

## CASE STUDY

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### THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF UNREALITY: THE REAL AMERICAN DILEMMA

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#### HEGEL AND MARX ON CONSCIOUSNESS

Efforts to define consciousness, individual awareness and the connection between individual consciousness and social consciousness, abound in philosophical, historical and sociological inquiry [1]. Hegel elevated consciousness to the realization of pure spirit (*Geist*) and insisted that the existence of his True Spirit was the Absolute reality subsuming specific time, history, and reason. False consciousness is imbedded in the Hegelian postulate “Unhappy Consciousness”, as that which could not experience and merge with the *Geist* manifested in the German nation-state [2]. Objectively, “pure” consciousness rested on the historical conditions which existed and those which dominated. Despite a dialectical approach conceptually, Hegel’s glorification of consciousness rested on a static worship of the nation-state. As such, the acceptance of this transcendent consciousness demands the acceptance of Hegel’s disembodied system as it is. Justification of divergent, contradictory and unequal conditions of life flow from the basic Hegelian assumption that consciousness rests on philosophical objectification of experience, coinciding with the rulers of the state who reflect the Absolute *Geist*.

Hegel’s view of consciousness is that of an abstracted totality, a pseudo-integration. For example, the Master/Slave relationship is his-

torically relative, and total, because depending on the angle from which one views the reality of the relations, it is not clear who is the Master and who is the Slave. The consciousness of one depends on the consciousness of the other. From the point of view of “true” consciousness, the master may be as dependent on the slave as the slave is on the master, hence, *it makes no rational sense to reverse the situation*. That would merely turn around the actors; it does not demystify the abstract Master/Slave consciousness. Ultimately, the acceptance of a transcendent totality of interchangeable parts is a legitimation of whatever exists in a given historical moment. Self-consciousness of any dimension is beyond the reach of the average man or woman; thought is given only an abstract existence; socio-economic power is irrelevant. This positing of consciousness as a “basic” philosophical problem, removing it from the social sphere stunts our cultural and political understanding, while negating our praxis.

Marx reconceived the Hegelian dialectic, and as is well known, grounded it firmly in the historical material conditions and relations of everyday life: “It is not men’s consciousness that determines their existence, but on the contrary, their social existence that determines their consciousness” [3]. Social consciousness is not subjective, neither is it psychological perception or identification: it is the concretized praxis of social existence, a product

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of human activity. "This means that man must become conscious of himself as a social being, as simultaneously the subject and object of the socio-historical process" [4]. In a class society, "common interest" or "general will" are ideological categories which originate in the generalization of private interests. In capitalist society, the interest of the ruling class is transformed into the "common interest". Under capitalism, "communal interests", writes Marx, consist of "the doublesidedness, manysidedness . . . of selfish (individual) interests" [5].

Social consciousness in a class society is dominated by the class that controls the material wealth and means of production. As Marx notes in his famous passage from *The German Ideology*, "the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas . . ." Consciousness for certain groups of people in capitalist society is not based on their material situation, but on the false assumption that they are either part of the ruling class or have the potential to enter that class. As in the United States, identification with the "middle class" is construed as a belief that this class dominates the "democratic" process, since it constitutes a majority. This, in fact, is the ideology of bourgeois consciousness which exists insofar as it assimilates socio-historical consciousness to the contradiction involved in its own existence as a class. The psychologizing of consciousness serves the purpose of reducing it to the level of the perception of immediate interests [6]. Marx projects that the interests of a growing and increasingly exploited proletariat will lead to the development of a class consciousness that would destroy the dominating class, but does not explain what would happen historically if these opposite interests are not expressed in the development of a working class, fully conscious of its historical role. It is at this point that further historical analysis must be pursued.

Marx, however, did suggest that the imposition of ruling class consciousness on the domi-

nated is facilitated by the process of alienation, namely the separation of workers from the products of labor and control of the means of production. The contradictions between self interest and social interest in class society creates alienation. Alienation facilitates false consciousness but it is not false consciousness per se, as may be mistakenly assumed. For the reduction of false consciousness to alienation tends to narrow the former notion to the mere misidentification of class loyalty, mission or direction, and defines consciousness as no more than the individual recognition of interests.

