John Alford argues that propaganda designed to change so-called "false consciousness" is, in itself, futile and the effectiveness of a propaganda-oriented "correct line" political parties is highly questionable. He offers an alternative which includes breaking down the divisions between intellectual and non-intellectual workers as part of the process of generating organic intellectuals as working class activists who are in touch with everyday concerns of people. This article is based on a paper given at the ALR sponsored Marx Centenary Symposium in Melbourne, April 1983.

I want to discuss something with a strategic implication, namely the relationship between classes. In particular I want to look at the political relationship between those who rule and those who are ruled. Why is it that the great majority of ordinary people, whose daily lot is not one that meets their needs, who are economically vulnerable, pushed around in their working lives, alienated in their domestic existence, surrounded by urban desolation, and in the case of substantial sections just plain downtrodden, deprived and discriminated against, within the present social order, why is it that ordinary people acquiesce to the social order? This question is crude but it is not a new question. The left has been asking it for decades. The answer used to be that working class people were held down by the power of the state, or conned by their social democratic leaders. More recently, the answers have changed. "False consciousness" is the key. According to this approach, ordinary people are more or less brainwashed into an acceptance of the system as it is, especially through the media and the schools. They gain "illusions" about what is and what is possible. ("We live in the best of all possible worlds"). I'm painting a gross caricature of the approach. Leftwing theorists have written countless volumes of analyses which spell it out in great sophistication.

But whether its rough or refined, the strategic implication is the same — that is, that the task for the left is to counter the brainwashing, so that we can get people organised into collective forms of action against the boss and the state. This means basically a continuing emphasis on propaganda in various forms, convincing people about the "real" nature of the system, persuading them of the alternatives. And the main devices for this are a declamatory party press backed up by pamphlets, books, public meetings and public manifestations such as demonstrations and rallies. "The message" is all-important. And by implication so too is "the party line".

The "message" and the "party line" are inevitably focused on class interests, that is on countering false consciousness by explaining people's "true" class interests. Well I'd suggest that the spectacular failure of the propagandist approach is evidenced by the small size of the left in this country. I'd also suggest that the problem lies in the analysis of false consciousness on which it is based, which when you think about it doesn't fit well with some hard facts. For instance, there are thousands of teachers who are progressively minded and who honestly seek to open their pupils' eyes to the world. And to take another example, the antipathy of the average Australian worker to those in authority, starting with the foreman, is well known.

What I want to do here is re-examine this view of false consciousness, and by doing so challenge the strategy which it implies. I'll start by looking at two of the assumptions of this view. One is the instilling of false consciousness is somehow an active process — that is, a process actively carried out by a particular group (those who rule) against another group (those who are ruled).

The other, related assumption, is that it is a one-way traffic, in which people have false consciousness pumped into their heads from outside. These two assumptions lie behind the
propaganda orientation of the left, behind the view that the task is to counter the one-way traffic perpetrated by those who rule with our traffic in the other direction. If we pump true consciousness into one ear it will drive the false out the other. The problem is that our pumps are very small compared to those of the other side, so we face an uphill battle.

More importantly, this approach ignores the way in which consciousness forms. It ignores the fact that people themselves construct their own view of the world out of what they perceive in their own practical, day-to-day experience. If we are to understand how consciousness forms, we need a more realistic framework, one which takes account of its contradictory aspects and which allows us to get at its real bases and thus sidestep the unwinnable battle against the one-way traffic. That framework is the Gramscian concept of "hegemony". By "hegemony" Gramsci did not mean simply "false consciousness". He was referring rather to a kind of order of society. As a commonly quoted definition puts it, hegemony is "an order which a certain way of life and thought is dominant, and in which one concept of reality is diffused throughout society".

To explain this, let me define three elements, and then proceed to put them together. First, there is the material world itself, and its social relations — the activities and processes we all experience as a reality. Basic examples of these are the commodity-form or exchange-relationship, and the division of labor.

