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TOWARDS AN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA STRATEGY:

GRAMSCI'S THEORY IN PRACTICE

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis employs concepts developed by Antonio Gramsci as a theoretical framework for the development of an alternative media strategy. Specifically it looks at the role of television as a popular and democratizing force in contemporary society. It is argued that television's emancipatory potential has, for the most part, remained untapped. A strategy for its use as an instrument for achieving social change is offered.

Current global conditions which see the unequal distribution of the world's resources, a deteriorating environment, famine and war, call for radical change in the social, political and economic structures of industrial society. Given that classical revolutionary strategy is inappropriate in a society of abundance, structural change will occur only through the cooperative effort of those who share a common view of fundamental human values. To mobilize the social forces of change it is necessary to raise the level of awareness of the majority so that they may participate equally in a free and open debate, and in so doing, acquire a critical consciousness of the conditions of their existence. It is suggested that television as a medium of popular culture is ideally suited to this task.

A brief overview of the existing literature which might be considered alternative media theory is provided. The work of Brecht, Benjamin and Enzensberger is analyzed for its contribution to the development of a rationale for media production. The writings of Gramsci are then examined. In particular, his concepts of "hegemony", "historical bloc" and "war of position" are found to provide the theoretical basis for a new strategy of media production. Finally, the thesis looks at some of the material that is particularly critical of the television medium and suggests that such a perspective precludes any possibility for altering a well-established paradigm.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Need for Change

The problems we face today as a result of the development of industrial society are enormous. At a time when our level of technological sophistication has enabled us to produce incredible amounts of material wealth, many areas of the globe are unable to sustain their populations, even at the barest levels of subsistence. Malnutrition affects a majority of the population in the underdeveloped countries of Southeast Asia, South America and Africa, while significant numbers suffer from undernourishment, a form of slow starvation. Lately, and with certain regularity, the story of famine in some part of the world appears in the news media and elicits only modest expressions of concern from the more affluent sectors of society.

The recent tension-reducing events of Eastern Europe notwithstanding, the "Nuclear Age" sees us poised on the brink of total global destruction. We live under constant threat of nuclear annihilation. The firepower of some tens of thousands of nuclear warheads stockpiled by the world superpowers since World War II, represent a destructive potential which is beyond human comprehension.

Dioxins have entered the food chain. This most deadly form of toxic substance known to us, however, represents only one of many facets of environmental deterioration our planet has experienced in the last two hundred

years. Acid rain, chemical herbicides and pesticides, oil spills, the greenhouse effect, and a general squandering of our natural resources have all combined to drive home the fact that there is an absolute limit to the earth's ability to cope with the impact of industrial production.

On the social level, western societies are in a chaotic state. Exceptionally high rates of urban crime, domestic violence and drug and alcohol abuse have become the accepted "way of life". While, undeniably, today's dominant economic paradigm has brought us untold material advancements, along with all of the advantages have arisen forces so menacing that they threaten the very foundations upon which rest the hopes for the survival of future generations.

For those who dream of a more human world, a world in which the notions of freedom and justice are more than simply trite and trendy political slogans, the need for a fundamental change in our social system is obvious. It is obvious that what is required is a widespread change in the values which serve as the guiding principles for our society's development. Other human values must come to supplant economic self-interest as the motive which drives human activity. What is somewhat less widely accepted, however, is precisely how we are to achieve this radical change.

The Critical Path

One work which provides an interesting analysis of the pressing need for social change and the means to achieve it is a book by Erik Dammann entitled, **Revolution in the Affluent Society.**[1] Dammann suggests that there exists, in most

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[1]   Erik Dammann, **Revolution in the Affluent Society,**
       trans. Louis Mackay (London: Heretic Books, 1984).

of us, a repressed wish for a more human existence. He argues, as I do, that the creation of the best possible society for all involves a choice of values. Under our current economic system, the value of creating greater material wealth serves as the primary motive for productive human activity. Dammann believes, however, that it is conceivable the development of our society could be driven by another set of values - values such as cooperation and fellowship, equal access to responsibility and personal development, human contact, freedom, peace and stability. What is required is that a majority of the population must be willing to take a position regarding the aim and direction of social development, and such a position involves taking a stand on the values that we believe should serve as the principal guidelines for our own, as well as society's development.[2]

Dammann's vision is one of an impending revolution, ".... based on an increasingly conscious, popular protest against all forms of elite control and monopoly of thought..." In his words,

> What is brewing in today's pyramidal society is a revolution from below - a revolt for the right of the majority to responsibility and for the legitimacy of the common sense and the values of ordinary people, which many theoreticians have clearly lost sight of.... It is not a question of renouncing self-interest, but of making room for other types of self-interest than the material.... The contradictions between underlying values must be drawn into the debate in such a manner that the choice and its principal implications are clear to the majority of people. A fundamental transformation from below is only possible if ordinary people are respected as being responsible for the basic choice of direction....[3]

Revolution in the Affluent Society argues that while traditional theories of revolution were developed around the premise that the decisive motivation for

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[2] Ibid., pp. 13-23.

[3] Ibid., pp. 12 and 23.

change was the poverty of the lower classes, classical revolutionary strategy is inapplicable in our society of abundance. The economic contradictions which, according to classical theory, should have brought about the collapse of the system have been weakened rather than strengthened over the last century, and those which still exist have obviously not provided the majority with sufficient motivation for change. The fundamental transformation of the "affluent society" will be realized only through the cooperative effort of "all free thinking people who share a common view of fundamental human values and are open to a free debate about their consequences."[4]

While Dammann sees the process of social change as one that, to be successful, must necessarily be driven by the majority, he places paramount importance on the role of the intellectual within that process, suggesting that their influence on public opinion ultimately serves either to advance or repress the possibilities of change for the larger group. He suggests that if "the politically involved" are to contribute to the realization of a more human world, they must be willing to communicate with the majority of people in terms which are accessible to the public. What is needed is "a process of creating a consciousness of the consequences of values through independent activity and discussion...."[5] Intellectuals must strive "to create channels for a broad exchange of information which will make it possible to maintain contact and a sense of fellowship among the majority." They must attempt to "disseminate information in such a way as to counteract the established means of influencing values."[6]

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[4]   Ibid., p. 12.

[5]   Ibid., p. 128.

[6]   Ibid., p. 157.

The Role of the Media

From a communications perspective, of particular interest in Dammann's work is the importance he assigns to the media in this process of popular revolt. As he puts it,

> Only by presenting and explaining (questions of values) in popularly accessible terms in the mass media will it be possible to arouse an interest in crucial choices about values and social problems among people who otherwise feel that political debate goes over their heads .....[7]

Dammann believes there is a pressing need to convey alternative images of the future in a popularized form such as is offered through the media. As he sees it, the contemporary media such as television offer a unique experience to portray, in graphic style, the consequences of alternative courses of action and modes of behavior that will be required if we are to achieve a different world, "putting them in a personalized and accessible form so that ordinary people could see themselves in the context of possible futures."[8] He suggests that through a creative use of the media, ordinary voters could be provided with the opportunity to ponder the outcome of various courses of action in relation to certain human goals, thus allowing them to see what might be required in order to arrive at an alternative to the existing order. ".... And this would make active participation possible by indicating the types of conduct and action that could help to fulfill the dream of a better world."[9]

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[7] Ibid., p. 150.

[8] Ibid., p. 150.

[9] Ibid., p. 150.

On the Media as a Tool for Change

While Erik Dammann may be the most explicit in integrating his vision of a particular use of the media within a prescribed process for achieving social change, he is not by any means tne only theorist to expound upon the emancipatory potential of the media of communication. As early as the 1920's and 30's, the playwright Bertolt Brecht wrote in very positive terms regarding the revolutionary potential of both popular art and the technological innovations of film production and radio.[10] His friend and colleague Walter Benjamin was also one who, early on, identified certain liberating qualities of the emerging communication technologies. In a piece entitled "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction", Benjamin recognized motion picture film production as a political tool, with the potential to effectively mobilize people.[11] In 1972, Hans Magnus Enzensberger once again reaffirmed the power of the media to mobilize people, and offered what he believed constituted a progressive strategy for the use of the new electronic media technologies.[12]

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[10] Bertolt Brecht, "Radio as a Means of Communication: A Talk of the Function of Radio", in Armand Mattelart and Seth Siegelaub eds. **Communication and Class Struggle** Vol. 2 (New York: International General, 1983).

[11] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" in Berel Lang and Forrest Williams, eds. **Marxism and Art** (New York: Longman Group Ltd., 1972).

[12] Hans Magnus Enzensberger, **The Consciousness Industry**, (New York: The Seabury Press, Inc., 1974).

With specific reference to the medium of television, Raymond Williams, in a book written in the early 1970's entitled **Television: Technology and Cultural Form** , reviewed the recent developments in televisual technology and made reference to what he believed represented "a new universal accessibility"[13] In his view, television offered the possibility to affect or alter the social process. He perceived this new technology to be "the contemporary tools of the long revolution towards an educated and participatory democracy, and of the recovery of effective communication in complex urban and industrial societies."[14] He also made another important observation and one which is too readily overlooked; that mainstream broadcasting institutions remain dominant not only because of their accumulation of capital, but also because of their accumulation of production techniques and experience.[15]

Another thinker who has chosen to examine the importance of television as an instrument of enculturation is Douglas Kellner. In an article written in the late 1970's,[16] Kellner offered an analysis of how television images, narrative codes and mythologies conveyed, not only a certain hegemonic ideology and a legitimation of American society, but also contained contradictory messages which reproduced the conflicts of advanced capitalist society and ideology. He

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[13]   Raymond Williams, **Television: Technology and Cultural Form**, (London: Fontana/Collins, 1974), p. 151.

[14]   Ibid., p. 151.

[15]   Ibid., p. 147.

[16]   Douglas Kellner, "TV, Ideology, and Emancipatory Popular Culture", in **Television: The Critical View**. ed. Horace Newcomb (New York: Oxford University Press, 1987).

went on to suggest that television could and, in fact, should be used within the existing system as a means of political and cultural development and enlightenment.

It was Kellner's belief that "the central role of the electronic media in contemporary society makes it imperative for those who desire radical social change to explore the possibility of producing emancipatory culture and participating in media politics."[17] Arguing a similar position to that of Erik Dammann, he suggested that ".... television can cause an individual to question previous beliefs, values and actions," and that, ".... such a process contains the potential for more significant subsequent changes."[18]

In Search of a Theoretical Framework

While the above writers have all alluded to the potential which the media represent as a means of achieving social and cultural change, within the last fifty years, relatively little innovative use has been made of the media in general, and television in particular, in an attempt to provide the public with a vision of how the world might be, should we choose to alter our collective behavior. One possible explanation for the lack of interest in this form of television production could be found in the analyses of the Frankfurt School theorists and their followers who may have strongly influenced the general perception of North American popular culture, thus encouraging a certain scorn for its use as a tool

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[17]   Ibid., p. 484.

