

Ideological Domination: Deconstructing the Paradox of the American Dream and the Working Class Promise

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Abstract: The “American Dream” and “Working Class Promise” ideologies are ubiquitously dispersed in American society. These ideologies posit values of equality and opportunity. In this paper, I deconstruct these two ideologies in order to examine the effects these ideologies have on income inequality, social inequality, and social immobility. I argue these ideologies create a paradox in society whereby the more these ideologies are believed, the more the ideologies exacerbate income inequality, social inequality, and social immobility.

INTRODUCTION

The American Dream and the Working Class Promise are ubiquitous ideologies in American culture.¹ I argue these ideologies are social constructs that contribute to the discrimination against and, as a necessary consequence, the domination of the working class. In order to make this argument, I deconstruct the two ideologies, utilizing the work of communication professor Kristen Lucas, psychologists Shannon K. McCoy and Brenda Major, sociologist Pierre Bourdieu, and social philosopher Louis Althusser. Ultimately, I argue the ideologies create a paradox in society where, by believing in the ideologies, society reproduces gross income inequality, social inequality, and social immobility. Therefore, I argue the American Dream and the Working Class Promise ideologies ought to be rejected in order to promote the very values these ideologies posit.

¹ I am using the term “American” purely for fluidity and esthetics to refer to residents of the United States.



DEFINING KEY CONCEPTS

Ideology is a set of overarching, unified assertions about the way social conditions are or ought to be. Discrimination, as philosopher Andrew Altman defines it, is constituted by “acts, practices or policies” that “a) wrongfully impose a relative disadvantage or deprivation on persons based on their membership in some salient social group, and b) the wrongfulness rests (in part) on the fact that the imposition of the disadvantage is on account of the group membership of the victims.”² Discrimination can be assigning values and/or distinctions to one group that places the group members at a disadvantage through exclusions. Stereotyping is the actual process of assigning values and/or distinctions to a group. Domination is treating others as if they are inferior to oneself in such a way that serves to manipulate or influence their actions.

LUCAS, THE WORKING CLASS PROMISE, AND THE AMERICAN DREAM

The ideologies in question are the American Dream (hereafter AD) and the Working Class Promise (hereafter WCP). Lucas quotes American businessman James T. Adams’s definition of the AD as “that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man [sic], with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement.”³ The quotation continues that the AD is “a dream of a social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstance of birth or position.”⁴ Lucas points out how Adams separates the AD into both “a materialistic myth” and “the moralistic myth.”⁵ The AD is both the dream of becoming monetarily successful and also the dream of equality of opportunity.

² Andrew Altman, *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, s.v. “discrimination,” (Spring 2011): accessed October 10, 2012, <http://plato.stanford.edu/cgi-bin/encyclopedia/archinfo.cgi?entry=discrimination>.

³ Kristen Lucas, “The Working Class Promise: A Communicative Account of Mobility-Based Ambivalences,” *Communication Monographs* 78, no. 3 (2011): 347-369, accessed October 12, 2012.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 350.

⁵ *Ibid.*

After interviewing sixty-two working class individuals, Lucas describes the “WCP” as “four core values: (a) work ethic, (b) provider orientation, (c) the dignity of all work and workers, and (d) humility.”⁶ Lucas asserts that the “social construction of [the] working class is accomplished through communicating” these values, and these values give the working class “much pride and [are those] around which they rally their identities.”⁷ The working class passes down values, shapes their identities, and makes social value judgments based on the WCP.

As per Lucas, the working class criticizes the privileged class because the privileged value the opposite of the WCP.⁸ In the hierarchy of values, the working class place themselves at the top of the hierarchy with the privileged at the bottom.⁹ According to the AD, the working class faces a paradoxical problem when trying to move up in society because, in doing so, they are moving down according to the WCP.¹⁰

