



REVIEW ESSAY

THE TWILIGHT OF THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF
COMMUNICATIONS: On Reading Smythe's
Dependency Road.

Dallas W. Smythe

**Dependency Road:
Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness
and Canada**

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Canadian communication research might be a young discipline in the institutionalization of its administration and pursuit, but it already affords a noteworthy pedigree of interesting texts and accomplished scholarship. For many, this is summed up by the dropping of the signatures of Innis and McLuhan. Popular as this may be, it eliminates one sage/worker from the front row who deservedly ought to be placed there: Dallas Smythe. This is not to erect a parochial pantheon for the readership of this journal, but an attempt to balance what from an Eastern/Anglo-Canadian point of view seems to be the mis-recognition of important work done by someone who worked and lived during the last twenty years mainly to the West. For a country

and an intellectual community so helpless in resisting theoretical colonialism and developing indigenous cultural analysis -- all the while aware enough to bemoan it -- this is a curious state.

It has to be considered a significant vignette in this picture that Dallas Smythe's book **Dependency Road: Communication, Capitalism, Consciousness and Canada** has been published outside Canada. The tale of Smythe's journey in search of a printer might make appropriate material for a situation comedy. As a sequence to his academic oeuvre it might get his work a much wider audience, and, not the least, exhibit greater irony.

An appreciation of **Dependency Road** has to consider the book in relation to the context into which it enters. Notwithstanding the pedigree, the lingering rachitis of Canadian communication studies is such that we in large measure lack adequate historical studies of media institutions and their development. To date we have had to make do with rather apologetic recounts, e.g., Kesterton's **History of Journalism in Canada** (1967) or mere chronicles in R. G. Collingwood's sense (Collingwood, 1961) which may be guided by infatuated addiction to the object of study but certainly lack any theoretical ambition, e.g., Rutherford's **Making of the Canadian Media** (1978; see also Kline, 1980). In terms of a political economy of the Canadian media after Innis, we can use Porter's (1965) and Clement's (1975) work on class analysis of the national media elite. But models and theories which focus solely on the interlinkages of the various subsegments of the ruling elites and which emphasize the consequences of private ownership and proprietary relationships for media production have their obvious difficulties to escape mechanistic theories of ideology and

to hold their terrain in the current debates.

The recent publication of Audley's book (1983) on the cultural industries has provided us with more sophisticated topographical data but fails to fill any theoretical vacuum. Lastly, for policy analysis we have some excellent case studies, e.g., Babe's (1979) work on the CRTC and almost sixty years of Royal Commissions. But these studies hardly amount to more than pulling every ten years on another corner of the blanket.

Within such a context an almost comprehensive study of the Canadian communications system (also known as consciousness industry) must /should receive front page attention. Particularly so, if such a study shows historical depth, as Smythe's book does, and if it has a serious and consistently developed theoretical agenda, which *Dependency Road* also exhibits. Having said so much, let us see how the text performs within the spotlight.

THE BOOK

The book's initial concern lies with the communication dependency of Canada on its 'big friend' to the South. This dependency has made the country effectively part of the United States core of monopoly capitalism. Notwithstanding some -- obviously mistaken -- notions of national autonomy, Canada was developed by corporate capitalism into the largest and most loyal cultural colony of the United States. Underneath this concern with dependency, Smythe sets out to show how production industries and media industries work hand in glove. Moreover, he considers,

the mass media of communications (to be) a systemic invention of monopoly

capitalism. Their purpose is to set a daily agenda of issues, problems, values and policies for the guidance of other institutions and the whole population. They mass produce audiences and sell them to advertisers. These audiences work on, and are consumed in, the marketing of mass-produced consumer goods and services to themselves (p. xii).

Within monopoly capitalism we can, according to Smythe, identify the place where people are made into audiences. The audience is, so he claims, a new historical subject onto which we might pin our revolutionary hopes:

The mass-produced audience is a new major institution which now holds a central place in the interwoven complex of institutions....I contend that in creating the mass produced audience, monopoly capitalism produced not only its own chief protagonist, but also its major antagonist in the core area, displacing organized labor (p. xiii).

The methodology which Smythe assumes for himself is a historical materialism within which materiality is assigned to all "actual processes which link people together in social production and consumption" (p. xiv). The stress on the materiality of the consumption process is critical Smythe's project. It is the basis from which he argues the centrality of the analysis of audience power for an understanding of cultural development and the operation of corporate capitalism as a whole.

