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Theories of the media, theories of society

TONY BENNETT

'MASS', 'MEDIA', 'COMMUNICATIONS'?

The new media distinctively associated with the nineteenth and twentieth centuries — the press, radio and television, the cinema and the record industry — have traditionally been grouped together under the heading 'mass media' and their study developed as a part of the sociology of mass communications. At one level, this inherited vocabulary fulfils a useful descriptive function; we know what is being referred to when such terms as 'the media of mass communication' are used. At another level, however, such terms may prove positively misleading. It is clear, for example, that the media which are customarily referred to in this way resemble one another only superficially. The relationships between the state and broadcasting institutions, for example, are quite different from those which obtain between the state and the press or, different yet again, between the state and the cinema. Similarly, the relationship between industry and audience is quite differently articulated in the case of the record industry as compared with the film industry.

More important, perhaps, the vocabulary of 'mass', 'media' and 'communications' frequently involves particular assumptions about the nature of such media, the processes of which they form a part and the ways in which these are connected with broader social and political processes and relationships. In its classical usage, for instance, the term 'mass' implied that the audience created by the new media was socially undifferentiated, lacking any clear divisions along class, sex or race lines. The other, the production side of the communication process, it is true, was rarely filled in, at least not in any degree of explicit detail. But the implication was clear. If the audience which constituted the receiving end of the communication process was to be regarded as a 'mass' or 'the masses', then the business of producing and transmitting messages was viewed as being vested in the hands of an élite, however it may have been defined. It was in this way that such terms as 'mass media' and 'media of mass communication' formed a part of a ready-built theory of society which answered in advance the more pertinent questions that might be put concerning the connections between the media and social processes. Between whom do the media communicate?

Between the élite and the masses, the few and many: the answer is pre-given in the concept.

It is true that, in its contemporary use, such connotations are rarely present in this inherited vocabulary. If the term 'mass media' still enjoys a widespread currency, this is more by force of habit than anything else; a convenient way of marking out an area of study rather than a means of stating how that area should be studied or of outlining the assumptions from which research should proceed. However, it is noteworthy that in recent research the media have tended to be grouped under different headings. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, for example, coined the phrase 'the culture industry' in referring to the collective operations of the media (Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972) whereas, more recently, Louis Althusser has grouped the media with the family, the church and the education system under the heading of 'ideological state apparatuses' (Althusser, 1971). Of course, there is more at stake here than the simple question of naming. Such shifts in vocabulary have involved and been a part of the development of new approaches to the study of the media within which the connection between media processes and broader social and political relationships are construed in terms which differ significantly from those embodied in the more traditional sociology of mass communications approaches.

My purpose in this essay is to tease out some of the broader issues which lie behind this apparently simple question of naming, by identifying the nature of the expectations and presuppositions which have influenced the way in which the study of the media has been approached from within different bodies of theory. More particularly, my concern is to show how the sorts of assumptions made about the broader structure of society within different bodies of theory have determined both the sorts of questions that have been posed in relation to the media and the way in which those questions have been pursued.

I will do so by commenting on four traditions of media theory. I shall deal, firstly, with the mass society tradition which, having a pedigree reaching back into the mid-nineteenth century, has viewed the development of the media pessimistically as constituting a threat to either the integrity of élite cultural values or the viability of the political institutions of democracy, or both. I shall then examine the contrary assumptions of liberal-pluralist schools of thought. According to these the media, functioning as the 'fourth estate', play an important part in the democratic process in constituting a source of information that is independent of the government. They are also viewed as adding to the series of countervailing sources of power which, in liberal democracies, are said to prevent a disproportionate degree of power from being concentrated in any one section of the population or organ of government. Next, I shall consider the critical theory of the Frankfurt School as an instance of an attempt to incorporate the mass society critique and put it to use from within a Marxist framework. Finally, consideration will be given to more recent attempts to develop a

Marxist approach to the media as part of a more general theory of ideology concerned with the role played by ideological institutions in the process whereby existing relations of class domination are reproduced and perpetuated or, to the contrary, challenged and overthrown.

THEORIES OF MASS SOCIETY AND THE CRITIQUE OF MASS CULTURE

The range and diversity of the theorists who are normally regarded as having contributed to the development of mass society theory is forbidding. We have thus, to name but a few, cultural theorists such as Matthew Arnold, T.S. Eliot, Friedrich Nietzsche and Ortega y Gasset; political theorists such as John Stuart Mill and Alexis de Tocqueville; the students of crowd or mass psychology from Gustave le Bon to Wilhelm Reich and Hannah Arendt; and, finally, such representatives of the Italian school of sociology as Vilfredo Pareto and Gaetano Mosca. Although conventionally grouped together as 'mass society theorists' on the somewhat loose grounds that they share the same vocabulary, the concerns articulated within these diverse traditions are, in some respects, quite different.

These difficulties are exacerbated by the fact that the mass society conception has been complemented by the parallel perceptions of social theorists working in other areas. The writings of the founding fathers of classical sociology have been particularly important in this respect. There can be little doubt that the theories of such scholars as Ferdinand Tönnies and Emile Durkheim concerning the implications of the dissolution of traditional forms of social relationships for the maintenance of social cohesion did much to lend academic weight and credence to the thesis of social atomization which underpins most variants of mass society theory (see Bramson, 1961). It is, as a result, somewhat difficult to draw a clearly defined boundary line around the mass society tradition which tends, rather, to be 'fuzzy' at the edges, merging imperceptibly with the related theoretical traditions upon which it has drawn at various moments in its history.

The mass society tradition, then, by no means constitutes a unified and tightly integrated body of theory. It should rather be viewed as a loosely defined 'outlook' consisting of a number of intersecting themes — the decline of the 'organic community', the rise of mass culture, the social atomization of 'mass man'. Taken collectively, these have articulated a polyphony of negative and pessimistic reactions to the related processes of industrialization, urbanization, the development of political democracy, the beginnings of popular education and the emergence of contemporary forms of 'mass communication'.

The themes which comprise this outlook, however, have been orchestrated in different ways within different strands of the mass society tradition. For some theorists, responsibility for the emergence of mass society is imputed to the incorporation of 'the masses' within the formal processes of

government via the extension of the franchise. For others, it is imputed to the levelling and homogenizing effects of a market economy or to the preponderance which has been given to the opinion of the 'average man' by the development of the press. Similarly, whilst some fear the threat to élite values of excellence embodied in the standards of mediocrity which the 'reign of the masses' is said to have promoted, others fear that, politically, the power attained by the masses has seriously threatened the viability of democracy to the extent that it has strengthened the role which irrational forces, the so-called psychology of the crowd, play in the political process. There are also those who consider that the primary threat embodied by mass society relates to the masses themselves to the extent that their atomization has rendered them vulnerable to manipulation by the élite, the passive prey for whatever predators might be stalking the political jungle.

