

THE MEANS OF PRODUCTION OF MEANING: A THEORY OF REVOLUTION?

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Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism: Developments in Semiology and the Theory of the Subject*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1977. Pp. 165.

The following proportion is far too interesting to ever appear in the Miller Analogy Test: *The ego is to intrapsychic conflict as ideology is to social conflict*. Both the ego and ideology afford us an illusory experience in which conflict, stemming in one direction from competing, unconscious drives and in the other from the domination of one class over others, is transformed into apparent harmony. For the subject, actual social relations of domination are obscured by the subject's ability to not only accept them, but to perceive them as "precisely the way things are, ought to be, and will be." Similarly, far from experiencing the conflict of competing drives, the subject finds itself unified in the consistent "I," for which life is the experience of conscious intention. The development of such a "materialist" theory of the subject¹ and a review of the field of semiology are the two tasks undertaken by Coward and Ellis in *Language and Materialism*.

The Book

Both readers and the writers suffer under the burden of this twofold task. Despite the obvious overlap of the material, many of the theorists who belong in a review of semiology are not essential to Coward's and Ellis's formulation of a theory of subjectivity. Furthermore, the complexity of the project can not entirely account for the difficulty of the text, the style of which can be kindly characterized as dense.² The two tasks are pursued as if they were synonomous, and once they are untangled the review of semiology stands as the more successful. However, the more significant of the two, the integration of the work of Barthes, Kristeva and Lacan, and the application of this synthesis to a theory of the subject, remains ultimately problematic.

Coward and Ellis explore the interrelation of semiology with political sociology, literary criticism and psychoanalysis in their attempt to uncover

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what might well be called: "the means of the production of meaning." This mental tongue-twister — the means of production of meaning — refers to the act of signification, wherein the subject "produces" a sign, which can be analyzed by distinguishing two elements: a concept (that which the subject wants to express, i.e., the signified) and a world, series of words or nonverbal element which represents the concept (the signifier). The concept of signification, when misunderstood, seems to be a tortuous way of saying that words stand for things, in a one-to-one correspondence. Such an idealist representation depicts the subject as the juggler, who sets the elements of signification in motion, and remains autonomous and unaffected. This image misrepresents the process for two fundamental reasons: first, each element bears on the others, *including the subject* in a reciprocal fashion; secondly, the elements (again, including the subject) are not indivisible "things," but are heterogeneous, consisting of complex, dissimilar constituents. Lacan's characterization, "sliding of signifiers over signifieds," indicates their heterogeneous nature, so that signifiers elicit meaning, but never fully represent the signified.

Coward and Ellis emphasize the impact of Barthes' literary criticism in the study of the subject. The example of realist texts (those written with fidelity to "real life"), where the text *appears* natural and is experienced by the readers as being in accordance with reality, demonstrates how imaginary relations are accepted in place of actual relations: "The final effect of connotation in the realist text is to produce the illusion of denotation, the illusion that language is incidental in the process of transcription of the real. The "superior myth" is precisely that of the identity between signifier and signified, the way in which they are treated as equivalents" (pp. 53-54). As Coward and Ellis note, even realist works of fantasy (e.g., science fiction) seem to point to the "real."

In *avant-garde* texts, by contrast, the unity of signifier and signified is not implied. Poetic works and passages in novels such as those by James Joyce evoke different meanings with each reader and even with each reading. These texts confer upon the reader the role of creator (whose own unconscious stirs to fill the text), whereas the realist novel reduces the reader to a consumer of a text which mimics a supposed reality. In *avant-garde* writing, the process by which metaphor and metonymy bring the unconscious into play is much more visible through the experience of re-reading the same words (signifiers) and discovering (producing), effortlessly, new meaning (signifieds). The subject, induced unwittingly to perceive "reality" in the realist text, is here overtly thrown into itself for meaning, and this meaning can now be seen more clearly to be created in the process of reading. In poetic language, particularly, the signifier is visible as a powerful semiotic agent — the rhyme, tone, rhythm, juxtaposition of sounds, elicit responses both conscious and unconscious. Meaning can no longer be mistakenly located in a pre-given relationship

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between the signifier and signified: rather, it is produced by the interaction of the signifier with the heterogeneous subject.³ The same elements are involved in reading either type of text (subjectivity, signifier, and signified), with the crucial difference that the consumer of the realist text, like the consumer of products, is predisposed (formed in a certain way) to buy into the text (or product) as if it were reality, or satisfied a real need.

