

# MEDIA POWER AND CLASS POWER: OVERPLAYING IDEOLOGY

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The media have a contradictory role in relation to class power. They do predominantly carry corporate and state friendly messages, but not exclusively. They do have a role in legitimating capitalist social relations, but the role of ideology in maintaining social order has been overplayed by some theorists. A variety of other mechanisms employed by the powerful to pursue their interests are arguably as important as the mass media in the maintenance of 'ruling ideas'. In attempting to rethink the relationship between media power and class power, this essay uses the work of Stuart Hall as the starting point for a critique of cultural and media studies. It argues that Critical Theorists such as Hall overemphasized the importance of ideology and the 'function' of the media in capitalist social order.

The primary interest of this kind of argument was in the alleged 'ideological effect' of the media on the public and how this might help to secure hegemony. A key assumption was that definitional power was 'always already' power in society. The argument advanced here is that definitional power is just power over definitions and has no necessary link with either popular ideology or societal power. The media do play a role in 'keeping America [and the rest of us] uninformed', as Donna Demac put it.<sup>1</sup> They also mislead key sections of western populations about their own interests, and persuade some that happiness lies in the pursuit of goods. But this is not the only role of the media in relation to class power. The media play a direct role in the system of governance in which the public have very little say, or are really heard only *in extremis* (e.g. following successful campaigns or demonstrations — i.e. when opposition is effective). The public are in many circumstances mere spectators at what James Connolly in a different context described as the 'carnival of reaction'.

Furthermore, huge swathes of decision making and power-broking occur not just beyond the reach and influence of the public but also outside the purview of public and media debate. For example, the existence of the multimillion dollar/pound lobbying industry is a standing rebuke to those who argue that the media are overwhelmingly important. Ironically, then, a 'Marxist' analysis of the media assumes, along with liberal analyses, that the public have a fundamental legitimating role in liberal democracies, when in fact public consent is only needed to legitimize decision-making in certain circumstances. And even strong, consistent and popular protest can be ignored by the powerful under many circumstances. We need an alternative model of the relationship between media power and class power, on the lines outlined towards the end of this essay.

### MEDIA POWER AND CLASS POWER

I have adapted the title of this essay from an essay written by Stuart Hall in the mid-1980s. It was a short and simplified piece for a book which attempted to make an intervention in media debates in the UK at the time. In it the media are said to be:

*the machinery of representation* in modern societies. What they exercise is the power to represent the world in certain definite ways. And because there are many different and conflicting ways in which meaning about the world can be constructed, it matters profoundly what and who gets represented, *what* and *who* regularly and routinely gets left out; and *how* things, people, events, relationships are represented. What we know of society depends on how things are represented to us and that knowledge in turn informs what we do and what policies we are prepared to accept.<sup>2</sup>

There are four points to be made here. First, what we know of society depends only in part on how things are represented to us, since we also experience the world directly. Second, the world is not only represented to us by the mass media. There is an elision here between representation in general and the mass media in particular. Third, this is a model which assumes fairly powerful media effects. Fourth, note the assumption that the argument stops at the level of the public. But what we are constantly being 'prepared to accept' is often not the same as what the public actually consents to.

Hall acknowledges the importance of ownership and control and of direct and indirect censorship and policing of the media in curtailing diversity. But he argues that these are not by themselves adequate explanations:

[t]here is also the way in which the hierarchy of *power* in the society is reproduced, in the media, as a structure of *access*. Or how the respect for, orientation towards and reproduction of power in the media surfaces as a set of limits and constrictions on knowledge. That is how, without a single Ministerial or MI5 intervention, 'topics' come to be defined, agendas set and frameworks deployed which ultimately define the 'sayable and 'unsayable' in society. The area of what is considered as 'reasonable talk'

about anything, as the appropriate and inappropriate registers, as the intangible boundaries which rule the inclusion or exclusion of certain things, certain points of view, is one of the most powerful of the ways the media's regimes of truth come to be established.<sup>3</sup>

This seems like a mysterious process. How is the structure of access determined? How exactly is it that topics come to be defined? What set of processes establish the boundaries of the sayable? Hall does acknowledge that 'we know far too little' of such processes. He asks: '[h]ow can we pinpoint, in the endless, diverse, flow of "talk" in the media, the precise ways in which the state stands as the "definer of the limits of political reality" for the media'.<sup>4</sup>

### THE IDEOLOGICAL EFFECT?

Perhaps the mysteriousness of this process arises as a result of the simplified content of this particular article. But when we turn to Hall's earlier formulations, the process becomes if anything more mysterious. Here the media are the pre-eminent ideological institutions. They furthermore operate effectively to ensure the reproduction of capital:

[t]he 'definitions of reality', favourable to the dominant class fractions, and institutionalised in the spheres of civil life and the state, come to constitute the primary 'lived reality' as such for the subordinate classes. In this way ideology provides the 'cement' in a social formation.<sup>5</sup>

This assumes on the basis of theory (rather than evidence) that bourgeois ideology actually does indoctrinate the masses. But how does this happen? To understand this we need to look at the theoretical heritage on which Hall's work is based.

