

## CHAPTER B

# Marxism

Miliband, R. (1973) *The State in Capitalist Society: The analysis of the western system of power*, London: Quartet Books Limited.

### INTRODUCTION TO MARXISM

While Marxism underpins and informs various ways of theorising media, culture and communication, there is no specific Marxist theory of the media (Enzensberger 1972: 100). Rather, Marxism is described as a ‘political, social, economic and philosophical critique of capitalism’ (Wayne 2003: 4). This suggests that any study of the mass media has to be set in the context of capitalism, forcing recognition of the relationship between communication, culture and the economy (Williams 2003: 37).

Marxism has been the subject of much debate and controversy since it was developed in the nineteenth century ‘out of a synthesis of French radical politics, German idealist philosophy and British economic analysis’ by a ‘German bloke with a big beard’ (Wayne 2003: 4). Karl Marx (1818–83) was the person with the big beard.

Marx is lauded as one of the outstanding figures of the nineteenth century (Briggs and Burke 2002: 112; MacRae 1969: 59; Scannell 2007: 37). He studied law at the University of Bonn and then philosophy at the University of Berlin, before moving to Paris in 1843 and then on to London in 1848. Marx is variously described as a German social theorist, revolutionist, sociologist, historical materialist and economist.

Over the course of his life Marx produced a number of key texts. They include *The German Ideology* (1970 [1846]), *The Communist Manifesto* (2004 [1848]), *The Grundrisse* (1980 [1858]), *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* (1970 [1859]) and his most famous work *Capital / Das Kapital* (1992 [1867]). The latter has been described as a classic political economy text (Briggs and Burke 2002: 112). For a variety of reasons, some of Marx’s work was not published until after his death. Its eventual emergence into the public realm was due to the endeavours of Friedrich Engels (1820–95), Marx’s close friend, collaborator and patron.

Engels, the son of a German manufacturer, managed his father's cotton-mill in Manchester (Worsley 1982: 39), and as well as writing jointly with Marx also produced work of his own. Engels's *The Condition of the Working Class in 1844* (1845) was based on his observations of life in Manchester (Rex 1969: 68–70). It is, therefore, not surprising to find definitions of Marxism that make reference to Engels. Marshall (1998: 393), for instance, defines Marxism as '[t]he body of theory and diverse political practices and policies associated with (or justified by reference to) the writings of Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels'.

Marx was also a practising journalist throughout his life. In Germany, in his mid-twenties, Marx was already editing newspapers, and after moving to London he worked as the European correspondent for the *New York Herald-Tribune* and also produced numerous articles for radical newspapers in Britain and in mainland Europe (Briggs and Burke 2002: 111; Murdock and Golding 1977: 15). Some of these articles were actually written by Engels who allowed Marx to claim the credit – and the fee – for them (Rex 1969: 72).

Despite his close and active relationship with newspapers, Marx did not produce a comprehensive analysis of the role of the press in capitalist societies (Murdock and Golding 1977: 15). However, he and Engels did provide some clues about where such an analysis might begin. The following quotation, which originally appeared in *The German Ideology* (1846), is suggested as the most apt illustration of the link between the economic organisation of capitalist society and the role of the press and other forms of mass media.

The ideas of the ruling class are, in every age, the ruling ideas: i.e. the class, which is the dominant material force in society, is at the same time its dominant intellectual force. The class which has the means of material production at its disposal, has control at the same time over the means of mental production . . . Insofar as they rule as a class and determine the extent and compass of an epoch, they do this in its whole range, hence among other things they regulate the production and distribution of the ideas of their age; thus their ideas are the ruling ideas of the epoch.

(Marx and Engels 1974, cited in Williams 2003: 37)

Three key points are evident in the above extract. First, because the capitalist class – the bourgeoisie – control the 'means of mental production', they also exercise control over the 'production and distribution of the ideas'. Secondly, through the control that they exercise, the capitalist class are in a position to ensure that it is their views and accounts of the world that will dominate the thinking of other – subordinate – classes. Thirdly, as a result of the dominant ideology 'imposed' by the capitalist class, inequality between the social classes in society is maintained (Murdock and Golding 1977: 15).

The failure, or inability, of the subordinate classes to 'see through' the dominant ideology is explained by Marx's notion of 'false consciousness' (Marshall 1998: 219). This concept is intended as a way of illustrating how a dominant form of thought can work in a way that confirms working people's understanding of their place in society, rather than emancipating and empowering them.

In other words, the 'false consciousness' brought about by the dominant ideology of the capitalist class obscures, distracts or intentionally distorts the actual inequalities of the capitalist system. Ideology, in this context, is taken to mean

that the more complex and interrelated a social reality becomes, a) the harder it is for individuals to analyse and understand the totality of which they are a part and b) the

more they are dependent for their knowledge of that totality not on direct experience, but on experience mediated in symbolic form. Because of these two related factors there is a greater possibility of intellectual error and – since the essence of symbolic forms is their capacity to lie – a greater possibility of manipulation.

(Garnham 1990: 62)

In reflecting on what a Marxist analysis of the media and mass communication offers, Stevenson (2002: 9) highlights three obvious strengths. The first is that Marxism emphasises the role of the media in the ‘social reproduction of the *status quo*’. The second is that Marxism illustrates how ‘unequal social relations have helped form ideological images and representations of society’. The third is that Marxism establishes a link between ‘questions of ownership and the cultural content of media production’.

Marxism, therefore, proposes a view that the economic ‘base’ of society determines the ‘superstructure’ of culture and ideas, a variously interpreted and strongly contested concept that has been the subject of extremely robust debate (see for example, Garnham 1990: 23–7; Murdock and Golding 1977: 16–17; Stevenson 2002: 20–26; Williams 2003: 37–8; Worsley 1982: 48).

McQuail (2002) suggests that the application of Marxist thought to the study of media, culture and communication can be characterised in two ways. First, he includes traditional, or classical, Marxism under the label ‘early critical theory’, while approaches that emerged in the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s are described as vaguely neo-Marxist and listed as ‘later critical theory’.

Classical Marxism is associated with work that has focused on the ‘new democracies of the 20th century’. This type of analysis has cast the mass media as ‘weapons in the hands of the ruling (capitalist) class’ which are employed either to ‘control and guide the masses by propaganda or to narcotize them from effective opposition by escapist fantasies and consumerist dreams’ (McQuail 2002: 8). As an example of the first type of analysis, he cites the work of C. Wright Mills, and in the case of the latter he includes the Frankfurt school and in particular the work of Adorno and Horkheimer on the ‘cultural industries’ (see our Chapter 6 on the Frankfurt school).

Marxist-informed work, such as that described above, was in direct opposition to the functionalist approach to the study of mass media which relied predominantly on quantitative research methods, and which was at its height in the 1940s and 1950s. This type of approach resulted in a ‘new academic orthodoxy’ which argued that the media had limited influence, and rather than manipulating people, it was people that manipulated the mass media (Curran et al. 1995: 103).

Marxist thinking and theorising about the media underwent a period of change in the second half of the twentieth century. The main reasons given for this change was the collapse of ‘socialism’ in the Soviet union, the emergence of neo-liberal governments in Britain and the United States, led respectively by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher and President Ronald Reagan, and an emerging view that Marx’s focus on social class did not help explain other divisions in society, such as those around gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality and age (Williams 2003: 57). While the socialist revolution was no longer seen by many as a solution to societal inequalities, capitalism remained the target of criticism (McQuail 2002: 8; Scannell 2007: 37).

The focus of concern for those initiating and supporting new movements and new causes was both the commercial and public service funded media. In particular, a belief

that the media as a whole was centralised, controlled and controlling, and was operating out of self-interest and, in doing so, ‘maintaining the “status quo” rather than helping to promote social change’ (McQuail 2002: 9).

For those on the political Left in particular, there were hopes that emerging new technologies could help in mobilising the masses. This was epitomised in Enzensberger’s description of the media as an ‘industry that shapes consciousness’, and where he conceptualises the (then) media system and its practices as ‘repressive’ while imagining the possibilities of ‘emancipatory’ uses of the media (1972: 115).

McQuail (2002) suggests that much of the neo-Marxist research in this post-Second World War period tended to focus on two areas. One involved attempts to ‘expose’ the ways in which media organisations presented a very limited view of ‘social reality’, not for obvious ideological reasons, but to serve their own organisational and economic interests. The other involved researchers focusing on ‘media meanings’, and proposing that all ‘texts’ were open to multiple ‘readings’, with the interpretations being dependent on the particular circumstances and characteristics of the reader (McQuail 2002: 9).

The significance of this shift from classical Marxism to neo-Marxism was twofold. First, rather than envisaging ideology and culture being linked to the economic base of society, the revised position stressed the ‘autonomy of ideological practices’ (Williams 2003: 52). This changed the ways in which the mass media were understood. Instead, therefore, of considering the mass media as a means for the capitalist class to ‘enforce’ their dominant ideology on other social classes, the media were now conceptualised as ‘sites of struggle’ where all groups in society could compete to promote their particular views and interests (Williams 2003: 52).

