

BLINDSPOTS ABOUT WESTERN MARXISM: A REPLY TO DALLAS SMYTHE

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Dallas Smythe's recent article, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism" deserves serious attention from anyone interested in the possibilities for a viable materialist theory of mass communications. According to Smythe, not only do we not have such a theory at present — we do not even have a firm basis for its development. And this, he argues, is principally because western Marxism suffers from a fatal blindspot on the subject. It is not only that communications has been a relatively underdeveloped area of work with Marxism; it is also that the attempts at analysis made so far have been fundamentally misconceived. They have treated the mass media primarily as part of the ideological superstructure and ignored or underplayed their integration into the economic base. Smythe argues that we need to reverse this emphasis and return economics to the centre of Marxist cultural analysis. For him, "The first question that historical materialists should ask about mass communications systems is *what economic function for capital do they serve*, attempting to understand their role in the reproduction of capitalist relations of production" (p1 italics in the original). It is a bold polemic, delivered with panache, and embracing almost all of the currently fashionable variants of European Marxism. His list of the "blind" includes, Adorno and Horkheimer, Gramsci, together with leading contemporary writers such as Louis Althusser, Hans Enzensberger and Raymond Williams.

Smythe is undoubtedly right about the underdevelopment of economic analysis in western Marxist work culture and communications. However, he is by no means alone in this perception. A number of European Marxists would wish to go a good deal of the way with him. Raymond Williams' recent writings, for example, are peppered with attacks on versions of Marxism which over-emphasise the ideological role of communications. As he put it in a recent article then, "the main error" is that they substitute the analysis of ideology "with its operative functions in segments, codes and texts" for the materialist analysis of the social relations of production and consumption.¹

In his latest book, *Marxism and Literature*, he insists that "the insertion of economic determinations into cultural studies is the special contribution of Marxism, and there are times when its simple insertion is an evident advance."² Moreover, questions of economic determination have recently provided the

GRAHAM MURDOCK

focus for several Marxist and *Marxisant* analyses of the British mass media.³ However, these studies part company with Smythe on the question of the value and relevance of the western Marxist tradition. Whereas for him it is an obstacle to be cleared away, for Williams, for myself and for many others in Britain and Europe it is a resource to be drawn upon. Certainly it needs to be rigorously reworked and the dross jettisoned, but I want to argue that a critical engagement with western Marxism is still indispensable to the development of a comprehensive and convincing Marxist analysis of mass communications. Not least, this is because the central topics of western Marxism are precisely those which were left underdeveloped in the work of Marx and of classical Marxism: the nature of the modern capitalist state; the role of ideology in reproducing class relations; the problematic position of intellectuals; and the formation of consciousness in conditions of mass consumption. Smythe acknowledges the continuing importance and centrality of these issues and itemises them as areas requiring further development at the very end of his essay. Yet paradoxically he turns his back on the rich sources of insight and conceptualisation offered by European Marxism. This wholesale rejection seems to me to be rooted in an over-simplified view both of the tradition itself and of the historical experience to which it speaks. This is Smythe's own blindspot. Before I elaborate on this point however, it is necessary to outline his argument a little more fully.

As noted above, Smythe is not alone in insisting that contemporary mass communications systems must be analysed as an integral part of the economic base as well as of the superstructure. At its simplest this is so because communications are now big business with mass media companies featuring among the largest corporations in the major western economies. Indeed, some commentators have argued that recent developments, particularly the general shift from manufacturing to service industries and the investment switch from armaments to communications, have made the information industries "one of the economic leading edges of developing multi-national capitalism."⁴ Smythe's primary interest though, is not so much in the emerging structure of contemporary capitalism as in its underlying dynamics. For him the crucial question concerns the role of mass communications in reproducing capitalist relations of production. His answer centres on the part they play "in the last stage of infrastructural production where demand is produced and satisfied by purchases of consumer goods" (p3). In particular he focuses on their articulations with advertising and on the way that the mass media create "audiences with predictable specifications who will pay attention in predictable numbers and at particular times to particular means of communications" (p4). In order to generate these stable consumer blocs he argues, media entrepreneurs offer their audiences inducements in form of news and entertainment material designed to keep their attention and induce a favourable response towards the products being advertised. Hence, while he recognises

BLINDSPOTS ABOUT WESTERN MARXISM

that mass media content plays an important role relaying and reproducing dominant ideologies, for Smythe this is less important than their prime task of creating audiences-as-commodities for sale to monopoly capitalist advertisers. Through their exposure to mass media audience members learn to buy the particular goods advertised and acquire a general disposition to consume, thereby completing the circuit of production. Moreover, while they are doing this they are simultaneously reproducing their labour power through the relaxation and energy replacement entailed in consumption.

