

POWER-KNOWLEDGE: A DIALECTICAL CONTRADICTION

Garry Potter

Wilfrid Laurier University

NOTE: Due to technical problems there is a bit missing in the end of this paper.

Introduction (1): Foucault

Power-knowledge as a term was coined by Foucault to indicate the mutual imbrication of power and knowledge. Power and knowledge are jointly imbricated in institutional practices such that power is always involved with the production of knowledge and knowledge involved with the institutional exercise of power. This much the argument of this paper shares with Foucault. However, there are also many fundamental differences.

The paper thus presents an *implied* critique of Foucault. It shall not be made explicit. Instead Foucault is left to function as the ghost that haunts this text. That I mention him at all is merely to give credit where credit is due and for readers of a more scholarly nature they can consider the Foucauldian concepts of genealogy, discursive formations, the double sense of discipline and the like, in terms of the Laclauian notion of a 'hauntology'. However, this paper will be more explicitly focused upon *ontology* and *my own* theorisation of power knowledge.

Introduction (2) Hegel, Marx and Bhaskar

The adjective 'dialectical' is often used as a magic wand to paper over the cracks of confused theoretical argument. This is not to say that it has not also been used profitably as a sophisticated explanatory tool. The three thinkers of this sub-section's title being excellent examples of such. Confusion and profundity thus equally colour the history of the term's usage. Part of the problem is semantic; part of it is historical and scholarly; part of it is real conceptual disagreement. The intention in this paper is to sacrifice some elements of sophistication (and perhaps profundity) for the sake of clarity. Thus, I shall immediately make clear what is intended in *my* utilisation of the term in this paper. Where the relatively simple definition of the term dialectical contradiction stands in relation to other thinkers I leave it to the reader to judge; the meaning I intend by it is as is defined below.

A dialectical contradiction indicates a fundamental contradiction between essential characteristics of a 'thing' manifested in a fundamental multi-leveled conflict between the opposing forces expressive of the thing's essential characteristics. By essential characteristics, I mean here such characteristics necessary to a thing's identity, without

which it would not be itself but would in fact be something else.

A dialectical contradiction, as I am defining it does *not* indicate a formal logical contradiction. It indicates an *apparent* formal logical contradiction. What does it mean to say this? It indicates a particular linkage of ontology with epistemology. This can be made clear most easily by means of example, an example which we will go into in some detail later on in the paper. Here are two *apparently* contradictory propositions: 1) the production and dissemination of knowledge is an essential characteristic of all educational systems; and 2) the obfuscation of the production of knowledge and the restriction (and sometimes outright prevention) of the dissemination of knowledge is an essential characteristic of all education systems. Are these two propositions contradictory in terms of formal logic? It depends rather precisely upon how they are formulated as such. But the meaning intended implies no such thing. Asserting that educational systems have knowledge production and dissemination as an essential feature says no more than that if they did not fulfill such functions to some degree they could not be said to be educational systems. The contrasting position is more controversial and needs to be argued for, an argument that we shall make later on in this paper. However, on one level the contradiction is clear. I call this contradiction dialectical because it involves the essential primary defining characteristics of the institution. I call it dialectical because the contradiction manifests itself in the form of a conflict between the structural forces that make the institution what it *most fundamentally* is. The conflict itself is an essential characteristic of the institution. This conflict, as we shall later see, manifests itself in both subtle and rather obvious fashions. It manifests itself on a number of different levels simultaneously and constantly. This dialectical contradiction is, however, itself, the expression of an even more general dialectical contradiction: the dialectical contradiction at the heart of the production of knowledge which arises from knowledge's imbrication with the power relations of inequality.

Introduction (3) Structural Mystification

Structural mystification is the term I have labeled the dialectical opposite to the process of knowledge production and dissemination. It is a *trans-historical* concept. It manifests itself in specific ways in different institutions. It manifests itself differently in different historical and cultural contexts. Nonetheless, it *is* trans-historical. It is trans-historical because it has a specific general cause related to what has hitherto been a *constant in the human condition: social inequality with respect to power relations*. Societies, so far as we know, have always been stratified. They have been stratified and unequal with respect to specific social groupings (gender, ethnicity and class being the most important of these groupings but others have featured historically as well).