In particular we need to note the way in which two bodies of literature were drawn together in an attempt to renovate Marx. First there was contemporary work on language and semiotics. These approaches relied heavily on speculation about the meanings of texts. Drawing on semiotics, structural linguistics and anthropology via Levi-Strauss and Saussure, Hall attempted to posit a homology between Levi Strauss' proposition, that a speaker can use a language without any consciousness of its generative code, and Marx's famous statement that people make history but not in circumstances of their own choosing. The point of this was to show that language and discourse have their own determinate rules and can be seen to operate autonomously from the economic and political levels of society. On this basis Hall could argue for the 'relative autonomy' of the ideological and for an apparently autonomous 'class struggle in language', or for the 'specificity of the cultural'.<sup>6</sup>

Second and perhaps most importantly was the influence of Althusser. Althusser's work on ideology was an attempt to avoid the economism of certain strands of Marxism. Althusser conceived of society as being a complex totality of different 'levels' or 'instances'.<sup>7</sup> Of particular note was the instance of ideology, which had a 'relative autonomy' from the political and the economic. The

economic level of society determined the ideological 'in the last instance'.<sup>8</sup> But if the last instance guarantees ideology for capital, relative autonomy is really not very autonomous at all and only narrowly, if at all, escapes the charge of economism. It certainly does not escape the charge of functionalism, as Hall notes, but his take on Althusser is also vulnerable to the same problem of assuming a function for the media even if it is only a 'systemic tendency'.<sup>9</sup>

Hall's model blurs together, under the heading of ideology, the distinct moments of the propagation and promotion of particular ideologies by the dominant class, the work done on them to transform them into media products, the understanding and response to them of audiences and the impact of this in societal outcomes.<sup>10</sup> It does this by conceiving of language and ideology as nearly indistinguishable and assuming that understanding language is tantamount to 'being spoken' by ideology.<sup>11</sup> Ideology, in other words, is an unconscious process. Hall discusses 'effective communication'<sup>12</sup> as the site of ideology. It is as if it were not possible to step outside of ideology; language itself is ideological regardless of the intentions or views of the speaker.

To put it in its extreme form, a statement like, 'the strike of the Leyland tool-makers today further weakened Britain's economic position' was premised on a whole set of taken for granted propositions about how the economy worked ... for it to win credibility, the whole logic of capitalist production had to be assumed to be true.

So far so good, but the key to this passage is the way that Hall goes on to assume that the statement wins credibility simply by virtue of having been understood:

Much the same could be said about any item in a conventional news bulletin, that, without a whole range of unstated premises or pieces of taken-for-granted knowledge about the world, each descriptive statement would be literally unintelligible. But this 'deep structure' of presuppositions, which made the statement ideologically 'grammatical' [was] rarely made explicit and [was] largely unconscious ... to those who were required to make sense of it.<sup>13</sup>

To win credibility for the proposition that strikes are a 'problem' for the nation (or whatever is the latest piece of capitalist ideology or state propaganda) certainly requires that it is repeated and elaborated on the 'unbiased' TV news as if it were simply a statement of fact; but it also requires that people believe it, which is not guaranteed simply by virtue of it being an intelligible statement. We may understand the message but not accept that it is true, valid or fair. This has been found extensively in critical audience research in recent years.<sup>14</sup> In formulations like Hall's the problem of the reproduction of capital is solved not by direct investigation of the relationship between the media, popular ideology and societal outcomes, but by theoretical fiat.<sup>15</sup>

In later formulations (in the early 1980s) Hall moved towards the Foucauldian

notion of discursive practice, where ideology is said to speak through people without their knowledge:

[w]hen in phrasing a question, in the era of monetarism, a broadcasting interviewer simply takes it for granted that rising wage demands are the sole cause of inflation, he is both 'freely formulating a question' on behalf of the public and establishing a logic which is compatible with the dominant interests in society. And this would be the case regardless of whether or not the particular broadcaster was a lifelong supporter of some left-wing Trotskyist sect ... In the critical paradigm, ideology is a function of discourse and of the logic of social process, rather than an intention of the agent ... The ideology has 'worked' in such a case because the discourse has spoken itself through him/her.<sup>16</sup>

It strains credulity to suggest that left journalists would not and do not notice their contributions to dominant ideologies. The MI5 vetting office in the BBC certainly does not take that view, nor did the management of Fox TV when they sacked two journalists in Tampa, Florida for their reporting of Monsanto.<sup>17</sup> But for Hall, what is important is the mysterious functioning of ideology, which we have imbibed so thoroughly that we no longer notice.

Hall, following Althusser, goes on to discuss ideology as an unconscious process:

[i]mportant modifications to our way of conceiving dominance had to be effected before the idea was rescuable. That notion of dominance which meant the direct imposition of one framework, by overt force or ideological compulsion, on a subordinate class, was not sophisticated enough to match the real complexities of the case. One had also to see that dominance was accomplished at the unconscious as well as the conscious level: to see it as a property of the system of relations involved, rather than the overt and intentional biases of individuals; and to recognise its play in the very activity of regulation and exclusion which functioned through language discourse, before an adequate conception of dominance could be theoretically secured.<sup>18</sup>

If anything, however, the idea of the unconscious as the last guarantor of bourgeois ideology is less sophisticated than the model it seeks to replace, in the sense that it explains everything by a hidden principle. It does not match the complexities of actual societies in which people do continuously and consciously struggle for a better tomorrow. Elegant and sophisticated the theory and the delivery might be, but it does not conform to the available evidence on public belief and popular ideology. As McDonnell and Robins put it:

[i]deology [is] ... not a factor of the unconscious as Althusser maintains. This latter position would ... make class consciousness impossible ... Ideology does not permeate people's minds: the working class does not find it impossible to unmask the ideological mystifications of capitalist society.

For ideology is far from watertight; it requires an incessant struggle by the capitalist class to maintain its precarious validity. A validity that is constantly called into question, not in a separate sphere of ideological struggle, but throughout the daily struggles in the workplace, the community etc.<sup>19</sup>

This is a much more adequate position and lets us theorize the role of state and corporate information management, censorship and secrecy in the reproduction of inequality. It lets us see the importance not of the 'system of relations' but of concrete actions by concrete institutions and individuals in concrete historical circumstances not of their choosing. What else is the whole machinery of state and corporate public relations (together with confidentiality, intimidation, the use of the law etc) but a massive daily attempt to 'noble' the media and 'indoctrinate' the people? The capitalist class is perfectly aware of the need to brief, spin, dissemble and lie.