Despite the reservations which I will come to presently, Smythe deserves credit on at least two counts. Firstly, in contrast to most Marxist discussions of communications which start from Marx's more obvious statements about ideology, notably *The German Ideology* and the *1859 Preface*, his analysis is firmly grounded in the central economic works; *Capital* and the *Grundrisse*. This redirection of attention enables him to highlight a number of formulations which have been passed over previously and which deserve the attention of Marxists interested in communications. Secondly, Smythe's own attempt to apply these insights to the contemporary situation succeeds well in demonstrating their importance for a full understanding of the role of the mass media in capitalist societies. Unfortunately though, his argument suffers somewhat from overselling.

In part the problem stems from his treatment of the North American situation as paradigmatic. "Europeans reading this essay", he argues, "should try to perceive it as reflecting the North American scene today, and perhaps theirs soon" (p2). Today New York, L.A. and Vancouver, tomorrow London, Paris and the world. Of course there is a measure of truth in this assertion. North America does occupy a pivotal place in the world media system; as a source of ownership and investment, as an exporter of products, technologies and organisational styles, and as a key market for English language material. Certainly no analysis of the media systems of Britain and continental Europe would be complete without an analysis of their various links with the systems of North America. At the same time though, the European situation displays important differences which are reflected in the emphases and preoccupations of Marxist theorising. Smythe's failure to acknowledge and come to terms with these departures has produced his own blindspots about western Marxism. There are three particularly important omissions in his presentation.

1. He drastically underestimates the importance and centrality of the state in contemporary capitalism. True he refers in passing to the recent work of Nicos Poulantzas and Claus Offe, but only on his last page and then very much as an afterthought. Certainly the implications of their work are not explored in the body of the essay.

The continuing crisis of profitability has produced two contradictory movements within European capitalism. Firstly, a number of industries in-

GRAHAM MURDOCK

cluding mass communications have witnessed a marked concentration of ownership as the large firms have absorbed smaller concerns in a variety of sectors. In an effort to maintain profit rates these emerging multi-media conglomerates have sought out new markets, thereby further extending their reach and influence. Examples include: the institution of aggressive export policies, the opening up of new outlets such as commercial radio in Britain and so-called "free" television in Italy, and the incursion of competition and market criteria into hitherto public communications sectors such as French television. At the same time however, as the crisis has deepened, so the state has assumed a larger and larger role in formulating and directing economic activity and policy in order to guarantee the necessary conditions of existence for continued accumulation. The result is an indissoluble but contradictory relationship between the centralised capitalist state on the one hand and concentrated monopoly capital on the other. Consequently, as Bob Jessop has recently noted, "the analysis of the state . . . is an absolute precondition of adequate economic theorising today".⁵ Indeed, the very notion of a materialist *political* economy presupposes the centrality of state-economy relations. How exactly these relations are best analysed remains the subject of pointed debate among European Marxists, but it is a debate which is missing from Smythe's presentation. Nor are the questions to be settled solely economic. The problematic relations between capital and the capitalist state have important social and cultural repercussions. They are mapped onto the ideological conflict between criteria of profit as against need and onto the political struggles between public and private ownership and control. In Britain at the moment, for example, protracted struggles are being waged around the allocation of resources for the fourth television channel, and for local community radio and cable TV. And to varying degrees this pattern is repeated in the rest of continental Europe.

