The dominant ideology thesis*

ABSTRACT

A good deal of research and theory construction in the sociology of knowledge relies on the 'dominant ideology thesis'. This thesis suggests that there is in most societies a set of beliefs which dominates all others and which, through its incorporation in the consciousness of subordinate classes, tends to inhibit the development of radical political dissent. In this article we propose a number of reinterpretations of this thesis which at present systematically ignores the effect of the dominant ideology on the dominant class. There is good evidence that the subordinate classes are not incorporated into the dominant ideology and that, by contrast, the dominant classes are deeply penetrated by and incorporated within the dominant belief system. In most societies the apparatus of transmission of the dominant ideology is not very efficient and, in any event, is typically directed at the dominant rather than the subordinate class. We conclude that there is no well marked dominant ideology in the later phases of capitalism. Thus, the dominant ideology has the function of maintaining the dominant class's control over property in feudalism and early capitalism. In late capitalism, however, the changing nature of the dominant class in terms of a partial divorce between ownership and control means that the dominant ideology ceases to be crucial for the coherence of the dominant class.

INTRODUCTION

The view that religion, or more generally common culture, can be manipulated to the political advantage of the dominant class can be traced back through the rational criticism of the Enlightenment philosophes to Plato's 'golden lie'. However, the main impetus for contemporary analysis of dominant ideologies comes from Marx and Engels' The German Ideology and, partly through the influence of Marxism on the sociology of knowledge, the thesis occurs in many areas of sociological research, particularly in studies of politics and culture. Its argument is, very basically, that there is in most class societies a
pervasive set of beliefs that broadly serves the interests of the dominant class. This dominant ideology is then adopted by subordinate classes which are thereby prevented from formulating any effective opposition. A number of assumptions and implications in this conventional position require further examination, in particular the notion that capitalist societies require a dominant ideology to ensure the continuing political superiority of the dominant class.

In criticizing the dominant ideology thesis here we examine the position of subordinate classes in feudalism, early and late capitalism, in order to show that these classes rarely, or never, shared the ideology of the dominant class. The role of ideology in feudalism and early capitalism was to ensure the accumulation and inheritance of property which had the effect of creating some political coherence within the dominant class. The limitations on the spread of dominant ideologies throughout class society were to some extent a consequence of the fact that these societies did not possess an institutional machinery for disseminating the beliefs of dominant classes. In late capitalism there are important changes in the development of institutions which can carry dominant values (such as the centralization of compulsory education), but we suggest that there is still no requirement for a clearly defined dominant ideology because of changes in the nature of dominant classes. Given the historical scope of this examination, evidence for certain sections of the argument is necessarily schematic. Our aim is primarily to suggest various ways of reinterpreting existing studies of ideology in relation to class structure. In the course of this reinterpretation, we wish to focus on a question which has been rarely or inadequately posed, namely, what is the function of the dominant ideology for the dominant class? The stages in our argument (the ideological conditions of various forms of social organization, the presence of institutional means of dissemination, the place of ideology in late capitalism) are not intended to be logically dependent on each other. Each section of the paper is thus a relatively autonomous contribution to the debate about dominant ideologies.

MARX’S TWO THEORIES OF IDEOLOGY

Marx and Engels can be said to have developed, at least implicitly, two theories of ideology. The first is based on the formula from the Preface that ‘social being determines consciousness’ which is usually interpreted as ‘social class determines consciousness’. Each class by virtue of its particular relationship to the means of production and out of its general conditions of existence generates for itself (typically through the medium of class intellectuals) a culture which gives expression to its material conditions. Since social classes have different economic circumstances, they also have different interests, so that ideas grasp, represent and promote separate interests. In short, each class forms its own system of
beliefs, the character of which is determined by the particular interests of the class. As Marx says in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*,

Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought and views of life. The entire class creates and forms them through tradition and upbringing.²

The second theory, again from the Preface, claims that ‘the economic structure of society, the real foundation' determines ‘a legal and political superstructure'. The theory that the base determines the superstructure can be rendered in terms of class relations by noting that the base (relations and forces of production) is associated with dominant and subordinate classes which exercise functions of (in capitalism) labour and capital. The base determines the superstructure in the sense that each mode of production has a dominant class which generates a dominant ideology; the effect of the dominant ideology is to facilitate the subordination of the working class. The classical version of this theory is to be found in *The German Ideology* where Marx and Engels assert that the ideas of

the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, i.e. the class which is the ruling material force of society, is at the same time its ruling intellectual force.³

Since each mode of production has a dominant class which controls both material and mental production, each mode of production has a dominant ideology. The dominant class is able to impose its system of beliefs on all other classes. The adoption of the ideology of the ruling class by dominated classes helps to inhibit the development of a revolutionary consciousness and thereby contributes to the reproduction of existing conditions of the appropriation of surplus labour.

