


Chapter 5

Re-Engaging Critical Communication Studies With Social Classes: Communication as Experience

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ABSTRACT

This article is an attempt to reestablish the linkage of the political economy of communication with the field of social classes and class relations. Studies in the field of political economy of communication are mostly shaped within the scope of instrumentalist explanation: Social communication institutions such as communication and media are perceived as a very homogeneous structure and these institutions are directly considered as the apparatus of capital and capitalists. However, in this study, it is argued that in capitalist societies, communication, and media should be understood as a field and medium of class struggle loaded with contradictions. Another point is that the political economy of communication is mostly limited to media studies. However, in today's capitalist societies, the media is not the only structure and actor in which communication forms. In this study, communication practices in capitalist society are discussed in the context of class discussions and the relationship between class struggle, culture and communication is discussed.

INTRODUCTION

This study¹ is an attempt to re-engage the political economy of communication studies with social classes and the field of class relations. Most commonly, studies in the political economy of communication fall under instrumentalist accounts. In this context, social communication institutions such as the media are conceived as a homogeneous structure and these institutions are seen as a direct apparatus of capital. This study rather argues that in capitalist societies, communication and media must be considered as

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Re-Engaging Critical Communication Studies With Social Classes

a contradictory field and a means of class struggle. Another point is that studies of political economy of communication are mostly limited with media studies. Despite being a primary institution of communication, however, media is not the sole structure and actor of communication in capitalist societies. This study approaches communication practices in capitalist society in the context of debates on class, discussing the connections of class struggle, culture and communication with each other. Thus, it is an attempt to form a basis to revisit and revive, through a critical perspective, the relatively weak relationship between the field of communication and class studies. As an aspect of correlating these two fields, the problematic of the study is to focus on how to re-evaluate “experience”, one of the basic concepts of class studies, through communication studies and how to build a new form in connection with these two fields. In this regard, “communication as experience” is brought forward for discussion. Such a connection between class studies and the field of communication is considered important, not only to fully comprehend social reality with all its aspects but also to expand scientific activity through fertile factual foundations.

Jay (2012, pp. 24-25) indicates that, writing a book on “experience” is an experience itself. That being the case, the attempt to enhance explanatory power of experience, by centring upon it in communication, and expand the boundaries of the discipline might be a significant experience as well. Yet, I am also aware of such experience might potentially have adverse effects for an academic study. The source of my courage, however, is my confidence in the instructiveness of experience rather than myself. In his book, *The Emergence of the Proletariat as a Learning Process*, Michael Vester (as cited in Kluge and Negt, 2018, p. 319) emphasizes the central importance of the communicational aspect in the making of the working class as a class for itself,² whereas this study focuses on the significance of interpersonal and group communication dynamics emerging as cultural forms and experiences in the making.

In an objective sense, whereas it can hardly be assumed that an individual worker’s position in the workplace as a waged labourer would not ever lead to a class position, the concept of “working class” in particular, and the concept of “class” in general, have been excluded from theories, especially of the second half of the twentieth century, to comprehend the dynamics of social development — thus, the concept of class position faded into oblivion as an explanatory tool. As the class concept presupposes antagonism and renders conflict a precondition for analysis, we witness a neglect or redefinition of the concept, emptying its Marxian essence. Certain social science schools, increasingly having more far-reaching implications and flourishing in the aftermath of the Soviet Union, reacted to the concept and theory of class in two ways: rejecting and/or trivializing the class.

The approach of rejecting the class bases its arguments on the assumption that conflicts with historical character are not a possibility anymore; and new contradictions stemming from relations of production are not capable of engendering a new regime of social distribution, therefore the concept of class has lost its functionality in the social scientific analyses. These approaches, all subsumed under the label “New Right”, are known to be effective also in communication-based globalisation ideologies of the twentieth century.

The approach of trivializing the class, while not ontologically neglecting its existence, dispute its significance as a phenomenon lying at the very heart of social conflict. Such approaches can be divided into two groups: the first is the “new social movements” approaches who, despite acknowledging the definition of class and the presence of a conflict between the classes, consider other aspects of social life such as gender, ethnicity, centre-periphery etc. equally important in extent and explanation; and the second is the “Weberian” approaches who attempt to redefine the content of the class concept, its role in social contradictions and the relations of production. The New Right infers from sociological facts

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