[18]   Ibid., p. 490.

for change.[19] Or it may be that a particular form of elitism may be prohibiting the development of alternative media[20] production. There could be some truth to Enzensberger's statement that it may be "precisely because of their progressive potential that the media are felt to be an immense threatening power; because for the first time they present a basic challenge to bourgeois culture and thereby to the privileges of the bourgeois intelligentsia."[21]

Another possible explanation for the lack of any concerted activity in the area of alternative media production may be the absence of a well-formulated and clearly articulated strategy or plan of action relating to the use of television as an instrument of social change. As we have seen above, a number of writers have identified what they consider represented a certain emancipatory potential in the new media technologies. However, a review of the relevant literature reveals a dearth of any comprehensive theory which might serve as a guide for their use as such.

It has been written that, "... what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises his structure in imagination before he erects it in reality. At the end of every labour-process, we get a result that already existed in the imagination of the labourer at its commencement."[22]

[19] See, for example, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, **Dialectic of Enlightenment**, trans. John Cumming (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972) and Herbert Marcuse, **One Dimensional Man** (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964).

[20] The term "alternative media" as used in this paper is defined as an emancipatory form of popular culture that promotes ideas and objectives which, by their content, offer the possibility of achieving political ends which transcend the existing order.

[21] H. M. Enzensberger, p. 102.

What separates humans from other forms of animal life is the ability to consciously plan our activity. The strategic plan is, in fact, a crucial component of all meaningful human productive activity. Accordingly, we cannot expect to arrive at a particular result unless we devote some time to the preparation of a preconceived plan of action. This paper will argue that, although his work was produced prior to the advent of televisual technology, the Italian intellectual Antonio Gramsci can quite correctly be labelled, "the architect of alternative media theory." More specifically, the main argument of this paper will be that Gramsci's development of the concepts of hegemony, war of position and historical bloc, when taken together, constitute the theoretical basis for an effective strategy relating to the production of alternative television material.

The following chapter will explore the range of perspectives that one finds in the literature relating to the medium of television. The purpose will be to provide the reader with an understanding of the cultural context within which contemporary, mainstream television is situated. Chapter Three will present a brief overview of the existing material which might be considered alternative media theory. The work of Brecht, Benjamin and Enzensberger will be analyzed for its contribution to the development of a rationale for media production. Chapter Four will examine the prison writings of Antonio Gramsci. His elaboration of the notions of hegemony, war of position, and historical bloc, combined with his vision of the importance of popular culture will be shown to constitute a solid basis for the development of an alternative media strategy. The final chapter will look at some of the more dogmatically critical material

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22 Karl Marx, Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, ed. Frederick Engels (New York: The Modern Library, 1906), p. 198.

dealing with the television medium. It will be argued that this particular perspective on television contains nihilistic tendencies that preclude any possibility of altering a well-established paradigm.

CHAPTER II

TELEVISION; A NOTE ON THE MEDIUM'S
HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT

Television has variously been described as 1) a "cool" medium", which "promotes depth structures in art and entertainment alike, and creates audience involvement in depth as well"[1]; 2) as "a cultural agent, particularly as a provoker and circulator of meanings"[2]; 3) as "corrupt" and constituting "a clear and present danger for its susceptible viewers"[3]; 4) as the dominant medium of social discourse and representation in our society"[4]; and, 5) as an important component of the "patriarchy's techno-systems" which serve to " despoil the planet, wipe out indigenous cultures, homogenize the mind, eliminate the body, exploit the unconscious, and create a flesh-free environment in which all living beings are in the way of "progress"."[5]

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[1] Marshall McLuhan, **Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,** (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965), p. 312.

[2] John Fiske, **Television Culture,** (New York: Methuen & Co., 1987), p. 1.

[3] Gregg A. Lewis, **Telegarbage,** (New York: Thomas Nelson Publishers Inc., 1977), p. 135.

[4] Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies", in **Culture, Society and the Media,** eds. Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran and Janet Woolacott, (New York: Methuen & Co., 1982), p. 75.

[5] Joyce Nelson, **The Perfect Machine: TV in the Nuclear Age,** (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1987), p. 173.

Statistics provided in the **Report of the Task Force on Broadcasting Policy** in Canada reveal that almost every Canadian home is equipped with a television set and that, for the past 15 years, Canadians on average have watched some 22 to 24 hours of television a week.[6] Figures in the U.S. indicate that 98 percent of American households own at least one television (with ownership being over 90 percent since 1962), that the average household has a television set on for close to fifty hours a week,[7] and more incredibly, that children aged two to five watch over twenty-five hours of television per week.[8]

The advent of television has had a devastating impact on the readership of daily newspapers, replacing them as the primary source of news and information about current affairs. Opinion surveys conducted in both Canada and the United States reveal that people rely more on television than any other medium for their news. A Canadian study undertaken in 1981 for the Royal Commission on Newspapers revealed that 67 percent of the respondents viewed television as the most influential of the news media, while 54 percent considered it to be the most believable. Television was also regarded as the preferred medium for obtaining international, national and provincial news, with newspapers being preferred only for local community news.[9]

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6   Gerald Lewis Caplan, Florian Sauvageau, et al,
     Report of the Task Force on Broadcasting Policy,
     (Ottawa: Minister of Supply and Services, 1986), p.
     84.

7   Based on surveys conducted by the A.C. Nielsen Co.
     cited in Joshua Meyrowitz, **No Sense of Place: The
     Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior,** (New
     York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. viii.

8   Ibid., p. 76.

9   Gerald Lewis Caplan, Florian Sauvageau, et al, **op.**

Yet access to news and current affairs information is not television's primary use. A recent study which analyzed Canadian television consumption patterns indicated television is essentially an entertainment medium, with 60 percent of peak-time viewing of English programming being accounted for by drama (i.e., adventure, comedy, soaps, etc.) and another 15 percent accounted for by variety, music, and quiz shows.[10] It is not surprising, then, that the assumption that media messages and images constitute a powerful social, cultural and political force dominates both public debate and perspectives of research in the field of communication. As Joyce Nelson has succinctly stated:

> Television has assumed extraordinary ritual and institutional power in our lives: not just by commanding some seven hours a day of our leisure time (the U.S. average) but by becoming the new matrix, the new "ritual container" for most people. Culture has become almost entirely television culture, or television derived "culture", ritual is now television ritual: we follow its change of seasons, the rhythms of its broadcast day, we attend to its pageantry and festivities, its stories, songs and dance.[11]

A Technical Innovation and its Uses

It should be noted at the outset that, while there are a multiplicity of other uses being made of televisual technology (e.g. in education, sports, surveillance, etc.), the notion of television that has given rise to much public discussion, has been the focus of volumes of academic research, and that which

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[9]   Gerald Lewis Caplan, Florian Sauvageau, et al, **op. cit.**, p. 107.

[10]   Ibid., pp. 92-3.

[11]   Joyce Nelson, **op. cit.**, p. 25.

is the subject of this paper is a certain institutionalized system which makes use of a particular type of electronic technology to produce and broadcast audio/visual messages for popular consumption and which might best be referred to as "mainstream" television. As is the case with all of the other dominant institutional structures which have developed in the Western world over the past few hundred years, television, as we know it, has developed within the context of an economic system which is based on the production and consumption of commodities within a global network of interrelated markets. The two principal agents which have served as the driving force behind the development of this economic system are the nation-states with their subordinate state sub-systems (including the military, educational and cultural institutions, etc.) and business corporations.[12]

As Raymond Williams has pointed out, the invention of television was not the result of any single event or series of events but, rather, was the outcome of a complex of inventions and developments in electricity, telegraphy, photography and motion pictures and radio.[13] Television, as such, became a specific technological objective towards the end of the 19th century. It developed as an enterprise in the 1920s with the first public system making its appearance in the 1930s.

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[12] Dallas W. Smythe, **Dependency Road: Communications, Capitalism, Consciousness, and Canada,** (Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 1981), pp. 2-3.

[13] Raymond Williams in his work entitled **Television: Technology and Cultural Form,** (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), provides a comprehensive history of television's growth and development. The material in this section represents a summation of some of the key observations in that work.

An interesting observation Williams makes is the fact that key periods of technological advance in the field of communication coincided with important stages in the development of industrial production, both in terms of the technical needs emanating from an emergent primary production process, as well as the social needs related to industrial development. Electricity allowed for increased mobility and flexibility in the production process; the development of electric telegraphy, which was closely followed by the appearance of a telephone system, coincided with the growth of extended trade regions and the growth of cities which, in turn, paralleled the development of railways and other transportation systems, and so on through the various phases of the process. In Williams words:

> What is interesting throughout is that in a number of complex and related fields, these systems of mobility and transfer in production and communication, whether in mechanical and electric transport, or in telegraphy, photography, motion pictures, radio and television, were at once incentives and responses within a phase of general social transformation.[14]

Williams draws attention to what he describes as "an operative relationship between a new kind of expanded, mobile and complex society and the development of a modern communications technology."[15] More directly, it was the priorities of expanding commercial and military systems which defined what type of communications systems were needed. In the first phase of its development, the modern communications technology was oriented to person to person uses within specific, established structures. It was only in its second

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[14] Ibid., p. 18.

[15] Ibid., p. 20.

phase of development, the broadcasting phase, that the technology became oriented to the transmission of a variety of messages to a wide audience.

To understand the development of this second phase, it is helpful to bear in mind the existence of a broader communications system which preceded the developments in technology. This broad and vital area of social interaction is that of oral communication - within every kind of social group. Included in this system of oral communication were institutions involved in the process of social teaching and control (e.g. schools, churches, assemblies and direction at work), all of which interacted with communication in the family. With the development of an extended social, economic and political system came the need for a new form of social communication. An increasingly more mobile population in a rapidly changing society required a new means of transmitting new and social information to replace the older less effective channels of communication. First newspapers, then radio and finally television emerged to fill that need.

"New social relations between men, and between men and things, were being intensely experienced and in this area, especially, the traditional institutions of church and school, or of settled community and persisting family, had very little to say." This situation, Williams suggests, "led to a major redefinition, in practice and then in theory, of the function and process of social communication."[16] People needed a source of information which would enable them to "make sense" of their rapidly changing world - what Williams refers to as "the whole orienting, predictive and updating process."[17] The new

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[16]   Ibid., p. 22.

[17]   Ibid., p. 21.

communication technologies of radio and television served as the instruments through which the dominant order could now easily be conveyed.

Until after World War I and in some ways until after World War II the needs of a new society were met through specialized means: newspapers for political and economic news; the photo for community, family and personal concerns; motion pictures for entertainment; telegraph and telephone for business. It is within this complex of specialized forms that broadcasting emerged.

The Institutional Arrangement

Another important observation Williams makes in his analysis of television is the fact that relatively little consideration had been given to defining what would serve in the way of programming content for the broadcasting facilities prior to the actual development of the appropriate transmission and reception devices. The reason for this situation is relatively simple. It was the manufacturers of the broadcasting apparatus, and particularly of receivers, who provided the primary thrust for the development of our modern broadcasting systems. The major investment in both radio and television was in the means of distribution and the main concern of the equipment manufacturers was the sale of their hardware and not its programming content. Investment in the production of software was important "only in so far as to make the distribution technically possible and then attractive."[18]

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[18] Ibid., p. 25.