The contradiction inherent to knowledge production derives from the fact that knowledge production is first of all social, and secondly, thus has knowledge dissemination intrinsically bound up with it. The contradiction derives from the dual manner in which knowledge and power are bound up with one another. This, even in the abstract, is a very complex relationship and its specific institutional manifestations even more so. However,

the fundamental notion can be expressed very simply and crudely without too much distortion.

First, power relations determine what gets ‘certified’ as knowledge; that is to say in a general way, *socially accepted and transmitted as knowledge*. Such socially defined knowledge may or may not be ‘genuine’ knowledge. It is necessary to make a distinction between ‘genuine knowledge’ and alleged knowledge socially certified as such but which is not ‘really’ so. It does not matter here whether we appeal to a correspondence notion of truth or an alethic one. The crucial point is that the above distinction must be made. Error can and does get socially certified as knowledge. This is *not* the same as merely maintaining the standard critical realist fallibilist understanding of knowledge. Rather it is asserting the possibility that individuals may be in possession of the (relative) ‘truth’, while society has certified a less true theory or belief or ‘fact’ as knowledge. It also asserts the possibility that everyone in society may be blind, so to speak, to a potentially knowable relatively greater truth. Social inequality, objective interests in power acquisition and the reproduction of previously existing power relations ensures that this sort of certification of (relative) falsity as truth will occur.

As knowledge production is most importantly social in nature, the dissemination of knowledge and alleged knowledge, is crucial to its production. Thus, the dissemination of ‘genuine’ knowledge enables the production of further knowledge while the dissemination of socially certified ‘error’ impedes the process.

Further, the historical constant of some sort of social inequality of power relations ensures that the transmission of knowledge will also be restricted. Crudely put, power relations determine who learns what in society. This is enabling for some and constraining for others. For society as a whole it works as an enabling feature for the production of some sorts of knowledge and an obfuscating restraining feature for the production of other sorts. In general, it works so as to facilitate the production of knowledges useful to the maintenance of whatever is the existing *status quo* of power relations and to severely constrain the production of knowledges relevant to a better general understanding of those power relations. This corresponds to the objective interests and relative power of society’s different social groupings (though not necessarily simply and directly when one looks at the processes in their specific institutional detail).

Structural mystification theory thus does much of the work that the term ‘ideology’ has frequently been employed to explain. To better explain the concept of structural mystification we shall accordingly first look at the key problem which ideology as a concept has been employed to resolve.

Structural Mystification Theory and ‘The Dominant Ideology Thesis’

In Marxist terms, the issues surrounding the relationship between base and superstructure, the control of the production and dissemination of ideas by the ruling class, associated questions of class consciousness and false consciousness etc., all relate to this problem. In less specifically Marxist terms structural mystification addresses the question of the possible collusion of 'the dominated' in their own domination. A variety of what have been labeled 'dominant ideology theses' have been employed to explain this (possibly existing) phenomenon.

There are five categories of possibility with respect to the effect of the 'cultural sphere' and its various 'superstructural' institutions upon the maintenance and potential change of the *status quo* of existing power relations. First, there is the possibility a 'dominant ideology' exists which incorporates the belief systems of the dominated classes. This coherent set of beliefs legitimates the power of the ruling class. This legitimation of the hierarchy of power relations exerts a substantially contributing causal force to the maintenance of that hierarchy. The 'false' beliefs of the dominated classes thus implies a collusion in their own domination. Second, there is the possibility that whether such a phenomenon as 'the dominant ideology' exists or not, the causal role it might play in the maintenance of ruling class power through such a collusion in their own domination by the dominated is relatively insignificant. The determining force of the economic factors, the repressive utilisation of physical force, and the coercive manipulation of more overt political institutions is sufficient causal explanation of the maintenance of power by the ruling class. Third, there is the possibility that social reality is structured such that experience itself generates false beliefs. That is, ideology is all pervasive and is actually better understood as the *generative process of cognitive error* than as a set of beliefs. Such a possibility makes the analytical separation of infrastructure and superstructure something of a theoretical error. These two levels of the structure of social reality are integrated in a fundamental manner such that existing power relations in themselves produce the deceptive and legitimating cognitive processes which contribute to their maintenance. The fourth possibility is that *particular social structures induce the cognitive errors and consequent sets of beliefs* which legitimate and/or conceal existing power relations. The fifth possibility is the theory of structural mystification.

