

Lecture 24  
Sociology 621  
December 12, 2005

## MYSTIFICATION

In the next several sections we will follow up in more detail the distinction Thereborn made between three modes of interpellation: what is, what is good, what is possible. These distinctions correspond fairly well to a more traditional set of distinctions within Marxism between three different aspects of ideology or ways in which ideologies are understood:

Ideology as *Mystification* = what exists

Ideology as *Legitimation* or *Normative Structure* = what is good

Ideology as *Hegemony* = what is possible

### 1. Definition of Mystification:

1.1 *MYSTIFICATION* = Distortions of perceptions of reality that mask/obscure that reality.

Ideological practices produce human beings as social subjects by transforming “lived experiences” into subjectivity. Mystification concerns the ways in which cognitive understandings of “what exists” are formed out of our lived experiences, formed in such a way that they distort and mask the way the social world really works.

1.2 *Mystification of nature*: To illustrate the idea of mystification, consider a nonsocial example linked to what we might call “ideologies of nature”:

We see the sun setting. This is the appearance, the lived experienced of our real relationship to the sun and earth. No matter how hard you try, you cannot see the earth rotating. In medieval society with its specific social structures and ideologies, the scientific understanding of the relationship between earth and sun was blocked by the natural ideology of nature that posed as science. People were burned at the stake for arguing that the sun was stationary. In capitalism, there is no obstacle in natural ideology any longer because of the character of capitalist social relations, and thus we can comfortably see the sun set, experience a sun rise, and yet know that it is fixed and the earth moves. This does not mean that our visual perceptions have changed, but those perceptions no longer generate a subjective understanding of what exists that masks reality.

As is clear from this example, the discussion of mystification immediately poses very murky epistemological issues: If we claim that people’s consciousness is false or their ideas about the world are distorted/incorrect, we must of necessity have some sort of standard of unfalse/true consciousness or undistorted/correct perception. This notion of ideology, thus, poses a contrast of *ideology* vs. *science*, which ultimately depends upon a sound theory of science.

For the present I would like to suspend that discussion and just assume that somehow or another we will be able to adequately distinguish scientific understandings from ideologies. Here I would like to focus on the problem of mystification as a substantive issue and see what marxist theory has to say about it.

The heart of Marxist discussions of mystification centers on the concepts of *commodity fetishism* and *capital fetishism*. But before I discuss these two rather complex concepts, I would like to give some simpler examples of mystification:

## 2. Social Examples of mystification

### 2.1. *Individualistic explanations of individual acts.*

a. **Poverty:** We observe that some people are poor and some people are well off. We also observe that some people who are born poor become well off, and some do not. Since these people differ in their outcomes/fates, the cause of these outcomes must be born by the individual. Thus explanations of poverty are collapsed into explanations of why some people are poor and some not. The structural basis for the existence of poverty as such--exploitation, class domination, etc.--is opaque and ignored.

b. **Crime:** This is an even more powerful example: individuals commit crime. They actively make a choice and act. Two people in the same socio-economic condition may make different choices, and thus the explanation for why one person commits a crime and another does not must lie in the differences between them. The explanation of Crime is reduced to the explanation of individual criminal acts. But, the possibility that the range of choices open to individuals is socially-structured independently of their wills, and that it is the structure of choice-ranges which determines the rate of crime, is again ignored.

### 2.2. *Partial structural explanations of structural effects.*

It is not the case, of course, that structural explanations never enter accounts of social causation. On the one hand, social conditions are seen as relevant in the determination of individual attributes. In the popular consciousness, people do recognize that children of the rich are benefited by virtue of their social origins in the development of skills, personality capacities for competition, etc.; and culture of poverty analyses are commonplace for explaining why the poor are the way they are. And, on the other hand, in some instances, social outcomes are seen as directly shaped in some sense by social processes. Thus, people commonly see government spending as affecting inflation and unemployment.

But what is not grasped in popular consciousness is the “conditions of possibility” of such partial effects, that is, the social structural context within which government spending has such effects. A very good example of this is the effect of mechanization of unemployment, loss of jobs, etc. People typically experience mechanization as itself a cause for the destruction of jobs, not understanding that capitalist relations of production are the “condition of possibility” of this outcome. Instead of mechanization releasing time from toil for all people, it releases some people from jobs altogether.

### 3. Fetishism

Now let us look at commodity fetishism and capital fetishism:

a. *commodity fetishism*: Really not such a complicated notion. Commodities acquire value through a process of social labor, that is by virtue of them being produced as commodities within the capitalist labor process. But they appear to have this property only by virtue of their exchange with other commodities, that is by their relationship to another physical object. The social relation between producers thus takes the form of a relation between things. “It appears,” Cohen writes, “That (people) labor because their products have value, whereas in fact they have value because labor has been bestowed upon them.” Commodities thus appear to have a power of their own, autonomous from the producers.

b. *capital fetishism*: Capital appears to have a power of its own, independent of its conditions of existence. Since capital is necessary for means of production to be set in motion, it appears that capital is itself productive. Furthermore, it appears that capital as such generates profits (see p. 123 in Cohen for a good explanation of this). This leads economists to see capital and labor as two factors of production each of which receives their proper share of revenues (the fallacies Marx explicates in the Trinity Formula discussion in vol. iii of Capital).

