

Cultural compliance and critical media studies

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This commentary is a challenge to social scientists. In it we ask why much of social science and in particular media and cultural studies can now communicate little that is critical or relevant to its own society. In the ferment of social and political ideas which we associate with the 1960s, it was assumed that science could be ‘for the people’ and that it would be possible to link theory and practice in progressive rational critique. These ideas were not new and indeed had their origins in Enlightenment thinking. But the period of post-war consensual politics certainly increased demands for academic approaches which were relevant and critical. In the period which followed there was a profound shift in political power towards the right, in both the USA and in Britain. The 1980s saw a ferocious struggle to establish a new dominance for the free market. This involved pushing back the restraining influences of the post-war consensus with its commitment to full employment and social welfare. This period was therefore a high point in the development of news management and of state and business public relations – the age of spin doctors (Miller and Dinan, 2000). Yet strangely it was also during this period that the concept of ideology disappeared from much academic work in media and cultural studies. A new set of theoretical questions and issues now preoccupied cultural theorists. We will argue here that much media and cultural studies had in fact wandered up a series of theoretical dead ends. To illustrate this, we will look first at the cultural and material changes which did occur in our society and then at the problems with the new directions taken by media and cultural studies.

The rise of the New Right in the 1980s did not signify a new age or a new type of society. The same social relations of production existed (between employers and employed) and the same tendencies of capital to accumulate. It continued to agglomerate into larger and larger units giving greater power in the market. For example, in 1996 the £28 billion merger of Boeing and McDonnell Douglas in America gave them nearly two-thirds of the world’s commercial airline market and over half of the US military aircraft production. In the same year, the proposed

MCI/British Telecom merger was valued at over £35 billion. The essence of such 'modern' economic relationships is that capital will agglomerate, will move and will do whatever is necessary to secure the conditions of its own existence. The same can be said of mass communication systems where a small number of corporations now control the bulk of all privately owned commercial communications (Herman and McChesney, 1997). The political dominance of the new right and the deregulation of the market also produced a cultural shift with an increased emphasis on the values of individualism, interpersonal competition and material power. Lewis Lapham, the editor of the New York *Harper's Magazine*, has written of how the press in America celebrate the new world order:

As might be expected, the shining face of the global economy wears its brightest smile in the show windows of the media owned and operated by the same oligarchy that owns and operates the banks. The accompanying press releases predict limitless good news in the world joyfully blessed by open markets, convertible currencies and free trade. The financial magazines make no attempt to quiet their emotions or restrain the breathless tenor of their prose. Behold, men of genius and resolve – Billionaires! Visionaries! Entrepreneurs! – trading cable systems for telephone lines and telephone lines for movie studios and movie studios for cable systems, buying and selling the wells of celebrity that water the gardens of paradise. (Lapham, 1998: 19)

The politicians and theorists of the new right sought to remove the limits on accumulation and the power of capital on the market. In this they were in fact looking back to an older society rather than creating anything very new. Their project was to roll back the priorities of the social democratic state with its commitments to welfare, full employment and 'high' taxation to fund these. The role of the state would instead be to remove the 'restrictions' on the free market in labour (union powers, minimum wages, etc.), to deregulate and allow larger units of capital to form (to increase profitability) and of course to reward the 'wealth makers'. To do this they would reduce direct taxation, which would, in practice, be of most benefit to the top 20 percent of the population. This would allow the market to develop in a more unfettered form, but it would still be a capitalist market and still therefore a modern society. These changes, however, did have a profound effect on material and cultural life. The most obvious change was in the social division of wealth. In Britain between 1979 and 1991, the disposable income of the top 10 percent of the population rose by 62 percent while that of the poorest 10 percent fell in real terms by 17 percent. There was also a crucial change in the pattern of social ownership. The privatization programme undertaken by the Conservatives meant that the majority of the population were poorer in the sense that what they formally owned was sold for a fraction of its worth. The loss to the state caused by the discounted sales of the nationally owned industries was estimated at over £20 billion (Hutton, 1995: 184). The privatization of public utilities such as gas, electricity and water also signified a crucial change in the public service ethos of care and security which had been promised by the 'old' consensual politics. What had been seen as public services became merely commodities to be sold. In a free market, the social right to have clean water or to be warm could depend on the ability to pay. Policy in this area was no longer to be determined by 'public service' companies but by private industry whose ownership and shareholders were international. To be secure and to have rights in such a system depends on the ability to purchase in the market. Those who cannot do so are deemed to have 'disconnected themselves'. The language of this society revealed the new relationships. On the railways, 'passengers' became 'customers'

