

## **UC Santa Barbara**

### **Other Recent Work**

#### **Title**

Explaining Consensual Domination: Moving Beyond the Concept of Hegemony

#### **Permalink**

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0rj9f4dm>

#### **Author**

Kollmeyer, Christopher J.

#### **Publication Date**

2005-06-07

Peer reviewed

**EXPLAINING CONSENSUAL DOMINATION:  
MOVING BEYOND THE CONCEPT OF HEGEMONY**

(Word count, including references and notes, is 8,262.)

Written by  
Christopher J. Kollmeyer

Forthcoming in  
*Beyond Resistance: The Future of Freedom* (Nova Science Publishers, 2005)

Global and International Studies  
University of California, Santa Barbara  
Santa Barbara, CA, 93106, USA  
Email: kollmeyer@global.ucsb.edu  
Fax: (805) 893-8003  
Tel: (805) 893-7899

# EXPLAINING CONSENSUAL DOMINATION: MOVING BEYOND THE CONCEPT OF HEGEMONY

By Christopher J. Kollmeyer

“You can fool some of the people all of the time, and those are the ones you have to concentrate on.” —George W. Bush, Gridiron Club Dinner, Washington, D.C., March 31, 2001

## INTRODUCTION

Why do large numbers of people willingly accept, and in some cases even actively promote, political projects that clearly place them in disadvantaged social positions? Consider the following example from American society. A peculiar political movement is sweeping across the heart land of America, the writer Thomas Frank (2004) tells us, one in which the lower strata are enthusiastically mobilizing to advance a political agenda that clearly favors the rich. For example, in the 2000 presidential election, the pro-business Republican candidate, George W. Bush, won 75 percent of the vote in the poorest county in the United States—Loup County, Nebraska, which has an average per capita income of less than \$7,000 per year.<sup>1</sup> And four years later, after presiding over one of the most pro-business administrations in U.S. history, Bush won here by an even larger margin, taking 81 percent of the votes.<sup>2</sup> Yet, as Frank explains, these are not isolated incidents. All across the Great Plains, working class people are championing an exceedingly conservative political movement, one that has already rolled back workplace regulations, reduced corporate taxes, repealed the estate tax, and nearly banished labor unions altogether. While cultural issues have been the primary motivation for working-class conservatives, the movement’s right-wing leaders rarely address these issues once they

---

<sup>1</sup> The *Grand Island Independent* (2003), a newspaper published in Nebraska, reports that the three poorest counties in the United States are all in Nebraska.

<sup>2</sup> For a county by county breakdown of the 2004 presidential election in Nebraska, see the website of the Nebraska Secretary of State (2004).

have been elected. Instead, they steadfastly pursue a public policy agenda that further enriches Corporate America and its stockholders. Frank describes this political movement as “the French Revolution in reverse,” with the lower strata rising up to do “incalculable, historic harm” to their own interests. It has been, he writes further, “a political trap so devastating to the interests of Middle America that even the most diabolical of string-pullers would have had trouble dreaming it up.”

How could so many people actively pursue a political agenda that clearly betrays their own interests? How can we account for this seemingly illogical behavior? The standard answer to such questions, especially within the field of resistance studies, centers on the now-classic concept of “hegemony.” According to this idea, more than any other form of political power, elites maintain their privileged socioeconomic positions by securing an omnipresent ideological sway over allied and subordinate social classes. Scholars supporting this explanation generally assert that elites, through their disproportionate control over civil society, can effectively promote political ideas, moral values, and cultural norms that lend ideological support for the prevailing social order. Once achieved, ideological hegemony can become a powerful political tool, because it ultimately leads ordinary people to adopt worldviews and political opinions that are consistent with the interests of elites. This type of political power, moreover, can help create what I call “consensual domination”—any form of rule in which the lower strata of society either willingly accept or actively pursue political projects that directly undermine their own interests. Relative to the subject matter of this book, this situation is paradoxical because it inverts our basic understanding of resistance. Instead of struggling against social injustice and economic inequality, the lower strata may in extreme cases wind up doing the exact opposite—enthusiastically participating in political movements that intensify their subordination.

Contrary to arguments advanced by many resistance studies scholars, it seems implausible to me that consensual domination could rest on the ideological hegemony of elites alone. Motivated by this suspicion, I seek to construct a more comprehensive theoretical explanation for this phenomenon, one that more precisely specifies those aspects of our social structure that make some subordinated people see “up as down,” and “down as up,” in matters of political life. In general, I argue that some individuals from subordinate social groups may be confused about how best to advance their interests, but that their confusion is not derived solely from a distorted political consciousness imposed upon them by elites. Instead, it arises from three intertwined social forces—ideological hegemony, mass ignorance, and collective misunderstanding—that together can lead otherwise clear-thinking and rational people to support political movements that undermine their well-being.

### **WHAT ARE THE BASIC DIMENSIONS OF POWER?**

Before proceeding with my primary argument, it is important to define the concept of *power* clearly. While apparently simple and mundane to outside observers, the concept of power takes on multifaceted and complex meanings in the social sciences. As the British political scientist W.B. Gallie (1956) pointed out several decades ago, power is an “essentially contested concept,” meaning that it has numerous and variegated definitions, some of which even conflict with one another. For example, within the field of resistance studies, several definitions of power can be usefully invoked. In a now-famous statement on the subject, the German sociologist Max Weber defined power as “the chance of a man or number of men to realize their own will in a communal action even against the resistance of others who are participating in the act” ([1920] 1958:180). Defined in this way, power represents the probability of overcoming

direct opposition to one's desires or to the collective desires of one's social group. It emphasizes, furthermore, that people have clearly defined goals and interests, and that these goals and interests, at times, can directly conflict with those of others.

