

THE CONSCIOUSNESS INDUSTRY: ON LITERATURE, POLITICS AND THE MEDIA

by Hans Magnus Enzensberger. Selected and with a postscript by Michael Roloff. New York: Seabury Press, 1974, 184 pages, \$6.95

Reviewed by Sue Curry Jansen

Emerson maintained that the world belongs to the person who can see through its pretension. These words find a renewed resonance in the pages of this collection of essays by poet-activist Hans Magnus Enzensberger, who contends that if human liberation is to be realized in today's world the consciousness industry requires "alphabetizers" capable of provoking "consequences" instead of evoking reviews. His editor describes Enzensberger as profoundly partisan: philosophically he is a "radical constitutionalist," but within the context of West German politics he is a Marxist who has "become something of a one-man literary and political guerilla enterprise."

The essays, written over a thirteen-year period, encompass a broad spectrum: the avant garde, the future of literature, the world language of poetry, poetry and politics, the industrialization of the mind, the media, and tourists of the revolution. The last three have a special relevance for anyone who is still courageous enough to harbor the conviction that the sociology of knowledge can be more than a chimera in an age in which the mass media has profoundly altered the roles of intellectuals and, all too often, transformed them into accomplices in their own exploitation. These essays may be partisan but they reflect no orthodoxies. Enzensberger acknowledges a large debt to Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht, but his views are essentially his own.

"Constituents of a Theory of the Media" (1970) is a preliminary effort toward developing a Marxist theory of the media. Enzensberger is critical of the New Left's analysis of the media which reduces this complex phenomenon to a single concept—manipulation. He acknowledges that

this concept once had utility, but warns that it "now threatens to degenerate into a mere slogan which conceals more than it is able to illuminate, and therefore [itself] requires analysis."

He contends that in the late sixties the New Left attitude toward the media merely combined a resurrection of the old elitist fear of the "masses" with a romantic yearning for preindustrial times and clothed these reactionary sentiments in the strident tones of progressive verbiage. He concludes that capitalism is the sole beneficiary of the New Left's antagonism toward the media. According to Enzensberger's thesis, the mind industry has a dynamic of its own and contains currents which run contrary to its dominant mission of stabilizing the status quo. Therefore, only a dialectical approach can effectively come to terms with it.

In "The Industrialization of the Mind" (1962) he asserts, "Criticism of the mind industry which fails to recognize its central ambiguities is either idle or dangerous" since "no one can nowadays express any opinion at all without making use of the industry, or rather, without being used by it." He contends that the capitalistic exploitation of the media is accidental rather than intrinsic. Whether the media is in the hands of the promoters or the party (a contingency he strongly opposes), it is manipulative. Writing scripts, casting characters, filming, and broadcasting are by definition manipulative acts.

Enzensberger believes that the apolitical (particularly McLuhan, on whom he ventilates an uncharacteristic vitrol) have made far more progress in dealing with the media than any of the leftist coteries. "Constituents of a Theory of the Media" is a solid contribution toward rectifying the balance.

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Enzensberger's analysis of the structure of the media is distinguished by its concentration on exactly those issues which McLuhan refuses to address—the political and social implications of the electronic media for the class structure of industrial societies. He explores these implications by referring to specific examples drawn largely from Third World revolutionary politics.

If Enzensberger's analysis of media theory does not spare the New Left, the Old Left comes under critical scrutiny in "Tourists of the Revolution" (1973). In this essay he explores the *delegacija* system, a Russian invention which has been adapted by virtually all socialist regimes—the practice of inviting sympathetic intellectuals from the outside to participate in expense paid tours of the socialist country. During the visit the guest is assigned an official guide who functions as a "translator, nanny, and watchdog." The guide's purpose is to shield the guest from situations he might not be able to handle and, not incidentally, from the reality of socialism.

Enzensberger discredits conspiratorial interpretations of the origins of this system by pointing out that during the chaotic period when the socialistic system was being created, it would have been almost impossi-

ble for an unaccompanied foreigner to travel through Russia without risking starvation, exposure, and violence. However, as the *delegacija* system has evolved it has become the cheapest and most effective means ever devised of influencing world opinion. Very few guests have been so gauche as to violate the rules of hospitality which their bourgeois upbringings instilled.

As long as socialist countries remain isolated by blockades, iron curtains, or the Wall, travel is highly restricted; the Left (which distrusts all official news agencies) is dependent on these eyewitness reports relayed by this idiosyncratic "pre-industrial messenger service." Perhaps Enzensberger's remarks will encourage an enterprising researcher to embark on a systematic empirical study of the workings of the *delegacija* system in mainland China—indeed, the composition of the chairman's guest list itself deserves study.

This essay can also be seen as a vindication of the ghost of André Gide. Gide was invited to Russia to deliver a memorial address at Gorki's funeral. On his return to France he published two books, *Return From The U.S.S.R.* (1936) and *Afterthoughts On The U.S.S.R.* (1937), in which he exposed his experiences with the *de-*

legacija system. These reports provoked very painful consequences for their author. Leftist intellectuals were outraged. A campaign of public vilification of Gide ensued. The incident marked the decline of Gide's popularity—so much so that when he died in 1951, one periodical announced that a corpse had died!

However, Enzensberger acknowledges that "rereading his books today one must admit, however reluctantly, that they have outlasted much of what his Marxist opponents put on paper at that time." Enzensberger contends that Gide's genuine solidarity with the Russian workers and farmers distinguishes his reports from the tirades of other disillusioned visitors and separates them completely from the anticommunist propaganda of the Cold War era, as well as from "the arrogant knowledge, all attitude and malicious gleefulness that survives in some writers of the Left to this day."

Without question Gide's reports on Russia, like his account of his journey to the Congo in 1927 (which was applauded by the Left), are pervaded by a deep humanism. But Gide's aesthetic ethos also contributed to the cogency of his critique: his resolve to follow Claude Bernard's dictum—"The investigator must pursue what he seeks, but also see what he was not seeking"—and to view himself as a "posthumous author" if necessary. Ideological rhetoric notwithstanding, the alphabetizer who penned "Poetry and Politics" is impelled by a similar ethos and, we might add (although Enzensberger would perhaps abhor the label), a similar humanism. This humanism and the dialectical approach it embodies is marred only by an overabundance of noncommittal adjectives.

To review Enzensberger's work is to betray it; but to read these essays is to experience their consequences. They inspire no simple affirmations and no easy condemnations. In a word, they disturb. Serious readers will find themselves drawn into a radical confrontation with their own conventional opinions, cherished theories, and comfortable professional myths. Among the "constituents" for a socialist theory of the media, Enzensberger lists Gramsci's epigram "pessimism of the intelligence, optimism of the will." These essays meet the constituent.

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