

The Political Economy of Communications

This is a double paper arising out of discussions between Stephen Hymer, Robin Murray and Tom Wengraf.

The first part was written up by Tom Wengraf and the second by Robin Murray.

I. Notes on Communications Systems

Methodology for the Analysis of 'Historic Communications Systems'

The terminology and the approach adopted follow those of the marxist-structuralist school commonly associated with Althusser. Possibly this is only a metaphorical parallel; hopefully, it might suggest real theoretical connections.

(1) Every society ('social formation') possesses a particular 'historic communications system'. Each 'historic communications system' is to be understood as, and analysed in terms of, its particular combination of different 'pure' modes of communication.

(2) Every historic communications system ("H.C.S.") is to be understood as a complex dominated structure of modes of communication. In other words, in any H.C.S., one of the modes of communication present is dominant and whatever others are present are always subordinated. A "revolution in communications" should be understood as a displacement of dominance.

(3) Any given 'mode of communication' is to be characterised as a particular combination of certain means of communication and of certain social relations in

Robin Murray is a lecturer at the London Business School and was on the board of the May Day Manifesto.

Tom Wengraf is a lecturer in sociology at the Enfield College of Technology. He was the secretary of the May Day Manifesto and used to be on the editorial board of New Left Review.

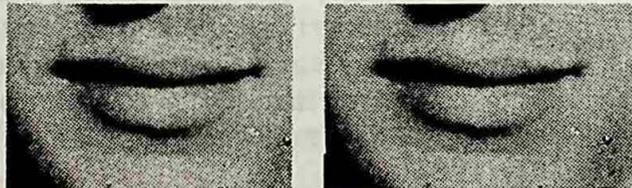
communication which those means permit and generate and in terms of which the means are deployed.

(4) A given mode of communication may therefore be dominant in one H.C.S. and subordinated in another.

(5) The same material means of communication may form part of different modes of communication as the social relations which determine their operation are different.

(6) The specific unity of an H.C.S. is to be found in its relationship to the dominant mode of production which characterises the particular social-economic formation.

(7) In class societies, the H.C.S. will be found to operate in such a way as to confirm and enhance the power and cohesion of the dominant class and to confirm and control the fragmentation and subordination of the subordinated classes. The relation of modes of communication to the State is hence of particular significance.



Communication Exchanges: Symmetry/Asymmetry; Access and Exposure

This section deals with the different technologies or means of communication and the types of

social relations which they enforce, allow and prohibit. It therefore points toward, but does not provide, an enumeration of characteristic modes of communication.

We take as our base-line for discussion, historic communication systems resting on a mode of communication whose material means (technology) allows (but does not enforce) symmetric relations of communication: speech (unmediated aural-oral).

Given an equal mastery of the language, the oral exchange is intrinsically symmetrical. All individuals have an equal capacity to initiate exchanges, an equal capacity to avoid and terminate exchanges, an equal capacity to determine the content of the exchange and the terms of any discussion. There is also an equal capacity to store and retrieve information from past exchanges. All individuals are equally exposed to such exchanges and have equal access to the means of operating them, since they require no more than a common language or code and normal physical condition of voice and ear.

(a) In a stratified society, such a symmetrical means of communication can come into contradiction with the social relations of production. We can therefore expect the development of relations of communication which impose a ritual or juridical asymmetry of use on intrinsically symmetrical means.

(b) The right to initiate and terminate speech becomes of critical importance when speech is the dominant means of communication. The rule becomes: "Speak only when spoken to, and as directed".

As an index of power, the right to "have one's say" or the contrasting obligation to speak only as and when required is of great value. Who must listen and who can speak, when and how, are questions always worth asking.

In our society, that is in an H.C.S. where immediate-oral speech is not generally a dominant mode of communication, we can still note the operation of ritual-conventional rules of speech in such face-to-face groups as the family, the work-team and particularly in the combat group, the army. Asymmetric social relations of communication and different modes of address are in our society seen as instrumental or conventional rather than ritual or juridical.

(c) Bi-lingual social-formations exist, however, and the existence of a separate elite language is a powerful method of ensuring asymmetrical speech relations. Privilege can then take two forms:

(i) the elite alone speak a second language (Tsarist Russians speaking French; medieval Europeans knowing Latin) and can thus maintain secrecy and a restricted circulation of ideas: thus, the use of Latin to indicate the genitals in English vernacular literature and its use by Renaissance humanists in a way not exciting the 'ignorant populace'. Knowledge circulates in one language; ignorance is preserved in another.

