

Manufacturing of Consent in Times of War I: Information as Ideology¹

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"It's something more fundamental going on. It's a well-organized, all-European campaign to turn us scientists, human or natural, into experts. The idea is, we have a problem—let's say an oil spill in Louisiana—so, we need experts to tell us how to contain it. We have a public disorder, demonstrations; so, we need psychologists and so on. This is not thinking. What universities should do is not serve as 'experts' to those in power who define the problems. We should redefine and question the problems themselves. Is this the right perception of the problem? Is this really the problem? In other words, we should ask much more fundamental questions." (Slavoj Zizek on Democracy Now, October/18/2010)

Introduction

Let me begin by thanking the organizers of this conference for inviting me and Prof. Whyte to participate in this conference. The current Honors In Action theme – The Democratization of Information: Power, Peril, and Promise” – not only seems to be important in general, but, given recent developments in the media systems and the internet, it also seems to be quite timely.

In my talk, I will try to discuss three main things: namely (1) the general “problem of information,” (2) access to information, and (3) the difference between “spin” and “information” and what in philosophy is called *social materialism* and *critical theory*, which go back to 19th Century ideas – especially to the philosophy of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels – and which have become more prominent in the 20th century in critical social philosophy. The problem of information, though it sounds so modern, was not foreign to social and political thinkers in the past, though the problem was posed in different terms, namely, in terms of *belief* and what Marx called in his text. *German Ideology*, “ideological reflexes.” This problem has been picked up and

¹ Prof. Whyte will speak about “Manufacturing of Consent in Times of War II: TBA”

redefined by the tradition in sociology, social theory, and social philosophy in the 20th century. However, given the time frame of this presentation, I will not be able to go into the details of the historical underpinning of the “problem of information,” so instead I will focus first on trying to reconstruct the problem and dissemination of information in terms of Marx’s concept of ideology; second, I shall discuss a recent example from the Gulf war in 1991, which should demonstrate that we need to analyze the problem of government, information and spin from a broader theoretical context that ultimately includes the institutional power institutions and economic culture within which we find ourselves. Seen from a materialist and critical standpoint, we cannot separate the problem of information from the problem of how we think of our society as a whole. Indeed, my brief reflections are based on the overall claim that information is *never* socially neutral, that it *never* just expresses or consists of “facts,” and that it is *never* independent from power. I am, accordingly, against the, in my view, illusionary and technocratic idea that information is readily available, just “there” to be disseminated, and that it only needs to be picked up. Such a position even strikes me as the best expression of what Marx calls ideology (a point that I will return to a bit later).

Nevertheless, it is common that many people (still) believe that the main problem we are faced with is the *selection* and *dissemination* of information. And although I partly agree with this diagnosis, I ultimately would like to make the stronger claim that the real problem is not how information is *selected* by the users, audiences, etc.; rather, I think that the theoretical challenge here is to understand the *production* of information, i.e., I believe we should rethink the notion that information, especially in the age of the internet, is simply available and, as such, neutral, especially since there are consequences that follow from thinking this is true. I shall call the

claim that information is neutral *Informational Positivism*. At least three aspects speak against this position:

[1] information is not to be *found*; rather, it is *produced*;

[2] information is not simply produced; rather, it is needed;

[3] the need for information is not simply to be found; rather, the need for information is itself produced.

With these three aspects of the circle of information production, I am taking up Marx’s model of social reproduction; for what Marx (initially) had in mind in his early philosophy is the following: the economy is not a subsystem of our society; rather it is the main mode through which societies as a whole reproduce themselves. *Every* subsystem of the society, accordingly, becomes a subsystem of the social-economic reproduction of the society. So, if the main mode of the social-economic reproduction of the whole society is capitalist (or any other mode for that matter), all subsystems will necessarily be affected by the primary mode of economic reproduction that operates in that society. As a consequence, from a Marxist point of view, traditional separations between the production of the “ideal” level (ideas, theories, beliefs, etc.) and the “real” level (economy, classes, productive forces, capital, social structure, etc.) can no longer be maintained, as the subsystems, such as the education system, the art system, the political system, the health system, etc., become *productive* systems themselves, which in one way or another contribute to the overall reproduction of the society. The education system, for example, is not simply disconnected from what we need to produce in order to reproduce our capitalist mode of life as a whole; rather, *it is part of the (re)production*.

