the 1940s and commanding the field through into the 1950s and 1960s, from the period of its decline and the emergence of an alternative, 'critical' paradigm. Two basic points about this break should be made at this stage in the argument. First, though the differences between the 'mainstream' and the 'critical' approaches might appear, at first sight, to be principally methodological and procedural, this appearance is, in our view, a false one. Profound differences in theoretical perspective and in political calculation differentiate the one from the other. These differences first appear in relation to media analysis. But, behind this immediate object of attention, there lie broader differences in terms of how societies or social formations in general are to be analysed. Second, the simplest way to characterize the shift from 'mainstream' to 'critical' perspectives is in terms of the movement from, essentially, a behavioural to an ideological perspective. [...]

### The critical paradigm

It is around the rediscovery of the ideological dimension that the critical paradigm in media studies turned. Two aspects were involved: each is dealt with separately below. How does the ideological process work and what are its mechanisms? How is 'the ideological' to be conceived in relation to other practices within a social formation? The debate developed on both these fronts, simultaneously. The first, which concerned the production and transformation of ideological discourses, was powerfully shaped by theories concerning the symbolic and linguistic character of ideological discourses – the notion that the elaboration of ideology found in language (broadly conceived) its proper and privileged sphere of articulation. The second, which concerned how to conceptualize the ideological instance

within a social formation, also became the site of an extensive theoretical and empirical development.

[...]

### Cultural inventories

I shall first examine how ideologies work. Here we can begin with the influence of the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in linguistic anthropology. The Sapir-Whorf hypothesis suggested that each culture had a different way of classifying the world. These schemes would be reflected, it argues, in the linguistic and semantic structures of different societies. Lévi-Strauss worked on a similar idea. [...] Lévi-Strauss was following Saussure's (1960) call for the development of a general 'science of signs' – semiology: the study for the 'life of signs at the heart of social life' (Lévi-Strauss, 1967, p. 16). Potentially it was argued, the approach could be applied to all societies and a great variety of cultural systems. The name most prominently associated with this broadening of the 'science of signs' was that of Roland Barthes, whose work on modern myths, *Mythologies*, is a *locus classicus* for the study of the intersection of myth, language and ideology. [...]

In the structuralist approach, the issue turned on the question of signification. This implies that things and events in the real world do not contain or propose their own, integral, single and intrinsic meaning, which is then merely transferred through language. Meaning is a social production, a practice. The world has to be *made to mean*. Language and symbolization is the means by which meaning is produced. [...] Because meaning was not given but produced, it followed that different kinds of meaning could be ascribed to the same events. Thus, in order for one meaning to be regularly produced, it had to win a kind of credibility, legitimacy or taken-for-grantedness for itself. That involved marginalizing, downgrading or de-legitimizing alternative constructions. Indeed, there were certain kinds of explanation which, given the power of and credibility acquired by the preferred range of meanings were literally unthinkable or unsayable (see Hall *et al.*, 1977). Two questions followed from this. First, how did a dominant discourse warrant itself as the account, and sustain a limit, ban or proscription over alternative or competing definitions? Second, how did the institutions which were responsible for describing and explaining the events of the world – in modern societies, the mass media, *par excellence* – succeed in maintaining a preferred or delimited range of meanings in the dominant systems of communication? How was this active work of privileging or giving preference practically accomplished?

This directed attention to those many aspects of actual media practice which had previously been analysed in a purely technical way. Conventional approaches to media content had assumed that questions of selection and exclusion, the editing of accounts together, the building of an account into a 'story', the use of particular narrative types of exposition, the way the verbal and visual discourses of, say, television were articulated together to make a certain kind of sense, were all merely technical issues. They abutted on the question of the social effects of the media only in so far as bad editing or complex modes of narration might lead to

