

ALTHUSSER'S THEORY OF IDEOLOGY AND CRITICAL COMMUNICATION STUDIES

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摘 要

阿圖塞的意識形態理論影響當代馬克斯文化研究至深，本論文首先介紹其理論的重點，分析阿式如何從結構主義的觀點解釋意識形態和社會之間的關係，並分別說明阿圖塞理論中的重要觀念：壓制性國家機器（RSAs），意識形態國家機器（ISAs），相對自主（relative autonomy），多重決定（overdetermination），再製功能（reproduction），以及其意識形態理論中的特點，包括意識形態是“表徵”體系（representation system），具有物質特徵（material effect），並且是代表一種想像的關係（imaginary relationship），供做人們生活實踐所用。

其次，本論文從媒介的相對自主的角色以及媒介意識形態的表現是透過“表徵”體系，而非“意識內容”兩點來說明阿圖塞意識形態理論對批判傳播研究的貢獻。

本文也同時提出對阿式意識形態理論的批判，主要問題是將社會結構做硬性的劃分，再製功能的解釋陷入狹隘的功能主義窠臼，主體的解釋太過被動，無法說明社會變遷等。

最後則建議以葛蘭西的爭霸觀點和最近發展的論域研究來補足阿圖塞結構主義意識形態理論之缺點，發展以重視傳播內容多義性，以及社會主體主動解讀觀念的批判文化研究。

Althusser's theory of ideology and the notion of ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) have undoubtedly been the major intellectual inspiration underlying the current upsurge of the ideological approach within Marxist cultural studies (Lovell, 1980b: 29; Clark, 1980: 29). His major contribution is to put on the agenda the whole neglected issue in traditional Marxism about how ideology functions in society and becomes internalized of individuals. He also sponsors a decisive move from viewing ideology as "ideas" or "consciousness" to conceive ideology as "materiality" with social effects. McDonnell and Robins, in their comprehensive review essay, "Marxist Cultural Theory: The Althusserian Smokescreen" (1980) identified the development of Althusserian and post-Althusserian theories as the "new orthodoxy" within Marxist cultural studies (p.221).

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This paper is thus proposed to concentrate on

- 1) how Althusser theorize the notion of ideology and the related concept “ideological state apparatuses”;
- 2) how these reformulations contribute to the study of critical communications;
- 3) what are the advantages and disadvantages of this alternative approach; and finally,
- 4) based on the above critique, I will suggest that a Gramscian notion of hegemony rearticulated by a discursive approach can provide a more theoretically convincing framework for us to understand the relationship of the society, media and human beings.

The so-called Althusserian Marxism, usually includes a complex theories frequently supplemented by semiotics and Lacanian psychoanalysis. (McDonnel and Robins, 1980: 158) There is no “single” theory of ideology within Althusser’s own work either. His followers have extracted particular elements for their own theoretical purpose. (ibid, p.165) These complex theories -- Lacanian psychoanalysis, semiology, and Althusserian Marxism -- have been brought to bear on a broad spectrum of cultural studies in the late sixties and early seventies in France and Britain as well, especially in the studies of film, literature, TV, and commercials.¹ (Lovell, 1980: 232) It is beyond the limitation and the scope of the paper to cover all those developments. My discussion will be focused on Althusser’s works of ISAs (1971) and “Contradiction and Overdetermination” (1970) to explicate his conceptualization of society and ideology.

II. Social structure: RSAs and ISAs

To understand Althusser’s notion of ideology needs to trace back to his view of social structure. The overall framework of Althusser’s theory of ideology is rooted in the crucial Marxist metaphor -- base and superstructure. For Althusser, society is conceived as a totality constituted in three substructures: the economic, the political and the ideological. (Althusser, 1971, p.134)

¹ The best known example is the British film journal *Screen* -- the most influential journal working within this current in the seventies. (McDonnel and Robins, 1980; Grossberg, 1984: 410) Besides, Stuart Hall and most of the working papers in the Center for the Contemporary Cultural Studies in University of Birminham also take up Althusser’s essays on “Contradiction and Overdetermination” (1970) and “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus” (1971) and combine them with ideas drawn from a particular reading of Poulantzas (1973) and Gramsci (1971).

Briefly, economic practices are the production and reproduction of the material means of substances and of the specific historical and economic productive relations. So economic practices consist in 1) the form of the productive forces and 2) the forms of the relations of production.

Both the political and the ideological structures belong to superstructure activities. The way for Althusser to make the two distinct phases of superstructures is to borrow from Antonio Gramsci (1971). Dissatisfied with the orthodox Marxist approach to view the state as merely a repressive institution which controls through pure coercive domination, Gramsci tries to distinguish between two types of power in Western capitalist societies: one is through repressive control exerted by the political society, the other is achieved through the civil society (Gramsci, 1971: 12). As for Althusser, he uses two different terms to classify superstructure: the Repressive State Apparatuses (RSAs) and Ideological State Apparatuses (ISAs). The former include the military, the police, the legislature, etc.; and the latter include various ideological, religious, ethical, educational institutions and value systems (Althusser, 1971: 143).

