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Reviews

Narrating the Crisis: Hegemony and the South African Press

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Reviewed by: Michael Chapman

Narrating the Crisis: Hegemony and the South African Press is the first of a series of three books, compositely entitled *Addressing the Nation*. The aim is to examine the history of the commercial press, broadcasting and the 'alternative' press in South Africa. The present study, edited by and written largely by Keyan Tomaselli, Ruth Tomaselli and Johan Muller, concentrates on the mainstream commercial press, and contains a general theoretical overview of the methodology to be adopted, a chapter which traces the political and economic context of the South African media, and several 'case studies' which investigate the struggle for political dominance between the two Afrikaans publishing groups Perskor and Nasionale Pers, the reporting of educational matters by the Afrikaans press, and the responses in English-language newspapers to labour issues and to the 'problem' of black housing.

With buzz-words like ideology and hegemony immediately confronting the reader, the approach and conclusion might seem predictable: the mainstream press in South Africa, whether English or Afrikaans, was ultimately the lackey of racial capitalism, its selection of news dictated by what was not harmful to the prevailing system of power and privilege. In consequence the 'freedom of the press' is a myth, as anyone possessing the superior insights of Althusserian Marxism knows, and instead we have news as an ideological discourse mediated by journalists who, as members of the petty bourgeoisie, consciously or unconsciously participate in hegemonic processes. That this is the consensus of the various contributors does not, however, make *Narrating the Crisis* itself simply an overdetermined product of the plot of history.

In their opening section the editors suggest a theoretical grid which will take into account not only Althusser's somewhat idealised view of the functioning of state apparatuses (whether political parties or newspapers), but also Raymond Williams's notion of 'experience' as a mediating activity through which social process is 'lived' by different people, and E.P.

Thompson's concept of values (activities which vary according to class and therefore compete in any socio-economic arena).

We are reminded that ideology and culture are the products of human endeavour and not just passive reproductions of the state and its institutional life, and the essays in the book succeed on the whole in conveying the complex character of press interests and practices in our social formation. If hegemony, as Gramsci puts it, is the unstable equilibrium that a ruling class achieves at a particular moment, the authors do not try here to erase or avoid the often conflicting demands of race, capital, Afrikaner sectionalism, Botha's "Total Strategy" and journalistic liberal tradition which together constitute something of the operating field of the commercial press in this country.

Chapter 1, 'A Conceptual Framework...', clarifies difficult theoretical issues, while Chapter 2 explores the parameters of 'freedom' and 'constraint' in the construction of news. In relating reportage to larger contexts the mainstream press, we are told, highlights 'events' at the expense of situational analyses, so that as 'resettlements' of black communities became more frequent, for example, we have a 'condition' which is no longer newsworthy. Such procedures of selectivity, emphasis and 'gatekeeping' have of course a powerful effect on the shaping of the South African 'reality'. Johan Muller writes with subtle understanding of the Afrikaans press, but I tended to get a little lost in Simon Burton's chapter on 'Labour and the English-language Press'. The problem (that the commercial press reports on dramatic disputes while largely ignoring the ongoing processes of labour development and contestation) should be fairly self-evident given the nature of the commercial press and its readership, and the argument could have been shortened to effect. Perhaps a perspective of debate on Burton's chapter can only be supplied by a comparative study of mainstream and 'alternative' approaches. How do *New Nation* and *The Star* respond, respectively, to similar labour related concerns? Is the *Weekly Mail*, which has a largely white 'bourgeois-intellectual' readership, a labour-event or a labour-process newspaper?

As my own field is South African literature, I noted with interest that Jeffrey McCarthy and Michelle Friedman preface their chapter on black housing with lines from Lionel Abrahams's poem 'Soweto Funeral', and comment that "social scientists may have been a little less perceptive than the poets in their interpretation of the existential role of the dilapidated built environment assigned to blacks...". The point is that poets have usually tried to touch the 'lived experience' in all its local contours. McCarthy and Friedman attempt to subject the urban geographer's understanding to the political and commercial prerogatives of the press and address questions such as: Why did the media 'discover' black housing during certain periods?; against what background was the 'discovery' of black housing made by different sectors of the media and in what context was it discussed once it emerged as an issue? But the argument, while rigorous, seems ill at ease with

the contours of our own experiential geographies, and the authors admit in their postscript that their article, which was written some years previously, relied perhaps too exclusively upon European Marxist concepts to interrogate specifically South African urban problems.

The reminder is a useful one. A great deal of current cultural analysis uses concepts such as ideology and hegemony in overly Europeanised ways. Generally, however, *Narrating the Crisis* avoids the diagrams of any new Eurocentricism and firmly rubs theory against local circumstances. For this alone, the book should prove valuable not only to students of cultural studies, but to a wider readership concerned to understand the signifying procedures of this society. Finally, I would suggest that free copies be sent to the editors of our mainstream press. Perhaps they would then begin to realise, more self consciously, why their editorials, based on good liberal principles often sound so hollow in a vacuum of sociopolitical investigation. If violence has become a 'condition' and therefore no longer particularly newsworthy, thank goodness for 'events' such as Jani and Eugene Terre' Blanche's sexcapades.

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