Ideology

In this connection, Marx held two theses: [1] the production of ideas, which for him mainly occurred in religion and philosophy, depends upon the overall reproductive system; [2] the production of ideas is called ideological if it produces a *false consciousness* of the social reality. Accordingly, ideologies, from a Marxist standpoint, are false belief-systems that are necessary to keep the reproduction of a society in place. Thus, ideology, for Marx, has a hallucinatory quality (Althusser 2001, 108), given that ideologies involve the production and maintenance of beliefs, ideas, and theories that do *not* allow us to see how the real existing social conditions operate and work. Ideologies function, therefore, like Freud's unconscious. For example, in one of my classes that I teach at *MSU* I usually ask my students at the beginning of our first class whether they believe that they live in a free society and whether they believe that they live in a democratic system. As it turns out, usually around 90% of my students positively affirm those questions. Now, the interesting aspect is the following: once we start to reflect on what it actually means to live in a free society and what democracy is, it turns out that almost all of those students never thought about those meanings and their immediate claims. Consequently, without proof, without reflection, and without any further conceptual insight into what they are talking about, my students simply assumed or, in different words, *believed* that they live in a free and democratic society. The question is, then: where does this belief stem from? Given that these beliefs did not rationally enter the minds of my students, why is it there?

It should be clear that there is much more to this problem than just these questions: just think about everything you simply assume about the world you live in, without having ever asked whether your beliefs are true. The simple answer that all those beliefs are in our minds because we go through education and culture, even if these processes lead us into the right direction, is

not really sufficient, as almost none of us gets *explicitly* indoctrinated. Rather, most of the time, the ideas that we have in our minds about the world we live in are tacitly placed in us and – in my words – *produced* by the system within which we participate. Some of those beliefs refer to the *whole* of our society, such as “we live in a free society,” we “live in a just society,” or “hard work leads to social success.” When I ask my students why they believe that they are free, most of them answer that they have choices, that they can say what they want, and that they can choose to do what they want. I usually ask my students if they would choose to stay in class if I would simply give them a 4.0 in class. It turns out that 90% would leave the classroom. Consequently, those 90% do not stay in class because they really *choose* to be there; rather, they “want” to be there because they feel “causally forced” to stay in class because of the grade they believe they want or need to receive. So, in this case, they are not really free: instead, the success system we are operating within and what we call “grading” *makes* them stay in class, and produces the belief that they are in class voluntarily. In addition, they feel the *need* to stay in class, which is a need that is produced by society. Consequently, it is not a choice; rather it is the production of a *need* (in this case to go to college) that determines what we *believe* are our own choices. Why do we “need” to go to college? Where is that *need* coming from? The need to go to college is certainly not “natural,” although it *appears to us* as something “fixed” and naturally demanded.

My point, hopefully, is obvious: the whole issue of that we *believe* about our societies and social reality becomes more complex, as we must assume that our “hallucinations” about the society, our never-questioned assumptions, the doctrines we have in mind, are all produced as part of the reproduction of the society. It is very clear, for example, that what we call the “American dream” is *really* a dream, as it does not match anything in the reality. Ideologies are produced as a necessary part of keeping a system running. They are, as Marxists would put it,

false conceptions of current and, more importantly, possible (!) social modes. As we can further learn from the debates in the 20th century, ideologies have an “unconscious” quality and are ultimately not simply mental content in our minds; rather, they are lived and real: ideologies permeate our institutions, our buildings, our practices, our disciplines, our doctrines, our movements, our streets, as well as our state apparatuses, such as the police, the university, the churches, the military, and so on.

Information and Ideology

We should see now be able to see why the problem of ideology is so closely connected to the problem of information, insofar information – as it interests us here at this conference – has much to do with what a member of a society gets to know about events or, even, about the setup of that society. I think that we can re-formulate the problem of information in terms of ideology construction, as we simply need to ask *where*, *who*, and *why* is information produced as something that we experience as “given,” “fixed,” “facts,” etc. More specifically, I think that we must make a case for the following: the call of *Informational Positivism* for the “information itself” and the call for “let the information speak for itself” is itself the central expression of an ideology, as it implies the assumption that information is thing-like, objective, and not made. However, as I just tried to outline, beliefs require the production of *needs*,² and as such, every so-called “piece of information” belongs to a social-political system that itself controls, forms, frames, and structures the production process of that information.