Following Gramsci, Althusser tries to explain the complex phenomena of the maintenance and development of modern advanced capitalist societies (ibid., f. 141-2). Both reject the notion to reduce the state as a mere oppressive instrument of the dominant classes. Meanwhile, both try to grant the superstructures a more independent role which can exert their ideological power. Therefore, on the one hand, there are RSAs directly linked to the common interests of the State. While on the other hand, private institutions like families, religions, trade unions, and mass media, are obvious neither managed nor controlled by the State in many advanced capitalist societies. But for Althusser, they are also part of the State apparatuses because "Given the fact that the 'ruling class' in principle holds state power and therefore has at its disposal the (Repressive) State Apparatuses, we can accept the fact that this same ruling class is active in ISAs insofar as it is ultimately the ruling ideology which is realized in the ISAs..." (Althusser, 1971: 146)

III. Relative autonomy and overdetermination

Yet, for Althusser, this does not mean that the superstructure, especially the ISAs, is simply the reflection of the economic base. In order to break the economic-deterministic model of traditional marxism, Althusser argues each of the economic, political and ideological levels has its own specific effectivity. Different instances follow their own logic of development and are not always and everywhere equally effective. Each practice works with its own particular contradictions which are

not mere reflections or expression of the contradictions of economic level. In fact, various levels often seem to contradict and affect each other, and evolve somewhat autonomously (Althusser, 1971: 134).

Though each social practice enjoys a certain kind of relative autonomy, it does not mean for Althusser that the superstructure is completely independent. The economic is still determinant "in the last instance" in the sense that the mode of production of a given social formation determines which of the levels of that structure occupies the determinant places and what its degree of effectivity shall be. (Althusser and Balibar, 1977: 177 & 224)

McDonnell and Robins (1980) are right to observe that it is through the combination of these two concepts -- on the one hand, the "relative autonomy" of the superstructure, and on the other, the "determination in the last instance" by the "economic -- that Althusser attempts to overcome the deterministic implication (McDonnell & Robins, 1980, pp. 176-7). In other words, Althusser refutes the mono-causal economic determinism by arguing that the various base and superstructural practices may have their own effectivity while the base remains determinant only in the last instance.

This non-economistically determinist relationship between base and superstructure is expounded by Althusser in his "overdetermination thesis." The concept of overdetermination is taken from Freudian psychoanalytic theory. The general meaning of the concept is that those factors which may contribute to the formation of a symptom (e.g. a dream) always constitute in several simultaneous factors, while each of them has some explanatory power. (Smith, 1984: 159-60)

Althusser's overdetermination thesis attempts to reformulate the base-superstructure relation which is no longer seen as a directly "reflective" one. Rather, as Laclau and Mouffe claim, in their representative work *Hegemony and Social Strategy*, that the process of overdetermination is a purely "symbolic" one and "has no meaning whatsoever outside it" (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, p. 98). Namely, the notion of overdetermination triggers an extremely critical move away from seeing the superstructure, or ISAs² as determined by the "economic" base. The emphasis of "linguistic" analysis of the relation between base and superstructure has been introduced, and, therefore, various discursive theories are incorporated into Marxist social analysis.

² The superstructures for Althusser virtually includes RSAS and ISAs as we expounded earlier, however, the analysis of the superstructural function for Althusser is exclusively on ISAs — namely, through ideology.

Nevertheless, Althusser does not follow the discursive notion consistently in his writings. By insisting that the "economic" remains the determinant factor "in the last instance," he returns to all the problems with which he started. Laclau and Mouffe explains this point succinctly as they argue that if the claim that the "economic" is determinant in the last instance is valid for every society, it must be defined independently of any specific moment of society and history. The "economic" then assumes a universal existence as an a priori and its deterministic power is again a simple determination rather than the complex process of overdetermination. All problems of a dualistic view of society, reductionism and determinism recur this formulation (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, pp. 98-9).

IV. Theory of ideology

1. Function of ISAs: reproduction

Although Althusser emphasizes the "relative autonomy" of different social levels, the overall structuralist analysis of Althusser is to argue that both RSAs and ISAs function to maintain the established economic and state order. As Althusser argues that all the Ideological State Apparatuses "contribute to the same result: the reproduction of the relations of production, i.e., of capitalist relation of exploitation." (Althusser, 1971: 154) Though the reproduction of the relations of production is largely secured by ISAs behind a "shield" provided by the RSAs (ibid, 150), each of the ISAs can contribute toward the single result in the way proper to it. For example, the communication apparatus functions through cramming every audience with "daily dose of nationalism, chauvinism", and religious practices through "recalling in sermons with other ceremonies of birth, marriage, and death," etc. (Althusser, 1971: 154)

Based on the presupposition that the superstructure is necessarily characterized by the essential function of reproduction, then the subsequent question arises : How to achieve this reproduction? Another way to put the question is: How the order of capitalist societies is maintained through the function of the ideological superstructures?

2. Definition of ideology

To answer this question, Althusser has offered a carefully articulated notion of ideology. His famous definition of ideology is:

Ideology is a representation of the imaginary relationship of individuals to their real condition of existence. (Althusser, 1971: 162)

This definition consists three major theoretical breaks of previous notion of ideology:

- 1) Ideology constitutes in a “representation system” rather than ideas or consciousness.
- 2) Ideology serves to offer an “imaginary” relationship for individuals to live their social life.
- 3) Ideology has the function to constitute individuals through its representation imaginary systems.