and in inner cities, the cardboard box became the symbol of homelessness. The state thus moved away from social priorities and the key commitment of the post-war years to the welfare of all its citizens. This was confirmed by other changes including the reduction of unemployment and social security rights. The net result was the production of insecurity. This was greatly added to by the economic policies of the New Right which relied on interest rate rises to curb inflation. The result was two serious recessions between 1979 and 1983 and 1989 and 1994, resulting in very high and sustained levels of unemployment (as high as 3.75 million people in 1983). This in combination with the reduction of trade union rights very much weakened the position of the work force in the labour market. Labour was casualized and versions of this including short-term contracts spread through the manufacturing, finance and service sections of the economy. As the power of management increased it was possible to impose arbitrary changes in work practices, to enforce longer periods of work for the same reward. Levels of stress associated with work increased and unemployment was also linked to ill-health and suicide. With weak unions and a demoralized workforce, Britain's private sector was on the way to becoming either the sweatshop of Europe or to being a 'flexible labour market' depending upon political perspective.

The public sector was intensely disliked by the new Conservatives and free marketeers. It was portrayed in New Right demonology as bloated and incompetent and in need of 'control'. It was to be disciplined by the appointment of layers of managers and accountants who constantly pressured those who were actually providing services, whether they were teachers, civil servants or health workers. This was presented as accountability but is actually a kind of 'punishment by counting'. These groups were constantly made to account for and justify their work as its 'quality' is assessed from above. The true function of the new layers of management is to impose 'efficiency savings' which can amount to enforcing more production for the same or less reward. At the same time levels of bureaucracy increased because of the constant demands for measurement – national testing, league tables, quality assessment, and other variations of 'performance indicators' were extended through the public sector. This new 'accounting' meant that the social values of production for the public were eroded. They were replaced with the processes by which production and 'efficiency' were measured. Teachers spend less time teaching and more on assessment – of their pupils and themselves. Hospitals are measured in terms of the 'through-put' of patients. Social security staff are given 'targets' for the reduction of numbers of claimants rather than having the provision of help as the central goal. In this new market, rewards are given for 'performance'. So, in place of a collective commitment to the use and value of what is produced, there is division and competition. Instead of a collective demand for proper funding, individuals and institutions compete with each other for a share of the dwindling resources. Most importantly, the ethos and purpose of activity in terms of social use is lost in favour of simply meeting the formal criteria for the latest performance targets and plans. We become adept at demonstrating on paper how we have performed. But there is little room in such a system for collective discussion about the purpose of what is being done or what social interests are actually being served.

This period also saw other major social developments in the transformation of political culture, most notably these included the reduction of democratic control through the growth of government patronage and a very sharp erosion of civil liberties. There were intensified pressures on the public sphere in the form of direct and indirect censorship and secrecy with a specific impetus on Northern Ireland (Miller, 1994, 1995; Robertson and Nicol, 1992). None of these processes suggest

a weakening of the state or the detachment of the 'cultural' from the exercise of state or economic power. They do not suggest a weakening of determining forces or the growth of a 'postmodern' society. They point instead to the centralization of political and economic power.

