Stuart Hall's Theory of Ideology: A Frame for Rhetorical Criticism

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This paper investigates Stuart Hall's theory of ideology as a tool for rhetorical theory and criticism. After explicating the theoretical presuppositions of the theory in which issues of power and dominance, epistemology, language, legitimation, and consensus are considered, the paper offers a method for rhetorical critics which focuses upon Hall's pivotal notion of articulation. By examining terms and "logics" of public discourse in relation to historical conditions, Hall's theory enables the critic to examine how consciousness is produced in the relations among linguistic structures and social formations.

The data on crackers suggests that they are either juvenile delinquents or plain criminals. (Harper's, p. 49)

Information should flow more freely... and the hacker can make it happen because the hacker knows how to undam the pipes (Harper's, p. 48)

Currently, the perspectives on computer hacking's proper role in society range from the charge that it is an irresponsible and possibly even criminal activity to the defense that it is expansively creative and serves to check the authoritarian impulses of social institutions. Traditionally, such apparently diverse perspectives are aired in such forums as the monthly colloquy in Harper's, and are often lauded for their free and open exchange of ideas. Ideology theory, as developed by Stuart Hall, suggests an alternative possibility: given that meaning is socially constructed, Hall argues, there exist ideological "logics" to public debate which create limiting social realities about the way the world works. Such debates are not, in other words, as free and open as they appear. I contend that Stuart Hall's theory of ideology offers rhetorical critics a way to subject debates on social issues like computer hacking to an analysis that goes beyond appearances and examines the underlying constraints and determinants of the discourse.

Postmodernist theories of ideology are not new to rhetorical theory and criticism. Michael McGee (1980) has urged rhetoricians to examine the synchronic and diachronic structures of ideographs to get at the impact of ideology on freedom and of power on control of consciousness.

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Philip Wander (1983) has argued for employing criticism to upset ideologically-embedded discourse and social practices in order to move toward emancipation. Recently, Raymie McKerrow (1989) has developed a theoretical rationale for a critical rhetoric analyzing the "discourse of power" toward the end of emancipation from dominant discourses and social relations. Neither Wander nor McKerrow, however, has developed either a critical methodology, or as complete a critical theory of ideology as Stuart Hall. Not only does Hall treat relations of power and dominance, but he has also developed a subtle conception of the production of consciousness (especially but not exclusively by the media and the state), which includes the workings of epistemology, consensus, hegemony, and legitimation while questioning the limits of common sense formulations and the practice of democratic pluralism.

Furthermore, through the notion of articulation, Hall's critical theory of ideology provides a systematic and comprehensive method for the analysis of discourse in interaction with social practices and structures, a method which goes beyond McGee's formulation of the synchronic and diachronic analysis of ideographs. Hall not only provides for the analysis of single terms but also of "logics" of debate while spelling out in detail the ways in which diachronic analysis might disclose the interaction between discursive structures and historical conditions. For Hall, "articulation" refers to non-necessary connections that can create structural unities among linguistic and historical conditions. Hall employs this notion to bring into view the roles that such structures and conditions play in producing unities that underpin or emerge within a field of struggle over meaning. Finally, although the emancipatory agenda that Wander and McKerrow explicate and McGee implies is present at the theoretical level in Hall's work, his critical method does not necessitate it. Consequently, Hall's approach can be used to critique not only discourses of the dominant capitalist system but also attacks upon it. In sum, Hall develops an especially rich critical theory of ideology and a critical method focusing upon articulation which offers possibilities for a flexible and incisive critique of discourse by guiding the critic's attention to specific connections between ideological elements and social, political, economic, and technological practices and structures.

Although Hall's critical methodology has not heretofore been presented (nor has his work been explicitly acknowledged among rhetoricians except by McKerrow), his significance has been underscored. Within the field of communication he is frequently and widely quoted in Critical Studies in Mass Communication. In 1986, an entire issue of the Iowa Journal of Communication Inquiry was devoted to the issue of postmodernism and featured Hall's work. Furthermore, he has published well over a hundred works, including articles, book chapters, and books.  

The significance of the postmodern discussion—in which scholars are trying to make sense of how, and if, we know what we know—has been
underscored by scholars in disciplines outside of communication as well. Lyotard (1984), Caputo (1987), and Barthes (1987), among others, have argued from various perspectives that social knowledge is created discursively in interaction with historical conditions. Yet, again, Hall develops a particularly rich and complete critical theory that uses the notion of articulation to relate the analysis of public discourse with such postmodern issues as Lyotard's concern with instabilities and narrative archetypes, Caputo's focus on living in the flux, and Barthes' interest in deep readings of multiple meanings of texts. In addition, by understanding the media to be ideological, because they engage rhetorics to "operate in the domain of the social construction of meaning" ("Ideology," p. 48), Hall develops a productive framework for analyzing public discourse within its usually mediated context.