As one might suspect, the Marxist tradition in the social sciences conceptualizes power differently. For example, according to the Greek social theorist Nicholas Poulantzas (1973:104), the Marxist tradition defines power as "the capacity of a social class to realize its objective interests." Albeit short and seemingly simple, this definition departs from the Weberian tradition in at least two important ways. First, it clearly links the notion of power to disputes over economic issues, especially those disputes over the distribution of wealth and resources among different social classes. Second, it suggests that a meaningful distinction can exist between the *subjective* interests of the individual and the *objective* interests of his or her social class. If we want to understand consensual domination, this latter aspect of the Marxist conceptualization of power is vital, because it leaves open the possibility that some individuals may, either consciously or unwittingly, work against the interests of their social class.

By combining aspects of several perspectives, the British sociologist Steven Lukes (1974) has arguably developed the most theoretically sophisticated account of power. Overall, he posits that power manifests in three distinct forms, each of which operates at a different level of contestation. What he describes as *one-dimensional power* represents a group's capacity to force another group into actions the latter wish to avoid. Consistent with Weber's definition, this dimension of power operates when two or more social groups, each with well-defined interests and political objectives, come into conflict with one another. Under such a situation, one-dimensional power becomes the medium used to determine whose interests will prevail. For

example, by obtaining higher wages and fringe benefits for its members at the bargaining table, a labor union exerts one-dimensional power over a corporation.

The other two levels of power are more insidious. What Lukes describes as *two-dimensional power* represents the ability of one group to structure a given power struggle in ways that ultimately reinforce its advantages. When exercised effectively, this form of power operates by strategically narrowing the manner in which adversarial groups seek to advance their interests. For example, in the early days of industrial capitalism, workers confronted the power of capitalists in numerous ways, including organizing into radical political organizations that sought to overthrow capitalism. However, over the late-19<sup>th</sup> century and early-20<sup>th</sup> century, corporate interests successfully channeled these revolutionary social movements into the formal institutions of electoral politics and collective bargaining. This, in turn, served to redirect the political ambitions of workers, moving them away from radical alternatives to capitalism, and toward compromise solutions that ultimately helped corporations cement their control over the economy. Now, despite experiencing regular set-backs in elections and at the bargaining table, corporations continuously benefit from having workers and the public accept the legitimacy and desirability of an economy organized around the pursuit of private profits.

Finally, what Lukes calls *three-dimensional power* is the most effective form of power because it quells conflict before it even arises. Instead of antagonism between competing social groups, three-dimensional power serves to align the values, desires, and goals of allied or subordinate social groups with those of the dominant social class, something that helps create a situation in which the former willingly embrace a normative social order that ultimately serves the interests of the latter. For example, in contemporary American society, the upper-middle class typically views the lifelong pursuit of career achievements as a noble aspiration. To the

degree that members of this social class organize their lives around this cultural value, corporations benefit from having deeply committed and highly motivated employees, ones who will make substantial personal sacrifices to advance their careers along with the goals of their employers. This outcome, of course, not only helps corporations achieve their goals of profit-maximization, but it also significantly diminishes the potential for conflicts around numerous workplace issues. With little or no resistance, these employees will usually work large amounts of unpaid overtime, work during holidays and important personal celebrations, accept job transfers that uproot their families, or even avoid personal relationship altogether as a means of freeing more time and energy for work.

#### **TOWARD A FULLER ACCOUNT OF CONSENSUAL DOMINATION**

Among other factors, the phenomenon of consensual domination requires that large numbers of people, on a consistent and ongoing basis, fail to draw basic links between their subordinate social positions and the manner in which their society is organized. The relevant question, then, becomes what causes this to happen over and over again for many people? The following section attempts to answer this question by advancing a three-prong explanation for consensual domination. Figure 1, shown below, anticipates my primary argument by depicting what I hypothesize to be the social foundations of consensual domination.

[Insert Figure 1 about here.]



### ***Ideological Leadership***

To fully understand the role ideology plays in shaping the political consciousness of society's subordinate social groups, it helps to begin with several ideas developed by the German political philosopher Karl Marx. Writing during the early phases of industrial capitalism, Marx developed a wide-ranging theory of human history, in which he purported that the organization of the economy plays the primary role in determining many aspects of social life. This theory, more specifically, held that all societies in human history have featured a dominant social class, which controls and enjoys most of society's wealth, and one or more subordinate social classes, which physically produce that wealth. While not central to his argument, Marx also asserted that this exploitative economic arrangement has always been supported by what he called a "superstructure," a term that refers to those social, political, legal, and moral institutions that assist the economy in some important way (see Marx [1862] 1977:389). Among other functions, the superstructure purportedly helps produce a set of widely held moral and political values that confer legitimacy upon the prevailing economic order. Expressing this argument, for example, Marx wrote in the *Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* that:

Upon the different forms of property, upon the social conditions of existence, rises an entire superstructure of distinct and peculiarly formed sentiments, illusions, modes of thought, and world views. (Marx [1849] 1977:317)

Importantly, since the dominant social class disproportionately control the ideas that constitute society's prevailing ideology, the superstructure general supports their vested interests. On this subject, Marx wrote with his colleague Friedrich Engels in *The German Ideology* that

The class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its *intellectual* force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, consequently, also controls the means of mental production, so that the ideas of those who lack the means of mental production are on the whole subject to it. The ruling ideas are nothing more than the ideal expression of the dominant material relations. (Marx and Engels [1845] 1998:67)

Based on this analysis, the immediate goal of Marxism, at least as a political project, has always been to heighten the political consciousness of the working class. In Marxist terms, this entails transforming the working class from a *class-in-itself* into a *class-for-itself*—meaning that, in the latter state, the working class develops a collective awareness of itself as a distinct social class, one that has political interests that substantially deviate from those of the dominant social class. After Marx’s death, Engels began using the term “false consciousness” to describe a lack of such awareness within certain segments of the working class (see Eagleton 1991:89). But, for the most part, Marx and Engels paid only secondary attention to the role ideology played in the success of capitalism, because they generally assumed, albeit incorrectly, that the working class would eventually develop a revolutionary political consciousness forged through their daily confrontations with the exploitative nature of early industrial capitalism.

