Discourse and Power

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Abstract

The paper argues for the possibility of reworking the concept of ideology in such a way as to depend neither on a problematic of truth and error, nor on a division of the world into two parts one of which is more real than the other, nor on an expressive relation of subjects to meaning. The political force of the concept can be retained if ideology is thought as a provisional state of discourse (a function of its appropriation and use) rather than as a content or an inherent structure. Any discursive system produces a particular configuration of subject-positions which are the conditions of entry of individuals into discourse; but these acquire political significance only through the (historically variable) codification of discourse in terms of a play of relations of power, and the positions available can be refused or undermined. Some implications of this argument for models of the social and for discourse theory are discussed.

In this paper I seek to outline a semiotic definition of the concept of ideology. Given the force of the arguments against the current usage of the term, it seems to me a gamble as to whether this redefinition is possible.

This is so in the first place because the concept is traditionally defined within a relation between truth and error, as the designation of error. The theorization of error or false consciousness is not possible without establishing a position of authority which would be external to the ideological; but to the extent that this position claims an epistemological and so a political authority, it reveals itself to be complicitous with power, with the will to knowledge which is a form of the will to power. Such a criticism is not in itself conclusive, since it can itself be shown to derive from the same claim to mastery, and because it naively supposes the possibility of an exemption from the field of power. It is a criticism which fails to account for its own conditions of possibility. Nevertheless it has the effect of denying the universality of that standard of rationality that Marxism has ascribed to itself and against which deviation is measured, and of enforcing the paradox that

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the critique of ideology must itself be relativized to the position of power from which it is enunciated.

In the second place, the concept of ideology is predicated upon a distinction between the symbolic and the real, and hence an exclusion of the symbolic from the real. However much the 'last instance' is, in classical Marxism, mediated and deferred, its eventual finality relegates the symbolic to an epiphenomenal status. The problem that is posed is that of the working through of a further paradox, in which the real would be thought not as substance but as a texture of symbolic systems, and the symbolic would be thought as having a real effectivity. There are additional problems here which have to do with the generality and inclusiveness of the concept of the symbolic, and with the postulation of a single general form of causality.

In the third place, the concept of ideology seems necessarily to presuppose a relation between knowledge and a knowing subject. The relation may apply at the level of individuals, but is more generally a relation at the level of social class. In the simplest formulation, class is thought as an expressive unity; more complex formulations for the most part merely qualify this model. In particular, it is not clear that the concepts of hegemony and of the 'relative autonomy' of ideology do not repeat the metaphysical framework that defines the orthodox theorization of ideology.

These questions cannot properly be answered in abstraction from particular textual constructions of the category of ideology; so I have chosen to examine briefly one particularly lucid account, in one of the great texts of classical Marxism, of the working of ideology. This account is Engels' reading of the city of Manchester, a reading which is doubly instructive: first, in that the semiotic system Engels reads is at once 'superstructural' and directly functional, and second, in that Engels' reading can be understood in terms of quite contradictory methodologies.


text continues...

Manchester in 1844 is built in such a way that 'a person may live in it for years, and go in and out daily, without coming into contact with a working-people's quarter or even with workers,' on condition that he is not seeking to know the structure of the city, 'so long as he confines himself to his business or to pleasure walks' (Engels, 1975: 347–48). This restriction of knowledge is made possible above all by the fact that 'the working-people's quarters are sharply separated from the sections of the city reserved for the middle class' (348).
This quasi-universal ‘person’ (part of the text’s political ambiguity lies in the status of its inscribed reader) is then specified as ‘the members of the money aristocracy,’ who can take the shortest road through the middle of all the labouring districts to their places of business, without ever seeing that they are in the midst of the grimy misery that lurks to the right and the left. For the thoroughfares leading from the Exchange in all directions out of the city are lined, on both sides, with an almost unbroken series of shops, and so are kept in the hands of the middle and lower bourgeoisie, which, out of self-interest, cares for a decent and cleanly external appearance, and can care for it (348).

The effect of this structure is a ‘concealment of everything which might affront the eyes and the nerves of the bourgeoisie’ (349); and this concealment is at the same time motivated, there is a relation of distorted representation, of concealment/manifestation, between the façade and the districts behind it:

True, these shops have some affinity [Verwandtschaft — Marcus (1975: 170) translates this well as ‘concordant relation’] with the districts which lie behind them, and are more elegant in the commercial and residential quarters than when they hide grimy working-man’s dwellings; but they suffice to conceal from the eyes of the wealthy men and women of strong stomachs and weak nerves the misery and grime which form the complement of their wealth (348–9).

Engels seems to be using the model of a truth which is hidden beneath an ‘external appearance’ and which is nevertheless revealed on the surface in an alienated form. One can infer [schließen] what lies beneath appearances (‘Anyone who knows Manchester can infer the adjoining districts, from the appearance of the thoroughfare’) but it is nevertheless invisible (‘but one is seldom in a position to catch from the street a glimpse of the real labouring districts’) (349). The ‘separation’ between working-class and middle-class districts would therefore be the bar between a signifier (the thoroughfares) and its repressed signified (the working-class districts); the ‘concordant relation’ would be a relation of signification, or rather of (mis)representation.

