

Communication & Latin American Society

Trends in Critical
Research, 1960-1985



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Means of Communication and Construction of Hegemony

The objective of this study is to formulate some general provisional hypotheses that will allow us to discuss the specific structural and superstructural functions of the dominant mass media. Such functions operate within both the social processes or apparatuses of hegemony that promote the reproduction of the capitalist system and the social relations that support it. It is not my purpose to demonstrate which system of cultural apparatuses is dominant in every particular formation (in the Marxist sense of *Form*)—this would require historical-empirical investigation within every society—but only to point out some of the principal hegemonic apparatuses of modern capitalism.

The following theoretical and historical reflections will, I hope, contribute to the determination of the role of the dominant mass media in a capitalist state. To this end I will attempt to specify the function of the mass media within the process of the reproduction of the capitalist bloc in so far as it is related to the cultural superstructure and its implementing organs.

The Capitalist State: Creating Its Own Cultural Supports

Structural antagonisms arise from the basic inequality of the capitalist form of production. The ruling class controls and mitigates these contradictions through the machinery of the state to create and conserve the equilibrium

needed for the existence, reproduction, and transformation of capital. During the period when the dominant class maintains the cohesion and direction of society by cultural action, the ideological state apparatuses (ISAs) are the most important political means for maintaining the levels of the social formation. The ISAs are thus of fundamental importance to the cyclical reproduction of the system, permanent tools for the creation of the capitalist bloc. It is on this basis that the social formation achieves authoritarian and vertical stability through cultural action.

The modern capitalist state faces the need to apply its policies of cultural domination and at the same time its global plan of social subjugation. It must continually create and select the most appropriate superstructural institutions in order to inculcate the reasonableness of its domination. This involvement tends to manifest itself extensively and intensively in every cultural field and in every social group, and especially in those that constitute the base of support for capitalist society: the labor forces and working-class people in general.

This means that the ruling class, in order to survive, must continually revolutionize its forms of capital accumulation and its mechanisms of political control and continually modernize the material and cultural infrastructure of its historical legitimation. With this mechanism, the state protects its sources of surplus and confronts the structural antagonisms generated by its unequal economic system. We cannot forget that the main problem faced by every elite on its way to power, or already in power, is how to legitimate the basis of its domination day by day.

With this in mind, we find that every capitalist state carefully selects the means, instruments, and subjects of its ideological efforts to achieve the highest degree of ideological domination in all the fields of human awareness and behavior. This allows the state to impose its particular concept of society as the model of social reference and expectation—that is, to implement the ideology of its own class as the dominant one.

This practice is not stable but changes depending upon the different requirements of different phases of capital reproduction. In each phase the most advanced cultural system, or a combination of the most advanced means, is chosen by the ruling class to inaugurate its hegemony among the unlimited number of ideological positions that vie with one another at the level of the superstructure.

Privileged by their central role in capitalist development, the advanced means of communication are converted into the principal ideological apparatuses of the state to implement the program of cultural subjugation required for the stability of the social system. Through these cultural institutions, the dominant class produces and circulates its class-in-power ideology and inculcates it into the consciousness of the rest of society. Capital thus produces its

principal ideological tendency throughout the consciousness industries that represent for the state the political control of ideology by means of consensus.

We must recognize the importance of specifying which of the state's ideological mechanisms is being used to dominate each social formation. To make this more manageable, we must locate the principal superstructural mechanism in every social formation that is shaping the consciousness of the working class to the value accumulation demands of each situation.

The Dominant Mass Media as Principal Means of Hegemony

The modern capitalist state has a wide repertory of ideological mechanisms for its own legitimation and for cultural socialization—educational systems, cultural organizations, churches, labor unions, mass media, professional associations, laws, and so on. The most effective ideological mechanisms today are the mass media: television, radio, and other new communication technologies. In both central and peripheral areas of capitalism, the communication media are used culturally to integrate the demands of capital in its different cycles of development with other forms of social consciousness.