Drawing on these Marxist ideas, the Italian political theorist Antonio Gramsci (2000) advanced his now-famous argument that ideological power represents the primary force by which elites maintain their domination. Jailed for dissent in the 1920s by the fascist regime of Benito Mussolini, Gramsci sought to understand why large numbers of working class people in Europe and North America embraced capitalism, even though it placed them in a subordinate

social position, and even though other economic systems, such as social democracy and communism, were viable alternatives during this time. The question was important for many reasons—one being that it shed light on how fascist parties in Europe simultaneously garnered sizeable support from the working and lower-middle class, while pursuing a political agenda that clearly favored industrialists and other wealthy members of society.<sup>3</sup> The answer to question, Gramsci concluded, is that elites within capitalist societies maintained their privileged socioeconomic position through “hegemony,” which he generally defined as an ideological, cultural, and moral leadership over allied and subordinate social classes.

Gramsci’s work represented an important theoretical shift within earlier attempts to explain why many members of the working and lower-middle classes supported pro-capitalist political parties. Unlike classic Marxism, with its emphasis on explicit and direct conflict among antithetical social classes, Gramsci’s theory of hegemony suggests that society’s most important power struggles are largely invisible. This is often the case, he claimed, because the dominant social class often exercises its power indirectly by exerting influence over the ideas, values, and norms promoted across civil society—for example, by influencing the ideological messages espoused by churches, community groups, political parties, the media, schools and universities, trade unions, and innumerable other voluntary associations. Purportedly, as similar messages appear and reappear throughout one’s daily life, a person eventually internalizes a belief system that supports the interests of society’s elites. For most people, this belief system manifest as what Gramsci often called “common sense.” But, far from being politically benign, this type of

---

<sup>3</sup> For an excellent sociological analysis of fascism, see Michael Mann’s (2004) book *Fascists*. In particular, the appendix gives statistical estimates of the occupational backgrounds of fascist party members in five European countries. This data indicate that a majority of fascists came from the lower-middle class, while many others came from the working class.

common sense provides ideological cover for domination, because it often leads ordinary people to view socioeconomic inequality as natural, unavoidable, or even desirable.

When domination is secured in this manner, subordinate social classes cannot confront the source of their domination by seizing “state power” or commandeering “the means of production.” These types of strategies, Gramsci concluded, would be highly ineffective, largely because the state and the factory were not the primary repository of elite power. Instead, the real source of elite’s power, he maintained, resides in their ability to strategically influence the take-it-for-granted ideas that average people have about how society operates and what constitutes a just and moral society. Given this situation, Gramsci concluded, if subordinate social classes want to improve their collective well-being, they must first construct a viable “counter-hegemony,” one that fashions an ideological framework that supports their general political interests.

Ideological hegemony, then, describes a form of domination based on consent rather than coercion, cultural leadership and moral persuasion rather than direct conflict and overt repression. Related to Lukes’ typology of power, it is obvious that Gramsci saw three-dimensional power as being the primary way elites maintain their rule. This is not to say, however, that Gramsci believed that domination can be maintained by ideological hegemony alone. He and his contemporaries clearly argued otherwise. In fact, they often acknowledged that elites must supplement their ideological hegemony with other means of creating compliance with their policies, such as making meaningful concessions to the interests of other social classes or employing physical force, if needed.

The use of ideology as a form of political power, however, has significant limitations. First of all, as the British literary critic Terry Eagleton (1991) points out, the belief systems

associated with any ideology cannot merely manifest as an imposed set of illusions and distortions about the way the world works. To be adopted by most people, an ideology must minimally conform to the everyday practices and experiences of diverse groups of people. If it does not, and subordinate social groups find significant inconsistencies between the hegemonic ideology and their daily lives, they will reject it—an outcome that Eagleton notes will quickly destroy its usefulness as a source of political power. Or, stated differently, this means that hegemonic ideology must be plausible, something that significantly limits the degree to which its message can diverge from lived reality.

Second, contrary to the claims of many cultural Marxists, several British sociologists have convincingly demonstrated that the hegemonic ideology rarely enjoys anything close to universal acceptance within society (Abercrombie and Turner 1978; Mann 1970). Drawing on historical case studies and survey research, they investigated the link between an individual's class standing and his or her likelihood of accepting the hegemonic ideology. They found that, in general, members of the dominant social class almost always accept the hegemonic ideology, but that most members of the lower strata usually reject some crucial aspect of it. Given this situation, one might reasonably suspect that society would eventually become polarized along ideological lines, thereby creating the social basis for a widespread political backlash against elites and their interests. But this usually does not happen, they claim, because the lower strata are rarely unified behind a coherent "counter-hegemony." Instead, their findings indicated that a variety of political beliefs circulate among subordinate social classes, many of which can reasonably be described as conservative or traditional.

The key question, then, becomes what prevents the hegemonic ideology from being universally accepted? The answer to this question, according to these sociologists, rests with the

limited ability of the dominant social class to transmit their ideas, values, and norms down the class hierarchy. In socially stratified societies, since most social interactions occur between people of the same social class (Kelly and Evans 1995), members of subordinate social groups have numerous opportunities to exchange ideas with one another through a range of media and associations that lie well beyond the control of elites. This situation creates ample social space for non-hegemonic ideas to arise and circulate. Based on these arguments, it seems improbable that ideological hegemony creates political power for elites by massively distorting, jumbling, and mystifying social reality for most subordinate people. For this reason, I propose a revised conceptualization of ideological hegemony, one that incorporates the idea that people frequently make important political decisions without having access to complete or accurate information.

