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claim that legitimation is a fundamental mode in which the coherence of class-dominated societies is secured as of these other theories of consensual ideology. It is particularly important to be cautious about the thesis that crises of legitimation are the main sources of tension which threaten the stability of Western capitalist societies. Such a view presumes—in company with Parsons and Althusser—that social order rests upon normative consensus—that normative consensus, mixed with a little police power and coercion, is the main mechanism whereby sectional interests are held together in a class society. But there is good reason to question just such a presumption.

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THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF SOCIETY

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In these brief remarks I should like to refer to several problems which are central to the contemporary Marxist theory of ideology. In discussing these problems, it is evident that we presently live at the centre of a theoretical paradox. The terms of this paradox could be formulated as follows: in no previous period has reflection upon 'ideology' been so much at the centre of Marxist theoretical approaches; at the same time, however, in no other period have the limits and referential identity of 'the ideological' become so blurred and problematic. If the increasing interest in ideology runs parallel to a widening of the historical effectivity attributed to what was traditionally considered as the domain of the 'superstructures'—and this widening is a response to the crisis of an economistic and reductionistic conception of Marxism—then that very crisis puts into question the social totality constituted around the base-superstructure distinction. As a consequence, it is no longer possible to identify the object 'ideology' in terms of a topography of the social.

Within the Marxist tradition, we can identify two classical approaches to the problem of ideology. These approaches have often—but not always—been combined. For one of them, 'ideology' is thought to be a *level of the social totality*; for the other, it is identified with *false consciousness*. Today, both approaches appear to have been undermined as a consequence of the crisis of the assumptions on which they were grounded: the validity of the first depended on a conception of society as an intelligible totality, itself conceived as the structure upon which its partial elements and processes are founded. The validity of the second approach presupposed a conception of human agency—a subject having an ultimate essential homogeneity whose misrecognition was postulated as the

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source of 'ideology'. In this respect, the two approaches were grounded in an *essentialist* conception of both society and social agency. To see clearly the problems which have led the theory of ideology to its present impasse, we need to study the crisis of this essentialist conception in its two variants.

Let me turn, first, to the crisis of the concept of social totality. The ambition of all holistic approaches had been to fix the meaning of any element or social process *outside* itself, that is, in a *system of relations* with other elements. In this respect, the base-superstructure model played an ambiguous role: if it asserted the *relational* character of the identity of both base and superstructure, at the same time it endowed that relational system with a centre. And so, in a very Hegelian fashion, the superstructures ended up taking their revenge by asserting the 'essentiality' of the appearances. More importantly, the structural totality was to present itself as an object having a positivity of its own, which it was possible to describe and to define. In this sense, this totality operated as an underlying principle of intelligibility of the social order. The status of this totality was that of an essence of the social order which had to be *recognized* behind the empirical variations expressed at the surface of social life. (Note that what is at stake here is not the opposition, structuralism vs. historicism. It does not matter if the totality is synchronic or diachronic; the important point is that in both cases it is a *founding totality* which presents itself as an intelligible object of 'knowledge' [*cognitio*] conceived as a process or re-cognition.) Against this essentialist vision we tend nowadays to accept the *infinitude of the social*, that is, the fact that any structural system is limited, that it is always surrounded by an 'excess of meaning' which it is unable to master and that, consequently, 'society' as a unitary and intelligible object which grounds its own partial processes is an impossibility. Let us examine the double movement that this recognition involves. The great advance carried out by structuralism was the recognition of the relational character of any social identity; its limit was its transformation of those relations into a system, into an identifiable and intelligible object (i.e., into an essence). But if we maintain the relational character of any identity and if, at the same time, we renounce the *fixation* of those identities in a system, then the social must be identified with the infinite play of differences, that is, with what in the strictest sense of the term we can call *discourse*—on the condition, of course, that we liberate the concept of discourse from its restrictive meaning as speech and writing.

This first movement thus implies the impossibility of fixing meaning. But this cannot be the end of the matter. A discourse in which meaning cannot possibly be fixed is nothing else but the discourse of the psychotic. The second movement therefore consists in the attempt to effect this ultimately impossible fixation. The social is not only the infinite play of differences. It is also the attempt to limit that play, to domesticate infinitude, to embrace it within the finitude of an order. But this order—or structure—no longer takes the form of an underlying essence of the social; rather, it is an attempt—by definition unstable and precarious—of acting over that 'social', of *hegemonizing* it. In a way which resembles the one we are pursuing here, Saussure attempted to limit the principle of the arbitrariness