These three points offer the most important theoretical contribution made by Althusser’s notion of ideology:

**1) Ideology is representation system:
the materiality of ideology**

By representation Althusser means a set of “practices” to produce certain meanings. In other words, Althusser denies that ideology is only a system of *ideas* “floating above the real structure of society.” (Coward and Ellis, 1977: 72) Rather, ideologies are “bodies of representations existing in institutions and practices.” (Althusser, 1976: 155) Ideologies are “realized in institution, in their rituals, and their practices, in the ISAs. (Althusser, 1971: 184) Therefore, Althusser argues for the “materiality” of ideological representation:

I shall say that, where only a single subject is concerned, the existence of the ideas of his beliefs is material in that his ideas and his material actions inserted into material practices governed by material rituals which are themselves defined by the material ideological apparatuses from which derive the ideas of that subject. (Althusser, 1971: 169)

According to Althusser, then, all the various social, political, economical institutions, all the diversified practices of the institutions and all the categories people use and all the activities people conduct, whether there is or is not an explicit idea underlying them, are ideological. A simple example used by Althusser shows this point well: kneel down, move your lips in prayers, and you will believe. (Althusser,

1971: 168) For Althusser, therefore, every practice is ideological and the reverse is also true that every ideology should materialize itself in practice.

The emphasis on the "materiality" of ideology has great impact on the study of ideology. Research focus is now shifted to various ways of representations, practices, rituals, formats, institutions, etc., rather than the inner beliefs or ideas of individuals.

2) Ideology consists in the imaginary relationship

Imaginary relationship is used as a contrast to the "real relation" which means, according to Althusser, the original relation between people and their conditions of existence. As Althusser explains this point explicitly:

In ideology men do indeed express, not the relation between them and their conditions of existence, but the way they live the relation between them and their condition of existence: this presupposes both a real relation and an "imaginary", "lived" relation. (Althusser, 1971: 233-4)

The "lived" relations, which do not correspond to the "reality", (Althusser, 1971: 162) is an imaginary one in the sense that they are "illusion, they do make allusion to reality". (ibid.) Most ideologies, e.g. ethical, political, religious, legal, etc., are largely "imaginary". They are not "the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals but the imaginary [distorted] relations of those individuals to the real relations in which they live." (ibid., 165) So Althusser concludes that "Ideology = illusion/allusion." (ibid., 162)

This conclusion may remind us of the orthodox Marxist claim that the superstructure represents the "false consciousness" which reflects the existing dominant structure of society. (Hirst, 1976: 402) However, Althusser rejects the notion of "false consciousness" in the sense that ideology does not mean "consciousness" or "ideas". Rather, as constituted in the nature of materiality mentioned previously, ideology is representation, which consists of various material practices, social activities, rituals, institutions, categories, discourses, etc. Therefore, the presence of ideology is no longer limited to the capitalist mode of production. (Slack, 1984: 85) "There is no practice except by and in ideology." (Althusser, 1971: 159)

It is in this sense that ideology becomes no more false "consciousness", because the ideology functions not through conscious ideas, but through the routine practices, taken-for-granted assumptions unconsciously. Therefore, Williamson argues that

ideology is *invisible*, we are not deceived by the “false ideas”, what we do is just to repeat our everyday practices:

Ideology is always those we do not perceive it as such — it is invisible and hidden from us. Because we constantly re-create it that we do not receive it from above: it works through us, not at us. We are not deceived by someone else “putting over” false ideas: ideology works far more subtly than that. (Williamson, 1978: 41)

Yet, the “falsity” of various ideological representations is restored while Althusser conceives it as “illusion” — as against “reality”. By “reality” Althusser means the “real social (class) division and organization of labor.” (Althusser, 1971: 184) Williamson’s judgment of commercial messages as false categories may best show this point:

[Advertisements] invoke false categories -- to obscure the real structure of society by replacing class with the distinction made by the consumption of particular goods. So instead of being identified by what they produce, people are made to identify themselves with what they consume. [For example,] from this arises the false assumption that workers “with two cars and a colour TV” are not part of the working class. we are made to feel that we can rise or fall in society through what we are able to buy, and this obscures the actual class basis which still underlies social position. (Williamson, 1978: 13)

The problem with Althusserian notion of falsity lies, again, in the dualistic view of society. There is first a “real” social phenomena, and then an “inverted image” which falsely represents the “reality”. As our analysis has already shown that the so-called “social reality” “of class division and technical organization already has a symbolic dimension. Paul Ricoeur makes this point very clearly:

Social action and social relationship are mediated by representations, beliefs, images. It is the mediating function of ideology to secure the dimension of meaningfulness to social action and relationship. In other words, a presymbolic, and therefore pre-ideological stage of real “life” can no where be found. (Ricoeur, 1978: 51)

Yet, unlike the classical Marxism, the “falsity” of the superstructure, that is, the superstructure itself, has its own “effectivity”. Namely, the imaginary representation is capable of *constituting* subjects.