The theory of structural mystification is partly a combination of elements of the first, third and fourth possibilities. However, it *reverses* the first possibility such that rather than a subscription to a particular set of false beliefs by the dominated classes it is the *absence* of a particular set of beliefs - *true beliefs* - relevant to that domination which causally contributes to it.

It is through the consideration of dominant ideology theses of the first sort, by way of contrast, that the concept of structural mystification can initially be most clearly elucidated. A well known book by that title, *The Dominant Ideology Thesis*, is to be used as our starting point. It summarises the dominant ideology thesis as follows:

The thesis argues that in all societies based on class divisions there is a dominant class which enjoys control of both the means of material production and the means of mental production.

Through its control of ideological production, the dominant class is able to supervise the construction of a set of coherent beliefs. These dominant beliefs of the dominant class are more powerful, dense and coherent than those of subordinate classes. The dominant ideology penetrates and infects the consciousness of the working class, because the working class comes to see and to experience reality through the conceptual categories of the dominant class. The dominant ideology functions to incorporate the working class within a system which is, in fact, operating against the material interests of labour. This incorporation in turn explains the coherence and integration of capitalist society'. (Abercrombie et al. 1980, pp. 1-2)

The most important achievement of this work was its *empirical* evaluation of dominant ideology theses. They conclude that such theses are empirically false. Thus, with respect to the question of why the working class has failed thus far to overthrow capitalism, Abercrombie et al. maintain that it is *not* due to the subscription to a dominant ideology by the working class. They do not assert that there is no such thing as a 'dominant ideology', or that it has not served various important functions at different times, but that in general, and most particularly in the period of late capitalism, its importance has been vastly over-rated. They suggest that reasons for the passivity of the working class are more likely to be found in an analysis of more formally political factors and in what Marx termed the 'dull compulsion of the economic'.

While the empirical work of *The Dominant Ideology Thesis* is not unchallengeable with respect to detail, this is not what shall concern us here. In the main we shall simply accept their evidence and consider instead the question of what it proves exactly with respect to our own version of a dominant ideology thesis, that is: structural mystification theory. The most obvious thing to strike one about the work of Abercrombie et al, is that their principal conclusion conflicts with an obvious fact about working class consciousness. The British working class, for example, is not just politically repressed, or simply too tired out from work and worry about money to go out and have a revolution - ***they do not consciously want one.*** Abercrombie et al. seem to have missed the forest for the trees.

One could attempt to explain the failure of the working class to revolt purely through the an analysis of the effects of the 'dull compulsion of the economic' or mistakes and collaboration by their political leadership or the successful utilisation of politically repressive force, or even a consideration of all these factors together; that is one could, if the question was simply: why don't they revolt? That the working class of America, for example, is both repressed and frequently tricked politically is not the point; what is at issue is the causal and therefore explanatory importance of culture, cognition and beliefs in the maintenance of power relations.

Many theorists often proceed as if ideology were a self evident list of beliefs. That it is not, seems clear. This is evidenced by the considerable disagreement and confusion

concerning fundamental questions about ideology. For example, is ideology inherently false, or not? That one's theoretical stance on a variety of other issues will determine the answer to this question, means, at least, that if ideology can be construed in terms of lists of beliefs, the items which could be appended to such a list are certainly not self evident.

Abercrombie et al. criticise the whole notion of the implicit characterisation of ideology in terms of ostensive lists of beliefs because the beliefs which could be added to the list are potentially infinite. However in raising this very reasonable objection to such an approach they have provided the most telling criticism of their own characterisations of dominant ideologies. That is, in defining the dominant ideology of any particular period they resort to such lists of items; an approach they themselves recognise as naive: '... such an approach is unsatisfactory because the beliefs which could be added to the list are infinite' (Abercrombie et al., p.5).

It is not that such ostensive lists as they provide are unreasonable as candidates for the title of 'the dominant ideology' of any particular period. In fact their choices of such belief items are arguably the most sensible possible - were they not correct in their own criticism of such approaches! Ostensive lists of related beliefs is an unsatisfactory solution to the problem posed by the question 'what is the dominant ideology?'. The unsatisfactory nature of such an approach weakens considerably the force of their empirical evaluation. That is, with respect to the ideological incorporation of the working class in late capitalism, if Abercrombie et al. have proved anything concerning it, it is that the lists of beliefs which they propose as candidates for the dominant ideology have not penetrated the working class significantly enough for one to assert that those beliefs dominate working class values and attitudes.

