

# Political Parties and Mass Consciousness

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At the Marx Centenary conference on "Prospects for Socialist Change in Australia", held in Melbourne in April 1983, John Alford gave the opening speech on the topic "Class in the 1980s". He dealt with the opposing theoretical concepts of "false consciousness" and the Gramscian idea of "hegemony".

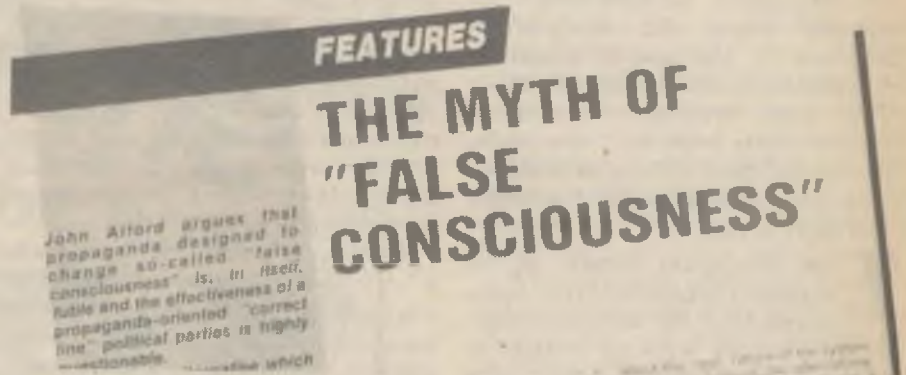
From the discussion he concluded that a new orientation away from "the propagandist organ and the correct-line political party" was necessary, if we were to get socialist change in Australia.

Given the importance of these strategic concepts, and the practical event of the resignations from the CPA in Melbourne in April 1984, it is worth taking a closer look at John Alford's argument, which was printed in *ALR* No. 84, 1983, and is also available on tape.

The argument was crudely simplified, for the sake of impact, as Alford himself noted. This makes it difficult to really come to grips with. Firstly, he dealt with the question: why do the ordinary people acquiesce in the social order of capitalism?

He says that because the left has based its answer on the concept of "false consciousness", and has adopted a propagandist approach, it has failed spectacularly, and the proof is in its present small size.

Whatever else may be said about this argument, it is not historical. The history of the Australian left, and the CPA in particular, cannot be boiled



down to one single strategic idea, and many factors are involved in the present parlous state of the left, and of the mass consciousness of workers in relation to the capitalist class.

John Alford set out a more complex theory of consciousness, that of "hegemony", as elaborated by Gramsci in his *Prison Notebooks*, in order to show the weakness of the concept of "false consciousness". He argues that consciousness is composed of three elements: the material world and social relations, common sense, and ideology. "False consciousness" only comes to grips with the element of ideology, he says: "ideological arguments don't even touch the well-springs of experience and common sense which underpin popular conservatism".

It follows then that the left must stop bashing away at ideology alone, and adopt an approach which is oriented to people's experiences and common sense, as it appears to them, to change the issues we address, as well as our language and arguments.

Above all, the left needs to develop working class "organic intellectuals"

able to connect day-to-day reality with the direction of the whole society, and build alliances which connect up all social groups: that is, a new type of cadre and a new strategic approach.

There are two things here to take issue with: firstly, the way Alford talks about the distinction between ideology, common sense and false consciousness; and, secondly, the conclusion he draws that the left no longer needs a "strident" newspaper or an organised political party in the tradition of Lenin. Both aspects, I believe, are at variance with Gramsci's own ideas about hegemony, politics, and the role of the working class party and press.

### *Ideology and Common Sense*

Alford describes common sense as the "diverse, contradictory, ill-formed fragmentary opinions and perceptions" people hold within their view of the world; whereas ideology is "more systematic than common sense ... more or less worked out bodies of thought about what exists, what's possible and what ought

to be in political terms'. Ideologies justify the position of particular social groups or classes, e.g. liberal democracy and free market systems of thought support certain phases of capitalist class history.

As Alford would have it, "common sense" is constructed by people from the material and social conditions of day-to-day existence, and ideology is constructed out of common sense.

This is far too simple, and Alford himself contradicts it when he discusses the very active role of the capitalist class organic intellectuals in organising "hegemony". As he says, the media's "function of organising hegemony involves selecting some aspects of reality and common sense and suppressing others .... as the basis for ideological formulations", for example about the dangers of unionism ... "the task of selectively emphasising is ideologically driven". It is a more systematic version of common sense from their view of the world, and their criteria of selection correspond to their position (including their high pay).

**T**his ideological element of the capitalist hegemony in fact helps to construct the "common sense" of the ordinary working people. In many cases, "common sense" is a collection of highly ideological positions. A good example is the ideology of white supremacy which is still "common sense" — though now generally debunked among scientists and other educated layers — that black skin denotes inherent inferiority, that warm climates produce lazy, unintelligent cultures, that somehow European ascendancy is entirely natural and the poverty of the Third World is similarly inevitable.

Another example is the idea of male supremacy held by many women and most men in our society — men are better because they are stronger, or more intelligent, or more like god, or the breadwinner, depending on which particular religious, pseudo-scientific or secular ideology is involved.

Another example is the way older Catholics simply repeat the straight ideological teachings of the Church about good and evil, about sex, about suffering, as part of their "common sense".