The two theories are potentially in conflict with one another. The first suggests that each class forms its own system of belief in accordance with its own particular interests which will be basically at variance with those of other classes. The second suggests that all classes share in the system of belief imposed by the dominant class. For example, according to the theory of ‘ruling ideas', the British working class in the nineteenth century should have shared the same beliefs as the bourgeoisie. However, when Engels wrote about the working class, his commentary illustrates the ‘social being’ theory of beliefs, namely that each class has its own beliefs:

The bourgeoisie has more in common with every other nation of the earth than with the workers in whose midst it lives. The workers speak other dialects, have other thoughts and ideals, other customs and moral principles, a different religion and other politics than those of the bourgeoisie.⁴
The separate interests and material conditions of the two classes produce two cultures rather than a dominant ideology imposed by a class which owns the means of mental production.

It would be possible to suggest various arguments whereby these apparently contradictory theories could be reconciled. In the case of the British working class, one might argue that, for example, their reformist consciousness was overdetermined by both the dominant ideology of the capitalist class and their own class-based beliefs. Our argument in later sections of this paper will be that this type of solution is not entirely satisfactory. Most conventional Marxist theories, and more generally sociological theories dependent on them, eventually come down to an implicit imagery of class/ideological relations in which one class (the ruling class) does something to another class which is underneath it. The result has been that Marxist theories often obscure the relationship of dominant class to dominant ideology. There is sometimes an admission that dominant classes do believe in their own ideology but we still need to ask what are the consequences of this for the organization of class relations. By raising this type of question, it is possible to pinpoint the analytical weaknesses of conventional interpretations which rely too heavily on convenient slogans like ‘religion is the opium of the masses’.

The force of the potential conflict between the two theories of ideology can be underlined by observing that this issue in Marxism is endemic to contemporary sociology in general. For example, there is a similar analytic problem in Parsons’ theory of socialization in dominant values through the cultural mechanisms of the family, church and school. The centrality of values as a theoretical solution for ‘the problem of order’ has made it difficult to produce a theory of the emergence and maintenance of deviant, sub-cultural value systems in relation to deviant behaviour. In *The Social System*, Parsons simply treats deviant role behaviour as a product of inadequate socialization; more typically, sociologists rely on Durkheimian assumptions about the effects of deviance on boundary maintenance. The problem for functionalists, however, arises most critically in the case of modern, differentiated social systems which are characterized by cultural pluralism. Differentiation produces social systems which are highly adapted to their societal environment, but it also creates a legitimation crisis, which arises from competing and diverse sets of beliefs. Berger and Luckmann’s answer appears to be that, while pluralism does indeed generate crises, there exists a bed-rock (‘sedimentation’) of taken-for-granted beliefs which are sufficient to make everyday worlds manageable. The point of these observations is not to assess the adequacy of functionalist theories of knowledge but merely to point out the similarity of analytic difficulties in functionalist sociology and Marxism. Functionalists are committed both to the notion that a common value system is a necessary condition for the existence of a social system, and to the theory of
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structural differentiation which creates pluralistic value systems. Marxists are committed to a theory of 'ruling ideas' and to the theory that each class, because of its own interests, has its own unique culture.

These two Marxist theories of ideology also raise problems of a more methodological character; both have to provide some specification of what will count as 'the dominant ideology' or 'the ideology of a class'. For example, many Marxist theories of culture tend to render the doctrine as being one about those systems of belief that are particularly obvious. Thus in studying a particular society's culture the dominant ideology is taken to be that which is 'obvious' or most widely available in written texts; it is simply that set of beliefs which occurs statistically most frequently in a sample of cultural products. The problem, however, is not merely one of content analysis; it is that the obvious ideology may be that appropriate to the dominant class but it may also not be. The nature of this ideology will depend on the constitution and class relationships of the intellectual stratum. That is, the most pervasive system of belief may be that appropriate to a rising but not yet dominant class. In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, for example, individualist doctrines of all kinds were prominent, although they are beliefs that are often said to be appropriate to a capitalist class that was not then economically or politically dominant. Everything in cases of this kind depends on the character of the apparatus that creates and distributes knowledge and opinion, and, in particular, on the constitution and class affiliation of the intellectual stratum. Intellectuals are not always closely bound to the dominant class and, when they are not, it is not unlikely that the most pervasive beliefs will not be those of the dominant class. In sum, conventional interpretations of the dominant ideology thesis often do not indicate how such ideologies are to be identified, and are equally unspecific about their actual content.

THE DOMINANT IDEOLOGY AND SOCIAL CLASSES

The basic assumption of the 'ruling ideas' model is that the dominant class, because it controls the means of mental production, is able to force, or at least ensure, that the dominated classes think their thoughts within the concepts provided by the belief systems of the dominant class. It may even be that the rebellions and protests of the subordinate classes are expressed through the medium of the dominant ideology since articulate, oppositional forms of thought are not available. At the very least, the theory must assume that there is a common culture in which all classes share and that the content and themes of that common culture are dictated by the dominant class. In fact it is typically the case that subordinate classes do not believe (share, accept) the dominant ideology which has far more significance for the integration and control of the dominant class itself.
In *Capital*, Marx states that

the mode of production of material life dominates the development of social, political and intellectual life generally . . . is very true for our own times, in which material interests preponderate, but not for the middle ages, in which Catholicism, nor for Athens and Rome, where politics, reigned supreme.9

This observation by Marx has been elaborated by Marxists like Althusser and Poulantzas10 to mean that the economic base determines which structure (politics, ideology or the economic) in any given mode of production is dominant. Briefly, this view of political and ideological structures means that certain modes of production may require functional support from ‘non-economic factors’. In feudalism, for example, where peasants by customary right have certain privileges over the use of land, extra-economic means (political/ideological structures) are required in order to extract labour-service from the peasantry. Hence, Poulantzas wants to argue that religion was a dominant region of the ideological structure in societies characterized by the feudal mode of production. This theory would imply, in terms of the ‘ruling ideas’ model, that the peasantry shared the religion of feudal lords or, to employ a term favoured by Poulantzas, the peasantry were ‘contaminated’ by the ideology of the landlords with the effect that their revolutionary interests were impeded.