False consciousness, however, arises out of the objective social and economic conditions of everyday life. Neither alienation nor false consciousness are individual pathologies. Marx viewed alienation as a collective, class phenomenon that *manifested* itself in individual estrangement and disenchantment, but was not determined by the accident of personality or family circumstance. In late capitalist society individual alienation is part of the crisis of bourgeois society, which ceaselessly attempts to mystify mounting internal contradictions. In speaking of the crisis of capitalist ideology, Lukács notes that consciously or unconsciously the bourgeoisie seek to suppress the forces that will destroy them as a class by embracing the whole of society in their historical mission [7]. Alienation, then, is also designed or manipulated.

### TOTAL ASSAULT ON THOUGHT

Thus, it should not surprise us that it is difficult to determine the existence of an opposition class consciousness in the United States today. Why? Marx makes it clear that a definable socio-economic class is not a political class until it is conscious of itself as such. The key factor in the formation of this class consciousness is, of course, opposition to the ruling class [8]. This antagonism was expected to develop in response to the crisis of capitalism;

however, the pervasive growth of mystification, alienation and ultimately of false consciousness have limited this opposition to confused, conflicted and isolated sects. Hence, it is possible to observe conflicting interests between the individual and groups that make up different strata of the society but not as a fully conscious and mature opposition to the ruling class.

Two contradictory processes may be identified with respect to the individual consciousness. On the one hand, the consciousness of individuals is increasingly *privatized*, with reference to the needs of everyday life. On the other hand, the consciousness of individuals is increasingly *collectivized* as the ideology of the ruling class focuses responsibility for intractable economic and social problems on individual behavior. Federal programs designed to fight inflation are an example. The individual is asked to save more, consume less, plant gardens, carpool, and so on; this reduces systemic economic problems and their solutions to the question of ordinary citizen behavior. Individuals are encouraged both to separate themselves from endemic economic, social and political problems, while putting their faith in the men and women at the top, and to solve those same problems by modifying their daily patterns of production and consumption without critically examining the system as such. Small wonder that, despite personal illusions, people realize that something is “deeply wrong” with the country [9]. Individual behavior is advertised as unique and determinative, while it actually is characterized by sameness and conformity.

Certain basic institutions, including the mass media, are instrumental in forming the general consciousness of personal well-being, while “informing” the public of the country’s grave problems. As one switches channels from news to soap opera to “sporting” event one moves from the actual disastrous world to an eternal middle class suburbia, to sometimes brutal, elitist competition projected as the key to success. Each individual is left to deal with

these discrepancies privately; the result is a damaged perception of reality.

In monopoly capitalist society, it is obviously advantageous for the ruling interests if the “mass” of citizens believe that they are *not* being molded, socialized or otherwise influenced by people or forces external to themselves. This helps insure that the individual assumes full responsibility for his or her own fate and “success” [10].

Through systematic enculturation, people begin to see themselves as competitive units either with equal or potentially equal (certain social reforms having been legislated) opportunity to live out the American fantasy. Such attitudes are *not* derived from praxis in the world but from the “common stock of knowledge” of class society [11], and are consistently disseminated by parents, schools, churches and the mass media. Their necessity arises from the objective structure of competition; in order for the ruling class to survive a little longer, the ethic of competition must be absorbed as the major social value. Both the ruled and the rulers are involved in a common dilemma: the preservation of American appearances requires masking the real social relations and crises of our time and place.

The manufacture of false consciousness is a system sustaining imperative in a society which imposes an intractably contradiction-ridden existence on its members. Rebellions do, however, occur, but they only succeed in putting pressure on the established institutions to further sophisticate the dynamics of false consciousness. These rebellions cannot reveal or replace entrenched interests, but they displace an enormous amount of social energy and attention, and to that degree, may serve a counter-revolutionary function. The most obvious examples are adolescent runaways, Jesus freaks, rebellions in secondary schools and colleges, all of which are primarily directed against “authority” as such, and have a personal or private locus.

On the other hand, many members of the

ruling class are victims of their own ideology and believe all the more strongly that their support of the status quo creates the best of all possible worlds. They are able to rationalize all the indicators of social collapse, including the personal rebellions. The pervasiveness of false consciousness immobilizes opposition by containing conflicts, confusing interests, encouraging petty infighting within organized quasi-oppositions and, in short, involving the participants in internal struggles through the socially-programmed game of competition.