I will clarify the considerable possibilities Hall's ideology theory opens up for rhetorical theory and criticism by first explicating the theoretical frame within which he is working. Then I will develop the critical method useful to rhetorical critics. Finally, I will offer a brief case study of the computer hacking debate found in Harper's in order to demonstrate how Hall's theory of ideology allows one to open up the ideological presuppositions of a debate for discursive analysis in interaction with historical conditions. Although ideology critique often engages wider arenas of debate, I have chosen this limited forum because it represents the kind of conflict that a more broadly focused ideology critic would engage, but allows the structural elements of the discourse to be clearly and succinctly articulated. In addition, although Hall's own studies tend to be critiques of deeply imbedded "establishment" ideologies like racism or Thatcherism, I have chosen one with an "anti-establishment" ideological foundation to demonstrate the open potentiality of ideology critique to be engaged in the service of any ideologically rooted perspective.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

While traditional conceptions of rhetoric presume practices of democracy and freedom, Hall's theory of ideology problematizes democratic pluralism. He maintains that the presumption of democratic pluralism's ideals of enfranchisement within a consensual value structure is unfounded for two reasons. First, the populations of western industrialized democracies generally lack political, social, and economic enfranchisement. They have neither an equal share in the bounties and direction of modern democratic capitalist society nor equal access to the process by which decisions are made. Those who remain outside of the consensual center are socially defined as deviant. By thus stigmatizing those outside its consensus, dominant society encourages conformity to its norms and produces and reproduces consciousness. Second, he argues that no natural consensus exists, but rather that meaning is socially constructed. The tension between those inside and outside the prevailing
consensus invites the question of who has the power to define whom, and in what interests the definitions are offered. These questions of dominance highlight how consent to a particular social, political, and economic order is enforced. If no natural consensus exists, then it is clear that meaning is socially constructed. Therefore, the consensus upon which democratic pluralism supposedly rests must be the result of social labor, a complex process of social construction and legitimation. For the consensus to be legitimized, events and practices must be defined in a way that makes them appear to represent the natural order of things. They must be endowed with a perspective of naturalness and inevitability that renders alternative constructions unimaginable, outside the realm of consideration.

Thus, Hall, drawing from Lukes, defines the power of "the ideological" as "the movement towards the winning of a universal validity and legitimacy for accounts of the world which are partial and particular, and towards the grounding of these particular constructions in the taken-for-grantedness of 'the real'" ("Rediscovery," p. 65). Hall argues that the legitimacy of an ideological claim depends on that part of the truth which it takes for the whole truth, and that these particular and partial constructions are taken to be natural and real phenomena. That is, they are represented as what is transparent, inevitable, and wholly natural. The ideological moment occurs when codes have become profoundly naturalized, when through habitual use they have developed an appearance of equivalence with their referents so that instant recognition occurs. "Everybody knows," for example, what democracy is.

The fact that ideological constructions are socially formed tends to be lost to consciousness. They are proffered without an inventory as truths which can function in a variety of contemporary contexts to legitimate current practices and interpretations of events. They function as taken-for-granted "grammars of culture" into which knowledge of the given case is ideologically inventoried (Hall, "Rediscovery," p. 73). Ideological constructions tender whole "logics" as the common sense of a culture. Thus, when one argues, for example, that computer hacking is ethical, a whole set of common sense notions of taken-for-granted propositions regarding the virtues of creativity, freedom of speech, and curiosity are written into the statement, creating a "logic" of what computer hacking is about. These underlying presuppositions are rarely made explicit and remain largely unconscious both to their authors and to those required to make sense of them.

The entailment of propositions produces what Hall calls the "reality effect" of ideology (Hall, "Rediscovery," pp. 74-76). Ideology produces in its subjects and consumers a recognition of what is already known, of the taken-for-granted status of reality. Ideology fails to recognize that social relations depend on historical conditions and instead represents them as natural, inevitable, and eternal truths. In Hall's words, ideology does not acknowledge "the contingency of the historical conditions upon
which all social relations depend. It represents them, instead, as outside of history: unchangeable, inevitable, and natural. It also disguises its premises as already known facts" (Hall, "Rediscovery," p. 76). When events and practices are represented as if they were ahistorical truths, problematic events or situations get cast unproblematically into the terms of what appears as "natural" within a society. Losing their propositional status, premises are transformed into narrative statements that are resistant to alternative interpretations of events. This perspective on common sense shifts the focus in rhetoric from the art of discovering and arguing from common ground to analysis of the construction of consciousness that controls discourse. That is, a shift is made from how the rhetor may discover common grounds with the audience from which to build a case to observation of the controlling influence of common ground as common sense reflecting consciousness as it limits possibilities for discourse.

Although Hall defines ideological power in these terms, he understands ideology itself to be "the mental frameworks—the languages, the concepts, categories, imagery of thought, and the systems of representation—which different classes and social groups deploy in order to make sense of, define, figure out and render intelligible the way society works" ("Problem," p. 29). Hall's definition unites discourse with social formations; social ideas arise in the interactive conjunction of rhetorics and social practice.

The production of social knowledge takes place principally through language, through the instrumentality of thinking, conceptualization, and symbolization (Hall, "Culture," pp. 327-28). By conceiving language semiotically, Hall emphasizes its signifying and codifying functions. Codes refer to the meaning signified by the signs. As Hall states: "codes refer signs to the 'maps of meaning' into which culture is classified; and those 'maps of social reality' have the whole range of social meanings, practices and usages, power and interest 'written in' to them" ("Encoding," p. 134). Ideology is profoundly embedded within a culture as codes. It operates as structures of language and social formations which constitute a reservoir of themes which in turn give meaning to particular events. In the name of reversing suppression of information, for example, creativity, freedom of speech, and human curiosity are engaged at the level of codes that legitimize the practice of computer hacking.

