

BOOK REVIEWS

Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada, by Dallas W. Smythe. (Norwood, New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1981).

Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada is a profoundly important synthesis of post-Marxist scholarship on the Consciousness Industry (CI). Ironically, it is not likely to receive the attention it merits due to the inclusion of the fourth "C" in the alliterative subtitle. If so, the resulting neglect will confirm one of Smythe's central theses: that the agenda set by CI in the core areas of monopoly capitalism places a very low priority on Canadian studies. In his view, this agenda-setting process creates *cultural screens* which block scrutiny of the world-wide system of economic colonialism that has been established since 1945 of U.S.-based transnational corporations (TNCs). In short, Smythe sees Canada as a U.S. colony: "its largest and most loyal colony." But he contends the entire apparatus of the CI is wired to deny such liberationist visions.

The factual warrant for Smythe's argument that the one-way flow of traffic from the U.S. CI played a decisive role in transferring Canada from a British to an American colony is compelling, e.g. 1. 70 percent of U.S. news in Canadian newspapers is written in the U.S. by Americans. 2. Circulation of foreign magazines (mostly U.S.) outnumbers circulation of Canadian-produced magazines in Canada by three to one. 3. Two U.S. firms control all newstand distribution of magazines in Canada. 4. Of the total book sales in Canada of \$200,000,000 in 1969, two-thirds consisted of foreign-made books. 5. In Canada, sale of Canadian authors' works declined from 38 percent of total sales in 1966 to 24 percent in 1969 to 17 percent in 1973. 6. Nearly all of the \$200,000,000 box office receipts from motion pictures shown in Canada are controlled by the U.S. film industry. 7. In 1973 the earnings of Bell Telephone Company in Canada equaled the combined total public revenues of four provinces. 8. Most Canadian television viewing is of U.S.-produced programs which reach Canadian viewers from Canadian over-the-air and cable systems as well as directly from U.S. border television stations. 9. In 1977, 50.1 percent of Canadian homes subscribed to cable television (as compared to 20 percent in the U.S.). Incentive: to receive a larger variety of U.S. programming! Nevertheless, the awesome achievement of this book does not rest on the analysis of Canadian dependency. It is in dealing with the other three "C"s that Smythe makes the theoretic breakthrough that allows him to transcend both conventional academic communications research as well as established neo-Marxian genres of media analysis.

Smythe regards previous academic and Marxist scholarship on CI as idealist and subjective since it deals with effects, meaning, manipulation, etc. – *what goes on in the heads of members of audiences*. He maintains that by focusing on the work people do under monopoly capitalism, it is possible to uncover the grounds of an objective and realistic approach in the commodity: audience power.

Basically Smythe is concerned with the agenda-setting power of mass media: not in the narrow sense well-documented by news analysis, but in the broad existential sense implied by Ortega Y Gasset's observation that, "Living is nothing more or less than

doing one thing instead of the other." Smythe is interested in how mass media institutions implicitly or explicitly coax or cajole us into doing one thing instead of another. He regards the agenda-setting function of mass media as the elementary principle of power-knowledge in our time. He therefore contends that, in a fundamental sense, what is omitted from the agenda set each day by the mass media is *censored* from mass consciousness. However, in Smythe's view, it is not the free lunch (the non-advertising content of programming, films, records, books, magazines and newspapers) produced by the CI that is the decisive agent in the agenda-setting process. It is not even the manipulative message encoded within the free lunch of entertainment that makes it indispensable to monopoly capitalism. For Smythe maintains that under monopoly capitalism, mass media and its artifacts should no longer be regarded merely as ideological apparatus. Rather, he contends they have entered the productive sector: become part of the economic substructure. Like oil, coal, steel, and transportation, they must now be regarded as part of the productive base of monopoly capitalism. Thus, in the core areas, Smythe contends that "... the mass media *produce* audiences and sell them to advertisers of consumer goods and services, political candidates, and groups interested in controversial public issues. These audiences *work* to market these things to themselves." Outside of the core, he contends, imperial control is exercised quietly through cultural domination via CI (with back-up support from the military power of the core).