### MYSTIFICATION

One of the consequences of false consciousness is the mystification of the social world; concrete facts and situations are surrounded with an aura of unreality. Actual relations between phenomena are obscured to the point where critical appraisals are difficult if not impossible. The distinction between fantasy and reality fades; mystification is the individual component of collective false consciousness.

Such mystification pervades the entire cycle of everyday life under capitalism [12], and can be best understood by analyzing the content of our everyday existence. The conventional – and major sociological – premise of bourgeois society is the separation of the individual and the social; in this separation the real debasement, alienation and isolation of the individual reaches its peak, and illusions must be generated endlessly in order to maintain “social equilibrium”.

T.W. Adorno, who steers a middle course between Hegel and Marx, analyzes the effect of this process in his *Negative Dialectics*. The argument of critical theory vis-à-vis individualism begins with the premise that the real individual is non-existent in the current stage of capitalism, wherein the extension of rationalized commodity economics flattens out unmarketable human irregularities. Hence, “the illusory importance and autonomy of private life conceals the fact that private life drags on

only as an appendage of the social process”. Adorno saw the mystification of individuality as a convenient fiction for the imposition of a false consciousness of self on the masses of isolated egos, and as a cheap and effective mode of escape from an administered world that is, in effect, an “open-air prison”, where even the basic tendency of the species toward variation is reversed. Thus, “it is no longer important to know what depends on what, such is the extent to which everything is one” [13].

This mystification originated in the great philosophical systems of the seventeenth century when “philosophy had an unexpressed mandate from the bourgeoisie to find transparent grounds for freedom” [14]. But such “freedom” is, at base, the permission granted the individual to sell his labor. Cast thus into a reified give-and-take, individuals developed a particular hubris, they became insulated from both the origin and nature of their condition, and this insulation “strengthens their flattening confidence in the subject’s autarky” [15]. The conceptual apparatus for individual salesmanship grows apace, but the capacity to understand the collective decays. This is the brutal impress of bourgeois society on consciousness: While being individually “smart”, one is condemned to chronic social “stupidity”.

In the individual there are supposed to reside reserves of power, spontaneity, imagination, and love, all somehow sealed against the deadening social process. The individual may even be perceived as standing against a bad society, and in his heroics preserve a moment of the primitive world which has been wiped away by rationalized bourgeois economy. Adorno anticipates a massive and collective nervous breakdown if this mystification were to be demolished: “A candid look at the predominance of the universal does all but unbearable psychological harm to the narcissism of all individuals . . . to see through selfhood as non-existent . . . would easily turn all men’s objective despair into a subjective one” [16].

Ironically, the idea of the individual has

gone through an historical cycle; it was once the cornerstone of humanism, a doctrine that catalyzed the revolutionary bourgeoisie. But under monopoly capitalism, individualism is merely ideological, contributing to the prevailing false consciousness by forwarding the notion of private life in a thoroughly administered world.

### THE CULT OF PRIVATE LIFE

The cult of private life is championed by agencies of the socialization process – family, schools, media, advertisers, psychiatrists. From the earliest phases of development, the mind is saturated with “cultural landmarks” that celebrate the struggle for existence (competition) in heroic (individual) terms. The more barbaric forms of individualism are leftovers of the frontier syndrome, whereas their more cerebral counterpart attempts to reject reality per se in favor of the rewards of the individual’s “inward path”. The pop song that proclaims, “I am a rock, I am an island” contains a grain of bitter truth: It is not simply the mischievous socialization process that alters perception in a privatized way, but the mundane facts of life’s routine which burn the image of isolated monads into the collective consciousness.

The great complaint of theologians and sociologists alike has been the “massification” of man, the disappearance of the “inner-directed” person [17]. There is truth in the dogma that the *principium individuationis* has been challenged by mass society, and that Mead’s famous theory of the social self has its parallel in nuclear fission [18]. The individual *has* been nullified as a crucial element in world-historical processes, while individualism as an ideology becomes increasingly vehement in its affirmations of legitimacy. The Nürnberg Tribunal’s ruling that each soldier is morally responsible for his action, the Maharishi’s claim that all TM initiates have their own special *mantra*, and the clothing salesman’s assurance that a mass-produced garment is “made” for the

customer are everyday advertisements of this unreality [19]. Ideological individualism is a basic method of social control; it brings the “divide and conquer” strategy to sublime refinement. Convinced that he or she is unique, and mystified to the point where everyday artifacts become surrounded with sacred auras, the isolated person cannot determine her/his social interest [20]. Thus people in hopelessly competitive situations may shun unions; the elderly and not-so-elderly may refuse unemployment and retirement checks, not wishing to accept “charity”. The state of Virginia seeks to lure new industry with the slogan that its citizens “pay their own way”.

