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The Ideology of Cultural Development: Theoretical foundations for research and action on communications

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The United Nations Education Science and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) is on the verge of instituting a global communications programme which could have a profound effect upon the practice and use of media and culture throughout the world - most particularly underdeveloped regions like southern Africa.

At the end of 1981 international bureaucrats met in Mexico City to put financial flesh on the bones of an 'International Programme for Development Communications' (IPDC). The programme has, as a minimum requirement, responsibility for assisting Third World nations to construct media structures which accurately reflect the cultural aspirations of their people while maintaining, on behalf of furious representations from Western states, a 'free and balanced flow' of information and culture throughout each region.

As in the case of many other lofty international pronouncements the aims of the IPDC are burdened with compromise. At national and local levels the temptation will be to dismiss the IPDC as yet another statement of good intentions far from the realities of 'on the ground' cultural activities. However, these temptations should be resisted. Already groups, agencies and institutions concerned with the role of media in development have taken up the ideals expressed through the IPDC. They are lining up new kinds of programmes for the training of journalists, the use of the media in adult education and agricultural extension, and the construction of local media networks which aim at giving expression to the cultural interests and information requirements of people at the base of developing societies.

The fact that these programmes will, through the IPDC, have access to previously unavailable funds means that there will be a sea change in the orientation of many national communications structures. Whether these changes will benefit 'grass roots' populations or simply provide a new source of capital and expertise to local elites for an extension of repressive national communications systems will depend a lot on the ideology underpinning IPDC operations.

IPDC is the result of a ten year investigation of national and international communications, sponsored by UNESCO, which culminated in the 484 page Final Report of the International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems. Fifteen commissioners under the Chairmanship of Ireland's former Foreign Minister, Sean McBride, brought together specific research reports from media analysts located throughout the northern and southern hemispheres.

The evidence provided by many of the reports draws attention to the role of information in society. Their conclusions hinge on two opposed interpretative ideologies: functionalism and historical materialism.
It is the purpose of this review essay to highlight these ideologies by examining the critique of both offered by Armand Mattelart, one of the researchers whose work is included in the McBride Report, and to use this critique to characterise the approach of two major exponents of these ideologies: Rosemary Righter and Anthony Smith.

Mattelart and Siegelaub present a compendium of critical studies which, they say, are united in the aim of "dismantling or merely describing the mechanisms of the bourgeoisie's ideological domination to reveal levels of critical consciousness which in turn, represent levels of resistance to the status quo" (1). At the outset, Mattelart warns that the current ideological confrontation between functionalism and historical materialism obscures the fact that there are actually two major 'factions' operating at the level of analysis. One, dependency theory, has been embraced by revisionist researchers and is largely incorporated into the McBride report presenting a 'neo-Marxist' perspective on culture. The other, which draws on a classical Marxist tradition emphasising base-superstructure relations within and between societies has been pushed to the edge of the international literature on communications.

First, the book offers a section devoted to the 'Bourgeois Ideology of Communication' where prejudice presumption, and authoritarian inclination of functionalism is documented, particularly in relation to communications in development. The history of functionalism in communications is traced to its origination as a 'therapeutic and operational' adjunct of psychology aimed at the construction of ever more efficient one-way relationships between message transmitters and passive audiences within the commercial marketplace. In another essay, Marshall McLuhan's analyses are said to be "prophetic doctrines" creating a sensational techno-determinist "meta-language" whose messianic character supports the confirmation of bourgeois social superstructures as the end-point of history. By accepting as the centre of their study 'accommodation' and 'control analysis', functionalists limited sociology in all its spheres to the simple quantification of processes and effects within societies leading to 'solutions' essentially irrelevant to actual political, economic or historical conditions:

Since true history can only be written by analyzing the history of crises, the interpretations of social processes and phenomena that may be offered by bourgeois sociology are doomed to remain forever at the halfway stage ... (Therefore) ... these sociologist's encyclopedic knowledge masks their incomprehension of the interplay of social forces, as well as their structural incapacity to apprehend and retain the decisive moments when the hegemony of a given class is challenged (2).

