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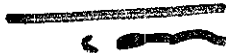
Professor George Gerbner
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Dear George:

I'm looking forward to your visit here in a few weeks!

Here's a copy of a talk I presented to the ICR on the 21st. It's basically the same paper I prepared for the Smythe Memorial Lecture at Simon Fraser in November.

Very best wishes,



Thomas Guback
Research Professor of Communications

*The crisis of the left and
the teaching of politics
Smythe*

**Counterclockwise:
Dallas Smythe's Contribution to Communication Policy and Research**

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January 21, 1994

"Counterclockwise" — many of you will be amused by that title for a lecture. But let me pass the responsibility for that word to Dallas Smythe. "Counterclockwise" was a word he liked to use — along with a few others — to describe the trajectory of his life. In December 1991, when we were talking about such things, he told me: "This has been a dialectical, skeptical, politicized, counterclockwise career." Indeed, his career had at its center the development of theory and practice, done enjoyably — as he put it — with zest and curiosity.

Dialectical, skeptical, politicized, counterclockwise — unusual words to describe a life's work that led to the founding of a field of study — the political economy of communication. I think we can understand the first three words only after we understand the fourth. I found out what he had in mind with "counterclockwise" when I was putting together the collection of his work that was published this month by Westview Press. He meant "counterclockwise" in a few ways. First, it referred to his geographic career movement around North America — from Regina where he was born and raised, to California for his university education, to Washington DC for government service, then to the University of Illinois, back to Regina and a position at the University of Saskatchewan, and finally on to British Columbia and Simon Fraser. Of course, Dallas Smythe made quite a few excursions to other places — the People's Republic of China, Australia, Europe, Latin America — excursions that contributed so much to his thinking.

Second, "counterclockwise" referred, as I discovered, to the structure of his autobiography, which unfortunately he never finished. I believe all of us think of an autobiography as the chronological account of one's life, beginning at the earliest years and then proceeding through maturity to the most recent years, which are described in the final pages. As you know, Dallas Smythe was unconventional. The chapters in his autobiography ran backwards — his birth and earliest years were described in chapter eight, and his most recent years were going to be described in chapter one. He thought of this autobiographical account as a clock, and what he was doing was turning things around and making everything run counterclockwise. Dallas Smythe likened all the chapters in the autobiography to a chain of elephants walking in a circle, the tail of one held by the trunk of the next. Life turns out not to be linear. It is an integrated organic whole with all the parts connected.

The organic character of life brings me to the third and undoubtedly most important meaning of "counterclockwise." Dallas Smythe understood his life to be an expression of radical commitment. "Counterclockwise," to him, meant that the hands on his intellectual timepiece always turned to the left, backing away from the conventional, moving in opposition to the mainstream. It was this oppositional Left perspective that organized his thinking and writing, and informed the way he approached the dozens of things he studied. In my editing of his work for the book, I came to appreciate that "dialectical, skeptical, and politicized" take on their true meaning for Dallas Smythe only when we understand them in the context of the

This paper originally was presented on November 12, 1993 as the first Smythe Memorial Lecture at the School of Communication, Simon Fraser University, British Columbia.

guback

radical Left.

That explains the title of the book. But what is this book about? It is one thing to say that it is a collection of a few classic published pieces, many unpublished manuscripts and talks, and a couple of chapters from his autobiography. The book is much more than that, of course. It is, first of all, about how we — scholars, students, policymakers, and practitioners — have come to understand the field. For those of us who share Dallas Smythe's perspective, I submit that the way we approach the field today responds to the synthesis he achieved. But exactly what kind of synthesis is it, and how did he develop it?

Dallas Smythe opened the door to a discipline. But I know he would not be content, nor should we, if the design of this field of study were attributed to a single person, a single inventor working from a spark of individualistic insight. To the contrary: we recognize, as he did, that knowledge, like property, is socially conditioned — that its form and extent depend on the context in which it is created and in which it exists.