incomprehension on the viewer's part, and thus prevent the pre-existing meaning of an event, or the intention of the broadcaster to communicate clearly, from passing in an uninterrupted or transparent way to the receiver. But, from the viewpoint of signification, these were all elements or elementary forms of a social practice. They were the means whereby particular accounts were constructed. Signification was a social practice because, within media institutions, a particular form of social organization had evolved which enabled the producers (broadcasters) to employ the means of meaning production at their disposal (the technical equipment) through a certain practical use of them (the combination of the elements of signification identified above) in order to produce a product (a specific meaning) (see Hall, 1975). The specificity of media institutions therefore lay precisely in the way a social practice was organized so as to produce a symbolic product. To construct this rather than that account required the specific choice of certain means (selection) and their articulation together through the practice of meaning production (combination). Structural linguists like Saussure and Jakobson had, earlier, identified selection and combination as two of the essential mechanisms of the general production of meaning or sense. Some critical researchers then assumed that the description offered above – producers, combining together in specific ways, using determinate means, to work up raw materials into a product – justified their describing signification as exactly similar to any other media labour process. Certain insights were indeed to be gained from that approach. However, signification differed from other modern labour processes precisely because the product which the social practice produced was a discursive object. What differentiated it, then, as a practice was precisely the articulation together of social and symbolic elements – if the distinction will be allowed here for the purposes of the argument. Motor cars, of course, have, in addition to their exchange and use values, a symbolic value in our culture. But, in the process of meaning construction, the exchange and use values depend on the symbolic value which the message contains. The symbolic character of the practice is the dominant element although not the only one. Critical theorists who argued that a message could be analysed as just another kind of commodity missed this crucial distinction (Garham, 1979; Golding and Murdock, 1979).

### *The politics of signification*

As we have suggested, the more one accepts that how people act will depend in part on how the situations in which they act are defined, and the less one can assume either a natural meaning to everything or a universal consensus on what things mean – then, the more important, socially and politically, becomes the process by means of which certain events get recurrently signified in particular ways. This is especially the case where events in the world are problematic (that is, where they are unexpected); where they break the frame of our previous expectations about the world; where powerful social interests are involved; or where there are starkly opposing or conflicting interests at play. The power involved here is an ideological power; the power to signify events in a particular way.

[. . .]

Central to the question of how a particular range of privileged meanings was sustained was the question of classification and framing. Lévi-Strauss, drawing on models of transformational linguistics, suggested that signification depended, not on the intrinsic meaning of particular isolated terms, but on the organized set of inter-related elements within a discourse. Within the colour spectrum, for example, the range of colours would be subdivided in different ways in each culture. Eskimos have several words for the thing which we call 'snow'. Latin has one word, *nix*, for the animal which in English is distinguished by two terms, 'rat' and 'mouse'. Italian distinguishes between *legno* and *bosco* where English only speaks of a 'wood'. But where Italian has both *bosco* and *foresta*, German only has the single term, *wald*. [The examples are from Eco's essay, 'Social life as a sign system' (1973).] These are distinctions, not of nature but of culture. What matters, from the viewpoint of signification, is not the integral meaning of any single colour-term – mauve, for example – but the system of differences between all the colours in a particular classificatory system; and where, in a particular language, the point of difference between one colour and another is positioned. It was through this play of difference that a language system secured an equivalence between its internal system (signifiers) and the systems of reference (signifieds) which it employed. Language constituted meaning by punctuating the continuum of nature into a cultural system; such equivalences or correspondences would therefore be differently marked. Thus there was no natural coincidence between a word and its referent: everything depended on the conventions of linguistic use, and on the way language intervened in nature in order to make sense of it. [. . .]

What signified, in fact, was the positionality of particular terms within a set. Each positioning marked a pertinent difference in the classificatory scheme involved. To this Lévi-Strauss added a more structuralist point: that it is not the particular utterance of speakers which provides the object of analysis, but the classificatory system which underlies those utterances and from which they are produced, as a series of variant transformations. Thus, by moving from the surface narrative of particular myths to the generative system or structure out of which they were produced, one could show how apparently different myths (at the surface level) belonged in fact to the same family or constellation of myths (at the deep-structure level). If the underlying set is a limited set of elements which can be variously combined, then the surface variants can, in their particular sense, be infinitely varied, and spontaneously produced. [. . .]