The interaction between ideology and the heterogeneous subject is the pivot point by which Coward and Ellis enter the discourse of both psychoanalysis and Marxism, and begin their criticism of idealist theories. In the idealist tradition, the world is perceived by a consistent subject, one who feels itself to be: ". . . the origin of ideas and actions . . . and represents [itself] as free even when there is evidence to the contrary. It is this coherency, this sense of a unified being which is produced in the work of ideology and fixes identifications and representations and subjects in relation to these" (p. 68). Thus, the subject is not so much the passive bearer of ideology, but rather, through the interaction with various social institutions, it perceives itself in a certain consistent position within the web of social relationships. In addition, the subject is socially constituted so that its very consciousness is ideological, and it is predisposed to "find" itself in the social web in two senses. First, particular subjective experience exists by virtue of relationships to others, so it is founded within the social nexus. Second, the homogenizing effect of ideology — what Coward and Ellis call the "work of ideology" — does not simply come to the subject, but is called forth by it. The "natural attitude" is doubly natural — it represents a specific, historical situation as natural, and it is part of the nature of psychical operations (synthesising functions of the ego).

Coward and Ellis write: "The practice of ideology has succeeded when it has produced this 'natural attitude,' when for example the existing relations of power are not only accepted but perceived precisely as the way things are, ought to be and will be" (p. 68). It is not simply the practice of ideology which has succeeded, but the ego's struggle against its underlying heterogeneity as well.

The Context

The current effort, exemplified by Coward and Ellis, to examine the constitution of the subject by recourse to signification and to the psychoanalytic understanding of intrapsychic processes, comes precisely at a time when subjects are hard-pressed to find a comfortable ideological position from which to view the world. The force of psychic gravity is waning.

The contemporary subject (the one with the natural attitude) is not faring well. What would have been referred to generally a decade or two ago as

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"alienation" must now be seen as a much more multifaceted process, which can not merely be described as a reification of subjects' relationships with one another and with their products. The stresses thus generated are now apparent at the intrapsychic level, and reveal themselves in the ubiquitous manifestations of narcissism (both as preoccupation with self and borderline personality disorders).⁴ Joel Kovel, in "Rationalization and the Family,"⁵ traces a connection between borderline pathology and recent changes in family structure, particularly in the role of the father, whose authority is being supplanted by an amorphous, bureaucratized state. These changes impede resolution of the Oedipal complex. The outstanding characteristic of the borderline personality is the length to which it will go in order to maintain the experience of a consistent ego. *Splitting* is the defense *par excellence* which serves the function of maintaining the illusion of a consistent subject (by producing two of them) when the individual is incapable of tolerating conflict or ambivalence through the normal mechanisms of the ego.

The prevailing ideology is of the "free" subject, exercising free will and independent of social determination. At the same time, the social institutions which are the conduit of ideology presently appear to exert a less cohesive and convincing influence: religion, nuclear family and the democratic American myth, for example, have become less successful in organizing an effective ideology. The subject's experience of free will now affords less comfort, since the world no longer seems to obey its "natural laws." The preoccupation with self can thus be seen as a flight inward from an increasingly chaotic external world. In short, as is often noted, one's place in the social network is not as clear as it once was; and, necessarily, when this positionality is less fixed, the experience of imaginary relations as natural is imperfectly maintained. In this larger context, we can situate Kovel's thesis that the subject's constitution in the family is shifting, with the decrease in paternal authority. As social institutions which support the illusion of the "free self" disintegrate, the individual desperately struggles to fortify the illusion through narcissistic pursuits.

