

Ideological Analysis and the Alternatives

Helena Sheehan

Review of *Communication, Culture and Hegemony: from the media to mediations*

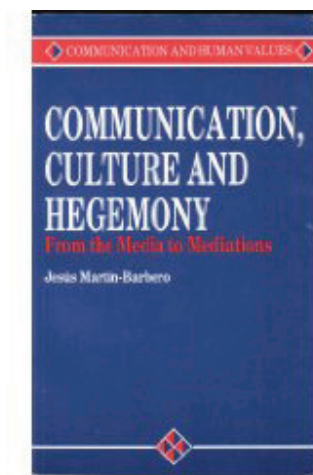
by Jesus Martin-Barbero

translation by Elizabeth Fox and Robert White

introduction by Philip Schlesinger

Communication and Human Values series

London, SAGE, 1993 272 pages



Review in *Irish Communications Review* (vol 5) 1995

On initial impact, this book strikes an engaging note. The author begins with an intimation of a journey:

I came from the field of philosophy, and moved along the paths of linguistic studies until finally I met up with communication. Coming down from the Heideggerian contemplation of being, I now found myself in the slum shacks of man, built of clay and reeds, but nevertheless with a radio and television set ... I diverted my journey through sociolinguistics and semiotics to find tools for an ideological analysis of texts and cultural practices ... a conception of the media process which left room for nothing but the strategems of domination, a process defined simply as a few powerful message senders controlling passive receivers without the slightest indication of seduction or resistance.

The thrust of this book is a reconsideration or refutation of this conception of the media process.

Much of the book travels through familiar territory, familiar at least to those involved in European / American communication studies and the intellectual history in which it is embedded. He traces a trajectory from the enlightenment through the romantic movement through anarchism and marxism to behaviourism, structuralism and critical theory. He focuses this search on the concept of popular culture.

It also travels through what is not-so-familiar territory to European and North American readers, that is the course taken by these theoretical debates in the intellectual life of Latin America. This book is a valuable resource for anyone wanting a map of the terrain of Latin American media studies.

This is one of those books which is put forward as sweeping away all the old orthodoxies and putting a new superior paradigm in their place. My problems with it are (1) that I do not accept his characterisation of all the old orthodoxies and (2) that I do not find his paradigm to be either new or superior.

Along the way, he rehearses some of the standard caricatures of marxism, which seem to be compulsory these days if marxism is to be mentioned at all. He does admit that Zhdanov (the translators have it as Jdanov) is not the same as Lukacs or Gramsci, but nevertheless claims that marxism cannot escape its restrictive logic of class struggle to see the complexity and specificity of cultures. I would argue that it does have the capacity to analyse both relations of production and constitution of meaning. Moreover, I believe it has a capacity to synthesise the two that is superior to any of the alternatives.

The author is particularly reacting against "the obsession with ideology", ideology being "the backbone of a mass discourse whose function was to make the poor dream the same dreams as the rich". I have to declare then that I am one of those who are obsessed with it, although I did not come by it by way of sociolinguistics, semiology or structuralism.

I do agree with the author that it is necessary to emphasise that neither the producers nor the audiences of mass media are homogeneous. It is true that there are internal conflicts and contradictions in the production of these texts. It is also true that there are complex strategies of assimilation and resistance in their reception.

On one level, it is a matter of emphasis: how much weight to put on hegemonic texts and how much on alternative or subversive or even oppositional readings of these texts. On another level, it seems to be something more: the unravelling of more powerful explanatory concepts, such as the media imperialism thesis in its more sophisticated versions, into pluralistic dissipation of mediations.

I do think that ethnography of audience reception and analysis of variable readings have an important role to play in media studies, but it can veer toward the old "uses and gratifications" studies masking relations of power. Some empirical studies conducted under this banner come up with results, which may be anecdotely valid, but cannot bear the weight of the claims they make. Meanwhile, they undercut the use of concepts which yield a more penetrating analysis of what is happening in the production and reception of media.

I'll stick with the idea of ideology.

E-mail: helena.sheehan@dcu.ie

Website: <http://webpages.dcu.ie/~sheehanh/sheehan.htm>

Index of works on doras: <http://doras.dcu.ie/view/people/Sheehan, Helena.html>