THE METHODOLOGICAL PROBLEMS OF IDEOLOGY CRITIQUE
Lee Harvey, 1983

ABSTRACT
Ideology inheres in all aspects of the social world and must be engaged in any attempt at critical social science. However, given its pervasiveness it is not possible to transcend ideology completely. Ideology critique must necessarily be partial. The analysis of myth provides a focus and vehicle for ideology critique. Such analysis must proceed dialectically relating myth to ideology. The identification of myths is in itself complex because of their plausibility. While there are substantial methodological problems in ideology critique they are not insurmountable.

The nature of ideology has been extensively debated however there is little agreement amongst commentators. Ideology is regarded, on the one hand, as incidental to sociological enquiry and on the other as a central feature of analysis. Conservative critiques regard ideology as analytically inadequate primarily because there is no identifiable dominant ideology while radical critiques suggest that ideology inheres in the very fabric of society and is therefore a crucial conceptual category.

The radical critique, in its various forms, derives from Marx. It suggests that ideology is present from the moment that social relations take on a hierarchical form and that far from being absent from bourgeois society, ideology is at its most sophisticated. The only approaches to the concept that actually engage ideology in a critical fashion are those within the Marxist tradition (Lenin, 19**; Lukacs, 1923; Mannheim, 1979; Althusser, 1969, 1971) Conservative critiques (Bell, 1962; Abercrombie *et al*., 1980) tend to misrepresent the notion of ideology reducing it to political ideologies and rejecting the utility of the concept on trivial essentially empiricist grounds. In essence, conservative critiques tend to detach ideology from the material conditions of its arising. There would be no need of ideology critique if this divorce could be endorsed. In the limiting case ideology becomes equated with any other metaphysical idea system and is, thus, not central to sociological enquiry but merely the object of particular studies directed towards it.

The dominant approach to sociology in the United States has been characterised by a tendency to ignore ideology (for example in the work of Robert Merton and Talcott Parsons), however, it does not divorce itself entirely from the notion of prevailing ideas guiding action, witness the use of concepts such as 'values', 'norms', and 'central value system'. These concepts differ from ideology in as much as they are uncritical and essentially idealistic, failing to engage the material grounding of ideas.

Ideology critique is central, however, given that it is both grounded and manifests itself materially and indeed ideology critique is possible only if ideology does not inhabit a separate realm of ideas. Marxist materialism provides the clearest assertion of the material grounding of ideas and the rejection of any ideas-reality dualism.

Larrain (1979) has suggested two developments of the materialist thesis of ideology within the Marxist tradition. These he calls a positive and a negative view of ideology. Marx, Larrain argues (1979, 1982), has a negative view of ideology, which most major Marxist theorists since Lenin have put to one side and instead developed varieties of a positive view. This positive approach tends to run into problems in overcoming the Kantian dualism (see Sayers, 1983, Craib, 1977, CCCS, 1978).

Ideology in its positive sense tends to relate ideology closely to Weltanschauung (world view), notably class-based world views (Lukacs, 1923). A dominant world view is seen as hegemonic and it serves to distort perception through various mechanisms embodied in education, religion, the media and so on, in order to conceal the real nature of the relations of production underlying class differences. Ideology thus serves to hide the interests of dominated groups from themselves. Ideology is virtually synonymous with false consciousness in this positive conceptualisation.

The negative meaning of ideology is opposed to a reduction of ideology to false consciousness and is more ostensibly materialist in its acceptance that ideas cannot be detached from the material conditions of their production. The implication, one discussed below, is that ideology can only be affected by changes in the material base. The negative view sees ideology as not simply a procedure by which reality is distorted, but one in which ideology is dialectically related to the nature of social relations and serves not to distort or hide that relationship but to reify class differences as intrinsic and natural.

Larrain's suggestion that ideology has been developed dichotomously is a useful aid in distinguishing the orientations of Marxists. However, it needs to be extended if it is to be used as a conceptual frame for ideology critique. Essentially, as Larrain argues, the negative view of ideology is the only one adequate for critical assessment. The positive view of ideology is framed as a self-evident abstraction and encumbers a materialist critique, rather than aids it, by inserting an idealist screen between social relationships and knowledge production. Ideology, conceived of negatively, inheres in thought which itself is dialectically related to praxis. The potential for establishing the basis of ideology and its manifestations is present in a negative view.

