

## **Notes on Political Economy**

### ***1. What is political economy (PE) of communication concerned with?***

PE originated in the 18th c. to explain, justify and support capitalist forays. The rise of the media industries in the 20th c. led business to take a close look at the economies of these various institutions - radio, television, film, and newspapers. Much of this work was administrative in nature.

Political Economy can be thought of as "the study of the social relations, particularly the power relations, that mutually constitute the production, distribution, and consumption of resources" (Mosco, 25)... "a more general and ambitious definition of political economy is the study of control and survival in social life" (Mosco, 26).

The products of communication (newspapers, books, magazines, films, audiences) are the primary resources. "It emphasizes the institutional circuitry of communication products that links, for example, a chain of primary producers to wholesalers, retailers, and consumers, whose purchases, rentals, and attention are fed back into new processes of production. The definition provides a set of basic categories that distinguish among the functions of, for example, a major film producer like Cineplex-Odeon, and the various types of consumers and consumption patterns, such as cinema attendance and television-viewing. Moreover, political economy tends to concentrate on a specific set of social relations organized around power or the ability to control other people, processes, and things, even in the face of resistance. This would lead the political economist of communication to look at shifting forms of control along the production, distribution, and consumption circuit" (Mosco, 25).

*"Study of processes whereby social change is located in the historical interaction of the economic, political, cultural, and ideological moments of social life, with the dynamic rooted in socio-economic conflict" (Clement and Williams...)*

### **Characteristics of PE:**

1. understanding social change and historical transformation
2. analysis of wider social totality - (interdisciplinarity) - connections between political and economic
3. moral philosophy - what are the social values and sense of social practices embedded

(often implicitly, sometimes not) in economic and political perspectives?

4. praxis - refers to the "free and creative human activity by which people produce and change the world and themselves" (Mosco, 37). Political activism and policy formulation....

PE of communication came about as a 1) reaction to (and a dismay with) behavioral-psychological models and administrative media theory;

2) way to integrate radical economic theories (particularly Marxist) with that of critical theory. PE scholars tend to extend their professional activity outside of the Ivory Tower (activism) they are concerned with the public interest and take an avowedly political stance.

Today, given the rapid privatization and deregulation of the communications environment, the converging media environment (the 'information superhighway'), the changing global political economy (defeat of communism, Third World rifts, etc.), the new culture of 'homeland security' and the rise of social movements (NGOs, women's organizations, environmental groups, gay and lesbian rights, etc.) PE takes on more significance.

PE can be thought to be the study of the social and power relations that comprise the production, distribution, and consumption of resources. A PE of communication, then, would emphasize the institutional network of communication products that links producers, wholesalers, retailers and consumers. The changing forms of control along the production, distribution, and consumption of communication are also looked at. PE also tries to understand social change and historical transformation. PE is also interested in what Vinnie Mosco calls the 'social totality': "understanding the connections between the political and the economic."

PE is concerned with an array of media ownership questions: consolidation, diversification, commercialization, internationalization, globalization, and public vs. private media. PE is also concerned with media practices and media content.

Mosco (1996) provides several 'entry points' or processes with which to organize PE analyses. These include the following: commodification, spatialization, and structuration.

commodification: the process of transforming use values into exchange values. Communication processes and technologies contribute to the general process of commodification of the economy as a whole. Commodification in society (in general) penetrates communication processes and practices. Commodity form in communication can take cognizance of the commodification of content; the audience commodity; the cybernetic commodity; and the commodification of labour.

spatialization: the effects of the constraints of space and time in social life (akin to Innis' theories). The term is used in concepts in the work of geographers and sociologists; Giddens' time-space distanciation; Harveys' time-space compression, Castells' space of

flows. PE of communication uses spatialization to address "institutional extension of corporate power in the communication industry." This can include ideas on media ownership: horizontal and vertical integration, cross-media concentration, and conglomerate ownership. Also concerned with issues of market and state regulation. Also: commercialization, liberalization, privatization, internationalization, and globalization.

structuration: "describes a process by which structures are constituted out of human agency, even as they provide the very 'medium' of that constitution." Combined with commodification and spatialization, structuration addresses and incorporates the ideas of agency, social process, social relation, and social practice. From the Digital Webster: agency - a person or thing through which power is exerted or an end is achieved: INSTRUMENTALITY ... "communicated through the agency of his ambassador." How does agency act at the micro-level of power of communication institutions? What social actors are involved? How do communication processes and content consider social class? How are gender and race related to social class?

## **2. What are some of the theorists that have been associated with PE?**

Dallas Smythe: Canadian theorist concerned with examining the audience commodity (the relationships that linked together media, the audience, and advertisers). Notable for article, "Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism", *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* 1(3)(Fall 1977): 1-27.

Herbert Schiller: In the early 1970s he looked at the internationalization of communication from a PE perspective; most of the work to date on international communication focused on its use for 'modernizing' countries, particularly the Third World. Schiller looked at the commodification of information in both bureaucratic and cultural life. His son Dan Schiller has continued in his tradition, with his latest book *Digital Capitalism* (MIT, 1999).

Janet Wasko: relationship of film industry and financial capital institutions. Has also been working on issues re Disney...

Noam Chomsky and Edward Herman: Globalization of media, PR industry, government/state to communications industries.

Robert McChesney: historical look at early radio broadcasting in U.S. and private vs. public debates. Recent work concerned with Internet, 1996 Telecommunication Act, and media reform. See [www.robertmcchesney.com](http://www.robertmcchesney.com).

Marc Raboy: Quebec historian of broadcasting in Canada and private vs. public debates; also Internet in Canada.

Michèle Martin (Canada): PE and gender approach to telephone history in Canada.

Vinnie Mosco: PE theory in general; commodification of information: the 'pay-per'

society.

Robert Babe: economics of information, commodification, telecom history, Canadian communication thought, cultural ecology.

Kaarle Nordenstreng: issues of NWICO - New World Information & Communication Order

Nicholas Garnham, Peter Golding and Graham Murdock: British theoreticians

Armand (and Michèle) Mattelart: influence of media imperialism on Latin America; history of communications, international communications.

Manjunath Pendakur: PE of film and video industry in global context.

See Mosco's *The Political Economy of Communication* (Sage, 1996) for more details; the journal *Media, Culture, and Society*; and the IAMCR (International Association of Mass Communication Research).

### **3. What are the challenges for PE?**

Relationship to policy studies (concerned with socio-economic policies for the public at large) and to cultural studies (broadly, the constitution of meaning in texts and social communications).

Strengthening of institutional support.

### **4. Resources**

Vincent Mosco. 1996. *Political Economy of Communication*, Sage.

Eileen Meehan and Ellen Riordan, eds. 2001. *Sex and Money: Feminism and Political Economy*, University of Minnesota Press.

Justin Lewis and Toby Miller, eds., 2002. *Critical Cultural Policy Studies: A Reader*, Blackwell.

Richard Maxwell, ed. 2002. *Culture Works: The Political Economy of Culture*, University of Minnesota Press.

Andrew Calabrese, ed. 2003. *Towards a Political Economy of Culture: Capitalism and Culture in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century*, Rowman and Littlefield.