In Britain, the theoretical development of these emergent approaches to understand media, culture and communication – generally referred to as culturalism and structuralism (Hall, 1980) – are indelibly associated with the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the shift away from classical Marxism attracted some vehement criticism. One example is provided by Garnham (1990), who was opposed to what he considered to be the dominant tendency to privilege the text, and to focus analytic questions on representation and ideology. In the context of a withering critique, Garnham suggested that this approach simply provided intellectuals and cultural workers with ‘cheap research opportunities, since the only evidence required was the unsubstantiated views of the individual analyst’ (1990: 2).

Garnham also identifies a second and, for him, more disturbing trend: that is, a tendency to view ‘media and cultural institutions as a given, perhaps technologically determined, field upon which a swirling and varying set of social interest groups compete for power’ (1990: 2). He argued that ‘this tendency has no concept of the structured and differential nature of social power or of the sources of power’ (p. 2) (see our Chapter 2 What is theory?).

The reading selected for this chapter provides an example of a classical Marxist analysis. This is because the author, Ralph Miliband, illustrates how and why the media and communication industries ‘are a crucial element in the legitimisation of capitalist society’ (1973: 197).

## INTRODUCTION TO THE READING

The reading is taken from a chapter in Ralph Miliband's *The State in Capitalist Society: The analysis of the western system of power* (1973). Originally published in 1969, the book was reprinted every two years or so right through until the late 1980s because of demand. Of interest is the fact that the book is dedicated to the memory of C. Wright Mills, whose work, *The Power Elite* (1956), inspired Miliband to undertake critical research on the state in capitalist societies. (See our Chapter 9 on C. Wright Mills: Mass Society Theory.)

An academic and active campaigner for socialism, Ralph Miliband studied at the London School of Economics before taking up employment there as a lecturer in political science. He moved to Leeds University as Professor of Politics in 1972, and from 1977 onwards taught at a number of universities in the United States and Canada. His other major works include *Parliamentary Socialism: A study of the politics of labour* (1961), *Marxism and Politics* (1977), *Capitalist Democracy in Britain* (1982), *Socialism for a Sceptical Age* (1994), and he also helped set up the annual *Socialist Register* in 1964 (Newman 2002). His two sons, David and Ed Miliband, are both Members of Parliament, and in 2011 the latter was elected leader of the Labour party.

Miliband's *The State in Capitalist Society* is about the role of the state in 'advanced capitalist societies'. While such societies might differ in terms of their histories, traditions, cultures, languages and institutions, Miliband argues that they have enough similarities to make the state a valid 'unit of analysis'. What these particular types of societies do have in common is that they are all highly industrialised, and that large parts of their economies are owned privately and are under private control (Miliband 1973: 8).

When the book was written, Britain and America were cited as prime examples of such societies. What prompted Miliband's interest in this topic was that while much had been written about, for example, government and public administration, elites and bureaucracy, political stability and political culture – all of which touched on the workings of the state – no single work had focused exclusively on the role of the state in an advanced capitalist society.

A further reason for his interest in writing the book was that previous works on this subject matter had not made explicit the authors' theoretical understanding of the state. This was not, as Miliband explains, due to these authors having no theoretical understanding of the state. Rather, it was because their writing was informed by a 'pluralist–democratic' perspective of the state, which failed to problematise questions about power. For Miliband, a 'theory of the state is also a theory of society and of the distribution of power in that society' (1973: 4).

In western societies, he argues, there is an assumption that power is equally distributed with no one individual, group or class enjoying a dominant position. Miliband takes issue with this view, indicating that the main purpose of the book is

to show in detail that the pluralist–democratic view of society, of politics and all of the state in regard to the countries of advanced capitalism, is in all essentials wrong – that this view, far from providing a guide to reality, constitutes a profound obfuscation of it.

(Miliband 1973: 6)

A review of the book which was first published in the *Guardian* newspaper is reprinted on the book's cover. It describes Miliband's work as '[a] sustained essay in demystification; honest, taut and disciplined . . . It makes an effective contribution to that formidable and sophisticated restatement of Marxism which the English language until recently lacked'. It is, therefore, not surprising to find that Miliband believed Marxism to be the most important alternative to a pluralist–democratic view of power.

Miliband spends some time in the opening chapter of the book correcting misapprehensions about what people might understand by 'the state'. In doing so, he points out that while the government is sometimes assumed to constitute the state, this is not the case. The state, he argues, is best understood as a number of institutions which are in continual interaction with each other. As a result, he suggests that it might be more accurate to refer to 'the state system', a system which comprises five key elements (Miliband 1973: 46–51).

The government is the first of these five elements. The second is the administrative system which includes, for example, the bureaucracy of the state, public corporations and regulatory bodies. The third element includes the military, other paramilitary and security services, and the police. The fourth element is the judiciary. The fifth element includes the units of sub-central government, such as regional and local authorities, and other bodies which, for example, would now include the National Assembly for Wales and the Scottish Parliament. Miliband asserts that these institutions both have, and wield, power (1973: 50).

The book comprises nine chapters ('Introduction'; 'Economic elites and dominant class'; 'The state system and the state elite'; 'The purpose and role of governments'; 'Servants of the state'; 'Imperfect competition'; 'The process of legitimation – I'; 'The process of legitimation – II'; 'Reform and repression'). The selected reading is an abridged version of Chapter eight, 'The process of legitimation – II'. This chapter sets out an understanding of the role played by the mass media in legitimating the state system in advanced capitalist societies. It also considers the legitimating role played by the education system and universities, but we have excluded this in our abridged version of the reading.

Miliband restricts his analysis almost exclusively to the mass media in Britain and America but mainly the former, addressing issues relating to ownership, production, influence, and the autonomy and independence of employees in these organisations. The thrust of the reading is evident in the following extract:

Given the economic and political context in which they [the mass media] function, they cannot fail to be, predominantly, agencies for the dissemination of ideas and values which affirm rather than challenge existing patterns of power and privilege, and thus to be weapons in the arsenal of class domination.

(Miliband 1973: 211)

Given the era in which the book was written, the mass media only include the press, radio and television. While Miliband would have been unable to imagine the recent technological developments enabled by digital technologies, much of his analysis about the role of the mass media – and capitalist societies – remains insightful today. Try and spot the ways in which Marxist perspectives are being used, and critically assess the examples and weight of evidence that Miliband cites in support of his arguments.

Like most of the readings we include in this book, this one also demands close attention and is likely to require more than one reading in order to ensure a reasonable understanding of Miliband's analysis and conclusions.



## READING

1

**Miliband, R. 'The State in Capitalist Society'****The process of legitimation—II**

I

In no field do the claims of democratic diversity and free political competition which are made on behalf of the 'open societies' of advanced capitalism appear to be more valid than in the field of communications – the press, the written word generally, radio, television, the cinema and the theatre. For in contrast to Communist and other 'monolithic' regimes, the means of expression in capitalist countries are not normally monopolised by, and subservient to, the ruling political power. Even where, as is often the case for radio and television, agencies of communication are public institutions, or mixed ones, they are not simply the mouth-pieces of the government of the day and exclusively the organs of official policy or opinions; opposition views are also heard and seen.

Nor, as occurs in many regimes where communications are *not* monopolised by the state, do those who work for them have to fear extreme retribution because what they communicate or allow to be communicated happens to offend their government or other public figures or bodies. No doubt they are subject to various legal and other official restraints and pressures, sometimes of a severe kind. But these restraints and pressures, which will be considered presently, only qualify the notion of independence of the communications media from state dictation and control; they do not nullify it.

Indeed, it cannot even be said that views which are profoundly offensive to various 'establishments', whether they concern politics or culture or religion or morals, are narrowly confined to marginal and *avant-garde* channels of expression, patronised only by tiny minorities.

Such 'controversial' views do find their way, in all these countries, in mass circulation newspapers and magazines; they are presented in book form by large publishing houses, often in vast paperback editions;<sup>1</sup> they are heard on the radio and seen expressed on television; they inspire films which are shown by major cinema circuits, and plays which are performed in the 'commercial' theatre – and no one (or hardly anyone) goes to jail.

1. Writing of the efflorescence of 'legal Marxism' in the Russia of the 1890s, B. Wolfe notes that 'finding Marxism a saleable and distinguished commodity, publishers contracted for translations of the classics and of contemporary German and French Marxist works' (*Three Who Made a Revolution* (1966) p. 140). The same phenomenon, which might be described as commercial Marxism, also occurred, on a vastly larger scale, in advanced capitalist countries in the 1960s.

## NOTES

## 1

## Content

Miliband begins the chapter by contrasting the characteristics of the 'field of communications' in advanced capitalist societies – his 'unit of analysis' – and communist regimes. At this stage, no actual countries are named and no examples of particular practices are provided. Essentially, Miliband suggests that there are a number of distinctions between these two types of societies.

First, whether publicly or privately funded, the agencies of communication in capitalist societies do not act as 'mouthpieces of the government', are not 'organs of official policy or opinion', do allow opposition views to be seen and heard, and do permit their employees to express opinions, subject to compliance with broadcasting codes. Furthermore, he argues, even when 'controversial' views are expressed in capitalist countries they are not confined to minority channels or avant-garde outlets, and it is only in exceptional cases that those who air such views are persecuted, prosecuted or dismissed by an employer.

