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DISCOURSE AND THE
CONSTRUCTION OF SOCIETY

Introduction

The studies that follow pursue the question of how certain specific modes of discourse—myth, ritual, and classification—can be, and have been, employed as effective instruments not only for the replication of established social forms (this much is well known), but more broadly for the construction, deconstruction, and reconstruction of society itself. Before we can turn to this topic, however, there is another that must be treated: No consideration of discourse is complete that does not also take account of force. Together, discourse and force are the chief means whereby social borders, hierarchies, institutional formations, and habituated patterns of behavior are both maintained and modified.

Force and Discourse

Force (i.e., the exercise or threat of physical violence) is an instrument open to a variety of uses by individuals and groups within any society. It is regularly employed by those who hold official power to compel obedience and suppress deviance. Thus they preserve generalized social stability and, what is more, a specific configuration in which they—and certain others with whom they have close and complex relations—occupy positions of privilege and enjoy disproportionately large shares of those classic scarce and desired resources Weber identified as wealth, power, and prestige as well as such other desiderata as education, information, health, leisure, and sumptuary goods of various sorts. Further, force may also be used by ruling elites to effect significant social change, for instance, when they direct the violence at their disposal beyond the borders of their own society in campaigns of expansive conquest through which ever-larger social aggregates with more varied and complex patterns of organization can be constructed.

Moreover, elites hold no monopoly on the exercise of force, and however much they attempt to define all that lies outside their control as illegitimate, nondominant groups of all sorts always retain some measure of force—if only that of their own bodies. This they can employ in a variety of ways disruptive to the established order, including scattered assaults on persons and property as well as more organized struggles in which they seek (1) to remove themselves from an encompassing and exploitative social aggregate (secession), (2) to dislodge and replace those in positions of power and privilege (rebellion), or (3) to reshape established social forms and habituated patterns of behavior in sweeping and fundamental ways (revolution).

In all instances, however, force—be it coercive or disruptive—remains something of a stopgap measure: effective in the short run, unworkable over the long haul. The case of imperial expansion (already mentioned) is an instructive one: Although new territories may be added by conquest, successful integration of the populations within those territories depends on—better yet, *amounts to*—the transformation of these peoples' consciousness so that they come to consider themselves members of an imperial society rather than the vanquished subjects of a foreign nation. Such a radical recasting of collective identity, which amounts to the deconstruction of a previously significant sociopolitical border and the corollary construction of a new, encompassing sociopolitical aggregate, can hardly be accomplished through force alone. Nor is the exercise of force an adequate long-term response to the episodes of revolt and rebellion that occur in empires within which conquered peoples remain imperfectly integrated and retain their preconquest loyalties to a large degree, because force can quell these outbreaks only at the cost of further alienating subject populations.

Similarly, it must be recognized that although force can surely be used to protect the interests of a ruling elite against the agitation of subordinate strata, this is quite different from saying it can ensure social stability. The coercive violence employed by elites itself effects change, in that it removes certain persons and groups from their previous places within society—for example, by death, banishment, incarceration, and the like—thereby modifying the size, shape, and nature of the total social aggregate. Genocide is the extreme case. Further, the employment of coercive force by a ruling elite modifies the affect of all members within society, sometimes dramatically so: Some groups and individuals may be emboldened, some intimidated, some depressed, some enraged. Such shifts are always significant, both in and of themselves and for the way they inform actions that produce still further change.

Discourse supplements force in several important ways, among the most important of which is ideological persuasion. In the hands of elites and of those professionals who serve them (either in mediated fashion or directly), discourse of all forms—not only verbal, but also the symbolic discourses of spectacle, gesture, costume, edifice, icon, musical performance, and the like—may be strategically employed to mystify the inevitable inequities of any social order and to win the consent of those over whom power is exercised, thereby obviating the need for the direct coercive use of force and transforming simple power into "legitimate" authority. Yet discourse can also serve members of subordinate classes (as Antonio Gramsci above all recognized) in their attempts to demystify, delegitimate, and deconstruct the established norms, institutions, and discourses that play a role in constructing their subordination.