The synthesis he gave us was conditioned by the historical circumstances of his time. That synthesis has two components. Part of his legacy to us rests on his acknowledgement a half century ago of the growing importance of mass media. Well before he was attracted to this area, of course, the mass media had become objects of social concern and criticism.

Dallas Smythe accepted the general conclusion of others that the mass media — broadcasting, publishing, film — were an important component of modern society. He took that a couple of steps further, though. First, he added telegraph, telephone, and mail to complete the communication system, because he understood communication organically. Second, he acknowledged that the system deserved serious study, but he recognized that it required analysis, particularly economic analysis, from a fresh perspective. So, he constructed a synthesis grounded in radical political economy — a synthesis that understood the communication system as a central feature of North American — and later, global — capitalism. The major thrust of that synthesis, if I may risk reducing it to one question, asked: what role for capital does the communication system play? Today, that question seems basic to many of us, but that is because we have been illumined by the answers that question has produced. That question has become the starting point for the critical research that has invigorated the analysis of communication. That question asked us to confront the communication system in a new way, and, for example, to see its ownership form and structure, not as something neutral or benign, but as an active determiner in the first instance. It is that unique economic perspective that is the second part of his legacy to us.

That synthesis, the joining of political economy to the study of communication, has allowed us to clarify — Dallas Smythe liked to use the word “demystify” — where communication stands in relation to the economic — to see communication not just as information and entertainment, not just as a shaper of ideology, not just as the source of effects, and not just as a purveyor of content that might reinforce or, perhaps in some cases, unglue the social system. The synthesis allows us to see the communication system as a creator of surplus value, as a locus of economic power, and as the centerpiece of the corporate market system. We see more clearly how the communication system replicates the social relations of production that are apparent throughout the rest of the economy — and perhaps most importantly, how it transforms humans into commodities.

The synthesis he provided encouraged us to push aside the view that the communication system, especially in market dominated societies, has reached the highest level of

organizational perfection and that the task for the future is merely to overlay what exists with bigger, faster, snazzier technology. The synthesis helped us refute the belief that the system operates as some independent value-free institution. The synthesis prompted us to reject industry public relations dogma that posits the system as a benefactor dedicated to providing truth, a mere servant of public demand in a democracy. The synthesis also asked us to challenge what so many believe to be the autonomous nature of technology. Dallas Smythe encouraged us to see communication as an institution in the service of capital. As we know, he was concerned, not just with *describing* this communication system — he also was devoted to *changing* it and the global corporate economic system of which it is a crucial part.

If the selections in the book do nothing else but display the contours of the synthesis and give us questions to ask, then those pieces would be an important contribution to the history of our knowledge. But the dialectical approach that yielded that synthesis had to have some motive power. So, we need to push further and to ask: why is it that Dallas Smythe arrived at this particular synthesis?

Seen in this way, the book is also about the process of radicalization, of becoming socially conscious. Dallas Smythe was not in a sterile vacuum when he began to link radical political economy to the study of communication. He learned from the social criticism of others, just as he recognized the limitations of conventional economic thinking. But he escaped from that background and began a lifelong process of pushing out in new directions. He was encouraged to do that by unique circumstances. Those did not include research grants from major foundations, or think tank policy conferences, and especially not the largesse of corporate funding. The synthesis Dallas Smythe achieved was grounded in his direct involvement in the struggles of people searching for dignity and justice — and it was grounded as well in his confrontation with the business system of North America.

While I was working on the book, I once asked him what had radicalized him — how it all started. He said it began in the 1930s. His ideas began to crystalize, he revealed, while he was in government service in Washington. He told me, for instance, about The Fair Labor Standards Act of 1938 that, for the first time, established minimum wages and maximum hours for workers in interstate commerce. It set up the Wage and Hour Division in the Labor Department to enforce that law. Dallas Smythe worked in that division. He studied labor practices in many industries, and his investigations helped not only to bring workers under the shield of the law, but also to temper their direct economic exploitation.

