CHAPTER 8

The Coolness of Capitalism Today

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It’s not just cheap labor

The iPhone is assembled in China by Foxconn, the largest electronics assembler in the world. US executives say they cannot function without companies like Foxconn. The Taiwanese company has a million workers, many willing to live in company dorms, work midnight shifts and spend 12 hours in a factory, six days a week. Chinese workers are cheaper than their American counterparts – but just as important, they are more flexible and plentiful, and thousands can be hired overnight.

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1 Introduction

In the study of communications and culture there are various different traditions of research. They may be incommensurate with one another or, alternatively, there may be grounds for synthesis between different schools of thought. Compatibility is especially difficult to achieve with regard to theorising and analysing the relation of political and economic factors to the determination of meaning. In the Marxist tradition, this has been a focal point of controversy and has resulted in schismatic lines of development. For researchers keen to avoid the kind of economic reductionism that once seemed to characterise Marxism, there has been a tendency to over-emphasise cultural autonomy and ideological determinacy in communications.

This chapter argues that the most satisfactory mode of cultural analysis in critical communication studies is multidimensional. That is, amongst other things, it takes account of the interaction between cultural-ideological and economic-political factors. However, critical multidimensionality does not so much present an alternative to economic reductionism of a Marxist kind today but instead it is obliged to challenge the ideological dominance of technological determinism. This is most notable and urgent with regard to the role of ‘new media’ and the significance of personalised and mobile communications in culture and society now.
2 Cultural Analysis and Political Economy

From the 1970s a split occurred between two traditions of Marxist-inspired communications research in Anglophone scholarship, in effect, between cultural analysis on the one hand and political economy on the other. The particular tradition of cultural analysis under consideration here, which had many precursors, became associated very largely at this time with the work of the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies under the leadership of Stuart Hall. The tradition of political economy under consideration was associated most strongly with the work of Herbert Schiller and his associates in North America and, in Britain, with the work of Nicholas Garnham, Peter Golding and Graham Murdock; not so much with the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory (see, for example, Murdock & Golding, 1973). It is unnecessary to rehearse here the key themes in the work of these critical communications' scholars. However, it is necessary to indicate, albeit briefly, why the cultural studies' tradition became separated from the political economy of communications so sharply in the 1980s.

The separation had already been signaled as early as the 1950s by Raymond Williams, the most important founding figure of what came to be known as “British Cultural Studies” (Turner 2003). Commenting on the kind of Marxist writings on culture that had flourished to some extent in Britain during the 1930s, Williams (1963 [1958], 272–273) remarked in exasperation twenty years later, “To describe English life, thought, and imagination in the last three hundred years simply as ‘bourgeois’, to describe English culture now as ‘dying’ [as Christopher Caudwell had indeed done in the 1930s], is to surrender reality to a formula.” Williams himself recognised that many Marxists were unhappy with such simplistic and windy rhetoric. Yet, even the more sophisticated Marxist ways of making sense of culture and society known to Williams at the time still left him perplexed as to the truth of the matter:

Either the arts are passively dependent on social reality, a proposition that I take to be that of mechanical materialism, or a vulgar misinterpretation of Marx. Or the arts, as the creators of consciousness, determine social reality, the proposition which the Romantic poets sometimes

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1 Interestingly, the Frankfurt School of critical theory that coined the term “culture industry” (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979 [1944]) and inspired a great deal of critical communications research was more interested in the ideology critique of capitalist culture than the political economy of capitalism and, in this respect, had an affinity with ‘the Birmingham School’ of cultural studies, as Douglas Kellner (1997) has noted.