As resilient as the human being is, the central nervous system has its limits; it is generally recognized that the present character of society-at-large creates diagnosable “mental problems” for large numbers of people [21]. Since the turn of the century, various clinical approaches have emerged in response to the increased number of breakdowns, and there now exists a wide range of therapies, psychologies, and doctrines from which the citizen-as-patient can choose the style that best suits her/his condition. With a few notable exceptions, the client-therapist role assumes an authoritarian character. In client-centered and transactional approaches, a partnership of sorts is posited, but in neither of these is the dominant social system viewed as a major factor in the client’s unhappiness. Infantile experiences, “characterological disorders,” chemical imbalances, sexual disfunctions, family influences, “maladjustment” and a plethora of similar causes are employed to locate the source of the misery at hand. The ranks of middle-class Americans that are yearly diagnosed as “neurotic” are aided by files of therapists in assembling logical and often sympathetic explanations of their conditions. The source, if not the cause of mental disorders is invariably traced to the client himself and/or his friends and relations. Society-at-large does not, and cannot, figure significantly in these

treatments, although the collective ill-effects of living day-to-day in an advanced industrial society have been repeatedly demonstrated [22]. Thus psychology, counseling, and allied techniques further privatize the individual, leading her or him to search for exclusively existential solutions, more sophisticated avoidance mechanisms, and tried and true adjustment techniques. Marcuse's remark about "shrinks" being so-called because they shrink minds to manageable proportions is appropriate as social problems are telescoped into personal ones [23].

Mannheim, in his discussion of conservative thought, makes a relevant, if commonplace, observation: "There are ideal elements surviving in the present as hangovers from the tension of former periods in which the world was not yet stabilized and which now operate only ideologically as faiths, religions, and myths which have been banished to a realm beyond history" [24]. The ideology of individualism, in this period of ultimate capitalist decline, has a foothold in the general consciousness stronger than the social structure it rationalizes.

### ILLUSIONS OF PLENITUDE

Marketing techniques, easy credit, and mass media combine to create unreal social perceptions among the dominated classes. Historically, the face of hard times has been easily recognized: It was toothless and gaunt, the mark of oppression was obvious in clothing, posture, speech, morphology. The poor knew who they were, and so did everyone else. A military press gang storming through the streets looking for "recruits" could abduct the ragged without fear of making mistakes. The obvious gulf between rich and poor has been obscured in late capitalist society, and even our "disciplined" historical knowledge is inadequate since the poor, the "ordinary", the lower classes have, until recently, been ignored or rendered featureless by the official writers of

history. However, graphic evidence of popular artists survives the years and aids in the understanding of class divisions. In *Le Printemps*, Brueghel shows young men and women, along with children and old people at backbreaking work in the garden of a noble family which appears in the background of the picture finely dressed, drinking wine, playing with lapdogs. In two engravings depicting poor and opulent kitchens, ravenous scarecrows fighting over morsels stand in vivid contrast to the wholesale gorging of sausage, cheese, pigs feet, and pastries by the rich [25]. Jacques Callot's *Les Gueux* shows the varieties of physical ruin that marked beggars [26], while Hogarth's studies of "Gin Street" and "Cruelty" demonstrate the condition of the lower classes in Enlightenment England [27].

The advent of easy credit and consumerism have reinforced, for the Western majority, the illusions of independence, individuality, and private life [28]. Proliferation of goods, especially those that have the fetish-qualities of "convenience" or "beautiful living", diverts consciousness from its self-recognition as dominated. The salaried worker — white, blue, or no-collar — who returns to a suburban home stuffed with luxuries, playthings, labor-saving devices all bought on time, tends to accept the accomplished fact of their physical presence more readily than the inevitable monthly payment or, in hard times, the dunning calls of collection agents with their threats of repossession. Since plenitude — or the illusion of it — supports feelings of security and uniqueness, the sheer volume of goods crowding one's homelife buttresses the ideology of individual well-being. And, to be sure, the distractions available through prolonged involvement with reified objects aid in the mental avoidance of brute economic facts. One works harder to maintain the fantasy for self and family that the "good life" has come to stay.