In his view, this substructural realignment radically alters the terms of power and creates a new age in which information activities assume central importance. At the end of the nineteenth century only about 12.5 percent of the U.S. gross national product consisted of informing activities. Today the figure is rapidly approaching 50 percent. CI has become an integral part of the power structure of monopoly capitalism. According to Smythe, its essential function is to create and manage demand for consumer products by producing audiences for sale to advertisers.

The term, *consciousness industry*, was, of course, introduced into neo-Marxist dialogues by Hans Magnus Enzensberger (*The Consciousness Industry*, 1974) and is derivative of Adorno's concept of *culture industry*. Following Enzensberger, Smythe conceives CI broadly. Enzensberger included radio, cinema, television, recording, advertising, public relations, publishing, fashion and industrial design, religions and cults, opinion polls, simulation, tourism, and education in CI. Smythe includes the primary information sector plus consumer goods industries in CI. For, he contends, "Every commodity is in a sense a teaching machine." That is, every commodity suggests priorities for allotment of consumer time and energy. But, unlike Enzensberger, Smythe does not regard the free lunch as the principal product of CI. He focuses on CI as a productive force: producing audiences (comprising virtually the entire populations of core nations) to sell to advertisers (TNCs) to facilitate management of demand for their commodity outputs.

Where Enzensberger, Marcuse, Adorno, Horkheimer, Habermas and others have been primarily concerned with the manipulative aspects of CI, with the ways in which the messages of CI pollute, damage, and distort human subjectivity thereby domesticating resistance, Smythe's view is more systemic and ultimately more hopeful. The assumption behind the stance of Enzensberger et al. is that if the manipulative character of the message of CI could be negated, undistorted communication would

be possible. However Horkheimer and Adorno could not foresee any conditions under which such a negation could be achieved. Hence, the praxiological sterility of their critical theory. And, even Habermas's brilliant attempt to overcome his mentors' defeatism has reached an impasse as the means in his plan for a rational society, the ideal speech situation, has displaced the end, emancipatory social change. Similarly Enzensberger offers no exit from corporate domination although his pessimism is sweetly coated in a placebo of poetic irony.

Only Marcuse held out some hope. He believed that the increased leisure time brought about by technological advances could have a therapeutic effect: that it could lead to creative mergers of the spheres of work and play which could reduce alienation and restore our powers of resistance. Smythe shares Marcuse's faith in human nature. He affirms evidence that individuals and groups express their resistances to the commodification of life in daily actions which "embody essential human qualities of love, creativity, and the struggle to assert dignity." However Smythe does not see this resistance as an expression of the proletarian antagonism of classic Marxism. Rather, he contends that the emergence of CI has altered the terms of the dialectics of history. And, he speculates that it may be producing a new regiment of gravediggers: "It appears . . . that in seeming to perfect its system for managing demand through producing and consuming audiences in order to market its products, monopoly capital has produced its principal antagonist in the core area: people commodified in audience markets who are consciously seeking noncommodified group relations." That is, Smythe contends that there is a "dialectical tension" between the work people do for advertisers and the efforts they feel are required to implement the values necessary to build a satisfying home, community, and nation.

Smythe also shares Marcuse's conviction that work in itself is not intrinsically oppressive. Indeed, he conceives of the emerging struggle as an opposition between the demands of CI and the resistances of people with what Veblen described as *the instinct for workmanship*. Thus Smythe avoids the paralyzing pessimism of Enzensberger et al. But he does not believe that the path to human liberation lies only (or primarily) in negating the negation: in demystifying the manipulative messages of CI. Nor does he believe that freedom from the most demeaning forms of labor will have the curative effect Marcuse anticipated!

Contra Marcuse, Smythe contends mass media rob us of *free* time. Mass media keep us at work (doing the unpaid but productive work of audiences) for an extra six-plus hours per day (average time television set is on in U.S. homes). This work includes: (1) marketing consumer goods and services to ourselves, "The Civilian Sales Effort"; (2) learning to vote for one candidate or issue, or another in the political arena; and (3) learning and reaffirming belief in the rightness of the present politicoeconomic system. It is this invasion of so-called leisure time by commodity-producing work under monopoly capitalism which creates the contradiction between "oppressive liberating activity in time which people are not paid." So that the bitter reality for most people in the core is that the commodity rat race makes "a mockery of free time and leisure."