Although ideological formulations have a controlling influence on the range of meanings that surround an event or situation, such constructions should not be taken to imply false consciousness or trickery. Meanings are social constructions. There exists no univocally true reality that people are either able or unable to recognize, nor a given interpretation that is absolutely right or wrong. In Hall's words, there is "no one to one relationship between conditions of social existence we are living and how we experience them" ("Signification," p. 105). This is not to say that ideologies cannot be false. They may provide maps of
meaning that mask the realities of economic and political relations, but they are not necessarily untrue or inaccurate. Ideology expresses the way people live their relation between themselves and the conditions of existence. Therefore, ideology is not like a building which one can exit; we are necessarily in the building, and all we can do is choose how to decorate or remodel it. The issue is how consciousness is produced and reproduced, not whether we can or should escape ideological formulation. It is a matter of which ideological formulations are engaged, not whether we should have them.

Further, because ideology is “a function of the discourse and of the logic of social processes rather than an intention of the agent” (Hall, “Rediscovery,” p. 88), ideological representation cannot be explained by the inclinations of individuals, nor can the motive of trickery be necessarily assigned to it. Ideological formulations remain largely unconscious to both their speaker and their receivers. Consequently, although rhetors may choose what they will say, ideology theory maintains that these choices are determined within the common sense of the culture. Functioning as systems and structures, ideologies may be said to maintain their speakers as subjects, displacing the authorial “I” of a discourse (Hall, “Signification” p. 102). Hall maintains that “we are hailed or summoned by the ideologies which recruit us as their ‘authors,’ their essential subjects” (“Signification” p. 102). The speaker, in turn, is subject to the ideological construction s/he presupposes in defining a situation or event. The subject is the category, the position where the author of ideological statements is constituted. Ideologies consequently create the lived realities of their subjects. Subjects are “constituted by the unconscious process of ideology” (Hall, “Signification” p. 102). Because ideologies are embedded within social formations and within the structures of language, they are resistant to change and thus to the introduction of alternative perspectives. There exists a structural constraint against alternative perspectives to the degree that they may be seen as violating the common sense of a culture.

Hall’s claim that ideology is resistant to change due to its pervasive-ly structural embeddedness is not meant to imply that people have no choice or power to act rhetorically. As Hall notes, “Structures exhibit tendencies, lines of force, openings and closures which constrain, shape, channel and in that sense determine. But structures cannot determine in the harder sense of fix absolutely, guarantee” (“Signification” p. 96). Although linguistic and social structures exhibit tendencies, they do not guarantee outcomes. Structure is actively reproduced through practice. It is important, however, not to err in the opposite direction by making a practice a fetish. Practices do not occur in isolation, but are constrained through structure. In the reciprocal relationship between structure and practice, structure is actively produced and reproduced through practice just as practice is constrained by structure. The combination of
structure and practice invites certain meanings and practices and discourages others.

Consequently, although ideological formulations are resistant to change, they are not impregnable. People do have the ability to act rhetorically in the world, to contest ideological representations despite their resistance to change. Ideological representation is a constantly shifting process that manifests itself in a struggle over definition. It is a struggle for the legitimacy of meanings assigned to events and practices.

At the same time, dominant definitions embedded within dominant social, political, and economic structures weight the struggle. It is not that dominant groups consciously coerce subordination (although police and the military do—as demonstrated at Kent State—enforce playing by the rules of the game). Rather, dominant groups are themselves the subjects of dominant ideologies, which operate at largely unconscious levels. Dominant groups offer a kind of cultural leadership in terms of which events and practices are defined. Dominance is a property of the system or structure of relations rather than the biases of individuals (Hall, "Rediscovery" p. 85). Thus dominance is accomplished at both the conscious and unconscious levels. It is an oversimplification, Hall explains, to envision dominance, as Marx does, as reflexive of a unitary economic principle or of an economic class. No simple underlying structure exists to which any single practice, as the production of ideology, can be reduced. Rather, society is constituted by a structured set of complex practices. Classes are fractured in their interests and in the social conditions that construct them, while at the same time they are unified by their power as dominant forces in society. They form a “fractured alliance” of dominance in a culture that wins the active consent of the subordinated to their influence. Thus, the attempt of hackers to legitimate computer hacking is not merely a struggle engaged by an historically upper economic class but has been engaged by individuals of other classes as well under the cry of freedom from establishment control.

Relations in a social formation have effects at multiple levels—economic, social, political, technological and ideological. Dominance is rooted in the unity overlaying differences among both practices and classes. For example, in the case of computer hacking, while both those arguing for and those arguing against hacking disagree among themselves on the desirability of hacking, they generally produce an overlaying ideological unity regarding the issue upon which decisions can be made. Such a dominant definition of what computer hacking is about denies the validity of alternative perspectives, since they fall outside of this produced common sense definition.