In this vein, we tend to disconnect the use value from the informational value and thereby create an independent, fetishized, and “dead” thing called “*the information*.” The pure

² See Zizek, *Mapping Ideology*, p.11

“informational value,” though, is an illusion, as it only hides the social relations of production and the production of *needed* information that brought it about and is still present within it. In technical terms, we tend to *reify* information as something non-social.

Need and Information

One of the best examples of the intertwining of information, the production of information and the need for information, can nowadays be found in the advertisement industry, as the advertisement industry is the most visible system through which we produce the need that is necessary for reproducing our commodified life. For example, advertising is everything on television. We tend to believe that TV, magazines or other forms of media are content-centered forms of information dissemination, with advertising as an unimportant add-on. When we watch our evening soap opera or favored show, we tend to believe that the show is interrupted by commercials. However, actually, it is exactly the other way around. *The content exists to support the advertising.* Also, most corporate news or government information is inherently meant to “sell” certain ideologies and values. Information has, thus, become a commodity, which is especially visible in several current trends: [1] political election processes are coming about and are realized as “advertisement campaigns,” through which the need for a “political brand” or “political commodity” is produced, and unfortunately any substantial democratic deliberative exchange is no longer visible; [2] government itself and the information need *it* produces is done through PR agencies, and as a consequence, political values, decisions, and the politicians themselves turn into something that must – as the English language nicely expresses it - be *sold* to the public. Because of this, the political process itself becomes reified, commodified and a capital process. As such, the political process no longer appears to us as something changeable:

all we are asked to do is to choose between “brands” and “products.” Ironically, this is *exactly* what the ruling ideology is about, namely, the belief in the total unchangeability of the political process itself. We are simply buying different commodities when we go and vote: the commercialization of the political process reduces political positions, arguments, political confrontations and the communal good to buttons, labels, backyard signs, t-shirts, names, mottos, logos, & etc. and thereby supports the notion that politics is identical with a brand and commodity that either works or does not work. Voting, in such a system, becomes simply a “consumer choice” that *seems* to be disconnected from social reproduction. The reduction of political debate and the fight to the exchange of short messages leads to what Marx called “fetishism of the commodity.” In addition, according to some 20th Century philosophers, *reification* (Lukacs) as the political system appears to us as something “foreign,” “fixed” and something that we can no longer influence, change, or participate meaningfully in. For example, the current political apathy on US campuses is most likely the result of the commodification of education and politics: indeed, information in politics and about politics has become commodified and reified.

Example: PR, Information, and the Gulf War in 1991

In our postmodern society, one might say that the best way to produce need is through *advertisement* and through the *commercialization* of the political process. Let me offer you an example of what I have in mind:

“At the start of the first Gulf War in 1991, president Bush said that Iraqi soldiers had invaded a Kuwaiti hospital, pulled 312 babies from their incubators, and ‘scattered them across the floor like firewood.’” (Robbins 2004, 128) “Too bad it never happened. The babies in the incubator

