

Ideology critique: the challenge for media studies

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Abstract

Taking our bearings from Stuart Hall's essay from 1982, 'The rediscovery of "ideology": return of the repressed in media studies', we argue in this discussion piece for the need to pick up the tools of ideology critique once again. Quite simply, the contemporary moment where accelerating inequality is masked by blame of the poor and of migrants demands it. The case is made first through a critique of ideological responses to the economic crisis after 2008. Then in the final section we examine advocacy of 'social mobility' in the public sphere, an ideological project if ever there was one.

Keywords

crisis, critique, ideology, inequality, media, public sphere

In 1982 an essay by Stuart Hall (1988) called 'The rediscovery of "ideology": return of the repressed in media studies' was published in a collection based on an Open University course. The book was hugely influential in the young discipline of media studies, being reprinted four times. In the essay Hall sketches a history of ideology critique to show how, after a pluralist hiatus, mass communication research had in the

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1970s rediscovered ideology. (Its original standard bearers were Adorno and the Frankfurt School.) The reason for the return was quite simply the inadequacy of existing approaches in which ‘the media were held to be largely reflective or expressive of an achieved consensus’ (1988: 61). From Hall’s vantage point, three years into Thatcherism, the social order did not look very consensual at all. Rather, there was a need to explain how ‘[a] society democratic in its formal organization, [but] committed ... to the massively unequal distribution of wealth and authority, had much to gain from the continuous production of popular consent to its existing structure’ (1988: 63). According to Hall, then, ideology legitimated a social world characterized by inequality. By the same token, the task for critical media studies was to show this ideology at work, or how, as Hall put it in the context of television news, ‘[u]nawittingly, unconsciously the broadcaster has served as a support for the reproduction of a dominant ideological discursive field’ (1988: 88).

The question which prompts the present piece is: why has ideology critique of the sort Hall advocated all but disappeared? For if 1982 was the nadir of the Thatcher-encouraged recession in the UK, when manufacturing jobs were being shaken out and the economy was being structured along what we would now call neoliberal lines, then the parallels with now are immense. Six years after a major global economic crisis, and with a massive extension of inequality brought in under the banner of ‘austerity’, we are surely seeing new heights of depredation in the neoliberal order. Yet there is little sign of a critical response in the academy which might expose the current ideological offensive; that is, the construction of consent to austerity. True, some references to ‘ideology’ may be found in the literature during the last five years. But these tend to use the word as a synonym for ‘discourse’, or theme running through a media genre often in the manner of Van Dijk (see Downey, 2008).

So, our starting point is what we take to be a major lack in the field of media studies: there’s no ideology critique! We begin by speculating about why this might be the case, and then in the second section consider some of the dimensions of the present conjuncture and the ideology of austerity. The third, concluding section offers a short case study of an important theme in recent ideology, namely ‘social mobility’.

Hall, ideology and the seeds of decline

It seems likely that the decline of ideology critique is part of a larger retreat from a left perspective in the academy. As neoliberalism became ensconced across the world in the 1980s so too there was a shift away from the Marxism, programmatic feminism and anti-racism which constituted the avant-garde of many disciplines in the humanities and social sciences in the previous decade. In effect, academic research accommodated political retrenchment, largely through the ascendancy of identity-based politics and the splitting of this tendency away from the critique of capitalism and economic inequality (see for instance the account of Lisa Duggan, 2003). We broadly agree with this diagnosis, but don’t have space to pursue it. Our goal is more focused: to recover what we take to be the key dimensions of ideology critique. To that end we want to look in more detail at Hall’s essay, identifying some insights, but also themes which have actually contributed to the later displacement of ideology critique in media studies.

At the heart of Hall's conception of ideology is sociologist Steven Lukes' notion of the 'third dimension of power', that is the shaping of people's perceptions such that they accept the existing, unequal social order of things. Hall re-names this, the ideological model of power. It is premised on a 'politics of signification' in which dominant interests and ways of viewing the world (for instance that of employers) are presented as natural and universal while those of the dominated (trade unionists) are excluded or presented as deviant. He cites the Glasgow Media Group's *Bad News* research in support of this (Hall, 1988: 64–9).