But it is not only the middle-class thoroughfares that Engels reads; elsewhere the text reads, with great thoroughness, the working-class districts themselves. The whole city is a semiotic system. The ‘separation’, then, is not that between a signifier and a signified but that between two sets of signifiers, one of which (the thoroughfares) stands synecdochally for the whole
and one of which is repressed. The working class districts are not the truth of the city, nor are they the deep structure which generates an illusory surface structure. They are that part of a semiotic system which is significantly invisible to ‘the eyes and the nerves of the bourgeoisie’ (349).

What is produced by this asymmetrical relation between two sets of architectural signifiers is not so much a single and necessary structure of ‘illusion’ (since ‘anyone’ can read the city, by using their feet) as a structure of positions of reading through which individuals will inscribe themselves within the semiotic system. There are two main positions (two types of reader): (1) the bourgeois reader who is affirmed by the city as a universal subject (and the text confirms this universality: the bourgeois reader is ‘anyone’); (2) the proletarian reader who is a non-subject (the text confirms this, at least at this point, by excluding this position). A third, synthetic position is that of the theoretical reader who, in speaking the repressed discourse of the working class districts and relating it to the discourse of the middle class enclaves, produces a total, structural reading of the relation between the parts of the signifying system, and relates this total system to the system of class relationships within which it is overdetermined. These positions are not imposed on agents, they are merely potential positions. The position of a theoretical reading, in particular, is not a fixed class position (Engels is a middle class businessman), and although it has the potential to be translated into revolutionary practice, it can also be used – this is suggested by the fact that the text is addressed to an implied bourgeois reader, who is warned of the consequences of capitalist oppression – to defuse revolutionary action (e.g., 581).

This is one sense in which we can speak of the ‘relative autonomy’ of ideology; another sense is discussed in terms of the origin of this ‘peculiar’ structure. Here the text grapples with the problem, which it cannot adequately theorize, of a causality which is both structural and yet corresponds to the objective intentions of the bourgeoisie. The construction of the city is ‘hypocritical’ (beuchlerisch), although it is based on straightforward economic considerations:

I know . . . that the retail dealers are forced by the nature of their business to take possession of the great highways;
I know that there are more good buildings than bad ones upon such streets everywhere, and that the value of land is greater near them than in remoter districts (349).

Nevertheless the exclusion (Absperrung) of the working class is ‘systematic’. But immediately Engels concedes that ‘Manchester
is less built according to plan, after official regulations, is more an outgrowth of accident, than any other city’ (349). However, even if its construction is not controlled by the bourgeoisie, the effect of this random construction is that it can be translated directly into a propagandistic meta-discourse:

When I consider in this connection the eager assurances of the middle-class, that the working-class is doing famously, I cannot help feeling that the liberal manufacturers, the ‘Big Wigs’ of Manchester, are not so innocent after all, in the matter of this shameful method of construction (349).

One sentence crystallizes these contradictions and suggests a possible resolution: the sharp separation between working class and middle class quarters comes about ‘by unconscious tacit agreement, as well as with outspoken conscious determination’ [durch unbewusste, stillschweigende Übereinkunft wie durch bewusste ausgesprochene Absicht] (348). ‘Determination’ may refer only to the control exercised by one class; but ‘agreement’ indicates the unconscious concurrence of both classes in the exclusion operated on the proletariat. As Marcus notes,

this astonishing and outrageous arrangement cannot be fully understood as the result of a plot, or even a deliberate design, although those in whose interests it works also control it. It is indeed too huge and too complex a state of organized affairs ever to have been thought up in advance, to have pre-existed as an idea (1975: 172).

III

Engels’ analysis mobilizes the classical tropes of an empiricist reading: the relation between the surface and the hidden, between seeing and not seeing, between will and accident. At the same time it can be read as putting into play a possible contradiction between two distinct strategies of reading: the one he deploys, which we could call ‘interpretation’ and which is partly blind to Engels’ own inscription as a reader in the text of Manchester; and a second strategy which reads the determinants of reading, the system that makes possible both those interpretations based directly in class interest and those directed against it. The concept of ideology produced by this second strategy would concern, not the translation of an originary class position but the effects of an objective and conventional system of signification — that is, the allocation of a differential structure of interpretation. Any semiotic system will generate specific possibilities of reception: it will
construct both a semantic structure and a limited set of formal positions from which this structure can be interpreted.

At one level the contradiction between these two strategies can be referred simply to conflicting epistemological presuppositions. If structure is located in the real, then ideology will be seen to be generated directly by this real structure. The theory of commodity fetishism in *Capital* is close to this position: the structure of commodity production involves as a necessary effect the production of surface forms which are illusory and opaque. Misrecognition of the structure is a consequence of the distinction within the real between deep structure and surface structure. In a similar manner, capitalist production directly produces the illusions of the contractual equality of socioeconomic agents, or of the givenness and ahistoricity of the social order. Ideology is imposed by reality in the sense that limits are set to the immediacy of ‘experience’: a worker, for example, will draw a finite set of possible deductions from the hierarchical and serial organization of the work process according to the position that they occupy within that process. ‘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’ (Hirst, 1979: 41). What is assumed in the thesis of ideology as a representation of an alienated reality is, first of all, preconstituted subjects who represent to themselves an objectivity which presents meaning directly to them; and second, that there is a necessary congruence between the subject’s position in the production process and their ideological position. Ideology is a simple effect of an auto-effective process. Thus ‘it is not that the subject is mistaken [se trompe] but that reality deceives him [le trompe], and the appearances in which the structure of the production process are concealed are the starting point for the way individuals conceive of reality’ (Godelier, 1966: 832).