This kind of cultural leadership functions as an alignment between power and consent. For the perspectives of those holding power to become
the perspectives of the people at large, they must achieve the status of legitimacy. Berger and Luckmann frame Hall's definition of legitimation:

Legitimation 'explains' the institutional order by ascribing cognitive validity to its objectivated meanings. Legitimation justifies the institutional order by giving a normative dignity to its practical imperatives. It is important to understand that legitimation has a cognitive as well as a normative element. Legitimation not only tells the individual why he should perform one action and not another; it also tells him why things are what they are. (Hall, "Deviance," p. 276)

As an explanation employing objectivated meanings, the process of legitimation allows the dominant class "fractions" to lead by winning the consent of the dominated. The institutions through which dominant class fractions operate—especially the state and the media—are accountable to the people and in fact gain much of their ideological power through their appearance of possessing no interests of their own, of being "public servants."^75

Being accountable to the people, they shape the consensus to square with the will of the people. If the interests of the ruling classes are "aligned with or made equivalent with the general interests of the majority," then their rule is legitimated (Hall, "Rediscovery" p. 86). As Mueller (1973) writes: "Legitimacy confers authority on a system of domination, making its decisions regarding policies, priorities, or the allocation of resources rightful . . . It is the most effective argument against attempts to change the structure of the political system" (p. 129).

Thus, no single dominant discourse or class exists. Rather, there exists a plurality of dominant discourses "that constitute the field of meanings within which they [the people] may choose" (Hall, "Culture," p. 343). The dominant classes, according to Hall, cannot proscribe the mental content of the subordinated. They "determine" it by "framing all competing definitions of reality within their range" ("Culture," p. 333).

In summary, ideological formulations function as linguistic structures which make sense of the world in interaction with historical conditions. Operating largely unconsciously as common sense, ideological formulations maintain their speakers largely as their subjects to create an overlying ideological unity. This unity, made up of fractured class alliances, produces a cultural leadership that cuts across classes and creates dominant interpretations of events. A struggle over meaning is engaged as various groups attempt, within the terms of the ideologically produced consensus, to create their definitions as the dominant ones. Hence a tension exists between rhetorical practices and the deeply culturally embedded ideological formulations accompanied by their material counterparts.

CRITICAL METHOD

The investigator who uses a critical method based on ideology theory is to "work back" to the social and historical process through the necessary mediations of rhetorical styles of presentation (Hall, "Introduction,"
p. 21). The end of analysis is to understand how meaning is ideologically constructed within the level of complex social formation. Hall maintains that analysis must be conducted through the critical concepts of ideology, power, and conflict interacting with social formations. Pivotal to these concepts is Hall’s notion of articulation, which provides the frame for such analysis. At the systems and structural level of linguistic and social formations, ideology interacts with social forces and formations to create social meaning and practices through the process of articulation. Hall defines articulation as “the form of the connection that can make a unity of two different elements, under certain conditions . . . the so-called ‘unity’ of a discourse is really the articulation of different, distinct elements which can be re-articulated in different ways because they have no necessary ‘belongingness’” (Grossberg, “On Postmodernism,” p. 53). That is, articulation is a connection among signifiers and among codes that have no necessary relationship among themselves or to the events they represent. Lacking a necessary relationship, connections can shift and change over time and across situation in the struggle over meaning. For example, because the term “computer hacking” has no necessary connection with the ideas or practices of breaking and entering or civil obligation or art, the kinds of matrices of meaning that may be established emerge within the field of ideological struggle. Articulation functions as non-necessary connections 1) between or among different elements within ideology, 2) between ideology and social forces, and 3) among different social groups composing a social movement (Grossberg, “On Postmodernism,” p. 53).

Connections between Elements within Ideology

First, the notion of articulation as a connection between different elements within ideology identifies ideology’s systemic and structural levels of operation. Ideologies operate as systems of linguistic practices for determining reality rather than as a determined set of coded messages. They do not function as individual entities. They are, in Hall’s words, sets of rules, networks “which appear to link, naturally, certain things within a context and to exclude others” (“Culture,” p. 331). As systems of linguistic practices, ideologies operate in discursive fields such that when any one ideology is proffered a coterie of connotations are engaged. In Hall’s words: “Ideologies do not operate through single ideas; they operate, in discursive chains, in clusters, in semantic fields, in discursive formations. As you enter an ideological field and pick out any one nodal representation or idea, you immediately trigger off a whole chain of connotative associations. Ideological representations connote—summon—one another” (Hall, “Signification,” p. 104).

As connection between different signs within ideology articulation works as a kind of connotation. By calling up one idea—or, in McGee’s terms, “ideograph”—such as “hacking,” a collection of connotations is
invoked to define a situation, overwhelming alternative constructions and cementing the meaning of the term and the event it may be defining. Hall attests to the significance of the articulation of individual signs when he writes that the "associative field of meanings of a single term—its connotative field of reference—was, par excellence, the domain through which ideology invaded the language system. It did so by exploiting the associative, the variable, connotative, 'social value' of language" ("Rediscovery," p. 79). The articulation of individual signs also has a widereaching effect on a culture's understanding of a situation and the array of meanings and possible courses of action which may be taken in the situation. Alternative descriptions of the situation thus tend to be systematically eliminated from the common sense understanding of what a problem is about.

Given the constraining force of connotation, the critic would examine the use of individual signs to get at articulations between different elements within ideology. Because signs are multi-accentual rather than uni-accentual, a number of articulations are possible. First, old terms may acquire new accents when new connotations are attached to signs in use, as when the connotation of black with evil was shifted by the phrase "Black is beautiful" (Hall, "Rediscovery," pp. 78-9). Second, meanings may be coupled with and uncoupled from signs. As Campbell (1971) has also recognized, new terms may displace common usage, as when Black replaced Negro (pp. 155-56). Finally, discourse may employ the metonymic mechanism of "sliding the negative meaning along a chain of connotative signifiers" (Hall, "Rediscovery," p. 80). An example of this shift can be seen in the case of the term black equals evil, to black equals beautiful in the parlance of the 1960's, to black is a social problem in the context of drug related shootings in the 80's. Here on the level of signs, rhetorical battles are lost and won.