In today's capitalist societies, and especially the dependent ones of Latin America, the mass media have become the most efficient instruments of consensus building. This can be attributed to two causes. First, scientific advances in the electronic and space industries have allowed a substantial reduction in the time and material conditions required for the development of social communications. Second, the increased efficiency of these technologies is being used by modern states and transnational groups to refine and promote efforts that result in an unequal development for others.

The new structural position of the mass media results in a new division of social tasks. The cultural functions of the mass media are many, and they change according to historical circumstances. Through their ideological practices, they influence politics, economics, morality, and other social behaviors as well as fulfilling functions in such areas as finance, birth control, and economic organization. However, the main structural importance of mass media lies in their triple role in the reproduction of capitalism. Through symbolic and cultural practices, the mass media carry out three functions critically required by the global structure of the capitalist state:

1. Speeding up the circulation of material goods
2. Inculcating ideologies
3. Contributing to the reproduction of the labor force

Speeding Up the Circulation of Material Goods

The first structural function of the mass media is to accelerate the circulation of capital. As the primary transmitters of the advertising discourse, they help

to spark the mass consumption phase required by the circulation of capital in its current state of amplified reproduction in order to reproduce itself as productive capital. This in turn solidifies the value process, which generates value from the surplus extracted from the labor force in the capitalist reproduction process.

Advertising uses the mass media to reduce the time that elapses between the moment of production and the moment of consumption. Capitalist society thus achieves the necessities of production, distribution, and particularly consumption through the superstructural forms of consciousness and behavioral influence. This makes possible the effective integration of the cultural economy and the superstructure, which harmonizes the functioning of the capitalist system. From this perspective we find that the mass media do not operate as simple entertainment institutions or information channels, as their owners would like them to appear. Rather, they are mechanisms in the production and reproduction of society through their involvement in the circulation of goods.

Thus, the mass media cannot be considered as complementary institutions in the reproduction system. Their task is not performed by any other mechanism of hegemony. It is unique to the dominant mass media and especially in conditions of socioeconomic crisis within the cultural system.

Inculcating Ideologies

A second organic function of the mass media within the social structure is to make the dominant class ideology the only one. Capitalism enters a new phase of development from the moment when the mass media, while maintaining their "relative autonomy" and their character as an "open" field for class struggle, produce, transmit, and collectively teach the various dominant ideologies and their ideological subgroups (required for different classes and class fractions, both foreign and national). Thus they solidify the many projects of capital accumulation through their respective mechanisms and their fetishization of reality.

The media, as noted above, serve to integrate the material sphere of society and the superstructural spheres dealing with political socialization and individual behavior, thus helping to achieve the social harmony required for the conservation of capitalism. This function is not exclusive to mass media but involves the group of ideological mechanisms of the capitalist state that support the cultural superstructure. What is special about the media is their massive audience, immediacy, and advanced technology. The following properties of the mass media have converted them into the principal form of hegemony in the civil societies of the modern capitalist states:

1. The wide scope of ideological action
2. The capacity for continuous and rapid legitimation

3. The capacity for social mobilization and consensus building
4. The early socialization of consciousness
5. Participation in ruling-class goals
6. The inability to serve working-class interests

The Scope of Ideological Action. The first distinctive aspect of the mass media's ideological role is their coverage in the broad field of culture. No other ideological apparatus of the capitalist state can achieve the breadth of the media's psychological influence. This is especially true of the electronic media.

Whereas the schools, family, political parties, churches, trade unions, and so on are ideological mechanisms for smaller groups, the mass media reach millions simultaneously in a variety of social conditions. Their penetration has been very effective. Whether through local transmission systems or international technologies such as satellites, the mass media have attained a truly global reach.

The superiority of the cultural influence of the media in comparison with other ideological means at the disposal of the class in power is confirmed not only by sociological analysis but by the very behavior of various fractions of the ruling class. The entire system of ideological formation, comprising schools, churches, political parties, and so on, turns to the mass media as the superstructural extension of each specific cultural task to be performed, whether educational, political, or religious. Thus, every ideological apparatus of the modern state, according to its own level, strategy, and class focus, uses the mass media as technological extensions of its particular superstructural function. The ISA of education, for example, uses television and radio as an extension of its work through such programs in Mexico as "Telesecundaria," "Tele-introduction to the university," "Tele-literacy for adults," "Radio Instruction for Youths," or "Literacy radio for adults." Film education is also used as a cultural reinforcement.