But more is at stake than a better account of the contemporary situation in Europe. If Marxism is to go beyond the critical analysis of capitalism to develop a genuinely comparative analysis of social formations it urgently needs an adequate framework for conceptualising the complex and shifting relations between modes of production and forms of the state. There are signs that this difficult but necessary enterprise is now gathering momentum within Marxism, with the revival of investigations into European Fascism, the spate of post-mortems on the fate of Chile, and the growing interest in the nature of socialist states and the problems of transition. This last is particularly crucial, for as Tom Bottomore has emphasised, an adequate "Marxist sociology at the present time would have to be capable of providing not only a 'real' analysis of capitalist society, but also a 'real' analysis of those forms of society which have emerged from revolutions inspired by Marxism itself, but which display many features that are problematic from the standpoint of Marxist theory."⁶ On this problem

BLINDSPOTS ABOUT WESTERN MARXISM

Smythe is entirely silent. His analysis applies only to advanced capitalist economies.

2. Smythe's preoccupation with the relations between communications and advertising leads him to underplay the independent role of media content in reproducing dominant ideologies. This is particularly clear in the case of those sectors with minimal dependence on advertising revenue — the cinema, the popular music industry, comic books, and popular fiction. True, they are still articulated to the marketing system through equipment sales (you need a record player to play records), through the use of film and pop stars to endorse consumer products, and through the manufacture of commodities based around film and comic book characters — Star Wars T-shirts, Mickey Mouse soap and so on. But selling audiences to advertisers is not the primary *raison d'être* of these media. Rather, they are in the business of selling explanations of social order and structured inequality and packaging hope and aspiration into legitimate bundles. In short, they work with and through ideology — selling the system.

These non-advertising based media are almost entirely passed over in Smythe's presentation in favour of the press and commercial television which are the exemplars *par excellence* of his thesis. Although secondary, the sectors he neglects are not exactly marginal. Certainly an adequate analysis would need to incorporate them, and here again western Marxism has much to offer. Pertinent work includes: Adorno's writing on the music industry; Gramsci's analyses of popular literature; Dieter Prokop's investigations of contemporary cinema; and Armand Mattelart's dissection of the ideology of Disney comics. Alongside these analyses of content and production others have worried away at the problem of understanding how ideologies become internalised and fixed in the consciousness of audiences. The various efforts to explore the relationships between Marxism and the ideas of Freud are probably the best-known. These range from the early work of Wilhelm Reich and of the Frankfurt School to the recent appropriations of Jacques Lacan.⁷ While these attempts have not always been particularly successful or convincing, they have at least grappled with the crucial problems of mediation and reception, and tried to explain how exactly the ideas of the ruling class come to constitute the ruling ideas of the epoch. In his eagerness to purge every last trace of idealism from his analysis, Smythe has abolished the problem of ideological reproduction entirely.

This is a serious oversight. Materialist analysis needs to begin by recognising that although integrated into the economic base, mass communications systems are also part of the superstructure, and therefore they play a double role in reproducing capitalist relations of production. They complete the economic circuit on which these relations rest and they relay the ideologies which legitimate them. This second function is not reducible to the first. Indeed, as several recent commentators have emphasised, the successful reproduction of

GRAHAM MURDOCK

ideology is one of the key conditions for the continued existence of prevailing productive relations.⁸ Therefore it is not a question of choosing between theories of ideology and theories of political economy, but of finding ways of integrating the two into a more adequate and complete account. To quote Tom Bottomore again: "This phenomenon, the maintenance of capitalist society through the reproduction of bourgeois culture" still "needs to be investigated in detail."⁹

3. Smythe tends to present the operations of mass communications systems as relatively smooth and unproblematic. Not only is this somewhat surprising theoretically, given Marxism's stress on contradiction and struggle; it does not fit the facts of the present situation. As mentioned earlier, the British media system is currently the site of protracted struggles over questions of use and control. There are demands for the extension of nationalisation and municipal ownership, for greater decentralisation and regionalisation, for various forms of worker control, and for greater public participation in planning and production. Similar demands are also being made across the rest of western Europe. Moreover, these struggles are mapped onto the broader patterns of class conflict: between different factions of capital, between owners and production personnel, between intellectual and technical workers within media organisations, and between producers and consumers. Smythe acknowledges the problem of class struggle as an important area requiring examination, but he gives no indication of how it might be accommodated within his framework. Once again however, some of the most fruitful pointers have come from western Marxism, particularly from the work of Gramsci.