In general, there are good grounds for believing that the European peasantry existed outside the ambit of the dominant Christian orthodoxy of the Church as a ruling institution. The peasantry were symbolically separated from the official mysteries of the Church by the liturgical rituals; whereas in the early Church the priest had celebrated Mass facing the people, in the medieval period

he turned his back on them and retreated to the fastnesses of the sanctuary, separated from the people’s part of the Church by a forbidding screen. Finally, the Mass was read in a tongue the people could not understand.11

On the face of it, the development of the confessional in the thirteenth century as a public, compulsory obligation on all believers under the monopoly of the Church which distributed grace from the Treasury of Merit, would look like strong evidence for ‘the ruling ideas’ model. The problem is that, while the peasantry probably only attended a short shrift on major and minor festivals and while absenteeism was rife, the nobility had spiritual directors in constant attendance. It would seem odd that the dominant class should be more plagued by problems of guilt and conformity than the dominated classes. Some doctrines in secular as well as religious use, might also be seen as candidates for the function of the dominant ideology. The ‘Great Chain of Being’,12 for
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instance, was a theory of the ranking of all beings in the universe, starting with God and the angels, working through the various conditions of men, and ending with the animals. Although such a doctrine appeared to give religious and even natural sanction to the feudal social order, it was simply not generally available to the peasantry since it was so often couched in an intellectualized form.

Religion is often cited as the dominant ideology of the feudal period. However, another example would be the role of theocratic theories of kingship in medieval society. Kingship was legitimated on one of two principles. The popular (ascending) theory suggested that the king was a landlord who, like other landlords, had responsibilities to society and was answerable to the community for the exercise of his privileges. The sacramental (descending) theory stated that the king was above society and responsible to God not men. A dominant ideology of this sort should presumably serve to legitimate kingship to the subordinate class, but in practice the main significance of the debate over the nature of kingship was to establish a relationship between barons and the king. The doctrine of theocratic kingship was utilized to justify the king to his barons, not to the peasantry.

These issues concerning the religiosity of the peasantry and the institutional dominance of the Church bear directly on the problem of secularization. While many sociologists of religion have been committed to the historical myth that the feudal period was an 'age of faith', Martin Goodridge has recently re-examined comprehensively the contemporary evidence on religion among the peasantry in France, Italy and England to show that the peasantry was generally alienated from the orthodox beliefs and institutions of the official Church. While the rural clergy were symbolically influential, they were often an unreliable channel for Christian belief; they were, even in nineteenth-century France, too badly educated to provide sermons. Throughout the medieval period, the Church appears to have experienced great difficulty in ensuring that some of its minimal requirements, such as the Easter communion, were adhered to by the poorer sections of the laity.

Our argument here is probably most aptly summarized by the religious sociologist, Gabriel Le Bras:

Catholicism was the ruler's religion. Civil registers were kept by the priests. Basic acts of Christian life were imposed by canon law. Orthodoxy was strictly enforced to discourage heresy and schism. Christianity came to be the religion of the French by virtue of the monarchical constitution.

Official Christianity appears to have been relatively unsuccessful in securing the rural peasantry within the precise confines of orthodox belief and practice.

A similar kind of argument applies to early capitalist societies. Again the conventional view is that there was a dominant ideology which
infected the working class. It is suggested, for example, that individualism, especially as expressed in the doctrines of the British utilitarians, was the key component of the dominant ideology of the bourgeoisie and penetrated all features of bourgeois political economy, morality and religion. Bourgeois political economy (*laissez faire*, the night-watchman state, the individual conscience) is usually regarded as the dominant ideology of a social class which was economically and politically triumphant after 1850. There are a number of problems with this interpretation. The syndrome of beliefs associated with individualism has a very ancient ancestry and this makes it difficult to connect individualism in any specific way with *modern* bourgeois capitalism. For example, Goldmann's *The Philosophy of the Enlightenment* connects the beliefs concerned with contract, individualism, free will, universalism and equality with the rise of commercial markets as early as the thirteenth century. Similarly, Chenu traces the rise of the individual, subjective conscience and the transformation of morality from objective laws to subjective intention from the growth of urban markets in the thirteenth century. In Britain, clear indications of 'bourgeois culture' (individualism, conscience, rights, contract) can plainly be found in the seventeenth century. The implication of these analyses of the early origins of 'bourgeois culture' is that the so-called dominant ideology of early capitalism was in fact the ideology, not of a dominant class, but of an ascendant class. The doctrines of the autonomous, subjective individual were used by the commercial, ascending bourgeoisie to criticize and challenge the ideological status quo. Further, this oppositional and pristine individualism becomes very much altered as the capitalist mode of production becomes established. This development can be most clearly seen in the evolution of British utilitarianism. Bentham's studies of the British legal system were an attack on conventional jurisprudence which he regarded as serving the interests of the landed aristocracy rather than the bourgeoisie. Benthamite philosophy was an attack on the 'sinister interests' which prevailed in parliament (that is, the over-representation of aristocratic families). By contrast, the later philosophy of J. S. Mill had much more conservative implications. Mill, frightened by the prospect of an uneducated working class controlling parliament and influenced by de Toqueville's study of American democracy, wrote to defend parliamentary institutions for the benefit of the middle class which was being undermined by a proletarian mass. Towards the end of classical utilitarian individualism, Spencer attempted to provide an evolutionist defence of the individual against state intervention in a period when the state was becoming increasingly important for British capitalism (in education, sanitation, town planning, economic protection, overseas expansion). Even if we did assume that individualism was the dominant ideology of capitalism, it would be difficult to show that the working class in British capitalism actually adhered to these beliefs. At best, it might be possible to show that the labour aristocracy was
utilitarian and that as the labour aristocracy became increasingly influential in the leadership of the trade unions after the 1880s, working class beliefs were ‘contaminated’ by the dominant ideology.