Before the 'process of legitimation' is fully outlined, it might be helpful to consider whether you have some idea of what this means. Also, why does Miliband use apostrophes around 'open societies', 'monolithic', 'controversial' and 'commercial'?

In the final sentence of the second paragraph, what does Miliband mean when he says these 'restraints and pressures . . . only *qualify* the notion of independence of the communications media from state dictation and control; they do not *nullify* it'? (Our italics.)

## Context

Although Miliband includes the press, written word, radio, television, cinema and theatre in what he describes as 'the field of communications', we need to remember that these forms of communication differ greatly when considering issues of regulation, reach and context. For example, the regulatory regime for broadcasting differs from that of the press, and both are quite different from the rules that are applicable to cinema and theatre. It is also noticeable that from here on Miliband restricts his analysis primarily to the press, radio and television, and only mentions cinema and theatre in passing.

One further point might be made about context in terms of the era in which Miliband was writing. His contrasting of capitalist societies and communist regimes is a response to the Cold War era which pitted the United States of America and its western allies against the (then) Soviet Union. The mass media were used by both 'sides' throughout this era for propaganda purposes (see, for example, Thussu 2006).

## Writing Style

Note how Miliband uses footnotes both to provide bibliographic details of his references and to offer brief notes of clarification and/or explanation.

## READING

## 2

The importance and value of this freedom and opportunity of expression is not to be underestimated. Yet the notion of pluralist diversity and competitive equilibrium is, here as in every other field, rather superficial and misleading. For the agencies of communication and notably the mass media are, in reality, and the expression of dissident views notwithstanding, a crucial element in the legitimation of capitalist society. Freedom of expression is not thereby rendered meaningless. But that freedom has to be set in the real economic and political context of these societies; and in that context the free expression of ideas and opinions *mainly* means the free expression of ideas and opinions which are helpful to the prevailing system of power and privilege. Indeed, Professor Lazarsfeld and Professor Merton once went as far as to suggest that:

Increasingly the chief power groups, among which organised business occupies the most spectacular place, have come to adopt techniques for manipulating mass publics through propaganda in place of more direct means of control . . . Economic power seems to have reduced direct exploitation [?] and turned to a subtler type of psychological exploitation, achieved largely by disseminating propaganda through the mass media of communication. . . . These media have taken on the job of rendering mass publics conformative to the social and economic status quo.<sup>2</sup>

The ideological function of the media is obscured by many features of cultural life in these systems, for instance the absence of state dictation, the existence of debate and controversy, the fact that conservatism is not a tight body of thought and that its looseness makes possible variations and divergencies within its framework, and much else as well. But obscured though it may be, the fact remains that the mass media in advanced capitalist societies are mainly intended to perform a highly 'functional' role; they too are both the expression of a system of domination, and a means of reinforcing it.

2. P.F. Lazarsfeld and R.K. Merton, 'Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action', in B. Rosenberg and D.M. White (eds.), *Mass Culture. The Popular Arts in America*, 1957, p. 457.

## NOTES

## 2

**Content**

Miliband uses the first paragraph of this section to stress the importance of ‘freedom of expression’, but also to argue that in order to fully understand the meaning and use of this term, it needs to be considered in the context of the society in which it is being used. Only then, he suggests, can we fully appreciate that ‘freedom of expression’ tends to represent the views and opinions of those in power.

Following the quotation from Paul Lazarsfeld and Robert Merton – which is the reading used in our Chapter 8 on the Columbia school – Miliband attributes to the mass media an ‘ideological function’ which is both subtle and opaque in the way it operates.

What do you understand by Miliband’s reference to ‘pluralist diversity and competitive equilibrium’ in the first paragraph? In reflecting on our introduction to this chapter and this reading, what do you think is the extent that Miliband’s analysis demonstrates Marxist thinking? In particular, what points in this analysis to date could be used to support the concept of ‘false consciousness’?

**Structure**

Note how Miliband has used these first few paragraphs and the quotation from Lazarsfeld and Merton (also see *Writing style* below) to ‘set up’ the reading. In the final sentence, he reiterates his theory about the role of the mass media and then goes on in the subsequent pages to ‘prove’ it.

**Writing Style**

Note how Miliband uses the quotation to introduce ‘ideology’ and ‘functional’ into his own analysis about the role of the mass media, even though neither word is actually mentioned here by Lazarsfeld and Merton. This is a good illustration of how to make a quotation ‘work’ for you, rather than just inserting one and then moving on saying nothing more about it.

You may also have noticed that around halfway through the quotation there are two square brackets – [?] – around a question mark. What does this convey to you?

## READING

## 3

The press may be taken as the first and most obvious example of this role. Newspapers everywhere vary enormously in quality, content and tendency. Some are sober and staid, others sensational and shrill; intelligent or stupid; scrupulous or not; reactionary, conservative, liberal or 'radical'; free from outside allegiance, or vehicles of a party faction or interest; critical of authority or blandly apologetic; and so on.

But whatever their endless differences of every kind, most newspapers in the capitalist world have one crucial characteristic in common, namely their strong, often their passionate hostility to anything further to the Left than the milder forms of social-democracy, and quite commonly to these milder forms as well. This commitment finds its most explicit expression at election time; whether independent of more or less conservative parties or specifically committed to them, most newspapers may be relied on to support the conservative side or at least to be deeply critical of the anti-conservative one, often vociferously and unscrupulously so. This conservative preponderance is normally overwhelming.

At the core of the commitment lies a general acceptance of prevailing modes of thought concerning the economic and social order and a specific acceptance of the capitalist system, even though sometimes qualified, as natural and desirable. Most newspapers accept a certain degree of state intervention in economic and social life as inevitable and even praiseworthy; and some, greatly daring, may even support this or that piece of innocuous nationalisation. Even so, most organs of the press have always been utterly dedicated to the proposition that the enlargement of the 'public sector' was inimical to the 'national interest' and that the strengthening of private enterprise was the condition of economic prosperity, social welfare, freedom, democracy, and so forth.

## NOTES

## 3

## Content

Here, Miliband begins with the press, his intention being to illustrate how they 'are both a system of domination and a means of reinforcing it'. After a first paragraph in which he strikingly acknowledges the differences between newspapers in terms of their quality, content and tendencies, Miliband uses the next two paragraphs to illustrate their similarities in respect of political allegiance and alignment, and the reasons why this is the case.

In the first paragraph, he argues that one shared characteristic of the press is their abhorrence of political views erring towards the Left. This political predilection, he asserts, becomes most evident during the course of elections, because even if the press are not overtly supportive of conservative parties or candidates, they will always tend to be critical of those representing anti-conservative views.

In the second paragraph, Miliband argues that the political alignment of the press is due to their support of the capitalist system, which through their reporting is portrayed as 'natural and desirable'. Moreover, with a view that private enterprise and 'free' markets, rather than state intervention, best serves the 'national interest', the press display an obvious reluctance to support enlargement of the 'public sector' (see *Context* below).

Are there any other reasons that you can think of that would encourage the owners and operators of the press to support conservative forces in society? To what extent does this analysis of the press have any currency today? Why? Why not?

## Context

It is insightful to ponder on Miliband's reference to press owners and operators generally favouring conservative policies and supporting the idea of small government, and particularly so given that his views were developed and recorded nearly forty years ago. The election of a Conservative government in 1979 under Margaret Thatcher resulted in a flurry of state utilities being privatised, such as gas, water, electricity, prison services and the railways.

This period also resulted in a marked liberalisation of regulation relating to the mass media and other sectors. These trends continued under the 'New' Labour governments of Tony Blair and Gordon Brown, with elements of both the education and health sectors now subject to private ownership.

## READING

## 4

Similarly, and consistently, the press for the most part has always been a deeply committed anti-trade union force. Not, it should be said, that newspapers in general oppose trade unions as such. Not at all. They only oppose trade unions, in the all too familiar jargon, which, in disregard of the country's welfare and of their members' own interests, greedily and irresponsibly seek to achieve short-term gains which are blindly self-defeating. In other words, newspapers love trade unions so long as they do badly the job for which they exist. Like governments and employers, newspapers profoundly deplore strikes, and the larger the strike the greater the hostility: woe to trade union leaders who encourage or fail to prevent such manifestly unsocial, irresponsible and *obsolete* forms of behaviour. The rights and wrongs of any dispute are of minor consequence; what counts is the community, the consumer, the public, which *must* be protected, whatever the cost, against the actions of men who blindly obey the summons of misguided and, most likely, evil-intentioned leaders.

In the same vein, most newspapers in the capitalist world have always had the 'extreme' Left, and notably communists, on the brain, and have only varied in their attitude to that part of the political spectrum in the degree of virulence and hostility which they have displayed towards it. It is also the case that for such newspapers the history of the world since 1945 has largely been a Manichean struggle imposed upon the forces of goodness, led by the United States, against the forces of evil, represented by aggressive communism, whether Soviet or Chinese. Revolutionary movements are almost always 'communist-inspired', and by definition evil, however atrocious the conditions which have given rise to them; and in the struggles of decolonisation of this century, the attitude of the vast majority of newspapers has always ranged from strong antipathy to passionate hostility towards movements and leaders (or rather terrorists) seeking independence.