Throughout the period when Western capital was establishing its dominant international position, and particularly in the post World War II period when the bourgeois notion of progress became the de facto definition of development applied to the Third World, functionalism travelled as the core piece of cultural baggage. Mattelart offers Latin America as a case study. At the beginning of the 1960s three developments brought a rise of interest in communication studies: expansion of television and the creation of a market for U.S. programmes; emphasis on the 'diffusion of modern attitudes' in rural areas in an attempt to turn peasants into market oriented farmers; campaigns for birth control and education 'up-grading' in an attempt to create a fundamental pre-condition for a transition from latifundia economics to industrial economics, allowing the introduction of multinational manufacturing concerns and Western style consumerism urges.

The Processes and Effects of Mass Communications, a book edited by the Americans
Wilbur Schramm and Donald F. Roberts. was the bible of this mission. Translated into Spanish, it became the guiding text for journalism and communications schools throughout the region. "Books and manuals on functionalism were translated by USIS (United States Information Service) and thousands were distributed in the universities by the U.S. embassies" (3).

In time, popular action against functionalist inspired development policies and projects became widespread. Peasant revolts, ad hoc strikes and liberation movements grew out of a reaction against a quickly evaporating food base, radical reductions in living standards, growing frustrations with urban industrial wage slavery, and cultural dysfunctions caused by the penetration of media encouraging consumer accumulation. Unable to recognize the structural contradictions underlying this social dislocation or understand the political occasion it occurred, a generation of social scientists steeped in functionalism offered treatises on how the situation might be 'controlled' or how the people caught up in the process might accommodate to their inevitable position. In more extreme situations functionalist sociologists have become experts in the methods of psychological control, propaganda and "the semantics of violence" (4).

Protected in their ignorance, from the stark reality of oppression which their ideology sustains, and resplendent in their occupation of science, with its catchwords 'balance' and 'objectivity', Western media sociologists continue to work as ideologues on behalf of the state/capital superstructure. Most recently they have engaged in what they call a 'rear-guard' action within the communications and culture sector. The 'challenge of the Third World' contained in the UNESCO inspired debate is seen as a threat to that cultural freedom insured through the capitalist 'market-place of ideas' where social balance was assisted by the mechanics of accommodation. The argument turns on the notion of the 'free flow of information'. The social scientists, believing information alone will have a liberating effect on individuals requiring 'socialisation for development', ignore the integration and dominance of Western media monopolies and their drive to turn all cultural expression to the replication of capitalist values.

The most recent and potent expression of this ideology within the international debate is set out by Rosemary Righter in her book Whose News? Politics, the Press and the Third World. Righter takes up a position within liberal democracy where the functionalist ideology confers neutrality on the acts of observation, description and elucidation. Yet she is plain enough about her bias when she says:

Whatever there may be in the accusation that 'the way mass media deal with issues impairs understanding, making intelligent decision - and policy - making impossible, and precludes the existence of an adequately informed participatory democracy', the market system with all its imperfections has a good claim to coming the nearest to doing the job (5).

The book sets out the 'problem' in narrow terms: for generations the Western liberal concept of press freedom has "matter-of-factly" underwritten the service of democracy by mass media. She sees this as a "non-ideological purpose". Now this definition is challenged by a strictly ideological notion of communications in society which is held with "evangelical" purpose. Righter sets out to examine the pros and cons of the arguments and evidence by the Third World. Righter finds that there have, indeed, been instances of misrepresentation. There has been an over-abundance of American content in international news. Training does seem to transmit Western values and concepts (all to the good, one expects she is saying).
On the other side, Righter says most Third World governments are openly totalitarian. Any move to offer these regimes more control over mass media would create a dangerous situation for journalists, media institutions and individual citizens.

Well meaning social democrats who have advanced the dependency analysis are seen as pons in the hands of hypocritical tyrants and feudal elites. Marxists are portrayed as heartless manipulators ready to serve any faction bent on the destruction of liberal democracy. Structural and ideological analyses which draw lines between Western capitalism and the dominated periphery by examining the integrated apparatuses of state and ideology are dismissed as so much "conspiracy theory".

Instead Righter points to the "fact" that "blanket criticisms of the free market approach to information necessarily do not concern themselves with the widely differing patterns of ownership" (6). She portrays a "diversified condition of control and competition" throughout Western nations where each government insures there are no monopolies. She goes as far to say that because of the heavy responsibilities of public trust to ownership of mass media many corporate citizens are making considerable sacrifices to take up their role.

