

Toward a Political Economy of Culture: Capitalism and Communication in the 21st Century. Edited by Andrew Calabrese & Colin Sparks. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2004. 392 pp. ISBN 0742526844 (pbk.).

The 19 chapters of this volume are the outcome of a conference held at the University of Westminster to honour and critically assess the work of a key contributor to the political economy tradition, Nicholas Garnham. Like many edited volumes, the results are uneven: a few significant chapters, the recycling of old content in others, and ultimately a loose overview of themes that bind an intellectual community and which gives readers a sense of what's important to that community and what's not.

In my view, one of the most thought-provoking chapters in the collection is Robert Horwitz's chapter on the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in post-apartheid South Africa and the lessons that can be drawn from that experience to understand and further the prospects for human rights in a post-9/11 world. As Horwitz puts it, the TRC was organized along Habermasian lines as an open arena of communication designed to foster a new political culture and nation-state based on understanding, human rights, and justice. The results were mixed. The TRC was a model of public communication, but this was achieved only after many perpetrators of apartheid-era violence received immunity from prosecution in return for testifying. That is, justice was sacrificed upon the altar of open communication. Now, if truth and justice were compromised in a context where most of the parties were committed to both aims, what happens in a global context where the U.S. administration ruthlessly disparages multilateralism, international law, global public opinion—the foundations of a global public sphere, rudimentary as they might be—as well as standards of justice not grounded in God and retribution? A benign dictatorship of a revived American Empire is one possibility, Horwitz warns. However, he also suggests that there are visible counter-trends in global culture as well as historically within U.S. political culture to suggest that things could still turn out otherwise.

In short, Horwitz shows that culture and visions matter when it comes to building nations and a viable world order. Less prosaically, but still important, they are also important to creating and sustaining media markets, as Vincent Mosco's and Thomas Streeter's chapters on myth and the intertwining of the media business with a sense of romance, respectively, show. In a somewhat similar vein, John Durham Peters explores another "myth" of U.S. media politics: the "marketplace of ideas" metaphor. Peters searches for the origins of this metaphor in its "natural setting," that is, the classic liberal texts of John Stuart Mill, John Milton, Thomas Paine, Wendall Holmes, etc., but returns empty-handed. This will surely confound those who see in the metaphor a fidelity with classic liberalism and a carrying over of that faith into the heart of the U.S. media system and policy. Yet Peters' discovery offers cold comfort to those who see the metaphor as a ruse whereby market values are indiscriminately mixed with the ideals of democracy, largely at the expense of the latter. This is because the metaphor, Peters finds, was "invented" in the context of arcane party politics in the U.S. in the 1930s. It was subsequently deployed by civil libertarians as a defence against McCarthyism in the 1940s, as a rhetorical weapon exploited by Cold War hawks after that, and as part of the lexicon in wider debates over media politics and policies since the 1980s. He reveals that the concept arrived later and is more heterogeneous than commonly assumed, by defenders of the status quo and media critics alike.

Yet even if the "marketplace of ideas" metaphor had yet entered U.S. discourse on the subject, Robert McChesney reminds us that John Dewey, Walter Lippman, and Upton Sinclair were already writing about media, markets, and democracy just after World War I. The intellectual history of political economy in the U.S. goes back further than is usually thought but was largely pushed to the sidelines, McChesney argues, as the discipline sought

and found institutional legitimacy after, roughly, the 1940s. In contrast to McChesney's tale of decline, James Curran documents the rise from the 1970s of the Westminster School, a school of thought indebted to the work of Nicholas Garnham and which did for political economy what the Birmingham School did for cultural studies. Garnham's work stressed the importance of studying the media first and foremost as industries with peculiar economic qualities, characteristics that have to be understood in order to grasp what gets produced and distributed and what does not, and the need for scholars to contribute to debate and public policy on the communication, cultural and media industries.

It is perhaps Richard Collins' chapter on the U.K. broadcasting system that best embodies these ideas. And in that chapter, unlike many analysts who foresee a gloomy future for public-service broadcasters (a position adopted by Giuseppe Richeri and Sylvia Harvey in this same volume), Collins points out that the BBC still holds a commanding position within the U.K. broadcasting system (with 38% of TV audiences and 53% of radio audiences). The main problem, Collins argues, is not the diminishing power of the BBC but its continuing influence in traditional markets and its expanding power in new-media markets. Collins shows that the unique attributes of the communication and media industries—restricted access to a few distribution networks, control over networks and content rights as the locus of power, the ability to exploit economies of scale and scope, the mediation of media production and consumption by advertisers and/or public funding, and so on—mean that media oligopolies are surprisingly difficult to dislodge. It is a finding that others in this volume suggest applies to other segments of the communication and media industries, most notably film (Janet Wasko), the press (Colin Sparks), and parts of the new media and the Internet (Robin Mansell and Michèle Javary).

However, rather than suggesting that media markets and ownership are becoming relentlessly more concentrated, these authors suggest that the impact of technological change, policies, and audience fragmentation varies across media sectors, albeit in ways that display fairly regular and discernible patterns. This is illustrated well by a typology introduced by Colin Sparks toward the end of the book, where he suggests that the impacts of the Internet will likely fall hardest and earliest on the press and the music industries, for reasons to do with technological and economic considerations, while television and film will probably remain relatively unscathed for years to come. Overall, the chapters underscore the need for detailed investigation, rather than *carte blanche* celebrations or denunciations of current trends; they also show that political economy is an open approach that is not predisposed to following a predetermined ideological script.

That said, there are central themes at the core of political economy. Here Graham Murdock and Peter Golding, for example, identify the centrality of class, information inequality, and citizenship. The problem, they argue, is that woolly measures of Internet access, most notably, have understated the magnitude to which class and inequality still shape the distribution of information resources in an age of abundant information. This can be seen most obviously in terms of household access to different forms of media and the uses to which such media are put within households, as organized by the determining variables of class and access to economic and cultural capital. Such observations invite a rapprochement between the political economy and the burgeoning "media and everyday life" work that is being done elsewhere. And this is indeed one of the key aims to this whole volume—to find points upon which competing traditions within the field of communication and media studies can find common ground. To that end, the last two chapters, by Eileen Riordan and Oscar Gandy, respectively, survey recent research by scholars which discuss the social and cultural consequences of the media industries' penchant for stratifying audiences along the lines of race, gender, and the perceived economic value. The thrust of these chapters is that such considerations provide common areas of research that

could usefully help span the divide between political economy and cultural studies approaches.

Of course, such ecumenical goals are laudable. However, the danger of continuing to work this well-tilled soil is that arguably better means for exploring the business and politics of the media and their relationship to culture more generally are ignored. In this, I would suggest that the absence in this volume of any references to “reflexive sociology” (i.e., Beck, Beck-Gersheim, Giddens, Lash, Lury, Urry) or to the culturally and socially inflected analyses of “embedded capitalism” (Boyer, Callon, Hollingsworth, etc.), among other developments of the 1990s, reveals how old debates between political economy and cultural studies are now doing more to stifle scholarly innovation than to reinvigorate the field of communication studies. The volume offers a useful overview of political economy but comes across as being, with a few exceptions, curiously disengaged with some of the most pressing issues of our times. That’s a shame, because there is a huge revival of interest in political economy, as witnessed, for instance, at the 2005 International Association for Media and Communication Research meeting and, more generally, by publishers’ “best-seller” lists. We live in extraordinary times and communication studies has much to offer by way of enhancing our grasp of them. This volume goes some way towards that goal.

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