This is not to say Abercrombie et al have not done something important with respect to possible dominant ideology theses. Anyone wishing to prove a version of such a thesis, must in the light of their work, do one of two things: either compose alternative lists as possible candidates for the dominant ideology and then show empirically that such beliefs are in fact extremely widely held by the working class; or find an entirely new approach to the question of a dominant ideology. Structural mystification theory is an example of the latter.

The notion of structural mystification differs from that of a dominant ideology thesis in two important ways. First, it is framed negatively with respect to knowledge, rather than positively with respect to belief. Secondly, it differs importantly with respect to 'coherence'. As structural mystification is to be understood negatively with respect to knowledge, it is only a particular sort of belief (i.e. 'true' ones) with which it is concerned; and then, only through a questioning of the reasons for an absence. Thus, the question of coherence of beliefs does not arise. Indeed, as we shall see inconsistency of beliefs and incoherent belief systems are the trademarks of structural mystification. Rather the question of coherence to be concerned with, is the organisational coherence of the structures where knowledge is both on the one hand produced and disseminated, and on the other hand, where its production is systematically obfuscated and its dissemination

prevented or restricted.

To further clarify the differences in approaches deriving from the concept of structural mystification and those which would derive from a more conventional dominant ideology thesis let us look at an example of the latter. The following quotation of Ernest Mandel's is an effective summary of a classic dominant ideology thesis from a Marxist perspective:

To consolidate the domination of one class over another for any length of time, it is...absolutely essential that the producers, the members of the exploited class are brought to accept the appropriation of the social surplus by a minority as inevitable, permanent and just. (Mandel, 1982, p.29)

Do the members of the working class (or a significantly large number of them) actually believe that the 'appropriation of the social surplus' by the minority is inevitable, permanent and just? To assert that they do, and prove this assertion, would require an empirical study. But a number of questions are immediately raised by the suggestion of such a study: What percentage of the working class is required to positively hold such a belief for it to be considered 'significant' enough to prove the thesis? Could the answer to this question be determined simply through a questionnaire? In constructing such a questionnaire would the simplest approach (i.e. directly putting the question: do you believe the appropriation of the social surplus by a minority is inevitable permanent and just?) actually get at what you wish to know? If not, then what alternative questions, or alternative methods to a questionnaire, could be utilised so as to give a confident expectation of receiving the sort of facts which would verify the thesis?

These questions would appear on the surface to be purely methodological ones. But when considered more carefully they can be seen to have profound theoretical implications. For example, how many of the working class understand 'profit' in terms of social surplus? Without engaging in any empirical study, it does seem probable, that most people understand profit purely in terms of daily life situations, and thus in purely micro-economic terms. Joe sells his mate a car for a hundred dollars more than he paid for it; that's profit. He also realises that the corner grocer has a mark up on what he sells cat food for; but we are still a very long way indeed from Marx. But if this is the case, does it prove that such individuals, by the very fact of their seeing profits in such terms, mean that they have incorporated a ruling class ideology? Does the fact that the most usual personal experiences of working class individuals are with petit-bourgeois small traders rather than wealthy capitalists (and that on that level, business profits can look very much like a wage) make any difference to the initial question? Are many or most of the working class aware that all of what could be considered a 'social surplus' is appropriated by a minority? To be aware of income differentials, to know that there are very rich people, is not at all the same as being aware of the distribution of wealth and power.

Another question arises from Mandel's assertion: why is it necessary to conjoin inevitability, permanence and justice? If the present system is just with regard to power relations and distribution of resources, one need not regard it as inevitable or permanent,

to actively wish to preserve it, let alone wish to try and change it. Similarly, if it is believed to be inevitable, what point could there be to attempt to change it even if does seem unjust? Logically, it would seem that only one belief or the other is required; yet there is evidence of substantial effort directed at propagandising variations of both. For example, the argument is often put, that because of human nature, capitalism is inevitable. The view is also promulgated that we live in a meritocracy; thus advantage and privilege are deserved. These two commonly propounded arguments are not logically incompatible with one another; but either, in addition to the other, would seem to be superfluous, from the point of view of legitimating the present system.