### GRAMSCI TO THE RESCUE?

Hall's greatest achievement, so far as many commentators are concerned, was his use of the concept of hegemony to avoid the disabling reductionism and functionalism of Althusserianism. Hegemony meant that consent was important and that the class struggle in language was or could be a two-sided affair. Hall noted that a problem with Althusser's work was that it was difficult to see how anything but the dominant ideology could ever be reproduced.<sup>20</sup> Volosinov and particularly Gramsci were deployed to show that there can be a class struggle in language. This appeared to mean that intelligibility was not guaranteed and could be ruptured by oppositional codes or subordinate meaning systems. There was not always 'an achieved system of equivalence between language and reality'.<sup>21</sup> This gave the possibility of a struggle for hegemony in language. This struggle was conceived as emanating from within the technical aspects of signs and language: there were 'mechanisms within signs and language which made the "struggle" possible'.<sup>22</sup> These mechanisms included the multi-acculturality of a discourse, or the fact that some words can mean more than one thing or can be interpreted differently. Against this we can say that the struggle over language is made possible not by the alleged technical features of language, but by the material facts of conflicting power and interests. Instead of seeing challenges to hegemony as emerging from separate discourses, we need to see them as emanating from experience, material and ideal interests, and struggles in which ideology and language play a role that we can only sensibly grasp in terms of totality. The example Hall gives is the conflict over the term 'Black' as a term of abuse, or as a positive sign of beauty and empowerment. But it is the fact of racist discrimination and violence, on the one hand, and the struggle for self determination and self respect, on the other, which make this conflict possible, not the technical features of language. These conditions form the material circumstances in which people 'become conscious of conflict and fight it out', as Marx put it.

Hall discusses the level of the discursive as if it were a separate domain.

Gramsci's notion of the war of position is transposed from political and class struggles to the 'field of discourse'. As a result Hall holds that 'now we have to talk about texts that are never closed, about discursive systems that are not unified but the product of articulation and always contradictory; about the possibilities of transcoding and decoding the dominant definitions in play'.<sup>23</sup> But we only have to talk in this way if we swallow all of this elegant theoretical edifice. Included in the bargain is the separation and elevation of discourse, as opposed to the importance of the reproduction of the means of survival. A materialist view holds rather that language is a product of human culture and is a part of the social relations of production of a 'whole way of life'. It is a tool used by humans to communicate and negotiate, even if we do not understand the rules which generate it. To see the level of the discursive as a separate level is to privilege language over experience, consciousness, and material and biological reality. The problem is that this is not how 'discourse' functions. Discourses, or ideologies (as Hall seems increasingly unwilling to call them) arise out of the material and ideal interests of real people. There is no abstract struggle over language, only a struggle over power and resources of which ideological battles form part. There is no 'class struggle in language' which is separate and distinct from the class struggle over resources and the organization of society. Changing the word is not changing the world, as Sivanandan memorably put it.<sup>24</sup>

The notion that it was ideology that pre-eminently explained the reproduction of capital foundered on the rock of all sorts of evidence that people were able to understand the world (and the word). On the part of some formerly radical theorists, this led to some confusion about the possibilities of using concepts such as ideology and to a renewed pluralist emphasis on the indeterminacy of power.<sup>25</sup> The narrow focus on the media, or on the moment of decoding or interpretation, meant that the wider picture of the assault on social democracy seemed simply to vanish from the academic agenda of media studies.<sup>26</sup>

### BACK TO MARX

As a potential way out of some of these problems I want to try and advance an alternative approach by going back to Marx and briefly re-examining his classic formulations about the relations between economics, power and ideas. There are three main points I want to make here. The first relates to the misunderstanding of the notion of the social relations of production, the second to the base-superstructure metaphor, which has often been interpreted as indicating that the ownership of the means of production endows the capitalist class with fantastic powers of persuasion, and the third relates to the notion of ruling ideas.

1. In one of the most famous passages on the question of ideology Marx argued that:

[i]n the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a given stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production

constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men which determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness.<sup>27</sup>

It is fairly clear from this passage that the 'social relations of production' are not simply a set of mechanistic 'economic' processes. They are a set of social processes which are determined by the need to reproduce the material basis of life and the forces of production. Such social processes act on the 'forces of production' and shape them in determinate, if historically contingent, ways. Social relations are profoundly ideological and are the real foundation on which capitalist self-interest — and opposition to it — are built. In other words, ideology is constitutive of the social relations of production. Further, ideology, and how people become conscious of their world, affects how those struggles are fought out and the resulting changes in both the forces of production and the social relations surrounding them. Ideology is not simply a reflection of the level of the economic, it is part of the means by which interests are welded to action and by which certain actions or states of affairs are justified and legitimated.

We should not reduce ideology to the system or structure of relations, but rather see the conscious (if ideological) actions of human beings as constitutive of the social totality and as causative agents in historical processes. This approach necessitates first and foremost empirical research to ascertain how human activities constitute history. It also means that we see the determinate actions of real human beings as being consequential for the reproduction of capital. Rather than seek power in some mysterious unobservable process of ideological interpellation or articulation, or simply in understanding language, we must seek it in the actions of real people in the (would-be) secret (but sometimes discoverable) low conspiracies which are a continuous and inevitable part of capitalist rule; in censorship, spin, lobbying, public relations, marketing and advertising;<sup>28</sup> in the institutions of 'disinformation and distraction' as Raymond Williams put it.<sup>29</sup> These, in the context of economic power and resources, are some of the key means by which capitalism is reproduced, and we treat them as mere epiphenomena of the real, hidden nature of ideology at our peril.