Trade unions, political parties, and churches all make use of media technologies and institutions to diffuse their respective dominant discourses to a much broader audience than they would otherwise have access to, as do judicial, professional, and cultural organizations. Such groups struggle in their respective fields to conquer and then conserve a consensus that allows them to reproduce themselves as dominant institutions.

Moreover, simultaneous transmission and sequenced dissemination allow these media to carry on the same operations outside their own sphere of production and domination: hence the so-called dephasing and cultural synchronization that permit the most remote and isolated superstructures to be intimately but unilaterally connected with the historic center of dynamic capitalism. It is this process of mass communication (and especially the electronic media), and not other, more traditional cultural institutions, that has provided the main ideological apparatus of the multinational state. Through the communication ISA the capitalist states of the center have created the greatest hold

over human consciousness in contemporary history, the better to promote their cultural project of increased capital accumulation.

Thus, the mass media are used by the state as technological and collective extensions of an array of diverse institutions of domination. These media have integrated heterogeneous ISAs of the capitalist state and civil society, since it is through them that the main cultural trends of the ruling class are channeled and reflected. This has turned the media into the principal means for consensus building, but they are also the point at which the secondary contradictions of the ruling class are most evident.

The Capacity for Continuous and Rapid Legitimation. Another characteristic of the media that has placed them in the cultural vanguard of the capitalist state is the capacity for continuous circulation of messages of the electronic media and the rapid but symbolically disjointed circulation of messages of mechanically based media.

Both qualities are important for purposes of structural legitimation, particularly for capitalist social formations in acute crisis (as is true of so many Latin American societies). They permit a national and international consensus favorable to the structural reproduction of the capitalist mode of production.

These qualities of the media, along with their mass diffusion, help make them the most rapid technical means of maintaining the direction and structure of the diverse social groups required for the reproduction of the dominant social relations of the capitalist bloc. Every day the mass media tie together, whether instantaneously or periodically, many different areas of consciousness where a variety of social agents work. They create and recreate, over and over again, the field of thinking and behaving that the task of social domination requires in changing circumstances. The ruling sector uses these media for the vital cultural task of creating ideas about "the nation," "the fatherland," "history," and, in a word, social participation. Day by day the image of a society is passed along to all levels of society.

Intellectuals in the dominant media specialize in creating a world view and lifestyle models that affirm the presence of capitalism through media discourse. Two kinds of media productions play a fundamental role in reproducing the subjective conditions that the reproduction of capitalism requires: these are the discourse of news and the discourse of advertising.

The news discourse operates under the twin ideological covers of "objective information" and "relevant cultural product." Thus, the awareness of the social agents in news works is permanently attached to the cultural demands of a political order promoting the daily reproduction, expansion, and legitimation of national and international capital. Their activity and behavior is constantly oriented in this direction.

The discourse of advertising, on the other hand, uses the slogans "satisfaction of basic needs" and "consumer choice" to constantly and unobtrusively promote the accumulation of capital. This is accomplished through the rapid

circulation and the easy mass consumption of goods produced under the conditions of exploitation. This discourse is favored by contemporary capitalism in its task of mass circulation of goods because it permits through a degree of collective influence the consumption of capital as a relation of value that generates value. It also helps to fetishize goods so that the inequalities of the production process are obscured. In both cases advertising helps to reproduce the fundamental relations of capitalism: the subordination of the working class to capital within the social relations of exploitation.

These two areas of discourse are today the cultural centers of greatest structural relevance because through them the mass media quite unconsciously reinforce, on a daily basis, the dominant relations of stability and reproduction/transformation required by capitalism: that is, the corresponding relations of capitalist exploitation and social subordination.