One can detect the ways terms are organized to create dominant structures of meaning by examining patterns of combination within a body of discourse. These may emerge through recurrences, omissions, breaks, continuities, exceptions, and shifts in signs, as suggested above. They may also be evident in literary devices as ad hoc explanations, proverbs, maxims, routines, recipes, truncated social myths, images, scenarios, metaphors, aphorisms, and stories (Hall, "Deviance," p. 300), and stylistic devices that register emphasis through position, placing, treatment, tone, intensification, or striking imagery (Hall, "Introduction," p. 23-4).

On a somewhat broader level, the terms that define the "rationality" of the argument may be struggled over as well (Hall, "Rediscovery," p. 81). This takes place in the structuring of the topic as the "logics" of the debate. Hall maintains that the structures "ensure the terms in which the topic will be elaborated, and the terrain across which the
‘debate’ will range” (“The Structured,” p. 136). At this level arguments are frequently constrained by their reasonableness or realism. Hence, positions that fall outside of the common sense structure of a controversy are made to appear as unreasonable or unrealistic (Hall, “The Structured,” p. 136). Hall offers the example of immigration of blacks into England, maintaining that whether arguing for or against allowing such immigration, the debate was always structured in terms of numbers, with the possibility of racial tension being absent (“Rediscovery,” p. 81).

Consequently, in addition to examining the terms in which the topic is elaborated, the critic would look at the field of meaning across which the debate ranges. The critic would interrogate the common sense of what the “debate” is about, considering how it is legitimate, what may be alternative constructions of the topic, how alternative constructions are delegitimated, and how the balance of power reflected in the logics used to define events and practices shifts over time.

Connections between Ideology and Social Forces

Second, as a connection between ideology and social forces, the notion of articulation grounds the discursive realm of meaning production within material conditions. Political, economic, technological, social, and ideological factors are interrelated in a complex conjuncture of unity. Put in other terms, an interactive linguistic and material structure produces and reproduces a taken-for-granted social knowledge regarding the meaning and practice of a term like “freedom of information.” Therefore, when thinking about the articulation between ideology and social forces, the critic would investigate the ways in which non-necessary connections exist between ideological formulations and political, economic, and social structures. These might include factors such as financial and employment structures as well as consumer products interests and advertising concerns.

Connections Among Groups

Finally, one would examine the non-necessary connections between different groups composing a social movement. As an ideological vision emerges, so do one or more groups (Grossberg, “On Postmodernism,” p. 55), which are constructed into a unity by that vision. Ideological formulations also construct as subjects the groups that lie outside of the common sense. Their discourse must reflect the dominant ideology. Thus groups both inside and outside the particular ideology are subject to the ideological formulation in interaction with social forces, for ideology and its subjects function as fractured sets of complex practices. Of course, those groups or individuals offering oppositional codes will at the same time likely be subject to delegitimation or simply not represented. For example, hackers may be labeled “crackers” in order to emphasize the intrusive and thus undesirable nature of their activities. Ideological
representation, thus, both produces and reproduces the consensus through the structural and epistemological process of defining discourses and practices as being within or outside of the consensus. In the process, alternative views—and their authors—are delegitimated.

Within this frame, the critic would also investigate access to the debate. Only in theory do all have equal access to participate in public forums, especially as produced and represented by the media. In practice, new groups and associations, political minorities and “deviants” (Hall, “Deviance,” pp. 266-67), and the public at large generally do not have access to public debate. The notable exception occurs when some group or individual expresses deviant ideas or behaviors. Then limited access may be granted as news or human interest, but, as noted earlier, this access is constrained by the terms in which the groups or individuals are defined, and they may be relegated to the status of deviance. Hall writes:

But the 'struggle over meaning' is not exclusively played out in the discursive condensations to which different ideological elements are subject. There was also the struggle over access to the very means of signification: the difference between those accredited witnesses and spokesmen who had a privileged access, as of right, to the world of public discourse and whose statements carried the representativeness and authority which permitted them to establish the primary framework or terms of an argument; as contrasted with those who had to struggle to gain access to the world of public discourse at all; whose definitions were always more partial, fragmentary and delegitimated; and who, when they did gain access, had to perform within the established terms of the problematic in play. (“Rediscovery,” p. 81)

As with the struggle over terms and “logics,” the struggle over access is more than situationally limited. It is also structurally limited. Access is not a simple, superficial matter of who is given or denied entrance into the public realm. More than that, it is an issue of how those in power, institutionalized in the spheres of state and civil life, form structures of systematic access as subjects of ideology. Through their dominance over social relations and practices, those in power form structures that systematically prefer “the institutions, groups and personnel who regularly and of right appear and define, the groups who cannot be left out” (Hall, “The Structured,” p. 135). Political leaders, government officials, and experts receive systematic access to the world of public discourse. Thus, an important part of analysis is to examine not only the dominant structures within the state but also to consider who and what events the media choose to cover, who they choose as participants, and how these choices work in practice to structure events and debates.

