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INDUSTRIAL CONFLICT AND THE

MASS MEDIA

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This paper is an attempt at an analysis of the signification of industrial conflict in the media during February and March 1973. This period was dominated by industrial action against Phase 2 of the Tory Government's Counter-Inflation policies. The workers involved were mainly public sector employees - the gasmen, hospital workers, train drivers, teachers and civil servants - in most cases groups not traditionally noted for their militancy - indeed it was the first ever civil service strike. Other notable events during the period were the shooting by members of the Special Patrol Group of 2 Pakistanis at the India High Commission at the Alwyck and the explosion of car bombs in central London on the day of the referendum on the future of Northern Ireland.

The material used for my analysis is tape-recordings of the coverage of industrial affairs in 68 television news and current affairs programmes is as follows: 34 BBC main news broadcasts, 16 Itn main news broadcasts, 13 editions of Nationwide (BBC 1), 4 editions of the BBC 2 News Summary of the Week and 1 BBC 2 late night news broadcast.

Previous Work

Apart from an excellent but little known paper by John Downing of Thames Polytechnic on the media coverage of the dock strike in the summer of 1970, little work has been done directly in this area besides the ACTT study "One Week": a survey of TV coverage of union and industrial affairs January 8-14 1971. I shall therefore begin with a critique of the better known ACTT study.¹

The ACTT enquiry "sought to discover how far ITV and BBC in their coverage of industrial relations fulfilled the legal obligations which require them to present news and current affairs in an impartial manner.

ACTT used three criteria in the analysis of programmes: neutral language, balance of views and balance of story elements. They concluded a) that BBC in particular scandalously failed to maintain impartiality and b) that industrial affairs are covered in a superficial and haphazard manner.

My criticism will be concerned with the 'problematic' which formed the framework of their analysis. This 'problematic' of neutrality/bias is adequate in the sense that it fails to come to grips with the

basic problem that any event must be presented in the media through some particular (inevitably value-loaded) conceptual framework.

Neutrality would only be possible if there existed a 'perfect language' in which the pure facts of the world could be recorded without prejudice. Neutrality would then consist of not going beyond these facts, and of not going beyond this sober language which was content to record them. Partiality or bias, on the other hand, would consist of going further, of adding moral evaluations.

But this model suggests that we can add values to facts, or refrain from adding them, as we add milk to tea. The model quite obscures the fact that some values are quite inescapably built into any language we care to employ to characterise and conceptualise things, if only to the exclusion of the values built into alternative terminologies. Using this language as against that cannot but further some purpose against another. Every language has its opportunity cost: evaluations are already implicit in the concepts, the language in terms of which one observes and records.

Moreover, while it may be significant to show whether a programme is balanced or not, as between different views or story elements it is much more significant to analyse the basic conceptual and ideological framework through which events are presented and as a result of which they come to be given one dominant/primary meaning rather than another. Thus, during the 1973 gas strike, the media coverage of which forms part of my analysis, programmes were often balanced in the sense that they had a gas board spokesman claiming that the strike, through lowering gas pressures, was causing danger to the public, and a union representative claiming that safety precautions were being observed and that therefore the public were not endangered. But analysis must also deal with the problem of how and why the strike comes to be primarily presented in these terms - in this case in terms of the possible dangers it might cause to the public.

The material in the ACTT study itself points to the necessity of this level of analysis - eg. of the ideological aspect of the way in which strikes come to be signified primarily in terms of the cost to industry of lost production, the threat to the National Interest, etc.

The ACTT problematic assumes that biased or partial propositions about, or descriptions of, an event can be seen as standing in some one to one relation with neutral or impartial propositions or descriptions. But the

analysis of the manifest text cannot be usefully performed on a word to word, proposition to proposition basis. This is a limitation which the ACTT study shares with Halloran et al's 'Demonstrations and Communications' - which took the word as the unit of analysis for press coverage of the demonstration, and simply tried to enumerate the number of times 'favourable' or 'unfavourable' adjectives were used to describe the demonstrators. Rather than this type, of 'piecemeal' analysis, which can only uncover specific ideological or biased propositions, what is needed is the identification of generative set of ideological categories and concepts which can supply the 'code' which relates these propositions to one another.

Ideology is not a collection of discrete falsehoods, but a matrix of thought firmly grounded in the forms of our social life and organised within a set of interdependent categories. The primary task of analysis is therefore to clarify the structure of this ideology, this set of interdependent categories and concepts through which events are presented in the media, to elucidate this 'code' which remains implicit and latent in the manifest content of the material broadcast.

The Analysis: fragments of an ideology.

What I am going to present here is a set of interrelated and interdependent categories which, I would claim, constitute the basic elements in the media signification of industrial conflict. These categories have been put together by identifying the recurrent patterns and orientations found in the totality of the coverage. What I will go on to deal with after this is the way in which, having identified these basic elements, one can then go on to analyse them in use - looking at individual programmes as 'structured wholes' and seeing how these elements are then fitted together.

The structure of the fragments:

1. The main actors and the stage:
 - a. The image of society
 - b. The image of trade unions
 - c. The image of employers/the state
 - d. The image of the price/wage system.
2. 'Explanations' of conflict:
 - a. Conspirators model
 - b. 'Intransigent attitudes'

3. Moderation and Extremism:

- a. Dedicated workers/irresponsible strikers
- b. Moral obligations and exhortations

4a. The Definition of Politics and the limits of acceptable protest:

- b. Subordinate ideology and the Opposition
- c. Violence and irrational protest.

5a. The media, the public and the Myth of the Two Giants:

- b. Normal working/the issue of peace
- c. Disruption: strikes cause 'chaos'

6. The Event Orientation of the media:

Actuality without context

Collapsed conflict

1a) The image of society:

The absence of structural conflicts of interest is assumed, along with the presence of a 'National Interest' which is shared by all members of the community. Such minor conflicts as do occur between conflicting interest groups are all overridden by the 'National Interest'. Thus, inflation is a national problem - the concern of the whole community - so, we as a nation need to be concerned about "our" exports, balance of payments, the state of the £, etc.