The media's ability to reach mass audiences rapidly and with a persuasive message allows the ruling class to transmit its dominant ideology. Besides this, the media provide it with the hegemonic power to achieve social mobilizations to protect its dominant interests, especially through various political programs. Thus, the dominant class can create and continually apply an ideological strategy of recreating and readapting the dominant culture. This explains its success in overcoming the periodic crises generated by its principle of inequality and its innate tendency toward irrational development.

These characteristics of the mass media oblige the current ruling class and its fractions to utilize and control them. It is only through their ownership and financing of the media that the dominant class can control the cultural direction of society. Not to do this would jeopardize their own existence by threatening continued social consensus.

The Capacity for Social Mobilization and Consensus Building. Another characteristic that helps to make the mass media the principal means of cultural struggle in modern society is their ability to create collective consensus and consequently to mobilize society. It is true that the ISA of education has certain advantages over the media in creating an ideological awareness in students: the dynamic persuasiveness in the teacher/student relationship and the learning model of repetition and evaluation of the dominant value system. Yet education is less flexible, and the media's power of socialization and mobilization is so broad and can be launched so rapidly that they hold a unique place in the global complex of communication and information.

The ideological effect of the mass media is not necessarily more complete and effective than that of the school; nor are the media all-powerful or automatically effective. Yet the media create a collective sense of reality and history that reinforces the main social consensus. Consequently, it is from the apparatus of the mass media that modern civil society takes its basic direction.

The social initiative of the media is carried out in two fundamental ways: (1) creating the economic demand for the reproduction of the national capitalist production through the consumption of goods, which maintains the momentum for the generation of capital; and (2) creating the political/cultural demand for the survival of capitalism by creating the consensus that turns the subjective order of consciousness to the current task of accumulation of capital. The persuasive ability of the media have made them the principal means of socialization and consensus building of contemporary capitalism.

The Early Socialization of Consciousness. A fourth characteristic that distinguishes the mass media from other cultural mechanisms is their increasing role in the multi-socialization of children from their earliest years. This aspect of the mass media has complemented socialization by the family since early in the twentieth century and predates the impact of the school. Advanced technology has strengthened the tie between the social and ideological processes of socialization.

Until the end of the nineteenth century, children were socialized through two primary networks: the family and the school. Cultural instruction by the family is limited to a rather narrow range of topics, unconnected with the interests and objectives of those groups who transform the social and economic structures of society. When children enter the network of socialization composed of the social relations of schooling, their cultural arena broadens to include those interests. Because in capitalist societies the apparatus of schooling is generally under the control of the ruling class, education means that students will identify with the interests of that class.

At the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth, children began to undergo a new process of socialization that emerged from the first mass media: film (1895), radio (1920), and television (1936). Depending on their social class, children generally began this process somewhere between the ideological phase of early family life and that of school, and media socialization continued for the rest of their lives. From their earliest years they incorporated an innovative and extensive cultural panorama that linked them with the heterogeneous interests at the heart of the superstructure of society. In this dependent kind of socialization, people's consciousness is linked through the mass media to the varied interests—economic, political, and cultural—of the distinct class fractions of financiers, merchants, bureaucrats, industrialists, farmers, locals, and foreigners who constitute the spectrum of this dominant social formation. Thus, in capitalist society, from the very earliest years to maturity, people's consciousness is shaped by the mass media according to the needs of national and transnational capital.

Participation in Ruling-Class Goals. The mass media permit broad participation in ruling-class projects and goals. Other institutions of hegemony—church, school, labor unions, family, and so on—usually express

the interests of the particular class fractions that sustain them. The mass media express internal ruling-class disagreements to a greater degree than do other ISAs.

In a dependent capitalist society, such as those of Latin America, the bourgeoisie, whether from commerce, industry, finance, or the bureaucracy, national or foreign, advance their ability to participate in the superstructure through the use of the mass media. The reason for this is that once the material infrastructure is installed (e.g., transmitters, a captive audience, increased signal coverage), all that is required for these class fractions to transmit and promote their dominant ideology on a massive scale is access to media time and space so that they can broadcast and impose their own class interests as general needs and priorities of society as a whole.