Over the last century, several sociologists and public intellectuals have shown that people often lack the rudimentary information they need to make important political choices, and that this recurring situation affects our collective decisions about issues of public concern (Babb 1996; Lippmann 1922; McVeigh 2004; Schwartz 1976). For instance, through a historical analysis of the Farmer's Alliance social movement of the late 1800s, the American sociologist Michael Schwartz (1976) showed that members of this populist social movement—despite facing the same situation, and despite sharing the same goals—often chose to pursue drastically different, and at times conflicting, courses of action. His explanation for this phenomenon, however, was not that some participants in this social movement were irrational, or that they were duped by ideological hegemony, but rather that they were forced to make strategic decisions based on limited or incomplete information. This situation, he held, led otherwise rational and clear-thinking people to draw very different conclusions about the same social problem. Similarly, decades earlier, the American public intellectual and journalist Walter

Lippmann (1922) described this situation as an enduring aspect of modern life. He noted that since “each of us lives and works on a small part of the earth’s surface, and moves in a small circles,” people must compensate for a lack of information by relying on “stereotypes” to make sense of the world beyond their direct experience (p. 53). By stereotypes, Lippmann meant that people necessarily employ some type of heuristic framework to help them interpret complex social processes that cannot be observed directly. But, for Lippmann, the implications of this unavoidable aspect of social life were not benign, because he believed it left most people vulnerable to manipulation by elites.

This line of scholarship yields important insights into debates on hegemony. In the broadest sense, it suggests that all people rely upon some type of ideological framework to interpret their social world, especially when the complexity of a given social process makes it difficult to discern basic cause-and-effect relationships. Viewed from this perspective, ideologies simply help people interpret unobservable aspects of their social world by accounting for missing pieces of information occurring across a complex and lengthy sequences of events. For example, everyone knows that the United States, despite its enormous wealth, has many people living in poverty. But since the genesis of this phenomenon cannot be observed directly, we rely on ideological means to help understand this situation. The important point, however, is that different ideologies suggest very different causes and solutions for this problem. Religious conservatives, for instance, often associate poverty with the supposed indolence and sinfulness of the poor themselves. Based on this assessment, it logically follows that religious conservatives would find it necessary for the poor to undergo a spiritual and moral transformation before society could eliminate poverty. On the contrary, liberals usually associate poverty with an inadequate response by government to certain structural limitations of capitalism, such as its

propensity to create unemployment and socioeconomic inequality. And this assessment, of course, suggests a very different solution, namely that the government should devote more resources to social welfare programs that will help elevate poverty.

To summarize, I maintain that ideological hegemony generates political power for elites not by massively distorting the political consciousness of subordinate social classes, but rather by offering ordinary people plausible explanations for complex social phenomena that direct them toward courses of action favored by elites. Functioning in this way, the hegemonic ideology can lead otherwise rational people to pursue political projects that directly undermine their well-being. For example, working class Republicans in the United States may endorse tax cuts for the rich, not because they want the rich to become wealthier, but because the hegemonic ideology leads them to believe that such policies will stimulate the economy, promote job growth, and eventually increase their wages and fringe benefits. This may or may not occur. But, either way, the important point is that—even though the rich receive immediate and unambiguous benefits from the tax cuts, while most people must cope with fewer government services or the effects of higher government deficits—working class Republicans see this policy as oriented toward the public good. And this gives the policy widespread moral and political legitimacy among this social group.

### ***Mass Ignorance***

In addition to ideological hegemony, the phenomenon of consensual domination requires that many members of society remain ignorant of basic facts about political life, an outcome that I call “mass ignorance.” Several sociologists have noted that modernity, despite resting on an ever-growing foundation of knowledge, actually generates widespread ignorance as an



unintended consequence of its intensification (Fuller 1994; Giddens 1990, chp 3; Luhmann 1998, chp 5; Selinger 2003). This seemingly paradoxical situation arises from modernity's reliance on a complex division of labor. According to the British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1990), our ever advancing division of labor, combined with the use of knowledge as a principal economic input, creates a situation in which "expert systems" become more and more numerous. Experts systems are simply those organizations or occupations that provide economic value more through the application of knowledge than through the provision of unskilled labor. Quite obviously, then, the proliferation of expert systems requires that greater percentages of the population become specialists in some particular area of knowledge. For example, perhaps one of your neighbors is a zoologist, specializing in studying microscopic organisms living at the bottom of the ocean, and perhaps your other neighbor is an automobile mechanic, specializing in repairing automatic transmissions on late-model German automobiles. This social division of labor enables our society to function more efficiently and effectively, as people become highly proficient in one area of knowledge, but it also creates a significant unintended outcome—ignorance. This occurs because people, once they leave their field of expertise, usually have little or no knowledge of other expert systems, even though they may interact with many of them on a regular basis. For example, the zoologist, with a doctorate degree and university faculty position, may seem brilliant in many ways, but when it comes to the transmission on his German automobile, he lacks the most basic understanding of how it operates, even though he uses it regularly. Hence, if it breaks down, he must hire an expert to fix it. In this way, modernity and its advanced division of labor make ignorance relative: under some situations people are experts, but under most other situations they are ignorant.

The level of ignorance afflicting the general population, however, runs much deeper than the unintended consequences of modernity's advanced division of labor. The social science literature contains overwhelming evidence that average Americans—and by extension, average members of other similar societies—often lack basic knowledge about how their social world operates. As the American political scientist Jeffrey Friedman (1998) points out, this phenomenon has been particularly well documented within the realm of political knowledge. The public's overwhelming ignorance of politics, he writes, "is one of the strongest findings that have been produced by any social science—possibly the strongest" (p.397). Examples abound. One survey finds that, one month after the Republican take-over of Congress in 1994, more than 57 percent of the American electorate had never heard of Newt Gingrich or his "Contract with America," despite the fact that this policy platform had been the centerpiece of the election, and despite the fact that Republican leaders had claimed a broad mandate for the proposed policies contained therein (Davidson and Oleszek 1996, chp 3). Another survey finds that, in 1998, only 28% of Americans categorized as "highly informed" based on their knowledge of political facts knew that the country's crime rate was falling, despite the fact that it had been falling for seven consecutive years (Gilens 2001).