In North America, the first broadcasting networks were, in fact, federations of equipment manufacturers. These competitive corporations were anxious to exploit what they could foresee was an extensive and lucrative market for their new "consumer durables". By the end of the 1920s, radio represented a major sector of industrial production. As discussed previously, the mobility required by industrial organization, on the one hand, and a new, more self-sufficient family life on the other, necessitated new kinds of contact. The new technology served these needs by providing news and entertainment to its listeners.

In the case of television, despite its technical inferiority to cinema as a visual medium, it offered a whole range of news, music, sports and entertainment within the confines of the home and, as such, was immediately successful. The transition from radio to television would have occurred in the late 1930s or early 1940s had it not been for the disruption caused by World War II. As it was, full investment in television transmission and reception occurred in the late 1940s, early 1950s. Growth, however, was rapid. By then, the tendencies referred to earlier were even more pronounced with the distances between population bases and the political and productive centres becoming greater.

At the outset, television preyed parasitically on public events such as coronations, sporting events and theatre for its programming. As with radio, transmission and reception capabilities had preceded the development of content. By the late 1950s, new kinds of programming began to emerge. But the new production requirements made it an expensive medium, particularly since there was no charge for viewing. The problem of investment for production was severe.

Three economic responses were derived to deal with the situation. One was licensing which was the system opted for in Britain. Another, less direct one, was sponsorship. The third was advertising which serves as the model for what we commonly know as "commercial" television. Since the airways were regarded as public property, a system of allocation of frequencies was devised in the U.S. in the 1930s (a process which was subsequently followed in Canada). Licenses were assigned to approved users and regulations were established to prevent any abuses. By the 1950s a non-market driven form of television which became known as "public-service" television (as opposed to the previously described "commercial" variety) began to emerge. But as Williams points out, their existence has been a constant struggle:

> Throughout its development, this public service television has been a poor relation of the commercial networks. Its production funds are subject to central control and in fact, through this, to political decision. The stations themselves are member-supported, and survive with great difficulty only by constant local fund-raising.[19]

The determining factor in the later stages of television's development has been the expansion of the American communications system. This Williams suggests "has to be understood in two related stages: the formation, in the United States of a complex military, political and industrial communications system; and then, in direct relation to this, the operation of this system to penetrate the broadcasting systems of all other available states."[20]

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[19] Ibid., p. 37.

[20] Ibid., p. 39.

Since World War II, there has been a close relation between the research and development of military and political communications and what is considered general broadcasting. A good example of this is the development of satellite broadcasting where the technology was developed first for military/political purposes and is now being used in commercial broadcasting services. Further, with formal ties existing between electronics manufacturers and broadcasting corporations, it is virtually impossible to separate military, government and general broadcasting institutions into distinct categories.

It was thus a short step to operations on an international scale. By the early 1970s, the U.S. Department of Defense had a world-wide network of 38 television and over 200 radio transmitters, while the three leading American broadcasting corporations had stations and networking contracts in more than 90 foreign countries.[21]

This global penetration can be viewed in terms of the sale of programming in a global marketplace as a source of revenue to cover the cost of new program production. However, more importantly, it must also be understood as a significant international commercial advertising service. As Williams states:

> The "commercial" character of television has then to be seen at several levels: as the making of programmes for profit in a known market; as a channel for advertising; and as a cultural and political form directly shaped by and dependent on the norms of a capitalist society, selling both consumer goods and a "way of life" based on them, in an ethos that is at once locally generated, by domestic capitalist interests and authorities , and internationally organized, as a political project, by the dominant capitalist power.[22]

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[21]   Ibid., pp. 40-1.

[22]   Ibid., p. 41.

The Canadian Situation

In Canada, the development of broadcasting systems occurred later than in the U.S. and saw a mixture of both public and privately-run networks established. Canadians, from the beginning, had over-the-air access to American network television and, for some time, were content to watch foreign programming.

It was not until 1952 that the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC), Canada's "public" television network, began its service in Montreal and Toronto. However, with its string of privately owned affiliates and its reliance on advertising revenues to cover production costs, it was not public television in the true sense of the term. The first privately owned networks in Canada were licensed in 1961. And while these and other "independent" stations in the country were, in fact, Canadian controlled organizations having no formal affiliation with the U.S. networks, the vast majority of their programming was, and continues to be, American produced.

In 1968, Canada enacted the Broadcasting Act which, with some amendments, remains in effect to this day. With it was created the Canadian Radio-Television Commission, now known as the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC), the Canadian broadcasting system's regulatory agency.

The mandate given the CRTC was to oversee the operation of "a single system.....comprising public and private elements.....owned and controlled by Canadians so as to safeguard, enrich and strengthen the cultural, political, social

and economic fabric of Canada."[23] Yet, with all the attention that was paid to safeguarding Canada's cultural integrity, it is interesting that the majority of the program content carried by both the "public" and private networks in Canada has, historically, consisted of American programming. The **Report of the Task Force on Broadcasting Policy** sums up quite vividly the current state of "Canadian" television:

> Although some foreign programming shown in Canada originates in Britain, France and other European countries, by far the most common source is Hollywood or the three American commercial networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC. Canadian access to American commercial programming is unique in the world. In fact, owing to the duplication of American programming between originating American stations and Canadian stations which also carry it, Canada's largest anglophone cities have more American TV on tap than comparable cities in the United States itself.[24]

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[23] Caplan, Sauvageau, et al, **op. cit.**, p. 14.

[24] Ibid., p. 93.

CHAPTER III

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO
THE MEDIA'S EMANCIPATORY POTENTIAL

Towards an Alternative Use

Arguing against technological determinism, Raymond Williams, in his exploration of television as both a technology and a cultural form sought to demonstrate the revolutionary potential of this electronic medium by showing that it could be changed and used in different ways and for different purposes. The development and use of television technology, he argued, was not an autonomous process but was dependent upon choices which were made as part of a more general process of social development, social growth and social struggle. "There are," he suggests, "contradictory factors, in the whole social development, which make it possible to use some or all of the new technology for purposes quite different from those of the existing social order ...."[1]

Traditional media processes involve conceptual models that have a direct effect on how program contents are packaged and how different formats and formulas are developed so as to appeal to a wide audience. These conceptual models incorporate certain assumptions that the modern media technology should be used in particular ways for particular purposes. A number of theorists, however, have sought to develop a perspective in which the media are seen to represent a means towards achieving the intellectual progress of the population and, ultimately,

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[1] Raymond Williams, **Television: Technology and Cultural Form,** (London: Fontana/Collins, 1974), pp. 135-136.

to a stage of constructive decision-making and action. The following pages in this chapter will provide a brief review of the development of this theoretical approach.

Negativity and The Frankfurt School Critique

Hans Magnus Enzensberger, in his attempt to formulate a theoretical framework from which it might be possible to develop an emancipatory use of the electronic media, felt compelled at the outset to remark that a "critical" inventory of the status quo was not enough.[2] Undoubtedly directed at the work emanating from the members of the Frankfurt School, it is understandable that he should feel the need to make such a comment. The great majority of what had been written to that time by those critical of the existing constitution of the media consisted primarily in critique and lacked considerably in strategy.[3] A brief overview of some aspects of the cultural criticism articulated by the members of the Frankfurt School is important at this juncture.

As Martin Jay has pointed out, from the very beginning, the scholars of the Frankfurt School, were interested in aesthetic and cultural phenomena,[4] and given the period during which they were active, it is not surprising that radio would be the focus of their analysis of the impact of the media on society. Since a major portion of his intellectual life was devoted to studies of music, it was only fitting that

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2   Hans Magnus Enzensberger, **The Consciousness Industry**, (New York: The Seabury Press, Inc., 1974), p. 96.

3   The work of Walter Benjamin being the only exception in this regard, and to which we will return later.

4   Martin Jay, **The Dialectical Imagination**, (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1973), p. 175.

Theodor Adorno chose to undertake the study of radio music in 1940. In agreement with the results of a previous study, conducted by Ernst Krenek, that radio presented the listener with music in a "depersonalized, collective, objectivized form which robbed it of its negative function,"[5] Adorno proceeded to suggest that, "recognition of the familiar was the essence of mass listening, serving more as an end in itself than as a means to more intelligent appreciation."[6] His appraisal of popular music led him to perceive it as "a kind of social cement operating through distraction, displaced wish fulfillment, and the intensification of passivity."[7]

In 1944, Adorno teamed up with Max Horkheimer to produce the **Dialectic of Enlightenment**, a critique of Western society and thought which was first published in 1947. In a section of the book entitled, "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception", the argument was made that what was known as "popular" culture was, in fact, an ideological production and that what they referred to as "the culture industry" in monopoly capitalism produced a "non spontaneous, reified, phony culture rather than the real thing."[8] In their words:

> The fusion of culture and entertainment that is taking place today leads not only to a depravation of culture, but inevitably to an intellectualization of amusement. This is evident from the fact that only the copy appears: in the movie theatre, the photograph; on the radio, the recording.[9]

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[5]   Ibid., p. 191.

[6]   Ibid., p. 192.

[7]   Ibid., p. 192.

[8]   Ibid., p. 216.

[9]   Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, **Dialectic of Enlightenment**, trans. John Cumming, (New York: Herder and Herder, 1972), p. 143.

To their minds the message conveyed by the various media of contemporary society was one of conformity and resignation.[10]

Herbert Marcuse, some twenty years later, advanced a similar thesis in a work entitled **One Dimensional Man**. Marcuse's contention was that through the process of "popularization", works of art were:

> .... deprived of their antagonistic force.... If they once stood in contradiction to the status quo, this contradiction is now flattened out.... It is good that almost everyone can now have the fine arts at his fingertips, by just turning a knob on his set, or by just stepping into his drugstore. In this diffusion, however, they become cogs in a culture-machine which remakes their content.[11]

As had been the case with the earlier work of Horkheimer and Adorno, Marcuse presented a very pessimistic picture of modern man as a slave to the culture industry, dominated in subtle but effective ways, lulled into passive acceptance. Horkheimer and Adorno's argument, that radio was to fascism as the printing press had been to the Reformation, clearly shows the extent to which technology, particularly as it served the culture industry, was seen as a repressive force.[12]

Whether they did not perceive any inherent potential for social change in the technology of the electronic media or whether, for whatever reasons, they simply elected not to devote any energy to its exploration and possible development is difficult to assess. The fact remains that nowhere in their writings did they attempt to expand on the possibility of exploiting any emancipatory potential within the media apparatus. That they chose to ignore an examination of its possible liberating

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[10]   Martin Jay, **op. cit.**, p. 216.

[11]   Herbert Marcuse, **One Dimensional Man**, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1964) pp. 64-65.

[12]   Martin Jay, **op. cit.**, pp. 216-217.

qualities is particularly surprising considering the fact that the issue had been raised earlier by Bertolt Brecht, the German playwright/dramatist who, although not a member of the Frankfurt School as such, nonetheless exercised a certain influence over some of its members.

