Marxism and Media Studies: Key Concepts and Contemporary Trends

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Media studies is a subject area that has struggled to define and defend itself. Academic interest in media developed largely as a response to the different uses of technological developments such as photography, cinema, radio and television. Language, image and text have, of course, always been important to human beings, but it was at a specific conjuncture that specific media, communications and cultural studies came into being. Early studies of media were concerned with ‘effects’ and we can find the reasons for this in two concerns: investigating the potential for commercial and political propaganda and the concern for social stability. Such studies were not, however, considered to be ‘media studies’, but were grounded in existing disciplines such as sociology1 and psychology2 that were themselves new disciplines at the time. Whilst some of the earlier studies on the effects of cinema, music and television considered them to be quite determinate, between the 1930s and 1950s in the USA a liberal-pluralist view of the media developed, which claimed that ‘effects’ theories were too simplistic. Instead, it proposed that audiences respond to media representations, using the media for their own gratification, rejecting messages of which they do not approve.3

The alternative to this view of the media appeared in the various media-related projects of the Frankfurt school, which, responding to the experiences of Nazi Germany, Soviet Russia and capitalist North America, concluded that the media was an industry just like any other in a totally administered society. This latter emerged as a part of the expansion of instrumental rationality under capitalism and the corresponding forms of disguised homogenisation accompanying it. Although both the liberal-pluralist and the Frankfurt perspectives were grounded in multidisciplinary research programmes, only the latter was a historically oriented holistic and critical programme. However, neither treated ‘media studies’ as a distinct field of research.

It was not until the 1960s that distinct media, communication and cultural studies became established in universities, with the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies

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1 See Blumer 1933, for example.
2 See Munsterberg 1916, for example.
3 Curran et al. 1982.
(CCCS) in Birmingham established in 1964, the Centre for Mass Communication Research established in Leicester in 1966, what is now Sheffield Hallam University offering the UK’s first communications studies degree in 1975, and what is now the University of Westminster launching the ‘country’s first media studies degree also in 1975. Since these establishments, the three areas of study, media, culture and communication, have been much maligned. Although certain strands of media studies in the UK are rooted in Marxism, Marxists are often dismissive of media studies. Certainly, the development of the field of media and cultural studies was influenced by the ‘linguistic turn’ in philosophy and the related ‘cultural turn’ that did so much damage to Marxism. Further, as cultural studies developed as a discipline, it moved further away from the materialist underpinnings that Williams and others had retained, and towards an idealist grounding. For example, Stuart Hall, one of the key figures in the CCCS, tended to treat media as primarily an ideological tool rather than a commodity. Such are the shortcomings of idealist critiques that they have the potential to seek redress for ills in discourse itself almost as though they were the logical consequence of the method. As Peter Jones points out, even left-wing media analysts such as Norman Fairclough are capable of fetishising the media to such a degree that he calls for a bourgeois government to communicate more effectively. This is to say nothing about the far deeper material structures of language that Fairclough’s discourse analysis is supposed to expose.

Even the more materialist media analyses, such as Bagdikian’s *The Media Monopoly* offer no real answer to the problem of the media. After launching an attack on the political economy of the media, Bagdikian informs us that the ‘threat [to democracy] does not lie in the commercial operation of the mass media. It is the best method there is and, with all its faults it is not inherently bad’. Lawrence Soley’s excellent analysis of corporate censorship undermines the view that democracy and the free market go hand-in-hand. He also challenges the ‘American’ idea that the only censorship to be concerned about is that coming from the state. However, he fails to fully address the fundamental issue of underlying capitalist relations of production that demand market expansion, offering only a legalistic solution to the protection of free speech. Dahlgren’s excellent investigation into the capacity of television to facilitate a public sphere ends with a call for ‘common’ and ‘advocacy’ media domains to be established so as to separate what roughly corresponds to centre and periphery public spheres in the Habermasian sense. Though Dahlgren recognises that ‘as an industry, television has to follow the precepts of audience maximization and profits’ and its ‘institutional logic of course greatly conditions its role within the public sphere’, he offers few indicators as to how the industrial constraints and the productive system in which it

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5 Bagdikian 2000, p. 223.
6 Soley 2002.
7 Dahlgren 1995 and Habermas 1996.