3) Subjects are constituted by ideology

“As a first formulation I shall say:”, as Althusser holds, “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as concrete subjects, by the functioning of the category of the subject.” (Althusser, 1971: 174) In other words, subject is constituted through being categorized into different roles and practices, e.g. the role of workers, managers, the dominators or the subordinate, etc. In fact, according to Althusser, individuals are almost doomed to, and always-already are subjects, even before they are born. For example, people have no choice but to accept the ritual that surrounds the expectation of a “birth”, the taking of the father’s name, and then, the pattern and norms of rearing, etc. (Althusser, 1971: 176) Insofar as man is an ideological animal by nature, men live, move, and have their being in various categories, discourses, practices, rituals, i.e., ideologies. (ibid, 171-2)

The relationships between ideology and subject thus implies a double constitutive. First, “There is no ideology except by the subject,” that is, the ideology, i.e., the imaginary representation of the relations of production, has the function (which defines it) of constituting concrete individuals as subjects. Without functioning as hailing, or interpellating subject, it will not be called ideology. Second, subject is formed through the imaginary relations -- in acceptance or recognition of the imaginary role of the subject, then, there arises the effect of *subjectivity*.

The notion of the “effect of subjectivity” deserves our further notice here. Though Althusser conceives human being as a constituted subject, he does not mean that a constituted subject is merely a passive result without its own effectivity. The “effect” of the “hailing” or “interpellating” is that the subject, recognizing itself from the imaginary representation, would submit to “a higher authority, and is therefore stripped of all freedom except that of freely accepting his submission.” (Althusser, 1971: 182) After the individual is interpellated as a “free subject”, he shall submit freely to the commandment of the ideology and shall freely accept his subjection and shall make the gesture and action of his subject “all by himself.” (Althusser, 1971: 182) Therefore, the operation of ideology in human life basically involves the constitution and patterning of how human beings live their lives as conscious, reflecting initiators of acts in a structured, meaningful world. Ideology operates as discourse, addressing, or, as Althusser puts it, interpellating human beings

as subjects. (Abercrombie, etc. 1983: 56)

Williamson precisely renders this concept of subject to show how the readers of commercials have the “illusion of creativeness” while they are virtually all created by the ideology:

We are constituted as “active receivers” by the advertisement. But the receiver is not a creator of meaning because he/she has been called upon to be so. As an advertisement speaks to us, we simultaneously create that speech (it means to us) and are created by it as its creators (it assumes that it means to us). (Williamson, 1978: 41)

Another example is that *Screen's* analysis of film also “focused on the ways to which the camera functions to produce a particular series of identification for the viewer.” (Grossberg, 1984: 410)

It is apparent that it is the notion of “positioning the subject” that contributes to the establishment of an effective cultural superstructure for Althusser. Besides, the Althusserian break with “humanism” also rests in the fact that through the mechanism of ideology to constitute subjects, Althusser re-asserts Marx's sense of the objective force of social relations on individuals. (Johnson, 1979: 70)

The implication of the theory of “interpellating ideology” is that the effectivity of an autonomous superstructure is built upon, for Althusser, an essentially passive notion of human beings. Whether what the media impose is an “illusion of creativeness” or simply the “illusion” itself, the critical point is: who creates the ideology, or the imaginary representation in its origin? Put it another way, the question is: how can social change be activated by those passive subjects? Lovell thus concludes that “the theory of subject which Althusser borrows from Lacan cannot be a candidate as it stands, for it contains no reference from start to finish to social class and the social relation of production.” (1980b: 44)

While Althusser cannot explain that ideology is generated from the “subject”, he again appeals to the abstract hypothesis of dualistic view of social structure: ideologies are not “born” in the ISAs but arise from the social classes in the class struggle, from their conditions of existence, their practices, their experience of struggle, etc. (Althusser, 1971: 186)

As we have repeated several times, there is no “given” base structure, or class/es. Without being ideologically and politically articulated, neither “class” nor “class struggle”, could be intelligible for us. It is now entirely explicit that the notion of a split social structure not only fails to grasp the nature of society, but

leads to all kinds of theoretical distortions of the consequent ontological assumptions. The theory of subject for Althusser is just one more example.

V. Althusser's theory of ideology and critical media studies

Althusser's influence on critical media studies could be discussed through the following two points:

1) Media are perceived as relative autonomous

Since Althusser argues that the society is constituted in different substructures and each of them functions through their own logic and possesses their own contradictions. What the economic base can do is to "overdetermine" the effectivity of other realms of practices such as mass communication, rather than mechanically "determine" the content of media.

Therefore, this is an important break with the "instrumental view" of mass media in which mass communication is always seen as the determined "cultural arm" of the ruling system. There is still close relationship between media and state though. "Relative autonomy" does not mean the absolute autonomy for Althusser. As one part of ISAs, mass media are accordingly conceived to be state apparatuses. Functioning through ideology, mass communication are considered as real, material practices, and ways of representations with immense ideological influence. (Lovell, 1980: 250)

However, while researchers are devoted to the study of the "specific effectivity" of the cultural phenomena, there is a constant tendency for the "relative autonomy" to lapse into "complete autonomy". The following explanation of Screen's exclusive emphasis on the "media message" or "text" itself may show this point explicitly.

The Althusserian emphasis on the autonomy of each practice within the social whole lends support to Screen's tendency to restrict its analysis of film solely to the "reading" of text. It has been unable to escape the confines of immanent analysis,... because Screen has merely (or nearly) ignored or neglected the question of social context -- these texts have assumed an autonomy, they have become detached and separated from the societies in which they are produced, distributed and consumed... (McDonnell and Robins: 1980, 176-7)³

³ Screen's version of Althusserian theory (in conjunction with Lacan's psychoanalysis and semiotics) has been scrutinized thoroughly in Robins (1976) and McDonnell and Robins (1980).

