

The Political Economy of the Contemporary Media and Cultural Production

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Received: December 29, 2011

Accepted: February 14, 2012

Published: May 1, 2012

doi:10.5539/ass.v8n6p36

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5539/ass.v8n6p36>

Abstract

Controlling the material and mental production, the ruling class is likely to keep reproducing the social relations and structure. By manipulating media and cultural systems, the ruling group constructs a dominating ideology and a desired hegemony, which help sustain the status quo. In this respect, the democratic and authoritative countries bear some similarities and differences. Notably, the mental production is sometimes dysfunctional, challenging the ruling class. In China, sometimes, the dysfunction takes the form of ideological struggles in terms of media and cultural production.

Keywords: political economy, ideology, hegemony

1. The Process of Mental Production

Marx and Engels once wrote,

The individuals composing the ruling class among other things consciousness, and therefore think. In so far, therefore, as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, it's self-evident that they do this in its whole range, hence among other things rule as thinkers, as producers of ideas, and regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age: thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch (quoted in Storey, 1998: 191).

Here, Marx and Engels not only pointed out that the ideas of the ruling class are in every epoch the ruling ideas, that is, the class which is the ruling *material* force of society is at the same time its ruling *intellectual* force (ibid), they also briefly analysed how the ideas of the ruling class become the dominant ideas. Now, I will go deeper into the process of mental production.

We have now realised that the social position of the social actors is not only determined by the economic capital, but also by the political and cultural capital, and in many cases the intangible capital, including belief, value systems, ideology and religion, is more important than the tangible one.

In this spirit, to preserve its ruling status, the ruling class not only needs to produce more economic capital, it's also vital to produce more political and cultural capital, because to maintain their money and power, they must persuade everybody else that things are just fine as they are, and that the ideas, values, and frame of mind which suit them so well, suit everybody else at the same time (Inglis, 1990: 78).

The ruling class has both the motives and the means of mental production. Into the social production, they invest their economic capital as well as their political and cultural capital. Accordingly, they harvest not merely economic surplus value, but also political and cultural surplus value, including ideology, consciousness and hegemony, which are employed by the ruling class to consolidate and sustain their status quo.

To a great extent, the control of the material production determines their control of the mental production. That is, "The mode of production of material life determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual process of life. It is not the consciousness of men that determines their being but, on the contrary; their social being determines their consciousness" (Marx, quoted in Hiebert, Ungurait and Bohn, 1991: 484).

2. Ideology, Hegemony and Media

Ideology, as a system of ideas expressed in communication, is a vital element in the social reproduction, and that is why the dominating class makes every effort to create, enrich and promote their ideologies. The significance of ideological production has been depicted by Marx and Engels as follows:

For each new class which puts itself in the place of one ruling before it, is compelled, merely in order to carry through its aims, to represent its interest as the common interest of all the members of society, that is, expressed in ideal form: it has to give its ideas the form of universality, and represent them as the only rational, universal valid ones" (quoted in Storey, 1998: 192).

It's well known that ideological influence is crucial now in the exercise of social power, especially in some authoritative countries. In China, in order to justify that the ruling Chinese Communist Party (CCP) was rightly chosen by history, the CCP has been producing a series of ideologies. From Mao Tsetung's introduction and modification of Marxism, Deng Xiaoping's Chinese-style socialist path, to post-Deng "Three Represents", every generation of national leaders, as they willed, has made its own mark on the dominating ideological system. The major reason for the ideological development, I believe, is that the old ones are not compatible with the fast changing situation, so they have to "advance with the times", in the words of President Jiang Zemin. According to their ideology, to be able to transcend themselves and keep up with the times is a forceful evidence that the CCP is capable and qualified to lead the country in the new century.

At today's information age, mass media plays a key role in constructing a potent dominant ideology. Media can elevate and amplify some ideologies. Thus, by manipulation of information flow the ruling elites "perpetuate their power, wealth and status [by popularising] their philosophy, culture and morality (Boggs, 1976, quoted in Lull, 1995a: 32).

The socio-economic elites, which control the media and cultural industries that produce and dispense symbolic forms of communication, are able to saturate the society with their preferred ideological agenda. As owners, managers, governors or regulators, they have the capacity to produce and reproduce meaning in their own interests. By articulation of a dominating ideology, mainly through the channel of mass media, the ruling class sets the limits—mental and structural—within which subordinate classes "live" and make sense of their subordination in such a way as to sustain the dominance of those ruling over them (Stuart Hall, 1997, quoted in Lull, 1995a: 33). In other words, ideologies are used by the social elites to stipulate social rules, suppress dissent, and eventually to establish desired hegemony.

In practice, the political-economic-cultural powers are always trying to manipulate every possible media and cultural means. In China, all the carders of media industry at different levels are required to be CCP members, no media are allowed to produce a sound different from the central government, most of the front-page news are about political elites, all the students must learn the CCP's glorious history and great contributions to China, every educational institution is under the absolute leadership of the CCP committee to ensure the young generation is politically qualified, so on and so forth. "The interlocking system of efficacious information-distributing agencies and taken-for-granted social practices that permeate every aspect of social and cultural reality" (Lull, 1995a: 33) strengthens the mass-mediated ideologies and help sustain the continuation of dominance of the CCP.