Chapter One considers the role of the mass media and popular culture. It develops the

argument familiar from Schiller (1973) and Ewen (1976) of the consciousness industry as the central mechanism of operation and legitimation of the socio-economic system. This system is based on private property of the means of production and consumption and on the appropriation of the surplus product of labor by the owners of capital (page 2). The mass media, the "shock troops of the consciousness industry", are considered the central means of forming attitudes, values, and buying behavior.

Smythe concurs, furthermore, with Schiller and Ewen that advertising and mass media constitute one and the same institutional mechanism for capitalism. They must be seen as direct responses to the needs of mass industrial capitalism (see Ewen, 1976; Schiller, 1973). But while Ewen still regards a particular world vision and cultural idiom as the principle product of this mechanism, and while Schiller still traces the central myths of capitalist consciousness, Smythe goes a significant step further. He argues that the principle product of the commercial mass media are not particular ideological messages or message systems, i.e., not an ideational substance, but the material substance of 'audiences'. The whole complex of the consciousness industry revolves around the production of audiences and their selling to the advertisers of consumers goods and services, to political candidates and causes. The Consciousness Industry encompasses both the primary information sector and the consumer goods industries (page 6). Audiences are its principal commodity.

The audience commodity theory makes up the heart of Smythe's book. The central tenets of this theory have been argued in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* in what became known as the 'Blindspot Debate' (Smythe,

1977, 1978; Murdock, 1978; Livant, 1979; Jhally, 1981). The book seeks to make the theory the hub of a critical approach for communication studies. In addition, the theory is used to give a new and materialist reading to a history of communications in Canada and to serve as the basis of a theory of culture under monopoly capitalism.

The audience commodity theory is made up of three different but related claims. The first one states that audiences are a commodity produced by media enterprises, the family, and the factor supply services for the media (p. 29). Audiences are traded and sold on markets for profit.

The second claim states that audiences are not just passive commodities, but that they also work. They perform services for the advertisers who have purchased them. Three kinds of work are distinguished by Smythe:

1. (Audiences) market consumer goods and services to themselves.
2. They learn to vote for one candidate (or issue) or another in the political arena.
3. They learn and reaffirm beliefs in the rightness of their politico-economic system (page 9).

The third claim argues that it is "audience power" which is bought by the advertiser (page 28). I take it that Smythe here means the capacity of the audiences to do their proper work and the tested probability that they will do so under specified conditions.

Audiences are the principal product of the media enterprises, but not their primary one. The primary product of the media is obviously

the message content, the news, entertainment and ads, Smythe's so called "free lunch." It has merely propagandistic value (page 39), and is carried only to capture audiences for advertisers. Audiences are the intermediate product. They are consumed in the production of the systemic end - product, i.e., consciousness and the ideology of the capitalist system (pp. 13, 16).

With his audience theory, Smythe bids an unsentimental farewell to the classical Marxist distinction between base and superstructure. The media, one of the central superstructure agents or apparatuses, are viewed as engaged in production of commodities, thus collapsing the conceptual base between base and the superstructure. Pushing this point even further Smythe suggests:

Perhaps the audience market even takes priority away from the job front because the former "beckons" the latter into action very directly through the mode of operation of giant integrated corporations. The superstructure is thus decisively engaged in production. And increasingly, as welfare programs of employers have engaged people at the job front in all manner of popular cultural activities and vocational training, it seems as if the old "infrastructure" has taken on in part the ideological training function previously associated with the 'old' superstructure" (pp 50 - 51).

Having argued his main theoretical points Smythe goes on in Chapters Three and Four to trace how the Consciousness Industry has developed. Like others before him, he argues that competitive capitalism entered in the second half of the 19th century into a cycle of severe

crises brought about by the ever increasing volatility of ever more homogenized and expanding markets. Advertising of brand names was sought out as the means to stabilize the demand patterns, and to gain partial monopoly and thus security in the selling markets for commodities (page 55). In the context of the growth of the merger and trust movement and the taking of control of formal political government, the development of the Consciousness Industry signals the transition from competitive capitalism to monopoly capitalism. The further development is then characterized by an increased rationalization of capitalism's mechanisms and mode of operation. Taylorism is the application of the scientific method to the production of material commodities. Market research is the application of the scientific method to the production of the audience commodity.

Communications technology is developed at the pace of capitalism. Smythe argues that innovations like monochrome and later color television have been:

primarily struggles for control of markets in which audience power would market to itself new broadcast equipment (page 82).