Finally we want to examine what changes have occurred at the level of ideologies and core social values – specifically how free market culture has a new prominence both in representations and in everyday lived experience. As we have seen, acquisition and material desire are officially sanctioned and parts of television (notably the news) took on a public relations function for these key values of the 1980s (Philo, 1995). But there is another important reason why the products of television begin to change in this period. The opening of the market increased the pressure on television companies for ratings and signified a move away from the traditional concern with quality and 'good taste'. The priority that television should be seen to be popular and to be responding to the demands of its market erodes the original Reithian ideal that it should in some way set and lead standards. The key issue in terms of the changes which we are identifying is that the media as a whole struggle for audiences in what has become an intensively competitive market. One tendency is therefore to push back the boundaries on what can be shown or written. A newspaper such as the *Sunday Sport* or magazines such as *Loaded* are interesting examples of this. We are not suggesting that all social values can be 'derived' from, or reduced to, these changing market relationships. The values of sexual consumption, male power and aggression are certainly not new. What is new is that pressure to dominate markets in communication moves such values into mainstream products and removes barriers on their presentation and celebration. The embracing by the BBC of 'laddish' culture is another interesting example of this in the Corporation's dive down-market for ratings. Thus, a programme such as *Top Gear* can become a celebration of the speed and sexual pulling power of cars. The values of the market celebrate a social and material world which is for sale and that is reduced to a mass of commodities. Human relationships and people are 'commoditized'. The millionaire hero of the film *Indecent Proposal* (1993) can afford to buy another person's wife and justifies it with the view that he 'buys people every day'. When the film was first shown on television in 1996 it was advertised on billboards showing a woman in underwear, along with the phrase 'The price is right so they come on down'. This culture both parallels and promotes the commodification of relationships – in which the greatest expression of interpersonal power is the power to buy the person.

In 1997 the Conservatives were followed in power by the New Labour Party of Tony Blair. 'New Labour' is an odd term. With its commitment to free market liberalism, its moral tone, its exhortations to the lower orders to discover the merits of work and its designation of the deserving and undeserving poor, it is actually a version of old-fashioned Christian Liberalism. It would certainly have been recognized by 19th-century Liberals such as Gladstone. In practice, many of the sermons delivered by New Labour owed more to the concerns of the tabloid press than to a rational social analysis. The 'War Against Drugs', for example, does not include the drugs which actually do the most harm – i.e. 40,000 deaths per year from alcohol and 120,000 per year from cigarettes. The vested interests that supply these products are too powerful. So a phoney war is conducted, which has criminalized large numbers of young people, increased the prison population and put truly huge amounts of money at the disposal of organized crime. It is now estimated that approximately 10 percent of the world economy is related to drugs while up to 25 percent of the British economy is now illegal (including drugs,

prostitution and fake designer products [Burton, 1999: 10]). This is a true triumph of the free market.

Such issues are rarely debated in public and there is almost no discussion in the media of the distribution of wealth and who ought to pay for public welfare, schools and hospitals. This is the second key issue which limits the actions of New Labour politicians. The public debate on tax has been largely dominated by the right-wing tabloid press. In order to secure their support, New Labour has kept broadly to the tax and spending limits that it inherited from the Conservatives. Michael White has written of this 'Faustian bargain' with Rupert Murdoch and his stable of media outlets:

In every country in which Mr Murdoch operates (and minimises his tax bill) he is a power-broker, speaking power, not truth, unto power through his diverse media outlets. The Blairites have charmed Lord Rothermere and made a Faustian bargain with Rupert. They think they have a good bargain. (*The Guardian*, 30 January 1998, quoted in Philo, 1999: xi)

The debate has thus been suppressed – the left of the Labour party has remained silent on the key issue on ownership and control of social resources, in order that New Labour can promote itself on the 'middle ground' of politics – that is persuade voters who might otherwise have supported the Conservatives. This silence is based on the assumption that only the bottom 20 percent of the population would be interested in issues of deprivation and poverty. But, as we have already suggested, the problem is generated by the unfettered free market which will affect very large numbers of people. It is only a minority (the top 10–20 percent) who will be able to buy themselves out of the effects of the free market, by purchasing private health, education and security. There are serious problems of deprivation, both relative and absolute which will affect the bulk of the population. At present well over half of wage earners in Britain earn less than £20,000 per year and over 20 million adults have no pension other than that provided by the state (*Observer*, 29 August 1999).