2. The base/superstructure metaphor is rather unpopular these days. Critics have suggested that it reduces ideas and ideologies to the economic, whether in the first or last instance. And to be sure, in some hands it does. But following Terry Eagleton,<sup>30</sup> I would like to enter a few words for the defence.

Speaking crudely there were two interpretations of the base-superstructure metaphor. One was the vulgar Marxist interpretation which saw the media simply as an agency of class control and the population as brainwashed (or subject to 'ideological effects' in Hall's more sophisticated versions). The second was that associated with Raymond Williams, who suggested that we see the economic (the ownership of the means of mental production) as setting limits on what could



appear in the media.<sup>31</sup> This does seem to provide a reasonable description of much media behaviour. We could query it on the grounds that the imperative to make money sometimes pulls against the supposed imperative to support the system. Or we might query it on the issue of popular ideology, since it is arguably not that case that economic power determines popular ideology, at least not in a simple sense. But this again betrays a misunderstanding about the sources of power and experience in society. The position advanced here is that ideas come from and indeed are inseparable from interests. Accounts of the world and evaluations of it emerge from material experience as well as from the media and other symbolic systems. So there is every reason to suppose that there will always be sources of opposition to capitalism.

And who could deny that material factors have a determining role in moving culture in particular directions? To pick an example from California, which comes to hand as I write, it is apparent that the development of new forces of production in Silicon Valley has involved a set of changing social relations of production. Capital has been poured into the development of dot.com companies in the latter half of the 1990s (prior to the transformation from dot.com to dot.gone as the NASDAQ index plummeted). This made a small number of relatively young people very rich very fast. One consequence of this has been an alleged deleterious effect on social solidarity in some neighbourhoods in the Bay area. The *San Francisco Chronicle* reports:

[i]t was the new millionaires, made rich by cashing in their abundant stock options, that changed the playing field here. They thought nothing of bidding up houses several hundreds of thousands of dollars over the asking price or paying cash for \$60,000 Mercedes-Benzes ... For many, the irrationality of it all came at a price: skyrocketing housing costs, maddening traffic jams, shortages of skilled labor and perhaps most frustrating, a diminished sense of community. The nouveau riche were moving into old neighbourhoods, tearing down vintage homes, building bigger ones and erecting giant fences.<sup>32</sup>

Now we might say that the 'culture' of the new rich and how they behave is not 'determined' in a mechanistic sense by the social relations of production. It was of course possible for the new rich to have given all their money away to anti-globalization protesters or for them to rip off the firms in which they work to fund the activities of revolutionary writers. The latter course was taken by Friedrich Engels at his family firm as a means of supporting Karl Marx.<sup>33</sup> But this has not happened — as far as we know — widely in the Bay area. Instead they put up fences and further dehumanized 'community'. Why must we say that this was simply a cultural matter with no deterministic link to the social relations of production? To say that the fences were built as part of a new cultural formation simply begs the question of what caused the culture to change. It seems more adequate to say that this was a 'determinate' outcome of the change in the social relations of production. Without wanting to reduce everything to such clear cut

causation, it is clearly imperative to understand the social and material genesis of ideas and values and how these then ripple through the social fabric, provoking approval, desire, opprobrium or opposition. We cannot explain phenomena such as this without a model in which the social relations of production 'condition', 'determine' or 'influence' how people live in the world and relate to each other.

3. But the extent to which particular ideologies or ideas require to be believed (and by how many people) for the system to function is not a straightforward affair. The key question was how far does the ownership of capital allow the capitalist class to dominate the thinking of subordinated classes? According to Marx and Engels:

[t]he ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling *material* force of society, 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 ... The individuals composing the ruling class possess among other things consciousness, and therefore think. Insofar, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it is self evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule also as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch.<sup>34</sup>

The widespread interpretation of this is that those who own the means of production dominate the production of ideas, with the result that their ideas are adopted by the masses, thus assuring capitalist rule. This is the clear assumption in the work of Stuart Hall, quoted at the beginning of this essay.<sup>35</sup> But there is not much in the passage from Marx and Engels to encourage this interpretation. One way to pose this is to ask what a ruling intellectual force might be? Is it a set of ideas with which everyone agrees, or at least with which the mass of the (working class) population agrees? Or is it a set of ideas that rule because they are the most powerful in the society, or because they are the operating assumptions of the power structure, without necessarily commanding widespread consent?

If we assume that it is the first of these it is not very difficult to slip into a rather condescending view of the proletariat as being 'subject' to ideology. But suppose we take the second definition. It does not assume that a majority of the population agrees with or accepts every piece of bourgeois ideology. But then the question arises, if such ideas are not accepted how do they rule? To assume that capitalist societies are so transparently responsive to popular belief and opinion is to assume a rather pluralist version of the theory of democracy. (In fact Hall is explicit about this, observing that the advantage of pluralism is that it has a firm grasp of the place of consent in the social order.<sup>36</sup>) But liberal capitalist democracies are founded on consent of an extremely limited and provisional sort.

## DEMOCRACY

What does liberal democracy entail? Does it entail the government of the people, for the people and by the people? Or does it entail simply voting once every four or five years? Assuming for a moment that the will of the people in terms of votes cast is respected in Western countries,<sup>37</sup> we can probably agree that the practice of democracy is somewhere between these two poles. There are occasions, albeit rare, when popular pressure forces concessions — from the defeat of the Poll Tax in the UK to the anti-WTO protest in Seattle. But overall the exercise of power in society does not seem to bow easily to public opinion or the popular will — let alone to principles of justice and equality. While the media have a central role to play here, it also seems to be the case that much of the decision-making in society occurs elsewhere, out of sight of the population and sometimes of the media too. It is a task of social activism to illuminate such processes and bring them to wider attention and sometimes that task is successfully accomplished. But we should be aware that class and corporate power occur ‘behind our backs’ in the sense that we do not know about them, rather than in the sense that we unconsciously consent to them via the mysterious mechanism of ideology. One neat way to sum this up is with Alex Carey’s aphorism: ‘[t]he twentieth century has been characterised by three developments of great political importance: the growth of democracy, the growth of corporate power, and the growth of corporate propaganda as a means of protecting corporate power against democracy.’<sup>38</sup>