This superfluosness indicates incoherence with regard to the principal point a dominant ideology would be expected to be achieving in relation to its power-maintenance function. The concept of structural mystification provides an explanation for this lack of coherence by its negative framing. Let us look again at Mandel's dominant ideology proposition, but this time formulated in terms of structural mystification:

To consolidate the dominance of one class over another for any length of time it is absolutely essential that the producers, the members of the exploited class, be *prevented from realising*: that a minority (ruling class) appropriates the social surplus; that this is unjust and against their interests as a group; that it is certainly not inevitable and need not be permanent . . . if they unite and actively resist this exploitation.

This explains what might appear to be the 'over kill' of the propaganda of 'superfluous' argument. That is, if the arguments regarding inevitability and justice are conflated and confused, it is so much the better from the point of view of the working class failing to make an accurate assessment of their position. In fact all arguments, propositions, half truths, disinformation, misinformation, lack of information, contradictory beliefs, outdated knowledge or incomplete knowledge; which could, however indirectly, be related to our reworking of Mandel's proposition, can be seen to serve the same sort of function that a dominant ideology is purported to. The point is, that rather than a specific set of beliefs that serve ruling class interests and which are 'more powerful, dense and coherent than those of the subordinate classes'; it is precisely the weakness, superficiality and lack of coherence of the belief 'system' of the dominated groups, which explains their lack of motivation to organise a concerted effort to change things.

Structural mystification theory stresses that this lack of coherence in belief, this lack of important knowledge relevant to exploitation, is not either accidental or a conspiracy by the ruling class. *It is structurally built into the institutions through which knowledge is acquired, produced and disseminated.* Further, for so far we have been referring exclusively to class, we must add that this is also true with respect to the power relations of gender and ethnicity.

From one point of view, structural mystification is perhaps not a dominant ideology thesis at all. For while structural mystification speaks directly to the question of the construction

of beliefs and the relation of that process to class or gender or ethnicity, it does not refer to any specific set of beliefs that one class or another may widely believe. In terms of reference to beliefs, structural mystification refers to an important set of beliefs which are *absent*, which are *not* held by the 'dominated class', beliefs which might incline them to act very differently: that is the set of true beliefs (knowledge) most directly related to power and their interests as a class . . . the truths of their domination and knowledge of the means of overcoming it.

In the next section we shall attempt to kill two birds with one stone. First, there is quite a powerful notion of the ideological incorporation of the dominated in the process of their own domination not directly engaged with by the belief orientated notion of dominant ideology thesis that is critiqued so well by Abercrombie et al. This is the notion of ideology as cognitive error experientially induced. Bourdieu utilises the term 'objective misrecognition' to refer to this process and provides an excellent example of its working in the educational system. We too, need a specific contemporary example of a knowledge producing and disseminating institution to demonstrate how structural mystification works in practice. Thus, we shall next outline the points in common between structural mystification theory and Bourdieu's analysis of the education system and further specify where the two theories diverge.

Reproduction: In Education, Society and Culture

Bourdieu and Passeron (1977) focus on the manner in which institutions reproduce themselves; a crucial component of structural mystification. Their thesis is that in the process of reproducing itself institutionally, the education system also reproduces existing class relations and ideologically justifies them. Language is an integral component of this process and is related to power through their concept of 'linguistic capital'. People's cultural background is also a crucial component of the process and is another form of 'capital'. Their use of the term capital (linguistic, cultural, educational, scientific etc.) outside of the sphere of the economy is more than merely metaphorical. These forms of non-economic capital operate in their own spheres in a similar fashion to capital in the economy. However, the term also indicates a linkage to the power relations of the economy. Understood correctly the terms function so as to theorise a very sophisticated and non-reductive form of economic determinism in which the very sense of the notion of determination is crucially changed (see Potter, 2000). Bourdieu's concepts of 'habitus' and 'field' refine our understanding of the relationship between initial class position and culture. One's habitus derives from one's initial class position and is a series of embodied habits, predispositions, modes of thinking and so on, which will exert a causal force upon one's conscious strategising, unconscious tendencies, actions and decisions in different ways in relation to different 'fields' of operation. Each of the fields has its own rules and logic and measure of relative autonomy. The educational system is composed of a number of such fields and the overall effect of their operation is to reproduce and legitimate existing power relations through a process of 'objective misrecognition' by the participants.