This move from the content to structure or from manifest meaning to the level of code is an absolutely characteristic one in the critical approach. [. . .]

### **The 'class struggle in language'**

[. . .]

Because meaning no longer depended on 'how things were' but on how things were signified, it followed, as we have said, that the same event could be signified in different ways. Since signification was a practice, and 'practice' was defined as 'any process of transformation of a determinate raw material into a determinate product, a transformation effected by a determinate

human labour, using determinate means (of "production") (Althusser, 1969, p. 166), it also followed that signification involved a determinate form of labour, a specific 'work': the work of meaning production, in this case. Meaning was, therefore, not determined, say, by the structure of reality itself, but conditional on the work of signification being successfully conducted through a social practice. It followed, also, that this work need not necessarily be successfully effected: because it was a 'determinate' form of labour it was subject to contingent conditions. The work of signification was a social accomplishment – to use ethnomethodological terminology for a moment. Its outcome did not flow in a strictly predictable or necessary manner from a given reality. In this, the emergent theory diverged significantly, both from the reflexive or referential theories of language embodied in positivist theory, and from the reflexive kind of theory also implicit in the classical Marxist theory of language and the superstructures.

Three important lines of development followed from this break with early theories of language. Firstly, one had to explain how it was possible for language to have this multiple referentiality to the real world. Here, the polysemic nature of language – the fact that the same set of signifiers could be variously accented in those meanings – proved of immense value.

Second, meaning, once it is problematized, must be the result, not of a functional reproduction of the world in language, but of a social struggle – a struggle for mastery in discourse – over which kind of social accenting is to prevail and to win credibility. This reintroduced both the notion of 'differently oriented social interests' and a conception of the sign as 'an arena of struggle' into the consideration of language and of signifying 'work'. Althusser, who transposed some of this kind of thinking into his general theory of ideology, tended to present the process as too uni-accentual, too functionally adapted to the reproduction of the dominant ideology (Althusser, 1971). Indeed, it was difficult, from the base-line of this theory, to discern how anything but the 'dominant ideology' could ever be reproduced in discourse. The work of Vološinov and Gramsci offered a significant correction to this functionalism by reintroducing into the domain of ideology and language the notion of a 'struggle over meaning' (which Vološinov substantiated theoretically with his argument about the multi-accentuality of the sign). What Vološinov argued was that the mastery of the struggle over meaning in discourse had, as its most pertinent effect or result, the imparting of a 'supraclass, eternal character to the ideological sign, to extinguish or drive inward the struggle between social value judgements which occurs in it, to make the sign uni-accentual' (1973, p. 23). [ . . . ]

The third point then, concerned the mechanisms within signs and language, which made the 'struggle' possible. Sometimes, the class struggle in language occurred between two different terms: the struggle, for example, to replace the term 'immigrant' with the term 'black'. But often the struggle took the form of a different accenting of the same term: e.g. the process by means of which the derogatory colour 'black' became the enhanced value 'Black' (as in 'Black is Beautiful'). In the latter case, the struggle was not over the term itself but over its connotative meaning. Barthes, in his essay on 'Myth', argued that the associative field of meanings of a single term – its connotative field of reference – was, *par excellence*, the

domain through which ideology invaded the language system. It did so by exploiting the associative, the variable, connotative, 'social value' of language. For some time, this point was misunderstood as arguing that the denotative or relatively fixed meanings of a discourse were not open to multiple accentuation, but constituted a 'natural' language system; and only the connotative levels of discourse were open to different ideological inflexion. But this was simply a misunderstanding. Denotative meanings, of course, are not uncoded; they, too, entail systems of classification and recognition in much the same way as connotative meanings do; they are not natural but 'motivated' signs. The distinction between denotation and connotation was an analytic, not a substantive one (see Camargo, 1980; Hall, 1980). It suggested, only, that the connotative levels of language, being more open-ended and associative, were peculiarly vulnerable to contrary or contradictory ideological inflexions.