All this, it should be stressed, has not been and is not simply *a* current of thought among many; it has been and remains *the* predominant, generally the overwhelming, current of thought of the national (and local) press of advanced capitalist countries.

## NOTES

## 4

## Content

In these two paragraphs Miliband moves on to outline how the press – in their ideological role as a vehicle which expresses and reinforces a system of domination – represent those who are perceived to oppose the capitalist system. The first group are the trade unions. Not only do the press fail to accurately and fairly report the rights and wrongs of labour disputes, according to Miliband, but they also uniformly condemn strikes, churning out stereotypes – such as irresponsible, greedy and misguided – in order to undermine the position of union officials and striking workers.

In the same vein, Miliband observes that since 1945 the press have virtually demonised individuals, groups and regimes that espouse views of the 'hard' Left. During and since the Cold War, communists in particular have been characterised in this way, with the press rhetoric casting the capitalism of the West as 'good' and the communism of the East as 'bad'. Also, any individuals or movements challenging the capitalist order have been similarly labelled.

Miliband asserts that press support for, and reinforcement of, the dominant ideology is evident in the local and national newspapers of all advanced capitalist societies. Does he provide enough 'evidence' to convince you of this view?

## Context

While Miliband is writing with experience of a lengthy Cold War period, his references to negative press depictions of those who oppose the capitalist order continue to have resonance. For example, individuals such as Nelson Mandela, in South Africa, and Gerry Adams, in Ireland, were originally portrayed by the press as guerrillas, or terrorists, before later being acknowledged by many people as 'freedom fighters'.

Similarly, certain countries today – such as North Korea and Iran – are regularly described in the western mass media as part of 'an axis of evil', a phrase coined and used by western leaders. Of interest here is Herman and Chomsky's thesis about the role the mass media play in 'manufacturing consent' (see our Chapter 12 on political economy). These two authors illustrate the ways in which anti-communist sentiment was used to 'frame' news and current affairs.

## READING

5

As has also been stressed repeatedly in preceding chapters, this profoundly conformist outlook admits of many variations and deviations: it certainly does not preclude a critical view of this or that aspect of the existing order of things. And while social-democratic governments, however conservative their policies, must expect very much rougher treatment at the hands of the press than properly conservative ones, the latter are not at all immune from press criticism and attack. In this sense the press may well claim to be 'independent' and to fulfil an important watchdog function. What the claim overlooks, however, is the very large fact that it is the Left at which the watchdogs generally bark with most ferocity, and that what they are above all protecting is the *status quo*.

Many 'popular' newspapers with a mass circulation are extremely concerned to convey the opposite impression and to suggest a radical impatience with every kind of 'establishment', however exalted, and a restless urge for change, reform, progress. In actual fact, most of this angry radicalism represents little more than an affectation of style; behind the iconoclastic irreverence and the demagogic populism there is singular vacuity both in diagnosis and prescription. The noise is considerable but the battle is bogus.

6

For their part, radio and television similarly serve a mainly though again not exclusively conformist purpose. Here too the appearance is of rich diversity of views and opinions, of ardent controversy and passionate debate. These media, moreover, whether commercially or publicly owned, are either required, or in any case wish to suggest, a high degree of political impartiality and objectivity. Newspapers can be as politically involved and partisan, as biased in their presentation of news and views, as they choose. But radio and television must not.

In most ways, however, this assumed impartiality and objectivity is quite artificial. For it mainly operates in regard to political formations which while divided on many issues are nevertheless part of a basic, underlying consensus. Thus, radio and television in such countries as Britain and the United States may preserve a fair degree of impartiality between the Conservative, Liberal and Labour parties, and the Republican and Democratic parties, respectively; but this hardly precludes a steady stream of propaganda adverse to all views which fall outside the consensus. Impartiality and objectivity, in this sense, stop at the point where political consensus itself ends – and the more radical the dissent, the less impartial and objective the media. On this view it does not seem extravagant to suggest that radio and television in all capitalist countries have been consistently and predominantly agencies of conservative indoctrination and that they have done what they could to inoculate their listeners and viewers against dissident thought. This does not require that all such dissent should be prevented from getting an airing. It only requires that the overwhelming bias of the media should be on the other side. And that requirement has been amply met.

## NOTES

5

## Content

This paragraph is used to highlight the subtlety of the ideological process. Essentially, the press retain credibility as a watchdog because they *do* allow some negative criticism of the current capitalist system. Also, the press *will* provide some critical commentary about the workings and policies of conservative governments, but will always ensure that social-democratic governments receive far more critical coverage.

In making his final point about the press ensuring the status quo by barking – as watchdogs are supposed to do – with most ferocity at the Left, Miliband is dismissive of the basic premise of liberal press theory (see our Chapter 4 on liberal press theory).

In order to illustrate a second point about the subtlety of the ideological process, Miliband draws attention to the headlines and campaigns of the ‘popular’ press. In effect, they are, he suggests, vacuous, but his language in this instance is quite vivid. What do you understand by ‘iconoclastic irreverence’ and ‘demagogic populism’ which are at the heart of the penultimate sentence?

6

## Content

Miliband now turns to the parts played by radio and television in the ideological process, arguing that both operate in ways that serve a conformist purpose but, like the press, not exclusively. Miliband notes how as a result of being subject to different regulatory frameworks, radio and television, whether publicly or privately funded, are either required to be, or pervade themselves as, independent and impartial, whereas the press are not subject to such requirements.

However, Miliband believes that any claims about impartiality and objectivity made by radio and television should be treated sceptically. His reasons are threefold. First, because there are limits to what constitutes impartiality and objectivity. Secondly, these limits only extend to what Miliband describes as an underlying political consensus, which allows for a reasonable degree of impartiality in the coverage of mainstream political parties. Thirdly, views or opinions that fall outside this aforementioned political consensus are unlikely to be treated with impartiality or objectivity.

In keeping with his earlier views about the press, both radio and television also include dissenting voices, but they will always be in a minority; and even when broadcast, they are likely to have little impact because radio and television have applied themselves well in acting as ‘agencies of conservative indoctrination’.

To what extent is the language of ‘objectivity’ and ‘impartiality’ useful in this analysis? What do you think Miliband means by these terms? What ‘evidence’ would you cite in support of, and against, Miliband’s claim that radio and television act as ‘agencies of conservative indoctrination’ in advanced capitalist societies?

## READING

## 7

So far the mass media have been discussed as if their sole concern was with politics and ideology. This is of course not the case. Mainly political magazines and books form a very small part of the total, and all newspapers devote much space to matters which bear no direct or even indirect relation to politics – many newspapers in fact devote much more space to such matters than to political ones. Similarly, radio, television, the cinema and the theatre are not run *as* agencies of political communication and indoctrination; they are also, and even predominantly, concerned with ‘entertainment’ of one sort or another. Indeed, in the case of the mass media which are privately owned and controlled, the overriding purpose and concern is with profit. This is also true of newspapers. Lord Thomson was not expressing a unique and eccentric view when he said that what he wanted from his newspapers was that they should make money.

On the other hand, making money is not at all incompatible with making politics, and in a more general sense with political indoctrination. Thus the *purpose* of the ‘entertainment’ industry, in its various forms, may be profit; but the *content* of its output is not therefore by any means free from political and ideological connotations of a more or less definite kind.

The mass media are often attacked for their cultural poverty, their debased commercialism, their systematic triviality, their addiction to brutality and violence, their deliberate exploitation of sex and sadism, and much else of the same order. The indictment is familiar and largely justified.

But that indictment also tends, very often, to understate or to ignore the specific ideological content of these productions and the degree to which they are used as propaganda vehicles for a particular view of the world. ‘A superficial inventory of the contents and motivation in the products of the entertainment and publishing worlds in our Western civilisation’, Professor Lowenthal has observed, ‘will include such themes as the nation, the family, religion, free enterprise, individual initiative’.<sup>3</sup> Such an inventory would in fact do more than include these and other highly ‘functional’ themes; it would also have to note the marginal place allowed to themes of a ‘dysfunctional’ kind. Professor Meynaud has said, in regard to the world of magazines that ‘ils contribuent par la structure de leurs rubriques et l’apparente neutralité de leurs articles à la formation de ce climat de conformisme qui est l’un des meilleurs atouts du capitalisme contemporain. A cet égard, le rôle des hebdomadaires féminins qui donnent, sans en avoir l’air, une vue entièrement falsifiée de notre monde est capital’.<sup>4</sup> The point is of more general application, and so is Raymond Williams’s remark about what he calls ‘majority television’, namely that it is ‘outstandingly an expression of the false consciousness of our particular societies’.<sup>5</sup>

3. L. Lowenthal, ‘Historical Perspective of Popular Culture’, in Rosenberg and White (eds.), *Mass Culture. The Popular Arts in America*, p. 50.

4. Meynaud, *Rapport sur la Classe Dirigeante Italienne*, p. 192.

5. R. Williams, ‘Television in Britain’, in *The Journal of Social Issues*, 1962, vol. 18, no. 2, p. 11. For a classic analysis of the reactionary values of boys’ magazines in Britain in an earlier period, see G. Orwell, ‘Boys’ Weeklies’, in *Collected Essays*, 1962.