Myth, Ritual, and Ideology

It has been common, ever since Marx and Engels coined the term, to contrast *ideology* with some other mode of thought and discourse, called variously knowledge, science, consciousness, or the like, but always characterized as both accurate and illuminating in its representations and thus an appropriate instrument of criticism, analysis, and demystification. Among other studies that implicitly adopt this position—and one of considerable importance to the present inquiry—is Roland Barthes's brilliant and influential essay "Myth Today," in which he characterized myth in an unusual but insightful fashion as a second-order semiotic system, that is, a form of metalanguage in which preexisting signs are appropriated and stripped of their original context, history, and signification only to be infused with new and mystificatory conceptual content of particular use to the bourgeoisie. "Myth," Barthes argued, "has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal. . . . This process is exactly that of bourgeois ideology. If our society is objectively the privileged field of mythical significations, it is because formally myth is the most appropriate instrument for the ideological inversion which defines this society."[1] To myth—the most ideological form of speech—he contrasted a form he took to be its dialectic opposite: the direct and transformative speech of labor and of revolution.[2] Barthes maintained:

> There is therefore one language which is not mythical, it is the language of man as a producer: wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, meta-language is referred to a language-object, and myth is impossible. This is why revolutionary language proper cannot be mythical. Revolution is defined as a cathartic act meant to reveal the political load of the world: it *makes* the world; and its language, all of it, is functionally absorbed in this making. It is because it generates speech which is *fully*, that is to say initially and finally, political, and not, like myth, speech which is initially political and finally natural, that Revolution excludes myth.[3]

More recently, a line of analysis similar to that which Barthes proposed for the category of myth has been advanced with equal verve and brilliance by Maurice Bloch regarding the category of ritual, which he defines broadly to include "greetings, and fixed politeness formula, formal behaviour and above all rituals, whether social, religious or state."[4] Such phenomena, he argues, are characterized first by severely attenuated parameters of discourse and second by thought categories that, being socially determined, render criticism of society quite impossible insofar as they are "already moulded to fit what is to be criticised."[5] Such criticism—and the contingent potential for social change—becomes possible only through thought and discourse that originate within a nonritual sphere, where they are shaped by something other than society and thus afford an objective, nonmystified perspective that allows one to talk *about* society and not just *within* society. This sphere Bloch locates in the experience of productive labor, where, he contends—making particular reference to the way in which time is structured and perceived—the categories of thought are determined not by the givens of preexisting social structure, but rather by those of nature. Summarizing his argument, Bloch states:

> This lecture starts by considering the old problem of how to account for social change theoretically. . . . The source of this problem is traced to Durkheim's notion that cognition is socially determined. By contrast it is argued that those concepts which are moulded to social structure are not typical of knowledge but only found in ritual discourse, while the concepts using nonritual discourse are constrained by such factors as the requirements of human action on nature. This means that there are terms available to actors by which the social order can be criticised since not all terms are moulded by it.[6]

Thus, like Barthes, Bloch located a nonmystified and potentially revolutionary mode of thought and discourse within the experience of productive labor, and here, of course, they both follow Marx. This they dialectically oppose to another mode of thought and discourse that serves only to mystify and thereby perpetuate the sociopolitical status quo: This latter category they locate in myth (Barthes), ritual (Bloch), and ideology (Marx).[7] Notwithstanding the importance of the questions these authors have raised and the considerable interest their formulations hold, there are problems with their common line of analysis. Both Barthes and Bloch present the experience of productive labor in somewhat romanticized (one might even say mythologized) form, for it is hardly a sphere in which thought and discourse are conditioned solely by nature in the absence of society. Indeed, the very processes of production are themselves socially determined (e.g., by technology, division of labor, and patterns of access to, and ownership of, the means of production), as are the conceptual models through which laborers experience, reflect on, and discuss the givens of their work. It thus overstates things to posit an accurate and nonmystified "knowledge" existing within the sphere of productive labor, and it is preferable to argue that what one may find there is ideological systems that differ from those that dominate in other spheres of activity (myth and ritual included). Any criticism or struggle that ensues might then be described not as a case in which knowledge opposes mystification or science ideology, but one in which a hegemonic ideology is challenged by one of the many counterhegemonies that exist within any society.