### *Hegemony and articulation*

The real sting in the tail did not reside there, but in a largely unnoticed extension of Vološinov's argument. For if the social struggle in language could be conducted over the same sign, it followed that signs (and, by a further extension, whole chains of signifiers, whole discourses) could not be assigned, in a determinate way, permanently to any one side in the struggle. Of course, a native language is not equally distributed amongst all native speakers regardless of class, socio-economic position, gender, education and culture: nor is competence to perform in language randomly distributed. Linguistic performance and competence is socially distributed, not only by class but also by gender. Key institutions – in this respect, the family education couple – play a highly significant role in the social distribution of cultural 'capital', in which language played a pivotal role, as educational theorists like Bernstein and social theorists like Bourdieu have demonstrated. But, even where access for everyone to the same language system could be guaranteed, this did not suspend what Vološinov called the 'class struggle in language'. Of course, the same term, e.g. 'black', belonged in both the vocabularies of the oppressed and the oppressors. What was being struggled over was not the 'class belongingness' of the term, but the inflexion it could be given, its connotative field of reference. In the discourse of the Black movement, the denigratory connotation 'black = the despised race' could be inverted into its opposite: 'black = beautiful'. There was thus a 'class struggle in language'; but not one in which whole discourses could be unproblematically assigned to whole social classes or social groups.

This was an important step. But one could infer, immediately, two things from this. First, since ideology could be realized by the semantic accenting of the same linguistic sign, it followed that, though ideology and language intimately linked, they could not be one and the same thing. [ . . . ]

Second, though discourse could become an arena of social struggle, and all discourses entailed certain definite premises about the world, this was not the same thing as ascribing ideologies to classes in a fixed, necessary or determinate way. Ideological terms and elements do not necessarily



'belong' in this definite way to classes: and they do not necessarily and inevitably flow from class position. What mattered was the way in which different social interests or forces might conduct an ideological struggle to disarticulate a signifier from one, preferred or dominant meaning-system, and rearticulate it within another, different chain of connotations. This might be accomplished, formally, by different means. The switch from 'black = despised' to 'black = beautiful' is accomplished by inversion. The shift from 'pig = animal with dirty habits' to 'pig = brutal policeman' in the language of the radical movements of the 1960s to 'pig = male-chauvinist pig' in the language of feminism, is a metonymic mechanism – sliding the negative meaning along a chain of connotative signifiers. This theory of the 'no necessary class belongingness' of ideological elements and the possibilities of ideological struggle to articulate/disarticulate meaning, was an insight drawn mainly from Gramsci's work, but considerably developed in more recent writings by theorists like Laclau (1977).

[...]

#### *Ideology in the social formation*

This may be a convenient point in the argument to turn, briefly, to the second strand: concerning the way ideology was conceived in relation to other practices in a social formation. Complex social formations had to be analysed in terms of the economic, political and ideological institutions and practices through which they were elaborated. Each of these elements had to be accorded a specific weight in determining the outcomes of particular conjunctures. The question of ideology could not be extrapolated from some other level – the economic, for example – as some versions of classical Marxism proposed. But nor could the question of value-consensus be assumed, or treated as a dependent process merely reflecting in practice that consensus already achieved at the level of ideas, as pluralism supposed. Economic, political and ideological conditions had to be identified and analysed before any single event could be explained. Further, the presupposition that the reflection of economic reality at the level of ideas could be replaced by a straightforward 'class determination', also proved to be a false and misleading trail. It did not sufficiently recognize the relative autonomy of ideological processes, or the real effects of ideology on other practices. It treated classes as 'historical givens' – their ideological 'unity' already given by their position in the economic structure – whereas, in the new perspective, classes had to be understood only as the complex result of the successful prosecution of different forms of social struggle at all the levels of social practice, including the ideological. This gave to the struggle around and over the media – the dominant means of social signification in modern societies – a specificity and a centrality which, in previous theories, they had altogether lacked. It raised them to a central, relatively independent, position in any analysis of the question of the 'politics of signification'.