In times of crisis the concept of the "National Interest" will be articulated explicitly - eg. Mr. Heath's speech at the end of the miners' strike, February 1972: "In the kind of country we live in there cannot be any 'we' nor 'they'. There is only 'us': all of us."²

There will also often be a redefinition of the boundaries of the community at such times: thus Mr. Heath spoke on Mar. 1 (BBC 5.45) of the government's obligations "in the interests of the whole community" to stand by its counter-inflation policies. What we see in the media coverage of the events of Mar. 8, when bombs exploded in central London is a process of redefinition of the boundaries of that community: the striking hospital porters, who had previously been portrayed as a threat to the community, were now praised fulsomely for their response to the authorities' appeals to them to return to work to help with the casualties; thus Nationwide: "In the hospitals everybody is buckled

down to help" while in Parliament Mr. Carr was reported to be "clearly speaking for all NP's (regardless of inter-party conflicts and disagreements) when he condemned the bombings.

1b. The image of the Trade unions:

The unions are basically presented as sectionally minded interest groups. Thus the clash between workers and employers, or workers and the government, is not presented as a clash between opposing interest groups, but as a clash between one party (the unions) who are motivated only by concern only for their sectional interest, and another party (the government) motivated by concern for the "National Interest". Thus Mr. Marsh (Chairman of BR) portrays ASLEF as a sectional interest group, yet claims his condemnation of their action is "not partisan": "it is not partisan ... to say again and again that the public are being monstrously used." Likewise Mr. Heath described the gasmen's decision to return to work for an offer within the government's pay guidelines as "a victory for common sense."

Sectionalism is highlighted in the coverage of the inter-union aspects of disputes: the media often came close to taking over wholesale the government's definition of the rail dispute as "really an inter-union row" between NUR and ASLEF. Certainly NUR's criticisms of ASLEF were given prominence. But the highspot of this tendency came on Mar. 4 (BBC 1) on a report on some Welsh miners who were unable to travel on a special train they had chartered to go to a union conference in London on opposition to the Govt. pay freeze "because local ASLEF drivers are engaged in a policy of non-cooperation in support of their own pay claims." The moral of the tale? The bitter bit, one assumes, or possibly "sectionalism run riot".

1c. The image of the employers/the state:

(As the state was the employer in most of the disputes occurring during the period of my analysis it was not possible to get discrete images of the employers and the state.)³

The state is presented as the representative and defender of the "National Interest" and of the rule of law: thus the police are seen to defend against threats to 'law and order' - BBC 5.45 Mar. 9:

"police stood by in case of trouble when pickets moved into the laundry of Manchester Royal Infirmary" ... "a line of 200 police faced hundreds of angry dockers as Hull docks stopped work today". The state is presented as the representative of the 'majority of the people' - not of any particular class' interest - thus Mr. Heath: "If the government is defeated then the country is defeated, because the government is just a group of people elected to do what the majority of us want to see done" (Speech after miners' strike Feb. 72)⁴

The authorities are presented as being 'concerned for public welfare' during strikes: Mr. Percy Gillet of BR's Eastern Region must have come close to being designated "the commuters' friend" for his repeatedly concerned accounts of the commuters' sufferings during the rail dispute and his battle weary efforts to help the commuters through their troubles. On Nationwide (Feb. 27) we were told that 'police controllers were making emergency arrangements for extra parking for commuters forced to use cars because of ASLEP's action, "while in the gas dispute" to help out, the gas board are providing a telephone answering service for worried consumers."

The state is further defined as conducting the national fight against inflation/keeping industrial peace/preventing disruption - and these are defined as non-controversial, technocratic tasks. The electors' choice between Labour and Conservative parties is defined as a choice to be made on the basis of a decision as to which party is best at this non-controversial task.

Once a dispute is in progress the state's role is defined as how to restore normal working as quickly as possible: unions are thus constantly urged by representatives of the state to call off their industrial action and enter negotiations with the appropriate authorities - eg. Sir Keith Joseph's repeated appeals to the hospital workers to "put their case to the pay board and go back to work".

1d. The image of the price/wage system:

The image of the price system is reified, in the sense that price rises are seen to 'happen' in a passive way, while wage claims are seen to be actively made: thus we get references to the 'laws' of supply and demand which are said to regulate price movements.

Moreover manufacturers' actions in raising prices in response to an increase in their costs is 'explained' via a built-in assumption of the need to 'maintain profit levels': the agricultural minister explained the government's decision to allow meat manufacturers to raise their prices on the grounds that "these firms had been running at very reduced profits, and might have had to withdraw some of their goods".

Where the need to maintain profit levels is argued rather than assumed it is argued in terms of the need to encourage profits which will increase investment, which will increase growth, which is in the national interest. However, at no stage in the coverage was the relationship between profits and investment explored: rather the highly dubious assumption prevailed that an increase in profits would automatically lead to an increase in investment in the home economy.⁵

Trade Unions are often presented as the only 'responsible' / free agents in a situation - in the sense that their decisions are presented as the cause of events - a union's decision to hold or call off a strike is repeatedly presented as the 'cause' of the event. The authorities are correspondingly presented as 'helpless' in the face of the union's decision. This was nicely put in the BBC 2 news summary of the week for Mar. 4: "Hospital boards, like the railway board, find the dispute hard to deal with - they can't do a thing, because they haven't got the money nor permission to give it."

However, there are of course, attempts at redefinition of responsibility by spokesmen for the opposition and the unions - thus Alan Fisher of NUPH on Nationwide (Mar. 13) said that he agreed that the hospital strike was a drastic form of action but went on to say that it was "a form of action that has been forced on the unions by the government."

2. "Explanations" of conflict:

2a. Conspirators model:

Once it has been assumed (see 1a) that our society is basically equitable and that we all share in an overriding National Interest the existence of conflict in our society becomes problematic. One

persistent 'explanation' of the origin of conflict is in terms of the actions of militant leaders or minorities, urging the moderate majority to militant action: ITN 10pm Feb. 28: "At Fords ... workers may reject militant demands for all out strike action ... the Dagenham plant has rejected the strike call - a defeat for militants and a victory for common sense."