His ideas also began to crystallize when he was loaned for part of 1940 by the Wage and Hour Division to work with the House of Representatives Committee on Interstate Migration of Destitute Citizens. Since the mid-1930s, he had been concerned about the plight of the migrants from Oklahoma and Arkansas — the Okies and the Arkies — a concern that helped to radicalize him, and here, he told me, was a chance to do something about it.

At the Wage and Hour Division, Dallas Smythe had studied workers in the telegraph business. During that study, he met officials in a progressive labor union that represented many telegraph workers. In the early 1940s, these friends introduced him to a few staff members in the Federal Communications Commission. This was during the Second World War. The Commission was studying labor supply problems in the communications industry — a subject Smythe knew something about. That introduction led to his being hired by the FCC in January 1943. But why did he want to work at the FCC? He accepted a position as Chief Economist because, as he told me, the FCC under Roosevelt New Deal leadership was a place where the public interest might be served. Dallas Smythe had become concerned about influencing public

policy toward monopolies in the telegraph, telephone, and radio businesses.

As I talked with him about these things, it became clear to me that radicalization is not something one ever achieves. Radicalization is a continuing process of affirming one's commitments against challenges, a process of perfecting one's beliefs and acting upon them. Dallas Smythe stayed with the FCC for five and a half years. He often found the atmosphere on the Commission in those days to be enlightened and politically advanced. That is to say, some Commissioners and some staff members were not automatically inclined every time to put the private interest before the public interest.

During his time with the Commission, Dallas Smythe worked on every major policy decision. What may come as a surprise is his own assessment of his contribution. In a letter to me shortly before he died in 1992, he wrote: "Possibly the most meaningful study I did while at the FCC was the short memorandum on farm telephone service." That was a report he wrote in October 1944. No one has ever heard of it, but it was instrumental in creating the telephone service program of the Rural Electrification Administration. The REA was a New Deal agency that loaned money to nonprofit, cooperative associations and public bodies so they could bring electric power, and phone service, to rural areas — areas that had been neglected by privately-owned, profit-driven companies.

But the political climate changed in Washington, and throughout the nation. Achievements that had been applauded by many were soon viewed with suspicion by those who wanted to roll them back. The benchmark of that change was the Truman Administration. It cooled off the enthusiasm for New Deal programs and affirmed a pro-big business policy that has dominated the US government since then. It spurred a nation-wide ideological review that took shape in the Red scare, the Unamerican Activities Committee, the purge of leftwingers in the labor movement, the blacklists, and the Cold War.

That was a chilling climate. Dallas Smythe needed a different kind of atmosphere. So he resigned from the FCC in July 1948 to accept two positions at the University of Illinois. One was in the Department of Economics. The other position was in the Institute of Communications Research, which had been founded a year earlier. The Institute was a site that offered possibilities for thinking creatively and critically about the role of communication in society.

But as Dallas Smythe learned, engaged political work often has a price. At the last minute, his University appointments almost fell through because of objections from a few people in powerful positions. Questions were raised about his activism, about his role in the late 1930s in the American League for Peace and Democracy — and questions were raised about his opposition in the '30s to fascism in Germany and Spain when it was not yet official policy of the US government to oppose it. Because of his involvement with the Left, he had been investigated and branded a pre-mature anti-fascist. For reasons explained in the book, his University appointments finally were approved. But even after he was on the faculty, the FBI secretly monitored his activities.

Looking over his academic work, I would conclude that much of it was both fundamental and openly engaged. Therefore, it was radical — radical in the political sense of being Left — and radical in the lexical sense of being at the root. While I was selecting material for the book, I was struck that he, as an economist, wrote accessible text that could be read. I also was struck by where he did not publish. Dallas Smythe did not write for the journals in economics or public policy. He did not write for what some communication scholars consider "the major

journals in the field.” Much of what he wrote was published in relatively obscure periodicals. Much of what he wrote was never published at all. His work was confrontational. It had qualities that, some would argue, do not meet the rigorous standards of the social sciences. Yet, the lesson we can learn from his scholarship is that the benchmarks of empirical science may be irrelevant for doing something about the problems our societies face these days.