### 4. Mystification and Reality

Mystifications are distortions of reality, but *they are not hallucinations*. They do represent real relations. Poor people may have different characteristics from nonpoor, criminals may have specific personality traits, government spending may increase inflation, mechanization does destroy jobs, commodities do assume an autonomous power which dominates exchange and capital does receive a profit proportional to its own magnitude. And, from the vantage point of the earth, the sun moves through the sky. These are real effects. The mystification is in the distortion of the understanding of the character of these effects, their causes/determinations, and conditions of existence/possibility. If they were pure hallucinations they would be easier to combat

## 5. Mystification of the Actual and the Possible

Perhaps the most crucial consequence of mystification is that people fail to understand that the existing social world with its properties, structures, constraints, is not “inevitable,” “natural,” “eternal.” When capital assumes the character of an independent power, as the necessary condition for production, then it appears to the actors that without capital there would be no production. Capitalism thus becomes the only form of social organization capable of organizing the production of industrial use-values. This is of great importance, for if people are convinced that no other form of society is possible, then even if they feel the existing society is rotten, there will be little incentive to struggle against it.

This is precisely why demonstration models of alternatives -- either through revolutionary example or through liberation projects within existing social structures -- have important potential ideological effects. *The social production of functioning alternatives is one of the basic ways of struggling against the mystification of the existing society as the only possible society.* (Note tremendous effort of imperialist powers to wreck such experiments -- Cuba as good example)

## 6. Functionalist Thinking in the Theory of Mystification

There is a strong tendency in Marxist discussions of mystification to adopt a highly functionalist view of such distortions. Capitalism is seen as somehow secreting spontaneously precisely those distortions which are optimal for the reproduction of the relations of production. Commodity and Capital fetishism are not simply masks of reality, but mystifications that optimally deflect worker's consciousness from challenges to the capitalist order.

We have already criticized functionalist explanations in our discussions of the state and many of those criticisms apply here. But in addition I would like to emphasize two important points.

1) *Mystification distorts the perceptions and understandings of the bourgeoisie as well as the proletariat.* Ideology-as-mystification prevents the bourgeoisie and the state from understanding adequately the workings of capitalist society, and thus impedes their own rationality. Capitalists thus tend to have narrow, particularistic forms of consciousness, quite incapable of grasping the long run requirements for the reproduction of their class power. Mystification is thus contradictory as well as reproductive. Distorted understanding of capitalism may be more devastating to oppositional groups -- since a correct theory may matter more for challenge than for maintenance of the system -- but the distortions go on both sides.

2) The thesis of the automatic functionality of mystification tends to deflect analysis away from the problem of the *institutional obstacles to demystification*. Rather than asking the question in the form:

“what is it in people’s daily practices which distorts their cognitive maps of the society?”

We also need to ask the question:

“What are the obstacles or mechanisms or processes which block the process of demystification, which obstruct challenges to mystifications?”

Especially given that many of the elements for knowledge of these relations exist, we need to know why people resist this knowledge. Why is it that people continue to accept the mystifications generated in everyday life even when they are exposed to challenges to those misperceptions, distortions?

## 7. Ideological Apparatuses & struggle

The answer to this question leads to an investigation of what is sometimes called **ideological apparatuses** --institutions which systematically codify, defend, propagate ideologies and block challenges to those ideologies in various ways. When Marx writes that the ruling class not only controls the means of physical production but of ideological production, this is what he is referring to: the control of institutions which elaborate ideologies defines a basic process by which the process of demystification is thwarted.

**Ideological Struggle** = struggle over these apparatuses, struggle to disseminate demystifying frameworks.

## 8. Mystification and Socialism/Communism

Cohen argues that fetishism disappears in Communism, and that more generally communism is unmystified. All relations become immediately transparent; there is no gap between the experience of reality and the knowledge of reality.

In contrast, Althusser argues that Communism also has ideology, that there is never a transparent unity between immediately experienced relations and the relations themselves, and thus there is still a need for science. Cohen says that social science withers away with communism, just like the state.

I think a better way of seeing this is that in a society without class antagonisms there would be less of a contradiction between the ideology of everyday life and science. There would still be

distorted perceptions -- just as there is in nature -- but there would be no particular obstacles to scientific demystification.

In feudal society, feudal relations generated obstacles to scientific demystification of the ideology of nature. Those obstacles were embedded in the Church and its practices of sustaining mystification. These obstacles no longer exist, at least not to such a socially pervasive extent. In social relations, however, there are still exists obstacles to demystifications -- these are the ideological apparatuses. In a society of human emancipation these obstacles are minimized.