

It's About Power, Stupid!

Maryellen Boyle

In the spring of 1985, students and faculty, walking on a peaceful picket line calling for divestment of B.U. funds from South Africa, found themselves being photographed, close-up, by B.U. police. In fact, the campus police routinely took photographs and maintained files of students taking part in rallies and demonstrations.

The case of Yosef Abramowitz is not an aberration, but an accurate representation of the atmosphere at Boston University. Abramowitz, a well-known student leader active on the issue of university divestment from South Africa, was threatened with eviction because he hung a sign from his dormitory window with the one word "Divest."

The Silber administration argued in court that it was not concerned with the content of Abramowitz's sign, only with its aesthetic effect on the neighborhood. At the ensuing trial students testified about the things they had hung from their windows (a yellow rubber chicken, in one case!) without a word of reproach from the administration. B.U. lost the case, but not its ways.

When B.U. students constructed a shanty, representing South African apartheid, on a grassy area in front of the Student Union (which students at Yale and other universities had done without repercussions), Silber, who has a love affair with the police and anything military, immediately called the police to tear down the shanty and arrest the students for trespassing.

Moral Values and the *Times*

Under Silber, faculty members seeking tenure have been interrogated about their political beliefs, faculty with tenure have been denied raises because they dared criticize the administration, candidates for the faculty whose politics ran counter to Silber found themselves crossed off the short list.

How much endowment would you need, how many "world-class" faculty stars would you need, to balance *that*, the destruction of liberty in a university, the creation of an atmosphere of fear among students and faculty? What does the highlighting of financial problems, and the small attention to civil liberties on campus, tell about the moral values of the *Times* and its reporters?

Silber Versus Free Speech

John Silber's lack of qualifications for president of a university is stunningly displayed in *Manufacturing Consent: Noam Chomsky and the Media*, the excellent Canadian documentary by Mark Achbar and Peter Wintonick now showing in the United States. One segment presents Silber in a supposed debate with Chomsky. Silber refuses to let Chomsky finish a sentence and hurls sneers and epithets at him as the program ends. Silber and his fellow members of the National Association of Scholars make much of student and left intolerance and interference with people's right to speak. As captured on film, a hysterical Silber sets a clear standard for abusive interference with the rights of free speech.

—Edward S. Herman

In his front-page story, "Propaganda to Journalism: Europe's Latest Revolution," *New York Times* reporter Roger Cohen claimed that the post-Communist East European politicians threaten the newly fashioned journalistic practice of "independence and objectivity" (December 27, 1992). According to Cohen, the battle between the politicians and independent-minded journalists is waged most intensely in television and radio, which, regrettably, as Cohen sees it, have remained state monopolies. In one country after another, he wrote, newly elected governments have reneged on their promise to permit private television networks and to release their hold on the media formerly controlled by the Communist Party.

Cohen suggested several reasons for this delay in privatization. In Czechoslovakia, for example, efforts to privatize television "remain much talked-about but nonexistent, delayed by arguments linked to the breakup of the country next year into the Czech and Slovak halves." In this situation, Cohen said, the legislature was occupied by more urgent problems.

The war over the media in Hungary has reached crisis proportions and is not the result of legislative oversight. "The most overt political conflicts over the future of the news media have emerged in Hungary. Demonstrations outside the country's national television and radio headquarters have become regular events this year in what people routinely call the country's media war." The problem throughout Eastern Europe, in Cohen's view, is political immaturity. "This maneuvering reflects the fact that in societies still nervously coming to terms with pluralism, the degree of independence of news organizations remains a fiercely contested issue." According to Cohen, private networks would be a solution to this press independence problem, for they would be outside the reach of politicians, would function above politics, would guarantee political pluralism, and would safeguard journalistic autonomy.

What claptrap! As journalists around the world would attest, television and radio (public and private alike) operate as primary institutions in the real world of politics—always have, and always will.

European "Objectivity" Escapes the *Times*

The *Times* presents the conflicts between journalists and politicians as a war outside power politics, a war for professional independence and autonomy. The real issue, however, is that these struggles in post-Communist Eastern Europe are about the very essence of politics—power and the formation of a new political order. Journalists from Poland to Russia make the same

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point: They, the professionals, have a story to tell and the government either supports it or attempts to repress it.