BBC 5.45 Mar. 25: "At a mass meeting ... miners were urged to vote in favour of strike action".... "The union's communist dominated left wing will mount a massive effort to swing miners behind the strike call" - Times Mar. 24. In a similar vein the passage at the TUC conference on Mar. 5 of a resolution calling for a one day strike against the government's pay policy was attributed to the machinations of 'militants'.

Moreover, implications are often made of the 'unrepresentativeness' of these leaders and their militancy: Mr. Macmillan, interviewed on Nationwide Mar. 15, on the rail dispute: "I know many drivers, and I don't believe that most of them, in their heart of hearts, would want to have anything like this following from their action."

However, this model of a militant leadership urging on the moderate majority plainly didn't fit the actions of most of the official union leaderships involved in disputes at this time - in the hospital strike NUPE was in the position of restraining their members from going on all out strikes without emergency service provisions. Fisher of NUPE, Duckton of ASLEF and Gormley of the NUM all took great care to make it clear that they were not 'militant leaders but reasonable men who didn't even want to be on strike if that could possibly be avoided.'

2b. 'Intransigent attitudes':

A second persistent 'explanation' of conflict is in terms of people 'taking the wrong attitudes: being intransigent, unwilling to compromise - here there is a displacement in the coverage to the level of attitudes - disputes are seen to occur because unreasonable attitudes have been adopted: correspondingly, the solution to conflict is for both sides to adopt more moderate and conciliatory attitudes.

Militancy comes to be equated with 'anger': BBC 2 News Summary of the Week Mar. 4: "Angry gas men get angrier, as the country carries on in the cold..." while on the same programme a demonstration at the Fine Tubes factory was described as "an angry demonstration over a three year old strike."

The idea that conflict occurs because of people's attitudes rather than because of structural contradictions was implicit in an important speech by Glen Philips of Nalco reported from the TUC conference Mar. 5 (BBC 9pm) - he spoke of the need to "combat the increasing dangers of 'us' and 'them' which have become so prevalent in this country."

In a similar vein Mr. Whitelaw (BBC 5.45 Mar. 20) urged people of Northern Ireland, as a solution to the Ulster problem to "abandon your prejudices and grievances and look simply to the future."

3. Moderation and Extremism

3a. Dedicated workers/irresponsible strikers:

There is a persistent focus on the dedication and responsibility of some workers - eg. nurses, who will stay at their jobs because of their humanitarian concern for their patients - this is persistently presented as a counterpoint to the irresponsible action of the strikers. Thus we have the reports of volunteers manning emergency services to take food to old people unable to cook because of the gas dispute, and of hospitals which are able to stay open "due to the extra efforts which the remaining members of staff are prepared to make." From this point of view the hospital strike was clearly irresponsible - in the words of a midwife; "it's not humanity to have a strike in a hospital."

Also involved here is the idea of the proper, British, response to a crisis: cooperation with the authorities is accredited as the proper, common sense response: thus the police appealed to commuters during the rail strike - "if the public will help us we shall be able to help them." (Nationwide Feb. 27). Of special concern were the gas consumers who were thought irresponsibly to have not turned off their gas appliances when asked to do so by the gas board, and whose irresponsible and selfish action thus created a danger of explosions "not only to the person who hasn't turned off but to neighbours." (BBC 5.45 Mar. 4).

As a counterpoint to the long suffering patience of British commuters during the rail strike we were shown the non-British way of dealing with a crisis: the Tokyo commuter riots, where in response to a rail go-slow commuters ran amok beating up railmen, etc.

3b. Moral obligations and exhortations:

The moral wrongness of strikes and the moral obligations of strikers are spelt out most clearly at times of crisis as Thompson points out in "Sir, Writing by Candlelight": "at times of grave adversity and crisis... Oughts are discovered within the reciprocal flow of goods and services on which our society depends - these 'oughts' are the moral obligations of the striking workers.

This theme was particularly applied to the hospital workers, in so far as they were seen as endangering human life; their strike was described as "a pretty drastic form of action in an area of life and death" (Nationwide Mar. 5) and Sir Keith Joseph pronounced to the workers that their duty is to get back to their patients."

For many of the groups on strike in this period militancy was quite a new thing, and this breakdown of dedication among traditionally non-militant groups made their strikes particularly problematic for the media. This theme took a new twist when the nurses, who had been held up as a great example of responsibility and dedication throughout the ancillary workers' strike, announced that they were going on strike themselves unless they were awarded a 40% pay increase, although finally they withdrew their threat, and settled for a pay award within the government guidelines.

4a. The Definition of Politics and the Limits of the Acceptable Protest:

'Politics' is identified with the procedures of parliamentary debate and trade union negotiation, through which elected representatives debate the 'issues' and arrive at business-like compromise. There is a basic affirmation of the values of responsibility, moderation, negotiation and compromise and a rejection of irresponsibility, extremism, disruption and intransigence. A basic polarity is established between 'talks' and 'disruption'.

The basic assumption is that it is reasoned argument, not power, that settles strikes. Those with a grievance are encouraged to 'make their case': only once during the period of my analysis did the view emerge that "The government is not going to take a blind bit of notice of any case, however well argued, unless we punch home the message with a bit of industrial action" (Bil Kendall CPSA rep. at TUC conference Mar. 5 on BBC 9pm news) - and this view was immediately labelled as that of a 'militant'.

Strikes are defined as being irrelevant to the real business of politics:⁷

Mr. Heath: "The present wave of strikes is pointless....and irrelevant to the real issues facing the nation, industry and the trade unions" (BBC 5.45 Mar. 1); Keith Joseph on the hospital workers: "They're not going to gain anything by staying on strike"; Macmillan on the rail strike: "A dispute which will benefit no-one" (Nationwide Mar. 15).