3. Two Styles: Democratic versus Authoritative

In democratic countries, media are expected to reflect diversity of opinions and outlook. And in practice, voices different from the ruling party and the government can be heard here and there. But further study of the so-called balanced reports reveals that these voices are also produced by some social elites, albeit in many cases as spokespersons of political parties or civil societies. In this context, the communication is by nature a dialogue between ideologically different parties. In the meantime, in order to obtain the maximising support of the public, the social powers also need to publicise their policies and ideologies. Therefore, the communication in these countries are both horizontal and vertical.

But in authoritative countries, nobody else is permitted to set the national agenda. All media and cultural channels are made to transmit and implement the wills and instructions of the ruling group. Obviously, the communication in this situation is simply vertical.

Meanwhile, in most democratic countries, media industries can be owned and run by private sectors. But in authoritative countries, all media are owned and tightly controlled by the state, and the public sphere open to the public is reduced to the minimum extent. This has brought about some very serious problems, because "the people are the only censor of their governors" (Thomas Jefferson, quoted in Hutchison, 1999: 72), so when the

public are deprived of the right to express their opinions and supervise the government, the government will be more likely to distance itself from its people. What's more, the accumulation of dissatisfaction with the government can endanger the social stability or even incite political upheavals. Additionally, in some cases, the ideological oppression will force the opponents to go underground or even flee to other countries.

After I arrived in England, I have made some investigation into the Chinese media in Europe. To my astonishment, some of the Chinese media here are violently criticising the Chinese government, trying to reveal the inbuilt flaws in the Chinese political-economic systems. Further inquiry showed that some of the owners, practitioners and shareholders were once prosecuted by the Chinese government. So, I am wondering, if they had been admitted into the public sphere in China, would they still run the risk of establishing their media outside China?

4. The Television Dilemma in China

While reproducing the existing institutional structure and ideologically selling them to the society, the elites sometimes encounter certain unintended challenges, often from the politically marginalized and economically depressed.

Some Western scholars feel puzzled with China: "On the one hand [China] continues to protest against despoilers of its socialist revolution, while on the other hand it promotes crypto-capitalism. The country often appears to be going in opposite directions at the same time" (Shell, 1987, quoted in Sreberny-Mohammadi et al, 1997: 262). To a great degree, it is the case with China, and I believe this self-contradiction can't be rectified in the predictable future. The dilemma, in a way, can be seen in "the world window"—TV screens.

Since December 1978 onwards, in China a satellite-based national television system was made a top priority for achieving a wide range of propagandist objectives and the television system grew quickly and TV sets were made easily available to nearly everyone, especially urban families, as early as the mid-1980s.

But ironically, although the Chinese government has attempted to strengthen its leadership via manipulation of TV system, the medium has also become a central agent of popular resistance against a political and economic system.

This "popular" resistance stemmed from overlapping sources. First, some counter-tendencies do exist within the ideology-transmitting institutions, some news workers have both the ambition and capacity to produce polysemic TV programmes, which make it possible for the audience to interpret TV programme contents in unintended and often resistant ways. What's more, media imagery contains variety and contradiction. Some programmes expand counter-hegemonic values, lifestyles in certain indirect ways. When reviewing the causes of the events of Beijing Spring, the CCP leaders realised that the ideological orientation played a vital, misleading role in the cultivation of the movement. As a result, the media and cultural industries underwent a political purification, and Du Xian and Xue Fei, the then sympathetic news presenters of CCTV (China Central TV) were "marginalized".

Second, the unique Chinese culture, especially the Chinese language, invites creative interpretive practices. The Chinese tradition encourages indirect expression. At the same time, the Chinese words, with few exceptions, have four tones, which listeners must take pains to distinguish. Similarly to English, the same word in different contexts have different meanings. Also, two phrases with the same pronunciations can have quite different meanings. All these have trained the Chinese audience to interpret TV programme contents creatively, reading between the lines, which adds more difficulties to propaganda and media practice.

Third, such TV programmes as dialogues, news probe, intensify and amplify the social problems China is confronting, including widespread corruption, high unemployment and economic bipolarisation, which I summarised as "the three current hazards" in my previous articles.

Fourth, the raised awareness of market-oriented economy, harsh competition between TV channels, TV stations, mediums compel TV practitioners to break through some fetters at the weakest points. For example, commercials and imported films and dramas which celebrated the individualism and materialism of a consumer society were screened in great numbers at the very time the Chinese people could not break out of their monotonous routines or prosper from their initiatives. These contents, I am sure, can provide a new frame of reference, and foster the public dissatisfaction with the situation the audience have been caught in.

The fact that television has decisively stimulated the revolutionary change of consciousness that has taken place in China is an unintended result, as far as the ruling CCP is concerned. Historically, this TV dilemma, to some extent, prompted the events of Beijing Spring.

Clearly, it is a privilege for the political-economic-cultural elites to manipulate the media and cultural production to obtain both economical and ideological benefits, but it is also a “privilege” for the public to interpret the ideologies and cultural products they are saturated with. The interrelatedness of these two privileges is an intrinsic character of historical advance.

5. Conclusions

In the global extent, the superpower USA has been trying hard to sell American values to safeguard its national security and interests, but has received more challenges due to its unilateralism and economic decline. In the case, the concept of smart power is articulated to preserve USA’s global dominance. Until today, its elites would not admit that it is its aggressive policy that leads to the increasing suspect of Americanism.

In China, after more than 30 years’ reform and opening-up, the traditional ideology is challenged by more people. In the micro-blogsphere, it seems the grassroots has gained the upper hand. The central government is compelled to invest more into Marxist study, trying to find evidence to support the status quo. The cases of US in the global context and China have taught us that when the policies are against the majority, the mental reproduction wouldn’t help.

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