Whilst an adequate treatment of the variations of stress and emphasis that have characterized the mass society tradition cannot be attempted here, a brief adumbration of its more central themes should suffice for current purposes. (More extended surveys can be found in Bramson, 1961, Giner, 1976, Kornhauser, 1960 and Swingewood, 1977.) Five such themes can be distinguished:

The tensions of liberalism

Although he cannot be regarded as a mass society theorist proper, Mill's fears for the health of the body politic reflected that sense of increasing tension between the ideals of liberty, equality and democracy which has come to typify the liberal variant of the mass society critique. Mill's central concern was that democratic forms of government gave rise to the danger of a new form of despotism — the 'tyranny of the majority'. He consequently called for a series of constitutional provisions which would curb and limit the power of the majority by defining the spheres within which that power might be legitimately exercised whilst retaining due respect for the autonomy and rights of the individual. However, Mill was as much concerned by the moral authority exerted by the majority as by its exercise of power in the formal or constitutional sense:

Protection, therefore, against the tyranny of the magistrate is not enough: there needs to be protection also against the tyranny of the prevailing opinion and feeling: against the tendency of society to impose, by other means than civil penalties, its own ideas and practices as rules of conduct on those who dissent from them; to fetter the development, and, if possible, prevent the formation, of any individuality not in harmony with its ways, and compel all characters to fashion themselves upon the model of its own. (Mill, 1969, p. 9)

The concern expressed here, the fear of social homogenization, has been central to the mass society outlook. Mill goes on to develop this theme in the chapter of his essay *On Liberty* devoted to the subject of 'individuality' where he argues that the differences between classes, regions and professions have been so blurred by the development of the market, by

popular education and by new means and forms of communication as to result in a tendency toward conditions of moral and intellectual uniformity. Rather than being viewed as vehicles of enlightenment, popular education and the press are regarded as reducing intelligence to the level of the lowest common denominator, the promoters of a moral and intellectual mediocrity. It is worth noting, however, that Mill viewed the threat to moral and intellectual authority as being posed less by 'the masses', in the sense of a modern variant of the mob, than by the dull complacency of the self-satisfied middle classes.

Mass/élite theories

Although apprehensive with regard to the cultural consequences of the extension of the franchise and the development of literacy, Mill did not oppose these developments so much as merely point to their consequences and to the safeguards that would need to be taken against them. In this, he was typical of the English strand of the mass society critique which, on the whole, has been somewhat qualified in its élitism, hedging it around with a good degree of obeisance to democratic and egalitarian susceptibilities. It is thus noticeable that, for the greater part, the division between élites and masses, as it has been construed by English social and cultural theorists, has been represented as a socially and culturally produced division rather than as one resting on the differential distribution of innate natural characteristics.

The main thrust of the continental tradition of mass society theory has run in the opposite direction. Among the more important figures here are José Ortega and Friedrich Nietzsche. Stridently anti-democratic, these shared the view that men were naturally divided between the weak and the strong; between those destined to be the objects of the wills of others and those who were self-willed; and construed the social division between the élite and the masses as a product of the unequal distribution of such innate characteristics.

The difficulty, as far as Nietzsche and Ortega were concerned, was that this 'natural' balance between élites and masses had been threatened by the advent of democracy, the development of the press and of popular education and, more generally, by the dissolution of those traditional forms of social relationships which allegedly had hitherto clearly defined for the masses their subordinate 'place' within a hierarchically structured social order. In short, they feared that the rule of the élite was over and the reign of the rabble about to begin unless the former could be induced to rouse itself, to turn back the tide of democracy and liberalism which threatened to engulf it.

The masses and moral disorder

An enduring theme in the work of the founding fathers of the sociological tradition was the concern with the threat of moral disorder which was said

to be posed by the disintegration of the traditional social ties binding the individual to the community and defining his or her place within it. In England where, as Perry Anderson has noted (see Anderson, 1969), questions concerning the integration of the social order have more usually been the province of literary and cultural criticism than of sociology, similar concerns have been expressed in the tradition of cultural analysis running from Matthew Arnold to T.S. Eliot and F.R. Leavis. Typifying this tradition has been the perception that social anarchy, the threat of social turbulence from 'below', can be regarded as the consequence of cultural anarchy defined as a condition in which the cultures of different classes or social groups are in competition with one another rather than coexisting, as mutually complementary parts, within a cohesively integrated system of cultural relationships. Matthew Arnold communicates this apprehension very nicely in his description of the 'Hyde Park rough', his oblique way of referring to working class political protest:

He has no visionary schemes of revolution and transformation, though of course he would like his class to rule, as the aristocratic class like their class to rule, and the middle class theirs. But meanwhile our social machine is a little out of order. . . . The rough has not yet quite found his groove and settled down to his work, and so he is just asserting his personal liberty a little, going where he likes, assembling where he likes, bawling as he likes, hustling as he likes. Just as the rest of us, — as the country squires in the aristocratic class, as the political dissenters in the middle class, — he has no idea of a *State*, of the nation in its collective and corporate character controlling, as government, the free swing of this or that one of its members in the name of the higher reason of all of them, his own as well as that of others. (Arnold, 1971, p. 65)

Writing in the aftermath of the popular agitation that had accompanied the progress of the 1867 Reform Bill, Arnold's fear of anarchy was a real one and he was quite unequivocal in declaring that, when and where necessary, this threat should be countered by the use of directly coercive means. The need that he articulated, however, was for the formation of a 'centre of authority', embodied in the state, that would reduce such occasions to a minimum by producing, within the members of all classes, a voluntary compliance with the direction given to social and political life by the representatives of such a 'centre of authority'. In doing so, and in this he was entirely typical of the mass society tradition, Arnold responded to the *political* problem of social disorder by redefining it as a *cultural* problem. If anarchy threatens, he argued, it is because the mechanisms of 'culture' — that is, of an integrative system of values, 'the best that has been thought and known in the world' — have broken down with the result that different classes pursue their own interests rather than subordinating them to a consensually agreed upon 'centre of authority'.

The masses and totalitarianism

Perhaps the most pessimistic current of the mass society outlook is that which seeks to argue a connection between the social conditions of 'mass

man' and the rise of totalitarian social and political movements. The most influential tendency within this current of thought has been that represented by Hannah Arendt and Carl Friedrich.

Regarding Nazism and Stalinism as mere variants of an essentially similar form of totalitarianism, they have sought to explain them as the result of the entry into politics of irrational forces which the age of mass democracy is said to have inaugurated by giving political weight to the opinions of the masses during a period when their social atomization rendered them pliable to élite manipulation. Arguing that the nineteenth century witnessed the almost complete fragmentation of the social structure, the creation of a society without classes or even primary social groupings, men — and women, it needs to be added — were said to enter the twentieth century in a condition of utter isolation and alienation, totally lacking the degree of psychic self-reliance which their situation required. Rootless, lonely, directionless, 'mass man' thus constituted ready-made fodder for totalitarian parties to the extent that the chiliastic ideologies these espoused offered him a means by which he might overcome his puniness and isolation, the psychic pain of responsibility, by merging his will with that of a mass movement.