## NOTES

## 7

## Content

Here Miliband recognises that the discussion to date has focused on the role of the media in terms of politics and ideology, but that much of the content of the mass media is concerned with entertainment, and in the case of some organisations this is their sole intention. Reference is also made to a media baron in order to remind the reader that the overriding purpose of commercially funded media is to make a profit.

However, producing product for the purpose of entertainment – and making money – does not mean that there is an absence of ‘political and ideological connotations’ of one sort or another. Moreover, the complaints that are hurled at some media organisations and some of the products that they produce serve the ideological role of the mass media in two ways. First, they overlook or fail to point out the ideological nature of the content and secondly, they divert the attention of audiences away from such concerns.

Miliband draws on published research to indicate that some regular themes evident in media products, such as the nation, the family, free enterprise and individual initiative, have ideological potential. Moreover, these themes can be considered as ‘functional’ and ‘dysfunctional’. Thinking more broadly about the latter, Miliband draws on Raymond Williams’s argument that ‘majority television’ plays a key role in encouraging ‘false consciousness’.

What does Miliband mean when he refers to the media’s ‘cultural poverty’? How would you interpret the notion of ‘functional’ and ‘dysfunctional’ themes in this context? If you follow Miliband’s analysis, how do you think he positions audiences in terms of their role and power?

## Context

In listing a wide range of complaints that are made about the behaviour and attitudes of some media organisations, and the nature of the content being produced, Miliband’s comments would not be out of place today. We might simply add the electronic media’s new predilection with gambling as a current concern.

Also, in respect of what today would be referred to as the discourses – rather than themes – that pervade entertainment genres (such as soaps, game shows and situation comedies), the following would also be present: drug use, sexuality, migration and terrorism. Following Miliband’s argument, the dominant discourses in these genres would be more likely to support, rather than question, the *status quo* – but still leave room for some dissenting opinions.

## Writing Style

Note how Miliband tends to draw on published academic research to support and illuminate his arguments. Presumably the quotation, which is not translated into English, assumes that his readers will have a certain standard of education!

## READING

## 8

Furthermore, it is worth noting that much of the ‘message’ of the mass media is not diffuse but quite specific. It would of course be ridiculous to think of such authors as Mickey Spillane and Ian Fleming (to take two writers whose sales have been astronomical) as political writers in any true sense. But it would also be silly to overlook the fact that their heroes are paragons of anti-Communist virtues and that their adventures, including their sexual adventures, are more often than not set in the context of a desperate struggle against subversive forces, both alien and home-grown. As has been said about the anti-communism of the Spillane output, ‘it is woven into the texture of assumptions of the novel. Anyone who thinks otherwise is taken to be either treasonable or hopelessly naïve.’<sup>6</sup> This kind of crude ‘ideology for the masses’ does not permeate the whole field of ‘mass culture’; but it permeates a substantial part of it in most media. Nor of course is the rest of ‘mass culture’ much permeated by counter-ideological material. There are not, on the whole, many left-wing and revolutionary equivalents of James Bond. It may be that the *genre* does not lend itself to it; and the political climate of advanced capitalist societies certainly does not.

6. S. Hall and P. Whannel, *The Popular Arts*, 1964, p. 148.

## NOTES

## 8

**Content**

Miliband ends this section of the reading by pointing out another less obvious way in which media products work to express and reinforce dominant ideology. Here, he refers to the work of prominent and prolific authors such as Mickey Spillane and Ian Fleming, arguing that while these figures might not be seen as political writers, their books and the subsequent filmic adaptations can be seen as ideological. This is because they reinforce anti-communist viewpoints and alert audiences to the possibility of subversive forces which need to be stopped.

While he acknowledges that material such as this doesn't permeate the whole of 'mass culture', he questions how much of the content produced and disseminated via the mass media could be considered to be counter-ideological. To what extent, and in what contexts, do we read and hear about the notion of 'mass culture' today?

**Context**

Two points might be made here. First, Miliband's mention of Ian Fleming is a reminder of the need to consider both the aspect of change and that of continuity when discussing the role and nature of mass media. Secondly, had you considered the idea of a James Bond film acting as a means of reinforcing dominant ideology? Also, staying within this Marxist framework, what media products could be perceived as counter-ideological today, and why could they be construed as such?

## READING

9

II

The nature of the contribution which the mass media make to that political climate is determined by the influences which weigh most heavily upon them. There are a number of such influences – and they all work in the same conservative and conformist direction.

The first and most obvious of them derives from the ownership and control of the ‘means of mental production’. Save for state ownership of radio and television stations and of some other means of communications, the mass media are overwhelmingly in the private domain (and this is also true of most radio and television stations in the United States). Moreover, these agencies are in that part of the private domain which is dominated by large-scale capitalist enterprise. Ever more notably, the mass media are not only business, but big business. The pattern of concentration which is evident in all other forms of capitalist enterprise is also evident here: the press, magazines and book publishing, cinemas, theatres, and also radio and television wherever they are privately owned, have increasingly come under the ownership and control of a small and steadily declining number of giant enterprises, with combined interests in different media, and often also in other areas of capitalist enterprise. ‘The Hearst empire’, it has been noted, ‘includes twelve newspapers, fourteen magazines, three television stations, six radio stations, a news service, a photo service, a feature syndicate, and Avon paperbacks’; and similarly, ‘in addition to magazines, *Time, Inc.*, also owns radio and television stations, a book club, paper mills, timber land, oil wells, and real estate’.<sup>7</sup> The same kind of concentration is increasingly found in all other capitalist countries: the Axel Springer empire, for instance, alone controls over 40 per cent of German newspapers and magazines, and close to 80 per cent of Berlin newspapers. As for films, it has been observed that ‘in Britain, for example, film distribution is virtually dependent on two companies which run the circuit cinemas, and since films can normally be financed only on guarantees of distribution, this means that two companies have almost complete control over what films are to be made, and what subjects are acceptable’.<sup>8</sup> And it is also noteworthy that new ventures in the mass media are easily captured by existing interests in these or in other fields. Thus, Mr Hall and Mr Whannel, speaking of commercial television in Britain, note that ‘rather than spreading power into new hands, it has increased the power of those already holding it. More than half the resources of commercial television are owned in part by newspapers, the film industry and theatrical interests’.<sup>9</sup>

7. G.W. Domhoff, *Who Rules America?*, 1967, p. 81.

8. A. Hunt, ‘The Film’, in D. Thompson (ed.), *Discrimination and Popular Culture*, 1964, p. 101.

9. Hall and Whannel, *The Popular Arts*, p. 343. One of the main promoters of commercial television in Britain, Mr Norman Collins, described this process as follows: ‘... the viewer has found himself offered a service that is the expression of the combined experience of those men who for years have run the nation’s theatres, cinemas, concert halls and newspapers. It is also a healthy and democratic [*sic*] thing that financial interests in the Independent Television should be spread so widely. It is gratifying that so many branches of industry and the press and entertainment can participate in Independent Television’ (*ibid.*, p. 344). Gratifying the venture has undoubtedly been for the participants: it is the ‘democratic’ bit which is rather less obvious.

## NOTES

## 9

**Content**

Miliband's attention now turns to what he suggests as the main influences on the mass media. He argues that, individually and in combination, these influences encourage conservatism and conformism. Ownership and control of 'the means of mental production' is listed as the first influence. Miliband makes a number of points that we probably take for granted today.

First, most of the mass media is owned privately. Secondly, concentration of ownership has become evident. Thirdly, a few 'giant enterprises' owning different types of media have emerged. Fourthly, ownership has impacted on what gets produced, an example being the power of film distributors in Britain. Fifthly, the owners of 'old' media, such as the press, were quick to invest in 'new' media, in this case the growth of commercial television in Britain.

**Context**

Miliband identifies some trends that have continued since this book was first published. Today, concentration of ownership has become more pronounced. The 'giant enterprises' of yesteryear are now described as transnational media conglomerates, the obvious difference from this earlier era being that ownership now extends beyond the boundaries of a single nation-state. 'Old' media also continue to buy into 'new' media.

## READING

10

Rather obviously, those who own and control the capitalist mass media are most likely to be men whose ideological dispositions run from soundly conservative to utterly reactionary; and in many instances, most notably in the case of newspapers, the impact of their views and prejudices is immediate and direct, in the straightforward sense that newspaper proprietors have often not only owned their newspapers but closely controlled their editorial and political line as well, and turned them, by constant and even daily intervention, into vehicles of their personal views.<sup>10</sup> In the case of Axel Springer's newspaper empire, it has been remarked that 'he runs his papers like a monarch. He denies that there is any kind of central ideological control, and certainly such control is not formalised in any way. But Herr Springer is a man of the strongest political views. Deeply religious, a militant anti-communist, he has also a sense of mission. He may not direct his papers openly but his ideas seep downwards'.<sup>11</sup> Much the same may be said of many newspaper owners in all advanced capitalist countries. The right of ownership confers the right of making propaganda, and where that right is exercised, it is most likely to be exercised in the service of strongly conservative prejudices, either by positive assertion or by the exclusion of such matters as owners may find it undesirable to publish. Censorship is not, in a free enterprise system, purely a state prerogative. No doubt, private censorship, unlike state censorship, is not absolute. But where no alternative source of newspaper information or views is readily available – as is mostly the case in many towns, cities and regions in the United States,<sup>12</sup> and elsewhere as well<sup>13</sup> – such censorship is pretty effective all the same, particularly where other media such as radio and television are, as often in the United States, also under the same ownership and control.<sup>14</sup>

10. As Lord Beaverbrook told the Royal Commission on the Press, 'I run the paper purely for the purpose of making propaganda, and with no other motive.' Quoted in R.M. Hutchins, *Freedom, Education and the Fund*, 1956, p. 62.