LUCAS’S WCP, THE AD, AND MCCOY AND MAJOR’S EVIDENCE REGARDING POSITIVE STEREOTYPING AND SELF DISCRIMINATION

McCoy and Major’s research demonstrates how the AD and WCP ideologies as described by Lucas psychologically shape members of society. McCoy and Major found when women were asked to unscramble sentences that gave affirmations such as, “Effort leads to prosperity,” and were then asked to read an article on sexism, the women practiced more “self-stereotyping” behaviors by rating themselves higher in factors such as “warmth” and lower in factors such as “competence.”¹¹ When the women read studies providing evidence of discrimination against women at universities, they were “more likely to justify [the] disadvantage by minimizing sexism, by endorsing stereotypes that justify women’s subordinate status relative to men and by self-stereotyping” when compared to women who

⁶ Ibid., 353.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., 359.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Shannon K. McCoy and Brenda Major, “Priming Meritocracy and the Psychological Justification of Inequality,” *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology* 43 (2007): 341-351, accessed October 19, 2012, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0022103106000904>.



were not given the sentence unscramble task.¹² According to McCoy and Major, the practice of assigning positive values to a lower status group, or positive stereotyping, “reinforces the belief” that some lower status groups “are best suited for subordinate roles and justifies the over representation of” members of high status groups in high status positions.¹³ Such a practice “allows low status group members to feel good about their group identity while simultaneously keeping them from attempting to advance in the status hierarchy.”¹⁴

McCoy and Major’s Evidence and Bourdieu’s Habitus

McCoy and Major’s research combines positive stereotyping with the ideology of the AD to show how positive, negative, and self-imposed stereotyping leads to discrimination, which then leads to domination. They found members of lower status groups use positive stereotyping to classify and structure their identities socially based on the objectively structured social construct of the AD, which in turn then structures society.¹⁵ The interplay between the structured and structuring forces of society is Bourdieu’s “habitus.” Bourdieu states, the “habitus is not only a structuring structure, which organizes practices and the perception of practices, but also a structured structure, the principle of division into logical classes which organizes the perception of the social world is itself the product of internalization of the division into social classes.”¹⁶ Bourdieu continues, “[t]his means that inevitably inscribed within the dispositions of the habitus is the whole structure of the system of conditions, as it presents itself in the experience of a life-condition occupying a particular position within that structure.”¹⁷ Habitus is both a social objective structure of institutional judgments and practices that classifies people within society and also an individual subjective internalization of the classifications of society and one’s own place within society. Society is at once both an independently

¹² Ibid., 349.

¹³ Ibid., 347.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ “Objective” is taken to mean a bird’s eye, unbiased, independent, generalized perception.

¹⁶ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1998), 170.

¹⁷ Ibid., 172.

structured entity of classifications and also an entity being structured by individual perceptions and judgments of the classifications.

McCoy and Major’s research demonstrates how lower status individuals act in “system-justifying” ways by assigning characteristics to themselves that society would assign to them or by justifying their lower status positions as being what they deserve.¹⁸ Bourdieu states “through the differentiated and differentiating conditionings associated with the different conditions of existence, through the exclusions and inclusions . . . which govern the social structure and the structuring force” of society, “social divisions become principles of division, organizing the image of the social world.”¹⁹ These social divisions act as “objective limits” on individuals and give individuals a “sense of one’s place’ which leads one to exclude oneself from the goods, persons, places and so forth from which one is excluded.”²⁰ Therefore, the dominated “tend to attribute to themselves what the distribution attributes to them, refusing what they are refused” by “adjusting their expectations to their chances, defining themselves as the established order defines them, reproducing in their verdict on themselves the verdict the economy pronounces on them, in a word, condemning themselves to what is in any case their lot.”²¹

BOURDIEU’S HABITUS AND ALTHUSSER’S WORK ON IDEOLOGY

Bourdieu argues differences in each status group’s conditions of existence create exclusions between individuals in different status groups, which inculcates into individuals their place in society. When individuals recognize their socially defined place in society, they will act according to the definition assigned for that place. Althusser offers insight into how ideology can reproduce actions in accordance with the ideology when the individuals committing the actions believe they freely and consciously believe in the ideology. As per Althusser, ideology is the social construct that teaches individuals their role and place in society. Althusser asserts that a dominant ideology is dispersed through society by way of media, politics, education, family, and other

¹⁸ McCoy and Major, “Priming Meritocracy,” 346.