These realities have contradictory aspects. The commodity-form, for instance, is experienced in a different way at the level of exchange from the way it is experienced at the level of production. At one level, it affirms the apparent equality of the market-place — everything has a price; you pay your money and get your goods. Quid pro quo is the order of the day. At the other level, in the work place, the payment of wages for labor is experienced unequally, in the sense that the amount of wages is fixed but the amount of production is unlimited, except by the resistance of the worker, which is external to the bargain. And the day-to-day expression of this inequality is the more or less authoritarian role of the boss. Now the important point is that both these levels are real — neither is illusory, a point to which I'll return.

The second element is "commonsense" — the diverse, fragmented opinions and perceptions that individual people have of the world, not only of what exists but also of what is possible. Examples would be statements like "It's human nature to lord it over others if you get the chance", or "I'm not smart enough to be a boss".

The third element is "ideology". Ideologies are more systematic than common-sense. They are more or less worked out bodies of thought about what exists, what is possible and what ought to be, in political terms. They tend to justify the positions of particular social groups. Liberal-democracy or the efficacy of the free market are examples. Now, by and large, the one-way traffic view of false consciousness only takes account of the third element: ideologies themselves, more or less identifiable with particular social interest groups.

The Gramscian framework of hegemony, however, embraces all three elements — the material world and its social relations, "commonsense" and ideology. And it puts them together in a way that explains why people generally consent to the existing social order but can simultaneously hold particular oppositional views.

How does it do this? Well, it starts from the recognition that people construct their own experience. Their ideology is constructed out of "commonsense" and out of the material and social world. And their commonse is constructed out of the material and social world.

Let me take the example of the commodity-form again to explain this. People believe in the free-market system unquestioningly, without thinking about it. They profoundly subscribe to a fundamental capitalist belief. But they don't do so because they've been conned by the press or the school-teachers against their better judgement. They do so because their material and social world means that exchange-relations are "commonsense". There is no conceivable alternative to the commodity-form. The quid pro quo is natural, unalterable and entirely rational. And this shows at the level of commonsense, in statements like "You can't get something for nothing".

Of course, the same point applies to the contradictory aspects of the material and social world. Other realities also validate fragments of "commonsense" and ideologies. For
instance, the role of manager in enforcing the unequal transaction of wage-labor leads many workers to construct the commonsense observation that "bosses are bastards". And this observation underpins the militant trade union ideology, in its corporatist and oppositional forms.

Hegemony is not just a matter of what people think, but also of what they do, their habits and practices. And here we get to the other part of the Gramscian framework: the particular role of intellectuals. By intellectuals I don't mean sueder-jacketed academics in ivory towers. I am referring to Gramsci's organic intellectuals. To quote from the Prison Notebooks:

Every (class) coming into existence ... creates together with itself, organically, one or more strata of intellectuals which give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own function not only in the economic but also in the social and political fields.

Organic intellectuals are therefore not only economists and social scientists, but managers, engineers, lawyers, bureaucrats, journalists, educational administrators, and politicians. They are people who organise hegemony. They are its active side, and interact with the structural elements of material/social world, commonsense and ideology. Indeed, organic intellectuals can only perform their tasks within the context of these structural elements.

Take the example of the media. As countless studies show, the media can play an ideological role only to the extent that it builds on real perceptions of the real world, to the extent that they mesh with people's commonsense observations of what is actually happening. A journalist can extol the virtues of the free-market (or attack the evils of central planning) precisely because this squares with one element of what people actually experience.

I said one element, and that raises the other thing about organic intellectuals. Their function of "organising" hegemony includes that of selecting some aspects of reality and commonsense and suppressing others as the basis for ideological formulations.

For instance, the ideological stance of hostility to "union power" can be derived from ordinary people's "commonsense" opposition to authority, which can include "big union bosses", and which could in turn be based in real experiences of having to fork out union dues to tough union organisers who aren't seen at any other time. Witness Fraser's union-bashing.

And this task of selectively emphasising fragments of experience and commonsense is itself ideologically-driven. The ideology of the manager, journalist, politician or whatever kind of organic intellectual, is itself a more systematic version of "commonsense", based on their experiences and observations from where they sit in the world. So the world looks different and their criteria of selection correspond to that. And of course, they get paid to do a certain job.