The sheer focus on the “text” leads to two major problems. One is that hardly any research on the mutual relationship between the economic and social practices. The other is that there is no attention given to any empirical study of various audience reading of the media text.⁴

The impossibility of Althusser’s theory to deal with this problem can be understood from several aspects: (1) There is no concept available to situate media production in a wider social context except a vague presupposition that the ISAs are overdetermined by the economic base in the last instance. (2) Neither does it seem to be necessary to study it since the text (the media) has its own specificity and effectivity. (3) Third, audience research is, indeed, in no sense anything more than a marginal effort to justify the given postulate that ISAs function in the interests of the ruling classes.⁵ (Althusser, 1971: 146)

2) media studies shifting from “content analysis” to “discourse analysis”

Since Althusser’s theory of ideology puts emphasis on the materiality of the social representation system, the ideologies of the media are no longer analyzed by means of “media content analysis” in which the “empirical messages” of the media are analyzed. Most Althusserian researchers agree that it is the everyday practice of journalism, including the professional norms, the routine frameworks, the conventional formats and patterns of program flow, etc., which set limits to what will be reported or represented and what will not. (Hall, 1978 & 1982; Hartley, 1982; Gitlin, 1980)

In other words, it is not the “partisan ideology” taken by the media workers and represented in media messages which renders news or other media messages ideological. (Hartley, 1982: 62) Rather, as following Althusser, it is by an “apprenticeship in a variety of *know-how* wrapped up in the massive inculcation of ideology of the ruling class” that the ideological apparatuses have reproduced the dominant relations of social order. (Althusser, 1971: 156)

The notion of ideology as representations system has undoubtedly enlarged the field of mass communication research. Nevertheless, Althusser’s version of ideology is illed with the problem of functionalism. Granted that every practice is ideological,

⁴ Coward and Ellis (1977) and Lovell (1980b) suggest that more research should be explored in this field.

⁵ The function of ISAs will be analyzed in next section.

What are those concrete ideologies implicated by each practice? Are they essentially the same? Will they contradict with each other? Althusser's overall presupposition is that all ISAs necessarily function to "reproduce" the dominant relations of production. In fact, he does not make any effort to scrutinize if there are different "dominant" ideologies, alternative or even oppositional ideologies represented in various practices.

The problems with Althusserian media studies are certainly closely linked to the overarching framework of Althusser's theory of ideology. The paper will discuss the major difficulties of it in the following.

VI. Critique of Althusser's theory of ideology

One major task of Althusser's intellectual effort is to reject economic determinism which results from the ambiguous formulation given by Marx works. Yet, if what Althusser wanted to do was to complement Marx's inadequate formulation about ideology and superstructure, what he has achieved is to replace the "economic determinism" with the "superstructural determinism" within a functionalist framework.

Let us begin with the problem of functionalism for Althusser. Insofar as Althusser poses the general theory of ideology as to secure the "reproduction of the relations of production", he is vulnerable to the criticism of functionalism. (Callinicos, 1983: Johnson, 1979, Hirst, 1976; McDonnell and Robins, 1980; Smith, 1984; etc.) His overriding concern with outcomes -- reproduction -- suppresses the fact that the reproduction of the dominant system is a result which needs to be continually won through concrete struggling process. (Johnson, 1979: 70) Furthermore, since the so called "ideological apparatuses" are conceived as means to fulfill the necessary "functional end", they virtually have no specific effect themselves. Their effectivity only means to perform the universal function of maintenance or reproduction. (Hirst, 1976: 388) Neither could they have any active role over the dynamics of the social process. (Robins, 1976: 362)

Due to a lack of specific articulation of the meaning of the overdeterminant relationship between base and superstructure, the simple notion of determinism of the economic in the last instance linking with the concept of "relative autonomy" of each distinct level, as McDonnell and Robins observe correctly, just solves the problem of "terminology without confronting the problem itself." (McDonnell and Robins: 1980, 160)

One crucial influence on media studies is that researchers tend to focus on the "text" itself with little concern with the "context". That is why Althusserian cultural

studies are usually criticized as confined to the methodological "narrow textualism." (Lovell, 1980: 250; McDonnell and Robins: 177) The textualism derives from, as explicated earlier, the determinist assumption that the audience/viewer would be "positioned" or placed by a text, whether it is a TV program, a commercial, or a particular film, so as to reproduce the dominant ideology. Althusser is thus identified as a functional determinist which corresponds to the economic determinist; both assume that human beings have no power to resist either the economic law or the ISAs' interpellation. The question "Who makes history?" is completely ignored in place of the question of "How is the current social order secured?" (Smith, 1984: 166-7) The crucial question of the process of social contradiction thus remains not only unanswered but in no way to be answered.

There is one point which must be made clear here. Althusser himself was not unaware of this problem. He thus notes that "the total process of the realization of the reproduction of the relation of production is therefore still abstract, insofar as it has not adopted the point of view of this class struggle." (Althusser, 1971: 184) What he tries to do is to include the notion of class struggle in his theory by arguing that the ruling ideology is achieved in a "very bitter and continuous class struggle". The struggle is first against the remnant of the "former ruling classes and their positions in the old and new ISA", and secondly, "against the exploited class". (Althusser, 1971: 147 & 185)

However, Althusser cannot go further to deal with the problem of the class struggle without confronting his theoretical impasse: How could a functionalist view of ideology account for the subversive ideas or for ideology struggle? (Hall, 1983: 64) The functionalist notion of ideology has prescribed the correspondence between individual and subject. (Hirst, 1976: 400) Althusser claims that individuals are always-already subjects even before they were born. (Althusser, 1971: 176) If an individual must become the constituted, interpellated subject through a whole series of social activities, including those of language, family, law, religion, education, etc., he/she is thus apparently incapable of generating contradictory practices against the imaginary representations.