Althusser’s critique of this empiricist position, and indeed his general critique of economism and historicism, seem to me to remain more powerful than any countervailing response, and I won’t argue the case for them here. Their consequence is that, if structure is located, conversely, in the systems of signification through which the real is constituted as an object of knowledge, then ideology will be seen as an unmotivated system which is a product of social determinations but is discontinuous with the structure of production. It will not be the expression or the transformation of a concealed deep structure (the structure of production which would be its secret truth). Rather, it will
represent the intricacy of relatively self-contained semiotic systems in the field of antagonistic class relations rooted in relations of production.

The counterpart of this rejection of an expressive conception of ideology is a critique of the epistemological problematic of the possibility of a correspondence between representation and the real, and the consequent move towards a non-epistemological conceptualization of knowledge and its objects. This shift is perhaps most dramatically exemplified in Hindess and Hirst’s argument that theoretical objects are constituted ‘within definite ideologies and discourses’ (1975: 318), whereas the ‘distinction and the correlation characteristic of epistemology depend on objects which exist independently of knowledge, and yet in forms appropriate to knowledge itself’ (1977: 20). Epistemology works by presenting an appropriate form of order to theoretical discourse which will guarantee the fit between the theoretical grid and the order of the real. The bases for this closure of discourse are: (i) the construction of privileged and tautological criteria of validity; (ii) normative requirements concerning the mode of operation of discourse; and (iii) an aprioristic conception of the process of production of knowledge (1977: 11–17). But discourse in fact remains stubbornly unlimited, because ‘the forms of closure of discourse promised in epistemological criteria do not work. They are silent before the continued discourse of theories which they can never correspond to or appropriate’ (1977: 8).

The occasion of this critique is a rejection of the definition of ideology as ‘false consciousness’ (and of the scientism that accompanies it). If ideology is defined — as Althusser, for example, defines it, in Lacanian terms — as the ‘imaginary’ then the forms of the ‘imaginary’ cannot arise spontaneously from the subject (that would convert recognition into imagination and restore the constitutive subject), equally, they cannot be given by ‘reality’ (that would restore a simple reflection theory). The forms of the imaginary should, if these positions were to be avoided, have the status of significations, representations which are reducible neither to a represented which is beyond them, nor to an origin in a subject, but which are effects of the action of means of representation (Hirst, 1979: 63).

The signifieds of discourse (including the ‘referential’ discourses of science or history) are generated not from an extra-discursive real to which we may appeal as a final authority but within specific processes and practices of signification. The decisive criterion of analysis could thus no longer be the relation between discourse
and a reality which would be external to it, since discourses would be ‘interpretable and intelligible only in terms of their own and other discourses’ constructions and the categories of adequacy which they apply to them’ (Hirst, 1979: 19). Instead, the relevant criterion would be that of the relations between discourse and power, the intrication of power in discourse. We would be specifically concerned with the institutions, the forms of transmission and diffusion, and the pedagogical forms which impose and maintain discourses and which contain dissenting or marginal positions within certain limits. It would still be possible to apply specific local criteria of adequacy and appropriateness (although not of validity), but there could be no appeal to the epistemological unity of a knowledge-process in general.

The danger here is that of simply reversing the empiricist argument by postulating the auto-effectivity of discursive systems and reducing all signification to the single model of highly autonomous symbolic systems which produce a uniform mode of being of the subject. But ideological systems work in very disparate ways and through very different forms of constitution of their subjects. There can be no single model of ideological structure because there is no hard and fast line between the ‘real’ and ‘symbolic’. The distinction between the ‘real’ and ‘symbolic’ realms is not ontologically given but is a social and historical result. The discursive is a socially constructed reality which constructs both the real and the symbolic and this distinction between them. It assigns structure to the real at the same time as it is a product and a moment of real structures. It therefore covers a spectrum of semiotic systems from both ‘realms’. Thus ‘material’ structures — for example specific work processes — are also immediately symbolic structures (structures of power, that is, the meaningful position of individuals within these processes). Conversely, symbolic systems cannot be conceived only on the model of intellectual formations transmitted through special institutions to empty subjects. They involve varying degrees of motivation, explicitness, and systematization; they are directly or indirectly linked to the process of material production; and they are appropriated by agents (and by different classes of agents) in different ways.

