CHAPTER 16

“Means of Communication as Means of Production” Revisited*

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1 Introduction

In this Chapter I attempt to analyze and critique the assertion made by Raymond Williams that means of communication can be understood as a means of production. I seek to do this in the context of a critical enquiry of Williams’ paper Means of Communication as a Means of Production (2005[1978]). It will be my thesis that Williams work opens up new possibilities in new communications theory. However I contend that despite opening up these possibilities, Williams' own theory is unable to develop these possibilities to their ultimate conclusion and we must turn towards Althusser’s structural Marxism to assist in such development. The essay itself will be structured in three main sections. In the first section I'll outline Marx's definition of the means of production and how he viewed the means of communication as a form of the relations of production. I will also discuss Marx's base-superstructure and what defining the means of communication as the relations of production does for this understanding of society. In the second section I'll outline Raymond Williams' argument for identifying the means of communication as a means of production, drawing on the work provided by Williams over his career, I'll argue that while Williams offers an interesting proposition, his argument is based on a definition of terms like 'production', which reduce their capability to express what the explicit means of production are. I'll argue that while Williams' wants to insist that production is beyond that of just 'commodity production', the use of communications now is one in which the information provided by the means of communication is treated like a commodity. In the last section, I want to examine how elements of Althusser's philosophy can produce the theoretical intervention necessary to examine the the internet as a means of communication identified as 'means of production'.

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which produces ‘information as a commodity’. The aim of this chapter is two-fold. To develop a foundation for the continued analysis of the means of communication such as the Internet, in the vein of Marxist theory and, to attempt to overcome the criticisms of structuralism that are contained in Raymond Williams’ work.

2 Karl Marx and the Means of Production

The Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy (Marx 1994) has often played the role of the rosetta stone in helping interpret much of Marx’s work. In this rather short text it is one passage that has garnered the most attention:

In the social production of their existence, men inevitably enter into definite relations, which are independent of their will, namely relations of production appropriate to a give stage in the development of their material forces of production. The totality of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation, on which arises a legal and political superstructure to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the general process of social, political and intellectual life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their existence, but their social existence that determines their consciousness. At a certain stage of development, the material productive forces of society come into conflict with the existing relations of production or – this merely expresses the same thing in legal terms – with the property relations within the framework of which they have operated hitherto. From forms of development of the productive forces these relations turn into their fetters. Then begins an era of social revolution. The changes in the economic foundation lead sooner or later to the transformation of the whole immense superstructure. In studying such transformations it is always necessary to distinguish between the material transformation of the economic conditions of production, which can be determined with the precision of natural science, and the legal, political, religious, artistic or philosophic – in short, ideological forms in which men become conscious of this conflict and fight it out. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, so one cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the