I learned in preparing the book that there is a continuity in Dallas Smythe’s work — a continuity that accounts in no small measure for his substantial impact on the field. Yet his work covered an amazing range. Among other things, he addressed television content, the rise of the bourgeoisie in 17th century England, communications technology, the North American political process, monopoly in the telephone industry, Canadian sovereignty, and nuclear weapons. But he brought to these subjects a consistent approach grounded in radical political economy, and showed how that approach could be applied to a group of seemingly diverse subjects.

As the book demonstrates, his was an engaged life without artificial barriers among what one believes, what one teaches, and how one lives. There was a unity of thought and action. And I might add that this kind of unity was both a benefit and a curse — a benefit because it allowed an integration, a wholeness in life — a curse because every moment of life is also a political moment of analysis and confrontation. It is something that cannot be turned off.

I found that the unity of thought and action also came at another price. His papers and speeches made partisans of many, but they also made foes. Where people stood in relation to his work could not always be predicted from a simple political test. In the 1950s and early ’60s, for example, when Dallas Smythe was talking to anyone who would listen about the dangers of nuclear war, he discovered that some of the warmest response he received was in theological seminaries. He discovered, he told me a few years ago, that seminary faculties and students were willing to talk about ideological aspects of the Cold War and were quite openly considering the role of religion as an opponent of oppressive authority. That observation may surprise some people — including most on the Left — who assume automatically that the religious establishment is by definition cohabiting with the dominant economic and social forces in society, and is itself part of the oppressive ideological mechanisms. Dallas Smythe was able to see this differently. He did not reject out of hand those who shared his concerns for peace, justice, and equality. That is a valuable lesson we need to keep in mind.

With his contributions to policy and research, he made friends, but he also made foes. When Dallas Smythe attacked the telephone monopoly, it fought back. When he exposed the irrationality of nuclear war policy, the red baiters went to work. What may be surprising is that some foes emerged from the very ranks of those we would have expected to be standing shoulder to shoulder with him. Sometimes the sharpest assaults on his work — on the approach he developed — came from those who claimed to be working in “the marxist tradition.” Textualists, as Dallas Smythe referred to some of them, criticized his approach for being deterministic, for being too economic, for ignoring the role that ideology plays. As far as Dallas Smythe was concerned, if those charges had been substantially accurate, they would have been worth listening to. Dallas Smythe brushed all that aside. “I think action is the name of the game,” he told me. He said: “The textual approach, the exegesis of text in media, doesn’t give rise to any action, except the waste of energy on the part of the people who do it. It ends up where it began, with speculation. It’s an excellent way of devoting an awful lot of energy for no purpose worth a damn.”

He also was criticized at times by those who work from the very approach he developed. When

Dallas Smythe began drawing parallels between the military-industrial complex in the USA and the USSR, and parallels between American and Soviet nuclear policy and imperialism, some people broke ranks with him. When he elaborated his ideas about the audience commodity, some with shared political commitments parted company.

This is not to say that unity of belief should be paramount. Those are the risks that have to be taken in public scholarship. Dallas Smythe put a commitment to honesty above any so-called mechanistic determinism. If one wants proof that the Left is hardly in lockstep, or that political economy is anything but monolithic, there it is.

Some of Dallas Smythe's controversial work was what I would call theoretical. His position on the audience commodity, and the labor done by audience members, remains an important contribution to communication scholarship. It continues to be debated and challenged. He told me just a few months before his death that he was updating his thesis and clarifying it in order to show just how far off the mark his critics were.

On the other hand, some of his controversial work has had a very practical impact on policy, particularly in Unesco. We should recall his important role in laying the groundwork for the anti-free flow position in Unesco that challenged the hegemony of Western powers. From the late 1960s through the early 1970s, he helped draft several major documents and Unesco reports that questioned the ideological assumptions implicit in the free flow of communication doctrine — a doctrine that seemed on the surface so value-free and inherently beneficial to the world community. His work both responded to and helped to clarify the concerns of Third World and other countries about their sovereignty and cultural integrity.