The pressures exerted by the audience which may "vote with its pocket book" creates an arena of competition guaranteeing a media responsive to the public interest. In the end, Righter agrees that certain reforms within the system could be useful. But to allow governments and international institutions the power to make these reforms would be an unacceptable precedent. Better to allow the levelling influence of the market and journalists themselves control the affairs of the mass media. It is a clear and seductive re-statement of the Western mythology of individual freedom, pluralism, and the independence of the press. The concept of reform advanced is particularist. It seeks to modify behaviour according to functionalist maxims and techniques.

This book has thrust Righter into the centre of the Western struggle to deflect the criticisms of current cultural hegemony. Operating from the pages of the London Sunday Times as a specialist in North-South affairs and the New International Information Order and hailed as a "voice of objective responsibility" by organs like the International Press Institute (London) and the Columbia Journalism Review (New York) her notion of reform has come to signify the "middle path" for embattled media multinationals and various Western governments.

The fact that the United States, for one, has refused to contribute funds to the IPDC and is encouraging 'independent arrangements' for the development of culture and communications projects' is a clear sign that the Western state/capital superstructure has rejected the conclusions of UNESCO's McBride report and will put its considerable economic might behind 'alternative plans' designed to maintain dominance through the appearance of accommodation orchestrated by the ideology of reform contained in the functionalist creed so neatly outlined by Righter.

In rejecting, or at least by-passing, the blatant functionalist hyperbole of Righter et. al., McBride has accepted a body of work based on dependency analysis which, according to Mattelart, is so flawed that plans instituted in its wake could cause the very degeneration of communications under totalitarian control envisaged by apologists for the multinationals.

Dependency analysis grew up amongst radical economists based in Latin America who viewed with alarm the failures of functionalist dominated development.
operations and sought a clearer explanation of the structural problems
affecting nations in this region. The analysis postulates a history of re-
lations between nations where, during the period of growth and expansion
of capitalism, a condition of unequal exchange came to characterise development.
In fact, as long as this condition of unequal exchange existed, the nation
in the 'one down' position would be 'underdeveloped' in direct ratio to the
appropriation of surplus to the centre of the capitalist system from the
peripheral nation.

The researchers charted the history of these unequal relations through various
stages of colonialism and 'independence' to the present day. They were able,
then, to look at each sector of social process in terms of the extent to which
that sector is in a 'one down' relationship with outside forces and is there-
fore being underdeveloped or is causing underdevelopment.

In broad terms, the approach was expanded into a viewpoint from which one
might understand economic and social interrelationships between nations and
population groups throughout the world. In the area of communications and
culture the categories were applied to each stage in the development of the
mode of communications production (eg. telegraph, railroad, radio, television
etc). In this way dependency analysis became a 'backdrop' to critical studies
of the structural role of international media which was delivered to UNESCO.

A number of major research reports and books have been forthcoming over the
past five years (7). One of the most recent inclusive of evidence which sums
up the underlying attitude of many decision-makers attached to UNESCO has
been provided by Anthony Smith's The Geopolitics of Information; How Western
Culture Dominates the World. Smith draws on content analyses from the 'quali-
tative' school (developed alongside functionalism where empiricist scientific
methodologies advise a technique for counting simple recurrence) to prove
the complaints of bias within international news. He criticizes the myopia
of the liberal "free market" definition of media in society saying that the
free market is now a single mass market which has been exported in tact to
the Third World under the guise of the "free flow of information":

In practice what has happened is that western economic models
have been introduced tieting the receiving society ever closer
(but in a condition of dependence) to Western companies; then
came the introduction of technology of a kind which has rendered
the society helplessly expectant of Western cultural
content, which has in turn 'softened up' the local elites for
the further spread of Western economic patterns. The technology
has been offered in a cool value-free mood, but it is quickly
enveloped in ideological and political clothing of a kind re-
jected by many within the receiving countries (8).

But Smith says neo-colonialism, pre-meditated or inadvertent, is only one aspect
of the case, and to overstate it would be misleading. He does not see cultural
domination as central to the continuing pre-eminence of the bourgeois structure
of dominance. Rather, the thrust to swamp all competition is just as much a
product of the "natural forces" of capitalism as of the "wish to colonise
culturally". He seems to think the two may be separated. Smith concludes
that the multinationals move like "blind elemental forces" driven by one impulse
for growth and profits, a process separate from political or ideological
motives.