To summarize, the critic analyzing public discourse would consider terms within ideology as they occur both as individual terms and phrases, and as “logics” of the “debate.” S/he would also address the interactions of those ideological formulations with social forces, including economic, technological, political, and social structures. Finally, the critic would consider the ways in which the “fractured alliances” of
groups were united as subjects of ideological formulations to regulate legitimation and access. In all cases, the critic would analyze how the ideological formulations of the message were structured in conjunction with the effects of its production and representation by the media.

CASE STUDY

In March 1990, Harper’s “Forum” reported a debate addressing the question: “Is computer hacking a crime?” Twenty people, with a variety of interests in computer hacking, participated in the discussion held on the WELL, a computer bulletin-board system based in Sausalito, California.7 The positions were as varied as the interests of the participants. Hacking was seen, for example, as a matter of exploration, connectedness with others, a crime, and a moral obligation. Given the variety of participants and positions taken, the discussion would seem to be a perfect model of democratic pluralism. Yet such an interpretation misses the production of consciousness that takes place at the ideological and material levels regarding what computer hacking is about. Ideology critique suggests that underlying the variety of perspectives and the arguments for and against the criminality of computer hacking lurks the ideological consensus that computer hacking is a noble enterprise. Utilizing Hall’s critical methodology as directed by the computer hacking text and the limited scope of an illustrative case study, this analysis will provide an example of how an ideology critique might uncover such ideological consensus.

The structuring of the debate occurs, as Hall suggests, at a number of levels. To make sense of the hacking debate, it is first necessary to examine who the participants are, for their selection is the first act in structuring the debate and thus the consciousness regarding the criminality of hacking. Although Harper’s engages a variety of participants, including businessmen, authors and editors, organizers, hackers, and technicians, all of them (with the exception of one, who may be a hacker) are directly involved with the computer industry. There are no business persons from outside the computer industry, like a systems analyst or executive officer from IBM; there are no government employees or representatives (with the possible exception of Bluefire who was a former information-policy analyst with the California legislature); there are no professionals from the fields of law, education, or medicine; and there are no “ordinary” citizens who may—or may not—own a personal computer.

It is not surprising that Harper’s would select people in the computer field, for the common sense of the culture is that when you want to know something you go to experts. However, as Sartre suggests, once you choose a priest for counsel you have already chosen the kind of answer you will get. By choosing only representatives of the computer field to participate in the discussion, Harper’s has structured the debate in ways
that have limiting effects. Based upon the selection of participants, it is not surprising that the discussion does not focus upon the issue of criminality as a matter of breaking and entering, for hacking, no matter how it is defined in order to decide the issue, clearly feeds the development of computer technology as well as the subject matter of periodicals, books, and conferences; and breaking and entering, "everyone knows," is just not a good thing. Had the participants been selected from other areas, the discussion may well have focused upon hacking in these or even other terms, for example, protection of new product development or security for weapons research.

Given the participants, then, it makes sense that in the attempt to decide the issue of criminality, the discussion would go in a different direction. At the same time, as Hall suggests, we would not expect to find only one side of the debate presented. Rather, as the site of struggle over meaning, a number of perspectives would emerge. Yet, at the level of ideological code, the discussion does reflect an over-determined unity which produces the common sense of the way a particular world works. In this case, at the level of signs, the term "hacking" is clearly a pivotal site of struggle over meaning. Given the participants and that hacking is, so to speak, breaking and entering, the debate centers on the legitimacy of the act. Within this context, from among a number of proffered definitions two emerge as dominant contenders: hacking is an act of creativity and exploration or hacking is a political act. The consensus underlying the struggle is that hacking is a noble and necessary act. Although the limits, possibilities, and responsibilities associated with hacking may be discussed, there is little possibility of discussing whether hacking itself is wrong or bad.

To see how such consciousness is created, let us examine how "hacking" is defined. On the one hand, as a creative activity "hacking" connotes "brilliant students who explored and expanded the uses to which this new technology might be employed" (Harper's, p. 47), "human knowledge for its own sake" (Brand, p. 47), and "creativity" (Lee, p. 47). In the struggle to define "hacking," as an essentially creative activity, the attempt is frequently made to isolate hacking from cracking. In this only partially successful move, hacking connotes exploration and creativity whereas cracking connotes breaking into systems to "liberate" controlled information. Cracking is also de-articulated from hacking by the metonymic mechanism of sliding the negative along a chain of connotative signifiers: hacking connotes cracking connotes illegal entry into computer systems.

On the other side, as a political activity hacking connotes an "anti-authoritarian" move (JRC, p. 48), keeping "the system honest" (Barlow, p. 50), "moral obligation" (Tenney & Barlow, p. 54). Here hacking is connected with terms like "institution," connoting control, theft, enemy, impersonal; and "liberation," suggesting individual rights and freedom from control. The ideological "logic" is that if institutions steal
information from innocent individuals and maintain a security system around it, then "freedom of information" and "free speech" are threatened. And "everybody knows" that freedom of information and free speech are basic human rights. Moreover, by using the terms hacking and cracking interchangeably, the positive connotations associated with creativity and exploration are connected with the slightly more questionable end of political change as a moral move. At the same time, others legitimize hacking-as-political and delegitimize hacking-as-creative by connecting the former with what is the new and necessary definition and the latter with the old, outmoded definition. Given that all of the technology garnered in part from hackers is now being used for authoritarian purposes, the ideological "logic" of the hacking-as-political position is that hacking is necessarily political. In this move, those who support the definition of hacking-as-creative are delegitimated as engaging in old, outmoded definitions.