Even if we admit that contradictory ideologies have already existed in society, Althusser is still incapable of explaining who created them and how they would change through struggle. The theory of subject which Althusser borrows from Lacan's psychoanalysis⁶ turns out to be incompatible with Marx's own account of the class

⁶ According to McDonnell and Robins, the neglect of concrete social process is actually a common thread which link Lacanian psychoanalysis with both Althusser and semiotics.

subject and its role in social struggle. (Lovell, 1980: 242)

It is at this juncture that we suggest that we should discard the Althusserian functional conception of ISAs, his dualism of base-superstructure, the passive notion of human beings, and consequently the way to study the media only in terms of their texts. The next section will be devoted to a tentative integration of Gramsci's theory of hegemony and recent developments in discursive analysis to replace Althusserianism.

VII. Suggestion: An integration of the hegemonic perspective and discursive approach

Confronting the problems generated from Althusser's notion of ideology, including the passive subject, false representations, lack of concern of social conflict, narrow textualism, etc., we are obliged to suggest some reformulation. Indeed, when I try to "disarticulate" the Althusserian theory, what I have in my mind is a general framework derived from an integration of both a hegemonic perspective⁷ and a discursive approach. I would like to make this framework explicit in the following analysis. A full-developed theory is obviously beyond the limitation of the current paper. What I will do is to note some major points with which to confront the major weaknesses in Althusserian notion of society, subject, and the implication for media studies.

1) Constituted society vs. constitutive society

As we have noted earlier, the "functionalist" notion of society proposed by Althusser implies several major defects: (1) It is deterministic, the ideological superstructures are assigned a necessary function, i.e., the reproduction of the relation of production in the base structure. (Hirst, 1976: 394) (2) The deterministic view is situated in the conception of a dualism of the social structure. The economic base is misconceived as practice which is purely *technical*, and *asocial* organizations, rather than as *political*, *ideological* representations. (3) Society, in general, is recognized as merely a constituted unity maintained by the mechanism of reproduction. This functionalist view provides no theoretical space for explanation of social change, class contradiction and power struggle.

⁷ Please refer to Chang (1984).

It is precisely in this context that the notion of a *constitutive* society is suggested to replace the functionalist view. Basically, the concept of a constitutive society is founded upon the Gramscian view of hegemony -- which is acknowledged as the most important Marxist attempt to confront the problem of the process of social formation. (Laclau, 1983: 42) The key notion of hegemony consists of the view that social domination is *won* through the social process of constant ideological struggle among a diversity of social groups which are formed by means of articulating their everyday economic activities.⁸ (Williams, 1977: 114-118)

It highlights the fact that the class domination does not automatically arise from the economic base. Rather, social formation has to be organized, and it is the "constantly contested result of an endless struggle between the exploiter and exploited." (Callinicos, 1983: 153) Society is thus conceived as a "lived system", its meaning may be diversely represented by different social groups -- i.e., it is continually constitutive and constituting. (Williams, 1977: 110)

This view can therefore counter the basic flaws of a functionalist notion of society as a constituted one. First, it is not deterministic; no a priori causal relation is predetermined. It is the concrete, specific historical process which explain the result of social formation. For example, it is still perfectly legitimate to argue that in certain social formations the relations of production have become the locus of an overdetermination of effects. But it is only legitimate if we conceive such an effectivity as the result of the social struggle and historical construction which is "not predetermined by any causal relations." (Laclau, 1983: 42)

Second, the economic base is no longer conceived as purely technical. Insofar as the social power of a class should be based on its "degree of homogeneity, self-awareness, or organization," (Gramsci, 1971: 181) the social class is an entity constituted through ideological and political articulation.⁹

In other words, there is no longer an abstract split in society between the economic base and ideological superstructure since any social practice consists of the articulation and disarticulation in the ideological discourse. Laclau observes this discursive nature of society correctly:

⁸ There is no simple definition possible for the notion of hegemony articulated by Gramsci because it consists of a perspective which involves both a historical-dialectical methodology and a vast ontological framework of social structure, social order, and change. (See Chang, 1984: 74) The points mentioned here are just those considered most relevant to the thesis of the paper.

⁹ This point is developed explicitly in Gramsci's notion of historical bloc.

to affirm the identity between society and discourses does not entail a "superstructure" conception as opposed to an "infrastructure" one because the point is to deny that the discursive and ideological are superstructure. The economic practice itself should be considered as discourse.

The discursive is not, therefore, conceived as one dimension of a society. Both the economic practice as well as the ideological practice are discursive products insofar as their meaning is intelligible for people.