The commercial response to these pursuits takes the form of books, workshops and some popular "therapies" which are promoted as commodities to fill the gap in subjective experience. The marketing of "self-presentation," which first blossomed as a technique to help the subject sell labor by selling self, now offers to form the subject in social relations. The shift from "communications" (which focused on pragmatics) to a training such as EST (Ehrhart Sensitivity Training), is a move from the facilitation of expression to the creation of a self (from which judgement can be exercised, i.e., a training in subjectivity).⁶

The quintessence of the non-subject, who suffers from an inability to act, appears in American literature in John Barth's *The End of the Road*. Jacob

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Horner's only route to action or desire is through identification with an order. It is this same subject, in need of an ego ideal, who is the target of American advertising. The relationship among subjectivity, identification and ego ideal can be loosely outlined by a comparison of the role of advertising in America and in France, which has a more traditionally functioning religion, nuclear family and national culture. There ads display large mouth-watering objects for consumption. In the metro, a slice of camembert cheese, six feet by four feet, makes its direct appeal. Most ads, whether billboard, magazine or movie, depict objects in glorious detail, filling all the available space with their presence. In America the equivalent products are usually linked with an ego-ideal consumer. Sale is promoted by the onlooking subject's identification with the ego-ideal, not through direct appeal to the subject's desire per se.

In both advertising and popular "improvement" trainings there is a response to what is perceived as a need on the part of the subject (or the cracks in the facade of imaginary relations) to be filled-in — through identification or through subjectivity training. The heterogeneous subject is visible now to many, including the theorists of subjectivity; and yet invisible to itself.

The Problem

Given the determinacy of material conditions (a Marxist premise embraced by Coward and Ellis), and the particular role of ideology in the constitution of the subject, how does social transformation occur? "Practice [praxis] is seen as the interaction of new objective contradictions with a subject formed in the place of old contradictions and old representations of contradiction" (p. 9). To understand this explanation of change, one must perceive the underlying assumption, which runs something like this: a materialist theory assumes that subjects are formed by the material conditions in which they live. These material conditions include ideology, which forms the subject in such a way as to obscure the reality of its own constitution and social role, and the role of real social relations. The subject's dilemma may well be expressed as "No escape is possible when you think you are free." How can change occur when the very material conditions in which the subject is formed preclude the experience of real social relations? Coward and Ellis also write that in traditional Marxist thought "subjective actions are initially posited as simply mirroring the objective processes of history" (p. 8). They therefore propose that subjectivity *does* in fact mirror objective processes in the constitution of the subject; as the objective processes change (the factors involved remain unspecified), contradictions emerge between the subject (who was constituted in prior conditions) and the new material conditions. From this position, Coward and Ellis imperceptibly merge their notions of change, transformation and revolution as if they were identical. New social conditions

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can result in subjects transforming one set of imaginary relations into another, i.e., merely supplanting one ideology for another; whereas progressive social transformation would be a modification in a very specific direction — a movement toward a social recognition of actual social relations. We have only to witness the reaction of Americans to the changing role of the United States in the global economy to realize that the ideology of the all-powerful United States, coming into conflict with new objective conditions, does not produce progressive transformation.

Marxist analysis is concerned with the role of ideology in people's perception of social relationships, and psychoanalysis with the constitution of subjectivity, based on heterogeneous, conflicting elements which underly the ego, and the individual's ability to preserve an apparently consistent self. Integral to the nature of ideology is its aspect of being a mass phenomenon. A materialist theory of the subject, which offers to complement the more traditional Marxist theory of the contradiction of material conditions, can easily lose itself in the "individual" subject, despite its aim of analyzing the *social* constitution of subjectivity, and the ideology of individualism. The problematic of Coward's and Ellis's effort is most apparent when they stretch a dialectic explanation of intrapsychic processes so as to consider it "a revolutionary theory and a theory of revolution" (p. 9).