story is a classic example of how easy it is for the public and legislators to be misled during moments of high tension. It's also a vivid example of how the media can be manipulated if we do not keep our guards up. [...] Iraq invaded Kuwait in August of 1990. As the BBC reported: "The country's ruler, Sheik Jaber al-Ahmed al-Sabah, fled into exile in his armour plated Mercedes, across the desert to the neighbouring Saudi Arabia." The Kuwait government had to find a way to "sell the war" to the American public, who were interested, but not deeply involved. So, under the auspices of a group called Citizen for a Free Kuwait, which was really the Kuwait government in exile (the group received almost \$12 million from the Kuwaiti government, and only \$17,000 from others, according to author John R. MacArthur,) the American PR firm Hill & Knowlton was hired for \$10.7 million to devise a campaign to win American support for the war. Craig Fuller, the firm's president and CEO, had been the then-President George Bush's chief of staff when the senior Bush had served as vice president under Ronald Reagan. The move made a lot of sense: after all, access to power is everything in Washington and the Hill & Knowlton people had lots of that. It's wasn't an easy sell. After all, Kuwait was hardly a "freedom-loving land." For, only a few weeks before the invasion, Amnesty International accused the Kuwaiti government of jailing dozens of dissidents and torturing them without trial. In an effort to spruce up the Kuwait image, the company organized both a "Kuwait Information Day" on 20 college campuses and a national day of prayer for Kuwait, as well as distributed thousands of "Free Kuwait" bumper stickers, and other similar traditional PR ventures. But none of this worked very well. American public support remained lukewarm the first two months. According to MacArthur's book "Second Front," the first mention of babies being removed from incubators appeared in the Sept. 5 edition of the London Daily Telegraph. The paper ran a claim by the exiled Kuwait housing minister, which stated that "babies in the premature unit of one of

the hospitals had been removed from their incubators, so that these, too, could be carried off." Two days later, the LA Times carried a Reuter's story that quoted an American (first name only) who said, among other things, that babies were being taken from incubators, although she herself had not seen it happen. From there it began to pick up steam, as one media unit after another started repeating the story without checking it. Sensing an opening, the Hill & Knowlton people jumped on the story. The key moment occurred on October 10th, when a young woman named Nayirah appeared in front of a congressional committee. She told the committee, "I saw the Iraqi soldiers come into the hospital with guns, and go into the room where 15 babies were in incubators. They took the babies out of the incubators, took the incubators and left the babies on the cold floor to die." Hill & Knowlton immediately faxed details of her speech to newsrooms across the country, according to CBC's Fifth Estate's documentary. The effect was electric. The babies in incubator stories became a lead item in newspapers, and on radio and TV all over the US. It is interesting that no one - not the congressmen in the hearing, or any journalist present - bothered to find out the identity of the young woman. She was the daughter of Kuwait's ambassador to the United States, and actually hadn't seen the "atrocities" she described take place at all. (When later confronted with the lack of evidence for her claims, the young woman said that she hadn't been in the hospital herself, but that a friend who had been there had told her about it.) Similar unsubstantiated stories appeared at the UN a few weeks later, where a team of "witnesses," coached by Hill & Knowlton, gave "testimony" (although no oath was ever taken) about atrocities in Iraq. It was later learned that the seven witnesses used false names and even identities in one case. In an unprecedented move, the US was allowed to present a video created by Hill & Knowlton to the entire security council. [...] Then, on November 29, 1990, the

UN authorized use of "all means necessary" to eject Iraq from Kuwait, and on January 12, 1991, Congress authorized the use of force." (Reagan 2002)³

The full scope of this “story” has not yet been reached: for not only is Hill & Knowlton involved in several international political advertisement campaigns, at decisive historical points within US government administrations, managers of this PR agency have worked, which demonstrates that the *production of information* has entered the governmental process itself and can no longer be separated from each other. For example, the General Manager of Hill & Knowlton's Washington, DC office, Victoria Clarke, was responsible for the Kuwait baby incubator story.⁴ She was then nominated by President George W. Bush to be the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs. In the position, Clarke was responsible for U.S. Department of Defense public

³ <http://www.csmonitor.com/2002/0906/p25s02-cogn.html>; see also <http://www.prwatch.org/books/tsigfy10.html>; see Robbins 2004, 128; see Johnson 2004, 230; see <http://www.counterpunch.org/cohen1228.html>