This set of observations leads me to a second, more general point: To hold that thought is socially determined does not mean that all thought reflects, encodes, re-presents, or helps replicate the *established structures* of society, for society is far broader and more complex than its official structures and institutions alone. Rather, such a formulation rightly implies that all the tensions, contradictions, superficial stability, and potential fluidity of any given society *as a whole* are present within the full range of thought and discourse that circulates at any given moment. Change comes not when groups or individuals use "knowledge" to challenge ideological mystification, but rather when they employ thought and discourse, including even such modes as myth and ritual, as effective instruments of struggle.

Classification and Counterclassification

In truth, the very texts we are discussing may themselves be considered as counterhegemonic ideologies and instruments of struggle, for what both Barthes and Bloch developed, following Marx, is a system for the classification of thought and discourse that is based on two inversely correlated taxonomizing distinctions: mystification and labor. Thus, they argue that the discourse grounded in the experience of productive labor is nonmystificatory (and potentially demystificatory), whereas the discourse that is not so grounded is mystificatory. Moreover (as is true in general of taxonomies), this system does not simply and idly differentiate the phenomena being classified, but—what is more important—in classifying it also ranks them. Here the moral and, in the long run, historic superiority of that mode of discourse, which could be described as +Labor/−Mystification, is clearly asserted.

It is not enough to consider the taxonomic system advanced by these theoreticians in isolation, however, for it evolves largely in reaction to another classificatory system that is much more broadly influential and—as Marx and all since have realized—a cornerstone of modern industrial society. This system is classically known as the division of labor: In its first move of categorization, it differentiates work that is predominantly manual from that which is mental, with preferential status reserved for the latter. Viewed in their relation to this hegemonic system, the taxonomies proposed by Barthes and Bloch appear as counterhegemonic inversions, artfully and strategically designed to overturn (quite literally) the hierarchic relations that are established and encoded within the division of labor (see Fig. I.1).

For the most part taxonomies are regarded—and announce themselves—as systems of classifying the phenomenal world, systems through which otherwise indiscriminate data can be organized in a form wherein they become knowable. Knowers do not and cannot stand apart from the known, however, because they are objects as well as subjects of knowledge; consequently, they themselves come to be categorized within their own taxonomic systems. Taxonomy is thus not only an epistemological instrument (a means for organizing information), but it is also (as it comes to organize the organizers) an instru-

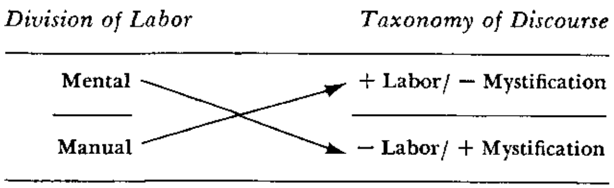

Figure I.1. Inversion of the hierarchy implicit within the division of labor, as effected by Barthes's analysis of myth, Bloch's analysis of ritual, and Marx's analysis of ideology.

ment for the construction of society. And to the extent that taxonomies are socially determined, hegemonic taxonomies will tend to reproduce the same hierarchic system of which they are themselves the product.[8] Within any society, nonetheless, there exist countertaxonomic discourses as well (inversions and others): Alternative models whereby members of subordinate strata and others marginalized under the existing social order are able to agitate for the deconstruction of that order and the reconstruction of society on a novel pattern.