There are, of course, a number of other candidates for the role of ‘the dominant ideology’ in early capitalism. One such is Methodism. Thompson has argued that

Methodism obtained its greatest success in serving simultaneously as the religion of the industrial bourgeoisie . . . and of wide sections of the proletariat.21

In the debate over Methodism from Halévy to Simmel, Thompson’s argument does, of course, have some support, but the strength of his position is weakened when one considers that, after the great boom in Methodism (in terms of membership/population ratios) between 1800 and 1850, all branches of Methodism never amounted to more than 3 1 per cent of the total population.22 Radical working-class Methodists tended to leave their predominantly petty bourgeois chapels because of the ‘no politics rule’ which successfully divorced religion from political struggle.23 The problem of any argument which would regard religion in general as an aspect of the dominant ideology of capitalism is that the working class was largely ‘unchurched’ by 1851.24 It is difficult to see how the churches could efficiently and effectively dispense the ‘opium of the masses’ when the working class were absent from the churches.

The counter-argument would be that, while the organized churches had failed to secure the allegiance of the working class to the dominant ideology, the working class were still dominated by ‘Victorian morality’ and religion through other, sometimes unofficial, means. The dominant Victorian moral norms of respectability, sexual puritanism, aspiration and asceticism were in fact the norms of the working class. Unfortunately, this secondary argument is also totally unconvincing. Engels’ view that the two classes of Victorian Britain were two races apart with different religions, moralities and politics is much closer to the mark. Primary and secondary evidence all point to the fact that, in terms of religion and morality, the working class and the capitalist class occupied separate cultures.25 It is worth recalling that Weber’s extensive research in the comparative sociology of religion led him to the view that the modern working class is ‘characterized by indifference to or rejection of religion’ because in capitalist conditions

the sense of dependence on one’s own achievements is supplanted by a consciousness of dependence on purely social factors, market conditions, and power relationships guaranteed by law . . . the rationalism of the proletariat, like that of the bourgeoisie of developed capitalism . . . cannot in the nature of the case easily possess a religious character and certainly cannot easily generate a religion.26

Attempts by English capitalists like William Ibbotson, the owner of a
Sheffield steel works, to use Christianity to discipline factory workers were, as a consequence, repeatedly unsuccessful.\textsuperscript{27}