[...]

The weakness of the earlier Marxist positions lay precisely in their inability to explain the role of the 'free consent' of the governed to the leadership

of the governing classes under capitalism. The great value of pluralist theory was precisely that it included this element of consent – though it gave to it a highly idealist and power-free gloss or interpretation. But, especially in formally democratic class societies, of which the U.S. and Britain are archetypal cases, what had to be explained was exactly the combination of the maintained rule of powerful classes with the active or inactive consent of the powerless majority. The ruling-class/ruling-ideas formula did not go far enough in explaining what was clearly the most stabilizing element in such societies – consent. 'Consensus theory' however, gave an unproblematic reading to this element – recognizing the aspect of consent, but having to repress the complementary notions of power and dominance. But hegemony attempted to provide the outlines, at least, of an explanation of how power functioned in such societies which held both ends of the chain at once. The question of 'leadership' then, became, not merely a minor qualification to the theory of ideology, but the principal point of difference between a more and a less adequate explanatory framework. The critical point for us is that, in any theory which seeks to explain both the monopoly of power and the diffusion of consent, the question of the place and role of ideology becomes absolutely pivotal. It turned out, then, that the consensus question, in pluralist theory, was not so much wrong as incorrectly or inadequately posed. As is often the case in theoretical matters, a whole configuration of ideas can be revealed by taking an inadequate premise and showing the unexamined conditions on which it rested. The 'break' therefore, occurred precisely at the point where theorists asked, 'but who produces the consensus?' 'In what interests does it function?' 'On what conditions does it depend?' Here, the media and other signifying institutions came back into the question – no longer as the institutions which merely reflected and sustained the consensus, but as the institutions which helped to produce consensus and which manufactured consent.

This approach could also be used to demonstrate how media institutions could be articulated to the production and reproduction of the dominant ideologies, while at the same time being 'free' of direct compulsion, and 'independent' of any direct attempt by the powerful to nobble them. Such institutions powerfully secure consent precisely because their claim to be independent of the direct play of political or economic interests, or of the state, is not wholly fictitious. The claim is ideological, not because it is false but because it does not adequately grasp all the conditions which make freedom and impartiality possible. It is ideological because it offers a partial explanation as if it were a comprehensive and adequate one – it takes the part for the whole (fetishism). Nevertheless, its legitimacy depends on that part of the truth, which it mistakes for the whole, being real in fact, and not merely a polite fiction.

This insight was the basis for all of that work which tried to demonstrate how it could be true that media institutions were both, in fact, free of direct compulsion and constraint, and yet freely articulated themselves systematically around definitions of the situation which favoured the hegemony of the powerful. The complexities of this demonstration cannot be entered into here and a single argument, relating to consensus, will have to stand. We might put it this way. Formally, the legitimacy of the continued leadership

and authority of the dominant classes in capitalist society derives from their accountability to the opinions of the popular majority – the 'sovereign will of the people'. In the formal mechanisms of election and the universal franchise they are required to submit themselves at regular intervals to the will or consensus of the majority. One of the means by which the powerful can continue to rule with consent and legitimacy is, therefore, if the interests of a particular class or power bloc can be aligned with or made equivalent to the general interests of the majority. Once this system of equivalences has been achieved, the interests of the minority and the will of the majority can be 'squared' because they can both be represented as coinciding in the consensus, on which all sides agree. The consensus is the medium, the regulator, by means of which this necessary alignment (or equalization) between power and consent is accomplished. But if the consensus of the majority can be so shaped that it squares with the will of the powerful, then particular (class) interests can be represented as identical with the consensus will of the people. This, however, requires the shaping, the education and tutoring of consent: it also involves all those processes of representation which we outlined earlier.