⁴ The full scope would also need to discuss the role of companies such as Hill and Knowlton (as the biggest PR company in the US): “In April 2009, H&K announced it was “expanding its presence in Africa with the launch of a new public relations firm in a joint venture with Scangroup, the first and only marketing services company to be quoted on the Nairobi Stock Exchange. ... The new company will operate as Hill & Knowlton East Africa and will cover Kenya, Uganda and Tanzania and will be headquartered in Nairobi.” H&K chair and CEO Paul Taaffe called Africa “perhaps the last great emerging market opportunity globally. ... While 2009 sees turmoil in some global markets, all the indicators are very positive for Africa and we will be there to guide and advise clients who want to capitalise on the many opportunities on this growing continent.” [3] In May 2005, it was reported that the London office of Hill & Knowlton signed a \$600,000 contract with the government of Uganda, “to improve Uganda’s image with donors and to help blunt damaging reports from human rights watchdogs that have been highly critical of the government.” The AFP report on the Uganda contract noted, “Political activity is now largely restricted in Uganda and plans for multi-party elections in 2006 have been overshadowed by a controversial bid to amend the constitution so President Yoweri Museveni can stand for a third term.” [10] Also in May 2005, the New York-based organization Human Rights Watch released a report documenting “recent cases of torture by Ugandan security forces against political opponents, alleged rebels and criminal suspect.” [11] In an interview with The Guardian, Hill & Knowlton associate director James Barbour said, “What we are doing is encouraging dialogue between the Ugandan government and people like Human Rights Watch, Amnesty, Oxfam. It’s not about spinning a different version of the truth, it’s about making sure that the Ugandans are having the right conversations with the right people.” [12] Hill & Knowlton also represents Debswana, a joint venture between De Beers diamond mining company and the government of Botswana. De Beers owns the rights to mine diamonds in the Kalahari, and through Debswana, has played a role in evicting indigenous Kalahari Bushmen from their land. According to Lord Pearson of Rannoch, a Peer in the British House of Lords, “Many of them (Kalahari Bushmen) felt that they had been evicted because Debswana wanted their land for its diamonds.” [13] Hill & Knowlton claims on its website that “an information campaign generated support [for Debswana] among members of Congress, UK Parliamentarians, Members of the Japanese Diet and Members of the European Parliament, as well as numerous media outlets.” [14]. H&K represented the Catholic bishops in America in their campaign against legalized abortion, and the Body Shop International when it came under criticism for making false claims about itself and its products.” (Wiki Source Watch)

information, internal information, community relations, information training, and audiovisual matters” (Wiki Source Watch). This “circulation of elites” (Johnson 2004, 58) can be observed on all levels and in all areas: political pundits on CNN come from advisor positions in the major political parties; military personnel move into high ranking civil or industrial positions; the personnel in the Pentagon move into and come from defense contractors; and finally, Vice-Presidents are CEOs of war-supporting companies such as Halliburton, not to mention that former presidents have come from the highest ranks of the oil industry, investing millions of dollars of their income into the major industries of our country. More than 50% of the current US-senators are having a net worth of more than 1.5 million dollars. Most of them belong to the upper monetary elite in the US, with financial and industrial ties to the upper 0.1% of the US society. All this supports only one claim, namely, that we should look at any form of (government) information as ideology.

Consequences: Information as Consumption

What do we have to learn from this example? I think we learn the following: the production of the need to know about the Kuwait-Iraq relations turned us from political participants into political consumers. The information we have today, be it produced by media companies, the government, or other agencies of our capitalist societies, turns us into *consumers of information* rather than political participants. We are damned to take in the “facts,” the “given,” and “the information” as something “neutral” and “fixed.” As consumers of information and as onlookers and observers of what our governments present as unchangeable “truths” and “facts,” we remain tied to a passive role (which is what is meant by reification). Unfortunately, the increased availability to and scope of information through the internet does not change this tendency, since

it becomes even easier to disseminate “information.” For example, though the documents of President Obama’s citizenship have been disseminated over and over again, 25% of the US-population still holds the (racist) claim that he is a Muslim.

To sum up, the theme of this Honors Conference “The Democratization of Information: Power, Peril, and Promise” sounds good, as long as one only focuses upon the “promise” part of the democratization of information. However, given that our political system and the capitalist culture no longer can be thought of as independent from each other, it is imperative that we learn to see, as I proposed here, that information is not to be *found*, and that it is rather the case that it is made through the production of needs, which tries to turn us into consumers with no imaginations left of a different sort of world. It is much easier today to imagine, as Slavoj Zizek reminds us, the *end* of the world (ecological disasters, etc., world wars, etc) than to imagine a different mode of social life, perhaps even one that rejects the reigning capitalist culture and life.