So far we have argued that in feudalism and early capitalism, there is little convincing evidence to suggest that the subordinate classes accepted the dominant ideology. In late capitalism the position is more complicated. Thus, it is often argued that there is a dominant ideology which is a major factor in inhibiting the development of a revolutionary consciousness in the working class. Miliband, for example, draws on Gramsci’s concept of hegemony to suggest that there is, in Western capitalist societies, ‘a process of massive indoctrination’.\textsuperscript{28} This is achieved as ‘the result of a permanent and pervasive effort, conducted through a multitude of agencies’ and specifically by the effort of members of the dominant classes who ‘are able, by virtue of their position, for instance as employers, to dissuade members of the subordinate classes, if not from holding, at least from voicing unorthodox views’.\textsuperscript{29} However, most contemporary sociological research rejects the ‘dominant ideology’ view in favour of an account of British working class culture which stresses its dualistic character. There has recently been a great deal of work on this issue and, although there are clearly differences of emphasis between various authors, the overall conclusion is that working class consciousness is characterized by a fluctuating relationship between ‘dominant’ and ‘subordinate’ conceptions. For example, Hill in a recent study of dockworkers \textsuperscript{30} concluded that workers would adopt more ‘militant’ postures in concrete situations, like the issue of trade unionism at the workplace, than they would towards more abstract questions, like the significance of trade union power at the national level. Again, Mann concludes that ‘at every turn we have been confronted by a profound dualism in the worker’s situation and his consciousness. . . . Surges of class consciousness are continually undercut by economism and capitalism survives’.\textsuperscript{31} Parkin sees the normative order as being made up of three competing meaning systems—a dominant value system, a subordinate value system which promotes accommodative responses to inequality, and a radical value system which promotes opposition. Thus, in ‘most Western societies all three meaning-systems tend to influence the social and political perceptions of the sub-ordinate class’\textsuperscript{32} although it is still the case that different groups will have differential access to each of the three. Other writers\textsuperscript{33} suggest that two forms of consciousness, the dominant ideology and a form of oppositional belief, coexist in the working class and are in tension with one another. Each system of belief comes to the surface at different times. The latter is mobilized in periods of conflict, particularly in strikes, while the former is adopted as a set of beliefs appropriate to more peaceable times. In sum, we suggest that, at least, the literature demonstrates the minimum conclusion necessary for our argument, namely that subordinate classes in contemporary capitalism do not straightforwardly adopt the dominant ideology.
The conclusion that dominant ideologies are not held, or are held in a moderated way, by subordinate classes, clearly conflicts with the conventional ‘ruling ideas’ model. Further, this model has little to say about the manner in which the dominant classes do or do not hold the dominant ideology. This problem is thought to be of little significance and the only relevant point seems to be that the dominant classes should not be seen as cynically manipulating the dominated classes; they do believe what they say. We wish to argue that just as the dominated classes do not hold the dominant ideology, the dominant classes do. This implies a redirection of sociological interests, for the chief impact of dominant beliefs is on the dominant not the dominated classes. To use another vocabulary, the prime function of the dominant ideology is towards the dominant class. To some extent we have already made this point in the earlier discussion. The dominant classes have been both the bearers and the recipients of orthodox religiosity, of conventional morality and conformist politics. While the shrift of the peasant was short and infrequent, the confessions of nobles under the guidance of spiritual directors was long and permanent. Attempts to enforce regular confessions on the poor usually drove the laity from the Church. Again the doctrines of individualism and utilitarianism were not formulated or appreciated by the working class; they were abstract theories produced by intellectuals. Even to the extent that individualism moulded religious beliefs, the dominated classes remained relatively untouched. Again the ‘true’ believers in the personal morality of the Victorian period were the bourgeoisie.

THE APPARATUS OF TRANSMISSION

The effect of our argument so far is to turn the conventional ruling ideas model on its head for we have suggested that, in terms of what people believe, the dominant ideology has a greater impact on the dominant classes than on the dominated. This conclusion is supported by some consideration of the apparatus by which beliefs are created and transmitted. This is an area in which the classical Marxist theory is comparatively weak. In that theory the ruling class has to ‘persuade’ subordinate classes of the truth and moral relevance of a set of beliefs which are contrary to the interests of the subordinate class. This would seem to imply the existence of an extremely powerful set of agencies which transmit beliefs downwards from the dominant classes and it has often seemed difficult to show that the agencies available are that powerful. We now attempt to argue that the apparatuses of transmission of belief are not very efficient in reaching the subordinate classes, and moreover, are more likely to affect the dominant class. For example, in feudal societies, the Church, in the form of preachers, mendicant monks and priests, constituted the main agent of transmission of the ideological structure. However, the actual practice of the Church was to erect both
language and ritual barriers between peasant laity and priesthood. In addition the medieval Church was characterized by massive regional, national and cultural diversities. In these respects the teachings of the Church were likely to be impenetrable to the peasantry but less so to the rather more literate dominant class who in any case would have had close personal contact with the priesthood. In early capitalism, as we have already indicated, the Church was even less open to the subordinate classes, and at this time the apparatus of transmission was probably at its weakest. However, the development of mass education and a system of mass communication do seem to promise a more effective apparatus. Nonetheless it could be argued that the education available to the elite, particularly in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century, is a great deal more intensive and more likely to be formative of a coherent set of beliefs than that provided for the subordinate classes. We conclude that, until fairly recently, the dominant classes were greatly more exposed to the apparatus of ideological distribution than were the subordinate classes and that they still are exposed to at least the same degree. One can suggest that the fact that the apparatus has become potentially more efficient is one of the reasons that subordinate classes in contemporary society have been drawn more closely into the dominant ideology. Therefore, we do not wish to argue that the dominant ideology is never believed by the subordinate classes, only that it is more pertinent for the dominant classes. It could be argued that any ideological incorporation is a secondary effect of the development of the educational system.