This openness to all the interests of the ruling classes is not as easily found in other ISAs. All of these hegemonic apparatuses reflect a variety of interests, but their responses to these interests vary according to their development over time. Thus, each apparatus—the school, the family, the church, the political system, and so on—responds more readily to the class that historically created it and in some fashion reduces or limits the participation of other class fractions. But this is less true of the mass media, because, given the current structure of their cultural hegemony, their very high operating expenses (especially those of the electronic media) demand the economic and, consequently, the political and cultural participation of all the dominant class fractions, both national and foreign, to support their functioning.

This openness of the mass media to all dominant class fractions involves the participation of the ruling class, both foreign and national, in the construction and readaptation of the apparatus of legitimation to serve them in maintaining and reproducing the distinct types of capital that support the social structure. As a consequence, in carrying out their function, the mass media reflect the power relations among the diverse fractions of the ruling class who operate at the heart of capitalist society. The mass media are dependent upon the fractions of the dominant class and thus have been raised to the highest levels of ISAs in the current evolution of capitalism.

The Inability to Serve Working-Class Interests. The mass media in a hegemonic capitalist society are almost totally closed to the interests of the working class. The high cost of access means that workers have little real possibility of influencing the production, transmission, or cultural impact of these media and even less of disseminating messages in the working-class interest.

The workers' principal influence in the direction of the mass media comes from the organized pressure of those who work within these institutions and have the right to unionize and to strike. In response to this possibility, however, the management of this cultural superstructure keeps the work force highly propagandized and controlled through reformist actions and slick pub-

lic relations (that is, a subtle manipulation of the image of capitalist enterprise). In this way the mass media are kept firmly in the hands of the ruling sector. The mass media, therefore, transcend their role as mere technical means of social relations and become the major cultural links for all people in the transformation of society. Mass communication constitutes the principal factor of the cultural superstructure by which world capitalism daily extends its social reach.

The Reproduction of the Labor Force

A third function of mass media has until recently not been mentioned by Marxists or critical communication researchers. Although it still has very little structure, it is daily gaining a more organic place in capitalist reproduction and the cohesion of society. This is the mass media's role in the training and reproduction of a qualified labor force. Marxist tradition views the school as the unique means to reproduce qualified workers. In fact, since the 1950s in the central capitalist countries and since the 1960s in the periphery, the information system for the masses is being affected by the global phenomenon of mass communication.

The twentieth-century school has had to modernize in response to two challenges: the new exigencies of capital accumulation in its modern phase of concentrated value, and the political-cultural crises periodically provoked by the inequality of capitalist society. Among the school's more relevant efforts has been the use of mass media as its principal technical extension. Through the media the capitalist school system has been able to amplify its basic functions of socialization in the dominant ideology and the preparation of the labor force.

This move demonstrates that the ISA of education, despite its traditional inertia, has not abandoned group instruction in ideology. The mass media used for the reproduction of a qualified labor force are the same media whose special properties we have just reviewed: their broad scope of ideological activity, capacity for rapid legitimation, power for mobilization and consensus building, multi-socialization of the young, and openness to ruling-class, but not working-class, interests.

The ruling-class intellectuals charged with guarding the smooth running of civil society have decided that the mass media and especially television can help solve a set of educational problems: the demand for higher education qualifications created by advances in the productive forces; the inadequate preparation of teachers through the traditional education system; the inability of schools to accommodate the growing number of students as a result of rapid population growth; and the periodic need to teach a new ideology more adapted to distinct social circumstances.

Among the many educational media projects implemented, the experiences

of the United States and the peripheral capitalist states of Mexico, Brazil, Argentina, Peru, Chile, Ecuador, Honduras, the Dominican Republic, Colombia, and India are noteworthy. In each of these cases the media were used in different ways to extend the school into the area of mass information.

In summary, the historical circumstances of advanced capitalism have led to the educational use of the mass media, and in the future it will use these same technologies, along with the school, to reproduce a qualified labor force. The potential for further extensions of the mass media into education is constantly increasing as a result of the rapid development of the electronics, computer, and space industries.