¹⁹ Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 471.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*



social institutions.²² Ideology is a “necessarily imaginary distortion” of individuals’ relations to each other in society and social institutions.²³ Althusser states, “What is represented in ideology is therefore not the system of the real relations which govern the existence of individuals, but the imaginary relation of those individuals to the real relations in which they live.”²⁴

Ideology distorts the relationship between individuals within society. Ideology shows individuals where they fit into society, but it distorts the relationship by making individuals think their place and role in society is natural and chosen. An individual who believes he has “in all consciousness freely chosen” to believe in an ideology will act, voluntarily and with conviction, in certain ways in accordance with the ideology.²⁵

ALTHUSSER AND MCCOY AND MAJOR’S EVIDENCE REGARDING IDEOLOGY

Althusser argues ideology is dispersed through society via many venues. He argues belief in an ideology will cause individuals of lower status groups to justify and act in accordance with their roles as promulgated by the ideology. McCoy and Major’s research demonstrates how giving individuals “subtle cues” in favor of an ideology can “influence thoughts and behaviors.”²⁶ McCoy and Major discovered that if individuals are given a simple sentence unscramble task, with statements affirming the AD ideology, then the individuals are more likely to have “increased personal endorsement of meritocratic beliefs” when compared to those who were not given the task.²⁷ When both women and men were primed with statements affirming the AD, then placed in a situation where they were rejected for a job, women and men behaved in “system-justifying” ways.²⁸ Women, who are

²² Louis Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses: Notes Toward an Investigation,” in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays*, trans. Ben Brewster (Monthly Review Press: 1971).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ McCoy and Major, “Priming Meritocracy,” 343.

²⁷ Ibid., 344.

²⁸ Ibid., 346.

traditionally seen as having a lower status, justified the rejection by the male interviewer as being their own fault. Men, who are traditionally seen as having a higher status, claimed the rejection by the female interviewer was discrimination.²⁹

COMBINING THE RESEARCH AND THE IDEOLOGIES: AN OUTLINE OF DOMINATION

The AD and WCP ideologies are being dispersed in America through media, politicians, families, schools, and certain religions. Althusser, McCoy, and Major's arguments demonstrate how such ideologies, as subtle cues, can reinforce the belief in the ideologies, and when individuals believe in the ideologies, they will justify their positions in society based on, and act in accordance with, the ideologies.

Lucas, McCoy, and Major's arguments demonstrate how the working class has embraced a value system opposed to the privileged class, placing themselves at the moral end of the value system and the privileged at the immoral end. The admirable values allow the working class to feel good about themselves while at the same time keeping them from advancing by positively justifying their place in the social hierarchy.

In line with Bourdieu, the WCP creates conditions for the exclusion of the working class. Individuals in the working class structure their perceptions of society, thus their place in society, based on these values but are also structured by these values. The values serve as distinctions between the working class and the privileged which gives the working class a sense of their place in American society. Once the identities of working class individuals are determined and their place in society is defined, each individual's values reflect in their mannerisms and tastes, which then act as a filter, either through self-exclusion or exclusion by the privileged, keeping the working class in their place.

Bourdieu argues that people perpetuate inequalities in society by structuring themselves based on structured class distinctions. The AD is structuring in that individuals' identities and relation to society are structured based on their perceptions of how they fit into the ideology, which then structures society. It is structured in that it objectively creates a hierarchy in society by classifying people. Such internalized external classifications contribute to the discrimination,

²⁹ Ibid.



and thus the domination, of the working class.

The ideology of the WCP, in line with Althusser, reproduces working class roles in American society. The four core values passed down to working class children act as rules, teaching them not only their place in society but how to fulfill their predetermined roles in the hierarchy. Employers love hardworking, humble employees who do not step outside of their roles and who find dignity in their lower level, lower pay jobs. Companies love consumers with a sense of provider orientation, who will spend more and go into debt in order to be good providers for their families.

