

REJOINDER TO GRAHAM MURDOCK

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The assertion is made that I propose a choice between a theory of economic process and a theory of ideology; that by a "serious oversight" I have "abolished the problem of ideological reproduction entirely"; that I failed "to come to grips with the European/Marxist tradition"; that I don't "settle accounts" with that tradition, but "simply refuse to pay". If these assertions were well-founded, then indeed my paper would have been misconceived and mischievous. I refute these charges but I welcome the opportunity to clarify and to some degree extend my thesis.

Murdock's criticisms reflect the very Eurocentered, class-biased, reductionist tendencies which warranted my paper in the first place. He has a curious inclination to reduce the real and the theoretical frame of paper which hinges on the meaning of "Western Marxism" in its title. I had elaborated this frame as "a blindspot in Marxist theory in the European and Atlantic basin cultures", and "This lag in considering the product of the mass media is more understandable in European (including Eastern European) countries than in North America". By implication, the antithesis of "Western Marxism" in this context is Eastern Marxism, specifically Chinese. Neither praise nor blame for Chinese Marxism is implied by my exclusion of it from the object of my attack. Chinese Marxists have not had to deal with the full impact on their population of the Consciousness Industry, powered by that advertising vehicle of Western Capitalism, the commercial mass media of communication. But to expand on this rationale in my article would have been to extend its scope unduly. Chinese communications theory deserves its own analysis. Is it not reductionist and Eurocentered to restrict the grounds for evaluating my paper's argument, as Murdock does, to Europe and within Europe to that part which lies between the Berlin Wall and the Azores? Marxist writings from the Americas are totally ignored, those from the Soviet bloc dealt with separately in Murdock's reply and the implications for the world capitalist order of my frame of reference are denied.

Do I propose a choice between a theory of the economic process and a theory of ideology and opt for the former? Do I reduce the function of the mass media in "relaying" the ideologies which legitimate capitalist relations of production

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to their function in "completing the economic circuit on which these relations rest" as Murdoch charges? If this is how the argument of the blindspot paper is perceived, I failed to express myself clearly enough in writing it. The part which advertising, political candidates, institutions and ideological points of view in the guise of the free lunch and advertising messages play in the work set for the audience commodities to do is recognized. It is provisionally concluded that the work which audience members do for advertisers takes place in a household context where familial, individual and other associative needs must be dealt with. I explained how the twin of the household matrix was that at the job where the ideological lessons are built into the job descriptions, promotions possibilities, and incentive wage arrangements. What I was trying to say regarding the production of ideology boils down to these propositions; that commodities as well as ideas carry ideological meaning, that at the job matrix there is ideological instruction and at the household matrix where income-spending decisions are made, the commercial messages or mass media output are to be considered in relation to the role of the audience as a do-it-yourself marketing agent and reproducer of labour power. In the interaction within and between these matrices, consciousness is produced and ideology cultivated — just how we do not yet know. These propositions are intended as a beginning toward understanding how ideology and consciousness are produced, not as disembodied abstract processes in the realm of psychology divorced from the nitty-gritty of daily life, but as part of the latter. We North Americans have had half a century to observe how the monopoly capitalist corporations through demand management via advertising and mass communications dominate culture and produce *mind slavery* (a tendency toward ideological tunnel vision). It would indeed be useful now to see some studies bearing on whether or not the writers in the Western Marxist tradition have dealt with this aspect of monopoly capitalism and, if so, how. The proximate reality imposes this burden of proof on them, not on me alone. When a mythical little boy shouted that the king wore no clothes, it was time for his elders to verify the proposition, and they did.