2) Mono-discourse subject vs. contradictory subject

Within a discursive notion of society, the problem of "subject" is also reformulated. To understand this point, let us briefly refer back to the problems of Althusser's notion of subject. For Althusser, the subject is passive and vulnerable and is necessarily "interpellated" by the "ruling ideology" reproduced in the ISAs. The implication of the constituted subject by the given text not only leads to the theoretical impasse for explanation of social change and class struggle, but also does not correspond to the fact that "given the prestige of dominant ideology and its reproduction in so many influential spheres..." there still exist "so many forms of resistance to it." (Hartley, 1982: 142)

Following the view of a constitutive society, social agents play the role of "active appropriators" who reproduce existing structure only through "struggle, contestation and partial penetration of those structures." (Willis, 1978: 175, cited from Morley, 1980: 150) Granted a given news text or commercial, or soap opera or whatever has a given meaning,¹⁰ as Hartley argues, it does not result in an ideological meaning without being "realized" by the subject with more or less subjective consciousness. Large numbers of audiences do not make a mass simply because the same message goes out. That twenty million people watch TV does not mean that twenty million people interact with it in the same way to get the "same" meaning, and the "same" understanding. (Hartley, 1982: 147-8)

To understand the subject as being "active" in appropriation process, we must distinguish between two critical concepts: the "historical/social subject" and the "text subject." (Willemsen, 1978: 48, quoted from Morley, 1980: 159) By historical/social subject we mean that the "real readers" are subjects in history, living in social

¹⁰ A text may in fact embody different textual practices. (Grossberg, 1984: 410) I will discuss the problem of "one meaning" of a text in next section.

formation rather than mere subjects of a single text. The “persons” involved are already subjects with social practices in a largely determinant social formation. (Morley, 1980: 159)

As we have mentioned earlier, the historical process of social formation constitutes in the ideological struggle among various discourses articulated by different social groups. Therefore, the subject exists only as the “articulation of the *multiplicity* of particular subjectivities born by an individual” (as legal subject, family subject, etc.) and it is the nature of the *differential* and *contradictory* positioning within the field of ideological discourses that provides the different reading of the texts.¹¹

Insofar as the subject is embedded in a complex situation of interdiscourses and of multiple interpellations, there is no way for us to assume that any “dominant” meaning may have finally or fully dominated the audience.

The notion of subject in contradictory social discourse, is reinforced, as Laclau argues, by the growth of increasing complexity of the social heterogeneity associated with the advance of modern industry society. (Laclau, 44) The dissolution of unity of subject can be shown in the example of the degree of the revolutionary consciousness held by a white worker on the one hand, and his attitude toward racial conflicts in his neighborhood on the other.

While the argument of the interdiscourse position of the subject may explain the possible contradictory consciousness within the subject and among subjects, one critical question remains unanswered: Human beings may be positioned differently in various discourses, yet, who creates the discourse?

It is at this point that we need go back to Gramsci’s notion of “contradictory consciousness” again.¹² As Gramsci argues:

The active man in the mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity, which nonetheless involves understanding the world insofar as it transforms it. His theoretical consciousness can indeed be historically in opposition to his activity. One might almost say that he has two theoretical consciousnesses (or one contradictory consciousness): one which is implicit in his activity and which

¹¹ Both Morley (1980) and Hobson (1982) attempt to emphasize the potential of differential reading of text.

¹² Both Morley and Laclau fail to deal with the dilemma: the subject is still a passive one whether he/she is interpellated by one or various discourses. However, the creation of discourses cannot be explained by such a relative passive notion of subject.

in reality unites him with all his fellow workers in the practical transformation of the real world; and one, superficially explicit, or verbal, which he has inherited from the base and uncritically absorbed. (Gramsci, 1971: 333)

What Gramsci is saying is that though there may exist some sort of dominant theoretical consciousness pervasive in society, there are still "practical activities" which are not yet articulated, and always remain to be articulated. In other words, Gramsci neither reduces the individual to simply the ideological or discursive subject, nor the society to merely symbolic.¹³ Those ideological representations cannot be identified with all the practical and genuine experiences. In fact, once an experience is articulated and represented in a discourse, it is then closed and opposed to the real nature of experience which should be ever open up to different articulation in different situations. (Gadamer, 1975: 319) Therefore, there exist two sources of contradictory consciousness: one is between the not-yet-articulated practical activity and the articulated theoretical representation; the other rests in those different articulated discourses.

It is these notions of contradictory consciousness, the struggle of ideological discourses, the potential to create articulation, that open up the theoretical space for us to analyze the problem of the "ruling ideology" and the media/discourse analysis.

3) Toward a multiple accentuality perspective of media studies

To argue for a constituted society and a contradictory subject is not only to refute the unified positioning effect of the media/cultural artifact, but also to question the "unified" ideology of the "ruling groups" and the unified representation of it in the media or other communication practices. Both the subject and the text are generated from their own history of discursive or ideological existence.

