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[23]

Excerpt from *Television and the Crisis of Democracy.*

1.3 Contested Terrain and the Hegemony of Capital

In contrast to postmodern media theory and the study by Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), I shall take a multidimensional approach, discussing both the regressive and progressive potential of new media and forms of culture. According to the first-generation thinkers of the Frankfurt School and many of their followers, the very forms of mass culture are regressive, exemplifying commodification, reification, and ideological manipulation. Commodity culture, from this viewpoint, follows conventional formulas and standarized forms to attract the maximum audience. It serves as a vehicle of ideological domination that reproduces the ideas and ways of life in the established order, but it has neither critical potential nor any progressive political uses.

The classic "culture industry" analysis focuses on mass culture as a cultural form. Whereas the critical theory of the 1930s developed a model of social analysis rooting all objects of analysis in political economy, the critical theory of mass culture neglects detailed analysis of the political economy of the media, conceptualizing mass culture merely as an instrument of capitalist ideology. My aim, by contrast, is to develop a critical theory that analyzes television in terms of its institutional nexus within contemporary U.S. society. Moreover, rather than seeing contemporary U.S. society as a monolithic structure absolutely controlled by corporate capitalism (as the Frankfurt School sometimes did), I shall present it as a contested terrain traversed by conflicting political groups and agendas. In my view, television—far from being the monolithic voice of a liberal or conservative ideology—is a highly conflictual mass medium in which competing economic, political, social, and cultural forces intersect. To be sure, the conflicts take place within well-defined limits, and most radical discourses and voices are rigorously excluded; but the major conflicts of U.S. society over the last several decades have nonetheless been played out over television. Indeed, contrary to those who see the logic of capital as totally dominating and administering contemporary capitalist societies, I contend that U.S. society is highly conflictual and torn by antagonisms and struggles, and that

television is caught up in these conflicts, even when it attempts to deny or cover them over, or simply to "report" them.

My response to the first generation of critical theorists (Adorno, Horkheimer, Marcuse, and so on) is the argument that the capitalist system of production and its culture and society are more riven with conflicts and contradictions than are present in the models of "one-dimensional society" or the "totally administered society" presented by earlier critical theorists. In addition, I stress that U.S. society is not only a capitalist society but also (in part) a democratic one. Democracy is perhaps one of the most loaded and contested terms of the present era. In its broadest signification, democracy refers to economic, political, and cultural forms of self-management. In an "economic democracy," workers would control the work place, just as citizens would control their polity through elections, referenda, parliaments, and other political processes. "Cultural democracy" would provide everyone access to education, information, and culture, enabling people to fully develop their individual potentials and to become many-sided and more creative.

"Political democracy" would refer to a constitutional order of guaranteed rights and liberties in a system of political decisionmaking, with governance by rule of law, the consent of the governed, and public participation in elections and referenda. The form of representational democracy operative in the United States approximates some, but not all, of these features of political democracy. (See Barber 1984 for another model of "strong democracy.") While I admit that full-fledged democracy does not really exist in the United States, I shall argue in this book that conflicts between capitalism and democracy have persisted throughout U.S. history, and that the system of commercial broadcasting in the United States has been produced by a synthesis of capitalist and democratic structures and imperatives and is therefore full of structural conflicts and tensions (see Chapter 3). As we shall see, television *is* its contradictions.

Furthermore, I stress the importance of conflicts within the ruling class and challenges to liberal and conservative positions by radical movements and discourses more than do previous critical studies of television. Given the ubiquity and power of television, it is a highly desired prize for ruling groups. Unlike most critical theorists, however, I attempt to specify both the ways in which television serves the interests of dominant economic and political forces, and the ways in which it serves to reproduce conflicts among these groups and to mediate the various antagonisms and conflicts that traverse contemporary capitalist societies. Accordingly, I shall attempt to present a more comprehensive and multidimensional theoretical analysis than the standard Marxist and neo-Marxist accounts, which tend to conceptualize the media and the state simply as instruments of capital. I shall also discuss current efforts at restructuring capitalist society in relation

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to the movements of the 1960s and 1970s, the world economic crisis of the 1970s, and the challenges of utilizing new technologies and media as additional sources of profitability and social control. In contrast to mechanistic "instrumentalist" accounts, which conceptualize the media merely as instruments of capital and of the ruling class and class domination, the "hegemony" model presented in this book provides an analysis of the ways in which television serves particular class interests in forging specific forms of hegemony at specific points in time.