Coward and Ellis have indeed gone further than others to demonstrate that we are speaking of the same "subject" when we speak of a person in a social class and a person in analysis. Intuitively, this was certainly known (a subject is a subject is a subject); but now, from a more cohesive theoretical perspective, the same subject can be referred to in each situation, whose subjectivity is expressed equally through the act of signification in the realm of dreams and in that of ideology. However, phrases like "the constitution of subjectivity" are semantically misleading because *subjectivity* can and does apply equally to an individual's constitution and constitution on a mass scale. Identifying social and psychic determinants at the individual and mass level is crucial.

When Coward and Ellis bring together the trinity of Lacan, Barthes and Kristeva, and extrapolate a theory of the subject which is both "material" and dialectic, they have too easy an entry into a theory of change, because the heterogeneous subject introduces a dynamic element. At this point, the problem of the place of individual and mass phenomena in the theory is found again, in the collapsing together of change and revolution. What evolves from their text as a concept of change at the level of *individual* subjects, is restated as a foundation for a theory of revolution. Coward and Ellis apparently assume this transition is viable because individual subjects are socially constituted — but close attention to the conceptualization of the difference between intrapsychic change, change in consciousness and social

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transformation, should simultaneously illustrate the difference between subjectivity as it pertains to individuals and to the mass phenomenon of ideology.

The authors take subjectivity as the origin of change:

subjectivity is seen to be the place of the highest contradiction: an atomized subjectivity which is the motor of practice and therefore of social transformation and revolution. The subject revealed by the Freudian unconscious in the movement of projection, is precisely such a subject in process. This is crucial for any elaboration of the concept of practice, for it allows a genuinely materialist understanding of history and practice which no longer falls back into the traps of idealism. (P. 148)

A materialist theory of subjectivity is crucial, but not sufficient. Coward and Ellis lack an examination of social relationships which are neither an extrapolation from the pre-Oedipal relationship (the Lacanian constitution of self through the Mother/other) nor an extrapolation from the Oedipal relationship (the internalization of the Father's authority) — i.e., relations of collectivity, as in a social class or small group. Group psychology, totally omitted by Coward and Ellis, is only recently moving toward its potential coordination with critical social theory.⁷ Yet even in its traditional psychoanalytic form (e.g., Bion), group psychology has never been conceived as the sum of the psychology of individuals (even socially constituted individuals). While Coward and Ellis do not state that revolutionary transformation can be explained merely as a summation of individual subjects' actions, they fail to suggest how this relationship (between revolutionary transformation and individual practice) might be understood or even to recognize it as an integral part of a theory of subjectivity. A theory of social transformation must include not only the fact that groups have "a life of their own," but also an account of the psychology of collectivity, and must account for desires which are mediated by the process of collective action and production. Furthermore, Coward and Ellis offer a theory of subjects who come into conflict with new objective conditions — conditions which differ from those by which their ideology was forged; but rather than meeting the claim of being "a revolutionary theory and a theory of revolution," this is a general theory of change, which could apply equally well to the rise of fascism.

In order to differentiate between the phenomenon of idiosyncratic change in consciousness and a change which would undo the effect of ideology (e.g., allow the formerly hidden aspects of relationships to be perceived), it is necessary to briefly discuss the conceptualization of *consciousness, change*

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and *transformation*. The term "false consciousness" implies the possibility of true consciousness, and such a dualism reduces ideology to the level of mistaken ideas which are "believed in," rather than the complex lived experience resulting in an ideological consciousness — a consciousness socially constituted and predisposed toward misrecognition. At the same time, no new terms have come forth to describe variations of consciousness and responses in situations where one individual's or group's level of consciousness differs from another's. Before discussing *how* change in consciousness may occur, these differences in consciousness that exist at both the individual and group level should be illustrated.