While the negative view implies that ideas change only when material conditions change, it is important to realise that the operation of ideology, as process, is also dialectical. Ideology, inhering in social relationships is both informed by, and informs, the nature of these relationships. A penetration of ideology, and thus the possibility of ideology critique, is therefore possible if one addresses the interrelationship between ideology and practice, thereby going beyond surface appearances.

A dialectical critique can partially transcend the superficial appearances of ideas. Indeed, such a critique is an intrinsic element of any material change in the structure of social relations. It is, therefore, incorrect to assume that a negative view of ideology restricts critique to a *post hoc* analysis in the wake of revolutionary change in the material base. Ideology is locked into practice and material change and ideological critique are interdependent. Similarly, it is mistaken to assume that changes in material conditions will effect changes in ideology in any deterministic way. That is, ideology should not be simply linked to material conditions even if, as Althusser (1971) suggests, there is a relative dependence such that ideological superstructure depends on the material base in the last resort, while, at any moment, acting through its superstructural agencies in a relatively independent fashion. To ignore the relative autonomy of ideology is a theoretical error (one committed, for example, by Abercrombie, *et al*. (1980) when arguing that there is no coherent dominant ideology) and a potential pragmatic error for revolutionary praxis. Appropriation of ideological structures is necessary for any long-term legitimation of revolutionary theory and, uncontrolled, the ideology support structure can become a base for counter-revolutionary activity.

As a negative view is effectively the only one that provides a basis for ideology critique, a closer scrutiny of levels of ideological abstraction is necessary. Three levels are suggested: first, ideology as a

legitimation for dominating procedures; second, ideology as a rationale for action; third, ideology as a pervasive mode of consciousness. Viewed negatively, this first level of ideology projects productive social relations as self-legitimating. The second level sees ideology as more than legitimation, rather it is a generally understood programme of action that is rooted in a prescribed, and taken-for-granted, political, social and economic structure. The third level sees ideology as inextricable from common sense. Dominant ideology becomes framed as unquestionably reasonable and pervades all aspects of consciousness and can be seen to be inherently rational through the very operation of the social milieu. This conceptualisation sees ideology sustained by the continued reproduction of relations of production, which in the last resort is its own legitimation and requires no deception, merely a reification of appearances. (Non-dominant ideology, in this sense, is revolutionary praxis). This conceptualisation of ideology is both central to and the major problem for ideology critique.

Given its material grounding and its pervasiveness, ideology cannot be revealed in total. Despite reductionist phenomenological perspectives (Husserl, 1969), there is no possibility of an apodictic transcendence of ideology while still retaining its materialist base. Developing ideology critique is not a matter of personal bracketing of experience, nor of distinguishing ideology from science. Both these perspectives are essentially idealist. The material grounding of ideology makes it impossible for a critique to proceed on the basis of 'the scientific method' so as to reveal the distinction between the ideological and the scientific. Science, itself, is ideological, its ideas and concepts are materially based and socio-historically specific. It is pure idealism to suppose science transcends its own historical moment. In short, one must face the overriding methodological problem of ideology critique, that of historical specificity. Being located in a specific socio-historical milieu, a critique of ideology cannot divorce itself from ideology but must work dialectically to expose elements of ideology and thus provide a context for going beyond surface appearances.

The analysis of myth provides a focus for ideology critique. That is, critique is aimed at manifestations of ideology. Myths constitute such manifestations; they are motivated articulations of aspects of ideology. Myths serve to legitimate the wider ideological frame through a focus of attention on specific elements.

Myth operates at various levels. Each level is dependent upon and informs those related myths at a more general level. Thus, for example, myths surrounding the nature of rape depend upon and inform those myths relating to the role and status of women in a patriarchal society. These myths are themselves specific aspects of the more general ideology of bourgeois economy and relate to the institutional 'control' of women through, for example, the family and the occupational structure.

As an articulation of ideology, myth is not simply the vehicle of communication of ideology, rather it is a particular motivated expression of some aspect of ideology, specifically aimed at legitimating and sustaining the reproduction of the means of production.