The woeful political ignorance of Americans, unfortunately, has remained remarkably stable across the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In an early study of ignorance, the American political scientists Herbert Hyman and Paul Steatsley (1947) analyzed the amount of knowledge Americans had about foreign affairs, a sphere of politics that was particularly germane at that time since the Second World War had just ended. Their survey research asked respondents five simple questions, each of which addressed some basic information about a prominent foreign policy issues. To their surprise, almost one third of the respondents missed all five questions. These

individuals, Hyman and Steatsley concluded, represented “a hard core of chronic know-nothings,” whose ongoing apathy and inattentiveness made them nearly impervious to information flows embedded within political debates and public discourse.

Interestingly, almost 50 years later this research was replicated, and the findings were remarkable consistent. Comparing the original 1946 data with similar data collected by the *Times Mirror Company* in 1994, the American political scientist Stephen Bennett (1996) was able to evaluate changes in the public’s knowledge of foreign affairs between the mid- and late-20<sup>th</sup> century. The results of his statistical analysis show that in both datasets one third of the respondents missed all five questions, and that in both dataset theses “know-nothings” were disproportionately members of subordinate social groups—specifically, racial minorities, women, the less educated, and the poor. These findings strongly suggest that, despite nearly 50 years of expanding access to higher education, neither the size nor the social composition of America’s least informed citizens had changed much, if at all. And perhaps more troubling is the idea that ignorance is not confined to disadvantaged social groups. Instead, Bennett (2003) concludes in subsequent research that average Americans, although better informed than their “know-nothing” counterparts, still possess very little knowledge about politics and public issues, and that only a very small portion of society, usually found within the upper-middle and upper class, can reasonably be described as “knowledgeable.”

How can we explain the persistence of mass ignorance? While thoroughly documenting its magnitude, the social science literature has not advanced a convincing explanation for this social problem. Most often, the tacit explanation is that people are apathetic and unconcerned about public issues (Hyman and Steatsley 1947; Bennett 1988), or that they rationally opt for ignorance because the cost of being informed far exceeds its direct political benefits (Downs

1957, chps. 11-14; Riker and Ordeshook 1968)<sup>4</sup>. While these explanations clearly have some validity, they nonetheless seem to miss a crucial point: given the scale of the problem, especially in a society with an advanced educational system, it seems very likely that mass ignorance stems, at least in part, from unofficial practices and policies put in place by elites. Or, stated in different terms, if mass ignorance threatened the social position of elites, or if it jeopardized the prevailing distribution of power and wealth in some real way, then surely elites would mobilize society's enormous resources to remedy this problem. But this has never happens, precisely because elites do not view mass ignorance as a social problem. Instead, they perceive mass ignorance as being supportive of their interests, largely because it helps conceal the systemic sources of inequality (see Moore and Tumin 1949).

If mass ignorance is a latent political strategy endorsed by elites, then we should be able to find empirical evidence linking it with the specific actions of important institutions within society. To undercover such an association, one should logically begin by examining those institutions that can most effectively disseminate information about politically relevant topics and events to the general public—for example, political parties, government, public schools, private think tanks, special interest groups, and the news media. However, due to the space constraints, the following discussion only examines the news media's role in this process.

Elsewhere, I have demonstrated that the news media's coverage of the economy creates a particular mixture of knowledge and ignorance, which as a whole, tends to support the existing socioeconomic order (Kollmeyer 2004). In particular, I compared the objective performance of

---

<sup>4</sup> The rationale for this latter argument centers on what rational-choice theorists call the “collective action problem.” Since the chances that any one person's vote will be decisive are infinitesimally small, voters have little incentive to spend the time and resources needed to become highly informed about their political choices. Given this situation, people will purportedly choose to remain ignorant. But critics of this perspective are quick to point out its major inconsistency: the logic of the theory suggests that nobody should vote, since the chances of making a difference are infinitesimally small, yet the fact is that huge numbers of people vote in each election.

California's economy during the late-1990s, as measured by statistical indicators, to more subjective accounts of the economy found in the state's largest newspaper—the *Los Angeles Times*. During these years, corporations and investors were enjoying rapidly rising profits and incomes, but the state's general workforce was facing stagnant wages and limited opportunities for full-time employment. Given these economic conditions, one would expect that an objective news media would highlight the many economic problems facing the general workforce, particularly the sizeable group of workers confined to low-wage, part-time, or temporary employment.

This, however, was not the case. After using content analysis to transform the qualitative news stories into quantitative data, basic statistical procedures show that the *Times* ran relatively few articles about economic problems affecting workers, and that when they did, the resulting articles were relatively short, most often placed in the back pages of the newspaper, and rarely discussed alternatives to existing economic policies. These findings, I argue, imply that the media's performance in disseminating knowledge about public issues is class-specific. On the one hand, they effectively draw the public's attention to current events and economic problems threatening the well-being of corporations and investors. But, on the other hand, they provide insufficient scrutiny of economic problems affecting the general workforce. Since social scientists generally agree that the news media teach us not what to think, but rather what to think about, these findings imply that the selective distribution of knowledge and ignorance helps ensure that problems affecting elites receive the greatest attention from policymakers and the general public.

### *Collective Misunderstanding*

In addition to ideological hegemony and mass ignorance, the phenomenon of consensual domination requires the presence of what I call “collective misunderstanding,” an occurrence in which some subordinate people hold patently false ideas about certain public issues. Although it has been given different names, social scientists have been studying collective misunderstanding through the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>5</sup> In the 1920s, the American social psychologist Floyd Allport (1924) documented that members of social groups frequently “share false ideas” about important topics of public concern (see also Field and Schuman 1976; O’Gorman 1986). To fully comprehend this phenomenon, it must be emphasized that unlike ignorance, which means that people lack information and knowledge about a particular topic, collective misunderstanding occurs when people unwittingly hold incorrect beliefs—and sometimes holding them with a great degree of confidence. Thus, the crucial characteristic of collective misunderstanding, at least as articulated by Allport and O’Gorman, is not just that the beliefs are demonstrably false or inaccurate, but also that they are held collectively by a particular social group. This latter characteristic, importantly, implies that collective misunderstanding is a discrete social phenomenon, not simply an aggregate of individual occurrences, and therefore it likely arises from some identifiable aspect of our social structure.