In the case of individuals, consider a typical car ad in which a sexy woman is linked to the car (usually lounging on it): one person desires the car and envies those who can possess the car and (as is implied to the unconscious) so possess the woman; another abhors the vision and sees in the ad an objectification of women in the service of the automobile industry. Both individuals obviously have socially constituted consciousnesses, yet there is a fundamental mystification in the consumer's attitude to the ad, compared to that of the ad's critic. Both individuals may act: the consumer impelled by the frustration of expectations and desire, the critic motivated by the recognition of oppression. While both may yearn for a different situation, only the critic's position incorporates the Marxist concept of "self-consciousness," a consciousness of the place of the self in social relationships (i.e., an analog to class consciousness). The point of this very simple example is to align the notion of "self-consciousness" with that of demystification of ideology. In this example, despite self-consciousness, the individual lacks a social forum for practice. In work groups, consciousness similar to that of the consumer of the ad may lead to "liberal-progressive" change which can result in the redistribution of material goods ("getting a bigger piece of the pie"), etc. However, the basic ideological premises remain unchallenged. In contrast, critical social transformation presupposes a degree of consciousness which alters the perception of social relationships and subjectivity, and would lead to a work group's struggle to change the structure of power.

A theory of the dynamic subject and a theory of social transformation can emerge from examining the nature of imaginary social relations and the process of their demystification. For example, when power is misrecognized as authority, and a subject experiences respect for this authority, ideology is at work. The power relation is in the background for the subject, and the fear it evokes is unconscious, while the foreground is experienced as respect. What allows this misrecognition to shift? Allows the fear to be less repressed? Allows the respect to dissolve, exposing the subject (not absolutely, but relatively speaking) to the real relationship?

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To explore the structural difference between actual social relationships and imaginary relations derived from the unconscious, it is necessary to examine the distinction between metaphor and analogy and their power to explain semiological and political phenomena. In metaphor (which, together with metonymy, we now take to be the process of the unconscious and of language) an element is missing. To borrow *Webster's* example, a "marble brow" may call forth the image "a brow as *white* as marble" (as *Webster* suggests), or "a brow as *cold* as marble" or the brow of *Michelangelo's David*. . . . The space which underlies "marble" can be occupied by any one or several meanings; this is an example of the process of the sliding of the signifier over the signified. In metaphor, by definition, an element is missing (and in the case of prohibitions and taboos, the missing element is repressed from consciousness).⁸ In the production of meaning, the unconscious evokes substitute (preconscious) material in the place of these missing (repressed) elements. In analogy, *there is no unspoken element*; analogies juxtapose two sets of relationships whose internal structures are identical to each other. By contrast, in metaphor, as in the process of language, there is never a correspondence of identity between signifier and signified.

In a social setting, the objective relationships of each member of a social group to the class or individual in power, are *analogous* to one another. The idea of analogy thus opens the way to comprehending how actual social relations might be experienced as such, i.e., these actual relations are no longer transformed through metaphor into imaginary relations. While neither actual social nor unconscious relations can be "recognized" (in their totality), it is nevertheless the case that in actual social relations, the subject *can* discover his social position by reference to the analogous positions held by others in a particular social formation. The identical nature of these analogous relationships has two important aspects. First, these relationships are analogous in *reality*, not in phantasy (where they may be similar, but certainly not identical). Secondly, the nature of analogy is such that there is a one-to-one correspondence of identity, with no missing elements. It is the *identical* nature of the relationships which provides the possibility of releasing the subject from the misrecognitions of ideological relations. A brief development of this possibility serves also to outline the problems encountered in uniting the theory of monadic subjectivity as developed by Coward and Ellis with a theory of transformation which depends necessarily on the introduction of group process.

In a social setting (e.g., work: workers and boss; education: students and teacher; community: women and men), the subject experiences itself in relation to authority (in phantasy, the Father) in the presence of the other members of the group. The "other" (members of the same social group) is the third component (along with the subject and the authority figure) in what

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resembles an Oedipal triangle. Thus we would expect, from a strict psychoanalytic reading, that the other signifies the Mother to the unconscious, and the relation to authority (Father) would remain an Oedipal one. However, on at least one level this situation is unlike the triangle of infancy, where the mother/other is first experienced as omnipotent — the “other” group members are in an analogous position vis-a-vis authority, and therefore do not necessitate the mediation of the Father (or the maintenance of imaginary relationship whereby actual social power is experienced as paternal). On the other hand, owing to analogy, the subject is able to identify with the other, and a fascinating hypothesis regarding the convergence of the real and imaginary in group process emerges at this point.