IV

The political implications of the abandonment of Marxism’s epistemological certainties are of course bitterly disputed, and much recent work seeks to reclaim the Real and the Material as sources of epistemological (and hence political) authority for Marxism. Perry Anderson, who played so important a role
in opening up English Marxism to European philosophy, has attacked structuralist theory in a rhetoric reminiscent of nothing so much as a religious denunciation of atheism. Structuralism’s ‘speculative aggrandizement of language’ and ‘free-wheeling nescience’ have brought about an ‘attenuation of truth’ and a dismissal of the ‘referential axis’ (1983: 45–47). In the ‘abyss of Parisian relativism’ (65) the imperialism of the linguistic model has destroyed the possibility of causal explanation and, so of ‘history proper’ (50), and brought about the disappearance both of the historical theme of ‘man’ and of the subject or agent of knowledge (52). Derrida is said to have ‘liquidated’ the ‘last vestige’ of the ‘autonomy’ of structures: the subject; to have ‘freed’ structures from subjects; and so to have brought about the reign of ‘absolute chance,’ ‘a subjectivism without a subject,’ indeed ‘a finally unbridled subjectivity’ (54). In short, the linguistic model ‘strafed meaning, over-ran truth, outflanked ethics and politics, and wiped out history’ (64). In similar vein Terry Lovell argues that in a ‘relativist’ and ‘conventionalist’ problematic theoretical terminology is defined systemically rather than referentially; but this model ‘is not open to Marxist materialism. Signs cannot be permitted [sic] to swallow up their referents in a never-ending chain of signification, in which one sign always points on to another, and the circle is never broken by the intrusion of that to which the sign refers’ (1980: 16): somewhere there must be an end to signification, an ultimate non-signifying ground. At one point Lovell finds it in the Holocaust, which she mobilizes as a sign of the ultimately Real: but that of course is precisely the ideological function of the Holocaust, to act as a sign of the real, as an argument. Elsewhere she devastates the heretics with splendid metaphors: whilst Althusser ‘sails dangerously close to the wind,’ the post-Althusserians ‘abandon caution and openly embrace conventionalism’ (1980: 17). For Lovell everything turns on the category of the ‘material’, as the object of ‘experience’ and as the solid ground against which to measure the symbolic. But in this kind of context (where it is set against the ‘ideal’ or ‘spiritual’) the concept is a metaphysical one and is only contingently related to Marxism. More importantly, it ensures that the distinctive criterion of Marxist analysis becomes the materiality of the commodity rather than the inscription within it of the process and the relations of production which determine its value and which are not, strictly speaking, material.

Against any such dichotomous conception of a ‘material’ economic base and an ‘immateriel’ superstructure it seems important to argue that all social systems are semiotic systems producing significations realized in material sign-vehicles. The system of
natural and physical objects is necessarily always also a system of social values; and the materiality of the body is a support of the complex gender systems through which sexual difference is constituted. The economic system is concerned precisely with the transformation of quantities of matter-energy into information: at one level into use-values, at a second level into the complex signification of exchange-value which endows qualitatively different commodities with a symbolic equivalence and so permits their circulation as signs within a generalized equation (cf. Wilden, 1972: 204). The political-juridical system articulates and consolidates class positions on a secondary and self-contained plane of power relations and categories of subject which is constrained by but not necessarily fully congruent with the structure of relations of production, and which in turn is functionalized in the struggle to secure the appropriation of surplus-value. And the ideological system, which mediates the categories of the other systems and allows individuals (as ‘subjects’) to construct their relation to these constraining structures, works as a system of signification only through its embedding in material forms.

There can therefore be no absolute ontological distinction (of the order ‘material/immaterial’ or ‘real/symbolic’) between the systems whose complex intrication constitutes the social structure. Rather, social structure can be thought in terms of a play of constraints, determinations and restrictions exercised upon each other by a range of semiotic practices and institutions. This play will result in particular states of balanced tension which will shift as the complex convergence of forces at any one point shifts: there are no necessary outcomes or ‘stages’ of struggle, and there can be no general model of the relation between components of social structure. To substitute in this manner an overdetermined series of semiotic formations for an ontological dichotomy is not to argue that each formation is equally determinant of each other formation, or that any one formation is the expression of others, or that a social structure is no more than a system of symbolic systems. Any of these arguments would ignore the fact that value-systems have the particular function of realizing relations of power. Power is equally a ‘symbolic’ value but it has direct material effects. It involves ‘need, work, and exploitation, that is . . . factors which brutally beset the human body of man in its psycho-physical materiality and not just the sign systems practiced by him’ (Rossi-Landi, 1975: 16). Power is realized in all formations (possession of economic, political and ideological values, and optimally also of the means of producing them), but this realization is asymmetrical. In class societies control at the level of relations of production tends to be realized in terms of hegemony in other formations; but
these relations of control and determination are fought out within each formation in terms and within formal constraints which are peculiar to each formation.

One of the effects of this asymmetry of social systems is a displacement between semiotic formations, such that one formation cannot be seen as the direct translation of the production of values in another. This ‘relative autonomy’ of practices — the historical result of the uneven realization of power at different levels by the hegemonic class in complex and dynamic social systems — renders invalid an expressive model which reduces social systems to a central deep structure of which each level would be the isomorphic transformation. Further, economic practice is not a ‘last instance’, a final and therefore absolute determinant of social structure imposing a necessary teleology on the development of this structure. Rather, the specific structure and temporality of each formation produce a limited range of possible developments; the actual course of development is realized in the play of the class struggle, where the limited teleology of class goals is worked out.

V

I take the following to be the general requirements of a working theory of ideology. First, that it not assert a relationship of truth to falsity (and so its own mastery over error) but concern rather the production and the conditions of production of categories and entities within the field of discourse. Second, that it not deduce the ideological from the structure of economic forces or, directly, from the class positions of real subjects of utterance; that it theorize the category of subject not as the origin of utterance but as its effect. Third, that it not be an ontology of discourse, deriving effects of meaning from formal structure, but rather theorize the multiple and variable limits within which relations of power and knowledge are produced.