This definition of industrial action as irrelevant to the 'real' business of politics was taken up by the media in interviews with trade union representatives on a number of occasions - eg. interview with CPSA rep. (ITN 10 Feb. 27): "In view of the government's stated determination to stand firm in its pay policy, wasn't today's strike something of a futile demonstration?"

Interestingly, this affirmation of the values of negotiation rather than force by the government was turned against them by spokesmen for the Opposition (BBC 9pm Feb. 28) - who were able to criticise the government precisely in terms of their having abandoned the proper channels of voluntary negotiation in its statutory pay and prices policy. Moreover, the media, having taken over this definition of politics, will criticise representatives of the state in so far as they fail to appear to be conciliatory and prepared to compromise - thus Mr. Macmillan was subjected to a very hostile interview on Nationwide (Mar. 15) because he was failing to take a conciliatory role in the rail dispute.

The question of the limits of acceptable protest was raised in many questions put to union representatives - eg. -- question to Ray Duckton of ASLEF (ITN 10pm Feb. 28): "Is this a strike for more money....or is it a strike against the government's pay policy?"

The question of political strikes reappeared sharply when the special TUC conference (Mar.5) called for a one day general strike against the government's pay policy, and this event was particularly problematic for the media as the 'very rule of law' had been brought into question at the conference: (BBC 9pm Mar.5) Jack Jones: "We cannot say that we will on the one hand, give support to the gas-workers who are the prisoners of phase 2....and in the same manner and in the same sentence, say that we will abide by the law..." "But at a more mundane level, the definition of the limits of acceptable protest was an ongoing aspect of the coverage - in particular these limits were established via vox pop interviews: (ITN 5.50 Mar.7) interview with commuter:

Q. "Do you have any sympathy for the railmen?"

A. "No, I don't think this sort of industrial action is the way to go about things."

"The way to go about things" was conveniently defined by Mr. Whitelaw in his speech on the occasion of the publication of the government White Paper on the future of Northern Ireland (BBC 5.45 Mar. 20); he said that this was a time for "Politics at the ballot box and not on the streets"; he stressed the point that these were "clear and reasonable proposals that reasonable men can work" and that the proposals "depended for their success on moderate opinion asserting itself."

4b. Subordinate ideology and the Opposition:

The assumption of basic social equality (see 1a) means that any claim for a wage increase has to be 'justified' - a case has to be made out of hardship, etc. Nationwide (Feb.27) dealt with the subject of those workers who were on strike for the first time ever; "to see why they feel forced to go on strike at this particular time": hospital worker: "I don't like strikes....but we feel that a stand just has to be made somewhere...we're just not satisfied with our wages...we just can't live on them."

Several vox pop interviews where support was expressed for the strikers 'justified' their action exactly in terms of the hardship they were suffering because of their low wages. Here the whole question of how much support there is for a group of workers'

claim for a pay increase from other workers and from the public is a crucial variable in the media language of 'good cases'. Thus NUR's criticisms of ASLEF are said to 'weaken their case' while the support for the hospital ancillary workers' claim for some medical staff is said to strengthen theirs.

This language of 'good cases' and 'special cases' represents a negotiated version of the dominant ideology - union representatives articulating this kind of approach will make a point of affirming their adherence to the central political values of our culture, but will then go on to make a particular case for their claim within that framework. The claim is that their case is 'justified' for some particular reason - of hardship, etc. Thus Duckton throughout the rail dispute was at pains to point out his adherence to the values of negotiation and compromise, and to stress that ASLEF "are not in conflict with HM Government."

Then there are the permanent 'special cases': the old, the poor, the weak for whom all parties express concern - indeed the parties compete to appear as the most concerned for the welfare of these groups. Thus Mr. Heath (BBC 5.45 Mar. 15) proclaimed the role of the state as guardian of the weak and stressed that "his government's plans would best help those with less to live on."

4c. Violence and irrational protest:

Strikes are persistently presented as an irrational form of behaviour. At times this takes the form of a focus on the 'pettiness' of the causes of strikes - as on Nationwide Mar. 14: "It's often the simplest of things which lead to the call of 'everybody out'..." - followed by an account of the actions of 'bacon butty protestors' and 'angry onion peelers'. The report was then 'summed up' by Michael Barratt: "They do seem rather daft reasons for going on strike, don't they?"

Once a dispute is in progress there is often, especially in the coverage of demonstrations, a focus on the irrationality of the form of the action - in these cases a focus on the irrationality of the 'chanting mob': individuals reason but mobs chant: the point is often made in the coverage when the camera shows a union

representative in the foreground, being interviewed and 'making the case' for the workers' demand in a 'reasonable' manner - while in the background we see and hear a mob of people engaged in ritualistic forms of behaviour, such as chanting in unison and marching around with banners - with the noise from this mob impinging upon, and at time drowning out, the union rep's statements.

A further related aspect of the coverage is the way in which the political motives of 'protestors' are denigrated - with the implication often being made that they are simply after 'trouble for its own sake'. Thus teachers on strike in London were said to have 'stayed away'; the situation in the rail dispute was said to depend on whether "individual drivers turn up for work or not"; and Nationwide's report on the NUS campaign for increased grants (21. Feb.) was introduced by this comment: "You can't ignore them, they make the headlines too often for that....and today they were at it again...demonstrating...the main NUS activity is Campaigning.."

5a. The media, the public and the Myth of the two Giants:

The media interpret their role in the balance requirement as speaking for the National Interest as against the sectional interests of employers and workers. The media project the role of spokesman for the public, supposedly sandwiched between the 2 mighty and embattled giants (unions and employers, and propose that while the giants stand shoving at each other we, the poor public, suffer. (For these points I am particularly indebted to John Downing's paper 'Class and Race in the British News media').

The implicit image of society here is of a plurality of competing interest groups, rather than a class structure where one class is dominant. The media man's 'vivid present' (Schutz) is often an orientation of criticism of the status quo, but there is an assumption that one 'interest' is very much like another, and that the only people to be sorry for are the people (like the old) who are not in strong interest groups.