Sentiment and Society

Whether such agitation can succeed in any given instance will depend on a great many factors, many of which are contingent to the specific situation. In general three factors must be taken into account. First, there is the question of whether a disruptive discourse can gain a hearing, that is, how widely and effectively it can be propagated; this largely depends on the ability of its propagators to gain access to and exploit the opportunities inherent within varied channels of communication—formal and informal, established and novel. Second, there is the question of whether the discourse is persuasive or not, which is only partially a function of its logical and ideological coherence. Although such factors, which are by nature internal to the discourse, have their importance, it must be stressed that persuasion does not reside within any discourse per se but is, rather, a measure of audiences' reaction to, and interaction with, the discourse. Although certain discourses may thus be said to have (or lack) persuasive potential as a result of their specific content, persuasion itself also depends on such factors as rhetoric, performance, timing, and the positioning of a given discourse vis-à-vis those others with which it is in active or potential competition.

Finally, there is the question of whether—and the extent to which—a discourse succeeds in calling forth a following; this ultimately depends on whether a discourse elicits those sentiments out of which new social formations can be constructed. For discourse is not only an instrument of persuasion, operating along rational (or pseudorational) and moral (or pseudomoral) lines, but it is also an instrument of sentiment evocation. Moreover,

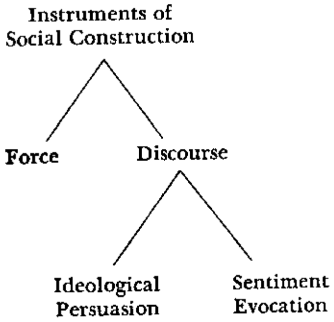

Figure I.2. Aspects of the instruments through which social formations are modified and maintained.

it is through these paired instrumentalities—ideological persuasion and sentiment evocation—that discourse holds the capacity to shape and reshape society itself (Fig. I.2).

In talking about society, it should be clear that I do not mean to focus primarily on political institutions: A state, a government, a system of laws, and the like, do not in and of themselves constitute society. Nor do I place primary emphasis on economic structures or those of kinship, although these, like politics, are a crucial part of any social entity and contribute powerfully to its stability and durability. Accordingly, consideration of these must inform any serious discussion. Often, however, analyses of social institutions or systems of social organization pass for the analysis of society itself, and it is worth recalling that the elusive and ill-defined entity that we call society (from the Latin verb *socio,* to join or unite together, to associate) is basically a grouping of people who feel bound together as a collectivity and, in corollary fashion, feel themselves separate from others who fall outside their group.

This state of affairs is often described by means of the metaphor of social borders, that is, those imaginary lines that distinguish one group of persons from another. Numerous and varied factors may help to mark and enforce such borders, for instance, differences in language, topography, diet, patterns of economic and marital exchange, habituated behaviors (customs), normative preferences (values in the moral sphere, aesthetics or taste in others), and so forth. However important such considerations may be to the parties involved, of infinitely greater analytic significance is the general pattern: That is, as groups and individuals note similarities and dissimilarities of whatever sort between themselves and others, they can employ these as instruments with which to evoke the specific sentiments out of which social borders are constructed. These I refer to as affinity and estrangement, meaning to include under the general rubric of these terms, on the one hand, all feelings of likeness, common belonging, mutual attachment, and solidarity—whatever their intensity, affective tone, and degree of consciousness—and, on the other ~~hand, those corresponding~~ feelings of distance, separation, otherness, and alienation.[9] Although in practice the capacity of discourse to evoke such sentiments is closely conjoined with its capacity to persuade, analytically the two are separate.

To cite a simplistic example, an inevitable part of any verbal discourse—and one quite unrelated to ideological persuasion except as a precondition for the latter—is the implicit statement "I speak language *X*." Ordinarily, this level of communication goes unnoticed, but within a multilingual group where *X* is not the language of choice, the introduction of a speech-act in *X* will evoke some minimal (and probably ephemeral) sentiments of affinity between the speaker and other *X* speakers present and will simultaneously evoke sentiments of estrangement between this group and that constituted by nonspeakers of *X*. The same can happen in less dramatic fashion when a particular idiom, accent, or patois is introduced into a conversation. In this moment and by this process, an act of discourse thus reconstructs the social field, catalyzing two previously latent groupings and (at least temporarily) establishing a border between them. What is more, this process ~~is~~ unrelated to the specific content of the catalyzing ~~discourse: That~~ is, ideological persuasion has nothing and sentiment evocation everything to do with it.