Mass culture versus folk culture

Finally, it has been argued that the development of mass society has been accompanied by the formation of a new type of culture — 'mass culture' — which, in its pervasiveness, threatens to undermine, to destroy by contamination, the qualities of moral and aesthetic excellence inscribed in the 'high culture' of the educated élite and which is construed as grossly inferior to the 'organic', supposedly more robust forms of 'folk culture' which had previously comprised the cultural life of the common people. In place of a sturdy, self-reliant and self-created culture celebrating the wholesome values of an organic folk, it is contended, we now have a weak and insipid 'mass culture' which is commercially produced and offered to the masses for their passive consumption:

Folk Art grew from below. It was a spontaneous, autochthonous expression of the people, shaped by themselves, pretty much without the benefit of High Culture, to suit their own needs. Mass Culture is imposed from above. It is fabricated by technicians hired by businessmen; its audiences are passive consumers, their participation limited to the choice between buying and not buying. . . . Folk Art was the people's own institution, their private little garden walled off from the great formal park of their masters' High Culture. But Mass Culture breaks down the wall, integrating the masses into a debased form of High Culture and thus becoming an instrument of political domination. (MacDonald, 1957, p. 60)

THE MASS SOCIETY OUTLOOK AND MEDIA RESEARCH

It can be seen from the above that the theory of mass society constructs its critique of modern society by positing a linked series of historical contrasts

between past and present. Once upon a time, it is argued, social relationships were communal and organic in nature. People knew where they were. Their place within the order of things was clearly fixed and legitimated by a universally binding system of beliefs and values. The distinction between élites and masses — or, in this case, the rustic folk — was clearly constructed and culture was clearly stratified, the folk growing wise in their own way rather than cutting their cultural teeth on the inferior, handed-down versions of the high culture of society's élites. Since then, the development of industry, in breaking up traditional social relationships, has thrown men and women into isolation and self-reliance, the promise of freedom having turned into the living nightmare of *anomie* and alienation. Democracy has turned into its opposite as new forms of tyranny, playing on the fears and isolation of a social atomized population, have established themselves. And culture, in being spread, has degenerated into moral and aesthetic barbarism.

The above sketch is, of course, a caricature. And deliberately so. For it has been largely in such highly simplified and condensed forms that the mass society critique has enjoyed a widespread currency outside the narrow enclaves of academia. Daniel Bell, writing in 1960, argued that, Marxism apart, the theory of mass society was 'probably the most influential theory in the western world today' (Bell, 1960, p. 21). Yet, assessed as a body of theory, the mass society critique leaves much to be desired. Its key terms, for example, have always been notoriously imprecise. The masses and the élite have usually been simply negatively defined as the obverse of one another instead of each being positively identified in terms of some objective set of social characteristics. Perhaps most important, however, is the fact that, for all that the theory depends on establishing a series of historical distinctions and making them work, it has notably failed to do so. The contrast between the organic community and mass society clearly depends on a highly romanticized conception of the past, as is evidenced by the fact that it has proved impossible to state, with any precision, when the one ended and the other began.

However, even assuming that the concepts of the organic community and mass society could be given the degree of historical support they require, there would still remain the problem of actually accounting for the transition between the two. Here, to cite Daniel Bell once more, the theory of mass society is crucially flawed in the respect that it 'affords us no view of the relations of the parts of the society to each other that would enable us to locate the sources of change' (Bell, 1960, p. 38). Why is the dominance of élites toppled? Why are the integrated social relationships which comprise the organic community fragmented? Unable to account for these developments as a product of the organization of the organic community itself in the same way, for example, that Marx accounted for the downfall of feudal society as the result of contradictions inscribed within its very structure, mass society theorists have had no alternative but to attribute responsibility for the demise of the organic community to such exogenous

factors as the rise of democracy, the spread of literacy, the development of the media and so on. But, of course, unless these developments are themselves accounted for in terms of their articulation with other social forces, tendencies and contradictions, any such explanation is necessarily inadequate.

It is somewhat surprising, in view of these difficulties, that the mass society outlook should have proved so influential in defining the field of vision within which so many of the initial empirical inquiries into the social role of the media were located. Yet, until recently, its influence in this respect has been absolutely preponderant. The general philosophical reflections of the more noted exponents of the mass society outlook have, of course, always been buttressed by an underlying level of social commentary which has viewed the development of the media with apprehension. However, it was not really until the 1930s, either in this country or in America, that the media were mapped out as a field of study in a formal or academic sense. Yet, initially, this had little effect on the issues addressed. Although there were some who took exception to it, the 'force-field' exerted by the mass society outlook still determined the questions around which the debate was conducted.

Some indication of what this has meant for inquiry into the media in this country can be gleaned from the work of the *Scrutiny* group. F.R. Leavis's *Mass Civilization and Minority Culture* (1930) and Q.D. Leavis's *Fiction and the Reading Public* (1932) played a particularly important role in the formation of the *Scrutiny* perspective. 'In any period,' F.R. Leavis argued, 'it is upon a very small minority that the discerning appreciation of art and literature depends: it is only a few who are capable of unprompted first hand judgements.' Endorsing this view, Q.D. Leavis went on to argue that 'the individual has a better chance of obtaining access to the fullest (because finest) life in a community dominated by "society"' — by which she means 'a select, cultured element of the community that set the standards of behaviour and judgement, in direct opposition to the common people' — 'than in one protesting the superiority of the herd' (Q.D. Leavis, 1965, p. 202). Given this perspective, the history of the reading public which Q.D. Leavis offers becomes, inevitably, a history of deteriorating standards. As a consequence of the authority of the cultured minority having been attenuated by the intrusion of market forces into the sphere of culture, she argues, pulp journalism has replaced respectable journalism, the novel has become sentimentalized, diversion has replaced edification as the motive for reading and, oh horrors! the presumption of the middle-brow public encouraged it to argue for a place for Arnold Bennett or even Ernest Hemingway on the university curriculum.

The debate with the mass society outlook in America — chiefly conducted from the late 1930s through to the 1950s — took a different form. This was, in good part, because the debate was conducted by sociologists rather than, as in Britain, by literary or cultural theorists. This had two consequences. First, the debate focused more on the 'social organization'

than on the 'cultural' end of the mass society critique: the question as to whether the thesis of social atomization could be substantiated, that is to say, was more to the fore than questions concerning the cultural consequences of the development of the media. Second, reflecting the markedly positivist theoretical culture of American sociology at the time, the debate was conducted in an empirical rather than a speculative mode as an attempt was made to check whether the central tenets of the mass society thesis would stand up to the test of controlled empirical examination.

