

Political Economy of Communication: Canadian Theorists

By Leslie Regan Shade

Communication analyses that take as their focus political economy typically look at the relationship between media and communication systems and the broader social structures of society. Political economic analyses of the media thus look at how media systems reinforce, challenge, or influence existing class or social relations. Two of the questions this approach asks are: How does media ownership, support structures, and government policies influence media behaviour and content? What are the structural factors and labour processes in the production, distribution, and consumption of communication? Political economy falls into the “critical” communication camp (see Hamilton essay).

Three Canadian political economists will be briefly discussed here: Dallas Smythe, Robert Babe, and Vincent Mosco.

The late Dallas Smythe was a Canadian theorist who was concerned with examining the audience commodity, which he described as the relationships that linked together media, the audience, and advertisers. He was most notable for his article, “Communications: Blindspot of Western Marxism,” which appeared in the *Canadian Journal of Political and Social Theory* (Fall 1977, pp. 1–27). He began his professional career as an economist at the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) and in 1948 went to the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, where he headed up the first doctoral program in communication at the Institute for Communication Research. His early academic work emphasized the importance of public broadcasting and examined the political economy of electronic media. In the 1950s, with McCarthyism in the United States, he returned to his native Regina, where he set up a communication program at the University of Regina. In 1974 he went to Simon Fraser University and worked there until his death, in 1992.

Smythe criticized administrative research for its origins in U.S. military propaganda, and he wrote that critical research should engage at three levels:

1. *International*: theories and practices of revolutionary and “liberation movements”; policy and structures of spectrum (radio, telecom); transnational corporations (TNCs); Third World initiatives
2. *National*: political economy of new technologies; advertising and commodity relationship; manipulation of public opinion
3. *Community/neighbourhood (local)*: communication systems with union and labour movement, women’s groups, ethnic groups, etc.

Smythe further advocated that critical research action should concern itself with:

1. the demystification of science and technology
2. the relationship between theories and practice
3. the decentralization of control of communications
4. the democratization of communications institutions and practices
5. the mass mobilization for organization and action
6. the promotion of communications for peace

Vincent Mosco is a professor of communication at Carleton University, in Ottawa. In his book, *The Political Economy of Communication* (Sage, 1996), he argues for a rethinking of political economy, with the theoretical entry points of commodification, spatialization, and structuration. Commodification is concerned with how capitalism accumulates capital and realizes value through the transformation of use values into exchange values. Commodification research is concerned with class power, media elites, ownership patterns, the audience commodity, and government–lobbyist relationships. Spatialization is concerned with the constraints of space and time in everyday life, and this research inquires into corporate power in the communication industry, and the mapping of media ownership (looking at vertical and horizontal patterns of ownership, as well as conglomeration). Structuration looks at agency, social relations, social processes, social practice, and social movements, with a look at gender, class, and race.

Robert Babe, Jean Monty Chair of Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario, has approached his look at political economy through the lens of mainstream neoclassical economics. In *Communication and the Transformation of Economics: Essays in Information, Public Policy & Political Economy* (HarperCollins Canada, 1995), he distinguished between liberal, Marxist, and institutional political economy.

Liberal political economy is typified by the neoclassical model, as expressed in Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations*. This is exemplified by a concern with greed and the self-interest of individuals in a competitive marketplace. Marxist analyses, on the other hand, offer a critique of the market system and the neoclassical position for not addressing social change. Institutional analyses are concerned with the organizational structure of society. They address how economies evolve and analyze technical and corporate infrastructures.

Resources

Melody, Bill. "Dallas Smythe: A Lifetime at the Frontier of Communication." *Canadian Journal of Communication* 17, no. 4 (1992). http://www.cjc-online.ca/title.php3?page=2&journal_id=11

Vincent Mosco's homepage: <http://www.carleton.ca/~vmosco/vm.html>