Whether defined as a creative or political activity, hacking is legitimated at the level of code as a noble and useful enterprise. It is "common sense" that creativity is a natural and universal part of being human. It is also "common sense" that if freedom of information is being suppressed by the government, then hacking is necessary (and thus reasonable) to freedom. In both cases, consciousness of what hacking is about is produced by the power of ideology to create hacking as natural and necessary. Not acknowledging the propositional status of such presuppositions, a reality effect is produced that this is what computer hacking is about.

Alternative perspectives about the nature of computer hacking are limited by the structure of this "logic" that presents computer hacking as either a creative or a political enterprise, together with the "I'm okay, you're not okay" logic of entering institutional computer systems but not personal computers, and the dominant definition of hackers having once been engaged primarily for the fun of creativity and exploration but now involved in an inherently political enterprise. Such dichotomizing effectively eliminates alternative perspectives like the view that there may be good reasons for data not to be available to all of the public. Such a perspective might hold, for example, that secrecy is necessary for national security, or if businesses are to justify the expense of new product development. Or it may claim that control of some kinds of information is in the best interests of the citizens. As Cliff suggests, it may not be in our best interest to make open to everyone a bank's records, credit histories, or records of AIDS patients (p. 48). This point (and it is rare in the discussion, occurring only when the participants discuss ethics) is almost entirely ignored, the only direct response being that "we should prohibit its [data] collection in the first place" (Brand, p. 49). Not only the dichotomizing but the very structure of the anti-institutional logic overwhelms the possibility of this objection being given legitimate voice.
While both sides of the struggle over definition produce the common sense of hacking as a useful and noble enterprise, one side does emerge as dominant: hacking as political. Given the fact that the ideological warrant of necessity and right is less powerful than the warrant of the creative nature of humanity, it may seem that such apparently rhetorical arguments really are stronger than the ideological warrants of naturalness, universality, and reality. Yet, necessity and right are also ideological formulations, the common sense being that necessity is just plain necessary and rights are self-evident truths which connote human and thus natural rights.

Other structural constraints operate as well to produce the dominant definition of hacking-as-political. First, the sequence of questions by Harper's produces a certain logic of the way the debate will proceed. After the first question Harper's poses on the ethics of hacking, they ask: “Suppose a mole inside the government confirmed the existence of files on each of you, stored in the White House computer system, PROFS. Would you have the right to hack into that system to retrieve and expose the existence of such files? (p. 53) and if you hacked files “from the White House and a backlash erupted” (p. 55), calling for regulation of computer use as property rather than of information, could “we craft a manifesto setting forth your views on how the computer fits into the traditions of the American Constitution?” (p. 55) The debate is inexorably driven toward political issues of rights both by the length of the discussion—roughly two-thirds—that is focused by the leader's questions on political issues, and by the way the two initial questions are phrased. Thus, by the sheer force of the amount of time devoted to the issue of rights as a question of information control and freedom of speech, and by the very rhetorical process of editing engaged by any media editor, hacking emerges as a political issue.

Not only is the definition of hacking dominantly produced as being a political issue but such a definition has real effects. First, as indicated above, the common sense of hacking gets shifted from the legal and moral issue of breaking and entering (and along with it obeying the law and protection of property) to the political and moral issue of human rights at both the level of ideology and social forces. As protectors of human rights, hackers surely do have not only the right but a moral obligation to break and enter impersonal and controlling government institutions.

This common sense also has the real effect of producing a consciousness of the government as authoritarian. By offering ideological descriptions that ignore the propositional status of alternative narratives, a door is open for ideographs to become common sense banners for any “worthy cause” at hand, whether it be jailing people because they are “communists” or breaking and entering in the name of “freedom of speech.” Given that the common sense of the way the world works changes over time within historical conditions, that there is therefore
no one true way to interpret events and texts, and that by the very decisions we make and the ways we represent them rhetorically we create the kind of world we live in, it seems worthwhile to consider the kind of government such a definition offers. The right to enter institutional systems to view information is legitimated with such narrative descriptions as “invasion of privacy” that “took place long before the hacker ever arrived” (Emmanuel, p. 50), “trespassing” (Adelaide, p. 50) and engaging in “surveillance” (Barlow, p. 50). Even the anti-hacking argument of Brand (p. 54) defines government in an authoritarian role as needing to protect itself against hackers. And “everybody knows” that it is not only acceptable but even a “moral obligation” to confound authoritarian impulses of a government seeking to suppress freedom of speech and freedom of information.

In short, at the levels of social forces and groups, the sign, and “logics” of the debate, computer hacking is defined as a noble and necessary enterprise. This “common sense” emerges as an ideological code underlying the struggle over whether hacking is an essentially creative or political activity.

CONCLUSIONS

Hall’s theory of ideology clearly can inform rhetorical theory and criticism. Although it is not news that rhetoric functions epistemically and ontologically to create social knowledge, ideology theory’s focus upon effects of discourse and historical conditions casts rhetoric’s function in ways that enrich possibilities for analysis of public discourse. Rather than addressing strategies, motives, and intention, as rhetoric does, ideology theory emphasizes the real effects that rhetorics have upon production and reproduction of consciousness which creates possibilities and places limits upon discursive strategies. Shifting from the frame of discovering common grounds from which to argue, Hall opens up an ideological “rationality” of articulation that structures the common sense of a culture in terms of which discovery of common ground may proceed. Consideration of the validity of arguments is also shifted to legitimacy, offering an account of the audience that highlights the presence of a consensus of common sense.