The basis of this approach lies in the media presenter usually taking the point of view of the consumer - who fails to get his goods and services because of the dispute: as consumers of gas we are all affected by a gas strike. But this elevation of the consumption sphere is very misleading - precisely because it neglects the sphere of production and our different relations to the means of production - which generate the structural conflicts, which cause the disputes by which we are all inconvenienced.

This orientation was explicitly spelt out in the introduction to the BBC2 News Summary of the Week for Mar. 4:

"This hasn't been a happy week for people who one way or another have made news.. an awful lot of people who were not interfering with anyone else found themselves the victims of other people's industrial quarrels...their only consolation was that however hard they found this week, it wasn't as bad as they can expect next week, according to some union men...."

From this standpoint interviews with hospital workers' representatives repeatedly enquired what their action meant "in terms of the patients", while a representative of the striking London teachers was asked: "I'm sure a lot of people will be wondering where do the children fit into all this.... aren't they suffering as a result of your battle with the government?" Strikes are particularly regrettable in so far as they cause special hardship to the young, the weak and the old "who don't have the power of the unions" - as in the case of the poor pensioners left cold and hungry and unable to cook because of the gas dispute. Indeed we were told (BBC 2 News Summary of the Week Mar. 11) that "in the hospital dispute...the government and the healthy aren't affected, only those who are ill, in or out of hospital."

5b. Normal working/The issue of Peace:

Once a dispute is in progress the 'issue of peace'/restoration of normal working comes to be signified as the issue above all else - above all the substantive issues of what a particular dispute is about, where injustice lays, which side is right, etc. In this

context the role of the state is defined as the non-controversial, technocratic task of maintaining industrial peace/preventing disruption and 'improving' industrial relations. Thus, on Nationwide (Mar. 13) the Liberal Party "Stop the Fight" proposals were introduced: "What with low gas pressures, disorganised hospitals.....ANY proposals to IMPROVE industrial relations must be welcomed.." while Mr. Wilson (ITN 5.45 Mar. 17) was making his own suggestions as to how to 'improve industrial relations' in order for 'modern industry to function effectively.'" Implicit here is a consensualist standpoint of judgement from which the industrial situation is said to 'improve' or 'deteriorate' - an assumption that 'improvement' for one is necessarily improvement for all, rather than an idea that what might be a 'solution' to the 'problem' of industrial relations for one class in our society might itself be a "problem" for another class.

As the 'keeping of industrial peace' is assumed to be a non-controversial goal, the announcement of strike plans, the commencement of a dispute the intensifying of industrial action all mean that the situation has 'taken a turn for the worse'. The announcement of plans for negotiation, the calling off of an industrial action, the settling of a dispute all mean, correspondingly, that the situation 'improved'. Thus in Nationwide's round up (Mar. 13) on the situation in the hospital strike, we were told that "In Leeds, things are gradually getting worse in an atmosphere of increased militancy" while "In Barnsley, good news, the workers have called off their strike."

5c. Disruption: strikes cause 'chaos':

Strikes are signified as 'problematic' events - disrupting normal working, causing 'chaos'; they are primarily signified in terms of their immediate effects - causing loss of production, inconvenience or danger to the public, damage to the economy and the 'National Interest'.

Thus, during the period of my analysis, in terms of their primary significations:

The gas strike meant the danger of explosions

The hospital strike meant danger to patients

The rail strike meant inconvenience to commuters
The teachers' strike meant disruption of children's education
The customs strike meant the creation of a "drug smuggler's
paradise."

Of particular interest is the fact that this kind of signification of strikes was particularly apparent in the headlines of news broadcasts: indeed the sheer existence or threat of 'disruption of normal working', or of the resolution of such disruptive conflict, constituted headline news in its most recurrent form during the period of my analysis. This would seem to be particularly important because it is in the headlines that events are assigned their primary significations. The later reports and comments in a broadcast will take up, expand on, and sometimes in the course of debate call into question these primary definitions. But is on the terrain established by these primary definitions that the later debate will move.

6. The Event Orientation of the Media: Actuality without context
: Collapsed Conflict

The coverage tends to focus on the immediate form of events, on what happened and who was involved, and to ignore the underlying context of the situation, rarely offering any analysis of the relationship between particular events and underlying structural processes. Mystification is inherent in this dehistoricised presentation of the news as a series of 'events' - a series of immediate images of 'actuality without context'.⁸

In this respect my findings are exactly in line with those of John Downing (op cit) when he says that "compared with the vastly disproportionate weighting given to the effects and implications of strikes, the level of explanation in the coverage as to what the strikes (are) about, how they (have) developed and what their broad antecedents (are), is quite extraordinarily shallow."

This conclusion is the same as that reached by Richard Hyman in his analysis of the media coverage of the 'Dillon Affair' at Fords Halewood (in "strikes" Ch.1. Fontana) - what is reported

is the apparently simple event: this dismissal of a shop steward for 'disobedience': what is omitted is the whole structural context in which the event makes sense: the power struggle over job control on the shop floor between management and shop stewards. Again, substantially the same point is made by Stuart Hall in his paper 'The structured communication of events' - the overall orientation of the media leads to the presentation of events in an 'collapsed' form; an industrial dispute which is really an instance of the structural conflict between government and organised labour will appear in the news as dramatic pictures of pickets and police locked in struggle - ie. as a disruptive threat to 'law and order' - this was exactly what happened in the BBC 2 News summary of the week Mar. 2 in their coverage of the Fine Tubes demonstration - it was explicitly characterised as an industrial story which 'was hard to understand'; an extremely truncated account of the background to the strike was given and then we were shown shots of this "angry demonstration" - mainly close ups of violent pushing and shoving - an unexplained, violent spectacle.