Given that these issues of state economy relations, of ideological reproduction and of class struggle, appear to be central to an adequate materialist theory of mass communications, why does Smythe give them such short shrift. The obvious reason is lack of space. Clearly it is unreasonable to expect a single article to offer a fully comprehensive framework. However, it is reasonable to expect a degree of balance between the important elements. Unfortunately Smythe's presentation is clearly unbalanced. In his eagerness to jettison western Marxism he reverses its priorities and treats its preoccupations as peripheral. Partly this is polemic, but I think it is also symptomatic of a real failure on Smythe's part to come to grips with the tradition. He doesn't settle accounts, he simply refuses to pay. What then is western Marxism and what does it have to offer?

At its broadest, the term "Western Marxism" covers all the variants of Marxism which developed in western Europe after 1918. Hence it stands in contrast to the other great current — Soviet Marxism. Although servicable, this distinction has a tendency to blur around the edges. For example, one of the most influential western Marxist, Georg Lukács, spent long periods in the Soviet Union, an experience which is reflected in his writings. Conversely,

BLINDSPOTS ABOUT WESTERN MARXISM

Trotsky is often co-opted as a sort of honorary western Marxist. But even if we leave these ambiguous cases to one side, western Marxism still presents a remarkably complex and variegated intellectual tradition.

While it is broadly true that western Marxists have tended to concentrate their attentions of ideology and culture (for reasons we shall come to presently) there has always been a vigorous though subsidiary current of work on economics. Indeed, we are only just now beginning to explore this legacy; to come to terms with Austro-Marxism and particularly Hilferding,¹⁰ to work through the implications of Pierre Sraffa's writings,¹¹ and to recognise the important contributions of neglected figures such as Sohn-Rethel.¹² Smythe is however correct in suggesting that the insights generated by Marxist economists have never been systematically applied to the analysis of mass communications. Among those mainly interested in culture and ideology however, other important divisions are evident, most notably the split between those who involved themselves in political activity and those who remained disengaged. Where the first group found their main base and audience within the left parties and the workers' movement, the latter found theirs primarily within the universities and the literary establishment. Hence the break was roughly between the activists and the academics. The first group includes Gramsci, Brecht and a number of lesser figures like the Trotskyist Franz Jakubowski,¹³ while the second includes Adorno, Goldmann, Althusser, and Raymond Williams (in his later phase). From the list Smythe offers (p22) it is clear that it is this academic group that he has most in mind as representatives of western Marxism. Once again however, this distinction is not as firm as it first appears. Louis Althusser for example, is usually counted among the more theoreticist of contemporary western Marxists, yet he is also an influential member of the French Communist Party whose works are permeated albeit surreptitiously, by party polemics. Nevertheless, Smythe's assertion that "professorial Marxists" have been preoccupied with questions of philosophy, ideology and culture is broadly correct.¹⁴ He poses the question of why this should be so, and expresses the hope that others will try to suggest an answer. An even half-way adequate reply would take at least a book, but for the moment some sketchy suggestions will have to serve.

To understand the blindspots and *idées fixes* of western Marxism we need to place its development in the context of the history which formed it. As a beginning it is useful to distinguish three broad phases: the interwar years, the period from 1945 to the end of the 1960's and the years since. Although certain themes are common to all three, each has inflected them in a distinctive way.

The central problematic of the interwar years was formed by the failure of the revolutionary initiatives in the advanced western economies. One after another, promising advances were turned back and crushed. Later, with capitalism facing an unprecedented crisis, instead of a resurgence of socialism, Fascism

GRAHAM MURDOCK

took root and flowered in the very places where revolution had seemed most possible: in Germany, in Austria and in Italy. Not surprisingly, explaining this spectacular reversal became a major priority among western Marxists. Since economic crisis had clearly failed to fuel the revolution, attention turned to the forces maintaining cohesion and domination. Some, like Trotsky, Franz Neumann and Sohn-Rethel,¹⁵ focused on the new fascist forms of the capitalist state and their coercive apparatuses. Others, notably Gramsci, Adorno and Horkheimer highlighted the part played by communications and culture in engineering the consent of the governed. This second line of inquiry was given added impetus by the massive expansion of the communications industries. These were the years that saw the rise of radio as a mass medium, the introduction of talking "pictures", the sophisticated deployment of photo journalism, and their wholesale co-option into the ideological apparatuses of the fascist states. Against this background of escalating propaganda management, censorship and repression the question of the mass media's economic and commercial role seemed relatively unimportant.