Eventually, Dallas Smythe's views became so offensive to certain Western countries that he was excluded from further participation in Unesco policy making. This happened some twenty years ago, just about the time he argued in a paper that commodities, as well as technology, have ideological content — an observation that astounds many people even today. He concluded that nations, particularly those trying to chart their own courses of development, might well use what he called “cultural screens” and be more consciously selective about what they were importing. Cultural screens, he argued, could help create some clear space in which nations might have more immediate control over their own destinies — rather than being passive recipients of ideologically laden commodities from dominant powers. In essence, Dallas Smythe was attacking the entire free trade, free flow of communication position.

This was quite the same position he maintained about Canada. In a paper he presented in Winnipeg in the late 1980s, he was quite blunt about Canada's choices. He began with a conviction that of all the world's capitalistic, advanced countries, Canada is the most dependent on the United States. It is an American neo-colony among many Third World neo-colonies. Dallas Smythe argued that Canada had to make a fundamental choice: either it should relinquish the theoretical sovereignty it thought it still had and openly move toward total integration with the USA — he was not a partisan of that option, of course — or accept the hard, real costs that authentic nationhood entails and strike out on a bold new course that means building Canada from the inside out. There was no longer any tenable middle ground, because a middle ground moderate reformist policy had gotten Canada into its current dilemma. And the future? “It may now be too late,” he conceded, “for the autonomy course to succeed — but it is certainly not too late to try to make it work.”

His ideas about cultural screens, about autonomy, about sovereignty, strike some people as bankrupt, as intellectually primitive. In an age of increasing integration — economically,

politically, culturally — at a time when the world is becoming a global village and North America just one big household market — when technology and information are bringing all nations, all peoples, together — when a common core of values and beliefs is just over the horizon — how could anyone argue seriously against global consolidation? How could anyone argue against the *certainty* of a global market system based on private capital? Dallas Smythe was arguing against these things, of course. But he also was arguing against what I call a *theory of inevitability*. Inevitability is a policy position that tells us there is only one course — that there are no alternatives. This policy rules out all debate about the legitimacy of what is claimed to be inevitable. It precludes testing viability. It excludes raising questions about justice, or power, or necessity. A policy of inevitability automatically resolves all issues beforehand, and in so doing, it rules out opposition.

This is the kind of policy we must reject outright because inevitability makes the future a mere uncontrollable product of the past. Dallas Smythe refused to accept such a pessimistic, deterministic view, because it allows no room for human intervention. Indeed, it actually mystifies history — it mystifies current events. Ironically, his critics accused him of being narrow and mechanistic. If there is one point that comes out repeatedly in his teaching, it is that humans can act on the situations in which they find themselves. The future is not history unless we allow it to be so.

These days, the inevitability school is actively at work. It sees in the death of the Soviet Union, the reorientation of China, and the rollback of progressive forces around the globe, a message — a message confirming the *inevitable* triumph of capitalism and a market system. These events, we are told, will usher the global community into an era of dramatic positive development. We are told these events signal, once and for all, the death of socialism and progressive forces — that they disprove marxism — that they demonstrate the hollow claims of any economic or social theory not based on selfish individualism and private gain.

There is no denying that the Left has been shaken, not just by world events, or by attacks of this kind, but also by internal disagreements that claim political economy is irrelevant as a tool of analysis. The economic has been superceded by the ideological, the criticism goes — which is the same as saying that capital has been superceded by information. Of course, one could seriously question whether any of these failed regimes were “actually existing democratic socialism” in form and practice, or whether they were not closer to autocratic state monopoly capitalism.