Research direction and cultural quiescence

Given the state to which much social life has been reduced, there is no shortage of subjects which a critical cultural studies could address. But some commentators have pointed recently to the very limited nature of much academic work in cultural studies and its effect on students (Ferguson and Golding, 1997). In practice, much work in communications and culture has been confined to speculating about the latest 'popular' tastes. Some academics have become culture industry groupies, dedicated to excavating the most recent trends in music, fashion or popular culture and mistaking it for 'resistance' or viewing the transgression of boundaries as progressive political practice – cultural studies as a rationale for hanging out with what is cool. Others have examined the 'social relations of media consumption', which could come down to asking people if they listened to the radio while doing the ironing or whether they felt sad when they watched *EastEnders*. Empirical work in the area has often been extraordinarily slight in its concerns or poor in its methods – such as guessing what people believe based on reading fan letters. There has been an absence of will to address the real and often brutal power relationships which have transformed our cultural life. For many in cultural studies a series of theoretical dead ends beckoned instead. Principal among these was what has become known as postmodernism.

We will look briefly at some of postmodernism's philosophical roots in arguments about reality and language. We have described above the social relationships of power and interest which structure our society as it is. The purpose of social ideologies is to justify and legitimize those relationships. Postmodernism would reject such an analysis of the 'real' structures which form a society. It offers instead a view of individuals as consumers in a sea of images, from which they construct their own meanings about the world. There can be no 'over-arching' narratives (either for the individual in society or the social scientist) about how the world works. One description of it (operating as a 'discourse') is as good as another. This effectively led to the abandoning of concepts such as 'reality' and 'truth'.

Arguments about the relationship of language to the 'real' have a long history in philosophy and have affected many areas of social science. The essence of these arguments is that reality is always constituted for us through language. The meaning of language is negotiated, therefore 'reality' is negotiated. In this schema, there cannot be a simple correspondence between an idea or a statement and an external objective reality. 'Truth' therefore becomes a function of how the text (be it a work of art, a written text or any moment of a language) is interpreted by the cognizing mind of the individual or the 'speech community'. In some postmodern accounts truth is entirely relative to issues of textual representation and to the 'textual strategies', 'signifying practices' and 'language games' that are employed to give authority to a particular account. Claims to objectivity are no more than 'strategic rituals' to assert authority and establish the dominance of one form of discourse. The problem with all such assertions is that they imply a reality of social relationships. Who is playing the language games and for what purpose? Whose authority and power over who else is being established in discourse? There is a further problem with the textualist/relativist approach. To assert that truth *is* what is made through textual strategies or signifying practices necessarily involves assumptions about how language 'really' works – that texts really relate to each other, that meanings really are negotiated. It can only be argued that this is really what occurs by pointing to examples of how language is actually used. To argue this is in effect to say that all truth (reality) is constituted in discourse, *except what we just said which really is true*. In this way, the proclamation that 'there is nothing but the text' involves universal truth statements (that there really are texts, that they really relate to other texts).

We can counter these statements with others – that the division between language and reality is a false dichotomy – that language is formed in a world of relationships and objects and is part of the measurable reality of that world – that judgements and expectations about what is true and what occurs are necessarily measured against the flow of actions and events in the world – that observable gaps between prediction and occurrence can undermine beliefs and expectations. If we expect the stairs to be there and they are not, then we trip. Now it may be that some postmodernists and relativists do not accept our statements of the true nature of the world. Then let them provide evidence to refute what we have said and to show what 'really' happens when people use language. We might for example ask for evidence of the view that 'meaning is constituted by the encounter between the reader and the text' (i.e. there are no intrinsic meanings which can be objectively measured). If we take this literally, it follows that it is not possible to classify texts or to distinguish between them, as a new meaning is generated with each new encounter. But how could anyone know this except by indicating that there are different encounters with the text (by people from different speech communities) which generate different meanings? These would have to be perceived by the

observer as 'objectively' different, albeit that observers generate their own meanings by their encounter with the new texts (of other people's encounters). So the problem the textualists face is, how could they know it is true that meaning is generated in the encounter with the text, except through observation – and if it was true how could they have observed it?