The More Positive Theorists

Brecht held a much more optimistic and positive view of the economy and society of his period than did his contemporaries of the Frankfurt School. Rather than rejecting capitalism outright, he shared the Marxist view that certain "productive forces" were developing within the capitalist system which would destroy the existing social and economic structures and ultimately replace them with new arrangements. He believed that these "productive forces" were not to be found solely within the realm of economic production, however. For Brecht, art was a form of production; an active, material part of social reality and, as such, contained the potential to contribute towards changing that reality. From this perspective, he was eager to exploit the resources of advanced technology and radio, in particular, as an agent of social change.[13]

In an essay written in 1930, Brecht set out to explore the function of radio as a means of communication. In his opening paragraph, he was quite explicit in his assessment of society's inability to make "proper" use of the available technology. Radio, he observed, was waiting for the public. As Brecht saw it, technology on the one hand had advanced to the stage where it could produce radio. Society, on the

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[13]   Graham Bartram and Anthony Waine, **Brecht in Perspective**, (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1982), p. 101.

other hand, had not sufficiently advanced to make proper use of it. In Marxian terms, he proposed that, "raw material was not waiting for methods of production based on social needs but means of production were looking anxiously for raw material."[14] Instead of saying "no matter what to no matter whom," radio , he suggested, was in need of acquiring an aim in life and he proceeded to outline some of the elements such an aim might embrace.

Firstly, Brecht proposed that for radio to become socially relevant, it was imperative that the medium be transformed from a mere distribution system to a communication system, "connecting" the listener rather than isolating him; organizing him as a "purveyor". A second function he suggested for radio was that it should endeavor to combat the "inconsequentiality" of the present institutions. As mentioned earlier, Brecht felt that radio needed to be given an aim in life rather than simply existing as a source of "aimless" entertainment, and he suggested that the "development of culture" should be its aim. For Brecht, cultural development was a never-ending process requiring a continual effort, and he saw the media as playing a major role in that effort.

Since Brecht regarded art as a collective rather than a purely individualistic enterprise,[15] similarly, he firmly believed that radio should involve a collective experience. Alluding to what he refers to as "the irrepressible question ... (of) whether there is no possibility of confronting the excluding powers with an organization of the excluded?", he suggested that a primary task of radio was one of

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14   Bertolt Brecht, "Radio as a Means of Communication: A
     Talk of the Function of Radio," in Armand Mattelart and
     Seth Siegelaub eds. **Communication and Class Struggle**,
     Vol. 2, (New York: International General, 1983), p.
     169.

15   Bartram and Waine, **op. cit.**, p. 104.

"ensuring that the public is not only taught but must also itself teach."[16] Finally, (and contemporary community-based media projects would do well to comprehend this particular point) he believed that it was "one of radio's formal duties to give these didactic projects an interesting character - to make interests interesting."[17] It was important for Brecht that radio attempt to treat its material artistically, particularly that material which was specifically aimed at youth. Such an effort, he felt, would correspond to that of modern art whose aim, as he saw it, was to give art a didactic function. Thus the foundation, albeit not the most elaborate, had been laid for an understanding of possible alternative functions of the media, and it is to a close friend of Brecht, Water Benjamin, that we now turn to gain further insights.

Unlike his colleagues of the Frankfurt School, Walter Benjamin held a relatively optimistic attitude towards the emancipatory potential of popular art and technological innovation. In an essay written to Max Horkheimer in 1935 entitled "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Benjamin emphatically disagreed with the line held by Adorno and Horkheimer that popular art forms served purely and simply to reconcile people to the status quo. Moreover, while he mourned the loss of a particular aspect of art which he referred to as its "aura" (something, he suggested, which was lost to art in the process of its mechanical reproduction), he nonetheless claimed that this elimination of art's aura had a positive effect and he was able to perceive the progressive potential of politicized, collectivized art forms."[18] Art, for Benjamin, had acquired a new use value:

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[16]   Brecht, **op. cit.**, p. 171.

[17]   Ibid.

[18]   Martin Jay, **op. cit.**, p. 211.

.... for the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual .... the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice - politics.[19]

For Benjamin, the cameraman's ability to penetrate reality like a surgeon rendered film the least "auratic" of the new art forms and, as such, he argued that it was the most progressive, politically. Whereas the audience for painting or books was the individual, for film, it was the collective and Benjamin affirmed its potential for "mobilizing" the people through the effects of shock and critical distancing.[20] Furthermore, film was seen as providing us with the opportunity of re-creating an image of the world in which we live, which, in turn, offers us a chance to act upon it:

The characteristics of the film lie not only in the manner in which man presents himself to mechanical equipment but also in the manner in which, by means of this apparatus, man can represent his environment .... film, on the one hand, extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives; on the other hand, it manages to assure us of an immense and unexpected field of action.[21]

In another essay entitled "The Author as Producer," Benjamin examined the role of intellectuals in the struggle for human freedom and dignity. Rather than simply experiencing his solidarity with the proletariat ideologically, for Benjamin, "the place of the intellectual in the class struggle can only be determined, or better, chosen on the basis of his position in the process of production."[22] While Benjamin's

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[19] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in Berel Lang and Forrest Williams, eds. **Marxism and Art,** (New York: Longman Group Ltd., 1972), p. 287.

[20] Susan Buck-Morss, **The Origin of Negative Dialectics** (New York: The Free Press, 1977), p. 147.

[21] Walter Benjamin, **op. cit.,** p. 295.

[22] Walter Benjamin, "The Author as Producer," in **New Left Review,** No. 62, p. 88.

essay was concerned primarily with literary forms of production, his arguments are equally valid with respect to other forms of cultural production such as television. He believed it was imperative that we rethink our notions of cultural forms, "in line with the given techniques of our current situation," in order to arrive at the forms of expression to which our energies should be applied today.[23] He viewed the capitalist system as one in which cultural forms were undergoing a powerful process of transformation and one in which they stood to lose their oppositional force.

For Benjamin, the role of the intellectual in the class struggle was two-fold. Influenced, as we have seen earlier, by Brecht whose "epic" theatre was aimed at having the public reflect over their life situations, Benjamin proposed, firstly, that it was important for intellectuals "to master the competencies in the process of intellectual production"[24] and, secondly, that they should strive "to alienate the apparatus of production from the ruling class in favor of socialism, by means of improving it."[25] Amazingly, (and here is where we might be required to concede a certain element of truth in the Frankfurt School's theory of the anesthetic function of the modern media) a period of thirty-five years was to pass before the theme of alternative uses of the electronic media was to be explored once again.

Hans Magnus Enzensberger, drawing on the works of both Brecht and Benjamin, set about to postulate what he considered to be the necessary constituents of a progressive strategy for the media. It is safe to say that what Enzensberger offered was really more a reformulation of what the earlier scholars had advanced than the development of a whole new set of concepts. It is also clear

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[23]   Ibid., p. 86.

[24]   Ibid., p. 91.

[25]   Ibid., p. 90.

from the tone of his article that he believed the development and enactment of an alternative media strategy should become a high priority among those concerned with effecting positive change in the social order. For him, the importance of the electronic media was to be found in its power to mobilize people and, accordingly, he stressed the need to "push ahead", to go beyond simply critiquing the existing structures.

Enzensberger agreed with Brecht's notion that technology was waiting for the public. As he saw it, built into the communications media was the capacity for feedback; reciprocal action between transmitter and receiver. It was not technology or the lack thereof that impeded the media from becoming a true communications facility. The problem was, rather, a social one:

> Electronic techniques recognize no contradiction between transmitter and receiver..... The development from a mere distribution medium to a communications medium is technically not a problem. It is consciously prevented for understandable political reasons. The technical distinction between receivers and transmitters reflects the social division of labour into producers and consumers, which in the consciousness industry becomes of particular political importance.[26]

Enzensberger also shared Brecht's vision of the media's didactic function as well as its collective structure. The media, he said, made it possible for the first time to record historical material so that it could be reproduced at will. As he pointed out, "There have been no historical examples up until now of the mass self-regulating learning process which is made possible by the electronic media."[27] As for the collective nature of the media, he suggests that, just as media equipment can be regarded as a means of consumption (i.e., anyone can consume the programs by a simple switching process), so too is it a means of production. The contradiction

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[26] Hans Magnus Enzensberger, **op. cit.**, p. 97.

[27] Ibid., p. 105.

between producers and consumers is not inherent in the electronic media but is one that must be artificially reinforced through economic and administrative measures.[28] It was his belief that:

> the proper use of the media demands organization and makes it possible. Every production that deals with the interests of the producers postulates a collective method of production. It is itself already a form of self-organization of social needs.[29]

The fact that the general population do not as yet know how to use the media properly does not presuppose that they are unable to learn. What was important for Enzensberger was that they should learn.

Another important consideration Enzensberger brought to the discussion was the challenge which the new media present to the existing class structure in society. In his words, "The new media are egalitarian in structure .... entirely different from the older media like the book or the easel painting, the exclusive class character of which is obvious .... potentially, the media do away with all educational privileges and thereby with the cultural monopoly of the bourgeois intelligentsia."[30] While he believed it improbable that writing as a special technique would disappear in the foreseeable future he, nonetheless, did consider the age of the electronic media as a return to the oral tradition, allowing a greater opportunity for people to "speak".

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[28] Ibid., p. 106.

[29] Ibid., p. 109.

[30] Ibid., p. 105.

Towards A Strategic Plan

What we have been presented with so far, then, is a vision (however utopian it may appear in certain respects) of the potential for social change that is within our grasp. The institutional structure of the media industries has, for a prolonged period, contained and limited the use of a particular technology for commercial, paternal or authoritarian ends. However, as Raymond Williams has pointed out, recent technological developments have opened the way to institutions of a radically different kind. Developments in television technology, particularly in the realm of video cassette production, now offer extraordinary opportunities not only for individual use but also for the emergence of "publishing" institutions and distribution networks. The availability of relatively inexpensive equipment now makes possible the production of a genuinely "popular" television programming.

As stated in Chapter I, while a number of writers have identified a certain potential for achieving social and cultural change through alternative uses of the modern media technology, there does not exist any comprehensive theory which might serve to outline a specific plan of action for their use as such. It is the main argument of this paper, however, that the work of Antonio Gramsci represents a solid basis for an effective alternative media strategy, and it is to his writings that we now turn.

CHAPTER IV

GRAMSCI'S SOCIAL THEORY:

FOUNDATIONS FOR AN ALTERNATIVE MEDIA

Gramsci's Social and Political Thought

Despite the increasing volume of material which has been produced dealing with Gramsci and his work, there exists little general agreement about what specific message, if any, Gramsci was attempting to convey through his writings. To a large extent, this is attributable to the fact that his extensive intellectual production was never developed into a systematic theory. What primary material is available consists of journalistic essays, policy papers, pamphlets and prison notes. As such, it is difficult to consolidate his work into any coherent theoretical unit. What we are provided with is, rather, "a very broad theoretical synthesis that suggests a particular orientation" towards the crucial questions of social change in contemporary society.[1]

Gramsci characterized his thought as "materialism perfected by the work of idealist philosophy."[2] The consensus amongst those familiar with his work is that Gramsci's principal contribution as a social theorist was that he broke with the economic determinism of Marx and stressed the role of the human will and ideas in the determination of historical events.[3] He believed that the notion of history

[1] Carl Boggs, **Gramsci's Marxism**, (London: Pluto Press Ltd., 1976), p. 20.