The above summary of concepts come from a number of different works by Bourdieu and are nuanced slightly differently in each of them. However, he and Passeron principally concentrate upon the power relations inherent in pedagogy and the selection processes involved in knowledge dissemination in their early work *Reproduction: In Education, Society and Culture* (1977). Through this analysis they demonstrate the manner in which the working class's *experience of the educational system as a meritocracy* serves to instill in them the *ideology of meritocracy*. This ideology of meritocracy is applied both to the educational system itself and to social economic differentiation in general. The processes of competitive examination, selection and streaming as are actually lived _ the examinations failed, the individuals who are *not selected* for the preferred path to economic reward justified by educational qualifications _ these experiences in themselves serve as powerful arguments for the reality of the propounded meritocratic ideology. The education system, however, has very definitely non-meritocratic features incorporated within it. The double edge of truth and falsity involved in the term *objective misrecognition* perfectly exemplifies one of the aspects of structural mystification.

A rather remarkable book was produced by the Italian peasant children of a small school run by a priest. These peasant children of the Barbiana School were all formal failures of the Italian educational system. They arrive at very similar conclusions to Bourdieu and Passeron concerning the possession of 'linguistic capital', selection and success within the system. They express their conclusions, however, in much more down to earth language; and one could also say with a good deal more poetry as well as personal bitterness:

Besides we should settle what correct language is. Languages are created by the poor, who then go on renewing them forever. The rich crystallize them in order to put on the spot anybody who speaks in a different way. Or in order to make him fail exams.

You say that little Pierino, daddy's boy, can write well. But of course; he speaks as you do. He is part of the firm. (Barbiana children, 1970, p.23)

The system reproduces existing class relations and the inequalities inherent in those relations (including inequality intrinsic to the educational system itself) and systematically conceals the manner in which it does so. The argument is that the system does so most effectively the greater the measure of relative autonomy it is allowed. The system contains meritocratic processes and non-meritocratic ones. The former are more on the surface and easily detectable. If a group of students take a fairly administered objectively marked test, for example, the experience of doing so validates the ideology of meritocracy. That there is more going on beneath the surface, however, only goes to show how the partial actuality of meritocracy serves to incorporate in individuals an objective misrecognition of what is really (at a deeper and more complex level) going on. Broadly speaking we can say that the system over selects the working class for failure, drop out and educational paths that in time lead to career paths, which in terms of probabilities and groups maintain the *status quo* inequality of societal rewards. In doing so, it further conceals the fact that it is accomplishing an ideological task under the guise of ostensibly performing a necessary

politically neutral purely technical function i.e. providing the skills of literacy, numeracy and general knowledge to all and training appropriate numbers in the requisite skills required by a technologically advanced and socially complex society and economy.

As said earlier, experience of the system lends itself to a perception of the superficial truth of meritocracy and equality of opportunity; an understanding of the deeper mechanisms whereby inequality is reproduced and legitimated is far more difficult. Participants in the system face a strong structural force and personal experiential force simultaneously. The structural force affects individuals differently. The 'fairly administered' educational selection procedures not only produces an ideological effect upon its failures but also upon its successes. The educational system's successes which stay in the system as teachers have a propensity to become 'oblates'. That is, they now have an objective interest in the maintenance of the meritocratic ideology of the system precisely because it has validated *them*.

. . . the agents themselves have a psychological stake in becoming party to the mystification of which they are the victims _ according to a very common mechanism which persuades people (no doubt all the more so the less privileged they are) to work at *being satisfied* with what they have and what they are, to love their fate, however mediocre it may be (Bourdieu, 1988, p.167).

The peasant children of the Barbiana School sum up this argument in a section of their book entitled 'Selection Has Reached Its Goal':

Daddy's boys constitute 86.5 per cent of the university student body; labourer' sons, 13.5 per cent. Of those who get a degree, 91.9 per cent are young gentlemen and 8.1 per cent are from working class families.