Smythe contends that the "vulgar, atomized, and capitalized exploitation of leisure as a cover for an ever-expanding range of commodity markets" produces an impover-

ished form of human consciousness which focuses its energies on the consumption of commodities – what Erich Fromm called *homo consumens*. When *homo consumens* dominates the structure of the psyche, individuals succumb to self-fetishization which defines selfhood exclusively in terms of commodities possessed or consumed. So that people are what they own or what they aspire to own. No more! The result of this self-fetishization is a life crowded with commodities but emptied of purpose. Where *homo consumens* triumphs, the private sector is engorged and the public sector is ravished. In Marx's time and in Marx's analysis the principal feature of capitalist production was the alienation of the workers from the means of producing commodities. In our time and in Smythe's revision, the principal feature of capitalist production is "the alienation of workers from means of producing and reproducing themselves."

What is to be done? Smythe's answer to the perennial question is double-edged. He contends that, given the present hold of CI, mere transfer of the juridical title of ownership of the means of producing goods to the workers, while necessary, is not in itself sufficient to build socialism. He maintains, "The sufficient basis of socialism will be found in finding systematically different answers to the question, what, for whom, and how consumer goods are to be produced." Moreover, he points out that while there is much cynicism about and dissatisfaction with the quality of life in the core, "There is no revolutionary class consciousness in the United States and Canada." Nevertheless, Smythe does not discount the importance of collective consciousness-raising activities, e.g. popular resistances expressed through horizontal information networks, alternative media, workshops, popular theater, publications, songs, and free schools – the *samizdat* of monopoly capital. But he warns that significant obstacles stand in the way of these efforts: (1) the tendency to search for individual solutions where only collective answers are viable; (2) the fragmented structure of community life which inhibits communications among groups; (3) the bias of the dominator through superior expertise and control of hardware. These obstacles do not mean that monopoly capitalism is impregnable. To the contrary, Smythe maintains that the infrastructure based upon CI is very fragile. He portrays the "electronic information tiger" as a "paper tiger" which is vulnerable to non-violent intervention and disruption by counter-hegemonic technologies.

Indeed there are indications that the Owl of Minerva may already have taken flight. Again viewing CI from a systemic and realist perspective, Smythe points out that if J. Voge's law of information subsistence substitution is an accurate reading of the life cycles of information societies, CI may already be on the verge of transformation. According to Voge:

A maximum level of "maturity," in terms of economic growth, must theoretically be reached when information activities make up 50% of the total national product (which I call the quantum of information). This point will be reached soon in the USA and within a few years in the other leading industrialised countries. At this stage, to increase the American national product per worker from the existing \$10,000 to \$12,000 to \$16,000 it would be necessary to raise the information quantum from 50% to about 70%. . . . It is unlikely a society would willingly forego such material wealth in exchange for something – information that was already considered to be in suprabundance.

If so, under what conditions can non-violent intervention produce democratic libera-

tion? Here, Smythe directly confronts the problem of vanguardism. But, in my judgment, he does not satisfactorily resolve it. He lists three pre-conditions for democratic liberation. First, since control of the means of communication is the basis of political power, those who initiate the liberationist venture must control the networks for horizontal communication. Second, a liberationist ideology cannot be imposed from above. Artists and intellectuals have a role to play. They are to act as readers of the dialectics of history, but not as its architects as in Leninist doxology. Third, elitism based upon techno-scientific expertise must be avoided. In my judgment, each of these prescriptions remains problematic. First, and most troubling, Smythe offers no guidelines for insuring that successful liberationists will not collapse horizontal communication networks into hierarchical channels. This has proven an irresistible temptation for successful revolutionists throughout history prompting Simone Weil to observe that justice is always the first fugitive of the winning camp. Moreover, it has been a special problem for socialist revolutionaries. Hence, programs for democratic socialism have a special responsibility for spelling out what mechanisms they will use to insure that criticism does not end when socialism begins. Second, Smythe assumes that objective readings of the dialectic of history are possible. I assume that history is constructed in the reading. And, that some readers of history give more dramatic readings than others and thereby reap the rewards of stardom. Therefore I also assume stars are brand names which will survive the decline of CI. And with them, the temptations of celebrity, elitism, and hierarchy. Third, Smythe is undoubtedly correct that vanguardism can only be contained if techno-scientific power-knowledge is demystified. But again, he fails to offer any concrete strategies for neutralizing or collectivizing the techno-scientific power-knowledge of professionals. What is to induce scientists, intellectuals, and artists to join no class where there are so many inducements to join "The New Class"? Idealism seems to be our realist's answer!