[2] Joseph V. Femia, **Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process**. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), p. 113.

possessing its own mechanistic movement, independent of human agency and emanating from the development of the productive forces, had the effect of promoting an attitude of passivity. In his view, the idea of waiting for the inevitable collapse of the economic system served to discourage the exercise of political action. He challenged the traditional Marxist view that human behavior could be understood as simply the direct response to external stimuli that were determined by social and economic conditions. As Carl Boggs points out, Gramsci, in his prison notes, repeatedly stressed the idea that "material forces acquire meaning only through human definition and engagement that includes a variety of possible mediations and individual perceptions. Ideas, concepts, the theoretical enterprise itself, are all part of an historically-evolving socio-political process...."[4] In Gramsci's own words, the dominant factor in history was,

> .... not raw economic facts, but man, men in societies, men in relation
> to one another, reaching agreements with one another, developing
> through these contacts (civilization) a collective social will; men
> coming to understand economic facts, judging them and adapting
> them to their will until this becomes the driving force of the economy
> and moulds objective reality, which lives and moves and comes to
> resemble a current of volcanic lava that can be channelled wherever
> and in whatever way the will determines.[5]

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[3]   See, Chantal Mouffe, ed. **Gramsci and Marxist Theory,** (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1979), Roger Simon, **Gramsci's Political Thought,** (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1982), Joseph Femia, **op. cit.,** and Carl Boggs, **op. cit.**.

[4]   Boggs, **op. cit.,** p. 31.

[5]   Antonio Gramsci, "The Revolution Against Capital," in David Forgacs, ed. **A Gramsci Reader: Selected Writings 1916-1935,** (London: Lawrence and Wishart Limited, 1988), p. 33.

Thus Gramsci's epistemology occupies a middle ground between classical materialism and classical idealism. It draws on both traditions and, in synthesizing them, it transcends the dichotomy between subject and object. Subject and object, being and thought are inseparably involved in a dialectical relationship. In Gramsci's view, reality cannot be known independently of man:[6]

> The existence of objective conditions, of possibilities of freedom is not yet enough: it is necessary to "know" them, and know how to use them. And to want to use them. Man in this sense is concrete will, that is, the effective application of the abstract will or vital impulse to the concrete means which realize such a will.[7]

Given this firm belief that the objective conditions themselves would not be the sole impetus for change, Gramsci argued that human consciousness had an independent and creative role to play in the historical process.[8] What he felt was required was that people should become aware of their own historical position. In his view, the conscious understanding of existing reality was a necessary precondition for its change, and only by shaping their own view of the world could people ever expect to alter it. Accordingly, he believed that the starting point of any revolutionary activity necessitated a concerted effort devoted to raising the awareness level of the populace.

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6   Walter L. Adamson, **Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory,** (Berkley: University of California Press, 1980), p. 133.

7   Antonio Gramsci, **Selections from the Prison Notebooks,** Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (trans. and eds.), (New York: International Publishers, 1971), p. 360.

8   Femia, **op. cit.,** p. 73.

As Joseph Femia points out, implicit in Gramsci's writings are elements of the classical theories of democracy which "envisaged widespread and continual popular participation in the political process where all decisions would reflect the peoples' wishes .... (and where) .... the general attainment of the ideal of a rational, active, informed democratic citizenry was essential to the realization of genuine political democracy...."[9] In this sense, Gramsci paints a picture of a society that not only has the capacity to make its own destiny, but one that will be liberated or "free" to the extent that its population obeys a certain order that is essentially self-imposed, that is, one in which they have a say in the actual formulation and execution of its regulations.[10] However, in order to achieve this state of freedom or autonomy, Gramsci also understood the need for a certain intellectual preparation:

> Together with the problem of gaining political and economic power, the proletariat must also face the problem of winning intellectual power. Just as it has thought to organize itself politically and economically, it must also think about organizing itself culturally.[11]

As Gramsci saw it, the task of leading the people to a "higher conception of life" was, most definitely, an achievable goal since, in his opinion, "all men are philosophers." However, in his prison writings, we find that he makes the distinction between two categories or levels of philosophy, the first of which he labelled "spontaneous philosophy." For Gramsci, this level of philosophy was contained in such things as language, which represents "a totality of determined notions and concepts"; "common sense" and "good sense"; as well as popular religion and

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9 Ibid., p. 181.

10 Ibid., p. 183.

11 Gramsci, "Questions of Culture" in David Forgacs, ed., op. cit., p. 70.

"folklore", which was the term he used to describe man's "entire system of beliefs, superstitions, opinions, (and) ways of seeing things and acting."[12] Thus all men and women engage in a particular form of philosophy when they make use of language, rely on common sense or draw upon beliefs and opinions which emanate from popular religions or "folklore". However, this form of philosophy is very personal and individual and, more importantly, as Gramsci points out, while spontaneous philosophy is accessible to everyone, it is engaged in unconsciously.

Gramsci's second category or level of philosophy, on the other hand, is one that involves conscious activity and criticism and can accordingly be referred to as "critical philosophy".[13] By stating that all men were philosophers and showing that through their use of language, common sense, etc., everyone engaged in a form of spontaneous philosophic activity, Gramsci attempted to provide evidence that the human mind, in itself, was n class phenomenon; that all men were, in fact, capable of thinking in conceptual terms. In his words, ".... it is not possible to conceive of any man who is not also a philosopher, who doesn't think, because thought is proper to man as such, or at least to any man who is not a pathological cretin."[14] What was imperative for Gramsci, however was that the majority of the population develop to a stage of conceptualization, that is, consciously practised, critical philosophy, for as he questioned:

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[12] Gramsci, **Selections from the Prison Notebooks**, op. cit., p. 323.

[13] Teodros Kiros, **Toward the Construction of a Theory of Political Action; Antonio Gramsci**, (Lanham: University Press of America Inc., 1985), p. 80.

[14] Gramsci, **Selections from the Prison Notebooks**, op. cit., p. 347.

Is it better to "think" without having a critical awareness, in a disjointed and episodic way? In other words, is it better to take part in a conception of the world mechanically imposed by the external environment, i.e., by one of the many social groups into which everyone is automatically involved from the moment of his entry into the conscious world .... or, on the other hand is it better to work out consciously and critically one's own conception of the world and thus, in connection with the labors of one's own brain, choose one's sphere of activity, take an active part in the creation of the history of the world...'[15]

Historically, critical philosophy has remained the exclusive property of a relatively small group of intellectuals, never having been democratically diffused to the general population. As Gramsci notes, "the active man-in-the-mass has a practical activity, but has no clear theoretical consciousness of his practical activity."[16] The challenge, then, lies in establishing a mechanism which will serve to cultivate the attainment of critical consciousness among the general population. Gramsci pointed out that what was desperately needed was to establish a form of contact between "intellectuals" (i.e., those individuals who were at the level of critical philosophy), and the "simple", who remained at the level of spontaneity, in order "to create an ideological unity between the bottom and the top."[17] As he put it, "only by this contact does a philosophy become "historical", purify itself of intellectualistic elements of an individual character and become "life".[18]

As Gramsci applied the term, "intellectual" was used to describe anyone in society whose function was primarily that of organizing, administering, directing, educating or leading others. He believed that every social class, "creates one or more strata of intellectuals who give it homogeneity and an awareness of its own

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[15]   Ibid., p. 323.

[16]   Ibid., p. 333.

[17]   Ibid., p. 329.

[18]   Ibid., p. 330.

function, not only in the economic but also in the political and social fields."[19] He

argued that if the working class was ever to achieve a leadership position in society,

it would require its own "organic" intellectuals.

> Critical self-consciousness means, historically and politically, the creation of an elite of intellectuals. A human mass does not "distinguish" itself, does not become independent in its own right without, in the widest sense, organizing itself; and there is no organization without intellectuals, that is without organizers and leaders.[20]

But for Gramsci, the role of the intellectuals was not simply to be leaders and

organizers. It was necessary that they establish a close relationship with the people.

He believed that only if there developed an "organic cohesion" between the leaders

and the led could the relationship be one of representation. As he put it,

> The intellectual's error consists in believing that one can know without understanding and even more without feeling and being impassioned .... in other words, that the intellectual can be an intellectual .... if distinct and separate from the people-nation, that is, without feeling the elementary passions of the people, understanding them and therefore explaining and justifying them in the particular historical situation and connecting them dialectically to the laws of history and to a superior conception of the world, scientifically and coherently elaborated - i.e., knowledge. One cannot make politics without this passion, without this connection of feelings between intellectuals and people-nation.[21]

Gramsci was critical of the Italian intellectuals who he felt were detached

from the people. He attributed this situation to the fact that they had not devoted

any effort to the development of a "national-popular" culture (i.e., through the use of

the novel, theatre and/or other popular cultural forms) and, accordingly, had failed

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[19] Ibid., p. 5.

[20] Ibid., p. 334.

[21] Gramsci, "'Knowledge' and 'Feeling'", in David Forgacs, ed., op. cit., p. 349-50.

to establish a "national intellectual and moral bloc, either hierarchical or, still less, egalitarian."[22] He suggested that the "lay forces (had) failed in their historical task as educators and elaborators of the intellect and moral awareness of the people-nation .... (and had) been incapable of satisfying the intellectual needs of the people precisely because they have failed to represent a lay culture."[23] For Gramsci, lay culture or popular culture had the capacity to "elaborate a modern "humanism" able to reach right to the simplest and most uneducated classes,"[24] and it was his belief that popular culture thus represented the "terrain" upon which any cultural transformation would take place.

As outlined at the beginning of this chapter, prior to his arrest and imprisonment, Gramsci had been a political activist who understood theory to be inseparable from practice, and by his example we are able to appreciate that he considered practice to be the dominant element of the two.[25] A similar focus is found in his written work. To a large extent, his writings incorporate the concepts of historical materialism, yet he has sought to mold them in such a way as to emphasize their "active" dimension. While he chose to refer to his particular synthesis as a "philosophy of praxis", it might be more easily understood as a philosophy of political action, since for Gramsci, revolutionary change would occur as the result of the political activity of an "informed" public.

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[22] Gramsci, op. cit., p. 367.

[23] Ibid., p. 369.

[24] Ibid..

[25] Thomas Nemeth, **Gramsci's Philosophy: A Critical Study**, (Sussex: The Harvester Press Limited, 1980), p. 2.

Since Gramsci understood the historical process to be the outcome of the conscious actions of human forces, in this regard, he attempted to develop a certain strategy which, in turn, provided what might be described as a general outline of political activity appropriate to the task of altering the existing order. He sought to shed light on the fact that social change involved all aspects of society, not only the economic and political but the "ensemble of relations" that included culture as well as ideology. In his words, "For the philosophy of praxis, ideologies are anything but arbitrary; they are real historical facts which must be combatted and their nature as instruments of domination revealed, not for reasons of morality, etc., but for reasons of political struggle..."[26]

In this way, Gramsci asserted that the "superstructures are an objective and operative reality" and, as we have seen, he viewed popular culture as a particularly effective means of nurturing a certain conception of the world, a certain critical outlook or "political consciousness" which he suggested was "the first stage towards a further progressive self-consciousness in which theory and practice will finally be one."[27] Given this emphasis on cultural development as a necessary precondition to social change, Gramsci's intellectual work represents the most clearly articulated theory to date which offers a framework for the production of alternative media. The concepts of "hegemony", "historical bloc", and "war of position", which he developed in his prison notes, constitute the key elements in this strategy.