Regulatory agencies have played the limited role of rationalizing technical and organizational planning for the introduction of new technologies. In the case of the broadcast facsimile, Smythe tries to show "how political-economic considerations produce the kind of technology which will be innovated" (page 84). Already in 1943, the broadcast facsimile had been developed enough as a technology to electronically deliver a newspaper to the home. The patents for the technology had, however, already expired. No corporation could thus hope to gain a competi-

tive advantage or monopoly by innovating the facsimile. Even more important, Smythe suggests, was the fear of the consumer good industries to upset the established vertical control of audiences produced by newspaper, radio, and television, and their unwillingness to let the scientifically stabilized marketing environment be upset by a new technology.

For Canada the Consciousness Industry has developed in the pattern of other industries. Smythe maps this context for the Canadian communication media in chapter five. The expansive and integrative forces of monopoly capitalism have lead Canada to be the "world's most dependent 'developed' country."

Furthermore, there never was a time when the dominant groups in Canada pursued policies which would build an autonomous nation (p. 95).

Canadian and United States American economic systems, consciousness and ideology have been fundamentally unified. Only after World War I did there appear to be a possibility that Canada might develop more of a national autonomy. But in the ensuing years the electronic media became as tributary to the United States as the newspapers before them.

In the following three chapters Smythe seeks to demonstrate medium by medium how Canadian cultural submission took hold, has been and is maintained. He uses the reports of the Davey and Rohmer Commissions to discuss the newspaper, magazine and book publishing industries. His discussion of motion pictures is based on Susan Crean's (1976) book **Who Is Afraid of Canadian Culture?** More original arguments can be found in the chapter on telecommunications where Smythe goes all the way back to 1866 to the days when

the first transatlantic telegraph cable was laid using St. John's, Newfoundland, as a way station. The initial chatter took place between the English Queen and the United States President, leaving Canadians out in the cold.

With the chartering of telegraph and telephone companies, the Canadian state would have had the opportunity to assert some cultural autonomy. In an interesting discussion on the work of the Mulock Committee in 1905, Smythe shows how any such initiative was defeated (pp. 141 - 145). Despite the fact that Canada was one of the first nations to formalize national policy on radio frequency allocation, the country grew up to be a very junior partner to the United States in the continental management of the airwaves (p. 153). The following discussion of the Canadian broadcasting industry recasts known material from E. Austin Weir and Frank Peers within the theoretical frame of **Dependency Road**.

Having treated the communications industry, Smythe turns in chapters nine and ten to examine art and technology and to 'demystify' them as but other mechanisms for the smooth operation of capitalism. Art, and here especially fine art, is seen as providing cultural legitimation for the capitalist system, as an adornment for capitalism and an effective advertising tool, as a means of ideological warfare in the world community (p. 216). Smythe strips all autonomy from the notion of technology, and discovers underneath the real processes by which capitalism has answered the questions what is to be produced, for whom and how (p. 231). Technology and commodities are results of an industrial inventiveness wherein "the internal capitalist ideological component has dominated the welfare component" (p. 225). Art and technology are products which have their use characteristics determined

by the imperatives of capitalism, e.g., individual selfishness, middle/upper class life style, profit making, -- minimum use -- value for maximum exchange value. Thus, the mere exchange of commodities and technology succeeds in undermining and upsetting the 'cultural screens' which serve to protect cultural communities against disruptive intrusion. In this way commodity exchange and technology serve as the tools of the cultural imperialism of monopoly capitalism.

The final two chapters of *Dependency Road* are concerned with fleshing out the theoretical claim of the book. Smythe first turns to challenge conventional theories of communication. He diagnoses their blindspot, the audience and its work (p. 250). He draws on Klapper's review of the literature in his criticism of message based effects research into audience behavior. A critical theory of communication, according to Smythe, has to begin with the examination of how audience power is produced in real time. The audience defines the mass media. The objective impetus for the operation of the entire capitalistic system and the integrated Consciousness Industry can be negatively defined:

The real sequence is: no prospective profit, no audience, no message, no medium, no production of the commodity (p. 263).

Critical research has to follow the avenue of first analyzing:

the role of the audiences produced by the media in the total strategic plan of the advertiser for creating a profitable market for each specific commodity (p. 264).

Smythe concludes the main body of the book with

a discussion of consciousness. He defines it as "the total awareness of life which people have" (p. 271). It is a dynamic process of the 'interface' between matter and spirit. Smythe tries to guard himself against an idealistic understanding of consciousness and looks out for a materialistically sound conceptualization. He takes note of the flat surface level of American consciousness by scanning some polls and surveys. He ends up giving advice to a liberation movement in Canada for its struggle to transform the monopoly capitalist system (pp. 292 - 299).