In some studies, it is true, the central tenets of the mass society thesis seemed to be empirically corroborated. In their *Small Town in Mass Society*, for example, Vidich and Benseman argued that the media were ubiquitous, overwhelming local organs of opinion formation to produce a situation in which, politically, the small town had 'surrendered' to the mass society surrounding it. The preponderant tendency of the period, however, was to undercut rather than to underwrite the terms of the mass society critique. Detailed studies of audience reactions to and use of the media played a particularly important role in this respect, suggesting that the average member of the audience 'reacts not merely as an isolated personality but also as a member of the various groups to which he belongs and with which he communicates' (Lazarsfeld and Kendall, 1949, p. 399). Such primary groups as the family, the church, the local trade-union branch or business community, it was argued, were by no means moribund — as the mass society critique had implied — but constituted the filters, the points of mediation, between the individual and the media. In short, it was argued that the audience, far from being a homogeneous mass, was profoundly heterogeneous, the way in which media messages were received and interpreted — and, consequently, the effects that might be imputed to them — being conditioned by the primary group pressures to which they were subject *en route* to the individual. Equally, if the audience was not homogenized, neither were the media. Nor were they necessarily distant and remote, impersonally relaying messages to an anonymous audience. Morris Janowitz, in a study of community newspapers, thus showed that these tended to have flourished rather than to have declined under the pressure of the national media and, in view of this, was able to argue that the media, rather than destroying local communities, often played a vital role in their maintenance (Janowitz, 1952).

An attempt was made, as an extension of this argument, to transform the phrase 'mass society' from a pejorative into a positive term. Having condemned the mass society critique on the grounds of its excessive élitism, for example, Edward Shils proceeded to appropriate the term 'mass society' in support of a liberal-pluralist position (see Shils, 1957 and 1962). He did so by arguing that many of the developments outlined within the mass society position — the dissolution of non-rational forms of social attachment, the weakening of traditional ties and obligations, the attenuation of the power of established hierarchies — tended to augment the democratic process rather than to undermine it. If, by 'mass society', one meant a society in

which 'the masses' had moved from the periphery to the centre of social, political and cultural life, then, Shils declared, he was all for it — provided that the mass was conceived not as a simple agglomeration but as a pluralist hotch-potch of differing regional, ethnic, religious and economic primary groupings.

We can see here how, in the work of such sociologists as Shils and Daniel Bell, the liberal-pluralist tradition of social theory emerged from within the mass society tradition by means of a criticism of it. This development was not restricted to the field of media sociology but formed part of a general revision of the heritage of European social theory undertaken by the younger generation of American sociologists in the war and immediately post-war years. This, in turn, was not unrelated to the need, given the war against Nazi Germany and, later, the tensions of the Cold-War period, to develop a theory that would distinguish the social structure of western democracies from those of totalitarian political systems rather than, as the mass society critique tended to, lumping them all together.

The contours of this argument were most formally stated by such political theorists as Joseph Schumpeter who defined the democratic method as 'that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of a competitive struggle for people's votes' (Schumpeter, 1976, p. 269). Basically, this amounted to saying that democracy, as its critics had contended, was indeed a system of government by élites but one in which the majority retained the right to determine, periodically, precisely which élite should govern. The contribution of American sociologists to this emergency repair job on the liberal-democratic tradition was to furnish a concept of social structure capable of breathing life into such dry constitutional bones. If the democratic process worked, they contended, it was because the wide range and variety of competing interest groups which constituted the bedrock of the social structure constantly checked and limited one another so as to prevent any one group from assuming a position of preponderance in relation to the others. Further, the incorporation of the masses into the political life of the nation, instead of being viewed negatively, was held to constitute a constraint which those élites temporarily vested with the responsibility for government could not afford to ignore.

These theoretical realignments had marked consequences for the way in which the media were viewed. Once regarded as the villains of mass society, they came to be viewed as the unsung heroes of liberalism-pluralism triumphant. The media, it was contended, were far from monolithic. The clash and diversity of the viewpoints contained within them contributed to the free and open circulation of ideas, thereby enabling them to play the role of a 'fourth estate' through which governing élites could be pressurized and reminded of their dependency on majority opinion. Further, in a decisive rejection of the mass culture critique, the media's role as the purveyors of culture was defended as it was pointed out that, in addition to an admittedly slushy pulp culture, they were also responsible for making the

established classics of high culture available to a wider audience whose cultural standards had been lifted with rising educational standards.

There can be little doubt but that, at the empirical level, the audience research undertaken by American sociologists during the 1940s and 1950s forcibly challenged the founding assumptions of the mass society outlook. The system of concepts that they proposed in place of this, however, is not so convincing. The modified version of democracy proposed by Schumpeter was only too clearly an attempt to cut the concept down to size; to trim it so as to enable it to 'fit' the observed workings of the American political system. More important, perhaps, the revisions that were proposed in relation to the concept of democracy did not entirely escape the criticisms that had been levelled against parliamentary forms of democracy by both Marxist and élite theorists. Schumpeter's definition, for example, does not differ significantly from Marx's castigation of bourgeois democracy as a system in which the oppressed are allowed, every few years, to decide which particular representatives of the ruling class shall be allowed to represent and repress them in parliament.

More particular difficulties are posed by the structure of media ownership. It is true, as Ralph Miliband has put it, that there is no field in which 'the claims of democratic diversity and free political competition which are made on behalf of the "open societies" of advanced capitalism appear to be more valid than in the field of communications' (Miliband, 1969, p. 219). But, as Miliband goes on to argue, to accept such appearances at face value would be to ignore both the highly concentrated structure of media ownership and the fact that the range of variation within the political perspectives of the dominant media is, in fact, extraordinarily narrow. Such criticisms have induced a modification of the liberal-pluralist thesis in the respect that it now tends to seek confirmation by analyzing the relationships *within* rather than those *between* media organizations. To put the point crudely, ownership of the media may be oligopolized but, it is argued, the interests of democratic diversity are nevertheless secured by virtue of the clash and discordancy of interests which exist between owners, managers, editors and journalists. Having originated in the study of the complex heterogeneity of media audiences, the liberal-pluralist perspective has since complemented such audience studies by examining the complex heterogeneity of the other, the production end of the communications process. It is noticeable, however, that a concern with what happens in between — with the structure and content of media messages — is an extremely poorly developed part of this tradition which lacks anything approaching an adequate theory or method for the analysis of signifying systems.

THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL AND THE CRITIQUE OF THE 'CULTURE INDUSTRY'

Although predominantly a conservative tradition, the mass society outlook has also influenced the development of Marxist theories of the media. Nor is

this surprising. Marx and Engels wrote suggestively on questions of the media and ideology, but they did not offer an elaborated body of theory with which to deal with such questions. Given this absence, early attempts to construct a Marxist critique of the media were virtually obliged to submit to the 'field of force' exerted by the mass society outlook. In doing so, however, they inflected its criticisms leftward, reworking them by putting them to use within the context of a critique of the media's impact in impeding the formation of a socialist political consciousness amongst members of the working class. The critique of the 'culture industry' constructed by the Frankfurt School was undoubtedly the most interesting of the attempts to fuse Marxist and mass society categories in this way.