These requirements are largely negative, and there is perhaps a strong argument to be made against the normativeness of any conception of ideology; an argument that one should more properly attempt a description of the determinations according to which discourses have historically been distributed between the true and the false (cf. Foucault, 1980: 118). But that would still leave unproblematized the position from which this description would be made. Marxist theory is inescapably involved in making political judgements about discourse, on the basis of categories which are necessarily provisional and themselves positionally constituted. This political force of the concept of ideology must be retained. But if the ideological is not to be ontologized,
it should be regarded as a state of discourse or of semiotic systems in relation to the class struggle. Rather than being thought through an opposition to ‘theory’ (a space external to the determinations of ideological production) it would be thought as a differential relation to power. Given that all discourse is informed by power, is constituted as discourse in relation to unequal patterns of power, then political judgements can be made in terms of particular, historically specific appropriations of discourse by dominant social forces. Note that this involves two distinct theses: first, that of the productivity of power; second, that of the inequality of powers. This means that power isn’t simply on one ‘side’, and hence that the ‘sides’ in any situation may be mobile and tactically constituted; they are not necessarily pre-given (except in the limit case of simple social contradiction) and can’t necessarily be specified in advance, since ideology is both constituted by and is involved in the constitution of social contradictions. But it also means that power is never monolithic, stable, or uniform in its effects. Every use of discourse is at once a judgement about its relation to dominant forms of power and either an assent or a resistance to this relation.

Insofar as power invests all discourse, the category of ideology is a description of systems of value in which all speakers are enclosed and which is the productive basis of all speech. Insofar as power is always asymmetrically split, the category describes a particular political functionalization of speech. It is both a ‘universal’ category and a category that refers to the tactical appropriation of particular positions by a dominant social class (in Engels’ text, the ‘universalizing’ capture of the thoroughfares on behalf of the bourgeoisie). But it does not refer to specifically ‘class ideologies’ or class cultures. Here I follow Poulantzas’ argument against a ‘number-plate’ theory of ideology according to which each class would possess its own distinct and characteristic view of the world, and his contention that ‘the dominant ideology does not simply reflect the conditions of existence of the dominant class, the pure and simple subject, but rather the concrete political relation between the dominant and the dominated classes in a social formation’ (1973: 203). The hegemonic practice of the ruling class attempts to ensure that subordinate classes operate within limits defined by the dominant ideology. ‘Subaltern groups are always subject to the activity of ruling groups, even when they rebel and rise up; only ‘permanent’ victory breaks their subordination, and that not immediately’ (Gramsci, 1971: 55).

This is not an argument that subordinate classes accept the tenets of a distinctly defined and externally imposed ‘dominant ideology’, nor is it an argument for the necessary effectivity of
such an ideology in integrating a social formation and securing the reproduction of the relations of production. Abercrombie, Hill, and Turner have mounted what I think is a correct critique of functionalist conceptions of ideology (including a large part of recent Marxist theory) which assume that there is social coherence, and that ideology is instrumental in securing it. My argument concerns not ‘an’ ideology which would be separately specifiable, but rather the differential, and differentially effective, investment of discourse by power, and in particular by ruling class power. What is at stake in this process is the consolidation of class power (through the integration, in the first instance, of the disparate fractions of the ruling class, and then insofar as possible of other classes) and the reproduction of the conditions for the extraction of surplus value (conditions which are always a combination of economic structures, the juridical and political relations buttressing them, judicial and military force or its potential, and the ‘consent’ of the working classes). But to describe what is at stake is not to describe an actual and necessary effectivity. Hegemonic strategies establish a shifting and tense balance between contradictory powers and concede greater or lesser degrees of autonomy to discursive positions occupied by subordinate classes (although even in yielding ground, such hegemonic strategies tend to define the terrain of struggle: to set the agenda of the thinkable and to close off alternative discursive possibilities). Hegemony is a fragile and difficult process of containment. Further, there are historically quite distinct degrees of coherence of the ‘dominant ideology’. It may either be the case that one discursive domain (for example, religion in the feudal period) is so heavily invested as to constitute in itself the ‘dominant ideology’, or the investment of power may range across a number of domains, no single one of which is dominant. It may be the total structure of a discursive domain which is appropriated because of its high correlation with a social function, or it may be one particular set of categories within a domain or across several discursive domains (the concepts of ‘nation’ or ‘individual’, for example, which draw upon and pull together quite different discourses and practices); and it may be the case that the resulting stresses are neither coherent nor non-contradictory. It is quite true to say, then, that ‘the functional relation of ideology and economy is ... a contingent one, specifiable only at the level of concrete societies. There cannot be a general theory of ideology’ (1984: 185). Here, however, I attempt no a priori specification of which discursive domains were most heavily invested or appropriated in particular periods, since this is precisely a matter for reconstruction from textual analysis.

If the function of ideological investment (in Freud’s sense of
Besetzung) is to bring about an acceptance or a tolerance of the hegemonic position of a dominant class, resistance is nevertheless written into the structure of all discourse. If power is no longer thought simply as a negative and repressive force but as the condition of production of all speech, and if power is conceived as polar rather than monolithic, as an asymmetrical dispersion, then all utterances will be potentially splintered, formally open to contradictory uses. Utterance is in principle dialogic. Both 'ideology' and 'resistance' are uses of discourse, and both are 'within' power. Ideological utterance is marked by redundancy, by an automatization which appears as a kind of semantic crust proclaiming its authority and its status as second nature (cf. Lukács, 1971: 86). Resistance is the possibility of fracturing the ideological from within or of turning it against itself (as in children’s language games) or of reappropriating it for counter-hegemonic purposes. This turning is an application of force. In both cases the conditions of possibility are given in the structure of discourse (although they are not necessarily grammatically marked), but they are not intrinsic qualities of the language; they take the form of enunciative acts, and of judgements about the status of those acts.