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of the sign with the assertion of the relative character of that arbitrariness. Thus, the problem of the social totality is posed in new terms: the 'totality' does not establish the limits of 'the social' by transforming the latter into a *determinate* object (i.e., 'society'). Rather, the social always exceeds the limits of the attempts to constitute society. At the same time, however, that 'totality' does not disappear: if the suture it attempts is ultimately impossible, it is nevertheless possible to proceed to a relative fixation of the social through the institute of nodal points. But if this is the case, questions concerning those nodal points and their relative weight cannot be determined *sub species aeternitatis*. Each social formation has its own forms of determination and relative autonomy, which are always instituted through a complex process of overdetermination and therefore cannot be established *a priori*. With this insight, the base-superstructure distinction falls and, along with it, the conception of ideology as a necessary level of every social formation.

If we now pass to the second approach to ideology—ideology as false consciousness—we find a similar situation. The notion of false consciousness only makes sense if the identity of the social agent can be fixed. It is only on the basis of recognizing its true identity that we can assert that the consciousness of the subject is 'false'. And this implies, of course, that that identity must be *positive* and *non-contradictory*. Within Marxism, a conception of subjectivity of this kind is at the basis of the notion of 'objective class interests'. Here I am not going to discuss in detail the forms of constitution, the implications and the limitations of such a conception of subjectivity. I shall rather just mention the two processes which led to its progressive abandonment. In the first place, the gap between 'actual consciousness' and 'imputed consciousness' grew increasingly wider. The way this gap was filled—through the presence of a Party instituted as the bearer of the objective historical interests of the class—led to the establishment of an 'enlightened' depotism of intellectuals and bureaucrats who spoke in the name of the masses, explained to them their true interests, and imposed upon them increasingly totalitarian forms of control. The reaction to this situation inevitably took the form of the assertion of the actual identity of the social agents against the 'historical interests' which burdened them. In the second place, the very identity of the social agents was increasingly questioned when the flux of differences in advanced capitalist societies indicated that the identity and homogeneity of social agents was an illusion, that any social subject is essentially decentred, that his/her identity is nothing but the unstable articulation of constantly changing positionalities. The same excess of meaning, the same precarious character of any structuration that we find in the domain of the social order, is also to be found in the domain of subjectivity. But if any social agent is a decentred subject, if when attempting to determine his/her identity we find nothing else but the kaleidoscopic movement of differences, in what sense can we say that subjects misrecognize themselves? The theoretical ground that made sense of the concept of 'false consciousness' has evidently dissolved.

It would therefore look as if the two conceptual frameworks which formerly made sense of the concept of ideology have broken up, and that the concept

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should consequently be eliminated. However, I do not think this to be a satisfactory solution. We cannot do without the concept of misrecognition, precisely because the very assertion that the 'identity and homogeneity of social agents is an illusion' cannot be formulated without introducing the category of misrecognition. The critique of the 'naturalization of meaning' and of the 'essentialization of the social' is a critique of the misrecognition of their true character. Without this premise, any deconstruction would be meaningless. So, it looks as if we can maintain the concept of ideology and the category of misrecognition only by inverting their traditional content. The ideological would not consist of the misrecognition of a positive essence, but exactly the opposite: it would consist of the non-recognition of the precarious character of any positivity, of the impossibility of any ultimate suture. The ideological would consist of those discursive forms through which a society tries to institute itself as such on the basis of closure, of the fixation of meaning, of the non-recognition of the infinite play of differences. The ideological would be the will to 'totality' of any totalizing discourse. And insofar as the social is impossible without some fixation of meaning, without the discourse of closure, the ideological must be seen as constitutive of the social. The social only exists as the vain attempt to institute that impossible object: society. Utopia is the essence of any communication and social practice.

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LA LANGUE INTROUVABLE

Michel Pêcheux/Françoise Gadet

Michel Pêcheux: Françoise Gadet and I have recently written a book, *La Langue Introuvable*, which concerns the relationship between history, ideology and discursivity and the question of the *langue*, as professional linguists have considered it. As far as we are concerned, the reflection upon ideologies took its point of departure from the early 1960's French problematic of philosophical structuralism, a problematic which was largely organized around the question of the *lecture* (interpretation) of ideological discourses. This problematic, which at that time condensed around Lévi-Strauss, Foucault, Barthes, Lacan, Althusser, and others, not only took the form of a research programme: it was as much a polemical device aimed at the dominating ideas of the time. Three sets of dominating ideas of that time can be mentioned. First, there were the still intact "remains" of a philosophical spiritualism associated with a religious conception of *lecture*. These "remains" extended from literary hermeneutics (which pursued