Recently, a group of American political scientists conducted a more thorough investigation into the workings of collective misunderstanding (Kuklinski et al. 2000). In a series of half-hour interviews, these researchers asked 1,160 people from the Chicago area several basic questions about the federal government’s welfare programs, the confidence they

---

<sup>5</sup> What I call collective misunderstanding is often termed “pluralistic ignorance” by other scholars (e.g., Allport 1924; O’Gorman 1986; Shamir and Shamir 1997). I avoid this term, however, because it conflates a *lack* of knowledge with the possession of *incorrect* knowledge. These are clearly two distinct phenomena.

had in each of their answers, and their personal attitudes toward the discussed welfare policies.<sup>6</sup> The resulting data yielded curious findings. Their statistical analysis found that not only were most people significantly misinformed—for example, no questions was answered correctly by more than one-third of the respondents—but astonishingly those holding the least accurate beliefs also tended to express the highest level of confidence in their answers. Moreover, the results indicate that mistaken beliefs are highly correlated with policy preferences and political attitudes. For example, people who grossly overestimated the percentage of the federal budget spent on welfare were, on average, the most likely to oppose the idea of welfare in general. Based on these findings, this team of political scientists warned that

although factual inaccuracy is troublesome, it is the “I know I’m right” syndrome that poses the potentially most formidable problem. It implies not only that most people will resist correcting their factual beliefs, but also that the very people who need to correct them the most will be the least likely to do so. (Kuklinski et al. 2000:799).

The logical next question, then, becomes what institutions or social processes spread inadequate, misleading, or patently false information about topics of public concern? Again, although numerous institutions use manipulative rhetoric and misleading associations to misrepresent factual information to the general public, I concentrate here on the news media’s role in this process. Over the last two decades, by inciting a backlash against the traditional liberal establishment in the United States, conservative news outlets in television and radio have become powerful participants in electoral politics. This outcome has not escaped the attention of

---

<sup>6</sup> The survey, for example, asked multiple-choice questions, such as “what percentage of the US population receives welfare?”—possible answers 3%, 7%\*, 13%, 18%, 25%. Or what percentage of the federal budget goes to welfare?”—possible answers 1%\*, 5%, 8%, 11%, 15%. (The symbol \* denotes the correct answer.)

social scientists, in part because it creates opportunities to test theories about mass ignorance and collective misunderstanding.

One such study, conducted by a group of American political scientists (Hofstetter et al. 1999), analyzed how listening to conservative talk radio (CTR) influences a person's knowledge of politically relevant information. Based on a random telephone survey, they gathered information on the listening habits, political viewpoints, and knowledge of political facts of 882 adults living in the San Diego metropolitan area. Their statistical analysis shows that frequent listeners of CTR were both less ignorant but more misinformed about basic political facts than compared non-listeners of CTR. This outcome seems paradoxical, but the explanation is quite simple. Being interested in politics, frequent listeners to CTR often have above average understandings of non-ideological political facts, such as "which political party currently controls the House of Representative," or "what's the vice president's name?" But when it comes to questions with partisan and ideological overtones—such as "did the federal budget deficit increase or decrease under the Clinton administration," or "do the majority of Americans oppose or support a woman's right to an abortion?"—frequent CTR listeners were significantly more misinformed than average. As one might expect, it seems that the ideological slant of CTR creates collective misunderstanding among its listeners.

Another recent study also finds a strong association between conservative news media and collective misunderstanding. In the months following the American invasion of Iraq, a group of American political scientists gathered information from 8,634 Americans about their knowledge of the Bush administration rationale for the war (Kull et al. 2004). Along with demographic information, they asked the respondents three basic questions: (1) Does the US have clear evidence that Saddam Hussein was working closely with al-Qaeda? (2) Has the US



found weapons of mass destruction in Iraq? And (3) does world public opinion support the US invasion of Iraq? Since the correct answer to each question is incontrovertibly “no,” respondents answering “yes” to any question were coded as “misinformed.” Statistical analysis of the data indicates that 60% of the respondents were misinformed, and that being misinformed was highly correlated with one’s support for the war. In particular, misinformed individuals were 4.3 times more likely to support the war than non-misinformed individuals.

Not surprisingly, the misinformed respondents were disproportionately viewers of conservative news programming. Specifically, 80% of the respondents who identified Fox News as their primary source of information were misinformed about the Iraq war. But only 20% of the respondents who identified PBS as their primary source of information were misinformed. After controlling for a variety of demographic factors—such as education, income level, political party affiliation—Fox News watchers were 2.1 times *more likely* to be misinformed than watchers of all other news programs, while PBS watchers were 3.8 times *less likely* to be misinformed than watchers of all other news programs. One’s sources of news, it seems, really matters.

## **DISCUSSION**

This essay develops new theoretical insights into the problems that subordinate social groups face as they attempt to resist domination. Overall, I maintain that often subordinate people become confused about how best to advance their material interests, but that their confusion is not derived solely from a distorted political consciousness imposed upon them by ruling elites. Rather this confusion stems from the confluence of ideology, ignorance, and misinformation (see figure 1), which in their combined effect can lead otherwise clear-thinking

and rational people to draw demonstrably false interpretations about the underlying causes of their subordination. Furthermore, once such misinterpretations become conventional wisdom, they can lead good-intentioned people to develop and implement political strategies that actually intensify rather than alleviate their plight—meaning that, in more general terms, some subordinate people may at times employ *rational means* to achieve *irrational ends*.