Once ideology was viewed as a key weapon in the arsenal of class domination, critical intellectual work on culture could be regarded as a crucial contribution to the general struggle against fascism and the capitalist system which supported it. For Horkheimer and Adorno this meant preserving the gap between the actual and the possible; for Gramsci it meant constant educational work to build a radical counter culture among the dominated. This emphasis on the importance of critical intellectual work and cultural practice provided a convenient occupational rationale for Marxist intellectuals. For, as Pierre Bourdieu has wryly pointed out, nobody believes more fervently in the transforming power of ideas than the professional intelligentsia who owe their class position to their intellectual skills.¹⁶ In a number of cases this occupational ideology was further reinforced by biographical experience. Adorno for example, came from a milieu where cultural activity and accomplishment was a central value. He had dabbled at composing and music criticism. Similarly it was not particularly surprising that Gramsci should value educational activity, given that it had provided his own escape route from poverty and his entry ticket into the radical intelligentsia.

After the initial period of post-war reconstruction, the advanced capitalist economies of western Europe entered a cycle of boom which generated a rapid expansion in the consumption of leisure and entertainment goods. Many of these developments were dominated by American style products and organisations, and were firmly articulated to the advertising and marketing system which Smythe describes. Why then did western Marxists generally pay less attention to these aspects than to the problems of cultural form and ideological transmission?

BLINDSPOTS ABOUT WESTERN MARXISM

Part of the answer has to do with the classification of Soviet Marxism. The concentration on culture among western Marxists at this time can be seen as an over-reaction to the economism of the official Soviet line and to the Stalinist political practice that stemmed from it. Against the Soviet tendency to reduce cultural forms to reflections of class position and class interest, western Marxists stressed the relative autonomy of ideological production and the complexity of its internal dynamics. Raymond Williams, for example, left the British Communist Party in the late 1940's to begin a long interrogation of the British socialist tradition in an effort to find non-reductionist ways of conceptualising culture-society relations. Elsewhere, others were independently engaged on the same task. In France, for example, Sartre was struggling to marry his existentialism with his growing commitment to Marxism; Lucien Goldmann was exploring the possibilities offered by Lukács' work, and Roland Barthes was trying to integrate Saussurian linguistics with a Marxist account of domination and to apply the resulting framework to the analysis of French popular culture. Once again, this general intellectual project was underpinned by occupational and biographical considerations. It is certainly no accident, for example, that a number of prominent European Marxists of the post-war period began either as professional philosophers (Goldmann and Althusser), or as writers and literary critics (Sartre and Williams).

Another part of the explanation however, lies in the changing texture of social conflict. The expansion of consumerism was accompanied by a dampening down of industrial conflict and class struggle. The contradiction between Capital and Labour receded from the centre of attention and its place was taken by conflicts grounded in age, in gender, in nationality, in race, and above all in the yawning gap between the developed and underdeveloped worlds, between the colonisers and the colonised. Moreover, these conflicts appeared primarily as political and cultural struggles for self determination, political liberation and cultural autonomy. To many observers on the left it seemed that culture was not just one important site of struggle among others, but perhaps the *most* important. This misreading of history reached its height during 1967-1968, when for a brief moment it seemed that the construction of a radical counter culture coupled with the control of key institutions of transmission would bring about a bloodless transformation of capitalism.