Smith does not accept Righter's stereotyped notion of Third World nations and
leaders. He believes many of the administrators in these newly independent
states are searching for a specific cultural identity. They see the con-
tinuing Western bias in media as ethnocentric. This drives them to
ethnic protectionism. Smith clings to this ideal of cultural repatriation - a subtle reworking of that liberal pluralist trend towards 'community access' in the media which swept the Western world during the 1960s and 70s and educated so many of those now populating charity based development agencies.

In the name of this social democratic ideal Smith is ready to support structural as well as functional re-alignments. He leaves the feeling that by achieving some sort of balance it may be possible to accommodate the aspirations of national cultures to the Western doctrine of 'a free flow of information'. Mattelart says this trend has two fatal flaws. First it assumes that the fundamental contradiction is in the "international division of labour" between nations. That is, the equation sets nations against nations without reference to the complex nature of all these nations:

The integrating myth of the "global village" has as a function to level out the particularities which are expressed in each social formation ... In literature on this theme there are few analyses which are capable of explaining how imperialist power works in connection with internal bourgeoisies and the local ruling classes which serve as its relay accomplice (9).

Small wonder, then, that dependency analysis of communications is the one most preferred by oligarchic nation states. Western analysts have, as Righter shows, made this weakness a central plank in their critique of the McBride report and its recommendations. They need only say that obviously oppressive governments cannot represent the people in these nations to justify the utter logic of a "free flow of information" offering all the people access to "constructive democratic ideas".

Mattelart poses a different corrective. He calls for a return to historical materialism which offers a clear vision of base-superstructure relations. Attention to class formation within and between societies would allow researchers to see how, for example, the one way flow of wire service news not only dominates individual Third World nations, but how the information and profits from that dominant form are shared out between capitalist classes from the 'periphery' as well as the centre. Then it would be clear that access to international media assists the continuing hegemony of local elites - no matter which corporate form generates the structure. In effect:

To pose the problems of imperialism therefore means posing the problems of the classes which act as its relays in these different nations. This also means treating the question of the relations between the local ruling classes and the metropolis, and weighing their degree of independence vis a vis the hegemonic power. In an era that abounds with denunciations of the multinationals, it is urgent to analyze the notion of national culture ... cultures elaborated and managed by the ruling classes of each nation (10).

This approach would also return a historical aspect to the materialism which has become a fetish in the hands of dependency analysts who derive their position from an economic interpretation of development essentially incapable of locating real experience. The interests of capital do move like "sharks" searching out profits in an almost blind elemental contest - as Smith says. However, these are not timeless thrashings. They are responses conditioned by a system, capitalism, which has evolved its structure and content through history. Researchers who ignore the historical dimension of capitalism will inevitably risk missing the central importance of the state/capital nexus driven to maintain cultural domination as a part of its survival requirement or fall prey to a series of conspiracy theories fed on the evidence of financial agglomeration.
To redress the balance, Mattelart and Siegelaub provide a complete section in their book which draws together excerpts from Marx, Engels, Gramsci and Mao. The texts are marshalled to show not only that any materialist interpretation of culture fails if it does not place base-superstructure relations at its centre but that many recent Marxist analyses have erred by according a simple economic determinism to this relationship. The base-superstructure relation in communications must be seen as part of a rich and complex evolving historical condition portrayed as much in the ideological nature of the modes of cultural transmission as the structure of their role in society.

Central to the study of communications from this perspective, particularly in an era when new technologies and combinations of capital make mass audience media a part of everyday life in all its stages of development, is a clear perspective on the relation between communications and the dominant superstructure. Capitalism came of age during the post feudal confirmation of mercantile monopolies. The superstructural ambience of the dominant capitalist class led it to direct the state towards the protection of the monopoly market system, making that the centre of its material survival. The ideology attending the growth of the capitalist system held as its core mythology the freedom of the individual in the marketplace:

This principle of individualism, of fragmentation, is the very basis for the ideological disorganization of the oppressed classes which is needed by the ruling classes if they are to impose their hegemony... The forms of transmitting reality, the very concept of information in capitalist society must reproduce this principle (11).