Even though the Left has been on the defensive, it is time now to take stock and to affirm a few basic points. The failure of so-called socialist regimes in eastern Europe does not disprove marxism any more than the failure of the savings and loan industry in the United States disproves capitalism. Indeed, for a mode of social analysis that has never been in power in North America, for a mode of analysis that consistently has been marginalized, it is amazing how influential marxism continues to be. As dead as it is said to be, its explanatory powers continue to command attention — and attack.

The end of the Cold War is truly laudable for many reasons. Let us remember what the Cold War gave us. The Cold War was a period of unconscionable waste geared to powers of massive destruction. When our weapons became obsolete, we sold them to other countries, increasing both international tension and corporate profitability at the same time. The Cold War also was the excuse for repression of civil liberties and for systematic efforts at thought control — “brain-rinsing” Dallas Smythe called it in North America. The Cold War led to massive distortions of our research and development agendas, distortions that shifted our attention

and resources away from social needs and humanitarian care.

The end of the Cold War is indeed laudable. Observers tell us that some of its by-products actually may go away to some extent. On the Left, though, some people are discouraged by global developments, and truly pessimistic about the future of progressivism. However, the Left does need to recognize something else — that it is on the threshold of an important opportunity. The end of the Cold War has cleared the table. The end of the Cold War has removed an enemy that has been used to divert attention from chronic problems of our own system. The calls for national unity to confront the evil empire no longer can have the same imperative. As the United States rethinks its own defense strategies, it also must come to grips with an economy that no longer will benefit from massive infusions of government military spending. For more than half a century, the US private economy has been propped up. What will the reduction of government defense subsidies bring? We are not foolish enough to believe the country will return to an era of *laissez-faire*, when the state stayed out of the economy. What we will see is an even more active management of the economy by the state on behalf of dominant private economic interests. What we will see, unfortunately in more graphic and more painful terms, are the contradictions of capitalism within each nation and across the globe. In the USA, we did not have to wait for the end of the Cold War to show us, for example, the incredible concentration of wealth in just a tiny fraction of the population — a concentration that is increasing with no signs of turn around.

With reduced state spending for defense, the private economy, which itself has been troubled for decades, is likely to become more and more shrill in its need for reproduction, multiplication, and accumulation. We will see this worked out in several ways. First, the relentless drive toward commodification of every aspect of life will become more incessant. Everywhere we look, the march of privatization is accelerating. Services that formerly were outside the private sector are now targets of opportunity. For example, hospitals, institutions that historically were operated by municipalities, religious orders, or universities, are now part of the private health care business. The results of this commodification have been so dramatic that even big business, the payer of a large part of the health care insurance bill, has had to call in the state to work out a solution to the private health care bonanza. The public school system is under attack, and the very principles of public tax-supported education are crumbling as privatization of education proceeds. The federal government is moving forward to sell parts of the electromagnetic spectrum to private interests. Postal services in many countries risk being handed over to the for-profit sector, which looks to depress wages in order to create that profit. In the USA, public broadcasting is besieged, forcing stations to look increasingly to business donations. In many countries overseas, public service broadcasting is becoming a memory.

The accelerated need for reproduction and accumulation also is apparent in the commercialism that engulfs every space. Shopping channels on TV, infomercials, and product placement in movies are only part of the phenomenon. Unsolicited direct mail advertising and telemarketing penetrate our homes. Corporate underwriting permeates the cultural sphere, as Channel One invades the classroom. Public education authorities remove prayer from schools and replace it with commercial messages that stimulate individualistic consumerism — at a moment in US history when the rate of saving is embarrassingly low compared to other developed countries — and when individual consumer debt is massive. Dallas Smythe thought audiences were the most important product of the media. That observation, I have always contended, does not go far enough. The audience is only an *intermediate* product for advertiser-supported media. The ultimate product of *all* privately-owned media — what they actually are in business to produce — is profit.