11. *The Times*, 15 April, 1968.

12. 'Only 6 per cent of all the daily newspaper cities in this country now have competing dailies' (W. Schramm, 'Its Development', in C.S. Steinberg (ed.), *Mass Media and Communication*, 1966, p. 51). These figures refer to 1953–4.

13. Thus for France, it has been noted that 'en province, les habitants d'une trentaine de départements n'ont à leur disposition qu'un seul journal' (F. Goguel and A. Grosser, *La Politique en France*, 1964, p. 157).

14. For the use of television and radio for anti-communist and related purposes by wealthy men in the United States, see F. Cook, 'The Ultras', in *The Nation*, 30 June 1962.

## NOTES

10

**Content**

A second aspect of ownership and control that facilitates the reinforcement of conservatism and conformism is the very nature of those – predominantly – men that own or operate large media corporations. Obviously, Miliband is referring primarily to privately owned rather than publicly owned media, and his main example is drawn from the press, his focus being on the Springer media empire in Germany. The ‘ideological disposition’ of owners, he argues, is generally conservative – even reactionary – and this is evident in the editorial and political line taken by their media outlets.

Private ownership, Miliband suggests, provides both the right to ‘make propaganda’ and the opportunity to do so. This prompts the recognition that censorship is not a practice solely employed by the state, but that it can and does occur in a free enterprise system founded on private ownership. Miliband does recognise that censorship is not likely to be absolute. However, he also points out that there is a greater likelihood of censorship occurring, even inadvertently, when ownership is concentrated and when most of the media are owned and operated privately. His reference point in this instance is the United States.

**Context**

While the power and influence of media owners continues to be a matter of public debate, the potential for privately owned media to exercise censorship – whether intentional or otherwise – receives scant attention. This may be because the wider public view is that the media in this country is free and that free speech is still possible. This, of course, is the basic premise of liberal press theory.

## READING

11

However, it is not always the case that those who own or ultimately control the mass media do seek to exercise a direct and immediate influence upon their output. Quite commonly, editors, journalists, producers, managers, etc. are accorded a considerable degree of independence, and are even given a free hand. Even so, ideas do tend to ‘seep downwards’, and provide an ideological and political framework which may well be broad but whose existence cannot be ignored by those who work for the commercial media. They may not be *required* to take tender care of the sacred cows that are to be found in the conservative stable. But it is at least *expected* that they will spare the conservative susceptibilities of the men whose employees they are, and that they will take a proper attitude to free enterprise, conflicts between capital and labour, trade unions, left-wing parties and movements, the Cold War, revolutionary movements, the role of the United States in the world, and much else besides. The existence of this framework does not require total conformity; general conformity will do. This assured, room will be found for a seasoning, sometimes even a generous seasoning, of dissent.

12

A second source of conformist and conservative pressure upon newspapers and other media is that exercised, directly or indirectly, by capitalist interests, not as owners, but as advertisers. The direct political influence of large advertisers upon the commercial media need not be exaggerated. It is only occasionally that such advertisers are able, or probably even try, to dictate the contents and policies of the media of which they are the customers. But their custom is nevertheless of crucial importance to the financial viability, which means the existence, of newspapers and, in some but not all instances, of magazines, commercial radio and television. That fact may do no more than *enhance* a general disposition on the part of these media to show exceptional care in dealing with such powerful and valuable interests. But that is useful too, since it provides a further assurance to business interests in general that they will be treated with sympathetic understanding, and that the ‘business community’ will, at the least, be accorded a degree of indulgence which is seldom if ever displayed towards the labour interest and trade unions: *their* displeasure is a matter of no consequence at all.

## NOTES

11

## Content

Miliband's final point about the ways in which ownership and control encourage conservatism and conformism involves consideration of employees. In effect, by raising questions about the power that owners might exert on employees, such as editors and journalists, Miliband brings into consideration ideas like 'editorial independence'. His response to the potential power of owners is to suggest that the political and ideological interests of the owners and operators 'seep down' to employees.

As a result, those that work for the organisation do have freedom to report on a range of matters, and even to criticise issues or events that might impact negatively on the owners. However, Miliband argues that these same employees also know that the overall thrust of coverage on certain matters, for example disputes between labour and capital and the role of the United States in the world, must ultimately favour the status quo.

Miliband has argued that the 'contribution that the mass media make to the political climate is determined by the influences that weigh most heavily upon them'. The first influence to be examined is ownership and control, and three aspects of influence are considered: concentration of ownership; the ideological disposition of owners and controllers; the power exerted on employees.

To what extent are you persuaded by Miliband's arguments in relation to all three aspects of influence? Also, how would you argue against the position espoused by Miliband?

12

## Content

The second major factor that influences mass media is the advertising industry. The influence of advertisers is exercised both directly and indirectly. In the case of the former, this is because privately owned media rely on advertising and sponsorship revenue for survival and profit. It is as a result of this financial dependency that indirect influence becomes apparent. For example, advertisers provide sufficient incentive to media companies to ensure that the latter's policies and content are generally favourable to the business environment and capitalism more generally. Thus, it will only be occasionally that advertisers and sponsors will need to intervene directly in the work and operations of media companies. One recent example is the withdrawal of Carphone Warehouse as a sponsor of *Celebrity Big Brother* (Channel 4, 2007) because of allegations of racism in the Big Brother House.

As a result of both the direct and indirect influence of advertisers and sponsors, Miliband argues, mass media organisations can be relied on to take a 'sympathetic' position to the world of business and capitalism more generally and, perhaps more importantly, to be sceptical about the claims of disgruntled employees and trade union leaders in labour disputes with employers.

To what extent would Miliband's arguments about the power of advertisers and sponsors have any currency in the contemporary period? If so, why does it matter?

## READING

13

A third element of pressure upon the mass media stems from government and various other parts of the state system generally. That pressure, as was noted earlier, does not generally amount to imperative dictation. But it is nevertheless real, in a number of ways.

For one thing, governments, ministries and other official agencies now make it their business, ever more elaborately and systematically, to supply newspapers, radio and television with explanations of official policy which naturally have an apologetic and tendentious character. The state, in other words, now goes in more and more for 'news management', particularly in times of stress and crisis, which means, for most leading capitalist countries, almost permanently; and the greater the crisis, the more purposeful the management, the evasions, the half-truths and the plain lies. In addition, governments now engage more extensively than ever before in cultural management, particularly abroad, and use education and culture as instruments of foreign policy. By far and away the greatest effort in this field since the war has of course been made by the United States whose endeavours, notably in the Third World, have given an entirely new dimension to the notion of 'cultural imperialism'.<sup>15</sup> Not, it should be said, that these endeavours, as shown by the uncovering of CIA activities in the cultural field, have neglected the advanced capitalist world, including the United States.

As far as newspapers are concerned, governments and other agencies of the state system may, in their desire to manage the news, resort to a variety of pressures and blandishments<sup>16</sup> – even threats<sup>17</sup> – which may be more or less effective. But they are, for the most part, forced to rely very largely on the cooperation and good-will of publishers, editors and journalists. In many cases, that cooperation and good-will are readily forthcoming, since a majority of newspapers tend, broadly speaking, to share the view of the national interest held by governments which are mostly of the conservative persuasion. But where newspapers are recalcitrant, as is often the case for one reason or another, there is relatively little that governments can do about it. In this sense too, newspapers are independent institutions; and for all their shortcomings, that remains an important fact in the life of these countries.

15. See, e.g. 'The Non-Western World in Higher Education', in *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, vol. 356, 1964.

16. Sometimes, as in Federal Germany, of a rather direct kind: 'In the budget of the chancellor, there is a secret fund of 13 million DM, which seems to serve partially to support government-friendly newspapers and journalists, and partially for more honorable purposes' (V. Dueber and G. Braunthal, 'West Germany', in 'Comparative Studies in Political Finance', *Journal of Politics*, p. 774).

17. As, for instance, in the case of the German government's attempt to crush the awkwardly critical *Der Spiegel*. See O. Kirchheimer and C. Menges, 'A Free Press in a Democratic State? The *Spiegel* Case', in G.M. Carter and A.F. Westin, *Politics in Europe*, 1965.

## NOTES

13

**Content**

Here, Miliband outlines the third form of pressure that is 'applied' to the mass media and which encourages conservatism and conformity. This is the influence exerted by government and other official agencies of the state. His first example is the press. But before considering how government and other agencies of the state might influence press reporting and coverage, Miliband points to three trends that have continued apace since this reading was published.