Is the North American situation a genuine paradigm for monopoly in relation to culture, or is it, as Murdoch seems to suggest, that Western Europe is a special case, somehow fixated in nineteenth century production relations and isolated from the effects of monopoly capitalist transnational corporations, advertising and mass-marketing, mass-communications processes? Murdoch concedes a "measure of truth" in my assertion that the North American situation is paradigmatic, but says that I "oversell" it. His argument is curiously like that of Jeremy Tunstall's *The Media are American*.¹ North American media do hold a pivotal place in the world media system, as source of ownership and investment, as exporter of products, technologies and organizational styles, and as exporters of English-language media material. He

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then argues that "the European situation displays important differences which are reflected in the emphases and preoccupations of Marxist theorising" and that my "failure to acknowledge and come to terms with these departures has produced (my) own blindspots about western Marxism." He does not indicate what these important differences are, but cites "three particularly important omissions" on my part; but first my answer to the immediate question.

I had not considered it necessary to demonstrate that transnational corporations, linked oligopolistically with major domestic monopoly corporations in capitalist countries, form a web of production and merchandising activity for consumer goods and services which spans the capitalist countries and even penetrates the "socialist" economies of Eastern Europe. Their rapid penetration of markets previously less rationalized is the result of strategies involving advertising, advertising agencies, takeovers, influence, aggressive merchandising of consumer goods and services and skillful propaganda for the "free flow of information". This has been analytically described by Schiller, Nordenstreng, Mattelart, and others² and it did not occur to me that Marxist readers of my blindspot article would need to be reminded of these facts. Murdock toward the end of his reply confirms what he had tried to deny in charging me with "overselling" my central thesis. "The expansion of consumerism was accompanied by a dampening down of industrial conflict and class struggle . . ." Welcome to the club. The ignominious defeat of the Henry A. Wallace Progressive Party in the 1948 election carried a similar message for North American Marxists who paid attention. Western Europe is not a special case, even if the implicit bourgeois assumptions of its Marxists seem to make it one.

The first of my alleged omissions is that I "drastically underestimate the importance and centrality of the state in contemporary capitalism." Of course I am aware of the lively interests by Marxists in Europe and North America in recent work on the theory of the state. This debate may indeed be central to the elaboration of an overarching theory of the superstructure. But theories of the state are at a level of abstraction remote from the nitty-gritty level where daily the institutions of monopoly capitalism use commodity marketing and the mass media to push capitalist ideology, to absorb the energies of the population in such a way that the old-style class struggle withers away, and conflict takes on the "demographic" character that Murdock uses to describe it (which happens curiously enough to be the specifications advertisers use to identify the audiences which they buy from the media). Is it necessary to regard work on the theory of the state and work on the theory of the audience commodity as mutually exclusive? I had thought each could benefit by work on the other.

True, I was silent as to how my theoretical analysis applied to the peripheral or third world economies. This silence was due, not to my analysis applying

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only to advanced capitalist economies, as Murdock would have it, but again because I thought the connection to be obvious. Wherever the transnational corporations and their allied advertising agencies, mass media programme and technique peddlers go in the third world or into socialist countries, there the practice of producing audiences as commodities designed to market goods and ideas to themselves goes also. Chile is a good example, and I'm glad Murdock raised it. Schiller and I published an article which pointedly drew the contradiction between the uninterrupted activity of consciousness industry in the interest of capitalist transnational corporations in the daily lives of Chileans and the unrealistic assumption on the part of the Allende government that once basic industry had been nationalized, popular support would carry the Unidad Popular over into the transitional stage to socialism — and we did it before the putsch, not *post-mortem*.³ I see the world capitalist system as having systemic integrity, albeit of a kind full of contradictions; I do not see it as a series of discrete structures and problems, as Murdock's reply seems to do.