DISCUSSION

Dependency Road is a good and needed book. It marks the end of theoretically innocent re-counts of Canadian communications development figuring as proper contributions to the field. It breaks with theoretically simplistic class models and elite analyses as the mainstay of a political economy of Canadian communications. It might well be the beginning to a new materialistic culture theory.

The State and Ideology

The promise of the book has to be put in the conditional for a number of reasons. For one, **Dependency Road** does little to advance the theoretical soundness and sophistication of the audience commodity theory. Smythe does not pick up on Murdock's reasonable criticisms in the **Canadian Journal of Social and Political Theory** regarding the importance and centrality of the state in contemporary capitalism (Murdock, 1978, 111, 112). It is true, he gives some more room to the consideration of the state in the case studies like his discussion of the telecommunications development in Canada and the state's lack of resolve to assert Canadian cultural autonomy. But there are important parts mis-

sing, particularly in the discussion of the CBC and the magazine, movie and recording industries. In the latter cases, the Canadian state has intervened with some lasting successes (see Audley, 1983). The case of the CBC would on the other hand warrant a significant expansion / alteration of the audience commodity theory. The CBC has to be understood as a massive although meandering intervention by the Canadian state in the production of audiences in this country. Considering this intervention Smythe would have to let go of a general materialist culture theory under monopoly capitalism and concentrate on a local theory of the production of Canadian audiences and culture. The absence of such an attempt is a serious flaw in a book which is squaring in on Canada.

Smythe might retort that the CBC case does not warrant special accounting in the theory because its programming has become dominated by commercial policy values (p. 181). Such a rebuttal would have to face Smythe's own rejection of any message centered arguments. Consistent with his outlined materialistic approach, the programming values are just part of the ideational 'free lunch'. What matters for the analysis is that objectively over the last fifty years the Canadian state has been buying by annual subsidy from Parliament CBC-produced audiences. At certain times and places, this state procurement was done under total monopoly conditions. The audience commodity theory has to allow for these facts.

Even if one would be willing to let Smythe nudge out of this quandry by breaking with his own methodological rules, and permit consideration of programming values, one would do the overall theory no instant good. Rather, one would open the floodgates on the manifold theoretical attempts to get hold of the media con-

tent/message system, and one would probably realize how underdeveloped, or, to put it more correctly, nonexistent the theory of the media message text is in the book. This could be rationalized by Smythe's rejection of any message centered analysis. In the book, however, this stance is not consistently held nor can it possibly be maintained in its extreme form if one is still interested in talking about culture, ideology, and, possibly, consciousness. Ultimately, Smythe runs himself into a curious bind. For it is impossible, I would argue, to do a political economy of communications and culture without a consideration of the message texts which are, as Smythe states himself, the primary product. Sidelining the message entirely means per definition giving up on the project of a materialist culture theory and contenting oneself with mere political economy.

In this sense **Dependency Road** is critically weakened by its complete bypassing of twenty years of debate on ideology and culture. Nowhere in the book does Smythe enter into serious dialogue with the structuralist, culturalist, evolutionary, hermeneutic or systems theoretical schools of thought which have laboured on this problematic. Like his friend Herbert Schiller, Smythe wants to make do with impressionistic reading and intelligent observation, often relying merely on the persuasive powers of his *highminded polemic and invoking organic notions of an etherial albeit all pervasive ideology.*

The Audience Commodity

Sut Jhally has neatly shown the correctness of the conceptualization of the audience as a commodity for advertising based media (Jhally, 1981). The audience commodity has distinct and separate use and exchange values. It has an objective existence, is produced by value adding

labour, and proprietary claims can and are made on it. Yet when it comes to the second level of the audience commodity theory, Smythe's argument seems to lose its footing. Despite Livant's repeated apologetics on this point (Livant, 1979; 1981), the labour theory of audience work remains inadequately theorized. Marx's labour theory of value has of late been again the center of heated controversies and some of the points raised in these debates might also be useful to Smythe (cf. Steedman et. al., 1981).

But more importantly, Smythe skirts the discussion of the very particular commodity character of audience labour. Audience labour, I would argue, has to be considered as being significantly different from other forms of labour in order to remain consistent with the theory of commodities. Polanyi has made the useful distinction between genuine and fictive commodities. Genuine commodities are produced in quantities and qualities according to the criteria of sellability on markets. The labour power of the audience is a genuine commodity in so far as it is produced scientifically according to the findings of market and marketing research. In general terms, however, labour power is a fictive commodity because the decisions of its production in family and other socialization agencies are made on other grounds than the criteria of markets (Polanyi, 1957, 73). Thus, we have to seek *additional categorical* specifications to the concept of labour power of the audience. Smythe does not provide them.