VI

The concept of ideology has generally been reserved to systematic and immediately political or propositional conceptualization — to 'opinion' or 'world-view'. But by ascribing political value only to what openly claims the status of political or philosophical discourse, this restriction of the ideological sphere impoverishes our understanding of the area in which class conflicts are fought out. In class societies, where the production and circulation of meaning function as a determined and determinant level within antagonistic social relations of production, all meaning is, in the fullest sense of the word, political. The concept of ideological system therefore needs to comprise not only explicitly conceptual systems, but the totality of codes and values through which speakers make investments in the construction of realities. A theory of ideology is a theory of semiotic value, because within the symbolic order the position and intensity of values are the index of a mediated tactical assertion, the site of a struggle for symbolic power and charged with the traces of that struggle. The ideological structure is co-extensive with the semiotic field — with the totality of signifying systems. Bakhtin/Voloshinov makes this point when he writes that 'the domain of ideology coincides with the domain of signs. They equate with one another. Wherever a sign is present, ideology is present too. Everything ideological possesses semiotic value,' and
'without signs there is no ideology' (1973: 10). This is not to claim the falsity of all signifying systems but to stress the arbitrariness of the sign — the fact that it signifies only by virtue of a social consensus, and that where this consensus is founded on social relations which are contradictory, the symbolic order is necessarily involved in this contradiction.

However, Bakhtin/Voloshinov's conception of the sign as an entity which 'reflects and refracts another reality outside itself, i.e. possesses meaning, represents something other than itself' (1973: 9) ignores the extent to which meaning is produced by structural inter-relationships within the signifying system, and instead locates the process of semiosis in the isolated act of representation, the relation between the sign and its referent. But ideological value does not reside in the falseness of a particular act of representation. It is only at the level of the articulation of the sign in a particular structure of signification that we can speak of a production of meaning, and here 'meaning' must be conceived strictly as a function of the diacritical coherence of the structure. Signification depends not on the correlation of signs with bits of reality, but on the order of signs amongst themselves. A meaning is not the sign of something irreducible to which it points as its essence but a sign of its own position in a differential system.

Within the semiotic order language holds a privileged position insofar as the values generated in all other signifying systems can be translated into linguistic form: 'The field of linguistic value corresponds entirely to the field of meaning' (Rossi-Landi, 1975: 139). At the lowest level of semantic structure the semiotic order could thus be defined as a collection of abstract positional units formed within a number of distinct systems of differential relations but corresponding to the signifié of the language system.

At this level of definition the axioms of structural linguistics are crucial. Saussure's conception of the purely relational character both of the signifier and of the signified destroys the traditional empiricist notion of signification as a relation between a material signifier, an abstract concept, and a 'thing' for which the word 'stands'. Language is no longer a secondary formation, an accretion superimposed on a naturally articulated reality, but rather it actively articulates our representations of reality. The assumption that the sign simply associates a word with the thing it names presupposes 'that ready-made ideas exist before words' (Saussure, 1966: 65); whereas Saussure's conception of the closedness of the sign stresses the gap which founds the systematic structure of language and the dependent independence of thought. It establishes that relative arbitrariness which enables us to grasp systems of representation as particular kinds of game rather than as a reflection of the real; and
it demolishes the privileged position that substantives enjoy in any empiricist typology, making it possible to think of relations, processes and qualities, as well as entities, as objects of signification.

Language thus, in Eco's words, establishes a 'cultural' world which is neither actual nor possible in the ontological sense; its existence is limited to a cultural order, which is the way in which a society thinks, speaks and, while speaking, explains the 'purport' of its thought through other thoughts' (1976: 61). The referent cannot therefore be understood as a transcendental signified external to the order of language, since

the so-called 'thing itself' is always already a representamen shielded from the simplicity of intuitive evidence. The representamen functions only by giving rise to an interpretant that itself becomes a sign and so on to infinity. The self-identity of the signified conceals itself unceasingly and is always on the move (Derrida, 1976: 49).

Meaning is an endless chain of semiosis, a movement between units which are virtual, positional, and therefore irreducible.

However the articulation of the semantic realm into pure differential values depends on an implicit hypostatization of the signified (or more correctly of the empty content-form) as a position defined outside of particular systems of signification. It deals in atomized units and rests on something like the lexicographer's convenient fiction of the existence of stable lexemes. In fact, the double relationality of the levels of form and content means that the correlation of signifier to signified, and so the production of meaning, takes place only within specific relations of signification. The system of these relations I shall refer to as discourse (I include in this term non-verbal semiotic systems). If we follow Foucault's terminology we will say that the mode of existence of language in discourse is the statement (énoncé), whereas the sentence is the relevant unit of analysis at the level of grammar or language-system (langue). What distinguishes the statement from the sentence, the speech act, or the proposition is not an addition of meaning (since isolated sentences and propositions can be meaningful) but the mobilization of the complex of rules and conventions of the language games that constitute meaning in use. The statement is not a unit of discourse but rather a function cutting across the other domains of structure such as grammar and acting as the condition of possibility of linguistic manifestation in these domains (Foucault, 1972: 87–88). Statements are by definition contextual, but they are not the direct projection of an actual situation. Rather, the statement is always a component of 'an enunciative field in which it has a place and a status.' It belongs to textual and inter-
textual systems, so that ‘if one can speak of a statement, it is because a sentence (a proposition) figures at a definite point, with a specific position, in an enunciative network that extends beyond it’ (Foucault, 1972: 99).