Hegemony, Counterhegemony, and Instrumentalist Theories

The hegemony model of culture and the media reveals dominant ideological formations and discourses as a shifting terrain of consensus, struggle, and compromise, rather than as an instrument of a monolithic, unidimensional ideology that is forced on the underlying population from above by a unified ruling class.[8] Television is best conceptualized, however, as the terrain of an ever-shifting and evolving hegemony in which consensus is forged around competing ruling-class political positions, values, and views of the world. The hegemony approach analyzes television as part of a process of economic, political, social, and cultural struggle. According to this approach, different classes, sectors of capital, and social groups compete for social dominance and attempt to impose their visions, interests, and agendas on society as a whole. Hegemony is thus a shifting, complex, and open phenomenon, always subject to contestation and upheaval.

Ruling groups attempt to integrate subordinate classes into the established order and dominant ideologies through a process of ideological manipulation, indoctrination, and control. But ideological hegemony is never fully obtained; and attempts to control subordinate groups sometimes fail. Many individuals do not accept hegemonic ideology and actively resist it. Those who do accept ideological positions, such as U.S. justification for the Vietnam war, may come to question these positions as a result of exposure to counter-discourses, experiences, and education. Accordingly, hegemony theories posit an active populace that can always resist domination and thus point to the perpetual possibility of change and upheaval.

Hegemony theories of society and culture can therefore be contrasted with instrumentalist theories. The latter tend to assume that both the state and the media are instruments of capital, and to play down the conflicts among the state, the media, and capital. Examples include the structuralist Marxist theories of Althusser (1971) and Parenti (1986). Instrumentalist theories tend to assume a two-class model of capitalist society divided into a ruling class and a working class. These theories see the state and media as instruments used to advance the interests of the ruling class and to

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control the subjugated class. The model assumes a unified ruling class with unitary interests. A hegemony model, by contrast, posits divisions within both the working class and the ruling class and sees the terrain of power as a shifting site of struggle, coalitions, and alliances. Instrumentalist theories of television tend to be ahistorical in their assumption that television, under capitalism, has certain essential and unchanging functions. The hegemony model, by contrast, argues that media take on different forms, positions, and functions in different historical conjunctures and that their very constitution and effects are to some degree the result of the balance of power between contending groups and societal forces.

Hegemony itself takes different forms at different historical junctures. After the disruption of the conservative hegemony of the 1950s in the United States by the radical political movements of the 1960s, the 1970s witnessed intense struggles among conservatives, liberals, and radicals. The radicals were eventually marginalized and the liberals defeated with the victory of Ronald Reagan in 1980. During the 1980s it became clear that television had been taken over by some of the most powerful forces of corporate capitalism and was being aggressively used to promote the interests of those forces (see section 2.5 and Chapters 3 and 4 for documentation).

Gramsci and Hegemony

The term *hegemony* is derived from the work of the Italian Marxist theorist Antonio Gramsci.[9] In analyzing power relations, Gramsci (1971) distinguished between "force" and "consent," two ways in which the ruling class exercises power and maintains social control. Whereas institutions such as the police, military, and prisons use force to maintain social control, ideology wins consent for the social order without force or coercion. Hegemonic ideology attempts to legitimate the existing society, its institutions, and its ways of life. Ideology becomes hegemonic when it is widely accepted as describing "the way things are," inducing people to consent to the institutions and practices dominant in their society and its way of life. Hegemony thus involves the social transmission of certain preconceptions, assumptions, notions, and beliefs that structure the view of the world among certain groups in a specific society. The process of hegemony describes the social construction of reality through certain dominant ideological institutions, practices, and discourses. According to this view, experience, perception, language, and discourse are social constructs produced in a complex series of processes. Through ideological mediation, hegemonic ideology is translated into everyday consciousness and serves as a means of "indirect rule" that is a powerful force for social cohesion and stability.

For a hegemony theory, therefore, all beliefs, values, and so on, are socially mediated and subject to political contestation. In every society,

there is a contest over which assumptions, views, and positions are dominant. In Gramsci's (1971) analysis, ideologies "cement and unify the social bloc" and are embodied in everyday experience. Specific cultural forms—such as religion, philosophy, art, and common sense—produce consent and serve as instruments of ideological hegemony. In Gramsci's view, hegemony is never established once and for all but is always subject to negotiation and contestation. He pictures society as a terrain of contesting groups and forces in which the ruling class is trying to smooth out class contradictions and incorporate potentially oppositional groups and forces. Hegemony is opposed and contested by efforts to produce a "counterhegemony" on behalf of such groups and forces.