A further problem, albeit an interesting one, arises from the fact that the audience commodity is unlike a genuine commodity because of its distinct variability. Smythe correctly states that what the advertisers sell is not actually the audience but audience power, which

means the capacity of the audience to perform the services for which it is purchased and the probability that it will do so. The substance of the audience commodity is thus subject to the uncertainty of how much audience power will be actually realized in concrete work performed, i. e., its variability. This should be accounted for in the theory.

Another critical weakness of the theory has to do with the capability of the audience to be the object of ownership. The purchase and sale of audience power does not constitute a legal transaction of ownership which is otherwise characteristic of market exchanges (Offe, 1977). Jhally is not correct when he argues in defense of Smythe that the audience commodity can be owned (Jhally, 1981, 9 - 12). In the case of the Canadian cable operators who were charged by the American network affiliates with audience theft after they substituted their own commercials on the rebroadcast programs, the matter of contention was not legal rights to the audience power. Legal rights can only be held, I would argue, over the primary product of media production, i.e., over time slots within certain programmes on given days at certain times within specifiable sequences or over printing space in a specified place on a certain page in a particular newspaper. No legal rights can be held over the intermediate product, i.e., consciousness. The sale of the audience power lacks the quality of a transfer of the commodity from the sphere of disposition of the seller into the one of the buyer. The audience cannot be had against its own will. This fact has to be adequately accounted for in an audience commodity theory. It also indicates once again the indispensibility of an appropriate consideration of the means and strategies for the inducement of the audience to realize its labour power, i.e., the message / text.

A final point is the question of the character of the production work which the audience does while attending to the media. Jhally has already probed Smythe's and Livant's attempt to explain what is meant by its particular productivity (Jhally, 1981, 13 - 14). There is an ongoing debate about productive and unproductive labour in Marxist political economy. Part of this debate is revolving around the dis-accumulation theory of labour under late capitalism (c.f., O'Connor, 1979; Aronwitz, 1981). I disagree with Jhally that the main problem lies with the conflation of production and consumption as necessary analytically distinct categories for the study of monopoly capitalism. The problem rather resides with Smythe's failure to develop the category pair of production/reproduction and to see the audience labour as being mostly reproductive. Smythe develops in **Dependency Road** only the first of the three above mentioned kinds of work done by the audience. He perceives the second and third kind only in terms of a never spelled out learning theory, where in fact they are the proper starting points for a theory of reproductive labour (cf., Althusser and Balibar, 1979, 254 - 272).

This reproductive labour, however, has to be considered also as an activity in itself, as a cultural practice constitutive of the historically specific cultural formation of, for instance, Canadian monopoly capitalism in the 80's (Williams, 1981). Smythe has to understand that a consideration of signifying systems and practices within a materialist theory of culture does not ipso facto mean the return to a message centered approach to communication (Hund et. al., 1978). Depending on where the project goes from here, **Dependency Road** will have marked the twilight of the morning or the evening for a political economy of communication.

CONCLUSION

Dependency Road is, as Herbert Schiller says in the foreword, the outcome of a lifetime's work and thought. While most communication scholars North and South of the 49th parallel occupied themselves with message and effects research, Smythe developed his theory of the audience commodity. Smythe was never under the spell of the Laswellian formula and its dictates of study object and field segmentation. Nor was he caught by the trappings of positivist and behaviorist science. He began working on communication questions as a political and economic thinker, first in policy making and government, then in university teaching and research. Communication is for Smythe a social process determined by the political economy of the age. Communication in the present Canadian context cannot be thought of without relating it to the mechanisms and operations of capitalism. In the appendix to the book entitled, "The Electronic Information Tiger, or the Political Economy of the Radio Spectrum and the Third World Interest," Smythe gives a prime example of the fruitfulness of such an approach. He shows in a most compelling way how a technologically developed resource is being unequally distributed through specific regulatory mechanisms. These eighteen pages alone justify making **Dependency Road** a required reading in all advanced theory and communications policy courses.

Overall, the present book documents a consistent effort to analyze the role of the mass media, questions of culture and technology, and ultimately of domination and its multiple forms of exercise from a critical vantage point. To date, it is certainly one of the most original attempts to write a political economy of the mass media in Canada. **Dependency Road** belongs to the select few theoretically engaging mono-

graphs in Canadian communication scholarship.

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