The paraphernalia, some of which is actually cheap enough to be owned outright, that contribute to a falsified consciousness include

remarkable devices unique to the contemporary situation. The destructive fantasy world of television has been examined from almost every perspective [29], but the salient function of this apparatus remains inescapable: continual exposure to the medium that jumbles together quiz shows, hair dryers, Nazis, Bugs Bunny, and “news from the front” constitutes the real “Truth or Consequences” of the airwaves: the Truth of false consciousness is actualized in the debilitating Consequence of media poisoning. The stereos, radios, tape-decks, and “home entertainment centers” that, along with TV, fire salvos of sensory overload into an already shattered consciousness have one feature in common; they force the mind into solitary communion with the electronic medium. The experiences they produce are shared insofar as Rhoda’s wedding or Sam’s flirtation with adultery are the major topics of conversation at work. These devices privatize and isolate a collectivity of industrial nomads whose centrally-heated caves are financed by the Bank.

### **SOMETHING TO BELIEVE IN**

The automobile as a vehicle of dynamic social change involving mating patterns, geographical mobility, and so on, has been pontificated on by sociologists in search of safe subjects. But the car is basically an agent of rigidification, reaction, and privatization. In the well-known arrangement, suburban housewife thrashes about the home while husband goes off to work, yet the breadwinner takes the isolation of homelife along, or rather, it takes him along. Careering onto an immense interstate highway at breakneck speeds, the homogenized sensations of V-8 engine, automatic transmissions, cushioned seats, and sheer bulk are designed to make the driver unaware of travel in the old sense of a reflective or difficult journey from A to B. In the majority of cases people commute alone, accompanied only by radio or tape-player that keeps the businessman informed with around the clock

repetitive news, the worker distracted by the Top Ten, and the intellectual edified with classical music.

Cars effectively limit the human contacts one can make; commerce exacerbates the condition with “curb service”, drive-in eating, films, banking, prayer, and, in California, funerals. With this kind of institutional backing, an automotive reality swiftly overtakes the human one. Cars emerge as distinct “personality types”, otherwise anonymous people are measured and evaluated in terms of their purchase: The urbane bachelor in his Jag, hippies smoking pot in a van, the girl from the typing pool behind the wheel of her Pinto, the pimp in a Mark IV, snobs in a Mercedes, even a transiently hired one. The tendency toward variation among organic species is here transferred to motor vehicles; persons sensing that their individuality and uniqueness is perpetually in question can re-privatize their existence every few years by buying a distinctive car that mirrors their special “lifestyle”. And this, in turn, acts to sustain the economy, and the society, along with the ideology of individualism.

Evidence of this domination of the mind can be found in surveys on auto use, market analysis, and government energy policies. One hardly need mention the contamination of language involved: the student “clutches” on an exam; the junior executive “shifts” his operation into “high gear”; the wiseguy has the “air taken out of his tires”; and the untrained observer can note the consequences of the combination of media and privatized transport as the spell of a hit song occasionally overcomes the stark reality of a traffic jam. Motorists may sing along with the radio, bob the head in time to its electronic rhythm, or absentmindedly execute a kind of primal bump-and-grind behind the steering wheel. Sometimes sexual tensions unresolved at home are released in the privacy of the automobile, and truck-drivers who have a privileged view from the cabs of giant semis have humorously

reported instances of both male and female motorists masturbating while buzzing down the freeway.

Despite the rigors of the driving routine, some commuters affirm that they would not give it up for anything; it puts them in a relaxing limbo between home and office. But it also rehearses a tableau of individual competition which is subsequently acted out in both places [30]. At high speeds, the commuter jockeys for lane-changes, dodges snarling trucks, keeps on the lookout for speed traps, calculates miles-per-gallon, battles bad weather and other drivers. The result, multiplied ten thousand times, is a work force well-seasoned for the day's challenges. Automobiles disgorge their rattled passengers who have just smelled blood amidst the life-and-death struggle of the interstate and are ready for in-fighting at the office or plant. The journey home is less intense if just as solitary, the combative energies perhaps dulled by alcohol, valium, and other soporifics.