For Gramsci, it was the communist movement and party that provided the genuine progressive alternative to bourgeois/capitalist hegemony. A counterhegemonic movement would thus attempt to fundamentally alter the existing institutional arrangements of power and domination in order to radically transform society. The concept of hegemony has recently been reconstructed by theorists such as Laclau and Mouffe (1985), who root counterhegemony in new social movements struggling for democracy. Television in the United States helps establish capitalist hegemony—the hegemony of capital over the state, media, and society. Because of the power of the media in the established society, any counterhegemonic project whatsoever—be it that of socialism, radical democracy, or feminism—must establish a media politics (see Chapter 5).

According to the hegemony model, television thus attempts to engineer consent to the established order; it induces people to conform to established ways of life and patterns of beliefs and behavior. It is important to note that, from the standpoint of this model, media power is *productive power.* Following Foucault (1977), a hegemony model of media power would analyze how the media produce identities, role models, and ideals; how they create new forms of discourse and experience; how they define situations, set agendas, and filter out oppositional ideas; and how they set limits and boundaries beyond which political discourse is not allowed. The media are thus considered by this model to be active, constitutive forces in political life that both produce dominant ideas and positions and exclude oppositional ones.

Media discourse has its own specificity and autonomy. Television, for instance, mobilizes images, forms, style, and ideas to present ideological positions. It draws on and processes social experience, uses familiar generic codes and forms, and employs rhetorical and persuasive devices to attempt to induce consent to certain positions and practices. Yet this process of ideological production and transmission is not a one-dimensional process of indoctrination, but, rather, is an active process of negotiation that can

be resisted or transformed by audiences according to their own ends and interests.

Gramsci's work is important because it provides as a model of society one that is made up of contending forces and groups. It thus avoids the monolithic view of the media as mere instruments of class domination. The two most prolific radical critics of the media, Herman and Chomsky (1988), come close to taking an instrumentalist position, assuming that the media are "adjuncts of government" and the instruments of dominant elites that "manufacture consent" for the policies that support their interests. Herman and Chomsky also argue that a series of "filters" control media content, beginning with the size of the media and their ownership and profit orientation, and continuing through advertisers, media sources, pressure groups, and anticommunist ideology. All of these forces filter out content and images that would go against the interests of conservative powers and characterize the media as a propaganda machine. To document their thesis, Herman and Chomsky carry out a detailed analysis of mainstream media coverage of U.S. foreign policy, including studies of television coverage of Vietnam and Indochina, Central America, and the alleged plot to assassinate the pope, as well as studies of the individuals deemed worthy or unworthy to be represented as victims of their respective governments.

Lacking a theory of capitalist society, Herman and Chomsky tend to conceptualize the media as instruments of the state that propagandize on behalf of ruling elites and their policies. Whereas they see ownership of the media and commercial imperatives as filters that exclude views critical of established institutional arrangements of power, I would argue that the media are organized primarily as capitalist media and only further foreign policy and other perspectives that are perceived to be in the interests of the groups that own and control the media. Nonetheless, Herman and Chomsky quite rightly contest the self-image of the media as robust and feisty critics that help maintain a balance of power and promote liberal democracy. Arguing instead that the media are primarily propagandists for the status quo, they conclude:

> A propaganda model suggests that the "societal purpose" of the media is to inculcate and defend the economic, social, and political agenda of privileged groups that dominate the domestic society and the state. The media serve this purpose in many ways: through selection of topics, distribution of concerns, framing of issues, filtering of information, emphasis and tone, and by keeping debate within the bounds of acceptable premises. (1988, 298)

The concept of *hegemony,* rather than that of *propaganda,* better characterizes the specific nature of commercial television in the United States. Whereas propaganda has the connotation of self-conscious, heavy-handed,

intentional, and coercive manipulation, *hegemony* has the connotation, more appropriate to television, of induced consent, of a more subtle process of incorporating individuals into patterns of belief and behavior. By the same token, the propaganda model assumes that its subjects are malleable victims, who willy-nilly fall prey to media discourse. The hegemony model, by contrast, describes a more complex and subtle process whereby the media induce consent. It also allows for aberrant readings and individual resistance to media manipulation (Hall et al. 1980).