As we have seen, disputes are primarily signified in terms of the 'immediate issues - of the effects of the strike, the chances of a quick settlement, etc. - and these issues tend to set the parameters of what is considered relevant in the discussion of a dispute. However, in studio discussion attempts are made by union reps. to introduce wider, background considerations into the debate - eg. Nationwide Mar. 13: after a consultant had said that the hospital dispute was leading to a "lowering of standards" in the Health Service Alan Fisher of NUPE took up the point:

Fisher: "The consultant talked about a 'cutting of standards' well, there have been falling standards in the Health Service for years...." - at which point the presenter of the programme cut him short:

Presenter: "Yes, but before you go off on that tack..." - and brought the discussion back to 'the immediate issues' of the effect of the strike on patients, etc.

In a similar way on Nationwide Mar. 8, after a report, which was the only one I found giving any indication of the historical origins of the rail dispute, the presenter immediately 'summed up' in a way that implicitly denied the relevance of such considerations:

Presenter: "Be that as it may, commuters still have to face the problems of getting to work tomorrow...."

The range of considerations deemed relevant in the signification of a dispute is thus at times brought into question, and the limits of that range have to be actively maintained in the studio situation.

These then, I would claim, are the main elements in the dominant ideology concerning 'industrial relations'. Before going any further, I would like to make clear what I do not think is implied by what has been said so far. I do not intend to suggest, in connection with the problem of 'the dominant ideology', that the source of this ideology and its mystificatory effects lies in the 'prevailing indoctrination of the masses by the media.'

This can best be made clear by way of a precis of some of the remarks made by John Mepham in his article 'The Theory of Ideology in Capital' in Radical Philosophy No. 6. As he points out, it would be a great mistake to think that "the dominance of bourgeois ideology has its basis in the dominance of the bourgeoisie as a class only in the sense that this dominance as a class allows the bourgeoisie to have a monopoly on the production, and dissemination of ideas...(so that)...from the point of view of the workers, ideas have their origin in the means of dissemination of ideas produced originally elsewhere (so that)...ideas are transmitted via cultural and educational institutions public communications systems and so on, into the otherwise empty minds of the working class...."

I do not intend to deny for a minute that the bourgeoisie do control the means for the dissemination of ideas....nor that they do use this as a powerful weapon in defence of their class interest. But to say that the bourgeoisie produces ideas is to ignore the conditions which make this possible, to ignore that which determines which ideas are thus produced, and to conceal the real nature and origins of ideology....It is not the bourgeois class which produces ideas, but bourgeois society. And the effective dissemination of ideas

is only possible because, or to the extent that, the ideas thus disseminated are ideas which....do have a sufficient degree of effectiveness both in rendering social reality intelligible and in guiding practice within it for them to be apparently acceptable. It is the relation between ideology and reality that is the key to its dominance.

Ideology arises from the opacity of reality, where the opacity of reality is the fact that the forms in which reality 'presents itself' to men, or the forms of its appearance, conceal those real relations which themselves produce the appearances....the origin of ideological illusions is in the phenomenal forms of reality itself.....the invisibility of real relations derives from the visibility of outward appearances or forms.....(this is) the mechanism by which capitalist society necessarily appears to its agents as something other than it really is....

The various appearance forms are not independent...they support each other..in a structure of appearances....and their systematic relations in reality are produced in their systematic relations in thought..We are not usually aware of these systematically generative interconnections because our awareness is organised through them...

Ideological language does not distract attention away from real social relations, nor does it explain them away, nor even does it directly deny them; it structurally excludes them from thought - because of the very immediacy and 'visibility' of the 'natural, self-understood meanings' encountered in social life, the 'spontaneous, natural' modes of speech and thought under capitalism.. We must reject the view that ideology has its basis in some sort of defective perception of clearly perceptible facts. The basis of ideology is precisely in its apparent justification by the perceived forms of empirical social reality.

Keeping these points in mind, one can get a firmer grip on the problem of the domination of the workers' movement by bourgeois ideology: this ideology dominates because, within serious limits, it works, both cognitively and in practice. It provides intelligibility and is embodied in effective working class organisations.

This is the point made by E.P. Thompson in his criticism of Perry Anderson's analysis in 'The Peculiarities of the English'⁹ - Thompson explains the absence of a socialist political and theoretical counterbalance to the spontaneously bourgeois union movement in England by reference to the history of the Labour movement's successes:

"The workers, having failed to overthrow capitalist society, proceeded to warren it from end to end....(however)....each assertion of working class influence within the bourgeois democratic state machinery, simultaneously involved them as partners (even if antagonistic partners) in the running of the machine.... reformist pressures from secure organisational bases brings evident returns - "British reformism is strong because, within serious limits, it has worked."

Going back to Nepham's points that "it is the relation between ideology and reality that is the key to its dominance" and that "the effective dissemination of the ideology is only possible to the extent that it does have a sufficient degree of effectiveness both in rendering social reality intelligible and in guiding practice within it", I would make a number of points about the different aspects of bourgeois ideology concerning industrial relations to which I have pointed in my analysis, and in particular, the relationship of this ideology to reality.

- 1a. The image of society: the concept of the 'National Interest' is not entirely ideological: we are all involved in the economy - workers are dependent on it for jobs in a day to day sense. What is ideological about this image is precisely that it restricts attention to the level of the phenomenal forms of social life - without considering our differential relations to the means of production and therefore our differential relations to the 'National Interest'.
- 1b. The image of trade unions: the media to pick up on the inter-union aspects of disputes - as in the case of the emphasis given to the NUR versus ASLEF aspect of the rail dispute - but there is a basis for this in fact - in so far as ASLEF, in trying to defend outdated craft union privileges, are engaged in a highly sectional policy.