Now consider the media – the means of representation. To be impartial and independent in their daily operations, they cannot be seen to take directives from the powerful, or consciously to be bending their accounts of the world to square with dominant definitions. But they must be sensitive to, and can only survive legitimately by operating within, the general boundaries or framework of 'what everyone agrees' to: the consensus. But, in orienting themselves in 'the consensus' and, at the same time, attempting to shape up the consensus, operating on it in a formative fashion, the media become part and parcel of that dialectical process of the 'production of consent' – shaping the consensus while reflecting it – which orientates them within the field of force of the dominant social interests represented within the state.

Notice that we have said 'the state', not particular political parties or economic interests. The media, in dealing with contentious public or political issues, would be rightly held to be partisan if they systematically adopted the point of view of a particular political party or of a particular section of capitalist interests. It is only in so far as (a) these parties or interests have acquired legitimate ascendancy in the state, and (b) that ascendancy has been legitimately secured through the formal exercise of the 'will of the majority' that their strategies can be represented as coincident with the 'national interest' – and therefore form the legitimate basis or framework which the media can assume. The 'impartiality' of the media thus requires the mediation of the state – that set of processes through which particular interests become generalized, and, having secured the consent of 'the nation', carry the stamp of legitimacy. In this way a particular interest is represented as 'the general interest' and 'the general interest as 'ruling'. This is an important point, since some critics have read the argument that the operations of the media depend on the mediation of the state in too literal a way – as if it were merely a matter of whether the institution is state-controlled or not. But it should be clear that the connections which make the operations of the media in political matters legitimate and 'impartial' are not institutional matters, but a wider question of the role of the State

in the mediation of social conflicts. It is at this level that the media can be said (with plausibility – though the terms continue to be confusing) to be 'ideological state apparatuses'. (Althusser, however, whose phrase this is, did not take the argument far enough, leaving him open to the charge of illegitimately assimilating all ideological institutions into the state, and of giving this identification a functionalist gloss.)

This connection is a systemic one: that is, it operates at the level where systems and structures coincide and overlap. It does not function, as we have tried to show, at the level of the conscious intentions and biases of the broadcasters. When in phrasing a question, in the era of monetarism, a broadcasting interviewer simply takes it for granted that rising wage demands are the sole cause of inflation, he is both 'freely formulating a question' on behalf of the public and establishing a logic which is compatible with the dominant interests in society. And this would be the case regardless of whether or not the particular broadcaster was a lifelong supporter of some left-wing Trotskyist sect. This is a simple instance; but its point is to reinforce the argument that, in the critical paradigm, ideology is a function of the discourse and of the logic of social processes, rather than an intention of the agent. The broadcaster's consciousness of what he is doing – how he explains to himself his practice, how he accounts for the connection between his 'free' actions and the systematic inferential inclination of what he produces – is indeed, an interesting and important question. But it does not substantially affect the theoretical issue. The ideology has 'worked' in such a case because the discourse has spoken itself through him/her. Unwittingly, unconsciously, the broadcaster has served as a support for the reproduction of a dominant ideological discursive field.

The critical paradigm is by no means fully developed; nor is it in all respects theoretically secure. Extensive empirical work is required to demonstrate the adequacy of its explanatory terms, and to refine, elaborate and develop its infant insights. What cannot be doubted is the profound theoretical revolution which it has already accomplished. It has set the analysis of the media and media studies on the foundations of a quite new problematic. It has encouraged a fresh start in media studies when the traditional framework of analysis had manifestly broken down and when the hard-nosed empirical positivism of the halcyon days of 'media research' had all but ground to a stuttering halt. This is its value and importance. And at the centre of this paradigm shift was the rediscovery of ideology and the social and political significance of language and the politics of sign and discourse: the re-discovery of ideology, it would be more appropriate to say – the return of the repressed.

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