The label of 'the Frankfurt School' is usually applied to the collective thought of those theorists — most notably, Theodor Adorno, Herbert Marcuse and Max Horkheimer — associated with the Institute for Social Research founded in Frankfurt in 1923. Recruiting largely from the cream of the young radical intellectuals of Weimar Germany, some of them disillusioned ex-Communist Party members, the Institute set itself the task of keeping the critical light of Marxism burning during the 'dark years' which its members saw ahead. Owing to this radical orientation, and to the predominantly Jewish background of its members, the accession of Hitler to the German chancellorship in 1933 forced the removal of the Institute to New York where, until 1942, it was affiliated to the Sociology Department of the University of Columbia. In 1949, Max Horkheimer, who had succeeded Carl Grunberg as director of the Institute in 1930, led the Institute back to Frankfurt — although Marcuse chose to remain in California. Horkheimer was succeeded as head of the Institute by Adorno who remained in that position until his death in 1968.

Applying the brush with broad strokes, the intellectual perspectives of the Frankfurt theorists were shaped by three major historical experiences. First, they shared a sense of monumental disappointment that the revolution of 1917 had not spread to western Europe. They were dismayed by the downturn in the revolutionary tide which resulted from this failure and by the fatal direction which, in their view, the dominance of Stalinism subsequently gave to working-class politics. Second, a deep and lasting impression was made on them by the experience of fascism which continued to haunt their works until well into the post-war epoch. Finally, they were deeply concerned by the apparent political stability which had been achieved in the post-war western world and attempted to describe and account for the ideological transformations by which this stability had been produced.

This, then, was the perspective which informed the Frankfurt theorists' historical vision. The dialectic of history, the mutually interactive relationship between the subject (human agents) and the object (the social conditions of their existence) appeared to have been fractured, the result being a complete social stasis in conditions which, so far as Adorno was concerned, were little short of hell. How had this come about? The

Frankfurt theorists sought the answer to this question on the subject rather than the object side of the equation. If the prospect of radical social change no longer seemed imminent, they argued, this was substantially because the consciousness of a need for such change had been eliminated, yielding an ideological climate in which the prospect of a horizon beyond the limits constituted by the present had been virtually lobotomized.

To do even rough justice to the Frankfurt analysis of the mechanisms whereby oppositional social and intellectual forces were said to have been thus contained and brought to heel would be a lengthy undertaking (Jay, 1973, and Slater, 1977, offer useful general surveys). We can only deal here with those aspects of the analysis which bear most closely on the media.

One of the more challenging thrusts of Marcuse's *One Dimensional Man* (1968) is the contention that the apparent rationality of production in advanced capitalism renders the social system as such immune to criticism. The system is 'sold' by its success, by its ability to produce the goods:

The productive apparatus and the goods and services which it produces 'sell' or impose the social system as a whole. The means of mass transportation and communication, the commodities of lodging, food, and clothing, the irresistible output of the entertainment and information industry carry with them prescribed attitudes and habits, certain intellectual and emotional reactions which bind the consumers more or less pleasantly to the producers and, through the latter, to the whole. The products indoctrinate and manipulate; they promote a false consciousness which is immune against its falsehood. . . . Thus emerges a pattern of *one-dimensional thought and behaviour* in which ideas, aspirations, and objectives that, by their content, transcend the established universe of discourse and action are either repelled or reduced to the terms of this universe. (Marcuse, 1968, pp. 26-7)

This tendency of the system of production to inoculate itself against subversion, Marcuse argued, has been reinforced by the tendency for the terms in which political issues are publicly discussed to be limited to the question of determining which techniques (for example, the debate between Keynesian and monetarist forms of economic policy) are best capable of managing the system as it is and of containing its contradictions. For the possibility of scheduling alternative political ends which qualitatively transcend or are at odds with existing social arrangements is automatically excluded from the terms of reference established by such debates. It was this tendency that Marcuse had in mind when he referred to the media's role in effecting a 'closing of the universe of discourse'.

In an analysis of the presentation of prominent public figures in the American popular press, for example, Marcuse argued that the language used tended toward an 'authoritarian identification of person and function' (Marcuse, 1968, p. 83) resulting in a 'functionalized, abridged and unified language' (*ibid.*, p. 85) which militated against conceptual thought. Commenting on the use of 'hyphenized abridgement' in the following phrase: 'Georgia's high-handed, low-browed governor . . . had the stage all set for one of his wild political rallies last week', he argues:

The governor, his function, his physical features, and his political practices are fused together into one indivisible and immutable structure which, in its natural innocence

and immediacy, overwhelms the reader's mind. The structure leaves no space for distinction, development, differentiation of meaning: it moves and lives only as a whole. (ibid., p. 83)

Marcuse's objection is thus to the 'overwhelming concreteness' of newspaper copy: 'This language, which constantly imposes *images*, militates against the development and expression of *concepts*. In its immediacy and directness, it impedes conceptual thinking; thus, it impedes thinking' (ibid., p. 84).

The media, then, define for us the very terms in which we are to 'think' (or not 'think') the world. Their influence has to be assessed not in terms of what we think about or this or that particular issue, but in terms of the way in which they condition our entire intellectual *gestalt*. The threat they embody is that they inhibit thought itself by inducing us to live, mentally, in a world of hypnotic definitions and automatic ideological equations which rule out any effective cognitive mediation on our part. (Pateman, 1975, offers a useful and interesting extension of this argument.)

It was, however, perhaps in their assessment of the cultural consequences of the mass media that the negativity of the Frankfurt theorists' vision received its most acute expression. For they did not limit their concerns to the more obvious manifestations of pulp culture produced by the American film and music industries. True, they did devote considerable attention to these, describing their mechanisms and effects, which they regarded as being virtually wholly narcotic or, worse, lobotomic, in some detail (see especially, Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). More distinctively, however, they also argued that the media had invaded and subverted the world of traditional high or bourgeois culture, making it more widely available only at the price of depriving it of the 'aura' of its separateness upon which its critical function had depended.

According to the Frankfurt theorists, the bourgeois culture of the nineteenth century had always been, if only equivocally, an oppositional culture. Sealed off from the everyday world of business and commerce, it had spoken for the ideals and aspirations which remained suppressed within the work-a-day world of the bourgeois order. Art, that is, belonged to the 'second dimension'. It embodied a vision of an alternative to existing social relationships and, in doing so, kept alive the concept of transcendence. It was, in short, subversive.

Within the social and cultural fabric of monopoly capitalism, however, art is said to have been deprived of its oppositional value. It has been tamed by being made a part of the established order. In part, this was viewed as a by-product of the nature of commodity exchange inasmuch as, concerned only with exchange values, a market economy is able to harness to its own purposes even those use values which are ostensibly opposed to it. Thus, just as Che Guevara is good for the poster business and Maoism generates a new fashion in headwear, so art — even the most subversive art — may be good for business, deprived of its critical value in being reduced to the level of a mere means for the self-reproduction of capital. I recall a particularly

telling example of this in the form of an advertisement, inserted by Lloyds Bank in *The Times* in 1974, which consisted of a full-page colour reproduction of Matisse's *Le Pont* beneath which there appeared the legend: 'Business is our life, but life isn't all business'. Profoundly contradictory, what was ostensibly opposed to economic life was thus made to become a part of it, what was separate became assimilated, as any critical dimension which might once have pertained to Matisse's painting was eclipsed by its new and unsolicited function as an advertisement for the wares of finance capital.