Ideology, however, consists not merely in particular, dominant views but a larger 'reality effect'. Note that this is not a depth-less Foucauldian power-knowledge. Rather Marx is cited to support the case that ideology 'represents [social relations] as outside of history: unchangeable, inevitable and natural. It also disguises its premises as already known facts' (1988: 76). Something real (historical capitalism) is naturalized, and this ideological naturalization is then presented as objective fact. Ideology is a matter of *misrepresentation* at two levels then; an account of the social world and the status of that account.

One other dimension of ideology is worth bringing out. It is partly so credible because the claim by the bearers of ideology, media institutions, to be 'independent of the direct play of political or economic interests, or of the state, is not wholly fictitious' (1988: 86). In other words ideology is effective because the meta-ideology of 'freedom of the press' is grounded in practices which are partially non-ideological.

All these insights we consider to be crucial, namely that ideology (a) is powerful in that it constructs consent to inequality, (b) conceals and misrepresents real historical social relations, (c) depends on the partial autonomy of media practice. But there are also aspects of Hall's account which were taken up at the expense of the above within media studies, and which ultimately helped to obliterate the concept of ideology altogether.

First, the strong focus on the construction of 'reality' paves the way for a fully discursive view, in which structures of capitalism, race and gender hierarchy, etc. – and struggles to transform them – either disappear, or else are transformed into struggles exclusively over symbolic representation. There is only one level in this new framework, that of discourse; no social reality beneath which might be obscured or distorted by ideology. Second, Hall emphasizes the multi-accentuality of the sign (1988: 77–9), and while this helps us to see how ideology can be resisted, it has also fed into the notion that media messages tend to be indeterminate. Third, Hall's advocacy of a Gramscian 'negotiated' hegemony, and his attack on class reductionism (i.e. a simplistic view of the working class as structurally given to resistance) were taken up, while his central argument that ideology supports domination has tended to be forgotten.

In sum, then, we want to recover Hall's 'rediscovery of ideology' from a selective tradition which has taken some insights, but removed key parts of the analysis, indeed *the* parts which help us to understand the role of the media in constructing consent to structural inequality.

Ideology and the 'austerity' moment

Crucially, our call to revive the practice of ideology critique in media and communication studies takes place in a conjuncture shaped by significant upheavals in the economic

system since 2008. To repeat, the parallels with 1982 are striking. But there is also an important sense in which the present conjuncture provides significantly greater challenges to the ideological project; how – on top of the changes wrought in the first period of neoliberalism – might consent be built for long-term recession, dramatic growth in inequality and significant further restructuring of capitalism in the interest of capital?

In 2008 the imminent collapse of giant financial institutions over-exposed to the dissolution of the US housing bubble was averted by a historically unprecedented intervention by the US Federal Reserve, followed by a chain of central bank-funded bank bailouts in Eurozone countries. In the latter context, the exposure of states to the debts held by commercial banks triggered investor anxiety over possible default, driving down the credit ratings of several sovereign states, and thus raising the cost of state borrowing to unsustainable levels.

The subsequent implementation of bailout and ‘fiscal adjustment’ programmes by the so-called Troika of the European Commission, European Central Bank and International Monetary Fund prescribed deep cuts to public services, social welfare programmes, pensions and public sector pay, and concomitant targets for privatization and long-term ‘reform’ of state services. The combination of market pressure and political opportunity has ensured that comparable programmes of ‘fiscal consolidation’ and state retraction have been implemented across the European Union and beyond. In the Anglophone world, this emphasis on the putatively unavoidable nature of cuts and reform has come to be known as ‘austerity’.

In a conjuncture where the impact of huge reductions in public spending worsens the socio-economic consequences of recession, the political insistence on ‘austerity’ performs crucial ideological work. In the first place, it carries ‘connotations of admirably severe virtue’ (Poole, 2011), an appeal to character that has seen it integrated into a flourishing genre of recession-themed self-help books and lifestyle publications, and even encouraged the British Princess Michael of Kent to reassure British subjects as to the royal embrace of austere living (Williams, 2013). This appeal to character is also collective, for the disciplinary virtue required is located by political elites in the resilient and exceptional national character of the people being asked to ‘make sacrifices’, and to recognize that ‘we’re all in this together’. We’re all in this together, apart from those who are never fully part of the We. That is, the politics of austerity demands identifying those stigmatized as preventing us ‘from doing more with less’: welfare scroungers, trade unionists, the wrong kind of young people, and the bad kind of migrant.