Cohen is right when he says that the journalists want to practice objective journalism. But he doesn't understand what they mean by "objective." No East European journalists will say that they are "objective" in the way Americans understand the term, that is, above the fray, unbiased, value-free, or neutral. They all know that how the story is told depends upon the angle of vision of the storyteller. "Objective" in post-Communist countries means that the stories originate in the newsroom rather than in Party and government propaganda offices (see sidebar).

Speaking Past Each Other

Michael Schudson offers this definition of the uniquely American journalistic genre of objectivity in *Discovering the News* (New York: Basic Books, 1978).

The belief in objectivity is just this: the belief that one can and should separate facts from values. Facts, in this view, are assertions about the world open to independent validation. They stand beyond the distorting influences of any individual's person preferences. Values, in this view, are an individual's conscious or unconscious preferences for what the world should be; they are seen as ultimately subjective and so without claim on other people. The belief in objectivity is a faith in "facts," a distrust of "values," and a commitment to their segregation (p. 5-6).

Dan Schiller, another astute observer of U.S. media practices, notes in his *Objectivity and the News* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1981):

Both within and outside the news room, objectivity undergirds the basic cultural role that the news media take as theirs: that of neutral or "unbiased" reporting of what often seem to be naturally occurring events. Objectivity facilitates the otherwise difficult belief that the newspaper "mirrors" or "reflects" reality (p. 2).

This American conception of objectivity—the argument that one can apprehend the world outside one's own interpretative framework—makes no sense to most journalists around the world, who readily acknowledge that one's values will always shape one's perception of events "out there."

Individual Consciousness Has a Class Nature

Journalists in Eastern Europe were schooled in the traditions of the Leninist press, which offered a fundamentally different concept of objectivity. Leninist objectivity, frequently known as "scientificity," is linked to *partiinost* (partisanship), which assumes that individual consciousness has a class nature. To be objective is to utilize the Marxist analysis of class relations to interpret the events and facts of the world. Leninist objectivity is a fundamental critique of the journalism of bourgeois individualism and bourgeois subjectivity.

So what are the East European journalists really complaining about, and how should we, as Americans, understand these grievances? Cohen noted that Polish television and radio president Janusz Zaorski objects to the 27 political parties knocking on his door to get their views on TV. Broadcaster Zaorski is not an autonomous television producer resisting political interference. He was appointed to his post by Lech Walesa's government. Zaorski doesn't complain about Walesa's party—the majority party. He wants to shut out the views of the opposition. In Hungary conflict between progressive journalists employed in state television and the rightwing majority in the parliament is

Journalists in East Europe also learned that the Party was the sole arbiter of this objective order. For journalists in Eastern Europe, the revolts of 1989 set them free from this Party control. Objectivity had a bad name—it meant the Party line, taboo lists, directives to print, censorship. These post-Communist journalists fought for "subjectivity," the right to put their own views in their reportage.

This cherished subjectivity does not mesh easily with U.S. objectivity. The ideal of subjectivity positions the journalists differently from those in power. Here we discuss the second "reinvention" in Eastern Europe: independence. In *The "Uncensored War"* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), Daniel Hallin notes that the norms of American journalism require being "above politics."

Of the relationship between the U.S. journalism profession and politics, Hallin writes:

The "profession" of journalism has not one but many different sets of standards and procedures, each applied in different kinds of political situations. It is in these varying models of journalism that the ambivalent relation between the media and political authority finds its practical resolution. In situations where political consensus seems to prevail, journalists tend to act as "responsible" members of the political establishment, upholding the dominant political perspective and passing on more or less at face value the views of authorities assumed to represent the nation as a whole. In situations of political conflict, they become more detached or even adversarial, though they normally will stay well within the bounds of the debate going on within the political "establishment," and will continue to grant a privileged hearing particularly to senior officials of the executive branch (p. 10).

To men and women of the East European press, tired of having to publish the Party line as the agitprop experts wrote it, independence means being able to write one's own story. But, and this is a fact generally missed by American journalists, their colleagues in the East practice "committed journalism." The journalists don't see themselves as voyeurs or impartial observers of some national drama. They are not detached from Party and engagement. They want to take sides in the national battle, promote particular political objectives.

—Maryellen Boyle

more intense. As Cohen framed the debate, the journalists are trying to remain outside the turmoil of partisan politics and to report objectively on the upcoming elections. Hungarian television political commentator Janos Horvat told me that journalists are opposed to the nationalistic, anti-Semitic majority in parliament.