In so identifying itself with the group, the subject is in the same instance recapitulating the archaic unity with the omnipotent mother, which characterized the imaginary phase at that time. The experience (in the imaginary plane) of impotence of the subject (and the group) contradicts the unconscious memory of omnipotence and a dialectic between the two is thus invoked. Under normal conditions it is precisely the threat of the imaginary fusion which is defended against by obedience to authority. As the subject is partially decentered from its position of child (in relation to Father), a new position from which to exercise its subjectivity is available — *experienced consciously as a collective position*. The group comes to recognize its omnipotence — *an omnipotence which partakes of both the imaginary and the real* — and acts upon it. In so far as the regression to the imaginary is accompanied by some measure of political awareness (self-consciousness) the recognition is at once regressive and progressive, imaginary and real.

The process of de-cathecting the phantasy relationship with the Father through identification with others who are in an analogous relationship, requires certain conditions; perhaps the new “objective conditions” in Coward’s and Ellis’s theory of change, a sufficient level of contradiction in ideology, a social context (collectivity) which permits the cathexis of fusion without invoking defense in the form of paternal intervention, etc. Critical social transformation can, no doubt, occur in a variety of circumstances; but a theory of subjectivity, which holds that the subject is constituted in a certain “position” in social relations, must recognize the interaction of the subject with others in analogous positions as a crucial aspect in understanding both change in consciousness and in social transformation. To posit social transformation as a direct outcome of intrapsychic change within the subject is to remain trapped within the confines of a semiotic theory which has come to recognize the importance of the “producer of meaning” — the heterogeneous subject — in a social context abstracted from human relations. It is the

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group and the analogy which informs the individual, and thus transforms subjectivity.

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Notes

1. Coward and Ellis assert the "materiality" of intrapsychic, imaginary processes, based on their dialectic, heterogeneous nature. While their understanding of the subject contributes to materialist theory, a basic argument can be made against relegating intrapsychic phenomena and the material conditions of life to the same realm.
2. A contributing factor is the plethora of anthropomorphized concepts, e.g., "Dialectical materialism thinks the concepts of historical materialism. . ." (p. 82). As would be expected, there is particular difficulty in the chapter on Lacan. One is often told that Lacan's thought can only be expressed by signifiers that slide a bit more than usual over their signifieds, and criticism of obscurity is not in vogue. Regardless, entering Chapter 6, "On the Subject of Lacan," is like falling into a quicksand of signs whose elements are sliding at an unprecedented rate; for example: "The claim that the phallus is a signifier the symbolic function of which already included him or her becomes clearer" (p. 120). Clearer?
3. "Heterogenous subject" is a paradoxical term, since subjectivity is precisely the illusory harmony that is the conscious experience of the underlying heterogeneity (competing drives). In a sense, recent work in the theory of subjectivity is requiring us to read: "[heterogeneous] subject" whenever the word "subject" is referring to a person; yet "subjectivity" — the experience of the [heterogeneous] subject, is an experience of homogeneity, harmony, etc.
4. Jon Robert Schiller, "The Illusion of a Future," *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory*, Vol. 3, No. 2 (Spring/Summer, 1979), 118-130.
5. Joel Kovel, "Rationalization and the Family," *Telos* 37 (Fall, 1978), 5-22.
6. This explains why EST graduates are frequently recognizable; despite their diverse biographies, they emerge with a style for apprehending the world, which appears as a common trait.
7. See the works of Gérard Mendel, Claire Rueff, Gérard Lévy and Jacky Beillerot in *Sociopsychanalyse*, vols. 1-7, Paris: Payot, 1972-1978. Gérard Mendel's article in *Sociopsychanalyse*, 2 has been translated: "The Theory of the Sur plus Value of Power and the Method of its Demystification," in W. Muensterberger and A. Esman, eds., *The Psychoanalytic Study of Society*, Vol. 6, New York: International Universities Press, 1975.
8. Jean Laplanche and Serge Leclaire, "The Unconscious: A Psychoanalytic Study," *Yale French Studies*, Vol. 48 (1972), pp. 118-178.