The stepped-up imperative to produce profit also becomes apparent in the size of mergers whose aim is to control larger shares of the market — a market that once was only domestic, but now is increasingly global. Let us remember that combinations of this size could never be possible without the active participation, if not instigation, of finance capital. Time's acquisition of Warner Communications a few years ago was endorsed by the state because it created a global media player of giant proportions. The proposed multi-billion dollar merger of Bell Atlantic and TCI is a prime case of private interest reshaping public policy. Our public policy has called for separation between the cable and telephone industries so that competition would spur development and regulate prices and services. But the proposed Bell Atlantic-TCI merger is reversing that policy. The state is lapping up the grandiose claims of what this mega-merger will do to create an information superhighway — clearly one of the great public relations slogans of the '90s.

The shrill tone of economic conduct also is apparent in the propensities for exploitation that are becoming increasingly visible. We already see the terrible impact on labor. Unionization, job security, safe working conditions, and reliable pensions are going the way of the horsedrawn carriage. Corporate profitability thrives when wage scales can be depressed. Unfortunately, all too many private policies are justified on the grounds that they create jobs and therefore are sound and correct. Automobile accidents create jobs too. Perhaps they should be encouraged as a boost to the economy.

Yes, the Cold War is over. Russia and eastern Europe are rocketing toward so-called free market economies. Western transnationals already are imbedded there, to make sure they get a good share of it. Global capitalism indeed has been unleashed — but so have its worst features and propensities.

What does this mean for the Left and progressive forces? The end of the Cold War has made the political economy of communication more relevant than ever. This is so because the continued internationalization of the corporate business system depends on a global communication system — and that global communication system is a business itself. The end of the Cold War, and what some call the inevitable triumph of capitalism, offer the chance to understand our economic system in its clearest form — undistorted by global political confrontation, or by the prop of state military spending. Rather than sounding the death knell for the Left, the end of the Cold War may invigorate it in ways we can not as yet imagine. Coalitions may be formed out of the need to struggle against a common opponent. Common concerns for equity and justice — common concerns for the oppressed and the poor — can spark uncommon alliances.

It is at this point that the Left must come to grips with a long-standing dilemma. I do not believe Dallas Smythe ever grappled with it publicly, though he may have confronted it privately. I know in his last years he was working on a theory of information and communication, which took him far from a concern I want to address now, even if briefly. This concern has to do with the latent morality in the critique offered by radical political economy. I believe there is an implied moral position at the base of political economy. This position has never been worked out clearly, or even acknowledged for that matter. The reason, I think, is that political economy is a product of the Enlightenment and rationalism, which has its own standards for conduct, while morality of a different order is rooted in spirituality. Radical political economy is a critique of the same economic forces that spawned the Enlightenment and rationalism. Radical political economy, therefore, stands in tension to the Enlightenment and rationalism in which it is grounded. It also stands in tension to something else. Let us remember that political economy grew from moral philosophy, which was nourished by

theologians. The Enlightenment rejected the spiritual, or at least moved from a theistic to a deistic conception. Where does that leave the critique offered by radical political economy? On what ground does it stand? It rejects the thought world of emerging industrial capitalism to which it is opposed. Yet as a child of that very Enlightenment, radical political economy also rejects a position grounded in spirituality.

On what ground, for example, does radical political economy decry exploitation of labor, alienation of the human being, mindless consumerism, human oppression, plutocracy, and commodification of life? What is the moral and ethical ground for these judgments? Could radical political economy be strengthened, and its arguments made more compelling, if its critique were grounded on something in addition to so-called scientific proof — on something more than reason?

To probe this question, I believe there is room for a rational-spiritual dialogue that could enrich the critique offered by radical political economy. Eighteenth and nineteenth century rationalism eroded the spiritual and moral foundation of political economy, and perhaps it is time to look toward repairing it. To begin that task, we first need to look more deeply into our own radical history in North America, seeing not just its roots in rationalism, but also its roots in spirituality. Secondly, we in developed countries need to learn from peoples of the Third World. In this part of the globe, the Left would do well to understand why and how liberation theology has become so important in Latin America, and the ways that the supposed tensions between marxism and Christianity can be sorted out, understood, and reconciled. What progressive theologians in Latin America have realized is that feeding the poor is not enough. They have needed to understand the historical conditions that produced the poor and perpetuated oppression. Marxism provided a convincing analysis, while also pointing to the kinds of changes that have to be made. As liberation theologians recognize, sin is not merely individual — it is structural as well. Secular radicals have to understand that religion can be a site of powerful resistance.