Empirically this means widening the focus of media and cultural studies to examine the interaction of the symbolic and the material throughout society and to examine the communicative processes which accompany and make possible the operation of power. This means more than studying the media as texts or as institutions. It means studying their whole range of interactions with the rest of the society. I would highlight two areas where this is especially important. The first of these is the role of corporations, states and activists in pursuing strategies for power and influence and the role that the media do (or do not) play in these. This means examining the intentions of actors and the planning and execution of strategies. Much of this will involve public relations and lobbying consultancies and these need to be a serious object of attention in media and cultural studies (and not just in terms of cultural industries). A second area is the question of the ‘success’ or failure of strategies. This is a much more complex area, which we might group under the heading of ‘reproduction’. It involves questions about the role of the media in informing/influencing public opinion and the variety of questions associated with the notion of the ‘active audience’. However, this notion has severe limitations, not least because it has not led on to questions intrinsic to the notion of reproduction, such as the question of outcomes. What happens as a consequence of popular belief or disbelief, or of ‘negotiated’ or ‘oppositional’ ‘readings’ of texts (to use the inadequate language derived via Hall from the pluralist Frank Parkin)? And what difference does this make to class power? We need to discuss these points under the specific heading of power in society, rather than in terms of media power alone.

## CORPORATE POWER AND THE MEDIA

It is clear enough that corporations regularly get a good deal from the mainstream media in the UK (and even more so in the US). But, there are occasions on which essentially anti-corporate themes become major running news stories. In the UK, food safety issues such as Salmonella and BSE,<sup>39</sup> and the campaign against 'fat cats' in the mid-1990s, are good examples.<sup>40</sup>

It is not that the coverage has always been progressive, although it sometimes has been, but that the stories' news values entail a concern for the 'public' as victims of state or corporate power, greed and arrogance. (It also helps that the corporations in question are not media corporations.) In such circumstances radical and liberal pressure groups can help to make the story run and can get some of their message across. Some recent writers describe this observation as a 'pluralist point', to which I would say the following: definitional power is not identical to political and economic power. It is important that we look beyond the front pages of the tabloids and the nightly news headlines to the issue of what happens as a result. In the examples of food safety, there can be little doubt, given the evidence of slump in the market for eggs, cheese and beef, that the radical view was widely shared by the public. Further evidence comes in the form of opinion poll and focus group research carried out by government and academic researchers,<sup>41</sup> but the key question then is what happens as a result of this.

For a long time at the level of government, nothing beyond cosmetic changes occurred. Indeed after the 1988 salmonella scare in the UK public health interests were marginalized in policy-making, thus contributing to the appalling treatment of the issue of BSE.<sup>42</sup>

Then under the Conservatives came an admission that BSE-infected meat was the 'most likely' cause of human deaths from CJD. Under New Labour this was followed by the BSE inquiry, and a Food Standards Agency — one of the key demands of the food activists from the late 1980s — was established. Both of these developments were 'nobbled' — the BSE inquiry by official spin, the Food Safety Agency by its limited powers and the fact that its head was a natural scientist unsympathetic to the critique of science and its increasingly close relationship with corporate power and money. There were no moves to reverse the deregulation which was at the root of the problems and very little 'political demand' (i.e. demand in policy circles as opposed to amongst the public) for change. So in terms of outcomes, even if we regard the media as having been on the side of the angels in this case — which would be a massive distortion — this does not lead us in a pluralist direction. The media may sometimes be the only ally that democrats and socialists have, given the foreshortened avenues for democratic change in current conditions, but they are not necessarily a powerful ally.

In what has been described as the information age, it is obvious that capitalism as a system, and corporations as institutions, require large amounts of information to function. Indeed the development of information technology has been an essential requirement for capital to increase its own mobility in the past couple of decades.<sup>43</sup> Corporations need market data, data on their customers and poten-

tial customers, information on political movements and regulatory regimes. Some of this information comes from the media. But they also need to communicate to function. They need to debate internally and amongst their competitors in the same or differing industries. And they need to discuss issues with politicians and decision-makers. Much of this information and communication is private, confidential or secret. Some is public in a very limited sense and some is public and on view in the mainstream media, although it is often tucked away on the margins of the business pages. In the following section I outline four ways in which corporate and class power operate beyond the reach of the popular will.

## CORPORATE AND CLASS POWER BEYOND THE MEDIA

### *1. Lobbying*

In recent years the power of the legislature has declined while lobbying and other covert means of influencing policy have massively expanded — from the hard money/soft money debate in the US to the ‘cash for questions’ and other lobbying scandals in the UK.<sup>44</sup> Although there is some measure of transparency in terms of the regulation of lobbying in the US, lobbying itself is an almost completely covert business. It trades influence for cash and generally does not attempt to influence public opinion. In its day-to-day activities it is beyond the reach of public debate. It is an organized conspiracy against democracy in the sense that private interests try to influence legislation and decision-making directly, rather than democratically or by means of debate. The role of the media here is negligible, with one exception. That is when lobbying misdeeds are exposed in the media. This does not happen nearly regularly enough, but the role of the media is sometimes to undermine this or that piece of corporate self-interest. Except in such cases, much decision-making in both the US and UK goes on in secret away from the prying eyes of the media and with precious little popular involvement. This is not an insignificant point given the very large sums of money and resources that the rich have managed to expropriate from the poor (especially in the US and UK) in the last couple of decades, through redistributive tax, cutting social spending and privatizing public assets.