More generally the Frankfurt theorists contended that, quite contrary to the optimism of such liberal-pluralists as Edward Shils, the media made the world of serious culture more widely accessible only at the price of depriving it of its critical substance. For the media, by bringing culture into everyday life, wrenched it from the tradition which had guaranteed it its separateness just as the techniques of mass reproduction deprived the work of art of the 'aura' of its uniqueness on which alone its critical function could be predicated. Marcuse argues the point with force and clarity:

The neo-conservative critics of leftist critics of mass culture ridicule the protest against Bach as background music in the kitchen, against Plato and Hegel, Shelley and Baudelaire, Marx and Freud in the drugstore. Instead, they insist on recognition of the fact that the classics have left the mausoleum and come to life again, that people are just so much more educated. True, but coming to life as classics, they come to life as other than themselves; they are deprived of their antagonistic force, of the estrangement which was the very dimension of their truth. The intent and function of these works have thus fundamentally changed. If they once stood in contradiction to the *status quo*, this contradiction is now flattened out. (Marcuse, 1970, p. 64)

It is this aspect of the Frankfurt critique which has been taken up most frequently by cultural theorists on the left. In particular, mention should be made of Walter Benjamin who argued that the development of techniques permitting the reproduction of works of art on a limitless scale, depriving them of their 'aura', the uniqueness of their singular existence, had created the technical preconditions whereby art, in being freed from the sacredness of its singular presence, was able to enter the domain of politics in a form in which it could be both produced and appropriated by the masses (Benjamin, 1970).

This was decidedly *not* the perspective of the Frankfurt theorists. Art, they argued, could fulfil its oppositional function only by refusing any compromise with reality. But, by the same token, it was thereby unable to have any impact on the consciousness of those whose minds are forged in the midst of a compromised reality. If art did compromise so that it might be made available to the masses it would, by the same token, lose its oppositional value. Adorno summarized this dilemma as follows:

The effect that they [works of art] would wish to have is at present absent, and they suffer from that absence greatly; but as soon as they attempt to attain that effect by accommodating themselves to prevailing needs, they deprive men of precisely that which they could ... give them. (Cited in Slater, 1977, p. 141)

The result was the advocacy of a policy of retreatism in relation to the media which, it was argued, were so compromised that they could not be used by oppositional social forces:

No work of art, no thought, has a chance of survival, unless it bears within it repudiation of the false riches and high-class production, of colour films and television, millionaire's magazines and Toscanini. The older media, not designed for mass production, take on a new timelessness: that of exemption and improvisation. They alone could outflank the united front of trusts and technology. In a world where books have long lost all likeness to books, the real book can no longer be one. If the invention of the printing press inaugurated the bourgeois era, the time is at hand for its repeal by the mimeograph, the only fitting, the unobtrusive means of dissemination. (Adorno, 1974, pp. 20-1)

How one chooses to assess the Frankfurt School depends on the perspective from which one views it. Karl Popper once remarked in a radio programme that, so far as he could see, Adorno had nothing to say, and, what is more, said it in a Hegelian fashion. This, in an exaggerated way, typifies the response to the Frankfurt theorists on the part of the mainstream of Anglo-Saxon philosophy which, rather than criticizing their works in a sustained or rigorous fashion, has been content to claim that they are simply incomprehensible, Hegelian mumbo-jumbo at its worst.

The reaction from the left has been more equivocal. For there can be little doubt that the Frankfurt School has acted as an influential theoretical ginger group in relation to the mainstream of Marxism. The centrality it accorded to the study of ideology has played an important role in undermining the economism which has always been a strong tendency within Marxism. There is also little doubt that the perspective of containment — the analysis of the ideological means whereby the contradictions of capitalism are contained or held in check — has proved influential. Nevertheless, the philosophical premises on which the Frankfurt critique rested — particularly its philosophical negativity — have been, by and large, rejected; more so in Britain than in America, however, where the journal *Telos* has kept the Frankfurt flag flying. The reasons for this rejection have principally concerned the role the Frankfurt theorists assigned to the category of 'negation'. In opposition to the Leninist construction of the relationship between theory and practice — that theory must become practical by gripping the minds and directing the activities of the proletariat through the mediation of an organized political party — the Frankfurt theorists, particularly Adorno, argued that theory must give up the endeavour to change the world by transforming itself into practice. Theory thus became passive, negative in its function. Theory's purpose was not to change the world but to oppose to the world its powers of negation, to refuse to confer on it a Hegelian consecration of the rationality of its reality. By thus adopting a position of transcendence in relation to reality, theory was, at the same time, deprived of any means whereby it might connect with reality in order to change it.

The consequences of this were serious. 'For in negative fault finding,'

Hegel argued, 'one stands nobly and with proud mien above the matter without penetrating into it and without comprehending its positive aspects' (Hegel, 1953, p. 47). This exactly describes the position of the Frankfurt theorists. Although they condemned reality in round terms, they had no positive suggestions to make as to how it might be changed. Counterposing to 'that which is' an ideal conception of 'that which ought to be', but unable to locate any concrete social mechanisms whereby the gap between the two might be bridged, the result of their criticism was merely to leave everything as it is. Our current social reality was castigated as a 'bad reality', indeed as irremediably bad, but, by the same token, it was simultaneously philosophically immortalized. Their policy of retreatism in relation to the media aptly symbolized this for, as Brecht argues, its result could only be to perpetuate the conditions that had prompted the critique in the first place:

Anybody who advises us not to make use of such new apparatus [the media] just confirms the right of the apparatus to do bad work; he forgets himself out of sheer open-mindedness, for he is thus proclaiming his willingness to have nothing but dirt produced for him. (Brecht, 1964, p. 47)

MARXISM: CLASS, IDEOLOGY AND THE MEDIA

The Frankfurt theorists, although remaining committed to Marxism, broached the task of analysing the relationship between class, ideology and the media through the conceptual prism supplied by an amalgam of the mass society critique and the presuppositions of German philosophical idealism grafted on to the framework of Marxist theory. More recent developments in Marxist theory have opened up a different theoretical space within which questions pertaining to the ideological role of the media are subject to a different formulation.

Before surveying these developments, however, some more general comments on the concept of ideology are in order. As we have noted, Marx and Engels did not provide any systematic exposition of this crucial concept other than that outlined in the Introduction to *The German Ideology*, a work which many Marxists have argued cannot be taken to represent Marx's concerns during the years of his theoretical maturity. Given this caveat, two distinct areas of concern can be deciphered from Marx's handling and use of the concept.