These arguments prompt the suggestion that the dominant ideology does not function to secure compliance from the dominated classes. Indeed it might be said that compliance of this kind (or even pragmatic acceptance) is irrelevant as long as there are other mechanisms of coercion. In British feudalism, the struggle for control of the means of production was settled eventually by enclosures, not religion. The alternative to ideological compliance is, however, not inevitably to resort to force. The conventional Marxist 'ruling ideas' model is, at least covertly, tinged with Weberianism; it rests partly on the assumption that without continuous legitimation social actors will not accept a social system which relies on the frequent employment of naked force. For conventional Marxism, the dominant ideology has the effect of making power appear legitimate in the eyes of the dominated class. While the ruling class may well desire a situation in which subordinate classes accept existing class relations as legitimate or God given, there is a sense in which this form of compliance may be unnecessary. In modes of production where the subordinate classes have been alienated from the means of production (for example, competitive capitalism), the fact that workers have to labour to live will itself constitute a permanent pressure towards their co-optation (Marx's 'the dull compulsion of economic relations'). One illustration of this pressure can be found in
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the fact that peasant opposition to feudal authority was typically seasonal since, particularly at harvest time, the conditions of everyday life in peasant agriculture systematically inhibited active, sustained opposition. Similarly, banditry was a seasonal occupation of unattached men. In capitalism, the 'coercion of everyday life' is reinforced by the fact that urban workers during economic crises cannot return to self-sufficiency off the land; the same also holds for agricultural wage labourers. In capitalism, especially before unionization, the working class is effectively controlled by everyday exigencies in that capitalists decompose labour by employing migrant, women or child labourers, extend the working day or ensure that necessary labour time is at the bare minimum. We do not of course wish to exaggerate our argument with the claim that the coercion of the workplace or the routine of everyday life is a complete explanation of working class quiescence and that ideology is completely irrelevant. However, we do wish to suggest that the importance of ideological compliance is exaggerated and that the real significance of the dominant ideology lies in the organization of the dominant class rather than in the subordination of dominated classes.

THE IDEOLOGICAL STRUCTURE OF LATE CAPITALISM

In earlier parts of this paper we argued that the working class in late capitalism does not in any straightforward sense adopt the dominant ideology. The best interpretation of working class consciousness is that it is dualistic, involving some accommodation with the dominant ideology. Connected with this feature is the greater efficiency of the apparatus of transmission of dominant beliefs. In sum, our argument that dominant ideology functions for the dominant rather than subordinate class has to be expressed less forcefully for the contemporary phase of capitalism than for either feudalism or competitive capitalism, although the general drift of the argument can still be sustained.

We now have to re-examine these arguments by considering the ideological structure of monopoly capitalism. This is a large subject, and our comments are necessarily brief and schematic. Again, our main intention is to cast doubt on the conventional interpretation.

Sociological interpretations of the ideological structure of late capitalism are notable for their lack of specificity, but, more importantly, for their bewildering variety. The reader is offered an enormous range of characterizations of belief ranging from the advocacy of the rights of private property to doctrines of utilitarianism. We will argue in the last section of this paper that many of these characterizations are anachronistic in the sense that they are more appropriate to early capitalist societies. However, the diversity of dominant ideologies on offer may indicate more than a simple failure to agree since it may suggest that there are good grounds for supposing that there is no strongly marked
dominant ideology in modern capitalist societies. Whereas moral beliefs played an important function in the ideology of early capitalism, the moral region of ideology is more or less irrelevant in late capitalism for supporting the economic and political place of the dominant class. More precisely we would like to argue that there is only a very weakly defined dominant ideology and there is considerable 'pluralization of life-worlds'. The net effect is that there is a lesser degree of ideological coherence in late capitalist societies than in the others that we have discussed. That there are paradoxes in this position will be plain, since it involves taking seriously the conclusions, though not the reasoning, of two arguments often thought to be discredited, namely the 'End of Ideology' thesis, and the view that the diversity of opinion and belief in the modern world is sociologically significant.

In the 1950s political sociology claimed that advanced capitalism was characterized by the end of ideology. The liberal ideologies of the West had solved the major institutional problems of political participation with the result that the ideologies of the Left, which presupposed class conflict, were now irrelevant. A typical response to this thesis was to provide evidence of continuing class struggle, social inequality and ideological confrontation. Thus, Miliband in *The State in Capitalist Society* pointed to the crucial role of legitimating institutions (family, church, school, mass media) in maintaining and justifying the capitalist system of class inequality. More recently, Westergaard and Resler have argued that the ideology of private property, individualism and achievement is closely connected with continued existence of social inequalities. The oddity of this reply to the end of ideology thesis is that it regards the supposed dominant ideology of early capitalism (such as laissez-faire liberalism) to be also the dominant ideology of late capitalism. This type of theoretical response consequently ignores major changes in the institutional forms of capitalism (such as changes in forms of ownership, control and possession) and changes in the nature of the capitalist class. In fact, the ideology of owners of small capitalist firms in the private sector is frequently in opposition to the beliefs and interests of large capitalist enterprises, multinational firms and the state industries. These conflicts between different sectors of capital find part of their ideological expression in Britain in policy struggles within the Conservative Party between different groups who represent conflicting interests within capital. Since early and late capitalism in Britain are still based on a form of socio-economic organization where profit is privately appropriated, it is to be expected that beliefs and institutions connected with the support of private property would continue to play an important part in the ideological system of capitalism, but it is difficult to claim that this feature of the ideology of capitalism is dominant.

The end of ideology thesis focused on the issue of whether the subordinate classes were no longer committed to radical alternative
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politics. We would suggest a reinterpretation of this issue by looking at the commitment of the dominant class to various ideologies. It could be claimed that the dominant class was characterized by an end of ideology in the 1950s and early 1960s in Britain in the limited sense that the various components of the dominant class converged on a common political platform, namely the ‘welfare consensus’.41 For example, in the post-war era there was at least minimal agreement over the mixed economy, industrial efficiency, the importance of welfare provision, the need for formal equality of opportunity in education and so on. Identification with this form of consensual politics represented a balance between the interests of various sections of society, although its net effect was to favour the interests of one particular fraction of capital. The so-called ‘dominant ideology’ of late capitalism is thus at best an uneven and uneasy amalgam of assumptions about private property and about the importance of state intervention in economic life.