The ideological effects of television are not limited to its content, contrary to the dictates of the propaganda model. The forms and technology of television have ideological effects too, as I shall argue in this book. I therefore present perspectives different from those of Parenti (1986) and Herman and Chomsky (1988), who tend to utilize a somewhat monolithic model of capitalist society in their interpretation of the media as mere instruments of class rule and propaganda. My viewpoint also differs from that of radical critics of the media who focus on cultural imperialism and on the nefarious effects of the importation of U.S. television throughout the world. I supplement this important work by emphasizing the roles of commercial television within contemporary U.S. society, and my case study (Chapter 4) indicates the ways in which television has processed domestic politics during the 1980s. Much of Parenti's work, and almost all of Herman and Chomsky's work focuses on how U.S. television presents foreign affairs and how its anticommunist bias reflects the dominant lines of U.S. foreign policy while ignoring, or obscuring, unpleasant events that put U.S. policy policy and alliances in question. The works of Parenti and of Herman and Chomsky are indeed valuable as damning indictments of U.S. foreign policy and of the ways in which the media serve the interests of dominant corporate and political elites in these areas. But a more comprehensive theoretical perspective on television would focus on television's domestic functions and political effects and the ways in which it is structured by the conflicting imperatives of capitalism and democracy.

Critical Theory and Television

This book provides a more differentiated model of power, conflict, and structural antagonisms in contemporary capitalist societies than previous radical accounts. Although television can be seen as an electronic ideology machine that serves the interests of the dominant economic and political machine that serves the interests of the dominant economic and political class forces, the ruling class is split among various groups that are often antagonistic and at odds with one another and with contending groups and social movements. Under the guise of "objectivity," television intervenes in this matrix of struggle and attempts to resolve or obscure conflict and to advance specific agendas that are prevalent within circles of the ruling strata whose positions television shares.

Because television is best conceptualized as a business that also has the function of legitimating and selling corporate capitalism, a theory of television must be part of a theory of capitalist society. Contrary to those who view television as harmless entertainment or as a source of the "objective" information that maintains a robust democratic society, I interpret it as a "culture industry" that serves the interests of those who own and control it. Yet, in contrast to Horkheimer and Adorno (1972), whose theory of the culture industry is somewhat abstract and ahistorical, I analyze television's mode of cultural production in terms of its political economy, history, and sociopolitical matrix. In the process, I stress the interaction between political, economic, and cultural determinants.

From the perspective of critical theory, in order to adequately understand a given object or subject matter, one must understand its historical genesis, development, and trajectory. Chapter 2 accordingly outlines the history of television in the United States, focusing on the ways in which powerful economic and political forces have determined the course of the established commercial broadcasting system. Indeed, the broadcast media have served the interests of corporate hegemony from the beginning and took on even more blatantly pro-corporate agendas and functions during the 1980s. Chapter 3 follows with a sketch of my theoretical perspectives on television in the United States. Here I discuss the ways in which the capitalist mode of production has structured contemporary U.S. society and the system of commercial television. I also analyze the methods and strategies with which corporations and the state have attempted to control broadcasting; the ways in which commercial imperatives have shaped the organization, content, and forms of commercial broadcasting; the structural conflicts between capitalism and democracy in constituting the system of commercial television in the United States; and the major conflicts among broadcasting, government, and business over the past several decades.

A critical theory of society must not only ground its analyses in historical and empirical studies but also develop a comprehensive theoretical perspective on the present age. Chapter 4 accordingly reveals the role of television in maintaining conservative hegemony in the United States during the 1980s. In this chapter I document the conservative turn in the media during this decade and suggest that television promoted the Reagan/Bush agenda of deregulation, tax breaks for the rich and for the biggest corporations, and pursuit of a pro-business and interventionist foreign policy agenda. Television's role in the 1988 election, especially, dramatizes the current crisis of democracy in the United States. Indeed, television has increasingly reinforced conservative hegemony during an era in which corporate capitalism was aided and abetted by a political administration that was aggressively pro-business and hostile to the interests of working people as well as to those of progressive organizations and social movements.