First, the concept implies something about the social determination of signifying systems. In a much criticized passage, Marx referred to ideologies as 'definite forms of social consciousness' which, together with legal and political relationships, constitute a 'superstructure' built upon and 'corresponding' to the 'real foundation' constituted by the relations of production (Bottomore and Rubel, 1965, p. 67). Although the concept of 'correspondence' does not necessarily imply a relationship of determination, the theoretical space opened up by the concepts of 'real foundation' or 'base' and 'superstructure' clearly implies that the latter is in some way dependent on the former. Yet, as Marx argued elsewhere, particularly in the

Grundrisse, ideologies also have their relative autonomy, their own distinctive properties, so that their dependence on the 'base' must be viewed as a highly complex and mediated one. This aspect of the concept of ideology might thus be said to open up the problem regarding the precise way in which the dependence of ideological forms upon the 'base' is to be construed without depriving them of their autonomy. (It is pertinent to note, however, that the cogency of maintaining that ideology may be regarded as being *both* dependent upon and yet *also* autonomous in relation to the economy, has recently been compellingly challenged. See Cutler *et al.*, 1977.)

Second, the concept of ideology carries with it the implication of distortion. This meaning is present in the common-sense usage of the term which is usually applied to statements which are felt to be a motivated distortion of the truth. Whilst there are passages in which Marx uses the term in this way, he more typically invoked the concept to refer to the unexamined categories and assumptions which form the unacknowledged impediments to scientific investigation. It was in such terms that Marx sought to explain the limitations of classical political economy as the product not of a subjective will to falsification but of the limitations which inhere in any analysis which, implicitly, takes bourgeois society as its point of departure and its point of return. In this usage, distortion is viewed not as the result of mendacity but as the effect of the action of the dominant social relationships which, although acting on the consciousness of individuals, do so in a way that is profoundly unconscious so far as they are concerned. On this construction, then, ideology is a process which takes place 'behind our backs', producing and structuring our consciousness in ways that we are not immediately aware of. It defines, as Althusser has put it, the form in which men 'live' their relationship to the conditions of their existence, the form in which 'their relationship to their conditions of existence is represented to them' (Althusser, 1971, p. 154).

In this sense, ideology comprises the sphere of representations within which an 'imaginary' relationship to the conditions of existence is produced, a relationship which embodies a 'misrecognition' of the real nature of those conditions. Although susceptible to a more extended usage, Marxists have traditionally granted the concept of ideology a privileged purchase in relation to the ruling or dominant forms of mental representation:

The ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas: i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force is, at the same time, its ruling *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production, so that thereby, generally speaking, the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are subject to it. (Marx and Engels, 1965, p. 61)

Ideology, in this most distinctive of senses, is thus concerned with the transmission of systems of signification across class lines. This is conceived not as an abstract process but as being effected, in a concrete way, via 'the means of mental production' controlled by the economically dominant

class. The consciousness of those subjected to this relay of ideologies is thus distorted not abstractly but in a way conducive to the perpetuation of existing relationships of class domination.

Viewed in this way, the concept of ideology suggests three main areas of concern in relation to the media. The first has to do with the nature of the social control exerted over the media. The central question here concerns the structure of the ownership of the media and, more generally, the ways and, of course, extent to which ruling-class control over the operations of the media is secured. Second, this time at the level of formal analysis, there is the question as to how, technically, the signifying systems relayed by the media work so as to achieve the effect of 'misrecognition' imputed to them. Finally, implicated in each of these areas of concern, the media — particularly such state-owned media as the BBC — occupy a critical position within the more general Marxist debates concerning the way in which the economic, political and ideological levels of the social formation should be construed as relating to one another. Needless to say, these problems are posed not abstractly but are related to concrete problems of political practice. Marxist inquiry into the media is motivated by the need to furnish a knowledge of their workings that can be put to use in the production of subversive signifying systems which might offset the effects of dominant ideology and contribute to the formation of a revolutionary consciousness within oppressed social groups and classes.

Unfortunately, the precise way in which such questions are addressed depends upon the way in which the concept of ideology is interpreted and handled — a matter on which Marxists have been by no means united. The importance of such general conceptual considerations for the specific way in which the media are to be interrogated can be illustrated by considering the contrasting approach to the concept of ideology embodied in the works of Georg Lukács and Louis Althusser.

Lukács's approach to the question of ideology is mediated through the framework of the so-called 'materialist inversion'. Whereas Hegel had construed being as the manifestation or product of consciousness, Marx argued that the relationship between these terms should be inverted. 'It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being', Marx wrote, 'but, on the contrary, their social being determines their consciousness' (Bottomore and Rubel, 1965, p. 67). The question this poses is: How is this determination of consciousness by social being effected? How are we to conceive and represent the logic of this determination? Lukács's contention was that the class relationships constituting the structure of social being determine the structure of ideological forms in the respect that they provide different conceptual vantage points which mould the consciousness of social agents in different ways. Ideological forms, that is to say, are regarded as the product or reflection of the 'already-structured' consciousness of different class-based subjects of cognition. The position that they occupy within the structure of class relationships determines the structure and content of men's and women's consciousness. The structure and content of

such ideological forms as works of art, literature and philosophy are then explained as the manifestation or reflection of what is thus posited as the *already socially determined* consciousness of the social agents to which they are attributed. Lukács added to this the further argument that whereas the conceptual vantage point afforded by the class position of the proletariat enabled the proletariat to acquire a true knowledge of the workings of the capitalist system of production, the bourgeoisie was able to attain only a partial knowledge of these owing to the 'false-consciousness' necessarily engendered by its class position.

Paul Hirst has offered a useful summary of this argument:

'False consciousness' is explained . . . by the *relation* of the subject to the object. Reality (the object) determines the place of the subject within it and, therefore, the conditions of its experience of it. Reality determines the *content* of ideology; it generates false recognitions of itself by subjecting subjects to circumstances in which their experience is distorted. Reality is the *origin* of ideology because it creates the different 'places', class positions, from which subjects view it. (Hirst, 1976, p. 386)

Although the most obvious route into the problem of the social determination of consciousness, this argument is both economist and idealist. It is economist inasmuch as it views ideological forms as the product of a determination operating solely in the economic sphere. Ideology is construed as the effect of economic place. What the subject thinks and how she or he thinks it is construed as a result of the place he or she occupies in the process of production. This is to allow the level of ideology no specific determinancy of its own. Nor does it offer any account of the actual mechanisms by which the consciousness of social agents is produced; this simply 'happens', consciousness is somehow magically formed as an effect of economic relationships.

Further, the position is idealist in the respect that it seeks to explain things which have a concrete material and social existence — ideological forms as articulated in language, written or spoken, or as embodied in visual signs — with reference to something that is abstract and has no concrete existence: the concept of consciousness. Vološinov admirably exposed the weakness of this conception in his *Marxism and the Philosophy of Language*, arguing that any conception of ideology which grants the concept of consciousness, as an attribute of the subject, an existence prior to (either logically or temporarily) the forms in which it is organized must be regarded as metaphysical. It explains something which has a concrete and identifiably material existence (ideology) with reference to something which does not, a mere abstraction (consciousness).