In dealing with the issue of the state, Murdock raises a very important issue, that of class struggle. He says I gave no indication of how it might be accommodated within my framework. He is correct, I did not. The reason was that I didn't know how to do so, not that I considered it irrelevant. So I left the class struggle at the point of the reproduction of labour power — a very unsatisfactory position in which to leave it. Murdock observed, as noted, that the "dampening down of industrial conflict and class struggle" "accompanied the expansion of consumerism" and this had a lot to do with misperception by the left of the counter culture's potential for revolution. In North America since 1945 there has been an abundance of strikes and lockouts, and a dearth of class struggle. Coincidentally the ideology of workers and their unions has been predominantly economic — the conflict is over sharing capitalism's goodies. To discern class struggle in North America one must look at minority ethnic groups (Blacks, Chicanos, Puerto Ricans, Native People) in class terms, and in that limited context it has been visible at times. Now that in the post-1968 period, European Marxists must face the same phenomenon, let us pursue the analysis of how ideology is produced in the daily round of life of workers, prominent in which is their experience as unpaid "workers" for advertisers. Perhaps through such analysis the dampened class struggle may be reactivated.

His second charge of "omission" is that I portray the mass media under monopoly capitalism as a smooth and unproblematic process. Of course, if you examine the media and advertising at close range, a dog-eat-dog competition for power and profit is evident. Monopoly corporations continuously struggle to create "new" services (cable TV originated in western United States in the late 1940's), and the struggles between terrestrial common carriers, cable companies and aerospace giant corporations pushing satellites displayed a tug-of-war for favour from the state to give just one example. In the area of soft-ware,

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a daily and weekly struggle characterizes the actual audience production scene. I have analyzed and written about these struggles for 30 years. More recently others (William Melody, Herbert Schiller, Manley Irwin, *et al*) have joined in this work. But my blindspot article was intended to focus on theory, not industry structure and policy; and the *systemic* characteristics were what I emphasized, at a sacrifice of detailed authenticity which would have blown the paper to the dimensions of a book. I contend that the enterprise "trees" do constitute a smoothly functioning monopoly capitalist "forest" because of and despite their intra-mural conflicts.

Have I underplayed the "independent role" of content in reproducing dominant ideologies? Is it to underplay the secondary role of the mass media to emphasize the primary role, neglected in the literature of the past century? Nevertheless I was and am dissatisfied with my treatment of the dialectical relation of media "content" to "advertising". I use quotes around the words to emphasize that they have no existence separate from each other. Humphrey McQueen, quite independently, came to the same conclusion:

To make sense of Australia's media monopolies, it is essential to get the relationship between the media and advertising the right way round: commercial mass media are not news and features backed up by advertising; on the contrary, *the commercial mass media are advertisements which carry news, features and entertainment in order to capture audiences for the advertisers . . .* It is a complete mistake to analyse the relationship between media and advertising by supposing that the media's prime function is to sell advertised products to audiences. On the contrary, the media's job is to sell audiences to advertisers.⁴

Within a given programme or newspaper or magazine, there is an integration of style and content between the ostensibly "advertising" and "non-advertising" content. Both must meet the advertisers' standards of what is entertaining, informative, and provocative. Murdock emphasizes that I ignored cinema, popular music, comic books and popular fiction. Superficially, as Murdock says, it seems that selling audiences to advertisers is not the primary *raison d'être* of these media. But, as he must know, their "content" is cross-marketed between themselves and between themselves and the mass media: stories, stars, songs, and films are passed from one to another medium and there cross-blended with the dictates of advertisers. For an axiom of the trade is that if it will sell as a paperback or song it will work as lure for the commercial

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mass media. So their apparent independence is illusory within the monopoly capitalist system.

I am accused of abolishing the problem of ideological reproduction entirely. In reality what I have abolished is the simplistic model of *direct* manipulation by the state or the government propaganda ministry. This I have done in the pursuit of a more realistic if more complex and presently obscure process by which consciousness industry produces ideology. In this connection, further consideration of the characteristics of the audience as commodity produces a provocative and possibly fruitful question, which I will put in the form of a conundrum: What mode of work is it which has the following characteristics: One is born into it and stays in it from infancy to the old folks' home; one is not consulted as to the precise work to be done tomorrow; work tasks are presented and done; and lastly, one is unpaid? Answer? Slavery? Yes, and the audience too? Is it not correct, as a matter of political economy, to refer to a category of work (not to all individual audience members any more than to all slaves) as "mind slaves"? Even before television, bourgeois sociologists Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton concluded that the mass media audiences were systemically subject to "dysfunctional narcotization."⁵