Scriptural teachings about oppression, love, charity, the poor, wealth, liberation, and economic conduct are not necessarily incompatible with more humanistic and worldly concerns. The Left would do well to recognize, first, that the Judaic-Christian tradition, in its best moments, always has been a site of struggle against oppression and injustice — and, second, that a spiritual-rational dialogue can be mutually enriching.

Even if one approaches this from the most narrow, parochial point of view — the political economy of communication is, by definition and intent, interdisciplinary — it cuts across customary boundaries — and this tradition should be respected and continued. We need to consider and be enlightened by other approaches to the problems we deal with.

It is beyond the scope of this paper for me to lay out a theoretical foundation for rethinking political economy along the lines of a rational-spiritual dialogue. But let me note briefly the kinds of issues in communications that a sample dialogue between liberation theology and radical political economy could consider.

One is the wise use of resources when pressing human needs are manifest. Our communications industry, with state encouragement and in some cases state financial assistance, rushes ahead to develop and deploy new technology. Personal communication systems, the information superhighway, high definition television, massive capacity interactive cable TV, direct broadcasting satellites — the list goes on. The 15-year transition to HDTV in the United States will cost, according to estimates, close to \$90 billion. This commitment of

enormous social resources is being made on engineering and legalistic grounds with no attention to moral or ethical considerations — with no attention to a just and wise use of resources. How such a vast sum of social wealth is used needs to be the object of intensive critical challenge — especially when so many human needs are not being met. Cities are decaying, our educational infrastructure is crumbling, people are without adequate food, housing, and medical care — and our nation stands ready to spend \$90 billion for a new television transmission system. Is there not something wrong with that?

A second is stewardship and accountability. Both need to be reaffirmed when the public interest is concerned, particularly as they apply to communication. Lockean liberalism tells us that the have-nots have no legitimate claim on the property of others. (Thomas Aquinas told us otherwise, though.) Translated to media terms, this means that no one can demand, as a right, that a newspaper or broadcasting station transmit what he or she says because media owners have a right to control their own private productive property. The sanctity of private economic property, especially in a vital social area such as communications, urgently needs to be reconsidered in light of a preferential option for the poor and the have-nots. The greater the social impact of private power, the less that power retains its purely private character.

A third area has to do with the commercial nexus on which our communication system is based. Individuals, as users of the system and its output, are treated by the system as customers, consumers, and commodities — and all relationships between individuals and the system are grounded in a marketplace mentality. Such a mentality implicitly rejects any concerns of responsibility, just as it brushes aside moral and ethical questions. Fairness, justice, equity, dignity are not qualities that the system is designed to cultivate or reward. So, alternatives outside the commercial nexus need to be constructed and sustained, while the system inside the commercial nexus is challenged and dislodged.

Finally, a spiritual-rational dialogue needs to address the question of the forms and bases of resistance that humans, individually and in community, can take. Turning off, switching channels, and not buying are not enough. Such acts may be good starters, but they must be complemented by education and understanding grounded in something other than a personal dislike for this or that TV program, movie, or newspaper columnist. It is not sufficient just to educate sophisticated media users, because users are still buyers, and it is that commodity relationship that feeds and sustains the system. As members of communities, we need to rethink our relationship to the world, and part of that world is the communication system.

If you feel powerless to affect change, then that is the proof of the argument I am making about the *need for it*.

As stewards of our intellectual heritage, we have to keep in mind the choice Dallas Smythe made and his contribution to our field — to policy and research. We need to ask ourselves: are our lives dialectical, skeptical, politicized, and counterclockwise?

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