Two examples might be worthwhile. The corporate campaign to open up China to global capital required that the US Congress pass the China Trade Bill. According to Public Citizen’s Global Trade Watch at least \$113.1 million was spent lobbying on this bill alone.<sup>45</sup>

Yet this is not part of the agenda of mainstream news or of widespread public debate. In this example power is exercised away from the media rather than by the media. Secondly, let us take the example of the negotiations over the Free Trade Area of the Americas (FTAA), a major and audacious attempt to abolish the minimal democratic controls that still exist over the abuses of big money throughout North and South America. There is very little discussion of this in the mainstream media and the public are kept in almost total ignorance.<sup>46</sup>

To be sure, a lot more people may have heard of it after the protests against it in Quebec in April 2001, but one indication of where power resides is that the

text of the agreement was kept secret by the state and corporate personnel negotiating it. 'Consumers' are almost completely ignorant of all such debates. This does not suggest that they are dupes of the system or that they have been ideologically spoken — it is just that they don't know.

As the system of global 'governance' emerges the global public becomes more and more disenfranchised and powerless, denied basic information with which to make up its mind. The trend toward global 'governance' has been boosted by the progressive dilution of democratic controls on capital as corporations have increasingly sought to buy their way into the political process. There has been a flurry of books across the Anglophone world with very similar titles on this 'corporate takeover' and on the 'sleaze' and 'scandals' which go with it.<sup>47</sup> These developments suggest a weakening of democratic controls. Do they also suggest that the role of the media as some form of check or balance within the system is becoming less important? On the contrary, media agendas are increasingly being set by corporate priorities to maximize profits.<sup>48</sup>

### *2. Private debates in public*

There is also a sense in which much of what appears in even mainstream newspapers is not really for the bulk of the audience who consume the news. Private debates among the powerful can surface in the media as part of a struggle within the state apparatus or corporations, such as the struggle between the Special Branch of the Metropolitan police and the intelligence agency MI5 over anti-terrorist operations in Britain,<sup>49</sup> or the 'dirty tricks' battle between British Airways and Virgin Atlantic,<sup>50</sup> or a thousand other pieces of intrigue and power struggle. We can sometimes listen in if we are able to read between the lines, but there are few ways in which we can be part of the conversation.

### *3. Withstanding hostile coverage*

The question is not 'is there definitional advantage?', but 'what difference does definitional disadvantage make?' When does it matter if the media are hostile? The issue of 'sleaze' in the UK did mean the end of ministerial careers and to some extent the unpopularity of the Tories and there was a field day on 'fat cats', as the bosses of the privatized utilities were dubbed. But this did not necessarily cause much angst in the business world — or at least it did not significantly materially alter board room pay rates which continued to rise, nor (beyond some populist rhetoric) did it result in any significant move by the Labour Government against boardroom pay rises or corporate power. Media coverage hostile to corporate interests often has little impact.

### *4. Ignoring public opinion, opposition and protest*

There is a further stage beyond hostile coverage, which is the question of public opinion and action. Corporate and state decision-makers are able to ignore popular opinion and protest even when there is widespread support for or against a particular decision. Popular protest too can be resisted. In the UK the protests against the Poll Tax were ignored for a long time and it was only when the tax

threatened to split the Conservative Party that it was removed. Throughout the counterinsurgency campaign in Northern Ireland virtually every opinion poll showed that the public was in favour of British military disengagement, yet no mainstream party ever attempted to carry through the will of the people on this issue.<sup>51</sup> In the UK and the US large sections of the population oppose corporate pollution and approve of public funding for everything from power and transport to health and education, yet governments in both states move further towards the market in their social and economic policy. The protests in Seattle 'shut down' the WTO talks, but they didn't stop the organization functioning and there is little sign of it fundamentally changing its course.

### CONCLUSION

All this is only to say that change is hard to achieve. It has to be struggled for in language and in action. Changing the word is not changing the world. But this essay has also tried to draw attention to the fact that capitalism reproduces itself by means not just of ideology, but by a myriad of social processes in which ideology is ever-present, but only as part of a wider struggle for power and resources.

So what is the role of the media in the reproduction of class power? The media do have a role in promoting dominant ideologies and in spreading them variably amongst sections of the population. The media can on occasion help to convince elements of the public of states of affairs and evaluations of them which are thoroughly ideological, even where this is not in their own interests. But the media also have a direct role which is arguably as important for the reproduction of inequality as ideological power over the masses. Furthermore, there is a variety of mechanisms and practices in society, by which power is exercised and resources distributed, in which the media have a minimal role. Lobbying is an obvious example. Of course ideology and communication are ever attendant on such processes.

Consent is not simply an ideological process, but interacts with material and ideal interests, even though ideology can affect the perception of interests. Consent, as in post-1945 Britain for instance, was gained not only by ideology but by real compromises such as the nationalization of key industries and the creation of the welfare state. Dependence on ideology as a privileged explanatory principle severs the connection between interests and ideas and neglects the importance of material interests in conditioning and creating ideas.

Secrecy, censorship and information management are all daily conspiracies against democracy. The way in which questions are ruled in and out are not mysterious processes but eminently researchable. Such research must not only examine media ownership, institutions and ideology, as much valuable work has, but also the real activities and strategies of corporations and states which are incessantly being planned and deployed. I am speaking of course of the promotional and information management activities of governments and corporations and of their secretive and covert lobbying and espionage activities. These are not

distracting epiphenomena the state and capital could do without, but some of the key ways in which our system works.

Some people under some circumstances believe some things that are against their own interests and in the interests of the powerful. But the working classes do not believe every bit of bourgeois propaganda. Nor is it necessary for them to do so for capitalism to survive — or more accurately, if we take the current historical epoch, to go from strength to strength. There is no straightforward and automatic relationship between ideology and public consciousness. Ideology has been overplayed as an explanation of the reproduction of class and other divisions. ‘Ruling ideas’ rule by a variety of mechanisms. These include media propaganda and the systematic distortions of ideology which do successfully fool some of the people some of the time, but not all of us all of the time.