Second, Hall expands the idea of rhetorical situation set out by Bitzer and Aristotle. Ideology theory extends situational limits and opportunities beyond the expectations and needs of a given audience in time and place, to include discursive formations as grounded in historical conditions. It considers who is and is not given public voice and what is not said as well as what is said within an interactive frame of linguistic and material structures. Ideology theory thereby accounts for structural limitations on public discourse imbued with factors of power and dominance. Dominant common sense definitions of events and situations have real effects on the terms and “logics” of public debate.
Focusing upon effects and structures of discourse, however, ideology theory has little to say about ethical issues, which I take to address the responsibility of the rhetor. Despite Hall's claims that discursive and material structures do not absolutely determine discursive practices (which indicates rhetorical agency), the structural component clearly takes precedence. If ideological formulations and processes remain largely unconscious and largely determined by linguistic and material structures, the mechanisms which animate individual responsibility for rhetorical strategies and their effects remain undeveloped. The next step, and the subject of another paper, is to develop the linkage between rhetorical agency and structural factors.

On the other hand, one can understand this shortcoming to have the creative effect of highlighting the issue of relationship between agency and structure, the investigation of which will enhance possibilities for rhetorical theory and criticism. Consequently, both from the point of view of raising a significant question needing further study and especially of developing the notion of articulation of linguistic and material structures in creating social knowledge and practices, Hall's theory of ideology offers to rhetorical theory and criticism a rich critical theoretical perspective.

ENDNOTES

1. See the Iowa Journal of Communication Inquiry 10 (Summer 1986) for a bibliography of most of Hall's works.
2. Lukes explains that ideological power arises from "shaping perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they [i.e., social agents] accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained or beneficial" (Lukes, S. (1975) Power: A Radical View, London, Macmillan, 24, cited in Hall, "The Rediscovery," p. 65).
3. The idea of "cultural leadership" is a redefinition of hegemony in the attempt to dearticulate hegemony and dominance from the naive notion of dominant worldviews always already held in place by a "homogeneous ruling class" (Hall, "Ideology," p. 51).
5. By general interest, the state garners legitimation to power. The media, by representing themselves as operating within the professional standards of impartiality, balance, and objectivity, also gain the legitimacy and thus the power necessary to define events. That is, presenting themselves as neutral organizations, the state and the media maintain the power to structure the mental environment of the culture. This is not to say that they consciously cultivate appearance, but rather that their discourses have this effect. By holding themselves responsible to "public opinion"—the consensus—they invoke a consensus which they have pre-structured. In producing and re-producing the "logics" of debate on public issues and the structures of access to the debate, their representations have the effect of constraining discourse within a dominant range of meanings.
6. By "rationality" or "logic" Hall does not mean logic in the philosophical sense adopted by western rationalism. Rather, he means "an apparently necessary chain of implications between statement and premise" (Hall, "The Rediscovery," p. 74). In other words, logic entails a framework of linked propositions, predications, or inferences about the social world, whether or not they pass tests of formal validity.
7. WELL participants by code as presented by Harper's; ADELAIDE: former hacker
who has sold his soul to the corporate state as a computer programmer; BARLOW: retired
cattle rancher, a former Republic county chairman, and a lyricist for the Grateful Dead,
who currently is writing a book on computers and consciousness entitled Everything We
Know Is Wrong; BLUEFIRE: associate director of the Human Interface Technology
Laboratory at the University of Washington and a former information-policy analyst with
the California legislature; BRAND: senior computer scientist with Reasoning Systems,
in Palo Alto, CA; CLIFF: astronaut who caught a spy in a military computer network
and recently published an account of his investigation entitled The Cuckoo's Egg; DAVE:
retired West Pointer who currently operates his own political bulletin board; DRAKE:
computer-science student at a West Coast university and the editor of W.O.R.M., a cyber-
punk magazine; HOMEBOY: professional software engineer who has worked at Lucasfilm,
Pyramid Technology, Apple Computer, and Autodesk; EMMANUEL: editor of 2600, the
"hacker's quarterly"; HANK: builds mobiles, flies hang gliders, and proofreads for the
Whole Earth Catalog; JIMG: author, with TRANS Fiction Systems, of Hidden Agenda,
a computer game that simulates political conflict in Central America; JRC: daily column-
ist for the San Francisco Chronicle and writer-in-residence for the Pickle Family Cir-
cus; KK: editor of the Whole Earth Review and a cofounder of the Hacker's Conference;
LEE: designed the Osborne-1 computer and cofounded the Homebrew Computer Club;
MANDEL: professional futurist and an organizer of the Hacker's Conference; RH:
Washington correspondent for the Whole Earth Review; RMS: founder of the Free Soft-
ware Foundation; TENNEY: independent-systems architect and an organizer of the
Hacker's Conference; ACID PHREAK and PHIBER OPTIK: hackers who decline to be
identified (Harper's, p. 46).

8. Here Harper's signifies the questioner. Throughout the analysis, the names of the
participants in the discussion will be included with the page numbers in Harper's magazine.

9. See Lawrence Grossberg, "The Ideology of Communication: Post-Structuralism and

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