These forms are culture and communications. They are one component within the material structure of the ideological superstructure. Therefore the matrix in which the mass communications network develops is underwritten by the network of commodity exchange relations protected by the state superstructure through its own material structure. From this vantage point research into communications which accepts uncritically the superstructural position of the dominant ideology and ignores the dialectical relationships between base and superstructure in any historical period cannot hope to unveil the complex patterns of cultural reproduction contingent upon domination.

This failure to grasp the structure of historical reality may be seen as endemic to both functionalism and dependency analysis, turning the second towards reformist policies inevitably supporting the hegemony of the first.

Mattelart singles out a second flaw in modern materialist studies of communications, of which Smith is a lesser example. This fissure grew out of an attempt to locate the process of ideological transmission and impregnation. Researchers looking at the content of media and culture sought out a more effective means of locating meaning than the 'quantitative' method of counting accrued information. Rejecting a simplistic 'score card' identification of common topics and stereotypes they focussed on the "production of discourse" - common themes repeated over and over within the process of communicating. For analytical tools they drew on Marxist-oriented studies of linguistics and semiology, particularly the work of Roland Barthes, Julia Kristeva and Christian Metz. In time the methodology thus constructed was used by dependency theorists looking at international media and became the basis for many of the content analyses appearing within and alongside the McBride report. These theories of language and knowledge draw heavily on the Marxist epistemology developed by Louis Althusser. Fundamentally the Althusserian concept of knowledge calls for the application of materialist categories to a piece of intellectual evidence.
However, Althusser has been criticized by Marxists convinced of the need to see ideological formulations as "reflections" (Lenin) of dynamic material interactions between infrastructure (base) and superstructure. The Althusserian semiologists are accused of divorcing intellectual behaviour from ongoing social reality so as to artificially 'freeze' moments of discourse, categorize them and then draw generalizations. Mattelart calls this a dangerous trend towards "formalism" which has become particularly self-defeating in the area of film studies. There

the over development of the narrative theory, of the analysis of the production of discourse, and the sanctification of language may also be viewed as other examples of a tropism which has drawn the study of communication towards the literary field (12).

Evidence of ideological penetration and manipulation in peripheral regions presented to UNESCO in this format have been ridiculed by functionalists as ridiculously narrow. For every ideological 'theme' said by Althusserians to prove a general case, the functionalists can provide a wide variety of quantitative content analyses showing Western media adequately 'covering' specific Third World issues. Mattelart's antidote for this problem is to get researchers out of universities. He says the abstractions of Althusserian Marxism have developed because the universities of the bourgeois West are "less and less in touch with national reality defined in terms of classes" (13). Universities within capitalism are charged with the construction and maintenance of bourgeois ideological hegemony. Marxist's caught in this system are reduced to mimicking the functionalist "micro-analysis" of social behaviour. According to Mattelart, conducting research into communications within this environment can produce "a counter-facination with power" which will actually "re-validate the myth of imperialism's omnipotence and omniscience" (14).

In effect, then, the materialist notions of content, as well as structure, operated by dependency analysts like Smith lead to a 'neo-Marxism' which underwrites the authority of the state and the supremacy of the distant 'expert'.

Seen in this light, the reformism recommended by the McBride report and the construction of the IPDC will achieve little more than another wrinkle in the already complex development equation. Development professionals with a new source of funding will arrive in Third World countries in ever larger numbers to assist 'national development policies' which do not confront structural contradictions at their root but simply re-work an original functionalist concept of communications spear-heading the 'trickling down' of innovations from the 'top' or 'most advanced sector' of society.

To break this vicious circle Mattelart and Siegelaub enlarge on their call for a return to fundamentals of historical materialism. Class domination through control of state and ideological superstructures is exactly that - domination. There are dominated classes and they have within themselves the ability to react to domination by creating their own consciousness, their own ideology and their own media of communication for their culture. For example, while functionalism was creating a theory and methodology for using communications to assist development these very actions created a backlash against the integrated economic and ideological oppression orchestrated by capitalist liberal ideology:

The meaning of the message is not limited to the stage of transmission. The audience may also produce its own meaning. The class consciousness and social practice of the listener-reader-spectator either allows him or her to accept or reject the inexorable, totalitarian effect of the message, its McLuhanian fascination.
... Therefore a dominant message may have the opposite effect of what is intended, and may be returned to the sender ... In the hierarchy of struggles, this form of defensive resistance guarantees, prepares and supports other responses to the hegemonic culture, which constitutes an offensive resistance. Through this resistance, the popular movement, based on various levels of consciousness attained in its reality, engenders its own communications networks for defending its interests (15).