## NOTES

Thanks to Barbara Epstein and Steve Marriott.

- 1 Donna Demac, *Keeping America Uninformed: Government Secrecy in the 1980s*, New York: W. W. Norton, 1984.
- 2 Stuart Hall, ‘Media power and class power’, in J. Curran *et al.*, eds., *Bending Reality: The State of the Media*, London: Pluto, 1986, p. 9. Note the Foucauldian language which Hall had adopted by the mid-1980s.
- 3 Hall, ‘Media Power’, p.12
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Stuart Hall, ‘Culture, the media and the ideological effect’, in J. Curran, M. Gurevitch and J. Woollacott, eds., *Mass Communication and Society*, London: Edward Arnold, 1977, p. 333.
- 6 Note how this severely tests the ‘last instance’ part of the formulation and threatens to let the cultural float free of all determination. For a critique of this position see Dan Schiller, *Theorizing Communication: A History*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.
- 7 See Louis Althusser, *For Marx*, London: Allen Lane, 1969, and *Lenin and Philosophy and other essays*, London: New Left Books, 1971.
- 8 Although the phrase was apparently first coined by Engels. See Leszek Kolakowski, ‘Althusser’s Marx’, in R. Miliband, and J. Saville, eds., *The Socialist Register 1971*, London: The Merlin Press, 1971.
- 9 Hall, ‘Culture, the media and the ideological effect’, p. 346.
- 10 See David Miller, ‘Dominant Ideologies and Media Power: The Case of Northern Ireland’, in M. Kelly and B. O’Connor, eds., *Media Audiences in Ireland*, Dublin: University College Dublin Press, 1997.
- 11 In a caveat Hall notes that language and ideology are not the same thing: ‘[a]n analytic distinction needed to be maintained’. But it is hard to see much of a gap between the concepts since he goes on to note the close relationship between understanding language and being spoken by ideology:



- 'one cannot learn a language without learning something of its current ideological inflections' (Stuart Hall, 'The rediscovery of "ideology": return of the repressed in media studies', in M. Gurevitch *et al.*, eds., *Culture, Society and the Media*, London: Methuen, 1983, p. 80). Once again this blurs together learning something, about which we might suspend judgement, with being 'spoken' by ideology.
- 12 Hall, 'Culture, the media and the ideological effect', p. 344; see also Stuart Hall, 'The "Structured Communication" of Events', Paper for Obstacles to Communication Symposium, UNESCO, *University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies Stencilled Occasional Papers*, Birmingham: CCCS, 1973.; Stuart Hall, 'Encoding/decoding', in S. Hall, D. Hobson, A. Lowe and P. Willis, eds., *Culture, Media, Language*, London: Hutchinson, 1980.
  - 13 Hall, 'Rediscovery', p. 74.
  - 14 See for example John Corner, 'Meaning, genre and context: the problematics of public knowledge in the new audience studies', in J. Curran and M. Gurevitch, eds., *Mass Media and Society*, London: Edward Arnold, 1991; J. Kitzinger, 'A Sociology of Media Power: key issues in audience research', in G. Philo, ed., *Message Received*, London: Longman, 1999; David Miller, *Don't Mention the War: Northern Ireland, Propaganda and the Media*, London: Pluto, 1994.
  - 15 See Kevin McDonnell and Kevin Robins, 'Marxist Cultural Theory: the Althusserian Smokescreen', in S. Clarke *et al.*, *One-Dimensional Marxism: Althusser and the Politics of Culture*, London: Allison and Busby, 1980, pp. 160-1.
  - 16 Hall 'Rediscovery', p. 88.
  - 17 See <http://www.foxgbhsuit.com>.
  - 18 Hall, 'Rediscovery', p. 88. This sits nicely with the appropriation of Lacanian psychoanalysis by Althusserians in the 1970s around the journal *Screen*, and later by Hall himself. The Lacanians saw the entry into consciousness as being the entry into ideology, via the mirror phase or the Oedipus complex. As late as 1996 Hall was hailing the importance of the 'suturing of the psychic and the discursive' (Stuart Hall, 'Introduction: Who Needs "Identity"', in S. Hall, and P. du Gay, eds., *Questions of Cultural Identity*, London: Sage, p. 16. For a critique of this position see Greg Philo and David Miller, *Market Killing*, London: Longman, 2001).
  - 19 McDonnell and Robins, 'Marxist Cultural Theory', pp. 167-8.
  - 20 In response to Thompson's *The Poverty of Theory*, Hall went furthest along the road of disavowing certain Althusserian positions, but this seems only to have had a limited effect on the extent to which the Althusserian 'problematic' continued to inform his thinking on ideology and media power. See Stuart Hall, 'In defence of theory', in Raphael Samuel, ed., *People's History and Socialist Theory*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980.
  - 21 Hall, 'Rediscovery', p. 78.