Our reinterpretation of the end of ideology thesis involves the claim that there is no decisive, clearly articulated and uniform set of beliefs which provides comprehensive coherence for the dominant class. Another manner of expressing this position would be to suggest that there has been a proliferation or pluralization of beliefs, world-views and ideologies, an argument very familiar to sociologists.42 We would argue that the proliferation of world-views, though confined mostly to the moral sphere, is significant. One index of the end of a central ideology in the region of morality is the development of certain doctrines in moral philosophy where it is no longer possible to specify in any coherent, authoritative fashion what will count as ‘duty’ or ‘responsibility’. The changes in moral philosophy from Moore to Ayer presents an ethical map of the transitions within the capitalist mode of production.43 Of course, the fact that pluralism and secularization appear to attend the differentiation and specialization of social systems has been specifically commented on by sociologists. For example, Berger and Luckmann claim that in a pluralistic society there exists a shared core universe taken for granted as such, and different partial universes coexisting in a state of mutual accommodation . . . outright conflict between ideologies has been replaced by varying degrees of tolerance or even cooperation.44

AN ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATION?

In the earlier parts of this paper we have argued, as against the conventional ‘ruling-ideas model’, that (1) subordinate classes in general do not hold the dominant ideology (2) ruling classes generally do hold it (3) consideration of the apparatus of transmission of belief lends plausibility to (1) and (2), and (4) in modern capitalism there is not such a
well-defined dominant ideology. Completeness would require a well constructed alternative theory of the dominant ideology which would account for these phenomena. We do not attempt such a theory. Rather we offer some comments which might form its outline, an outline which is still consistent with Marx's other postulates.

We suggest that the dominant ideology is best seen as securing the coherence of the dominant class. This is clearly not an argument about the requirements of a mode of production at a general, abstract level as is provided, for example, by Hindess and Hirst. In fact we believe that it is impossible to produce a concept of ideology as a requirement at the level of mode of production, and that there are in any case important difficulties associated with the distinction between pure modes of production and concrete social formations. It could be argued, therefore, that our discussion is pitched at an intermediate level in the sense that it makes claims about the necessary requirements of capitalism as that mode of production developed in a particular kind of society.

In feudalism and early capitalism, the conservation of private property—its inheritance, distribution, accumulation and investment—was of crucial significance for the continuity and reproduction of relations of production. In concrete terms, secure channels for the conservation and accumulation of property were necessary conditions of existence for the maintenance and expansion of the feudal manor and the family firm. Re-formulating Marx, we might express this significance by saying that, from this requirement of property, there arose a superstructure of political, legal and moral beliefs which grasped at the level of ideas, this functional requirement. Private property in land and capital required a relatively stable marriage system, clear laws of inheritance, principles of legitimacy, adoption and re-marriage. The dominant ideology provided this complex of legal, moral and religious values which have the function of conserving property. In addition, the dominant ideology provided a psychology of guilt which inhibited illicit sexuality, disregard of parents' wishes for suitable mates, respect for the (economic) needs of the family. In short, the dominant ideology was aimed at preventing 'marrying out'—an act which threatens the continuity and concentration of family wealth. In feudalism, it was Catholicism, on the one hand, and the system of honour, on the other, which provided the ideological mechanisms for insuring the loyalty of sons and daughters to family property. The confessional system of family spiritual directors was ideally suited to achieving this aim since it provided constant supervision of orthodox (conformist) patterns of sexuality, duty and marriage. The dominant ideology was only in a very secondary fashion concerned with the sexual life of peasants and workers. The stability of peasant families was of little interest to landlords concerned with the selection of suitable mates and dowries for their sons, the constancy of their spouses and the
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good behaviour and honour of daughters. One might say that feudal lords were as worried by romantic love as they were by the prospect of peasant rebellions.

The religious and moral core of the dominant ideology thus attempted to guarantee the family as a mechanism for the conservation of property; it functioned to provide a degree of normative coherence in the dominant class. Other aspects—legal and political—were also significant in providing this coherence. The dominant ideology had to minimize the possibility of fractions within the dominant class which would challenge its coherence. The long struggle in medieval societies over the theocratic and feudal character of the king represented such an attempt to establish a common basis between barons and the king. The dominant ideology was a cultural mechanism which had the role of protecting the dominant class from the threats of intra- and inter-class struggles. It effectively unified the dominant class by imposing a code of morality upon it, by ensuring that members of the class more or less believed the same thing. These dominant moralities in feudalism and early capitalism were also markedly inegalitarian, a feature whose effect was to separate the dominant class (in its own eyes) from other classes. In feudalism, honour was a personal status inherited by noble birth which eliminated the peasantry from the circle of cultural value. In early capitalism, the ethic of achievement served to define the wealthy as the religiously saved. While most commentaries by conventional Marxism on the dominant ideology of competitive capitalism have focused on political ideology (such as individual political rights), morality was probably more significant for the system. Furthermore, the accumulation of capital in early capitalism in Britain was heavily dependent on privately generated investment funds, an additional indication of the importance of the coherence of the property owning class.