On this definition, discourse cannot be equivalent to ‘speech’ in the linguistic sense of parole (it is closer to the extended sense that Derrida gives to écriture). Here again it is Bakhtin who has done the pioneering theoretical work. Holquist summarizes it this way:

Utterance, as Bakhtin uses it, is not . . . unfettered speech, the individual ability to combine langue elements with freely chosen combinations. As he says, ‘Saussure ignores the fact that besides the forms of language there exist as well forms of combination of these forms.’ If we take into account the determining role of the other in actual speech communication, it becomes clear that there is not only system in language independent of any particular articulation of it, but there is as well a determining system that governs any actual utterance. We might say the world of parole, like the sphere of langue, is controlled by laws; but to say so would be to change completely the definition of parole as used by Saussure (1983: 311).

Recent linguistic analysis, however, has largely failed to move beyond the langue/parole opposition. It has been dominated on the one hand by a formalism which treats the text as an extension of the syntactic and logical structuring of the sentence, on the other hand by an embarrassed empiricism which, in attempting to take into account the role of context and enunciation in the shaping of text, finds itself unable to formalize the infinity of possible speech situations (for the second position cf. van Dijk, 1977: 91). In both cases the result is a renewal of the traditional dichotomy between text and context or between énoncé and énonciation, in which only the former is seen as properly linguistic, and the situation of utterance is conceived as contingent, circumstantial, ‘subjective’, non-systematic.

VII

Here I can do no more than briefly sketch in some of the requirements of a more adequate theory of discourse. Let me propose in the first instance that utterances are produced within the framework of a number of distinct universes of discourse (or discursive formations) — the religious, scientific, pragmatic, technical, everyday, literary, legal, philosophical, magical, and so on; and that it is not possible to assign a cognitive privilege to any one of these
universes (even, paradoxically, to that within which this statement is made): each must be regarded as having equal epistemological validity, but as performing different (and variable) functions; that is, each will have a different mode of authority within the discursive economy as a whole and in relation to the distribution of social power. These formations govern the production of relatively autonomous semantic realms; forms of referentiality and figurality which are specific to each realm; and the production and reproduction of the subject as subject-of-signification through its positional inscription within these overlapping and often contradictory semiotic horizons.

At a more specific level — the level of the situation of utterance — I want to argue that the production of meaning is a function of the genres of discourse which Bakhtin/Voloshinov defined as normatively structured clusters of formal, contextual and thematic features, ‘ways of speaking’ in a particular situation (1973: 20). Each genre is stratified as a social practice through the importance of ‘language-etiquette, speech-tact, and other forms of adjusting an utterance to the hierarchical organization of society’ (21). The production of meaning is thus always highly specified by the rules of the discourse structure in which it occurs, and the structure of the genres of discourse is directly correlated with the semiotic constraints of the speech situation. These concepts have been given more precise theorization in Halliday’s elaboration of the concept of register, which I take to be roughly equivalent to that of genre. By understanding the speech situation, not spatio-temporally but semiotically as a situation-type, Halliday is able to establish correlations between normative contextual constraints and the three interacting dimensions of discursive structure which make up the complex unity of register and which he calls field, tenor, and mode (Halliday, 1978). These dimensions specify organized fields of semantic material, layered in depth and in complex relation to other fields; positions of enunciation, of authority and credibility, and patterns of strategic interaction; and linguistic and rhetorical options.

Registers, or discourse genres, are thus systems of metalinguistic rules governing the production, transmission and reception of ‘appropriate’ meanings by ‘appropriate’ users in ‘appropriate’ forms in particular social contexts. That is, they are normative systems (whose rules can be broken or changed or parodied) specifying what can and cannot properly be said at a given time and place. The concept refers to the relation between discursive practices and the systematic structuring of discourse. Todorov remarks that ‘any verbal property whatsoever which is optional at the level of the language system can be made obligatory in discourse; the choice
that a society makes between all the possible codifications of discourse determines its system of genres’ (1978: 23). Discourse is therefore not the random product of a free subject operating ‘outside’ or ‘above’ the language system, and it is not ‘an aggregate of conventional forms of expression superposed on some underlying content by ‘social factors’ of one kind or another’ (Halliday, 1978: 11). It is the production of a unified cluster of semantic, structural and contextual meanings in accordance with generic norms. Discourse is not parole, and a theory of the systematic structure of discourse renders invalid the Saussurean dualism on which modern linguistics is founded. Pécheux has proposed that the opposition of langue/parole be replaced by the couple langue/processus discursifs, intending by this an opposition not of the abstract to the concrete, the necessary to the contingent, the objective to the subjective, but of two types of system (1975: 81). In this model discourse is the crucial level at which meaning is produced, and the lexical and morphosyntactic levels are subordinated to their functionalization within discourse; they represent category options whose uses and effects are indeterminate until they are subsumed within a higher level of codification.