- 22 Ibid.
- 23 Stuart Hall, 'Ideology and Communication Theory', in B. Dervin, L. Grossberg, B. O'Keefe, and E. Wartella, eds., *Rethinking Communication: Vol I Paradigm Issues*, Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage 1989, p. 51.
- 24 Ambalavaner Sivanandan, *Communities of Resistance: Writings on Black Struggles for Socialism*, London: Verso, 1990, p. 49.
- 25 For critiques, see Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of postmodernism*, Oxford: Blackwell, 1996; and Greg Philo and David Miller *Market Killing*, London: Longman, 2001.
- 26 Although it should be acknowledged that Hall and his colleagues had produced a pioneering account of such questions in *Policing the Crisis* (London: Macmillan, 1978). In addition Hall did produce a wide range of political writings on Thatcherism, collected in his books, edited with Martin Jacques, *The Politics of Thatcherism* (London: Lawrence and Wishart in association with *Marxism Today*, 1983) and *New Times*, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1989). Unlike *Policing the Crisis*, however, these writings were not based on original empirical research, and much of the political analysis derived from the theoretical agenda being described here. This work encouraged the left to abandon much of its radical platform and embrace a kind of left mirror image of Thatcherism in order to build a new counter-hegemony. For critiques see David Harris, *From Class Struggle to the Politics of Pleasure*, London: Routledge, 1992; M. Rustin, 'The Politics of Post-Fordism and the Trouble with "New Times"', *New Left Review*, 175, 1989. This trajectory also fitted well with those tendencies which resulted in the virtual disappearance of the concept of class across academia. See Graham Murdock, 'Reconstructing the ruined tower: Contemporary Communications and Questions of Class', in M. Gurevitch and J. Curran, eds., *Mass Media and Society*, 3rd Ed. London: Edward Arnold, 2000.
- 27 Karl Marx, 'A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy', in *Early Writings*, Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1975, p. 425.
- 28 D. Miller and W. Dinan, 'The rise of the PR industry in Britain 1979-1998', *European Journal of Communication*, 15(1), January 2000; J. Stauber and S. Rampton, *Toxic Sludge is Good for You: Lies, Damn Lies and the Public Relations Industry*, Monroe, Maine: Common Courage, 1995.
- 29 Raymond Williams, *Towards 2000*, London: Penguin, 1985, p. 268.
- 30 Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction*, London: Verso, 1991, p. 82.
- 31 Raymond Williams, *Problems in Materialism and Culture*, London: Verso, 1980.
- 32 D. Walsh and S. Finz, 'Bay Area gloaters see upside in dot-com downturn', *San Francisco Chronicle*, Sunday 13 May 2001, pp. A1+A17.
- 33 Francis Wheen, *Karl Marx: a life*, London and New York: W. W. Norton, 2000.
- 34 Karl Marx, and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, New York: International Publishers, 1947, p. 39. The example that Marx gives of the

- doctrine of the separation of powers as the dominant idea which is expressed as an 'eternal law' is also compatible with this interpretation. This is what is expressed in the 'dominant' ideology, but in order to rule it may not be necessary for it to be shared by the vast bulk of the population. This is particularly the case if we hold a weak model of hegemony where dominance need only be secured by the absence of effective opposition. See Ralph Miliband, 'Counter-hegemonic struggles', in *The Socialist Register 1990*, London: The Merlin Press.
- 35 To be fair it is not only 'Marxists' influenced by Althusser who have endorsed this interpretation.
  - 36 Hall, 'Rediscovery', p.85
  - 37 Which is somewhat adrift from practice, as the US election of George W. Bush in 2000 showed.
  - 38 Alex Carey, *Taking the Risk out of Democracy: Corporate Propaganda versus Freedom and Liberty*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1995, p. 18.
  - 39 David Miller, 'Risk, Science and Policy: BSE, definitional struggles, information management and the media', *Social Science and Medicine* special edition 'Science speaks to policy', Vol. 49, 1999; David Miller and Jacquie Reilly, 'Making an Issue of Food Safety: The media, pressure groups and the public sphere', in Donna Maurer and Jeffrey Sobal, eds., *Eating Agendas: Food, Eating and Nutrition as Social Problems*, New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1995.
  - 40 Lewis Bastion, *Sleaze: the State of Britain*, London: Channel Four Books, 2000; Ed Vulliamy and David Leigh, *Sleaze*, London: Fourth Estate, 1997.
  - 41 Sally Macintyre, Jacquie Reilly, David Miller and John Eldridge, 'Food Choice, Food Scares and Health: The Role of the Media', in Murcott A., ed., *The Nation's Diet*, London: Addison Wesley Longman, 1998.
  - 42 See Miller, 'Risk'.
  - 43 See the various contributions in R. Babe, ed., *Information and Communication in Economics*, Boston, Dordrecht, London: Kluwer Academic Publishers, 1994.
  - 44 Elizabeth Drew, *The Corruption of American Politics: What went wrong and why*, Woodstock, NY: Overlook Press, 2000; Mark Hollingsworth, *MPs for Hire: The secret world of political lobbying*, London: Bloomsbury, 1991; Charles Lewis and the Center for Public Integrity, *The Buying of Congress: How special interests have stolen your right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness*, New York: Avon Books, 1998.
  - 45 P. Woodall, L. Wallach, J. Roach, and K. Burnham, *Purchasing Power: The Corporate-White House alliance to pass the China Trade Bill over the will of the American people*, Washington, DC: Public Citizen's Global Trade Watch.
  - 46 See <http://www.ifg.org>.
  - 47 C. Derber, *Corporation Nation: How corporations are taking over our lives and what we can do about it*, New York: St Martins Press, 1998; James Lull, and

- Stephen Hinerman, eds., *Media Scandals*, London: Polity, 1997; George Monbiot, *Captive State: The Corporate Takeover of Britain*, London: Macmillan, 2000; Rod Tiffen, *Scandals: Media, Politics and Corruption in Contemporary Australia*, Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1999; John B. Thompson, *Political Scandals*, Cambridge: Polity, 2000.
- 48 Robert McChesney, *Rich Media, Poor Democracy*, rev. ed., New York: The New Press, 2000; D. Underwood, *When MBA's rule the newsroom*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.
- 49 See Miller, 'Primary Definition'.
- 50 Martin Gregory, *Dirty Tricks: British Airways' secret war against Virgin Atlantic*, rev. ed. London: Warner Books, 1996.
- 51 See Miller, *Don't Mention the War*.