Nonetheless, one must ask why ideology should be framed as myth? Ideology, as characterised above, is pervasive and rooted in common sense. To oppose the prevailing ideology is to transcend common sense. Ideology is not a process of distorting consciousness detached from the material conditions of its arising, rather it is reificatory. Ideology does not operate through polemic or occasional 'rallying calls' (as in the articulation of political 'ideologies') rather, it inheres in taken-for-granted, day-to-day, uncritical repetition of conceptual frames. Ideology is reality at the level of surface appearance; so what

need is there for myth? Myth would be unnecessary if ideology was completely hegemonic and its manifestations were in accord. However, ideology is materially grounded, it is susceptible to critique and appropriated in different ways by different material interests. (This does not mean that there is no underlying ideology directed at the reproduction of the process of production, as anti-dominant ideology theses might suggest. Indeed, the lack of a single unified ideological manifestation is a strength rather that a weakness in as much as it inhibits critique.)

Myth serves both to reflect and conceal the disunity of ideological manifestations and also to deflect critique. Myths are motivated productions. They are not the 'normal' manifestations of a pervasive ideology, but specific articulations serving a given sectional end within the ideological framework. Myths are not fantastic fabrications but selected 'truths' acting to blank off alternative conceptualisations. Myth is not deliberate distortion (except in the limiting case of clearly transparent propaganda such as jingoistic war propaganda) but constructions built up, dialectically, through practice and exhibited in common sense. Myths are not isolated theoretical propositions inhabiting a realm of ideas but are rooted in social practice. Myth analysis involves the exposure of the legitimation process that motivates the construction of myth. Deconstructing myths is a dialectical process that exposes the 'fallacy' of the myth in itself and links it into a wider ideological structure through the examination of the motivation of its production. This process serves to expose aspects of the ideological milieu and provide specific identification of ideological processes. However, as myth is a particular motivated articulation it is partial and therefore inhibits ideological critique. Myth analysis, as the focus of ideology critique, provides a means to assess the legitimation process but its socio-historical specificity and that of the researcher ensures that the critique is limited. Myth analysis cannot provide a basis for the total exposure of ideology. To conceive of such a possibility is an ontological error. Ideology critique involves an encounter with ideological structures that permits penetration beyond the level of surface appearance. In short, one may move towards a critique of ideology through an examination of myth.

The identification of myths involves various other methodological problems besides those theoretical and conceptual ones, discussed above, concerning the nature of myth and its relation to ideology. These other problems include the 'classification' of myths and the critical assessment of the elements that constitute myths.

Pragmatically, myth may be seen to be any taken-for-granted conceptualisation (pertinent to a realm of study) that is grounded in 'authoritative' authentication either written or oral. Thus, for example, a myth of the 'Chicago School of Sociology' might be its predilection for participant observation studies and an element of this would be its abhorrence of statistical studies (Harvey, 1982). To facilitate the analysis of myth in practice, it is useful to designate a fourfold categorisation of myth. Thus myths are generated internally and externally, contemporaneously and historically (i.e., in retrospect). The researcher, however, should avoid simply identifying different interpretations of elements of a complex totality and relabeling them myths unless they can be structured into a coherent pattern. Such structuring involves a dialectical analysis. In effect, the designation of an element of myth provides a limited case of the identification of a fundamental unit for dialectical critique. (See Harvey, 1983b, Schmidt 1981, Zelney, 1980). That is, the deconstruction-reconstruction process of dialectical analysis, which aims at identifying a fundamental conceptual unit as the basis for reconstruction transcending surface appearance, as Marx did with commodification, (Marx and Engels, 1887), is paralleled by the deconstruction of myth to elemental units (as a preliminary stage) and the reconstruction of motivations.

These then, serve the elaboration of an alternative analysis of the ideational level and themselves provide the basis of the determination of a patterned structure for the analysis of the presumed elemental categories.

Myth analysis is not, despite the above pragmatic approach to identification and preliminary exploration, in any way a simple task. The negative view of ideology has consequences for myth critique in as much as myths are intrinsically linked with common sense. While myths are, at one level, transparent motivated articulations, they are also self-evident and plausible. At the third level of ideology, myth becomes a carrier of consciousness manifest in exemplary connotations. Positively viewed, myth is easily revealed. It is a thinly disguised denotative system reifying dominating relations. Negatively viewed, myth is pervasive and plausible and transcends its own unmasking at a connotative level. Thus, from a negative view it is necessary to critically assess the signification of myth. This involves a critical-dialectical semiotic approach (Harvey and Little, 1983).