If meaning is produced in accordance with generic discursive norms, it is therefore not an abstract potential but is closely tied to the structure of the context of utterance. Foucault argues that relations of signification can only be assigned within ‘a specific, well-stabilized enunciative relation’ (1972: 90), because language is based on a principle of thrif which gives rise to homonymy and synonymy, and therefore to an unsteady sliding between signifier and signified which is only eliminated in a higher order of contextual codification where the fixing of signifiers to signifieds, and the selection from complex networks of implied predicates attached to a cultural unit, takes place. Pécheux similarly claims that words receive their meaning from the discursive formation in which they are produced: ‘The meaning [le sens] of a word, an expression, a proposition, etc., doesn’t exist ‘in itself’ (that is to say in its transparent relation to the literalness of the signifier), but is determined by the ideological positions brought into play in the sociohistorical process in which words, expressions and propositions are produced’ (1975: 144). Polyvalence is a function of the semantic shift that occurs in the passage from one discursive formation to another. The particular enunciative frame taken as applying in any particular situation determines the probability and the conditions of appearance of discursive objects, their possible functions, and whether and to what extent they are to be assigned the status of referentiality and truth.

Questions of semiosis and epistemology are thus not separable
from questions of modality — that is, of the truth-status, the degree of seriousness, and the degree of authority carried by an utterance. Speakers enter discourse by way of subject positions inscribed in the structure of genre. These positions are modes of relation to authority, but, as Foucault argues, 'the subject of the statement should not be regarded as identical with the author of the formulation — either in substance or in function . . . To describe a formulation *qua* statement does not consist in analyzing the relations between the author and what he says (or wanted to say, or said without wanting to); but in determining what position can and must be occupied by an individual if he is to be the subject of it' (1972: 95–96). The formalization of registers over time means that there will not necessarily be a direct correspondence between the social position of speakers and the position they will occupy in discourse. Rather there will tend to be a simple binary structuration of most genres, specifying a dominant (unmarked) position as that of a ruling class adult male and a repressed position as that appropriate to members of dominated classes, females and children. In the case of those registers reserved to dominated groups this coding will be reversed. In practice this binary codification into appropriate and inappropriate users means the *excodification* of certain classes of user whose status as non-subjects is then concealed by the pseudo-universality of dominant registers.

In my reading of Engels' analysis of Manchester I argued that the ideological status of this discursive system (the city) derived not directly from the socioeconomic positions of the agents occupying it but rather from its construction of a set of formal positions which structured the distribution of semiotic authority (the distribution of power *within* this system). The most important factor here is the discontinuity between discursive positions and the actual social position of a speaker. The positions of utterance and reception which are specified as appropriate are empty and normative positions which may be filled, or rejected, or ironized, or parodied, or replaced with alternative positions; the speaker may fill them consciously or unconsciously, or may fuse them with other positions, or may simply be unaware of them or incompetent to fill them. There is thus a complex network of subject positions available to the speaker of a language (enabling the transformation of existing registers and the generation of new ones), and this means, in Foucault's words, that

the subject of the statement is a particular function, but is not necessarily the same from one statement to another; in so far as it is an empty function that can be filled by virtually any individual when he formulates the statement;
and in so far as one and the same individual may occupy in turn, in the same series of statements, different positions, and assume the role of different subjects (93–94).

The crucial question for a theory of ideology must be that of the possibility of disruption of discursive authority, and of the integration of this disruption into general political struggle. This possibility can be thought in terms which don’t rely upon the postulation of a realm of freedom external to discourse: that is, it can be thought in terms of a non-correspondence between socioeconomic locus and discursive position and in terms of the uneven articulation of subject positions inscribed in different domains. The overlap and contradiction of genres of discourse produces at once an effect of semantic stability (an effect of the unity of Being as guarantor of the variant repetition of meaning) and an effect of semantic contradiction (realms of Being fail to correspond). Silverman and Torode write that, against the assertion ‘that members’ in consensual fashion work to sustain a single social fact world, it appears to us that speakers articulate conflicting relations between voices. This occurs both within the repertoire of a single individual, and between individuals’ (1980: 185). These voices, and the realities they sustain and are sustained by, are not neutral, and the relations between them do not constitute a dialogue. The clash of voices is a clash of power, and the analysis of discourse is an analysis of and an intervention in this politics.

Notes

1. One could perhaps define a further position, that of the petit-bourgeoisie, the very ambivalence of whose class position would play a major role in the production of ideological effects. Engels’ text is interesting in terms of the ‘buffer’ role of this class, but there is no suggestion that it has an autonomous ideological position; the model I am using is not that of a direct correspondence between class position and ideological position; it is that of a contradictory coding, within which the non-categorical classes will fit themselves.

2. The ultimate material irreducibility of the body is the basis of the social and of power, the limit to meaning, the final source and measure of value: but the body then in turn becomes meaning in the social order; it is the canvas for elaborate semiotic differentiations, in particular for the construction of gender, and it is the measure of other signifying systems: it feels pain and joy, but it also talks.

3. Anthony Giddens (1983: 18) argues that the concept of ideology ‘is empty of content because what makes belief systems ideological is their incorporation within systems of domination,’ and that ‘to understand this incorpora-
tion we must analyze the mode in which patterns of signification are incorporated within the medium of day-to-day practices.'

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