If we reject the abstract reduction that the superstructure is determined (or overdetermined) by the base structure and recognize that the social domination is a form of hegemony which is continually won through the struggling process of

¹³ Discursive analysis, according to Lovell (1980), is never far from the temptation of treating the discursive order as the complete social reality. There is nothing external to discourse. (p. 28)

appropriation rather than “reproduced” within ISAs, the content of the “ruling ideology” could not be a unified one. It apparently involves the complex meaning ensemble reached through social interactions. No stabilized signification could be guaranteed, the dominant interests are constantly challenged, and articulated. Nevertheless, the continuing constitution of the “ruling ideology” will not conflict with the core interests of the dominant classes. (Mouffe, 1979: 200) This dialectic point is well put by Gramsci:

Undoubtedly the fact of hegemony presupposes that account be taken of the interests and the tendencies of the groups over which hegemony is to be exercised, that a certain compromise equilibrium should be formed -- in other words, that the leading group should make sacrifices of an economic-corporated kind. But there is no doubt that such sacrifices and such a compromise cannot touch the political, it must always be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of the economic activity. (Gramsci, 1971: 161)

If we recognize that the construction of “meaning” (including the ruling ideology) must be understood as a result of social interaction in terms of the discourse confrontation and ideological struggle for power, we then must argue that the meaning of “text”, or other forms of communication messages, is also socially determined, as Morley observes:

Because meaning is generated from discourse, i.e., process of social interaction -- it is this struggle over the construction and interpretation of signs that meaning is produced. (Morley, 1980: 156)

In other words, the meaning of “text” is essentially multi-accentual depending on various social interactions. The problem with Althusser’s notion of ideology in media studies, as in the case of Screen, is that the analysis of an ideological content of a particular text is unjustifiably identified with the pervasive symbolic order imposed on the whole society. (Robins, 1976: 368)

Without taking account of the struggle among contradictory discourses, the ISAs studies are excluded from the social and historical and contextual concerns. (Morley, 1980: 178) Carswell and Rommetveit, as quoted by Morley, make the proposition that

we must "expand our analysis of the utterance from its abstract syntactic form via its content, toward the pattern of communication in which it is embedded. Substituting the terms of argument, we can propose that we must expand our analysis of the TV text (or other texts) from its abstract signifying mechanisms (or mode of address) via its ideological themes toward the field of interdiscourse in which it is situated. (Morley, 1980: 158)

The problem of "false consciousness" or "false representation" is dismantled here. Society is no more conceived of separate "levels" or "instances" as in terms of the base-superstructure metaphor. What we need to study is the "dynamic and internally contradictory process" of social formation. (Williams, 1977: 82) There is no ruling ideology which completely and exclusively belongs to a certain "class" or "classes". Through the confrontation of various struggling discourses, the "ruling ideologies" would be constantly challenged and rearticulated. Ideology is a "terrain" of power struggle rather than a "stabilized" representation which contrasts to a so-called "concrete reality" of the base.

The task of media study is therefore to trace the process of the "struggle". It is equally important to criticize how the dominant ideologies are systematically represented in various media practices as to recognize the contradictions emerging from the text encoding as well as the decoding. There is no guarantee that a certain text is produced with absolute unified meaning. Neither is there any unified way of reading by audiences could be guaranteed.¹⁴

VIII. Conclusion

In conclusion, any modern approach to Marxist theory of culture, as Williams points out in his important article "Base and Superstructure in Marxist Cultural Theory", must begin by considering the proposition of the relationship between the base and superstructure. (1980: 30) Althusser attempts to refine and re-evaluate this

¹⁴ Concerning a hegemonic perspective integrated with the discourse analysis of media studies, refer to Chang, C. H. 1987, "Critical Communication Studies: Introduction to Stuart Hall's British Cultural Studies", Mass Communication Research, No. 39. pp. 91-116; and Chang, C. H. 1990. "Cultural hegemony Theory and Mass Communication Research". Proceedings of the Second Annual Symposium on Film, Television and Video: Screen and Monitor: A Critical Investigation of Image Culture. Taipei: Fu-Jen University.

relationship by emphasizing the “relative autonomy” of the superstructure. Yet most of his difficulties lies in his extension of the original metaphorical categories dualistic relationship between the base and superstructure. Meanwhile, through those concepts of RSAs and ISAs, overdetermination, reproduction, interpellation, etc., Althusser’s view of social practice is illed with a strong notion of deterministic functionalism.

Although Althusser’s structuralist conception of society is flawed, his emphasis on the specificity of each different social practice renders mass communication perceived as relative autonomous. This is an important break with the traditional Marxist view which usually sees all superstructure as merely the reflection of the basestructure. His elaboration of ideology as representation system exerts immense influence on media studies. Integrated with the semiotic and psychoanalytic analysis, Althusserian media ideology research is conducted in terms of its “material practices”, such as the routine practices, format patterns, narrative structures, etc., rather than its “inner content”.

However, Althusserian structuralist study of mass media is critiqued as “narrow textualism” with almost no “context” analysis and a relative “passive” notion of audience. In order to counter these problems, the paper suggests that we need a hegemonic view of society which conceives social formation as a continuing struggling process rather than the dualistic split notion embodied in the metaphor of base and superstructure and a deterministic relationship between the two. The hegemonic view of society argues that it is the ideological struggle by various social groups subjects that constitutes the dynamics of social formation. Therefore, there is no functional or absolute guarantee which group is “determined” to win the struggle. “Subjects” are hence seen as constituted but still “active”.

Finally, the ideological study of mass communication is not to identify “the” unified ideology embedded in a given text, but to recognize the “multiple accentuality” of language. It is equally important to analyze the encoding as well as the decoding of the text. That is, the text needs to be located in its context to be understood. It is here that we may agree with Callinicos (1983: 153) that through the confrontation of Gramsci’s perspective of hegemony with the theory of discourse, that further progress in the Marxist cultural study of ideology will be made.

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