Recent advances in automotive technology and marketing have perfected the car's privatization capacities. Within the past ten years, safety legislation has required greater amounts of foam-padding in passenger compartments, more restrictive body-harnesses, and warning lights and buzzers which admonish the driver to be careful. The car of the future has an interior not unlike that of certain therapy rooms in mental institutions. Motorists who openly love their cars recall the days of open-topped roadsters, picking up women (or men) with flashy sports models and blasting through the countryside at dizzy speeds. These days constitute a Golden Age for many Americans of all ages who have organized themselves as "enthusiasts" who oppose safety legislation on the ground that a person should not be denied the right to perish with *élan* by running off the edge of a cliff. Certainly, there is a precedent for this debased nostalgia as the legends of Camus and Isadora Duncan attest.

The real terror of the situation lies not in

the debate over safety versus speed, but in the widespread hostility toward mass transit. Having been seduced into loving the cellular isolation of the private auto, people cling to them as fetishes which falsely represent a middle-class way of life. Complaints about trains being slow, buses dirty, unreliable, and so on are not only self-fulfilling prophecies; they mask a certain truth. Mass transit means confronting people of other races and classes on a daily basis; it locates one socially in an immediate public context. Thus, of the everyday mechanisms that perpetuate a false consciousness among Americans, the automobile, as a capitalist function, may be the last to go. The emergence of motor-homes in an era of rising fuel costs underlines the tenacity of motorized life which can now combine two spheres of privatization — car and home — in one package. The family drives their motor-home to a forest preserve along with a thousand other vacationers. At nightfall they sit indoors and watch TV.

#### **BELATED TRIUMPH OF THE WILL**

To be sure, the individual's life is not yet hermetically sealed; there are still areas where people congregate in great numbers. These meetings typically occur in places of organized consumption — supermarkets, shopping centers, stadia. Unlike the traditional Kermesse or county fair, the classes do not mingle in such environments. The nature of the real estate business accounts for this, as does the administration of shopping centers where only certain types of trade are permitted. Within these arrangements, suburbanites seldom witness food stamp recipients at the check-out counter, and patrons of EJ Korvette rarely encounter customers from Saks. For middle-class women especially, a trip to the suburban shopping mall is an expedition pregnant with meaning since it is one of the rare occasions on which she can move at will among strangers, dawdle in shops without feeling guilty about

loitering, and above all, acquire goods which will distinguish the lifestyle of her family from that of a million nearly-identical people. The stores themselves try to foster the impression of uniqueness; an immense variety of ready-to-wear clothing promises to lift the individual out of the crowd in a splash of colored fabric. The practice of purposely confusing the customer in department stores has a payoff – since nothing is easily located, great amounts of floorspace must be navigated, and the chances for “impulse buying” increase. The customer returns to the car, armed with ornaments that will maintain the family’s illusory distinctiveness for a week or so. In essence, the shopping experience is a competitive one: For the bargain-hunter in a discount store, it involves elbowing one’s way through a tangle of rapacious shoppers and shoddy goods; for the more “affluent” person, it involves calculation and planning in which great care must be exercised not to duplicate a friend’s purchases, or to fall below a certain standard of elegance.

If the shopping mall is typically the acknowledged territory of women, then the sports arena tends to be most heavily attended by men who will occasionally bring “dates” to crucial games. It could be argued that sports competition between cities fosters a sense of community among the fans who, if not enthusiastic about their own locality, are at least united in their hostility to the visiting team. On a superficial level, this would seem to be the case, but it requires very few visits to stadium events to notice quite different sorts of collective behavior. In the massive superdomes the prevailing spirit is more one of proto-Fascist hysteria than community solidarity. Half-time shows or their equivalent underscore these sentiments with a demonstration of hebephrenic eroticism set within the submissive rigors of close-order drill. The game itself – football, prizefighting, hockey, – is punctuated by Muzak, bugle calls, and choral demands from the bleachers for “blood” or the equivalent. Even amidst the highly col-

lectivized atmosphere of professional sports, the privatized, individual features are stressed by staging and publicity, and the personality cult of athletes has become a dominant feature in the American cognitive landscape.