- 1c. The image of the state: A recent issue of the Sunday Times colour supplement (Feb. 17 1974) carried a cover photograph of "Anthony David, Royal Marine Commando. Shot in Belfast, September 16, 1972" as a lead-in to an article on the life of soldiers serving in Northern Ireland. The title of the article was "The most dangerous job in the country". Now, one could well argue that the presentation of being a member of the state's repressive apparatus as simply "a dangerous job" is highly ideological. However, one must remember that for an unskilled working class boy leaving school in time of high unemployment, joining the army is precisely just a job opportunity, and a relatively well paid one at that.
- 2a. The conspirators model: in so far as conflict is not just generated mechanistically by objective inequalities 'leaders' and 'interventionists' do play a role in the genesis of industrial conflict.
- 4b. Subordinate ideology: the whole conduct of the Feb./Mar. '74 miners' strike, and in particular the whole tenor of the broadsheet "the miner's case" put out by the NUM, would seem to be clear examples of the very limited style of political opposition that I pointed to in my analysis-the language is entirely that of 'hardship' and 'special cases', the case is made to 'justify' their claim for a wage increase. Thompson's point would seem to apply here - within limits this ideology and this style of political practice works - the miners got their pay rise.
- 4c. Violence and irrational protest: in nothing that the media tend to focus attention on the form of demonstration - eg. the violent/chanting mob - one must remember that to some extent the problem is implicit in the form of mass demonstrations - by choosing to work through the medium of public spectacle, demonstrators open themselves to the possibility that they will be 'appropriated' as spectacular entertainment.

5a. The myth of the 2 giants: the elevation of the consumption sphere - where we are all inconvenienced by the effects of strikes - and the corresponding neglect of the sphere of production - where the conflicts by which we are all inconvenienced are generated - can be seen precisely in terms of a concentration on the level of the phenomenal forms of social reality.

5b.& Normal working/disruption: while pointing to the media's overwhelming emphasis in the immediate/negative effects of strikes as being ideological in so far as strikes are seen to have meaning only in these terms, it would be pointless to deny the reality of the 'effects' that the media dwelt on - the effects on some patients of the hospital strike, the effects on passers by of the Old Bailey car bomb, the effect on commuters of the rail strike - at this level the media signification does serve to make these events intelligible.

6. Actuality without context: The point is to see both the importance of this level - of the immediately perceptible forms of social reality eg. in terms of the immediate effects of strikes - and to see that the crucial aspect of the coverage is the restriction of attention and awareness to this level, and the exclusion from awareness (at times actively, as in the Nationwide example where the presenter cut Alan Fisher short) of the underlying structural level of real relations which generate these phenomenal forms.

Taking into account all the qualifications made here by reference to Mepham, I would claim that the fragments I have presented in the earlier part of this paper represent the basic set of ideological categories through which industrial affairs are signified in the media. But they have been presented here in a static form, and although the relationships between some of the categories are clear, a further stage of analysis is necessary to elucidate the exact sense in which these categories can be said to form a 'code'.

What we must see is the process by which these dominant definitions of the situation are articulated in the programmes, but are also 'negotiated' and challenged by other speakers who may attempt to redefine the terms of the debate.

"Since the connotational maps of meaning signified by the media are 'structured in dominance' but not closed, the communicative process consists, not in the unproblematic assignment of every visual (or audial) item to its position within a set of pre-arranged codes, but of performative rules - rules of competence and use, of logics-in-use - which seek to enforce or prefer one semantic domain over another, and rule items into and out of their appropriate meaning-sets.....In speaking of dominant meanings, then, we are not simply talking about a one-sided process, which governs-how any event will be signified: it also consists of the 'works' required to enforce, win plausibility for and command as legitimate a de-coding of the event within the dominant definition in which it has been connotatively signified." (Stuart Hall - "Encoding and Decoding the TV Message").¹⁰ In short, we must see the reproduction of the dominant ideology as performative work.

"If the reproduction of the dominant ideology were free and uncontested - if nothing else 'got through' - then the study of the style, technique, forms, studio presentations, etc. would simply be a study, at the micro-level, of the dominant structures. But if the reproduction is of an ideology and its contradictions, then the level of signification...is a crucial level of analysis with a 'relative autonomy' of its own, since, in any instance, the outcome of an encounter in which several contestants are present cannot be fully predicted: in this arena, significant battles to win a hearing for alternative points of view can sometimes be won: the management of such conflictful situations has to be done 'in situ', and presenters can lose their grip on the situation, though they rarely do (because they have the ultimate signifying power of defining the events, and are the principal managers of the encounters): and there are crucial areas where the definitions and identifications have to be negotiated...the outcome of transactions (interactional, symbolic) at the situational level can affect the on-going reproduction of society at the 'social order' level. Hence situations while structured in dominance (ie. showing a systematic tendency to reproduce the hegemony of the dominant definitions of the situation) are not determined by it. Conflict and contradiction, therefore, as well

as consensus and social order can be produced at the micro-level. Each encounter, therefore, puts the 'structure in dominance' to the test: and the differing 'definitions of of the situation' must struggle for dominance, win assent for their outlook against others, try to amplify definitions so as to favour the dominant perspective, etc. The level of signification is, therefore, a privileged level with 'relative autonomy': but it is neither fully determined by larger structures, nor free of them." (Stuart Hall - notes to 'External Influences on Broadcasting').¹⁰

In this respect what is necessary is an analysis of individual programmes as 'structured wholes', taking a systematic look at the 'status' of the participants in the debate and the process of debate, for a statement will obviously carry a different weight and meaning coming from a media reporter or presenter, a political or institutional spokesman, an academic expert or media correspondent, and actor in a news event or a member of the public.

Statement is reported from persons of accredited high position - eg. the use of a 'summing-up' statement on the industrial situation by Mr. Heath at a privileged moment in a news broadcast - can be seen as attempts in the encoding of a message to structure the decoding of that message - by means of 'closures' directing the audience towards a particular meaning.

In a similar way, the status deriving from his assumed position as representative of the 'ordinary public' - gives his statements a distinctive weight and the programme can often be seen as structured around perhaps half a dozen 'summing up' or 'linking' statements made by him at the beginning and end of items in the programme. Taken together his statements provide a coherent perspective which, if taken over by the audience, 'makes sense' of events in a very particular way.