If the poor would band together at the university, they could make a significant mark. But, no. Instead, they are received like brothers by the rich and soon are rewarded with all their defects.

The final outcome: 100 per cent daddy's boys' (1970, p.65)

The system's new recruits from the working class operate the same procedures which over selected their class for failure. But yet they do not see this as in any sense a 'betrayal', precisely because they objectively misrecognise just what it is they are doing. They have accepted not only the meritocratic ideology of the system but also its alleged neutrality and autonomy. That is, they are as Bourdieu calls them 'mystified mystifiers'.

The agents entrusted with the operations of classification can fulfill their function of social classification only because this is performed *in the guise* of an operation of academic classification, that is, through a specifically academic taxonomy. They successfully perform what they (objectively) have to do only

because they *believe* that they are doing something different from what they are actually doing; because they are actually doing something different from what they believe they are doing; and because they *believe* in what they *believe* they are doing. As mystified mystifiers, they are the *first victims* of the operations which they perform'. (Bourdieu, 1988, p.207).

It should be emphasised that while Bourdieu and Passeron's thesis fairly exclusively deals with the educational reproduction process in terms of class, it is also quite applicable to gender and most other aspects of social inequality. Their points, for example, about shifting career choices according to class background in relation to the value of certain credentials (i.e. there was a shift away from social science and the arts into law and medicine by upper class students just as more working class students were entering higher education) can also be seen with respect to gender and career choice i.e. the feminisation of certain disciplines.

Structural Mystification: the Absence of Knowledge and Ideological Belief

The above section merely outlines very briefly what is a very sophisticated analysis. It is an analysis which is very much complimentary to structural mystification theory. However, a slightly different framing of the same idea, alongside a different emphasis, gives structural mystification its comparative distinctiveness with Bourdieu's analyses. First, we can say that one cannot wholly separate knowledge content from the process of acquiring it. This is equivalent to asserting that in reality we cannot have contentless form

or formless content. Bourdieu would no doubt be aware of this. However, in terms of this metaphor, all his emphasis is put upon 'form' rather than content. Indeed, he is rather scathing in his sarcasm with respect to the content of sociology syllabi for example.

Few analyses of student movements written by sociologists and sociology teachers fail to attribute the 'revolutionary' dispositions of sociology students to the beneficent or malignant power of sociology teaching. (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1977, p.105)

The reason for this over estimation is obvious enough; it is the '...vested interest in believing and propagating belief in the omnipotence of ideas, as *the* explanatory principle par excellence' (ibid.). That intellectuals and teachers do have such a vested interest, I would not wish to dispute, but where our argument parts company with Bourdieu's is to do with emphasis. Content *is* important. Knowledge production is integrally connected to knowledge dissemination. Thus, the educational system's selection processes are crucially interrelated to the disjuncture between the knowledge actually produced, and the knowledge that potentially could have been produced, but wasn't and won't be. Once again the peasant children of Barbiana provide us with an excellent starting point to begin to understand this point.

You wanted him to repeat the geography of Italy for another year. He could have left school without ever having heard of the rest of the world. You would have done him great harm. Even if he only wants to read the newspaper' (1970, p.23).

The argument here is that such failures of the system have an objective interest in 'the rest of the world' and much of the knowledge which they are selected out from ever receiving. There is a sort of knowledge of the relations between Capital and Labour that is best learned through the experience of the labourer. But there is ample room for much objective misrecognition here as well. A knowledge of 'the rest of the world' as is imparted formally within the education system, in great depth and breadth to some, is vital to the labourer understanding the workings of international capitalism and his or her place within it. Acquisition of such knowledge outside of the system is not impossible but it is difficult. However, our point does not merely concern the value of acquiring already produced knowledges. Rather, it is that knowledge is required to produce more knowledge, and that the objective interests of those in possession of such a necessary prerequisite will lead them to produce different knowledges and different sorts of knowledge. Those with the greatest personal stake in changing the system, those who the system crushes, are those with greatest objective interests in producing knowledge of the power relations of the system. But most of them never acquire the necessary knowledge prerequisites to make such contributions. Those who do so have a far less personal stake in system change. Ergo, the knowledges that are actually produced are different from those that might have been. The knowledges that are going to be produced are different from those that could be. Power relations are guiding the process of determining which potentialities will be realised and which not.