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[26] Gramsci, in David Forgacs, **op. cit.,** p. 196.

[27] Ibid. p. 334.

Hegemony

While some commentators maintain that, as Gramsci used it in his writings, the term is both complicated and variable,[28] most would agree that the notion of hegemony is the key concept in his prison notes. Derived from the Greek words "hegemonia" meaning authority and rule, "hegemon" meaning leader, and "hegeisthai" meaning to lead, in its common use, hegemony is defined as a condition of "predominance; especially (the) preponderant influence of one state over others." However, as Gramsci developed the concept, it came to mean more than mere supremacy of one element over another. There was a certain "acceptance" factor built into the notion. Rather than merely representing the domination of one order over any other, hegemony was seen to be the rule or control which exists in active forms of human experience and conscience.

Gramsci maintained that the primacy of one social group over another could be exercised in two distinct ways; through "domination" and through "intellectual and moral leadership." For Gramsci, contemporary society was divided into two categories; political society and civil society. Political society was said to exercise social control by domination, that is, through the use of coercive measures which served to influence behavior and choice by employing a system of punishment and reward.[29] Civil society, on the other hand, exerts its control through hegemony which, as Joseph Femia puts it, "refers to an order in which a common social-moral

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[28] Raymond Williams, **Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society**, (London: Fontana Paperbacks, 1983), p. 145.

[29] Femia, **op. cit.**, p. 24.

language is spoken in which one concept of reality is dominant, informing with its spirit all modes of thought and behavior."[30]

As Gramsci described it, civil society constitutes "the ensemble of organisms commonly called "private"."[31] and includes the myriad of institutions and social activities that are not directly part of the government, the legal structure, or the law and order enforcement agencies. It is this ensemble of the various educational, religious and corporate institutions, as well as the other voluntary associations in society that combine to constitute the ideological superstructure and which, it might be said, represents "the whole of ideological-cultural relations, (and) the whole of spiritual and intellectual life."[32] What these organizations in civil society have in common is the fact that they all incorporate social practices and conventions that are laden with a particular set of assumptions and values, a certain morality or ethics which, in turn, operate to shape or at least seriously influence the world view of their constituencies.

The outcome is a hegemonic order that reigns through the dissemination of a particular perspective of the world and of the relations within it which, in turn, gains wide acceptance among the majority of the population. It is the organization of consent to a certain dominant view of "reality." Gramsci is careful, however, to point out that hegemony is not to be regarded as simply a cultural or ideological influence. It is rather an active component of class relations, that is, one that

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[30] Ibid..

[31] Gramsci, in David Forgacs, **op. cit.**, p. 306.

[32] Norberto Bobbio, "Gramsci and the Conception of Civil Society", in Chantal Mouffe, (ed.), **Gramsci and Marxist Theory**, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1979), pp. 30-31.

"presupposes an active and practical involvement of the hegemonized groups." In his words, ".... though hegemony is ethico-political, it must also be economic, must necessarily be based on the decisive function exercised by the leading group in the decisive nucleus of economic activity."[33] Thus, Gramsci's elaboration of the notion of hegemony provides us with an insight as to how it operates as a process through which the economically dominant class succeeds in having the rest of the population accept the legitimacy of their own subordination.[34]

Other characteristics of the Gramscian notion of hegemony must also be understood. The first is that the hegemonic process is not something superficial but pervasive, permeating the social order to the extent that it eventually becomes incorporated in the "common sense" mind-set of people. Secondly, and more importantly as it relates to a theory for the production of alternative media, Gramsci's concept of hegemony represents a dynamic, dialectical process, the internal workings of which are constantly being negotiated. Since the hegemonic process involves a continuous struggle for the creation and maintenance of a system of alliances within the social structure, the opportunity for challenge and the prospect of change are forever present. As Gramsci notes, ".... the proletariat can become the leading [dirigente] and the dominant class to the extent that it succeeds in creating a system of class alliances which allow it to mobilize the majority of the population....."[35]

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[33] Gramsci, in David Forgacs, **op. cit.**, p. 229.

[34] Femia, **op. cit.**, p. 225.

[35] Gramsci, in David Forgacs, **op. cit.**, p. 173.

As discussed earlier in this chapter, Gramsci believed that any revolutionary social change required a certain cultural preparation. In reviewing certain periods of revolutionary change that have occurred at various times in the history of civilization, he remarked that, ".... it would be incomprehensible if we were not aware of the cultural factors that helped to create a state of mental preparedness for those explosions in the name of what was seen as a common cause."[36] Clearly, for Gramsci, a certain amount of hegemonic activity must accompany the realization of any structural change:

> .... the philosophy of praxis .... consists precisely in asserting the moment of hegemony as essential to its conception of the state and to the "accrediting" of the cultural fact, of cultural activity, of a cultural front as necessary alongside the merely economic and political ones.[37]

What he called for, therefore, was a process of intellectual and moral reform that would result in the creation of a new, common conception of the world. As he saw it, there must be "a cultural-social unity through which a multiplicity of dispersed wills with heterogeneous aims, are welded together with a single aim, as the basis of an equal and common conception of the world."[38]

Gramsci thus called for the dissemination of new ideas about man and society or, as he called it, ".... a turning of the popular mind to new principles."[39] To the extent that he believed phenomena such as beliefs, values, cultural traditions and myths function on a broad level to perpetuate the existing order, it followed for Gramsci that the struggle for liberation should involve the creation of a "counter-

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[36] Ibid., p. 59.

[37] Ibid., p. 194.

[38] Gramsci, **Selections from the Prison Notebooks**, op. cit., p. 349.

[39] Femia, **op. cit.**, p. 191.

hegemonic" world view or what he referred to as a new "integrated culture."[40] It is important to bear in mind, however, that in Gramsci's view these new conceptions of the world and these new guiding principles for human activity were not to be imposed upon the people from some outside source. Rather, he believed that they would flow out of a process which would involve a popular criticism of "common sense" which, in turn, would enable people to develop their own "good sense." In his words, ".... it is not a question of introducing from scratch a scientific form of thought into everyone's individual life, but of renovating and making "critical" an already existing activity."[41] He suggests that all that is needed is a little intellectual nurturing:

> The philosophy of praxis does not tend to leave the "simple" in their primitive philosophy of common sense, but rather to lead them to a higher conception of life. If it affirms the need for contact between intellectuals and simple it is not in order to restrict scientific activity and preserve unity at the low level of the masses, but precisely in order to construct an intellectual-moral bloc which can make politically possible the intellectual progress of the masses and not only of small intellectual groups.[42]

Historical Bloc

Any treatment of Gramsci's notion of historical bloc must necessarily begin by citing a fairly contentious passage contained in the preface to **A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy:**

> In the social production of their life, men enter into definite relations that are indispensable and independent of their will, relations of

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[40]   Boggs, **op. cit.,** p. 17.

[41]   Gramsci, in David Forgacs, **op. cit.,** p. 332.

[42]   Ibid., p. 333.

production which correspond to a definite stage of development of their material productive forces. The sum total of these relations of production constitutes the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which rises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general.[43]

It is in this way that historical materialism posited the relationship between the economic base and the ideological superstructure. From this perspective, the various forms of social consciousness, including ideologies, together with the relations emanating from the legal and political institutions constituted a "superstructure" which, it is suggested, is built upon and corresponds to a foundation or base which is constituted by the economic relations of production. In short, base or structure (economy) determines superstructure (consciousness).

Gramsci's contribution to historical materialist thought was to pronounce that human agency had a key role to play in the definition of "reality." For Gramsci, the superstructure was not merely a reflection of objective conditions. He argued against the position that superstructures are simply "apparent and illusory" and maintained that they were, rather, "an objective and operative reality." As he put it, ".... men become conscious of their social position, and therefore of their tasks, on the terrain of ideologies, which is no small affirmation of reality."[44] In an article which appeared in **Avanti**, in 1918, Gramsci wrote that,

Between the premisses (economic structure) and the consequence (political constitution) the relations are anything but simple and direct; and the history of a people is not documented by economic facts alone. The unravelling of the causation is a complex and involved process. To disentangle it requires nothing short of a

[43] Karl Marx, "Preface to a Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy," in Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, **Selected Works**, (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1975), p. 181.

[44] Gramsci, in David Forgacs, **op. cit.**, p. 196.

profound and wide-ranging study of every intellectual and practical activity..... it is not economic structure which directly determines political activity, but rather the way in which that structure and the so-called laws which govern its development are interpreted.[45]

Thus for Gramsci, structure and superstructure are not separate and distinct from each other. Instead, he saw their development as "intimately connected and necessarily interrelated and reciprocal," and he considered this reciprocity to be "nothing other than the real dialectical process."[46] In Gramsci's scheme of things, superstructural institutions exist as relatively autonomous organisms with a creative role to play in the historical process.

From Gramsci's perspective, economic facts in and of themselves are not regarded as decisive within the historical process. They "only create a terrain more favorable to the diffusion of certain modes of thought, and certain ways of posing and resolving questions concerning the entire subsequent development of national life".[47] More importantly, Gramsci suggested that economic conditions alone would not produce social change. Economic factors simply set the parameters within which such change may be possible.

In Gramsci's mind, what was crucial to the realization of social change were the "relations of force" that developed within society, ".... the degree of political organization and combativity of the opposing forces, the strength of the political alliances which they manage to bind together and their level of political consciousness...."[48] His was a dialectical conception of history in which human activity is seen as being shaped by social structures and which, at the same time, is

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[45]   Ibid., pp. 45-6.

[46]   Ibid., p. 193.

[47]   Femia, op. cit., p. 117.

[48]   Gramsci, in David Forgacs, op. cit., p. 190.

itself involved in the creation of new forms that seek to replace those very structures. As Carl Boggs succinctly states, Gramsci saw historical development as,

.... nothing more than the application of human will to the historical material that is available. ..... As the oppressed strata reach awareness of limitations imposed by class society and struggle to redefine and transcend those limitations, they take the initiative and begin to move towards emancipation precisely as their needs, demands, perceptions expand and then explode beyond the old structural boundaries that have contained them for so long.[49]

For Gramsci, social change (the realization of human freedom) is a conscious process which occurs when the people, through their relations with intellectuals, become "critically" conscious of their objective conditions and, as a consequence, undertake their transformation. It is this dialectical unity of subjective and objective conditions, of superstructure and structure, of intellectuals and the people, and ultimately, of theory and practice (praxis) which constitutes the essence of Gramsci's concept of the "historical bloc." In his words,

The concept of the concrete (historical) value of the superstructures in the philosophy of praxis must be enriched by juxtaposing it with Sorel's concept of the "historical bloc." If men become conscious of their social position and their tasks on the terrain of the superstructures, this means that between structure and superstructure a necessary and vital connection exists.[50]

The term historical bloc is important in Gramsci's work and has particular relevance to the main argument of this paper since it is a central concept which he employed

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[49] Ibid., p. 197.