The focus on the text produces a relativism which founders on its inability to be clear about how *they* can make declarations about what is true and real. There are many contradictions in postmodernism but this one is central. The postmodern account assumes that we are 'post' something – that the old industrial society with its strong cultural positioning has disappeared to be replaced by something else. Yet at the same time the account espouses a philosophical position on language and reality which rejects the identification of any structures as real or determining. As we will argue, postmodernists have mistakenly understood a series of new responses to market relationships as being a new type of society. Though how they would demonstrate that an old society is really different from a new one or from anything else is left unexplained. The problem with postmodernism is that it mistakes developments in market capitalism and public responses to it for an absence of defining structures. But, as we have already noted, the market is itself a structure and constitutes a system of relationships and values in its own right. The counter-attack of the new conservatives and monetarists on social democratic capitalism together with the collapse of the Soviet system has given the market and its values a new prominence. The growth of the market changes both individual relationships and corporate priorities. It signifies that we are not 'post' the period of modernism but rather are locked into a most vicious form of it. There are many different social responses to this. Some are traditional and collective such as the contemporary growth in trade union membership in the United States. In Britain, the impact of the new insecurity, stress at work and fear of unemployment has produced a situation in which approximately 5 million people who are non-unionized are now 'keen' to join a trade union (NOP Poll, *The Guardian*, 15 March 1997). Other collective responses include the green movement and new types of ecological politics such as the protests against road building and the WTO. Other responses, in contrast, celebrate the new individualism, interpersonal power and the definition of self by the capacity to consume. These responses are prominent in a popular media which constantly manufacture images of glamour, style and status. Some elements of media such as alternative television comedy can satirize free market culture and relate to public resentment at the effects of popular capitalism in everyday life. But this multitude of social responses including the growth of consumption and fragmentation of styles does not signify a new type of society. Without understanding this there is little that media studies or social science can offer that is critical of the society we have. Reducing social critique to ironic commentaries does not remove the social structures which position and limit us as we are – it simply reduces our ability to do anything about them. The inability to address the real and change it is implicit in the postmodern vision – what is its resort to irony, other than the gallows humour of the politically impotent?

The encounter with philosophy and postmodern theory has left much cultural/communications studies and indeed many other areas of social science, struggling with the notion of small groups or individuals 'actively' constructing their own interpretations and the meaning of their world. A key problem in such an approach is the neglect of outcomes or consequences. For example, asking about how people interpret texts cannot of itself answer questions about the influence of the media on ideology or belief. Such questions need to be asked directly. Furthermore, there are a series of highly complex moments between 'belief' and the reproduction of

modern society which have been very sparsely investigated by this tradition and are hardly visible as research questions in contemporary media and cultural studies (Miller, 1997). There is a need to examine the relationship between beliefs about the world and the political conclusions drawn by the public, the relationship between political conclusions and taking political action, and between public action, protest and political change or continuity. Do people, as a result of viewing *Neighbours*, *The Word* or *Newsnight*, believe that the sun always shines in Australia, people will do anything to get on TV or that inequalities are necessary for the functioning of the economy? As a result of any of these, do they then make a cup of tea, refuse to do the ironing, join the Conservative Party, burrow under Manchester Airport or blockade the WTO talks? And what difference does public belief or action make to corporate or government decision making? Do governments respond to public opinion? On which occasions? Are corporations or governments able to resist concerted and organized public opposition, and in which circumstances? Do consumers actually subvert the meanings of commodities? If the meanings of products are subverted is capitalism in any way inconvenienced? Does the 'subversion' lead to a critique of the system that produced the commodities? Do people actually buy the products? How do public knowledge, belief and purchasing trends affect corporate and state planning and regulation? These and associated questions ought to be, but are not, central to the agenda of media and cultural studies. We do not intend this as an exhaustive list of what should be studied. But we do think it is time for a serious debate about what could constitute the agenda for a critical media and cultural studies and we invite replies on this.

Note

A longer version of the arguments rehearsed here, together with commentaries on other areas of the social and human sciences and on how academics can respond is published as Philo and Miller (2000).

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