The AD, as McCoy and Major note, implies society has given the working class opportunities to succeed but they failed to work hard enough.³⁰ For members of the privileged class, the AD implies they deserve success based on their own merit.³¹ In line with Althusser, social institutions, by promulgating the AD, are teaching individuals their failings or successes are not the work of society, but of their own. The AD reproduces domination because individuals adopting the ideology act in ways to support the ideology. Belief in the AD disguises and transforms the inequalities in the conditions of existence, using stereotyping and discrimination, into natural consequences of personal failing or success.

SELF-DEFEATING IDEOLOGIES, INCOME INEQUALITY, SOCIAL INEQUALITY, AND SOCIAL IMMOBILITY

Numerous scholars and professionals, including economics professor Joseph Stiglitz, are showing how gross inequality and immobility are facts of American life.³² Taken together, Lucas, Bourdieu, Althusser, McCoy, and Major have shown how domination arises when inequality and immobility are legitimized via ideology. The AD and WCP ideologies together in combination with income inequality, social inequality, and social immobility create the social conditions for gross inequality and immobility to thrive by reinforcing domination. The problem is these ideologies necessarily exist within

³⁰ Ibid., 341.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Joseph Stiglitz, "The 'American Dream' is Now a Myth," *Business Insider*, accessed October 10, 2012, <http://www.businessinsider.com/the-american-dream-is-now-a-myth-2012-6>.

a hierarchal system and are immensely effective at encouraging social-psychological acquiescence to this hierarchy, which allows for conditions of inequality and immobility to exist and thrive.

Together the AD and WCP communicate that individuals, through their own efforts, ought to be able to advance their socio-economic standing and all individuals ought to be respected as ends in themselves, despite their place in the hierarchy. The discrimination and domination that arises from the belief in these ideologies in a society where gross inequality and immobility are facts of life directly conflicts with these assertions. The ideologies themselves are self-defeating in a society where inequality and immobility exist and thus ought to be rejected in order to promote the very values the ideologies seek to advance.

Put another way, these ideologies necessarily exist within and reproduce a socio-economic hierarchy. Lucas, Bourdieu, Althusser, McCoy, and Major provide evidence that demonstrates these ideologies reproduce a hierarchy of inequality and immobility. Where the hierarchy of inequality and immobility exists, these ideologies necessarily reproduce inequality and immobility. Where inequality and immobility do not exist, these ideologies provide fertile ground for inequality and immobility to take root and grow. In a hierarchy of inequality and immobility, such as exists in America, these ideologies dominate people by justifying the inequality and immobility. The paradox is that by believing in these ideologies, individuals are manipulated into reproducing the inequality and immobility they ideologically are against. The more these ideologies are believed, the less likely these ideologies are going to be realized. Therefore, even if one were to assume the climbable hierarchy implied by these ideologies is acceptable, achievable, and sustainable, these ideologies must be rejected in order to abolish inequality and immobility and thus to promote the valued hierarchy the ideologies posit.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

Gross income inequality, social inequality, and social immobility are facts of American life. Inequality of conditions of existence leads to members of different status groups assigning values and/or distinctions to themselves and other groups based on those conditions of existence. The WCP and the AD are socially constructed ideologies that assign values and/or distinctions to people based on conditions of existence. Discrimination arises when the values and/



or distinctions assigned create exclusions resulting in disadvantages, such as inequality and immobility, as well as when these disadvantages create further exclusions. Discrimination treats some people as inferior to others, and social constructs are dominating when they treat people as inferior, in a way that serves to manipulate or influence their actions. The WCP and AD are social constructs that have created exclusions resulting in disadvantages and which treat people as inferior, in a way that serves to manipulate and influence their actions. Therefore, the WCP and AD are socially constructed ideologies that discriminate against and dominate people. Such discrimination and domination allows inequality and immobility to thrive and directly conflicts with the very values the AD and the WCP posit. Therefore, Americans ought to reject the AD and WCP ideologies. By delegitimizing income inequality, social inequality, and social immobility, society can move toward creating an America closer to what America ought to be.³³

³³ I would like to thank Shannon Atkinson, Alexander Izrailevsky, David R. Keller, Michael Minch, and the editors of this journal for their immensely helpful and encouraging comments and criticisms on various drafts of this paper.