Ideology critique, because of the material grounding of ideology and the socio-historical specificity of the researcher is a complex and necessarily limiting practice. However, through an analysis of motivated articulations one may proceed to reveal the ideological process and penetrate the realm of surface appearance through dialectical analysis. Such analysis of myth, however, is itself complicated by the conflict of motivation that lead to overlapping and contradictory myths as a result of a variety of points of genesis. A fourfold categorisation is useful for disentangling these potential contradictions, provided that the designation of myths is developed dialectically rather than conventionally or arbitrarily. Such a designation requires a dialectical analysis of elemental units. This process is further complicated by the plausibility of myths that transcend their unmasking at the level of connotation. A dialectically informed critical semiotic analysis is necessary to aid the analysis of myth.

References missing

REFERENCES

Abercrombie, N., et al, 1980, The Dominant Ideology Thesis.
London, Allen & Unwin.

Althusser, L., 1969, For Marx, Harmondsworth, Allen Lane

Althusser, L., 1971, Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays.
London New Left Books

Bell, Daniel, 1962, The End of Ideology: On the exhaustion of
politcal ideas in the fifties. Rev. edn. New York, Free
Press.

Best, A., 1983, 'The Portrayal of the Rape Myth: The 'Sun' as
Case Study', Research Unit Discussion Paper, 12, Birmingham
Polytechnic.

Centre For Contemporary Cultural Studies, 1978, On Ideology.
London, Hutchinson.

Craib, 1977, 'Lukacs and the Marxist Critique of Sociology',
Radical Philosophy, 17, pp 27 ff.

Dittberner, Job L., 1979, The End of Ideology and American
Social Thought: 1930-1960. London, UMI Research Press.

Gamble, A., 1982, 'Review: Abercrombie, et al: The Dominant
Ideology Thesis', Theory Culture and Society, 1, p. 90.

Harvey, Lee, 1981, 'Misconceptions of the Chicago School',
Research Unit Discussion Paper, 6, Birmingham Polytechnic.

Harvey, Lee, 1983, 'Myths of the Chicago School', Research Unit
Occasional Paper, 1, Birmingham Polytechnic.

Harvey, L., Little, M., 1983, Towards a Semiotic Analysis of
Sporting Images, Crowd Behaviour Project Paper 6, Birmingham
Polytechnic.

Hirst, P., 1977, On Law and Ideology. London, Macmillan.

Husserl, E., 1969, Cartesian Meditations.The Hague

Larrain, J., 1979, The Concept of Ideology. London, Hutchinson.

Larrain, Jorge, 1982, 'On the Character of Ideology: Marx and

8

the Present Debate in Britain', Theory Culture and Society, 1, p. 5

Lenin, V.I., 1927, Materialism and Empirico-Criticism: Critical Notes Concerning A Reactionary Philosophy. New York, International.

Lichtheim, 1967, The Concept of Ideology and Other Essays. Vintage, New York.

Lukacs, G., 1971, History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics. London, Merlin. (Orig. pub. 1923).

Mannheim, Karl, 1979, Ideology and Utopia. (Trans E Shils, Preface L. Wirth). London, Routledge and Kegan Paul. (First pub. Chicago 1933). 395

Manning, D.J., ed 1980, The Form of Ideology. London, George Allen & Unwin.

Marx, K. & Engels, F., 1887, Capital. 3 Vols. London, Lawrence & Wishart, 1977 reprint.

Merton, Robert K., 1949, Social Theory and Social Structure. Glencoe, Free Press.

Sayer, Derek, 1980, Marx's Method: Ideology, Science and Critique in Capital. Brighton, Harvester.

Sayers, Sean, 1983, 'Materialism, Realism and the Reflection Theory', Radical Philosophy, 33, pp 16-26.

Schmidt, Alfred, 1981, History & Structures: An essay on Hegelian-Marxist and Structuralist Theories of History. Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press.

Zeleney, J., 1980, The Logic of Marx. Oxford, Blackwell. (Orig. pub. East Berlin, 1968).

*This paper is the result of discussions in the Research Seminar at Birmingham Polytechnic. The members of that seminar apart from the author are Ahrda Best Geoff Bateson Christopher Castleton Sallie Johnson John Matthews Ken Matthews Dave Payne Steve Salmon Neil Staunton Halina Szulc

(21B) ,OK,