First, there is increasing involvement of the state in communications within, and beyond, national boundaries. Secondly, more investment has been made by governments in resources for the purpose of 'news management'. Thirdly, there is greater use by governments of culture and education as 'instruments of foreign policy'.

Miliband suggests that governments and other agencies of the state can bring pressures to bear on the press, even including threats, which could involve withdrawing advertising. However, as most governments are of a generally conservative persuasion, they can expect a certain amount of goodwill from the press. Moreover, it is in the economic interests of the press to use press releases and other information provided by government and other agencies as it provides 'free' content.

However, if the press decide not to take a favourable approach to coverage of government policy, there is little the latter can do. Such occurrences do, though, provide newspapers and their editors with the opportunity to herald mantras about 'free speech' and 'freedom of the press'.

**Context**

Miliband's observations about government involvement in communications at home and abroad have been the subject of much discussion over recent years. For example, Schiller has written about the interrelationship between America's mass media industry and the American government's foreign policy (see, for example, Schiller 1998). In Britain, Franklin (2004) has documented the vast increase in communications professionals used by governments and the ways in which government policy has been embedded in the storylines of entertainment genres such as soap operas.

A final point might be made about Miliband's reference to 'cultural imperialism'. This is a term that tends not to be used today. Instead, the dominant discourse about international communication in contemporary society is about globalisation. Not surprisingly, critical scholars will ask what the idea of globalisation suggests, as well as what it obscures.

Miliband doesn't provide specific examples of cultural imperialism, but in reflecting on the substance of his analysis, can you? How would the notion of cultural imperialism be interpreted by a Marxist thinker? Should we, as some suggest today, consider transnational media conglomerates rather than nation-states as cultural imperialists? What does the idea of globalisation obscure?

## READING

14

Publicly owned radio and television, on the other hand, are ‘official’ institutions, and as such much more susceptible than newspapers to a variety of official pressures. They may well, as in Britain, enjoy a high degree of independence and autonomy from government, but they remain nevertheless steeped in an official environment and permeated by an official climate, which ensure that in political and general ideological terms these media fulfil a conformist rather than a critical role. This does not prevent government and official policies from being criticised and attacked. But criticism and attack tend to remain within a safe, fairly narrow spectrum. To paraphrase Lord Balfour’s remark about the House of Lords, whether the Conservative or the Labour Party is in office, it is generally the conformist point of view which prevails. At the time of the General Strike, John Reith, as he was then wrote to the Prime Minister in his capacity of General Manager of the BBC that, ‘assuming the BBC is for the people and that the government is for the people, it follows that the BBC must be for the government in this crisis too’.<sup>18</sup> Things may have moved somewhat since then, but not as dramatically as is often claimed or as the notion of independence and autonomy would suggest. Writing of BBC Television in recent years, Mr Stuart Hood has noted that judgements of what is to be produced ‘are based on what can be described as a programme ethos – a general view of what is fitting and seemly, of what is admissible and not admissible, which is gradually absorbed by those persons involved in programme-making’.<sup>19</sup> This ‘programme ethos’ is much more likely to produce controversy within the consensus than outside it. And where programmes are consistently, or appear to be consistently anti-Establishmentarian, official pressures come into effective operation, not necessarily from the government itself, but from such bodies as the board of governors of the BBC (and the Independent Television Authority). The latter are impeccably Establishment figures, whether Conservative, Liberal, Labour or ‘non-political’.<sup>20</sup> Thus, it was ‘on his personal responsibility’ that the Director-General of the BBC took a sharply satirical programme such as *That Was the Week that Was* off the air. But, as Mr Hood also notes, ‘no one with knowledge of the strength of feeling on the part of some governors at that time can doubt that the Director-General had no real alternative if he wanted to continue in his post’.<sup>21</sup> It is also worth noting that, for all its irreverence and bite, *TW3* eschewed any political commitment; indeed it was largely constructed around the notion that any such commitment was absurdly *vieux jeu*. Had it been otherwise, it may be surmised that it would not have lasted as long as it did.

The general point about governmental and official pressures on the mass media is not simply that they occur, and are more or less intense; it is rather that, given the usual political and ideological coloration of governments and state elites, these pressures reinforce the tendencies towards conservatism and conformity which already exist independently of them.

18. J.W.C. Reith, *Into the Wind*, 1949, p. 108.

19. S. Hood, *A Survey of Television*, 1967, p. 50.

20. ‘At the top of the BBC hierarchy is the Board of Governors, appointed by the government, consisting of nine men and women of ability, standing and distinction. Generally speaking they represent the upper class of British society, which is to say, the “Establishment”, the British equivalent of America’s “Power Elite”. There is no special attempt to appoint governors with trade union or working-class backgrounds, and very seldom do members have experience in broadcasting, journalism or related fields’ (B. Paulu, *British Broadcasting in Transition*, 1961, p. 17). For the class composition of BBC Governors and of the ‘Cultural Directorate’ generally in the 1950s, see Guttman, *The British Political Elite*, pp. 342ff.

21. Hood, *A Survey of Television*, p. 49.

## NOTES

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**Content**

Finally, Miliband moves to consider the pressures exerted by the government and other official agencies on publicly funded radio and television services. Of course, his focus in Britain is on the BBC. His purpose here is to examine the oft-made claims that the BBC is autonomous and independent of government. In essence, Miliband suggests that there are obvious reasons why the BBC may be susceptible to pressure. These include the fact that the government funds the BBC through the licence fee, and decides whether this levy will be increased and, if so, by how much. Also, that it is the government that appoints members to the body that oversees the BBC, previously the Board of Governors but since January 2007, the BBC Trust.

Miliband also provides some concrete examples of how government pressures have influenced BBC policies and programmes (see also Franklin 2004). However, he argues that pressure is also exerted in more subtle ways – for example, as a result of a culture within the BBC, that allows for criticism of government, but ‘within a safe, fairly narrow spectrum’.

The same culture, it is suggested, ensures that programming can be controversial, but only to the extent that it remains within the same consensus. It is as a result of these pressures that publicly funded broadcasters such as the BBC tend to operate in ways that err towards conservatism and conformism and, in doing so, reinforce the existing social order.

**Context**

These issues raised by Miliband are still the subject of debate today. While a BBC Trust has replaced the previous Board of Governors, these appointments are still made by the government. Moreover, the membership still includes people who might be considered part of a ‘power elite’ – a term Miliband borrows from C. Wright Mills. Also, in an era of multiple media services, the BBC continues to be attacked by commercial broadcasters and media tycoons, such as Rupert Murdoch, who argue that it is not independent of government, that people should have a choice about paying a licence fee, and that the wide range of services provided by the BBC should be reduced as it impacts on the profits of commercially funded media services.

Miliband suggests that the BBC is susceptible to influence from government and official agencies, which might now include Ofcom (the communications regulator), and is also subject to criticism from commercial media organisations. To what extent are these pressures likely to strengthen, or weaken, the BBC’s tendencies towards conservatism and conformity?

## READING

15

Yet an explanation of the character and intended role of the mass media in terms of the pressures, private and public, so far considered is inadequate. For it suggests that those who are actually responsible for the contents of the mass media – producers, editors, journalists, writers, commentators, directors, playwrights, etc. – are the unwilling tools of conservative and commercial forces, that they are suppressed rebels, cowed radicals and left-wingers, reluctant producers and disseminators of ideas and opinions which they detest, angry dissenters straining at the capitalist leash.

This is not a realistic picture. There *are* of course a good many such people working in and for the mass media, who suffer various degrees of political frustration, and who seek, sometimes successfully, often not, to break through the frontiers of orthodoxy. But there is little to suggest that they constitute more than a minority of the ‘cultural workmen’ employed by the mass media. The cultural and political hegemony of the dominant classes could not be so pronounced if this was not the case.

A realistic picture of the ideological tendencies of those who work for the mass media would divide them into three broad categories: those just referred to who belong to various shades of the Left; people with a more or less strong conservative commitment; and a third group, which is probably the most numerous, whose political commitments are fairly blurred, and who wish to avoid ‘trouble’. In effect, such people occupy one part or other of the spectrum of conformity and can accommodate themselves fairly easily to the requirements of their employers. Like their committed conservative colleagues, they mostly ‘say what they like’; but this is mainly because their employers mostly like what they say, or at least find little in what they say which is objectionable. These ‘cultural workmen’ are unlikely to be greatly troubled by the limitations and constrictions imposed upon the mass media by the prevailing economic and political system, because their ideological and political make-up does not normally bring them up against these limitations. The leash they wear is sufficiently long to allow them as much freedom of movement as they themselves wish to have; and they therefore do not feel the strain; or not so as to make life impossible.

## NOTES

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**Content**

Miliband turns again to focus on the employees of publicly and commercially funded media organisations. His aim is to examine the idea that these workers – who produce the content – are the ‘unwilling tools of conservative and commercial forces’, as his earlier analysis may have implied. He acknowledges that this is not the case, suggesting that the ‘cultural’ workers employed by mass media organisations can be divided into three categories.