"There are few systems in which the definitions of the powerful pass without any qualification or modification or challenge, straight into the media and are simply reproduced by its professional. The connections which the media form with the elites of power are extremely complex and contradictions of interest, outlook and interpretation - frequently arise between

them..... the media systems.....operate within the political structure of a formal democracy....so the obligation to reflect.....the viewpoint of those in power...is...enshrined in their terms of reference....('balance')... It would be wrong, however, to interpret this as producing a state of perfect pluralism where the dominant mass media systems are concerned. If the hegemonic viewpoint does not unilaterally (prevail)....this does not mean that the media serve all viewpoints equally." (Stuart Hall: The Structured Communication of Events.)¹⁰

What we need to see in the signification of industrial conflict by the media is what hold the definitions of the situation in terms of the dominant ideology articulated by the representatives of the state, have on the totality of the media output.

In this connection the crucial elements of the situation would seem to be

a) the media, via, the structure of access, and the systematic 'over-accessing' of the representatives of the state, are obliged to transmit and reproduce the definitions of the situation articulated by these representatives.

b) we need to see to what extent the media 'take over' the definitions of the situation articulated by the representatives of the state and thus to what extent these definitions come to 'underlie and permeate the texture of news reporting'.

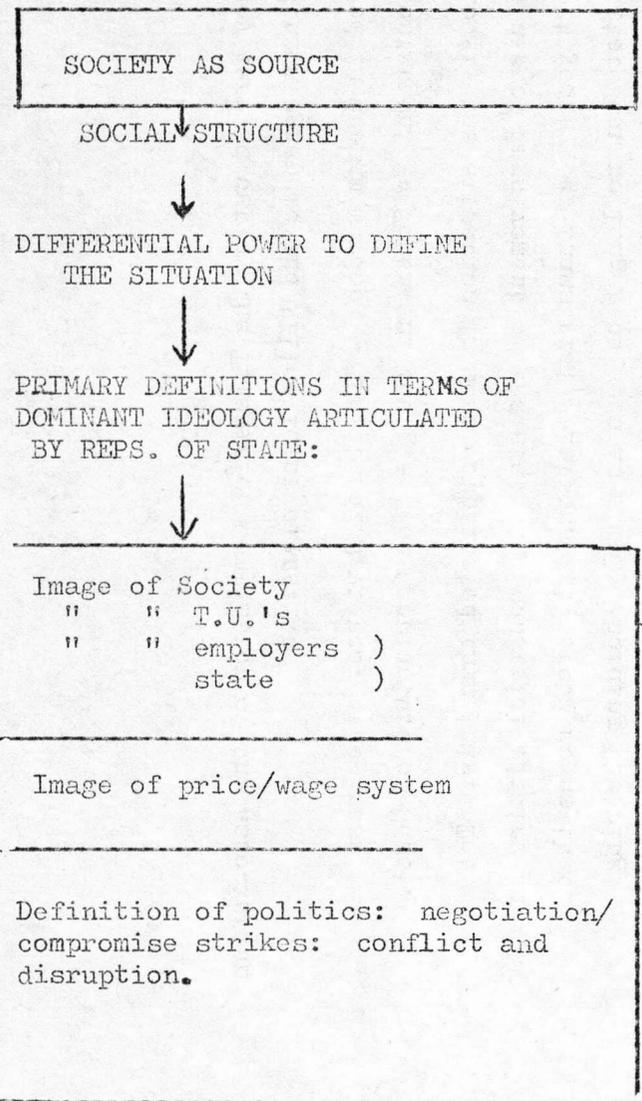
But we need also to see that the relative autonomy of the media means that

c) the media establish a distinctive media culture with its own set of values and orientations which is then superimposed upon, and thus comes to modify the definitions articulated by the state.¹¹

& d) that autonomy means that other groups are allowed access, though often on restricted terms, and that negotiations of the dominant definitions and counter-definitions are articulated, to the hegemony of the dominant ideology is continually put to the test.

Notes:

1. Survey carried out by the Television Commission of the Association of Cinematographic and Allied Technicians.
2. Quoted in Graham Murdock - 'Political Deviance: the Press Presentation' in Cohen and Young - 'The Manufacture of News'.
3. Obviously the situation is more complicated than this. The more direct involvement of the state in industrial affairs in recent years (eg. Industrial Relations Act, etc.) means that the state can no longer be seen as simply 'holding the ring' for the conflict between unions and employers. But this raises difficult questions which it is not possible to go into here.
4. Quoted in Murdock (op cit).
5. See Counter Information Services report No. 6 - 'Three Phase Trick: a handbook on inflation and Phase 3' - p.32: 'A particularly striking example of this is GEC, which despite an outstandingly rapid growth in profits, has been a net disinvestor in productive capacity.'
6. In Cohen and Young (op cit).
7. cf. ACTT report pp. A/22 & A/27.
8. cf. George Gerbner 'Ideological Perspectives and Political Tendencies in news reporting' (Journalism Quarterly Vol.41 No. 4).
9. Perry Anderson 'Origins of the present crisis' NLR 23
EP Thompson 'The peculiarities of the English' - in 'Socialist Register' 1965.
10. see Centre for Cultural Studies, University of Birmingham.
11. cf. Philip Elliott - 'The making of a TV series'.



STRUCTURE
→ OF →
ACCESS

MEDIA:
relative
autonomy from
state
a) media culture/
values superimposed
on primary defns.
b) the debate:
negotiations and
counter-defns.
articulated.

level of finished/visible
messages:

1. The main actors and the stage:
 - a) Image of society
 - b) " " T.U.'s
 - c) " " employers)
state)

 - d) " " price/wage system

2. Explanations of conflict:
 - a) Conspirators model
 - b) Intrasigent attitudes

3. Moderation and Extremism:
 - a) Dedicated workers/irresponsible strikes
 - b) Moral obligations and exhortations

- 4a) Defn. of Politics/Limits of Acceptable Protest:
 - b) Subordinate ideology and opposition
 - c) Violence and irrational protest

- 5a) Media, Public, Myth of 2 Giants:
 - b) Normal Working/Issue of peace
 - c) Disruption: strikes cause 'chaos'

6. Event Orientation of Media:
Actuality without context
Collapsed conflict