How does this argument fit into the existing literature on domination and resistance? For nearly 20 years, the American political scientist James Scott (1985, 1990), and his paradigm of “everyday forms of resistance,” have towered over the field of resistance studies. Arguing against the Gramscian notion of hegemony, Scott contends that subordinates almost always understand the actual causes and reasons for their inferior place in social hierarchy, but given an asymmetrical distribution of power, they rationally choose to avoid direct confrontations with members of dominant social groups. This creates a situation in which subordinates—when in the presence of those who dominate them—invariably adopt modes of behavior that conform to the hegemonic ideology. But, once beyond the gaze of power, these same people often engage in what Scott calls “everyday forms of resistance,” small but symbolically powerful acts of dissent that range from telling jokes about the boss to sabotaging equipment at work. Based on this assessment, Scott concludes that subordinates often leave behind a “hidden transcript,” which chronicles their anti-hegemonic political consciousness through inconspicuous acts of resistance. Armed with this paradigm, Scott’s followers entered the field, seeking to document the hidden transcript under various social contexts of domination.

Not everyone, however, argues with Scott’s work. The American anthropologist Robert Fletcher, for example, has been a recent and insightful critic of this perspective. Based on a study of a Chilean indigenous community, who were being displaced from their land by a

proposed hydroelectric project, Fletcher (2001) convincingly documents the numerous ways that the Chilean government used ideological power to preempt and overcome opposition to their modernization plan. Besides reasserting the validity of hegemony, this study also highlights the reasons why further research along Scott's paradigm has become more or less meaningless. As Fletcher points out, if Scott is correct and there is no hegemony, then scholars employing his theoretical approach are basically starting and ending their research program with only slight variants of the same answer—namely that subordinates actively resist domination, but that resistance is often disguised to appear as hegemony. Overall, Fletcher writes, this outcome created a situation in which “Scott's framework ensured that questions concerning the origin and causes of resistance would no longer be asked” (p. 13). Thus, at least for Fletcher, the popularity of Scott's paradigm effectively undermined the need for new theoretical perspectives of this subject, and as a result, the field of resistance studies reached an impasse—either we believe that (1) subordinates willingly cooperate with dominant social groups because they perceive their social position as legitimate or inevitable, or (2) they regularly resist domination, albeit in small and seemingly insignificant ways.

The argument presented in this essay, however, offers one possible solution to this impasse. At present, our theoretical understanding of domination and resistance runs along a one-dimensional spectrum, anchored by *hegemony* at one end and the *hidden transcript* at the other. Framing the object of its study in this way, the field of resistance studies has stagnated, as Fletcher points out in the introduction to this volume. But the theoretical argument presented here cuts across this spectrum, and in doing so, it hopefully opens new possibilities for fruitful inquiries into the nature of domination and resistance. The topic deserves nothing less.

## REFERENCES

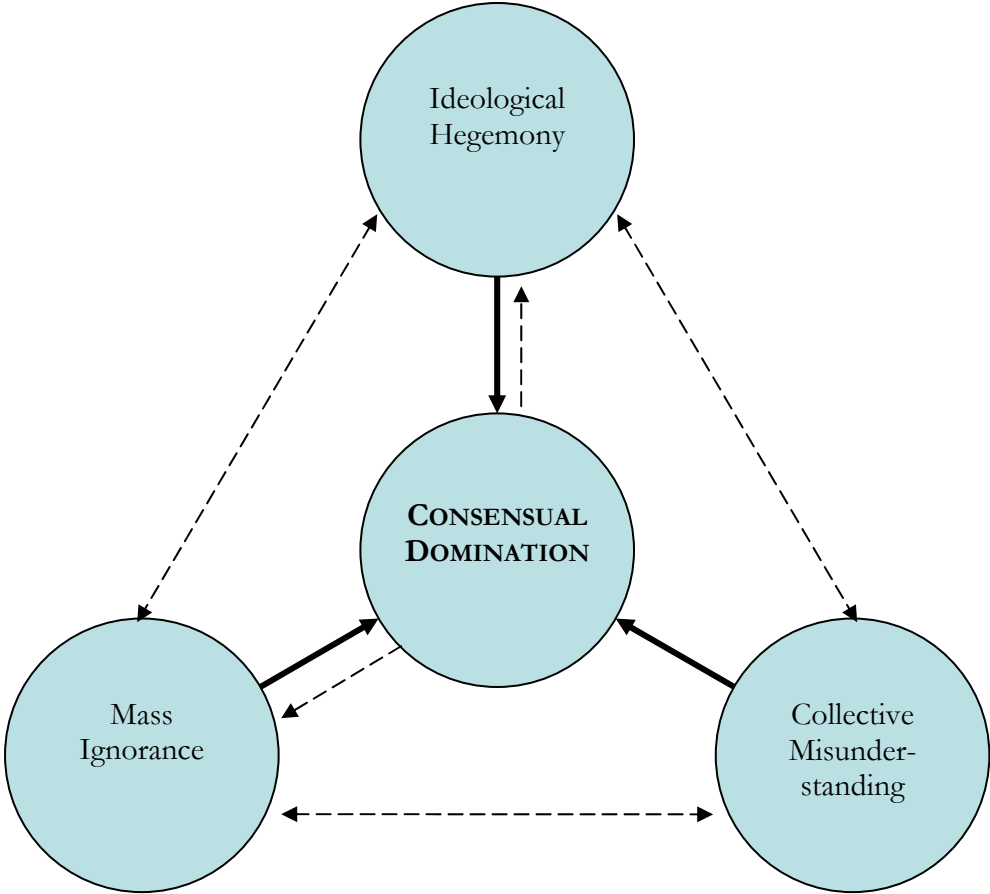
- Abercrombie, Nicholas and Bryan S. Turner. 1978. "The Dominant Ideology Thesis." *British Journal of Sociology* 29(2):149-70.
- Allport, Floyd H. 1924. *Social Psychology*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin.
- Babb, Sarah. 1996. "A True American System of Finance: Frame Resonance in the U.S. Labor Movement, 1866 to 1886." *American Sociological Review* 61(6):1033-1052
- Bennett, Stephen Earl. 1988. "'Know-Nothings' Revisited: The Meaning of Political Ignorance Today." *Social Science Quarterly* 69(2):  
-----, 1996. "Know-Nothings Revisited Again." *Political Behavior* 18(3):219-33.  
-----, 2003. "Is The Public's Ignorance of Politics Trivial?" *Critical Review* 15(3-4):307-337.
- Downs, Anthony. 1957. *An Economic Theory of Democracy*. New York: Harper & Row.
- Davidson, Roger H. and Walter J. Oleszek. 1996. *Congress and Its Members, 5<sup>th</sup> edition*.  
Washington D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press.
- Eagleton, Terry. 1991. *Ideology: An Introduction*. New York: Verso.
- Fields, James M. and Howard Schuman. 1976. "Public Beliefs about Beliefs of the Public." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 40(4):427-48.
- Fletcher, Robert. 2001. "What Are We Fighting For? Rethinking Resistance in a Pewenche Community in Chile." *Journal of Peasant Studies* 28(3):37-66.
- Frank, Thomas. 2004. *What's the Matter with Kansas: How Conservatives Won the Heart of America*. New York: Metropolitan Books
- Friedman, Jeffrey. 1998. "Public Ignorance and Democratic Theory." *Critical Review* 12(4):  
397-411.