(ii) the non-elite are forced to learn a second language, that of the elite. This is characteristic of imperial colonisation and its de-legitimation of native languages: only the metropolitan language is taught in schools, can be used in the law-courts or permits employment in the civil service. This performs a number of useful functions: (a) it places metropolitans at a permanent advantage vis-a-vis natives; (b) it forces the natives to learn a language that will expose them to metropolitan cultural products and hence to metropolitan cultural domination; (c) it makes it less likely for the dominated group to be able to preserve their original cultural traditions as a living, resistant resource. This also facilitates their primary orientation not to each other but to the elite.

Despite these qualifications, however, it has a certain validity to assert that immediate speech (unmediated aural-oral) is a relatively symmetrical means of communication, and that consequently in social formations where the dominant mode of communication is forced to use speech, a ritual-juridical differentiation of speech-rights is to be expected.

The development of letters and literacy, of alphabets provided a readier basis for a symmetrical relations of communication. Until the late nineteenth century, the capacity to read and write was always reserved for a minority: only recently have we seen the generalisation of literacy to the "dangerous classes". This more or less coincides with the displacement of dominance from letters to modes of communication involving other sets of means.

The domination of letters and the different material means it deployed have been well discussed by Innis and rather more confusingly by McLuhan. Changes in the materials used (stone and chisel, brush and paper, pen and parchment, pen and paper); changes in rates and costs of output with hand-powered press and finally machine-powered press . . . all these had very considerable consequences in political terms.

We shall consider the democratisation of print and the differential capacity of the market to maintain asymmetry of access to the dominant means of communication.

(1) Under conditions of *mechanised printing*, there is relatively little need for specific ritual-judicial restrictions on access to the means of printing, given a sufficient *difference of incomes* between the rich and the poor. Those who can afford the expensive means of communication-production are unlikely to distribute subversive messages; those whose messages would be likely to be subversive are unlikely to have incomes sufficient to give them access.

(2) This probability of market-control being sufficient is increased when the cultural *capacity to receive* literary communications (the ability to read) is absent from all but a small proportion of those who would be concerned to receive subversive messages.

(3) However, (a) at a certain stage the dominated classes can come to develop a movement of self-education which threatens to expand the market for subversive communications, (b) if the cost of paper and print fall absolutely or relatively vis-a-vis real incomes of the dominated classes, the equilibrium of asymmetry is threatened, (c) the inability to read subversive literary communications also involves an inability to receive conservative literary communications.

(4) There develops a system of *self-education* of the non-élite coupled with the development of a self-conscious underground and *subversive literary culture*. The market for a particular period fails to maintain the necessary asymmetry.

(5) The reaction of the dominant class is twofold: (a) repressive (b) pre-emptive.

(a) It becomes active in *repression*: the development of censorship, increasing the cost of printed materials by taxes on finished articles (Stamp Tax) or on raw materials, harrasing of the channels of distribution. This involves both *judicial* operations and *fiscal-financial* ones.

(b) It eventually becomes active in *pre-emption*: it devotes resources to the development of mass-education either directly or (as in England) through interposed religious or other charities; it develops a commercial press aimed specifically at a working-class cultural milieu operating an often slight but always systematic alteration and subordination of its content. It is prepared first to tolerate, then to encourage and finally to enforce the capacity to read precisely to the extent that it feels that it can provide both the education and the predominant material that will be read. While the 'opposition press' produces intermittent pamphlets with haphazard distribution circuits, the

'establishment-commercial' press uses well-capitalised distribution networks to distribute floods of daily papers, weekly papers and journals and regular series of booklets.

Once its superiority is well-established, the juridical-repressive methods of control can once more be lifted. The market can now be relied upon here as in other fields to operate as a mechanism for the production, reproduction and expanded reproduction of inequalities and monopolies in communication. Juridical repression only comes into play when for one reason or another the market has not proved sufficient.

Access/Exposure

Under certain conditions, we can discuss means of communication in terms of the privilege of *access*: what are the conditions for access to send communications through certain media; what are the conditions which restrict one's access to the means of receiving such messages?