If Smythe does not solve the problem of vanguardism, he does demonstrate the richness of systemic approaches to communication studies, e.g. the law of information subsistence substitution raises some fascinating questions. Has the first US president wholly constructed and supported by the machinery of CI been anointed by TNCs to preside over its demise? Should the decimation of arts, education, research, and welfare budgets with the concomitant expansion of the world's largest military budget by Reaganomics be read as a signal that TNCs have decided to close *the windows of vulnerability* of the information society with imperative control in the core as well as the satellite nations? Are the authoritarian experiments with scientific management of governments currently being underwritten by TNCs in Latin America prototypes? Is CI being replaced by FI: the so-called friendly fascism described by Bertram Gross (in *Friendly Fascism*, 1980)? Smythe does not address these issues. They are recent developments: a critic's pessimistic postscripts to an optimistic book committed to the search for non-violent paths to democratic liberation. But Smythe does provide us with a provocative critical framework for examining these issues and drawing our own conclusions.

My reservations about Smythe's interpretation of what is to be done are substantial. But in no sense do they diminish my appreciation for what Smythe has done. By approaching CI as part of the productive sector, he has set a new agenda for post-Marxist scholarship on CI. This conceptual innovation has brought into view a

whole constellation of phenomena that until now has been largely obscured from critical vision. This is a remarkable achievement. But, in my view, it is a semantic achievement. For I am very skeptical of Smythe's claims for the realism of his approach contra the idealism of previous neo-Marxian communication studies (including his own past work). I think the philosophical issues are far more complex than Smythe acknowledges. He does not take into account post-positivist reconstructions of epistemology which radically challenge conventional objective-subjective and realist-idealist dichotomies. For this reason, I am also skeptical of Smythe's claims that *Dependency Road* is discontinuous with all previous work on CI. Nevertheless, *Dependency Road* is a benchmark. All future scholarship on CI will have to come to terms with its arguments.

Sue Curry Jansen

State University of New York at Buffalo

Channels of Desire: Mass Images and the Shaping of American Consciousness, by Stuart Ewen and Elizabeth Ewen. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1982).

Channels of Desire by Stuart and Elizabeth Ewen examines the role of consumerism and mass images in the shaping of American consciousness. The book contains five separate, but interrelated, studies that combine theoretical analysis with historical investigation of technology and media; consumption as a way of life; immigrant women and the rise of movies; fashion and democracy; and mass culture and a "media panorama" promoting militarism in contemporary America. In this review, I shall first cite what I believe are the major contributions in *Channels of Desire* to the study of consumerism, fashion, and mass culture, and shall then note some problems that I have with the Ewens' theory of contemporary mass culture and media.

Throughout *Channels of Desire* there are telling examples and historical studies of the role of what the Ewens call "mass images" in the production of an Americanized society. The book provides striking analyses of how images shaped a vision of America that drew immigrants to the promised land, Americanized newly-arrived would-be Americans, and produced a powerful social cement and unifying force that helped create the consumer society. For instance, drawing on one of the many oral histories used in the book, the Ewens tell how pictures on cotton bales produced an utopian vision of America in the mind of a young Czech working girl and how labels on American products produced an image for her of America as a land of abundance (43ff.). The young woman thus saw "the consumer products of America as magical objects"; the brand names and images became "channels for her desires, emblems of a world denied, embodiments of wishes unfulfilled" (45, 46). Eventually, she immigrated to America and could participate in commodity paradise simply through purchasing and using these products. Thus, "the proliferation of mass images provided an introduction to a new way of life promised by industrial America" (47).

Similarly, flyers circulated in southern Italy drew Italian peasants to America. One flyer, distributed by a woolen manufacturer in Lawrence, Massachusetts "showed a 'picture of a mill on one side of the street and a bank on the other - and workers trooping from one to the other with bags of money under their arms.' Linking 'ancient utopian motives' to an as-yet-unknown future in industrial America, this ad functi-