Because there are virtually infinite grounds on which individual and group similarity/dissimilarity may be perceived and corresponding sentiments of affinity/estrangement evoked, the borders of society are never a simple matter. In practice there always exist potential bases for associating and for dissociating one's self and one's group from others, and the vast majority of social sentiments are ambivalent mixes in which potential sources of affinity are (partially and perhaps temporarily) overlooked or suppressed in the interests of establishing a clear social border or, conversely, potential sources of estrangement are similarly treated in order to effect or preserve a desired level of social integration and solidarity.

Several points follow from this way of seeing things. First, the metaphor of social borders may be understood to describe those situations in which sentiments of estrangement clearly and powerfully predominate over those of affinity, so that groups of persons experience themselves as separate and different from other groups with whom they might potentially be associated. Second, such borders being neither natural, inevitable, nor immutable, affinity may in the course of events come to predominate over estrangement, with the consequent emergence of a new social formation in which previously separate social groups are mutually encompassed. Third, within any society there exist what are commonly called (metaphorically again) cleavages, by which is meant those situations in which strong sentiments of estrangement persist between constituent subgroups of an encompassing social aggregate. These subgroups are, thus, only imperfectly and precariously bound together by the officially sanctioned sentiments of affinity that coexist with, and partially mask, the distintegrative and most often officially illicit sentiments of estrangement.

Society is thus a synthesis, in the most literal sense of the term: something that is con-structed, put together (from the Greek compound verb *syn-tithēmi*, to put or place together). And like all synthetic entities, a society may either recombine with others to form syntheses larger still, or—a highly significant possibility ignored in most Hegelian and post-Hegelian dialectics—it may be split apart by the persisting tensions between those entities that conjoined in its formation, with the resultant formation of two or more smaller syntheses. That is to say that the formation of any synthesis (intellectual, social, political, etc.) is never a final step. Any synthetic entity, having its origin in a prior dialectic confrontation, bears within it the tensions that existed between the thesis and antithesis involved in its formation, and this residual tension remains ever capable of undoing the synthesis. Ultimately, that which either holds society together or takes it apart is sentiment, and the chief instrument with which such sentiment may be aroused, manipulated, and rendered dormant is discourse.

On the Writing of This Book

In these chapters I offer studies of those discursive modes that were mentioned earlier and that, given my initial training as a historian of religions, I feel best qualified to consider. Thus the first three chapters are devoted to myth, the next four to ritual, and the last three to classification. Specific examples are drawn from a number of disparate societies: ancient India, Iran, Greece, Ireland, Wales, and Rome; England and France in the early modern period; Spain, Iran, the United States, and parts of sub-Saharan Africa in the present century, with occasional excursuses elsewhere. Some of these data I gathered myself (all translations are original, unless noted), but more often I am indebted to others for them; I have tried to acknowledge my sources wherever appropriate, knowing full well how inadequately these citations serve as notice of my debt and my gratitude.

~~In truth, this book is itself something of a synthesis, held together more by an affinity of its constituent parts than by a single core thesis or predetermined plan. In part this is the result of the way in which it was written, as it evolved out of initially separate researches undertaken between 1980 and 1986, some of which saw publication in earlier stages of their development (see Acknowledgments). In many of these it is now clear to me that I was groping toward formulations that emerged only in the later pieces; this demanded a recasting of the earlier ones. Crucial changes in my style of analysis came during the winter of 1984–85 when I was fortunate enough to teach in the Institute of Anthropology and Folklore of the University of Siena. There, detached from all my normal obligations and social contacts, challenged by the need to explain my ideas entirely in a foreign language, and exhilarated by the extraordinary nature of my discussions with a splendid set of students and colleagues, I first brought together the materials and developed the major lines of theory and method that are presented in this book. Further revisions and refinements were made during 1986–87, after~~