A Marxist theory of ideology, Vološinov argues, must start from the other direction. It must start not with the abstract, consciousness, but with the concrete, the structure of ideological forms themselves. Ideology must be viewed not as the product of an evanescent consciousness but as an objective component of the material world. For ideology, Vološinov insists, has a determinate reality. It exists objectively as a distinctive organization of sound patterns (speech, music) or as a codified co-ordination of light rays

(print, visual images). Its existence is thus wholly objective. It does not exist 'within' as an attribute of consciousness but 'without' as a part of material reality, articulated on and distributed through specifiable social relationships. Further, far from being regarded as the *product* of consciousness, such ideological forms must be regarded as the producers of consciousness inasmuch as they constitute the distinctive 'place' within which the social production of consciousness is actually organized and carried out. Ideology, Vološinov contends, is not an attribute of consciousness. Rather, both in general and in the particular forms it assumes, consciousness is a product of ideology. From the point of view of language as a fully developed system (and language is the home of all ideology), it is not the consciousness of individuals which determines the forms of language but rather the forms of language which, pre-existing the individuals who comprise the members of any speech community, produce the consciousness of individuals by defining the linguistic terms within which their thought is structured. And it does so not abstractly but concretely as a set of material signs relayed to individuals via the concrete mediations of home, school — and the media.

Clearly, this is a very different approach to the study of ideology. Rather than being regarded as the product of forms of consciousness whose contours are determined elsewhere, in the economic sphere, the signifying systems which constitute the sphere of ideology are themselves viewed as the vehicles through which the consciousness of social agents is produced. The consequence of this is to call into question the concerns of reflection theory, according to which ideological forms are interrogated to reveal how their determinations are 'reflected' or contained within their structure, and to put in its place a concern with the *activity* and *effectivity* of signification. The methodological import of this has been to suggest that the ideological forms relayed by the media should be read so as to decipher the signifying conventions by means of which they organize and structure the consciousness of social agents. Its more general theoretical and political significance, however, is that, escaping the economic reductionism of Lukács' position, it allows the signifying systems which constitute the sphere of the ideological to be granted their own specific role and effectivity within social life.

The work of Louis Althusser has been most influential in providing a framework within which this specific role and effectivity of the ideological can be theorized. To appreciate the role Althusser assigns to ideology, however, we must make a brief detour through Marx's *Grundrisse* where Marx distinguishes between the 'real history' of capitalism as a system of production which is already in existence and is thus 'moving on its own foundations', and the 'history of its formation'. Marx discusses this problem with reference to the so-called process of 'primitive accumulation' whereby the preconditions for production founded on capital, the separation of the labourer from the means of subsistence and the concentration of the ownership of the means of production, are brought into being. Marx's point is that the details of the actual historical mechanisms by which such

preconditions of capitalist production are created can have no bearing on the actual functioning of capitalism as an economic system. For, once production is founded on a capitalist basis, it tends to *reproduce* the conditions of its own possibility, its historical presuppositions, as a result of its own internal action. The completion of every cycle of exchange between the worker and capital increases the worker's dependence on capital by impoverishing him or her at the same time as it enhances the domination of capital over the worker by augmenting its value. In this way, the social relationship of wage-labour which forms the basis of capitalist production is reproduced as a result of the logic of capitalist production itself irrespective of the way in which, historically, that relationship was first founded.

This perspective of reproduction is vital to recent developments in Marxist theory. In truth, it is not the only perspective to be found in the *Grundrisse*. For Marx went on to note that, at the same time as they reproduce themselves, the conditions of capitalist production are also 'engaged in *suspending themselves* and hence in positing the *historic presuppositions* for a new state of society' (Marx, 1874, p. 461). Nevertheless, it is the contention of such theorists as Louis Althusser and Nicos Poulantzas that it is with reference to the reproduction processes of capitalism that the precise social role of ideology is to be understood. Thus, Poulantzas has noted that the purely economic processes of capitalist production merely reproduce the *places* within the system of production that are to be occupied by the agents of production (workers, overseers, managers). There therefore remains, he argues, the task of 'the reproduction and distribution of the agents themselves to these places' (Poulantzas, 1975, p. 28). It is not enough, that is, that the worker should be reproduced as someone capable of work and socially dependent on capital; he or she must also be produced as the subject of an ideological consciousness which legitimates the dominance of capital and the subordinate place which he or she occupies within its processes. Put simply, if capitalism is to survive as an ongoing system, then concrete social individuals must be reconciled both to the class structure and to the class positions within it which they occupy. They must be induced to 'live' their exploitation and oppression in such a way that they do not experience or represent to themselves their position as one in which they are exploited and oppressed.

In a lengthier presentation of the same issue, Althusser contends that it is at the level of ideology that the reproduction of the entire system of the relations of production characterizing the capitalist mode of production is secured (see Althusser, 1971, and also chapter 1, pp. 23-5, of this collection). In maintaining this, ideology is understood not as an intellectual abstraction but as a concrete social process embodied in the material signifying practices of a collectivity of 'ideological apparatuses' — the family, school, churches and the media. There are many difficulties associated with this conception (see Bennett, 1979, chapter 7, for a brief résumé of these). Whilst this is not the place to consider these in detail, it is important to note that Althusser's position comes dangerously close to

functionalism in the respect that, by viewing all ideological forms as contributing to the reproduction of existing social relationships, it tends to represent capitalism as a totally coherent social system ('one-dimensional' even) lacking internal conflict at either the economic, political or ideological levels. In this respect, Althusser's work joins a long list of 'Marxisms' which have managed to banish the spectre of class conflict from their work. This further means that the autonomy granted to ideology is purely nominal inasmuch as its action is conceived as being entirely subservient to the needs and requirements of the economy.

Finally, it should also be noted that Althusser's use of the term 'ideological state apparatuses' in relation to such institutions as the media, the family and religious organizations has been severely criticized on the grounds that it extends the concept of the state to such a degree that the ability to distinguish between state and non-state institutions is called into question.

It has been partly as a result of these criticisms that more recent developments in the Marxist theory of ideology have tended to look back beyond Althusser to the work of Antonio Gramsci whose writings on such subjects as culture and ideology, the role of intellectuals, and the crucial concept of hegemony afford a more flexible, less economic way of conceptualizing the relationship between ideological, social, political and economic processes and relationships. Be this as it may, the crucial role that Althusser has played in facilitating the development of significantly new lines of approach to the study of the media should not be underestimated. The stress that he placed on the *active* role of ideology, on the part that it played in shaping the consciousness of social agents, formed the central conduit through which developments in structuralism and semiology have both entered into and lastingly altered Marxist approaches to the media in placing questions concerning the politics of signification at least on a par with the traditional Marxist concern with the analysis of patterns of media ownership and control. It may be, as subsequent critics have argued (see Lovell, 1980), that Althusser — or, more accurately perhaps, those following him — bent the stick too far, resulting in a tendency towards purely formalist 'readings' or 'deconstructions' of the signifying mechanisms of media forms which paid scant regard to the conditions of their production or to the real history of their reception by different sections of the audience. A valid measure of Althusser's importance, however, is discernible in the fact that it has proved impossible for those who have wished to raise such questions to do so without acknowledging that his contribution has decisively altered the ways in which they need to be posed.

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