To prove this Mattelart and Siegelaub have peppered the book with documentation of popular media growing out of reaction to dominant structures of communications and culture throughout the Third World. Here, says Mattelart, is the true development media.

In these struggles, during the 1960s and '70s, it was crucial to:

determine the class character of the so-called 'mass culture', and to evaluate the degree to which the different genres and other divisions characterising the mode of production of the dominant messages (comics, magazines, television etc) in the existing society could be used in another definition of social relations with the reader or television viewer. Finally, it was important to detect the concrete alternatives for popular power which had started to germinate precisely in this area, the communication front of the cultural battle (16).

Now the battle has shifted to the international institutional sphere. Mattelart says the lessons of the '60s and '70s should help Third World peoples from "the framework for the construction of a popular alternative in each nation" (17). In many cases this infers a revolutionary class confrontation within these nations where the national and international state/capital superstructure must be located and defeated in all sectors including communications. There are evolving situations where this has or is happening and special documentation of these events is left to a second volume in preparation by the authors.

In the meantime there is urgent need for analysis of the military aspects of intelligence systems for, according to the case studies which complete this volume, the capitalist system is moving its ideological apparatus increasingly in support of the most repressive aspects of the state as economic confusion and depression deepens within capitalism.

In fact, the editors draw special attention to studies on the role of national media under Fascism and of the forgotten contribution of functionalism to military intelligence because they feel this is the direction Western influenced nations will move during the next twenty years. It is a study of direct relevance to southern Africa where the current international development thrust, tinged as it is with reformism, will leave unchallenged the politico-military hegemony operated from Pretoria which aims to appropriate cultural expression in favour of the latent transmission of its Fascist ideology.

Notes and References

2. Ibid. p. 55
3. Ibid. 31
4. For a clear and chilling documentation of the contribution of American communications professionals to the spread of authoritarian ideology within Third World states developing modern fascism, see: Chomsky, N. and Herman, E.S. 1979: The Washington Connection and Third World Fascism: The Political Economy of Human Rights. (In two volumes). Spokesman Books, Nottingham. In Chapter 3 (Title: Benign Terror), under the section headed "The Semantic Terror and Violence" the authors give just one example of how 'liberal' researchers operate within the structure of Western politico-military power when they quote from a USAID report. USAID, the USA's major 'soft' aid agency is deeply involved in communications and culture projects throughout the Third World including Africa: "An AID report of 1970, for example, refers to the improving capability of the South Vietnamese police, then very possibly the most extensive employers of torture in the world, as 'preventing the spread of violence'. And the 1967 'moderate scholars' statement on Asian policy, sponsored by Freedom House (Freedom House is one of the major Western contributors to the UNESCO 'debate' on communications) defended the US assault on Vietnam and passed in silence over the mass slaughters in Indonesia, referring delicately only to 'dramatic changes' there as encouraging ..." (see p. 86).


6. Ibid. p. 80

7. The two widely acknowledged experts in the field, who manage at least one publication a year on the subject are Kaarle Nordstrom and Hilbert Schiller, but there are many others. The best running bibliography on the whole area, titled Marxism and the Mass Media is regularly published by the International Mass Media Research Centre.


9. Mattelart and Siegelaub op. cit. pp. 41 and 24

10. Ibid. p. 59

11. Ibid. p. 45

12. Ibid. p. 29

13. Ibid. p. 30

14. Ibid. p. 58

15. Ibid. pp. 27-28

16. Ibid. p. 33

17. Ibid. p. 35

The three Books Reviewed are:

Mattelart, Armand, and Siegelaub, Seth. 1979: COMMUNICATION AND CLASS STRUGGLE, VOL 1: CAPITALISM, IMPERIALISM. Published by the International Mass Media Research Centre, 173 ave. de la Dhuys, 93170 Bagnolet, France;