#### **NARCISSISM: THE QUARANTINED MIND**

The sanitation, personal hygiene, and general cleanliness once dreamed of by reformers and professional do-gooders have now become an institutionalized nightmare. The neuroticism of this “cleanliness is next to Godliness” ideology is well-documented on the face of the TV housewife who is supposed to quake with anxiety when the dishwasher fails to discharge its duties with proper efficiency. And “ring around the collar” is presented as a symbolic death-chant for bourgeois respectability in families that value their image-management. Apart from the sadistic and humorous aspects of the cleanliness fetish (which have been effectively lampooned by Miner) [31] it both contributes to, and rationalizes, the social and even physical isolation of family “intimates”.

The median suburban home is a fortress of mechanical servants that re-charge the image batteries of the standard American family. Most laundering functions, for example, have been moved to the gothic privacy of the basement; this frees the middle-class housewife for other pursuits, and effectively seals her off from co-sufferers in the community. Once the chores are completed, she can withdraw into a boring, hermetically-sealed day of soap operas, hair dryers, and AM radio where a consoling vocalist croons out the message that, after all, “lonely women make good lovers”. Indeed, even if the female is the breadwinner, the basic characteristics of everyday life are only reversed, not transcended. Social alternatives can be pursued only to the extent that they make no fundamental difference in the structure of society, and where the economy is on the rise, giving individuals more time and security to contemplate the oppressive charac-

ter of the cultural environment. As soon as inflation, depression or repression return, the already implanted character-armour grows back to isolate, and protect the individual, and secure his or her everyday survival.

The individual becomes embalmed in the chemistry of these defenses. As the contradictions of the individualism ideology mount in their intensity and frequency, and as hard times serve to render those contradictions painfully graphic, the mind retrenches. An Alamo mentality takes shape as people begin to see a certain reward in going down fighting, without hope of rescue or victory. But the world-historical forces that lead to dissolution of the obsolete concept of individuals will not grant the wish for a final frontal assault. Instead, the ideology is peeled away slowly and with the greatest anguish for those who have been programmed to believe in it. Samuel Beckett's advice to these countless thousands is, "don't wait to be hunted to hide".

## CONCLUSION

Before Marx took up the concept of consciousness it was damaged by the submissive theology of Hegel. Marx grounded consciousness in the nuts-and-bolts happenings of everyday life in a repressive society. From the predicament of a dominated mind arises *false consciousness*, a condition in which subject classes are cognitively incapable of identifying their own interests, historical role, and human potential. *Mystification* is the construction of a *collective* unreality in which myth displaces the real antagonisms of social life. Of all the ideologies that contribute to a state of false consciousness, *individualism* is the most significant in its relation to de-fusing a class struggle; it is the "divide and conquer" tactic *par excellence*. Taking a page from Marx, we have presented scenarios from everyday life that perpetuate the individual's image of him or herself as an isolated, privatized element in society. We have also followed Marx in the

view, amply supported by the historical evidence, that the dominant class projects the standard cultural norms in capitalist society.

Sociologists of a phenomenological persuasion have viewed the social world as a dialectic between mind and concrete environment. "Reality" as such is the end product of subjective definitions by individuals and groups. We have argued that perceptions of social reality are in large part engineered by a minority whose interest rests in creating images that effectively disguise their control of society's resources. Thus, Americans who have been thoroughly mystified by the ideology of individualism are capable of seeing their own lives as bright with promise, while their nation's fortunes decline. Such mental acrobatics are not explainable in terms of dissonance theory, which gives an ahistorical analysis, or particularization, which reduces false consciousness to the psychological level. False consciousness – whether it be evidenced by individualism, chauvinism, religious fanaticism, aestheticism, or nature worship – does not result from a random ordering of phenomena: It is the reflection of a conscious choice by dominating classes and their agents, i.e., distortion of reality to prevent communal actions threatening the power structure.

## NOTES

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Peter Hiller, "Social Reality and Social Stratification", *Social Research*, no. 21 (Fall 1973), pp. 77–99.  
This literature was explored and was found to be irrelevant to our argument since it emphasized attitudes rather than social structure. Its explanatory power is severely limited.
- 2 G.F.W. Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Mind*, trans. J.B. Baillie, N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1967, pp. 241–267.