The existence of a dominant moral ideology does not, of course, imply that it will be uniformly imposed on the dominant class without opposition from certain strata or fractions within that dominant class. The tradition of Courtly Love, for example, was at one level an obvious threat to the moral code of the noble family. However, the main themes of Courtly Love poetry (humility, courtesy, adultery and romantic sexuality), recognized that, since marriage was in fact a contract for the security of property, romantic love could only exist outside marriage. Courtly Love, while appearing to be a form of deviance within the dominant feudal class, in fact gave explicit recognition to the contractual significance of marriage for property. This tradition of poetry also recognized that romantic love was necessarily ephemeral and insignificant when contrasted with the sacred values for which the Church stood. Romantic poetry gave expression to a form of aristocratic truancy rather than open rebellion. Similarly, the existence of systematic prostitution in Victorian London gave tacit support to the idea that marriage was a contract rather than a romantic/sexual relationship.
Our argument is that 'Victorian morality' with its emphasis on sexual control, paternal authority and family loyalty was important for the control of family property. We are, of course, aware of contemporary reappraisals of the traditional view that all Victorians were sexually inhibited. It is in fact quite clear that there were many 'Other Victorians' with secret lives involving pornography, prostitution, homosexuality and perversion. Our argument for the economic role of Victorian moral beliefs does not require that there should be no deviance within the dominant classes or their middle class agents. The notion that marriage was a contract rather than a sexual union carried with it the implication that sexual entertainments had to be sought outside the home. Two comments on My Secret Life—a book representative of Victorian pornography—are important in this connection.49 Firstly, the existence of organized prostitution was very much an 'open secret' especially in London and the large sea-ports. Secondly, this sexual autobiography is in many respects an anthropological exploration of the sordid underworld associated with certain working class occupations. It serves to demonstrate the gulf which separated the working and upper classes in terms of moral expectations in Victorian England. The deviance of a number of eminent Victorians and the availability of organized prostitution and commercialized pornography thus provide paradoxical support for the view that there was widespread commitment in the dominant class for preserving marriage as a viable economic contract. On the basis of his comprehensive study of Victorian sexuality, Pearsall comes to the conclusion that the exotic pornographic interests of Victorians like Richard Burton, Frederick Hankey and Henry Ashbee were the product of a society which was based on a conspiracy to keep sex where it belonged—in silence and between sheets... There was hardly room at all for prosaic sex; where sex was mentioned it was in nutty, esoteric, exotic . . . ultra-romantic contexts.50

The peculiarities of Victorian pornography and sexual deviance points, therefore, to the coherence of 'family morality' as the dominant moral code of the Victorian capitalist class.

By contrast the coherence of the dominant class in late capitalism is relatively unimportant since the economic functioning of this form is not dependent on the existence of a dominant class which retains capital within the family structure. For example, monopoly firms (especially multinational corporations) are not family firms, they are not privately owned, and they do not generally depend on inherited or family capital for finance. Instead they have recourse to financial institutions (banks, the state, pension funds, stock market). This indicates the real significance of the divorce between ownership and control. It is not that the divorce weakens the concept of a dominant class; rather it is that this class no longer represents the private ownership and control of capital.
The implication of this argument is that, as compared with early capitalism, there is relatively less need for a dominant ideology in monopoly capitalism.

Finally, we should add two points of clarification. Firstly, one should not exaggerate the difference between forms or stages of capitalism. For example, we have distinguished between early and late capitalism. However these are still forms of capitalism and we suggest that associated with any form of capitalism there must be certain doctrines or beliefs, in particular those stressing the rights of private property. Thus in late capitalism there is still a residue of such beliefs though a dominant ideology greatly more extensive than this is not present. Secondly, we do not deny the existence of a propertied class in late capitalism. We suggest that this is rather an effect of the continued private appropriation of profit rather than one of its conditions of existence.

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NOTES

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1. In this paper we wish to avoid confronting the specific theoretical difficulties which are associated with the technical distinction between 'competitive capitalism' and 'monopoly capitalism'. For an account of the competitive/monopoly distinction, cf. Nicos Poulantzas, Classes in Contemporary Capitalism, London: NLB, 1975, pp. 134 ff. The terms 'early' and 'late capitalism' are descriptive categories which refer to changes in the organization of capitalism in Great Britain such as the separation of ownership and control, the concentration of capitalist production and the crucial role of the state in economic organization. We also deliberately ignore the set of issues which are raised in Marx's treatment of ideology by the distinction between reality/appearance in the analysis of alienation. This issue is separate from the class analysis of ideology. For a discussion of the appearance/reality issue cf. Norman Geras 'Essence and Appearance: Aspects of Fetishism Marx's Capital' New Left Review, no. 65, January–February 1971, pp. 69–85.


29. Ibid., p. 181.


34. This effect of the confessional was a major aspect of the conflict between Jesuits and Jansenists. A detailed analysis is presented in Theodore Zeldin (ed.), *Conflicts in French Society*, London, George Allen and Unwin, 1970, ch. 1.


44. Berger and Luckmann, op. cit., p. 142.


47. For a recent discussion of the