The ideological significance of this process of ‘othering’ can be seen in the fact that it is precisely these scapegoats, what Imogen Tyler terms a ‘precarious political collective’ of ‘revolting subjects’ (2013: 4), who have featured centrally in the sporadic and coalitional protests and movements that contest the role of austerity in deepening inequality. Part of the ideological project, then, is to stigmatize the groups which have had the audacity to resist austerity. In turn the protest movement has attempted to denaturalize austerity through oppositional slogans such as ‘welfare for the banks, austerity for the poor’.

However, the ideological force of ‘austerity’ consists not merely in the moralizing displacement of politics, stigmatization of resistance or racializing populism. The declaration of an era of austerity also proposes a route back to general prosperity while

masking a fundamental re-ordering of the relationship of states to societies and markets. It is this double move, of appearing to confirm that 'there is no alternative' (TINA) while providing ideological cover for concerted political-economic restructuring that is of critical importance.

In thinking about this it is worth recalling that the period during and immediately after the near collapse of capitalism in 2008 was undoubtedly a period of optimism for those who wanted to challenge the preceding decades of neoliberal expansionism. In the wake of the seismic shocks of the financial crisis, as David Graeber argues, 'there was not only public rage and bewilderment, but the beginning of an actual public conversation about the nature of debt, of money, of the financial institutions that have come to hold the fate of nations in their grip' (2011: 15). As Graeber observes, however, the conversation never really took place. The reasons for this are complex. But perhaps the main factor was that too much faith was put in deliberation and the public sphere – that the now evident nature of capitalist crisis would seamlessly inform responsive political action – and not enough account taken of the fact that the democratic systems, which were supposed to enact some form of democratic control over capital's excesses, had themselves been undermined by decades of neoliberal 'hollowing out'. Thus instead of, for example, hoped for gains for left-wing parties in the post-2008 period, there was in Europe at least a swing towards 'technocratic' centrist coalitions and parties that promised better management of the economy, as well as to parties of the right that promised better protection for the nation.

This is undoubtedly a coup for the ideology of TINA: the crisis itself is presented as a natural disaster (as opposed to being a product of system failure) and the urgent need for stability is then read off, a need which can only be satisfied by the political mainstream and its endorsement of austerity. Such an ideological coup does not seem to have been inhibited in the slightest by the mobilization in the public sphere of powerful counter-arguments and revelations of flaws in the economic rationale for austerity policies. For example, a graduate student found key flaws in the data and methodology of Carmen Reinhart and Kenneth Rogoff's paper 'Growth in a time of debt', a paper that was widely cited by policy elites as proof that drastic cuts in government spending can stimulate a return to economic growth. Revelation of the flaws generated global headlines about the 'case for austerity' being undermined (see Krugman, 2013). Similarly, a high-profile report by the IMF that it had under-estimated the impact of austerity policies on market confidence, consumer demand and unemployment in Greece provided a political opportunity to call on the IMF to 'face the truth' of its miscalculations (Elliott et al., 2013). Significantly, all such moderate Keynesian challenges to austerity, even when they have been circulated widely by the media or been generated within institutions of global governance, have failed.

Does this failure indicate the brute power of the ideology of austerity to crush reasoned criticism, based on evidence and argument about how capitalism might be restored to health? On the face of it, yes. However, in an important sense austerity is not really concerned with 'recovery' at all, that is, with deficit reduction, fiscal consolidation and return to business as usual. Rather it is a political project. As David McNally (2010) suggests, it is a strategic response by the ruling classes to a global crisis that was deferred during the earlier phase of neoliberalism but never solved. There is now a burgeoning

critical literature exploring what McNally identifies as the necessary ideological gambit of austerity:

Just as the crisis is mutating, so is neoliberalism. Originally nailing its sails to the ideological mast of 'free markets', neoliberals have been humbled and embarrassed by the participation in the greatest government bailouts in history. So they have shifted their argumentative grounds, emphasizing the harsh 'necessity' of slashing government spending as essential to long-term economic survival. Neoliberal methods and practices remain central to this mutant neoliberalism, but its ideological justifications are being refashioned. (2010: 4–5)

Inter alia, McNally's discussion of this mutation underlines how the ideological claims of the 'free market' to ever-increasing liberty from state interference have always obscured the neoliberal imperative of 'retasking the state' (Peck, 2010: 4). This retasking has been linked explicitly to an intensification of what has long been termed a 'crisis of legitimacy' in representative democracies, whereby people and citizens clearly perceive that highly significant decisions are being imposed in ways that are not open to contest through established democratic avenues, but that, at the same time, they are invited to pretend is democracy in action (Crouch, 2011; Streeck, 2011, 2012).