- 3 Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The German Ideology*, ed. R. Pascal, N.Y.: International Publishers, 1947, p. 15.
- 4 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. Rodney Livingstone, Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 1968, p. 19.
- 5 Agnes Heller, "Towards a Marxist Theory of Value", *Kinesis*, Vol. 5, no. 1 (Fall 1972), p. 17.
- 6 Lukács, op. cit., pp. 47–55.
- 7 Ibid., p. 65. On parallels between Lukács and Weber on this point, see H.C. Greisman, "Disenchantment of the World: Aesthetics, Romanticism, and Sociological Theory", *British Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 27, no. 4 (December 1976).
- 8 Marx and Engels, op. cit., p. 41.
- 9 See William Chapman, "State of the Nation – 1974: Public Pleased with Self, Pessimistic on Nation", *Washington Post*, October 27, 1974, p. A2. This attitude survey used the traditional ladder-rating system, with the range running from the best (10) to the worst (1) possible conditions. In the national sample of over 1800 persons, the average ladder rating was 6.6 for personal affairs, the same average reported by a similar survey in 1959. But in the 1959 survey reported attitudes toward the condition of the country were substantially more positive. That national ladder rating was 6.7, and in April of 1974, it had declined to 4.8.  
The kinds of issues on people's minds had also changed: Rising prices and the overall cost of living were the greatest concerns, with violence and crime taking second place. Corruption in government, most likely a reaction to Watergate, ranked fourth. Foreign affairs dropped to the bottom of the list of national concerns, while in a 1964 survey, international affairs and defense were the top five items of concern. Last on a list of thirty domestic concerns was an item dealing with "problems of Black Americans".
- 10 Slater touches on this process but does not build it into a coherent analysis of everyday life. Philip Slater, *The Pursuit of Loneliness*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1970.
- 11 Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality*, Garden City, N.J.: Doubleday, 1966. This phrase is first coined in the above work, pp. 45–74.
- 12 See H.C. Greisman, "Marketing the Millennium: Ideology, Mass Culture, and Industrial Society", *Politics and Society*, Vol. 4, no. 4 (Winter 1974).
- 13 Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber, London: Neville Spearman, 1967, p. 214.
- 14 Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton, New York: Seabury Press, 1973, p. 214.
- 15 Ibid., p. 219.
- 16 Ibid., p. 312.
- 17 David Reisman, *The Lonely Crowd*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1967, Chapter Two.
- 18 Atamon was the Greek word for the individual, translated by Cicero as *Individuum*.
- 19 During the Third Reich, the Nazis promulgated the slogan "gemeinnützig vor eigennützig", meaning "collective good before individual needs". Through this and similar campaigns the national socialists attempted a total merger of state and person. In everyday reality, however, the Nazi state was a caricature of "every man for himself" stretched to unsupportable limits.
- 20 Morris Rosenberg, "Perceptual Obstacles to Class Consciousness", *Social Forces*, Vol. 32, October 1953, pp. 22–27.
- 21 Slater, op. cit., Chapter One.
- 22 Snell and Gail Putney, *The Adjusted American: Normal Neuroses in the Individual and Society*, N.Y.: Harper and Row, 1964.
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- 25 H. Arthur Klein, ed., *Graphic Worlds of Peter Bruegel the Elder*, N.Y.: Dover Publications, P9b, pp. 161–167.
- 26 Howard Daniel, *Callot's Etchings*, N.Y.: Dover Publications, 1973, pp. 75–76.
- 27 Sean Shesgreen, ed., *Engravings by Hogarth*, N.Y.: Dover Books, 1973, Plates 75, 76.
- 28 Alfred Winslow Jones, *Life, Liberty, and Prosperity*, N.Y.: Octagon Books, 1964, pp. 348–350.
- 29 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, N.Y.: Signet Books, 1964, pp. 268–294; David Manning White, ed., *Pop Culture in America*. Chicago: Quadrangle Books, Chapter Two.
- 30 Geoffrey Gorer, *The American People*, N.Y.: W.W. Norton, 1964, p. 261.
- 31 Horace Miner, "Body Ritual Among the Nacirema", *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 58, no. 3 (1956), pp. 503–507.