In support of the charge that I have underplayed the independent role of the content in reproducing relations of production, Murdock says that I have committed a serious oversight. "Materialist analysis needs to begin by recognizing that although integrated into the economic base mass communications are also part of the superstructure, and that they therefore play a double role in reproducing capitalist relations of production." I refer him to my paper:

"If this analytical sketch is valid, serious problems for Marxist theory emerge. Among them is the apparent fact that while the superstructure is not ordinarily thought of as being itself engaged in infrastructural productive activity, the mass media of communications are *simultaneously* in the superstructure *and* engaged indispensably in the last stage of infrastructural production where demand is produced and satisfied by purchases of consumer goods." (emphasis in original).

And I later refer to ". . . the implications of this 'principal and decisive' integration of superstructure and base which reality presents."

It was beyond the scope of my paper to try to explain *why* there has been a Western Marxist blindspot, to which question Murdock devotes the last five

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pages of his reply. No doubt this question should be raised and answered. But the purpose of my paper was to establish a *prima facie* case that such a blindspot does exist. Readers of his reply and my rejoinder, and possibly other replies and further rejoinders will determine whether I have succeeded or not. Because Murdock has raised the why question, I will close this rejoinder by volunteering what might be some clues to the answer. Doubtless the factors which he mentions played a part in producing the blindspot — superstructural domination via propaganda management by the fascist states; and the “ossification” of Soviet Marxism. But I suggest that the persistence of usually implicit bourgeois class conceptions of “Culture”, “Science”, “Technology”, and hierarchical bureaucratic organizational structures are to be found endemic amongst Western Marxists, and that these preconceptions have produced the blindspot regarding consciousness industry and ideology. Hence the need to challenge and re-examine the European tradition through a perspective which owes much to the Chinese experience.⁶ My view is that Marxism at bottom arises from historical dialectical materialism and class struggle through political economy. It is what Murdock calls the “culturalist” legacy of Western Marxism which stands suspect of being deficient in regard to such terms. I suggest that the way to a Marxist theory of how ideology is produced by monopoly capitalism is to use an historical, materialist, dialectical method always seeking the reality of class struggle, and the terms will reflect political, economic and psychological aspects of the process. Finally, I do not believe the first obligation of Western Marxism to be to speak “. . . to the real theoretical silences within classical Marxism.” It smacks of static abstractions. I believe the first obligation of Marxist theorists is to use the obvious and trusted tools to analyze and predict the development of modern monopoly capitalism.

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Notes

1. Jeremy Tunstall, *The Media Are American*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977.
2. Herbert I Schiller, *Mass Communications and American Empire*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1971. *The Mind Managers*, Boston: Beacon Press, 1972; *Communication and Cultural Domination*, New York: Int. Arts and Sciences Press, 1976.
Kaarle Nordenstreng and Tapio Varis, *Television Traffic: A One Way Street?* Paris: UNESCO, 1974.
Richard J. Barnett and Ronald E. Muller, *Global Reach*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1974.
A. Mattelart and A. Dorfman, *How to Read Donald Duck: Imperialist Ideology in the Disney Comic*. New York: International General, 1975.
3. Herbert I. Schiller and Dallas W. Smythe, "Chile: An End to Cultural Colonialism?", *Society*, 1972, Vol. 9, No. 5, p. 35-39, 61.
4. Humphrey McQueen, *Australia's Media Monopolies*. Camberwell: Victoria, Australia, 3124 (Widescope, P.O. Box 339) 1977, p. 10-11. Emphasis is original.
5. Paul F. Lazarsfeld and Robert K. Merton, "Mass Communications, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action", in Bryson, L. (Ed.) *The Communication of Ideas*. New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1948, 1964.
6. Charles Bettelheim, *Class Struggle in the USSR. First Period: 1917-1923*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 1976.