It seems, then, that what marks out the ideology of austerity from the free market ideology of pre-crisis neoliberalism which Stuart Hall was confronting in 1982 is a greater intensity. Then the free market was presented as a fundamental truth whose time had finally come after years of failed state interference and bullying trade-unionism. There was at least a certain formal logic to this, even if it was completely unfounded in historical terms. Now, however, it is the free market itself which has demonstrably failed. The ideological challenge is therefore much greater, and the response to it involves a correspondingly greater degree of duplicity. This is what it consists in: the obliteration of the systemic nature of the crisis, and the apportioning of blame instead to state intervention not only as a first cause of the crisis, but as a continuing problem. The solution proposed is the transfer of wealth from the working class to the capitalists, via both public spending and wage cuts. This is masked as 'good housekeeping' (here we see continuity with Thatcher-Reaganism), and involves the supremely ideological trope of making the working class appear as not 'us'. Hence the importance too of celebrating the middle class, or else presenting it as a hard done by 'squeezed middle'.

From such a perspective, detailed empirical work which explores the dimensions of ideology becomes more important than ever. The past year has seen the publication of research that has begun to examine the relationships between media work and the ideological implications of austerity (Manning, 2013; Mercille, 2013) but this does not yet seem to represent a coherent tendency in media studies. Coherence matters, we think, not because we want to produce a new 'school' or party-line, but because if ideology critique is going to have any purchase, if it is to change hearts and minds in the field, then a more fully worked-out theoretical and methodological approach will be necessary. The next, case study section is offered by way of a contribution to thinking along these lines. The task as we see it – and as Hall saw it in 1982 – is to link ideology to power, to show how inequality and domination are obscured or redeemed in some way through mediation. This may not necessarily be at the level of the ideology of austerity considered as a

complete project. Indeed, one important way into understanding austerity may be as an ensemble of smaller ideologies. If that is so, then we need case studies (see below), but also methodologies for joining them up and learning larger lessons.

Ideology and social immobility

The legitimacy of capitalist societies rests in part on the idea that individuals have equal opportunities in a competitive environment to 'rise to the top'. Capitalist societies are meritocratic and inequality of outcome is a result of individual hard work, intelligence and aptitude. The rich and powerful deserve to be so. Concomitantly, the poor and powerless deserve to be so. If these narratives of individual achievement are questioned and 'success' and 'failure' come to be seen as products of, say, class position, the legitimacy of capitalist societies is inevitably called into doubt. Capitalist societies make a dual claim to fairness: that opportunities are equal and unequal outcomes are earned.

Social mobility or intergenerational mobility is essentially a measure of whether equal opportunities do, in fact, exist. The more equal opportunities are, the less it matters who your parents are and which socio-economic class they belong to. The evidence from the UK is that social mobility has declined over the last 40 years. The economic benefits that accrue on average to the offspring of richer parents are greater now than they were in the 1970s. The relationship between family income and higher educational attainment (traditionally seen as a path to social mobility) has become stronger since the 1970s with the expansion of university education benefitting primarily the children of the middle classes (Blanden et al., 2005). Measured by its own criteria of fairness, capitalist society in the UK is not only failing but deteriorating. In such circumstances one would expect more enlightened members of the ruling elite to wring their hands and seek to reverse declining intergenerational mobility through increased educational expenditure targeted at the children of poorer parents. After all, the legitimacy and arguably the economic vibrancy of capitalism depend on their being a certain amount of mobility. There is, of course, a contradiction here between the ideology of equal opportunity and the relations of production that mean that opportunities are, in fact, unequal and increasingly so.

Given that intergenerational mobility has declined in the UK over the last 40 years, we might expect that capitalism is subject to a crisis of legitimacy. Under crisis conditions or a regime of austerity in particular, if citizens recognized that social mobility is declining, then logically the relations of production that produce this immobility would be questioned, even without a value change on the part of citizens, as a belief in the fairness of equal opportunities is a cornerstone of the liberal capitalist belief system. The question is, however, to what extent do citizens actually recognize the extent of social immobility?