Normative and political perspectives are also crucial to the conception of critical theory, which has traditionally been structured by a dialectic of liberation and domination that analyzes not only the regressive features of a technology like television but also its emancipatory features or potential. Critical theory promotes attempts to achieve liberation from forces of domination and class rule. In contrast to the classic critical theory of the Frankfurt school, which is predominantly negative in its view of television and the media as instruments of domination, this book follows Benjamin (1969), Brecht (1967), and Enzensberger (1977), who conceptualize television as a potential instrument of progressive social change. My studies thus maintain a doubled-edged focus on the media in which the progressive and democratic features are distinguished from the negative and oppressive aspects.[10]

Critical theory is motivated by an interest in progressive social change, in promoting positive values such as democracy, freedom, individuality, happiness, and community. But the structure and system of commercial network television impedes these values. In Chapter 5, I have proposed an alternative system that promotes progressive social transformation and more democratic values and practices. This alternative system embodies such values as democratic accountability of the media, citizens' access and participation, increased variety and diversity of views, and communication that furthers social progress as well as enlightenment, justice, and a democratic public sphere.

In short, critical theory criticizes the nature, development, and effects of a given institution, policy, or idea from the standpoint of a normative theory of the "good society" and the "good life." Capitalism defines its consumerist mode of life as the ideal form of everyday life and its economic and political "marketplace" as the ideal structure for a society. Critical theory contests these values from the standpoint of alternative values and models of society. In this way, critical theory provides a synthesis of social theory, philosophy, the sciences, and politics. Accordingly, I shall draw on a range of disciplines to provide a systematic and comprehensive critical theory of television. To elucidate the nexus between television and the crisis of democracy, I begin by situating television within the fundamental socioeconomic processes of corporate capitalism and by charting its growing influence and power in contemporary U.S. society.

Notes

8. This position is elaborated in Kellner (1979, 1980, 1982), in Best and Kellner (1987), and in Kellner and Ryan (1988). By contrast, the present book provides a more critical/institutional analysis of television. (I shall later devote a separate book to analysis of television as a cultural form.)

9. On hegemony see Gramsci (1971) and Boggs (1986), and on ideology and hegemony see Kellner (1978, 1979). Among those others who utilize a hegemony approach as opposed to a capital logic or instrumental approach to conceptualizing the media in relation to the economy and society are Stuart Hall and the Birmingham school (see Hall et al. 1980) as well as Gitlin 1980, and Rapping 1987.

10. Brecht (1967), Benjamin (1969), and Enzensberger (1974, 1977) developed perspectives in which new technologies, as in film and broadcasting, could be used as instruments of liberation—by "refunctioning" the media to serve progressive goals. The present volume follows this tradition, which attempts to develop progressive uses for existing technologies and media. I should note that the first generation of the Frankfurt school also discussed emancipatory uses of popular culture and new technologies (Kellner 1989a), but for the most part they took a negative stance toward mass culture and communication.

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Culture industry reconsidered

The term culture industry was perhaps used for the first time in the book *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, which Horkheimer and I published in Amsterdam in 1947. In our drafts we spoke of 'mass culture'. We replaced that expression with 'culture industry' in order to exclude from the outset the interpretation agreeable to its advocates: that it is a matter of something like a culture that arises spontaneously from the masses themselves, the contemporary form of popular art. From the latter the culture industry must be distinguished in the extreme. The culture industry fuses the old and familiar into a new quality. In all its branches, products which are tailored for consumption by masses, and which to a great extent determine the nature of that consumption, are manufactured more or less according to plan. The individual branches are similar in structure or at least fit into each other, ordering themselves into a system almost without a gap. This is made possible by contemporary technical capabilities as well as by economic and administrative concentration. The culture industry intentionally integrates its consumers from above. To the detriment of both it forces together the spheres of high and low art, separated for thousands of years. The seriousness of high art is destroyed in speculation about its efficacy; the seriousness of the lower perishes with the civilizational constraints imposed on the rebellious resistance inherent within it as long as social control was not yet total. Thus, although the culture industry undeniably speculates on the conscious and unconscious state of the millions towards which it is directed, the masses are not primary, but secondary, they are an object of calculation; an appendage of the machinery. The customer is not king, as the culture industry would have us believe, not its subject but its object. The very word mass-media, specially honed for the culture industry, already shifts the accent onto harmless terrain. Neither is it a question of primary concern for the masses, nor of the techniques of communication as such, but of the spirit which sufflates them, their