The use of the mass media in the formation and reproduction of the labor force makes two vital contributions to capitalist development. First, it converts mass media technologies into indispensable tools for the reproduction of capitalist production, and, second, it reinforces the dominant role that they already play as ideological apparatuses of the capitalist state.

Some Tentative Conclusions

From this analysis of the triple function of the cultural apparatus of the mass media in the production and reproduction of capitalism, we may draw certain conclusions.

First, the triple structural role of the mass media strengthens the capitalist bloc in two basic ways. The economic-cultural integration the media promote helps both in the reproduction of the productive process and in the political legitimation of the goal of capital accumulation.

In the first case the mass media's acceleration of the circulation of goods makes the creation, transmission, and impact of mass culture more coherent with their clients' demands for consumption. They place in a single functional and reciprocal relation the production and consumption of material goods and the production and consumption of cultural goods. They operate as intermediaries between the necessities of production and circulation involved in the contemporary productive process and the cultural practices of mass society.

The recent trend toward using the mass media in the reproduction of a qualified labor force has converted them into instruments of a new structural unity: they have linked the need for the preparation of an increasingly specialized labor force with the instructions of mass culture in its "educational role." In these two functions, the economy and the culture are organically joined to serve the needs of the dynamic accumulation of capital.

In the second case, the mass media constantly reinforce the historic capitalist bloc through their broad coverage and the great speed with which they link the political needs of capital with the goal of cultural legitimation. Through them one of the principal trends in contemporary capitalism—public

opinion—is promoted. This then becomes one of the main forces in building consensus for the political and economic mobilization to meet the requirements of capitalism. The capitalist state is able, through the media, to impose its most relevant cultural goals on nature, on people's consciousness, and on the political participation that capitalism requires in each historical stage in order to direct and reproduce its hegemony.

The many classes and dominant class fractions are able to pursue their own interests and ideological tasks by taking full advantage of the material and social characteristics of the most technically advanced mass media. Today every dominant sector attempting to maintain its domination and impose its own particular conception of society must have continual access to the apparatus of the mass media.

These media become the principal means of consensus of the contemporary capitalist state and reflect the basic interests that are indispensable for the reproduction of the dominant sector. They operate as the historic beacon of the ruling class, illuminating the needs and priorities of the power bloc for all. Still, at times the media reveal the secondary contradictions within the ruling class itself and the conjunction of forces at the heart of each historical situation that will change the group in power.

Each dominant class in history has had to control the primary apparatus of hegemony in order to remain in power. The feudal mode of production controlled the church and its practical ideology; the mercantile mode of production controlled printing and its diffusion; the premonopoly capitalist mode controlled the school; and contemporary capitalism is now obliged to control the mass media and such information technologies as satellites, computers, and telecommunications. At present the ruling class can get along without controlling the church, the school, and other lesser networks of socialization, but not the mass media. If it did not control the media, society would lose its political direction and the ruling class its power.

The three structural properties of the mass media and the specific nature of their operation have converted the media into the principal ISA used by contemporary capitalism to support its cultural goals for civil society. Thus, they have become more and more an organic function in the mode of monopoly capitalist production and can be changed only with a general change in the social structure.

Second, this discussion confirms that the current debate about the New International Information Order (NIIO) and national communication policies is not a simple disagreement about some cultural institutions that are distinctive because of their modernizing function in current society. Rather we are talking about transforming the three central functions of the mass media in the internal structure of capitalist society. The NIIO would transform the present dominant communication structure in the following ways:

1. In the economic sector of capitalist society, a change in mass culture would affect the circulation of goods and thus the general dynamic of production and the material bases supporting society. The goal of the NIIO is therefore also a new national and international economic order.
2. The distribution of political power would also be affected, bringing about a realignment of areas of influence of national and international power. This again means that the NIIO would be accompanied by a new kind of practical politics.
3. The other obvious effect of the proposed democratization of the mass media and the cultural process in its broadest sense would be on the dominant style of consensus building. Here too the NIIO would replace the prevailing form of consensus manipulation and create a new "moral direction" for society. In a word, what is needed in the debate over the NIIO and new communication policies is a struggle for the creation of a new society.

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