Such an approach reflects a historical epoch in which the typical mode of domination was enforced ignorance through denial of access, was negative. Consequently, to learn to read, to be able to send seemed by definition to be unambiguous benefits in terms of an increase in *knowledge* (items received) and an increase in *power* (items sent). The higher the quantity of items circulated, the better!

We shall now consider the negative functions of access, that grasped under the subjective concept of exposure. We shall consider

(a) *restrictions on the ability-not-to-send*;

(b) *restrictions on the ability not-to-receive*.

In Orwell's *1984*, Winston Smith is involved in a technology with a high level of generated asymmetry: he has a television set in his room that cannot be turned-off (compulsory reception); the screen also transmits an image of his behaviour back to the agencies of social control (compulsory transmission).

(a) *restrictions on the ability not to receive* either aural or visual messages can be exemplified in (a) canned music and announcements in a variety of public places, air-raid and police sirens, street loudspeakers, private transistor radios turned up high, etc.; (b) street-signs, posters and hoardings.

Streets are places for *hoardings and shops* to have access to people; commercial television is a method of putting a *hoarding in every home*.

The *countryside* is a diminishing area where people can retreat from enforced exposure to unwanted communications. If too many people take ad-

vantage of this liberty, then commercial facilities move in.

(b) *restrictions on the ability not to send* (a) at the level of print, compulsory tax returns, credit ratings, curriculum vitae, references and questionnaires, police and criminal records, identity cards and passports; (b) government access to telephones and the mail, corporate closed-circuit TV in shops and police TV in Soho, one-way mirrors and concealed microphones etc.

(c) *subliminal transmission and reception* in which one is not even aware either of the advertisements and bias to which one is being subjected or of the concealed receptors through whom one is involuntarily transmitting.

We can note a distinction here: you have to focus on print and open a book; you can't avoid a picture, you can't not hear a sound. One point to the shift from literary to *mediated audio-visual* means of communication.

Communication Exchanges: Memory, Swamp- and Retrieval

The contrast has been made between the *oral dialectic* of the medieval period and the *dissociated impacting* of the contemporary period. In the medieval period, the slowly accumulating stock of MSS literature meant the very considerable working-over and critical sifting and assimilation of this stock of written culture. A slow rate of written input: a high rate of confrontation of opinions and interpretations. In contemporary society, an 'information and publicity explosion' such as to produce a modern man perpetually reeling under a rate of unselected input that he can no longer work over and transform.

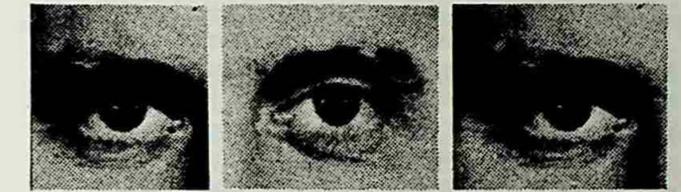
Previously, the communication of the present and the past through information storage and retrieval could only be prevented by the hunting-down of dangerous past printed information and their burning and elimination.

A less-obvious and more efficient method is that of swamping the individual with information in such a form and to such an extent that storage and retrieval is impossible. The ideal medium for non-retrievable swamping is electric information: the message lasts outside the memory only for as long as it takes to say it. The thoughtful contrasting of past radio or TV news is technically rendered impossible. The life-span of printed paper is still much too long for adequate rates of obsolescence: for the vast majority, however, storage space and the absence of cross-referencing as a technical possibility makes it very rare for newspapers to be stored or efficiently sifted by private individuals.

Newspapers could be produced on storable accessible specialised sheets classified by subjects for retrieval and comparison: they're not.

Secrets are no longer kept by refusing to say anything: they are kept by providing public relations officials to keep saying everything except what is significant. 'Practical secrecy' is achieved by concealing omissions and half-truths with a constant supply of plausible non-confidential material and 'pseudo-events'.

Immense contemporaneity: little storage and retrieval, except by corporations and institutions who can usually set against tax the costs of organising checks for consistency and pattern over time.



Towards a Characterisation of the British H.S.C.