"Commonsense" notions like "You don't get something for nothing" and "I'm not smart enough to be a boss" are based on experience on the material and social world, not only constructed by ruling class hegemony.

This organising role spans the whole of society. It entails keeping the finger on the pulse of the economic, social and political currents of society, and intervening, arranging, adjusting, compromising and so on, to the extent necessary to maintain the basic structure intact. It implies that capital and its organic intellectuals take account of all the groups in society, and develop strategies to minimise the opposition, ranging from accommodation to confrontation. This process of taking account of the whole of society is the essence of hegemony.

So what I'm saying is that "false consciousness" is not false at all, but is simply instilled by the media or schools. People's conceptions of the social order are in fact quite valid. They have "true" conceptions in their heads of society as it actually presents itself to them in their daily life experiences. Hegemony is the organisation of this presentation, both structurally and actively, so that it is quite reasonable, or unavoidable for people to accept the continuation of the existing order.

They have an "organic doctrine of society", a sense not only of what is desirable but also of what exists and what is possible. This last is important, because consent is not just a matter of people believing that their interests are more or less served by things as they are. It is also a matter of their capacities to do anything to change things.

Hegemony is an order in which the class capacities of those who rule far outweigh the class capacities of those who are ruled. They have the edge in knowledge, planning, organisational cohesion, inside contacts and links with elements of the opposing class, and confidence. Keeping this edge is the function of organic intellectuals.

By contrast, those who are ruled must overcome massive disadvantages in their capacities. Denied knowledge and understanding of what lies behind decisions and plans, divided and segmented by the strategies of capital, and excluded from the inside communications of the rulers, their horizons are limited by their modest view of what they can do. At the individual level, it is a matter of "I'm only a worker, who am I to say how things should be run?"

This view is itself a product of the observable daily-life reality that there is a division of labor between those who work with their hands and those who work with their brains, or within the latter category between those who are paid to create and initiate and those who are paid to do routine hack-work. At the level of the organised labor movement, the hallmarks are economism, sectionalism, and a tendency to react to capital rather than initiate. Even in its most combative sectors, the militancy of the labor movement is the militancy of the natural underdog, the assertion of its proper "rights" as a ruled class. Its strategies almost never touch on the prospect of it being the leading class in society.

What does this mean for our strategy? I'll conclude by suggesting four things. First, it means that propaganda in itself, no matter how massive, how well-argued, how well-produced, is futile.
Ideological arguments don't even touch the well-springs of experience and commonsense which underpin popular conservatism. Second, and by corollary, it means that we need a strategic approach which orients itself to people's experiences and commonsense, as it is for them, not simply for our own ideological preconceptions of their "real" interests.

Not only our language and our arguments, but the very issues and interests we see as important must change. We have to focus on aspects of daily-life reality about which people will take steps that point in the direction of social change.

Third, we need to conceive of how these immediate and sectional interests fit together at the broader level. We need to pose solutions for the whole of society, in terms that people perceive as realistic and reasonable. In other words, we need to develop and fight for positive alternatives, reforms in which the working class is not just the opposing class but the leading class in society. The labor movement has to evolve its own hegemonic approach.

Fourth, and in my opinion most importantly, we need to very explicitly orient ourselves to popular capacities as well as interests. In the shorter term this means fighting for reforms which expand the capacities of the labor movement to assert a say — things like disclosure of corporate information, trade union education, community organising facilities. These are reforms that ordinary people can perceive as reasonable from the point of view of equality and democracy, but which have a profound movement-building potential.

In the longer term, it means that we have to develop our own organic intellectuals from the ground up. We need to break the division between intellectual and non-intellectual labor, and evolve activists who are simultaneously in touch with everyday concerns and able to see the whole and see the possibilities. We need to evolve people who match and challenge the organic intellectuals of capital, precisely by doing away with the specialised function of the intellectual.

All this poses sharp questions about the existing left. It suggests a new orientation away from the propagandist organ and the "correct line" organised political party. It suggests a new role for all of us who want to change society.

‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it.’

Karl Marx 1883-1983

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