One category includes individuals who hold views of a Left political persuasion. This category, according to Miliband, would comprise the smallest group of cultural workers. A second group would include those whose views were generally conservative. The third and largest group would comprise those whose political views were ‘fairly blurred’ and who did not want to make ‘trouble’.

Miliband makes clear what he sees as the natural ‘fit’ of these workers and their conservative colleagues with the expectations of their employers. That is, these employees can ‘say what they like’ because their employers ‘like what they say’, or don’t find it overly objectionable. In other words, these employees are quite comfortable with the ideological and political status quo in society, and have no difficulty in working for media organisations that reinforce conservatism and conformism.

**Context**

While Miliband has cited a variety of sources in earlier parts of the reading to illustrate or buttress his analysis, no ‘evidence’ is provided here to support the three categories of cultural workers. However, there are obviously real pressures on all employees – whatever the nature of the business – to conform to organisational expectations. Also, when workers opt to take jobs in News Corporation, Channel Four, the BBC or ITV, they are more than likely to be well aware of the mission and values of such organisations and the freedom, or otherwise, that they can expect as a creative professional in such settings.

## READING

16

There is nothing particularly surprising about the character and role of the mass media in advanced capitalist society. Given the economic and political context in which they function, they cannot fail to be, predominantly, agencies for the dissemination of ideas and values which affirm rather than challenge existing patterns of power and privilege, and thus to be weapons in the arsenal of class domination. The notion that they can, for the most part, be anything else is either a delusion or a mystification. They can, and sometimes do, play a 'dys-functional' role; and the fact that they are allowed to do so is not lightly to be dismissed. But that, quite emphatically, is not and indeed cannot, in the given context, be their main role. They are intended to fulfil a conservative function; and do so.

The mass media cannot ensure complete conservative attunement; nothing can. But they can and do contribute to the fostering of a climate of conformity, not by the total suppression of dissent, but by the presentation of views which fall outside the consensus as curious heresies, or, even more effectively, by treating them as irrelevant eccentricities, which serious and reasonable people may dismiss as of no consequence. This is very 'functional'.

**NOTES****16****Content**

On the basis of his analysis, Miliband concludes that the mass media are 'agencies for the dissemination of ideas and values which affirm rather than challenge existing patterns of power and privilege', and, as a result, can be considered as 'weapons in the arsenal of class formation'.

Miliband accepts that there is always room for the dissemination of dissenting views, interpreted here as evidence of a 'dysfunctional' role, but that the predominant role of the mass media is to 'fulfil a conservative function'. Moreover, Miliband asserts that those who operate and control the mass media have perfected strategies of representing opposing or dissenting views in ways which are designed to avoid attracting the attention of publics.

Having finished the reading, how do you respond to the central thrust of Miliband's argument that the political and economic context of advanced capitalist societies ensures that the mass media are generally conservative and conformist, and that they serve to maintain the status quo? How would you counter Miliband's description of the mass media?

## REFLECTING ON THE READING

This is a closely argued reading in which Miliband, at every stage, takes the opportunity to answer, counter or undermine questions that might be developing in the mind of a doubting reader. A number of references are used to support and illustrate the arguments being developed by the author, most of which are drawn from academic sources. Some of these writers, such as Raymond Williams and Stuart Hall, are likely to be known to you.

However, much of the reading relies on Miliband's own analysis and examples, which in some instances prompt questions about how he reached his conclusions. An example in point being his categorisation of cultural workers into three distinct groupings, with judgements made about the political affiliations of those in each category. Overall, though, the carefully constructed, logical and detailed arguments developed by Miliband are powerful.

Miliband's analysis is also insightful, in the sense that his commentary highlights the gradually increasing size and reach of media corporations – which today we describe as transnational media conglomerates; the growing number of influential public relations and communications professionals – which has since expanded into a burgeoning industry; the potential dilemmas facing publicly funded media organisations – which are now evident in current debates about what constitutes 'public service', why we need a licence fee, and the future shape and size of the BBC; and, his observation that the vast majority of the mass media are privately owned – which has since been further enabled by governments relaxing regulation, and greatly assisted by the harnessing of new information and communication technologies to develop a multimedia and multi-channel media environment. Moreover, the mass media are now considered to be part of the 'creative industries', a core economic sector in all advanced capitalist societies (see, for example Hartley 2005).

Even though Miliband's work on the state and the mass media was completed nearly 40 years ago, it is still often quoted and continues to be held in high regard. His analysis is described as an example of 'traditional Marxism', primarily because he asserts that the mass media (along with education and universities) act as a conservative and conformist force in advanced capitalist societies and are, therefore, engaged in the process of legitimating the status quo (Williams 2003: 38).

While the ideological function of the media may be obscured – partly because of a widespread view that the media in British and other capitalist countries are 'free' – Miliband asserts that 'they [the mass media] are both an expression of a system of domination, and a means of reinforcing it' (1973: 198). In this respect, Miliband's view of the mass media differs sharply from that of Robert Park at the Chicago school, who imagined the press as a means of integrating, building and sustaining communities (Williams 2003: 38).

As a result of the period in which Miliband produced this reading, he restricts his analysis to the press and privately and publicly funded radio and television, although he does make one or two references to cinema and theatre. He argues that the contribution mass media make to the political climate 'is determined by the influences that weigh most heavily upon them'. Essentially, these influences are threefold.

First, there are influences that occur as a result of the ownership and control of mass media. Secondly, some influences are brought to bear on mass media as a result of their

reliance on advertising and sponsorship. Thirdly, there are influences that occur as a result of pressures, direct or otherwise, from government and other agencies, including regulators, in the state system, on privately and publicly funded media organisations.

While there is scope for dissenting voices and subversive content – demonstrating a ‘dysfunctional’ role – for the most part these influences ensure conservatism and conformism and, thereby, demonstrate the predominantly ‘functional’ role played by mass media (see, for example, Curran 2005; Garnham 1990; Murdock and Golding 2005).

What does Miliband say, or imply, about employees of media organisations, the content that is produced, and readers, listeners and viewers? Employees, or cultural workers as Miliband describes them, have a degree of freedom with regard to the content that is produced but, overall, are seen to be constrained by the nature of the organisations in which they are employed, the economic and political interests of owners and operators, and the wider capitalist society in which these organisations operate.

In terms of content, in which Miliband includes entertainment genres – using Ian Fleming’s James Bond as an example – as well as news and current affairs, this is again determined by economic and political factors. As a result, while most of the content will generally err towards the conservative, there is always the potential for occasional rebellious, subversive or cynical texts to emerge. However, in a search for examples that subvert the norm, Hesmondhalgh (2005: 163) only manages to suggest *The Simpsons* as an example of a subversive television programme, and in the area of popular music the politically Left-inclined band The Clash.

In respect of audiences, Miliband makes few direct references. This is not surprising as his analysis assumes little power on the part of audiences. Put rather crudely, the output of mass media are seen as manipulating listeners, readers and viewers, inducing them into a state of ‘false consciousness’:

Culture – like religion – is, then, in the often-quoted words of Marx, the ‘opiate of the people’. It is a drug, injected by social agencies such as the media and education, under the influence of which people fail to see how they are being exploited.

(Williams 2003: 38)

Obviously, Miliband’s Marxist analysis is in marked contrast to that of a liberal–pluralist position. In the latter, the media are seen as independent institutions that fight to preserve the value of ‘free speech’; they work in the interests of all classes in society and not simply as a mouthpiece for the ruling elite groups and, moreover, it is consumer choice that dictates content and not the political and economic interests of owners and operators.

While traditional Marxist theory has been criticised for its failure to illuminate other modes of domination beyond social class, such as gender, race and sexuality, its analytic power rests on its ability to focus attention on *material* interests (Worsley 1982: 67). In other words, it draws attention to the economic, power and status rewards that are enjoyed by those who control society; it highlights the exploitative nature of capitalist society and its inequalities, and it focuses our gaze on the ‘mechanisms which justify these basic inequalities and which cope with resistance to them’ (Worsley 1982: 67). Miliband sees the mass media as one of these mechanisms.

## Key terms to explore

pluralist diversity and competitive equilibrium; dissident views; legitimation; ideological function of the media; impartiality and objectivity; agencies of conservative indoctrination; false consciousness; reactionary; self-censorship; 'functional' and 'dysfunctional' roles of the media.

## Key writers who are mentioned

Paul Lazarsfeld; Robert Merton; Raymond Williams.

## RECOMMENDED READING

Enzensberger, H.M. (1972) 'Constituents of a theory of the media', in McQuail, D. (ed.) *Sociology of Mass Communications*, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books.

Argues that no Marxist theory of the media exists, and then explores how a socialist strategy could be assisted by the availability of new information and communication technologies.

Stevenson, N. (2002) *Understanding Media Cultures*, 2nd edition, London: Sage.

Examines the work of Raymond Williams, the Glasgow University Media Group and Stuart Hall, as a way of illustrating how key debates about mass communication have been informed by British Marxism.

Wayne, M. (2003) *Marxism and Media Studies: Key concepts and contemporary trends*, London: Pluto Press.

Uses Marxian concepts to provide an understanding of the creative and cultural industries in advanced capitalist societies, and uses a variety of different media as illustrations.

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