The seventies have provided a sharp corrective to this utopianism, and as the economic crisis has deepened so the intellectual pendulum has begun to swing back, and questions of economic dynamics and determinations have re-emerged at the centre of Marxist debate. The reappropriation of Marx's mature economic works, the renewed attention to the core problems of crisis and the falling rate of profit, and the revival of interest in figures such as Sraffa, all indicate a resurgence of Marxist political economy. This development in turn has opened up new issues in the other key areas of contemporary debate; the

GRAHAM MURDOCK

structure and role of the state in contemporary capitalism, the dynamics of class structuration and class struggle, and the nature of legitimation processes. At the present time then, Marxism in Europe is at a point of transition. It is simultaneously assimilating the *culturalist* legacy of western Marxism and confronting the implications of the emerging political economy. Certainly a choice has to be made, but it is not as Smythe would have it, a choice between a theory of economic processes on the one hand and a theory of ideology on the other. Rather it is a choice between different ways of conceptualising the complex relations *between* the economic, ideological and political dimensions of modern capitalism.

Western Marxism still has an indispensable role to play in this enterprise. Firstly, it speaks to real theoretical silences within classical Marxism, silences which cannot be adequately filled by Smythe's schema. Secondly, because it is grounded in historical processes which are still unfolding themselves it provides points of entry into the analysis of contemporary experience. The problem of understanding the resurgence of neo-Fascism within Europe is one obvious example of its continuing relevance.

To react to western Marxism's over-emphasis on culture and ideology as Smythe does by jettisoning it completely and calling for a new improved "non-Eurocentred Marxism" (p21) seems to me to be an over-reaction which substitutes one set of biases and blindspots for another. Rather than rejecting the European tradition *tout court*, we need to critically rework it, to confront the theoretical problems and possibilities that it opens up, to sort out the concepts and insights that remain viable, and to consign the rest to the history of ideas. There is no doubt at all that Marxism needs to be overhauled if it is to produce convincing analyses of contemporary mass communications systems. As part of this task we shall certainly need to develop the fertile line of analysis sketched by Smythe, but we shall also need to assimilate and build on the contributions of Gramsci, Althusser, Williams and others. For without them, the Marxism of the 1980's will be very much the poorer.

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BLINDSPOTS ABOUT WESTERN MARXISM

Notes

1. Raymond Williams, Notes on Marxism in Britain since 1945, *New Left Review*, No. 100, January/February 1977, p. 90.
2. Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, London: Oxford University Press, 1977, p. 138.
3. See Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, 'Capitalism, Communications and Class Relations', in James Curran *et al* (eds.) *Mass Communication and Society*, London: Edward Arnold, 1977. See also John Westergaard's contribution to the same volume.
4. Nicholas Garnham, 'Towards a Political Economy of Culture', *New University Quarterly*, Summer 1977, pp 341-2.
5. Bob Jessop, 'Remarks on Some Recent Theories of the Capitalist State'. Unpublished paper, University of Cambridge, 1977, p. 40.
6. Tom Bottomore, *Marxist Sociology*, London: Macmillan 1975, p. 22.
7. See for example, Rosalind Coward and John Ellis, *Language and Materialism*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977.
8. This argument is put with particular force in Anthony Cutler, Barry Hindess, Paul Hirst and Athar Hussain, *Marx's Capital and Capitalism Today*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1977.
9. Tom Bottomore, *op. cit.*, p. 30.
10. See Anthony Cutler *et al*, *op. cit.*, Part I.
11. See Ian Steedman, *Marx After Sraffa*, London: New Left Books, 1977.
12. A work by Sohn-Rethel on one of his major preoccupations ('Intellectual and Manual Labour') is due for publication by Macmillan later this year.
13. Jakubowski's major work, *Ideology and Superstructure in Historical Materialism*, was published in English in 1976 by Alison and Busby.
14. This argument is also central to Parry Anderson's recent analysis and critique of the western Marxist tradition, *Considerations on Western Marxism*, London: New Left Books, 1976.
15. Franz Neumann's *Behemoth: The Structure and Practice of National Socialism* has been available in English since the early 1940's. Trotsky's writings on the fascist state were only published in English in 1971 under the title: *The Struggle Against Fascism in Germany*. Sohn-Rethel's major work, *Okonomie und Klassenstruktur des Deutschen Faschismus*, remains as yet unavailable in translation.
16. Pierre Bourdieu, 'Cultural Reproduction and Social Reproduction', in Richard Brown (ed.) *Knowledge, Education and Cultural Change*, London: Tavistock Publications, 1973.