1. The dominant means of communication being electric, the printed means (with the exception of mass-circulation press) and the immediate oral-aural modes of theatre, assembly, face-to-face discussion are thus given a comparative degree of freedom. A degree of freedom greater than they enjoy in conditions where their relative subordination is less clearly marked.
2. The electric media can be divided into the mediated-symmetrical means (telephones, walkie-talkies) and the highly asymmetrical means (televisions, radio).

(a) The symmetrical means of electric communication are not diffused as a social right or necessity. Phones for the dominated classes would merely permit them to contact each other more easily. Although phones and videophones are available for the wealthy, no great priority is given into making them as basic a social essential as water and gas. Indeed, the recent shift from a 4d flat rate to a time-rate by the GPO suggests how little it is hoped to generalise telephones to the majority of the population. As regards the walkie-talkie (or mobile phone) they are legal in the States but illegal in Great Britain. A pocket transistor for reception of radio programmes is fine; a pocket transmitter is dangerous. The lonely crowd must be kept lonely.

(b) The asymmetrical means are placed

outside of mass reach by the cost of transmission and by State monopoly in the granting of mass media licences. There is a state and a commercial sector in television and the same may develop in relation to radio. There is strong pressure for 'decentralisation' of media transmission which would benefit provincial and local dominant class forces and permit a greater dependence on direct or indirect local business financing. The same pattern to increase dependence on business of cultural institutions can be seen in relation to the universities and colleges of the country.

In general, the State is concerned to keep members of the population from having direct access to screen time—with one exception. Commercial advertisements are specifically welcomed—indeed the government provides tax relief to encourage a business presence on the television screens once every fifteen minutes—and restricts direct social expenditure on those cultural operations that might make media workers independent of business. The commercial presence (interrupting the cultural flow) is the message about priorities: political parties and universities would not get the same tax relief for the purchase of screen time!

A non-profit orientation is a privilege reserved for the State radio: the right to non-official communications is reserved for business interests. The concern for advertising ratings thus tends to induce an "anticipatory orientation/socialisation" on the part of the workers involved.

II. Information, Communications and Capitalist Production

Information and communications have become central to capitalist production. Corporations devote increasing resources to the acquisition and preservation of information, and to means of communication.

Information may be acquired either through auto-generation (research and development, market research, training programmes) through purchase (fees and royalties paid for the use of patents, techniques or management services have become a prominent financial flow in modern capitalism—another example is the week-long course recently run by Shell on Natural Gas Drilling for which outside participants were charged around £100,000) or through stealing (in the words of the Zelex International Corporation of New York "industrial espionage accounts for billions of dollars in losses"—most modern business buildings have their conference

3. Sub-electric media—mainly print. These technologies of production are becoming cheaper, leading to the development of a multiplicity of *minority press* operations. The significance of this is firmly restricted by the 'commercialisation' of distribution and mass distribution networks being firmly in the hands of private and socially irresponsible monopolies whose effective censorship policy appears subjectively as safe commercial practice. The *socialisation of distribution* is a precondition for a flourishing of independent production. Market control of distribution leads to a drive for fewer items and more guaranteed mass-sales.

Space on the shelves is a logical condition like *time on the media* for the imperialism of free trade not to lead to monopoly. Cultural production should be as subsidised and protected as small farm production. State could create a chain of non-commercial (university and college co-operative) bookshops, or provide tax-reliefs for bookshops who provided a full range of material.

Posters hoardings for the corporation are tolerated universally; political bill-posters or a wall-poster are likely to be prosecuted.

The current socialist struggle confronts 24-hour multiple variant electric media at oral speeds of contact with sound-and-vision power vs print-produced occasionals (not even a daily) under conditions of artisanal production and restricted-circuit distribution.

rooms in the innards of the block where there are no windows through which long distance listening devices can operate).

Capitalism may be seen in part as the privatisation of information. A firm has monopolistic control over items of information. It devotes resources to the preservation of this monopoly position (the emphasis on corporate self-financing preserves information from would-be external financiers at the cost of growth—or consider the work of personnel officers trying to keep skilled (i.e. informed) workers within the company) and develops specifically capitalist institutions to the same end (patents are a prime example, or, in the field of employment, pension schemes).