- Fuller, Steve. 1994. "The Constitutively Social Character of Expertise." *The International Journal of Expert Systems* 7(1):51-64.
- Gallie, W.B. 1956. "Essentially Contested Concepts." *Aristotelian Society* 56:167-198.
- Giddens, Anthony. 1990. *The Consequences of Modernity*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Gilens, Martin. 2001. "Political Ignorance and Collective Policy Preferences." *American Political Science Review* 95(2):379-96.
- Gramsci, Antonio. 2000. *The Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings, 1916-1935*. New York: New York University Press.
- Grand Island Independent. 2003. "Seven Nebraska Counties among Poorest in Country: Loup, Blaine, Arthur Counties Rank as Three Poorest, Economic Analysis Shows." *Grand Island Independent* June 6<sup>th</sup>, 2003. Retrieved on December 14<sup>th</sup>, 2004 from [http://theindependent.com/stories/060903/new\\_poorcounties09.shtml](http://theindependent.com/stories/060903/new_poorcounties09.shtml)
- Hofstetter, C. Richard, David Barker, James T. Smith, Gina M. Zari, and Thomas A. Ingrassia. 1999. "Information, Misinformation, and Political Talk Radio." *Political Research Quarterly* 52(2):353-69.
- Hyman, Herbert and Paul Sheatsley. 1947. "Some Reasons Why Information Campaigns Fail." *Public Opinion Quarterly* 11:412-23.
- Kelly, Jonathan and M.D.R. Evans. 1995. "Class and Class Conflict in Six Western Nations." *American Sociological Review* 60(2):157-178.
- Kollmeyer, Christopher J. 2004. "Corporate Interests: How the News Media Cover the Economy." *Social Problems* 51(3):432-452.

- Kuklinski, James H., Paul J. Quirk, Jennifer Jerit, David Schwieder, and Robert F. Rich. 2000. "Misinformation and the Currency of Democratic Citizenship." *Journal of Politics* 62(3):790-816.
- Kull, Steven, Clay Ramsay, and Evan Lewis. 2004. "Misperceptions, the Media, and the Iraq War." *Political Science Quarterly* 118(4):569-98.
- Lippmann, Walter. 1922. *Public Opinion*. New York: Free Press.
- Luhmann, Niklas. 1998. *Observations on Modernity*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lukes, Steven. 1974. *Power: A Radical View*. London: Macmillan.
- Mann, Michael. 1970. "The Social Cohesion of Liberal Democracy." *American Sociological Review* 35:423-39.
- , 2004. *Fascists*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Marx, Karl. [1849] 1977. "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonoparte." In *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan. New York: Oxford University Press.
- , [1862] 1977. "Preface to a Critique of Political Economy." In *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, edited by David McLellan. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Marx, Karl and Friedrich Engels. [1845] 1998. *The German Ideology*. Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books.
- McVeigh, Rory. 2004. "Structural Ignorance and Organized Racism in the United States." *Social Forces* 82(3):895-936.
- Moore, Wilbert E. and Melvin M. Tumin. 1949. "Some Social Functions of Ignorance." *American Sociological Review* 14(6):787-95.

- Nebraska Secretary of State. 2004. *Official Results—2004 General Election—President of the United States*. Nebraska Secretary of State. Retrieved on 14 Jan 2005 from <http://www.sos.state.ne.us/elec/canvass/general2004/Pres.htm>
- Poulantzas, Nicholas. 1973. *Political Power and Social Classes*. London: New Left Books.
- O’Gorman, Hubert J. 1986. “The Discovery of Pluralistic Ignorance.” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*. 22:333-47.
- Riker, William H. and Peter Ordeshook. 1968. “A Theory of the Calculus of Voting.” *American Political Science Review* 62(1):25-42.
- Schwartz, Michael. 1976. *Radical Protest and Social Structure: The Southern Farmers’ Alliance and Cotton Tenancy, 1880 – 1890*. New York: Academic Press.
- Scott, James C. 1985. *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- , 1990. *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Selinger, Evan M. 2003. “Expertise and Public Ignorance.” *Critical Review* 15(3-4):375-86.
- Shamir, Jacob and Michael Shamir. 1997. “Pluralistic Ignorance Across Issues and Over Time: Information Cues and Biases.” *Public Opinion Quarterly* 61(2):227-260.
- Weber, Max. [1920] 1958. “Class, Status, Party.” In *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, edited by H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. New York: Oxford University Press.

**Figure 1. Three Social Foundations of Consensual Domination**



**Note:** Solid lines represent primary affects, and dashed lines represent secondary affects.