[50] Ibid., p. 197.

in a theoretical effort to assign a certain relative autonomy to the superstructural element within the historical process. In Gramsci's model, knowledge, ideas and consciousness, undoubtedly have a creative role to play in altering the human condition.

War of Position

As has already been discussed, Gramsci recognized the process in contemporary Western society through which the dominant group exercised their preeminence over the people. Not only was there a system of formal control which emanated from political society, there also existed a certain system of informal control, a form of accepted discipline, i.e., hegemony, which managed to permeate all of the various organizations of civil society and, as such, impacted at all levels of society. Given the well-established nature of this type of order, Gramsci proposed that any structural change could not be attained by initiating a "frontal attack" on the state, but would only be achieved through the gradual but sustained development of a broad alliance of social forces that shared a common world view. This strategy of developing such a political alliance which would then become involved in the struggle for hegemony, he referred to as a "war of position".

Gramsci explained that objective conditions establish the parameters within which subjective conditions develop and that the nature of that development is dependent upon political organization. He believed that, in order for society to arrive at a condition of human emancipation, the various factions of the subordinate group would have to band together in a unified front against the forces of domination. As Roger Simon writes, Gramsci's position was that,

> .... a class cannot achieve national leadership, and become hegemonic, if it confines itself only to class interests; it must take into account the popular and democratic demands and struggles of the people which do not have a purely class character, that is which do not arise directly out of the relations of production. (i.e., women's movement, peace movement, environmentalists, etc..)[51]

Once an alliance of social movements is firmly established, the war of position can then be extended to the task of transforming the existing relations of civil society.

War of position was the term used by Gramsci to describe what he believed was the only effective strategy for achieving social and political change in contemporary Western society. It was a strategy for the formation and development of the vital "relations of force" which, he asserted were essential to the attainment of a "realm of freedom that is organized and controlled by the majority of the citizens." In his elaboration of certain "principles of historical methodology," he suggested that,

> The decisive element in every situation is the permanently organized and long prepared force which can be put into the field when it is judged that a situation is favourable (and it can be favourable only in so far as such a force exists and is full of fighting spirit). Therefore the essential task is that of systematically and patiently ensuring that this force is formed, developed and rendered ever more homogeneous, compact, and self-aware.[52]

Fundamental to the creation of this force was the development of a "collective political consciousness" which, in Gramsci's words, ".... marks the decisive passage from the structure to the sphere of the complex superstructures; it is the phase in which previously germinated ideologies become "party", come into confrontation

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[51] Simon, **op. cit.**, pp. 23-24.

[52] Gramsci, in David Forgacs, **op. cit.**, p. 208.

and conflict, until only one of them, or at least a single combination of them, tends to prevail...."[53] Gramsci's concept of war of position is thus synonymous with the idea of hegemonic strategy.

In his prison notes, Gramsci explored what he referred to as the "parallels between the concepts of war of manoeuvre and war of position in military science and the corresponding concepts in political science."[54] War of manoeuvre, in the military sense, involved the use of heavy artillery in a direct attack on the enemy, while in the political sense it implied a "frontal attack" on the state. Militarily, war of position involved "the whole organizational and industrial system of the territory which lies to the rear of the army in the field,"[55] while, as mentioned above, politically it involved ideological preparation. Gramsci pointed out that ".... in wars among the more industrially and socially advanced states, the war of manoeuvre must be considered as reduced to more of a tactical than a strategic function...." and he suggested that ".... the same reduction must take place in the art and science of politics."[56]

What this signified for Gramsci was the need for "genuine cultural confrontation." A "battle of ideas" would have to be waged at all levels of civil society in an effort to dislodge the "cornerstones" of the dominant value system, and he offered his advice in this regard:

> Specific necessities can be deduced from this for any cultural movement which aimed to replace common sense and old conceptions of the world in general:

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[53]   Ibid., p. 205.

[54]   Ibid., p. 225.

[55]   Ibid., p. 226.

[56]   Ibid., p. 227.

> 1. Never to tire of repeating its own argument (though offering literary variations of form): repetition is the best didactic means for working on the popular mentality.
> 2. To work incessantly to raise the intellectual level of ever-growing strata of the populace, in other words, to give a personality to the amorphous mass element. This means working to produce elites of intellectuals of a new type which arise directly out of the masses, but remain in contact with them to become, as it were, the whalebone in the corset.[57]

Gramsci and Alternative Media Production

As stated in Chapter I, all meaningful human activity requires a preconceived plan of action. Gramsci's theoretical work provides the basis for such a plan regarding the production of alternative media content and it is particularly applicable to the realm of television production. The following strategy is based on the ideas developed by Gramsci and presented above:

1. There is, first of all, a definite need to produce alternative media programming.

Gramsci stressed the role of the subjective element in the historical process, that is, the role of human will and ideas in the determination of human events and he underlined the importance of human communication in the overall process. Television provides a means for democratically diffusing a critical outlook on existing conditions and of raising political consciousness. Those that have a vision of another world, one in which the guiding principles are those of fellowship, freedom of choice, a more equitable distribution of the world's resources, peace, etc., must strive to share that vision with others. Humans in contact with one another, sharing

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[57]   Ibid., p. 340.

ideas about the human condition and developing through such contact an alliance of social forces with a collective social will - that is the driving force of historical development.

2. Quantitatively, production activity must be engaged in on a relatively large scale.

An effective alternative media strategy must necessarily involve the production of large volumes of cultural programming since "men are lazy, (and) they need to be organized .... within their thoughts and their will in a ceaseless continuity and multiplicity of external stimuli..."[58] As Gramsci points out, broad based social change will require,

> the diffusion of culture and the spread of ideas amongst masses of men who are at first resistant, and think only of solving their own immediate economic and political problems.... The bayonets of Napoleon's armies found their road already smoothed by an invisible army of books and pamphlets that had swarmed out of Paris from the first half of the eighteenth century and had prepared both men and institutions for the necessary renewal.[59]

3. Qualitatively, alternative media programming must incorporate a perspective that is a) critical of existing objective conditions; b) offers an alternative definition of reality based on a new set of values and guiding principles; and c) is accessible to the general population.

Structural change necessitates the destruction of the existing hegemonic order and its replacement with a counter-hegemony of the collectivity. In Gramsci's

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[58] Ibid., p. 34.

[59] Ibid., p. 58.

view, this process of development is tied to a dialectic between intellectuals the general population. People can only acquire a critical and coherent conception of the world with the help of intellectuals who are willing to share their higher level of "awareness" and, conversely, intellectuals must have a "feeling" for the people and their needs in order to be able to communicate effectively. For Gramsci, the capacity and willingness of an intellectual to convey his conceptual and philosophical thought to others is an intellectual endeavor of significant merit:

> Creating a new culture does not only mean one's own individual "original" discoveries. It also, and most particularly, means the diffusion in a critical form of truths already discovered, their "socialization" as it were, and even making them the basis of vital action, an element of co-ordination and intellectual and moral order. For a mass of people to be led to think coherently and in the same coherent fashion about the real present world, is a "philosophical" event far more important and "original" than the discovery by some philosophical "genius" of a truth which remains the property of small groups of intellectuals.[60]

4. Those involved in the production of alternative media must acquire the ability to produce "popular culture." In other words, they must strive to produce a cultural product that is popular, in the sense that it will appeal to the sensitivities of the populace.

One of the key lessons contained in Gramsci's prison notes is the idea that, for revolutionary change to occur, it is necessary to arrive at a condition where the public become ever more conscious of their own potential, of their own capacity to shoulder social responsibility and, in doing so, become the makers of their own destiny. Thus, social change that is democratic in nature necessarily requires that it

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[60] Ibid., p. 327.

become a "popular" phenomenon. What this suggests is that the theoretical aspect of social existence (i.e., critical philosophy) must acquire a language that speaks to the customs, needs and aspirations of the people.[61]

Gramsci believed that the Italian intellectuals of his period failed in their capacity as educators and leaders of the people because they did not know "how to elaborate a modern "humanism" able to reach right to the simplest and most uneducated classes..."[62] It follows, then, that in order to be able to present a popular account of ideas that will satisfy the intellectual needs of the general population, it is essential that the producers establish closer ties with the popular element. Only in this way will they get a feel for the, ".... elementary passions of the people, understanding them and therefore explaining and justifying them in the particular historical situation and connecting them dialectically to the laws of history and to a superior conception of the world..."[63] For as Gramsci asks,

> .... what should the so-called theatre of ideas be if not this, the representation of passions related to social behavior, with dramatic solutions which can depict a "progressive" catharsis, which can depict the drama of the most intellectually and morally advanced part of a society, that which expresses the historical growth immanent in present social behavior itself? This drama and these passions, though, must be represented and not expounded like a thesis or a propaganda speech. In other words, the author must live in the real world with all its contradictory needs and not express feelings absorbed merely from books.[64]

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[61] Boggs, **op. cit.**, p. 9.

[62] Gramsci, in David Forgacs, **op. cit.**, p. 369.

[63] Ibid., p. 349-50.

[64] Ibid. pp. 372-73.

5) Strategically, alternative media productions must include the full range of programming formats.

For the most part, what we know as alternative television programming consists of documentaries, talk shows, human interest stories, and the like, which present a critical analysis that is overtly opposed to the dominant hegemonic world view. This type of programming closely resembles the "frontal attack" notion described by Gramsci in his prison writings. What is required is more of a strategic "war of position" approach which would see a full range of alternative programming content produced to include such formats as sitcoms, drama, children's programs, etc., incorporating a new set of values and offering a new vision of the world and new ways of arriving at solutions to our problems. The task of providing people with a new conceptual framework which operates to transform their ways of thinking and being will require creativity and innovation in terms of producing popular programming in the formats for which they have already demonstrated an interest. As Gramsci points out:

> Folklore must not be considered an eccentricity, an oddity or a picturesque element, but as something which is very serious and is to be taken seriously. Only in this way will the teaching of folklore be more efficient and really bring about the birth of a new culture among the broad popular masses, so that the separation between modern culture and popular culture of folklore will disappear.[65]

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[65] Ibid., p. 362.

CHAPTER V

TAKING A PROACTIVE STANCE:

A CRITIQUE OF CRITICAL PASSIVITY

Anybody who advises us not to make use of such new apparatus [the media] just confirms the right of the apparatus to do bad work; he forgets himself out of sheer open-mindedness, for he is thus proclaiming his willingness to have nothing but dirt produced for him.

Bertolt Brecht[1]

Undeniably, the strategy we are able to piece together from Gramsci's prison notes is incomplete. As others have already suggested, we are not provided with a clear picture of how the various elements of the superstructure are interrelated and of precisely how they may impact on political society or the state. Nor are we given any firm indication of the nature of any alternative hegemonic rule or of how any future society may be organized so as to allow for a truly democratic expression of the collective will.[2]

Gramsci's most important contribution to social and political theory was to emphasize the fact that historical development was a dialectical process and that a primary moment in such a process involved struggle at the subjective or ideological level of human existence. The key concept here is struggle, that is, the clash between opposing forces out of which arises a new reality. Dialectics require fuel

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[1]   Bertolt Brecht, **On Theatre**, (London: Methuen, 1964), p. 47.