Under capitalism most fabricated means of communications are commodities. Firms attach value to

means of communications since they play a role in production in four ways:

(i) *internal mobilisation.*

Firms are constantly mobilised, and mobilisation over organisational or spatial distance requires communications: telex, intercoms, internal postal systems, computer links and now video equipment. The telecommunications firms are by their very nature farthest advanced. The head of AT&T for example, is surrounded by television screens in the central office on which he can call up any of the firm's so-called state governors who can in turn project on their screens the head and other governors participating in the meeting. The growth of international firms and more important, of an international division of labour within these firms—the electronic industry for example—puts an even higher priority on the development of new forms of internal communications.

(ii) *distribution of physical goods.*

Some firms have private means of transport for distribution, private lorry fleets, fleets of company cars, private oil tankers. But most physical distribution is run as a separate service industry.

(iii) *'commercial diplomacy' i.e. relations with external units excluding customers.*

This covers employment, the purchase of inputs, the takeover of other firms. It covers relations with public authorities and with the mass media. The means of communication for this purpose tend to be less elaborate, letters, the telephone, and most important face-to-face meetings (the role of the business lunch, or the PR man and the Press Officer).

(iv) *selling*

Mass media advertising is only one form of sales communications: in France for example it is of less importance than in the Anglo-Saxon countries compared with other forms: shop display door-to-door selling, circularising.

The key feature of external communication of information is that it is a selective presentation. A firm having a relatively monopolistic control of information has the power of 'closure'. It influences through *structural omission*. The public relations profession publishes those facts which though true on the whole are selected to achieve what the PR firm Brook-Hart, Ruder and Finn call "the creation of sympathy towards a client's corporate aims and confidence in his operations".

Marketing, research and development, labour training, the distribution system, and much of a firm's overheads (secretarial staff, office services, company cars and aeroplanes, post and telecommunications) can all be seen in terms of resources devoted to information acquisition and preservation and communications. In any large firm these form a major part of their expenditure. On a national scale their importance is even more marked if we include expenditure in the military, political, and educational sectors, as well as those sectors which manufacture the hardware.

With this in mind we can shed some light on the nature of three dominant features of capitalist development.

1. Concentration and conglomerate diversification.

Liberal economists who have sought to find some structural limit to the size of firms have recently suggested that there are organisational limits. They entirely neglect the changing technology of internal communications on the one hand, and the irresistible pressure for corporate growth and monopolisation through the re-investing of the surplus on the other. One of the key factors in the direction of concentration is the control of information. We could suggest an economic theory of the takeover. The predatory firm commonly wants the sales network, the managerial skills, or the research of the victim. One of the most interesting features of the GEC takeover of AEI was the fact that AEI research laboratories followed a scorched paper policy in some places, burning research information rather than let it get into the hands of GEC. Or it may be that the taken over firm produces goods which are complementary to those of the takeover firm, which the latter lacks the information to produce. Often the factor which is lacking is managerial knowledge, and this explains the pattern of diversification of most conglomerates which in terms of effective control (as distinct from formal takeover) develop in the form of an ink blot, i.e. into industries which have some parallels with that which the managers of the conglomerate know about.

Conversely, the takeover may be the result of the dominant firm having more rather than less information than the firm taken over. The forward integration in the aluminium industry can be seen in this light.

2. Unequal spatial development.

As the costs of communication are central to the competitiveness of the firm, it will locate its

operations in order to minimise its communications costs. In some industries the costs of transporting physical goods may constitute the main communications cost, as traditional spatial theory argues, but for others, cheap 'commercial diplomacy', the availability of already trained labour, and proximity to markets are more important. These savings, traditionally called external economies, may be external to non-classical theory, but they are internal to any understanding of unequal spatial development. For while there may be decreasing returns to the scale of agglomeration as far as transport is concerned (traffic congestion) there are increasing returns in the other forms of communications.

3. Imperialism.

A monopolistic firm may dominate a region, and form the centre of an agglomeration. Monopolies spread spatially as they do corporately. When this double spread goes beyond nation states we find imperialism. External territories are drawn into the centripetal system of linkages that an international firm introduces as a sectoral monopolist. In terms of information it is one of the most prominent features of modern imperialism that the dominant economic power has the resources to bid away information generating sources in the dominated countries, and return the information to the dominated for payment. Thus the brain drain furthers the technological gap which is bridged by massive payments of fees and royalties by European companies to the Americans.



Power and the Means of Communication.