The big one is the **lack** of a "working class" common sense among very broad parts of society, precisely because of capitalist hegemony being

directly interested in suppressing this idea.

Gramsci recognised false consciousness as part of the historical movement of individual and class self-awareness from passive acceptance of inherited ideas to active critical marxism. He described it as "contradictory consciousness", whereby a worker or a mass of workers could verbally assent to the ideas of the ruling class and, in their active working practice, actually live by a different conception of the world, a socialist one.

In Gramsci's view of hegemony, the level of "common sense" itself is part of the hegemony (as Alford states), and equally so, the business of building working-class hegemony involves creating a new "common sense". This strikes quite a different note from Alford's argument which urges the left to tune-in to the "common sense" view of ordinary people in a much more uncritical way, and also diverts attention from the role of ideological arguments in helping to change that "common sense".

This is so, even though Alford made a very strong criticism of capitalist intellectuals in their function of organising hegemony from a class position antagonistic to that of the people they are influencing.

### **The Role of the Party and its Press**

**A** lot of revolutionary blood has flowed under the bridge since Gramsci crystallised his thoughts in Mussolini's jails from 1926-37. At that time, he elaborated a very strong role for the revolutionary party and its press in developing a new intellectual leadership which could defeat capitalist hegemony in advanced capitalist societies.

It is often said that the present strength of the PCI owes a lot to its Gramscian heritage. So how does Alford draw an opposite conclusion from Gramsci's ideas on hegemony?

The answer to that question must have something to do with Alford's view of the potential of the left and socialists within the AIP. However, he does not deal with this at all in his paper. Without some political-organisational perspective like this, there is no necessary logic to his conclusion, just as there is no necessary truth in his assertion that the role of the Australian left and the

CPA has been basically propagandist.

However, Alford, like many others, cannot fail to be suggestive about the need for a new strategic approach for the left, and a reassessment of the role of parties such as the CPA, if we are to overcome the particular Australian type of capitalist hegemony that does elicit the ongoing consent of the mass of workers to its exploitative, racist, sexist, environmentally destructive and warmongering order.

On this point, Gramsci has quite a bit to say:

*One should stress the importance and significance which, in the modern world, political parties have in the elaboration and diffusion of conceptions of the world, because essentially what they do is to work out the ethics and the politics corresponding to these conceptions and act as it were as their historical 'laboratory'. The parties recruit individuals out of the working mass, and the selection is made on practical and theoretical criteria at the same time. The relation between theory and practice becomes ever closer the more the conception is vitally and radically innovatory and opposed to old ways of thinking. For this reason one can say that the parties are the elaborators of new integral and totalitarian intelligentsias (unified, all-absorbing intellectual layers) and the crucibles where the unification of theory and practice, understood as a real historical process, takes place. (Prison Notebooks, The Study of Philosophy.)*

The real problem in Gramsci's view is about combining the socialist vision with practical activity so that both the vision and political work become more and more clearly defined and unified. This is carried out by parties which have the role of intellectual leadership or organising hegemony in interaction with classes and social groups.

**I** think Stuart Hall gave some sort of reply to Alford's wholesale rejection of the "propagandist organ and the correct-line political party" in his contribution to the "Class in the 1980s" topic:

*If you ask me why economic class appears at the level of politics and political struggle in a form which is not reducible to that of capital versus labour, you have to introduce those things precisely which represent class politically. Now the class is not given its political consciousness by its economic position. It is represented by the existing political traditions, through the existing political institutions and organisations. Representation is an active two-way process .... We hear formulated*



class position". This position gives rise to a part of "common sense" which at best is oppositional to the capitalist class.

Our present experience is that the capitalist class has its ideological and political unity ensured by an array of institutions — economic, political, legal, social, ideological — staffed by a veritable legion of "organic intellectuals". These forces also organise as much consent as possible from the working class and small capital, and even groups as alienated as Aborigines, and accommodate social movements, especially feminism and environmentalism, as much as possible.

Where necessary, force is applied (more or less).

As Alford put it, working class propagandists find their pumps overwhelmed by this situation. But I suggest that the picture is much the same for working class organic intellectuals, seeking ways to unite the class, build alliances, and really change all the elements of the capitalist hegemony over to our favour.

What probably keeps both forms of left activism going is the never-ending change and movement within the capitalist societies we are a part of — always challenging, always enraging, always offering new opportunities to develop the socialist movement.

But, I insist, the struggle requires well-organised mature leadership — a party — if it is ever going to succeed.

To quote Stuart Hall again:

*If we look not only at those (Winter Palace) moments, but at all those long important periods in between, we will find that politics consists of bringing together in some kind of dominant or ruling bloc precisely different elements of different classes and linking them with a variety of popular movements which arise from contradictions in other spheres of society apart from the strictly economic, and that until this link is made, political forces, political struggles, political settlements are never achieved. That is the actuals of the instruments of political, ideological and social struggle and contradiction.*



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for us by a newspaper, or a party, or somebody to whom we always talk, (emphasis added) a set of views in which we begin to recognise the position or interest which we ourselves have .... Class .... is the structuring principle of determinacy on our life in the area of material production but does not guarantee the political unity of a class .... only the conduct of political

struggle guarantees this .... the business of constructing political programs .... is the essence of politics .... and requires much new thought.

The material conditions and social relations of working people are the very stuff of the concept of "working class". This is equivalent to "economic

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