[2]   See, Joseph V. Femia, **Gramsci's Political Thought: Hegemony, Consciousness and the Revolutionary Process.** (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1981), and Walter L. Adamson, **Hegemony and Revolution: A Study of Antonio Gramsci's Political and Cultural Theory,** (Berkley: University of California Press, 1980).

and they are fueled by the intrinsic dynamics of the opposing forces at play. Unless the competing elements are comparably charged, the dominant side will reign supreme.

The "struggle over meaning" is such a dialectical process. Echoing Gramsci's perspective on the historical process, Stuart Hall has suggested that, "the signification of events is part of what has to be struggled over, for it is the means by which collective social understandings are created - and thus the means by which consent for particular outcomes can be effectively mobilized."[3] Hall recognizes that television operates to produce a certain form of social knowledge. The viewing public are presented with a selectively constructed social imagery which, in turn, enables them to reconstruct in their minds some intelligible "lived totality". As our lives become increasingly more fragmented, more and more are people coming to rely on information conveyed via the media for "making sense" of the world in which they live. In Hall's words, the media represent

> the site of an enormous ideological labour, of ideological work: establishing the "rules" of each domain, actively ruling in and ruling out certain realities, offering the maps and codes which mark out territories and assign problematic events and relations to explanatory contexts, helping us not simply to know more about "the world" but to make sense of it.[4]

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[3]   Stuart Hall, "The Rediscovery of 'Ideology': Return of the Repressed in Media Studies," in Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran and Janet Woollacott (eds.), **Culture, Society and the Media,** (London: Methuen & Co. Ltd., 1982), p. 70.

[4]   Stuart Hall, "Culture, the Media and the 'Ideological Effect'," in James Curran, Michael Gurevitch and Janet Woollacott, **Mass Communication and Society,** (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, Inc., 1979), p. 341.

It is not suggested that the social images conveyed through television reflect a monolithic view of the outside world to which its viewers summarily acquiesce. Mainstream television, in fact, presents us with all of the contradictions inherent in our everyday existence, including both dominant definitions as well as oppositional ones. As theorists such as Hall and Todd Gitlin have explained, how television operates to reproduce the "ideological field" of Western society and, in so doing, reproduce its "structure of domination" is not so much through programming content as through the established "frame" of discourse within which its material is presented.[5]

However, employing Gramsci's strategy, the work of Hall and Gitlin is incomplete. While their theoretical accomplishments are commendable, the challenge remains for them to have their critical insights translated into a popularized form which is accessible to the general population. If we are serious about our desire to create a world in which decisions are made freely, by an informed citizenry, then it is imperative that those who have attained a higher level of awareness devote significant effort to ensuring that those at the lower levels do, in fact, become informed. If gains are to be made in the "struggle over meaning", critical theory is not enough. Only by actively working to present and explain such theory in accessible terms through a democratic medium such as television will we arrive at a state where the public become aware of what may be preventing them from achieving a different world. The first phase in an alternative media strategy, therefore, must be to produce material which will help to arrive at a popular

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5   See Stuart Hall's work cited above, and Todd Gitlin,
"Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in
Television   Entertainment," in Horace Newcomb (ed.),
Television: The Critical View, (New York: Oxford
University Press, 1987), pp. 507-32.

understanding of how mainstream media achieve their ideological effects so that ordinary people can be inspired to begin discerning their own world view. Then, and only then will the public be adequately prepared to make crucial choices about values and about the social problems that affect them.

Many commentators have expressed their concerns about television and what they see are its negative influence. Most of these, however, represent an elitist stance which views television as being responsible for the homogenization of society, or as serving to lower the level of intelligence of the general population to the lowest common denominator, while others view it as contributing to the moral and spiritual bankruptcy of its audience. Still others are more fanatically critical and openly hostile towards the medium. Joyce Nelson, for example, refers to television as "the 'good whore': readily accessible, instantly "on", inexpensive and non-demanding, providing pleasure and momentary satisfaction, promising more if we stay tuned.[6]

Referring to brain research conducted in the late 1960s, Nelson suggests that, while a person is watching television, the left side of the brain which controls the logical and analytical information processing functions tunes out, while the right side which processes information emotionally and noncritically continues to function. She then goes on to assert that, "To live sanely in the world, one needs both hemispheres of the neo-cortex fully engaged in one's experience," although she admits that "there are times and situations when one or the other hemisphere is dominant."[7] Nelson's position is that since television engages our emotions which

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6   Joyce Nelson, **The Perfect Machine: TV in the Nuclear Age,** (Toronto: Between the Lines, 1987), pp. 170-71.

7   Ibid., p. 71.

cause us to perceive the world "in terms of past emotional experiences" and which may not always be consciously remembered, it is of no value and should therefore be avoided.

Two points need to be made in this regard. Firstly, the very aspect of television which Nelson views as worthless, i.e., that it tends to engage our emotions, is precisely what Tony Schwartz, the advertising campaign mastermind, suggests must be properly exploited for television to be effective.[8] Schwartz's "resonance theory" argues that how effective a television message will be is dependent upon the extent to which it relates to the feelings, moods, emotions, etc., which are already present in the viewing audience. According to Schwartz,

> That which we put into the communication has no meaning in itself. The meaning of our communication is what a listener or viewer gets out of his experience with the communicator's stimuli. The listener's or viewer's brain is an indispensable component of the total communication system. His life experiences, as well as his expectations of the stimuli he is receiving, interact with the communicators' output in determining the meaning of the communication.[9]

It is this very ability to understand the feelings and emotions of the people, as well as the kinds of information and experiences stored within them which Gramsci suggested needed to be acquired and then practiced in order to produce a popular communication form that would evoke a certain critical awareness. Only through such popular communication can we expect to develop a certain "cultural preparedness" that is a necessary precondition to achieving any qualitative social change.

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[8] Tony Schwartz, The Responsive Chord, (Garden City, N.Y.: Anchor Press/Doubleday, 1974).

[9] Ibid., p. 25.

The second point to be made in connection with Nelson's views on television relates to her suggestion that watching television tends to shut down the left hemisphere of the brain, disengaging its information processing capabilities. I would argue that television messages are generally replete with presentational information provided by the visual imagery as well as with discursive information that is contained in the narrative. Evidence would appear to suggest that the analytical skills of television viewers are not totally obliterated as they expose themselves to "the tube". A CHEK Television news story of February 27, 1989 reported that the U.S. Health Protection Branch was bombarded with telephone calls all day long as the result of a report aired on the CBS network's "60 Minutes" program of February 26, 1989, which suggested that traces of chemical pesticides found in apple juice posed a serious cancer threat to those exposed to it. Quite obviously, not everyone's left hemisphere was anesthetized by that program.

Nelson's argument is that "without the critical left hemisphere analyzing and involved, the right hemisphere is free to accept and act upon suggestions or commands, even nonsensical ones."[10] The question I ask, then, is why not take advantage of this situation by introducing some "sensible" ideas or concepts. Alan Swingewood has written that, "To reject capitalist culture as a whole is to misunderstand its contradictory development and to miss the critical point of the potentially liberative qualities of modern mass production and social relations."[11] If, as Nelson suggests, "whoever controls the screen controls the future, the past and

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[10]   Joyce Nelson, **op. cit.**, p. 72.

[11]   Alan Swingewood, **The Myth of Mass Culture**, (London: The MacMillan Press Ltd., 1977), p. 8.

the present,"[12] what have we to gain by sitting back and passively relinquishing control. Such a strategy represents nothing more than a nihilistic capitulation to the dominant order.

An appropriate objective should be the production of a vast selection of alternative media programming so that the public is at least offered a true choice in terms of what they are able to view on their television sets. The technology which is now used to diffuse a particular ideology can also be used for counter-hegemonic purposes. What is required is a concerted effort to produce high-quality alternative programming that is entertaining so that it will have popular appeal.

Today's increased transmission and reception capabilities has resulted in the need for a constant supply of new programming material. While, admittedly, a certain effort will also need to be applied to the task of gaining access to the airwaves, the new multi-channel television environment that has emerged as a result of satellite and cable technology will undoubtedly make such access more easily attainable. As Douglas Kellner suggests, "Today the networks will show just about anything that will increase their profits and competitive position in the ratings. Hence, if the audience responds to critical realism, subversive programs, or any type of potentially emancipatory culture, the networks will, with certain limits, probably play it."[13] Furthermore, recent statistics reveal that nearly forty percent of Canadian households are equipped with VCRs. This form of television technology now enables viewers to choose television programming from video stores and libraries

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[12] Nelson, **op. cit.,** p. 82.

[13] Douglas Kellner, "TV, Ideology, and Emancipatory
      Popular Culture," in Horace Newcomb (ed.), **Television:
      The Critical View,** (New York: Oxford University Press,
      1987), p. 499.

that is altogether different from that offered over the airwaves. Again, what is essential is that a wide variety of high quality alternative programming be made available in the appropriate format.

Tony Schwartz has written that "TV has a very mild effect in one sense - it makes certain knowledge available to us. The strength of the effect lies in TV's ability to make this knowledge available to everyone."[14] As Joshua Meyrowitz has pointed out, unlike the written word, television reaches people of all ages, any educational level, both sexes and every socio-economic background. In short, the messages conveyed via television are accessible to anyone who is able to make sense of them. People access information via television that they would never bother to read about in a book. This "shared information environment" fostered by television has the effect of leading to "a common awareness and greater sharing of options."[15]

Television, of course, does not itself possess the power to change society, simply the power to expose. It has the power to expose a very large segment of the population to new ways of seeing, new ways of understanding and new ways of behaving. Its power lies in the fact that it provides us with "direct access to people's minds."[16] Nonetheless, television should not be viewed in isolation from other agencies involved in defining our world. It represents only one of a number of factors that operate to influence popular opinion. And while its influence may be relatively powerful in relation to other communication forms, that influence is not necessarily of the same intensity on all of the people that it touches.

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[14] Schwartz, op. cit., p. 18.

[15] Joshua Meyrowitz, No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 134.

[16] Schwartz, op. cit., p. 67.

Finally, we must guard against viewing television and its institutional structure as a predetermined and unalterable entity. As with all other forms of technology, television can be transformed so that it becomes what we want it to be. If we accept Gramsci's belief that man makes his own destiny, then all that is required is the collective will to effect the necessary changes. In the words of Raymond Williams:

> .... neither the theory nor the practice of television as we know it is a necessary or predicting cause. Current orthodox theory and practice are, on the contrary, effects. Thus whether the theory and the practice can be changed will depend not on the fixed properties of the medium nor on the necessary character of its institutions, but on a continually renewable social action and struggle.[17]

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[17] Raymond Williams, **Television: Technology and Cultural Form**, (New York: Schocken Books, 1975), p. 134.

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