Journalists Are Active Participants

East European journalists are not interested in remaining outside the battle, above politics. They see themselves as important participants trying to save their countries from the nightmares in neighboring former Yugoslavia.

We need to look back a few years to the final moments of Communist Party power in the fall of 1989. Communist Party regimes collapsed overnight, leaving the populace and the journalists in a state of confusion. In the revolts of 1989, dissident and post-Communist journalists experienced a brief and much appreciated period of relative autonomy. New political forces quickly assumed power and set about creating a new political order. That was during the early days of 1990, when journalists and the new government leaders shared the goal of dismantling the Communist order. But tearing apart a system is quite a different endeavor from constructing a new one. The dissidents split into separate camps, each proclaiming a fundamentally different political ideal. Each sought to win at the newly liberated ballot boxes. These elections were not of the "Tweedledum and Tweedledee" variety we know so well here in the United States. The spring 1990 elections presented the electorate, and the journalists, with inchoate formulations of reform Communism, third-road socialism, a welfare state, or a free-market society. After the elections, the victors set about selling their program to the once-again apathetic citizenry.

Political Forces Everywhere Need Media Support

To gain and hold power, to inculcate belief and support among the popular masses, the political forces in any society need the support of the mass media. The battle to control the mass media in Eastern Europe—particularly television and radio—intensified in the spring of 1990, and has not let up. The struggle we are witnessing is not over what form of journalism should be practiced, but over who will hold power and what will be the contours of this new state formation. All East European journalists know this. The journalists are deeply involved in this struggle because they too hold political ideas. They have a stake in shaping, not just reporting on, the new political order.

Cohen quoted French television entrepreneur Bernard Cottin, who sees a parallel between events in Eastern Europe today and in Western Europe in the past. "Like West European countries 20 years ago, nervous governments there are reluctant to cut the umbilical cord with TV." Cottin's European colleagues in the mass media would certainly take issue with this claim; European governments would not dream of cutting this cord. Political parties have extraordinary reach into radio and television in every country of Europe, even at the BBC, producer Suzanne Levy assured me. Complaints about party interference with the media are common copy in the daily press, particularly in Germany, France, and Italy.

West European journalists are continually surprised at the

naïveté of their U.S. counterparts. One problem, they note, is that U.S. reporters, even *Times* reporters, are embarrassingly ignorant of the histories of the countries they cover. The greater problem, they contend, is that Americans report press conflicts as rude intrusions of politics into the press. French, German, and Scandinavian journalists, for example, frame conflicts within the mass media as politics of the first order—the fundamental structuring of the political system. They understand their East European colleagues as political actors. As do the East European journalists themselves. •

Brecht and the *Times*

Warren Leming

Bertolt Brecht, Marxist, director, and arguably the 20th century's most influential playwright, continues to pose problems for the *New York Times*. Unlike the less well known artists of the left, Brecht simply cannot be ignored. Brecht and his theater, the Berliner Ensemble, made world theater history.

Located in East Berlin, the Ensemble has undergone a number of changes since German re-unification. Cuts in personnel, infighting, and a new directorship featuring some of the most famous names in German theater, are but a few of the modulations at the theater over the last year.

Long a linchpin of the East German (GDR) cultural apparatus, the Ensemble's new role and its legacy are now the objects of the *New York Times* attention. How then does the West's leading newspaper handle the question of those who were, prominently, on the other side? Enter John Rockwell and his article of February 8, 1993: "Power Struggle at the Berliner Ensemble" (p. C11).

East German Theater Was Legendary

Rockwell began by noting that the former East German state subsidized the arts lavishly, but for "propagandistic purposes." East German theaters like Brecht's were legendary for their quality and affordability. They also played to large and enthusiastic Western audiences.

Rockwell next moved to a *Times*-honored position: Those drawn to Brecht had "perhaps naïve notions of leftist idealism." *Times*-style leftists are forever exhibiting either schoolboy "idealism" or "totalitarian" tendencies. Leftist "ambivalence" is a fixture at the *Times*, where "moderation" and "rationality" remain on guard. To his credit, Rockwell did not go on to suggest that those looking for work in U.S. theaters do so with "naïve notions of capitalist idealism." Brecht held that the "naïve" was a category essential to the making of art.

Having located left naïveté, the *Times* fingered the Ensemble as a "former stronghold of Communist ideology," now risen again as a "potent symbol of cultural life in the New Berlin."

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