The answer to this question is that there is widespread misrecognition of the extent of social immobility. Bamfield and Horton, in their qualitative research on attitudes towards wealth, argue:

there was a strong belief amongst most participants in fair inequality justified on the basis of one or more possible criteria of desert. One of the key factors underpinning the prevailing view

that salary differentials justifiably reflect desert was a widespread belief in the *availability of opportunity*. (2009: 13)

Despite evidence to the contrary that there is greater social immobility now, respondents continue to believe in the availability of opportunity. Success or failure in this 'individualized' worldview is the result of individual endeavour. Bamfield and Horton go on to note that the financial crisis and the revelation of the large bonuses paid to bankers had led some respondents to question whether these salaries were deserved, but had not led to a broader questioning of whether UK society was indeed meritocratic.

Such a worldview, where socio-economic class has been erased as an enabling and constraining condition, is an ideology because it is a belief that serves the interests of the powerful at the expense of the poor (see Thompson, 1990, for competing definitions of ideology). The propagation of such an ideology encourages both the wealthy and the weak to believe that their respective positions in societies' hierarchies are justified. Most of the work that examines how mass media have propagated such an ideology focuses on the representation of the poor, the unemployed and welfare recipients (for a recent exception see Boyle and Kelly, 2012). Such work shows how the poor are split into two categories: the deserving and undeserving in a *divide et imperia* strategy (Golding and Middleton, 1982). Such a strategy is clearly again at work in contemporary Britain as the poor are made to bear the burden of a crisis of neoliberal financialized capitalism not of their making. But, importantly, it is not only poverty that is presented as a consequence of individual behaviour but also wealth. Are the wealthy presented as privileged elites living off the labour of others or as worthy individuals who have risen to the top on the basis of their own efforts? Key here is the representation of those individuals from working-class backgrounds who have defied the odds or rather the inequalities of capitalist society to climb the ladder.

This is hardly a new argument but perhaps it has been forgotten. Leo Löwenthal in 1943 in his essay on biographies in popular magazines argues that the narrative of the 'self-made man' is common:

This unbroken confidence in the opportunities open to every individual serves as a *leitmotiv* of the biographies. To a very great extent they are to be looked upon as examples of success which can be imitated. These life stories are really intended to be educational models. They are written – at least ideologically – for someone who the next day may try to emulate the man whom he has just envied. (1943: 293)

Lowenthal also notes the shift in attention from 'heroes of production' to 'heroes of consumption', or celebrities as we know them now, in the first half of the 20th century in the USA. The social process of production is omitted while the focus on consumption creates demand for goods and services that social production fulfils but does not satisfy. In contemporary Anglo-Saxon neoliberal capitalism, however, the 'hero of production' has returned in the figure of the entrepreneur of which the celebrity entrepreneur is a prominent subset in highly popular programmes such as *The Apprentice*, *Dragons' Den* and *Troubleshooter* (Boyle and Kelly, 2012). It may be argued that such programmes increase social mobility through bringing a culture of entrepreneurship to a broader population

and inspiring emulation. These programmes may well inspire a generation of would-be entrepreneurs. However, the representation of entrepreneurs as self-made, highlighting their ability to overcome the barriers of class, provides an ideological view of the world that serves to support class privilege. While Boyle and Kelly (2012) point to the predominance of 'rags to riches' stories of entrepreneurial (auto)biographies they do not engage in an ideology critique. The young entrepreneurs attracting such media attention and government backing in East London's TechCity come predominantly, and expectedly so, from elite universities with highly dubious records of widening participation (Whitehead et al., 2012).

The ideal person in neoliberal capitalism is the individual entrepreneur from modest origins who, through his or her own ingenuity, tenacity and competitiveness brings innovative, disruptive products to markets thereby humbling mighty corporations and becoming fabulously wealthy (although the romance of consumption is clearly secondary to the romance of business, see Boltanski and Chiapello, 2006). The focus on the individual from modest origins legitimates capitalism, emphasizing that success and failure are down to individual attributes. That this ideological figure of the entrepreneur emerges precisely at the time of rapidly growing inequality and declining intergenerational mobility should reveal the pressing need for ideology critique that brings together textual and sociological analysis, and is grounded in an account of the economic and social conditions that enable all individuals to flourish (see Downey, 2008 for elaboration). The absence of such a concept from media and cultural analysis is indicative of just how dominant this neoliberal ideology has become despite finding ourselves in the midst of a crisis of capitalism (Dumenil and Levy, 2011).

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