We have argued that control over information and the means of communication constitute important economic power. They are necessary rather than sufficient conditions for economic power, and indeed in some cases not even necessary. Nevertheless the recognition of the role of information and communication in capitalist production is important for the light it throws on the directions and forms of the basic features of capitalism.

In other spheres, the relationship between power and information and communications is equally clear. In the military field, guerilla warfare empha-

sises the principle of closure of information to the enemy. Espionage is set up essentially to share information possessed by the other side. Communications systems have been the media for military information and were often designed for that purpose, whether they were the roads of China, Rome or the modern colonial powers, or the postal service of Louis XI of France.

The important point, however, is not merely to acknowledge the information and communications systems as constituents of power, but to see that in a class society the unequal distribution of information and the means of communication is a central component in the unequal distribution of power. The Chinese roads and Louis XI's horses at every inn were restricted for political use only. Similar judicial restrictions of communications have always occurred: censorship, the illegality of radio stations in Britain. However, under capitalism it is the market that primarily restricts. For there is always pressure from the military and commercial interests, an economic pressure that is, for the development of new forms of communication which are central as we have seen to their competitive interests.

Resources tend to be devoted to R & D of new communications systems in preference to developing the basic level of public communications. The GPO is developing advanced equipment, among other things the videophone, at the same time as there is a large waiting list for ordinary telephones. Radio has not been fully exploited from a social point of view. For the majority of the population, the main means of interpersonal communications still remains the letter whose use in the military and commercial fields has for some time been relegated to the status of a recorder of already verbally communicated material and the bearer of less important messages. IBM are currently even burying this use for the commercial letter because of its high cost (in Britain for example, the average cost of sending a business letter, according to a Treasury estimate, was 14s 5d). The inequalities in the means of communications revealed in the virtual restrictions of telephones and even letters in the under-developed countries to commercial, political and military uses, operates in developed capitalist economies; but less obviously to us because of our lack of awareness about the systems being used in military and commercial spheres.

Our argument has been that the stock (information) and possibility of flow (means of communication), are necessary if not sufficient conditions for the exercise of power. While both form part of the substructure the inequalities in both derive from the more general inequalities in economic power.



Soldiers in the Spanish Civil War

In our last issue Sheila Rowbotham discussed the development of Alexandra Kollontai's feminism and communism in Tsarist Russia, in exile and in the Soviet Union. In this concluding section she outlines Kollontai's contributions to the debate on the new morality and on communism and love.

Amidst all this the muffled voice of Alexandra Kollontai provides a crucial perspective. Much of what she said was neither unique nor new, but she maintained the tension between these various aspects of emancipation in a particularly balanced way. She refused to isolate any particular area of experience, and she refused to cordon off certain regions of consciousness as danger points it was forbidden to explore. To understand her significance it is necessary to see both how she continually connected her feminism to her communism, and how she followed ideas through to the furthestmost consequences of things. It was this connecting and following through, rather than simply the content of what she said, which made her ideas at once heretical, embarrassing, and revolutionary.

The way in which her feminism merged with her communism has already been mentioned. She always

Sheila Rowbotham is an economic historian and lecturer who has taken a special and active interest in the problems of Marxism and the liberation of woman. The article is in two parts, of which this is the second.

Sheila Rowbotham

Alexandra Kollantai: Women's Liberation and Revolutionary Love

related also the liberation of women to the freeing of men. In a critique of the bourgeois feminist movement, she pointed out how they failed to do both of these:

"From the start these advocates of feminine rights in the bourgeois camp never even thought of a new social order as offering women the widest and only firm basis of their emancipation. Socialism was alien to them . . . imagining themselves to be the advocates and spokesmen of the demands and aspirations of all women, believing themselves to be above class differences . . . while endeavouring to imitate the man in every possible way, they kept strictly apart and opposed the interests of women to those of men."¹⁸

Her opposition to their position is thus political in a double sense. She criticised at once their aims, and their belief that they were "above" class, and the way they restricted the possibilities of any genuine emancipation of women, by at once borrowing from the bourgeois man, and making "Man" in an abstract the enemy. This ignored the economic and social changes which were necessary for the freeing of all women rather than a privileged minority. They tried to by-pass social revolution.

The first conditions for such a revolutionary freedom were economic independence, improvements in education and training, social security and liberation from the drudgery of housework. "Separation of kitchen from marriage was as important a principle