GROWING OURSELVES TO DEATH? ECONOMIC AND ECOLOGICAL CRISES, THE GROWTH OF WASTE, AND THE ROLE OF THE MEDIA AND CULTURAL INDUSTRIES

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Abstract

Since the financial crash of 2008, large sectors of capitalist economies have been enveloped by a crisis that is typically represented by media discourses in purely economic and financial terms. However, the crisis is also ecological. Yet, while media discourses frequently embrace and propose small-scale environmental remedies, it is rarely pointed out that such calls stand at odds with the consumer capitalist system under which the media industries operate. Adopting a 'business as usual' approach to consumption, the media industries encourage the public to shop their way out of recession, despite crippling austerity measures that have been imposed on them. This is in the face of an unprecedented ecological crisis which is now largely accepted as due to anthropogenic factors. In light of this ecological crisis, continued growth-based economic paradigms are increasingly deemed unsustainable. Yet frequently, media discourse uncritically takes growth and waste as two aspects of an unchanging and necessary paradigm. Against this backdrop of economic and ecological crises this paper draws on a set of critical cross-disciplinary literature from Harvey's political economy, to Foster and Moore's political ecology to Baran and Sweezy on waste, through to Adorno, Bourdieu and Garnham, to identify and engage with the strategic role of the media. It outlines crisis theories of economy and ecology, moving on to discuss crucial, if neglected aspects of the role of the media and cultural industries with respect to these crises. This paper advances the view that the role of the media in construction of norms with respect to consumption practices and waste is of significance and arguably needs to be incorporated into crisis theory of both economy and ecology.

Keywords: Crisis, Capital, Political Economy, Ecology, Waste, Media

¿Creciendo Hacia la Muerte? Crisis Económica y Ecológica, el Crecimiento de la Basura y el Rol de las Industrias Mediáticas y Culturales

Resumen

Desde el crack financiero de 2008, amplios sectores de la economía capitalista se han visto inmersos en una crisis que los medios suelen presentan

en términos exclusivamente económicos y financieros. Sin embargo, la crisis es también una crisis ecológica. Aun así, mientras los discursos mediáticos alientan reparaciones medioambientales de pequeña escala, raramente se les escucha decir que tales ideas son contrarias al sistema capitalista de consumo en el que la industria mediática opera. Al entender el consumo desde un abordaje de 'business as usual' las industrias mediáticas proponen al público que para salir de la recesión hay que salir de shopping, a pesar de las tremendas medidas de austeridad que se le han impuesto. Esto ocurre frente a una crisis ecológica sin precedentes, que tiene causas antropogénicas, tal como se ha aceptado recientemente. En función de esta crisis ecológica, los paradigmas económicos del crecimiento continuo han sido considerados como insustentables. Sin embargo, usualmente el discurso mediático considera de modo acrítico al crecimiento y la generación de basura como dos aspectos de un paradigma necesario y que no cambia. Considerando la crisis económica y ecológica actual, este artículo se basa en un cuerpo de literatura trans-disciplinaria que va desde la economía política de Harvey, hasta la ecología política de Foster y Moore, los escritos de Baran y Sweezy sobre basura, Adorno, Bourdieu y Garnham, para identificar y entender el rol estratégico de los medios. Asimismo, se describen algunas teorías sobre las crisis económica y ecológica, para luego discutir aspectos centrales e ignorados del rol de los medios y las industrias culturales en estas crisis. El artículo propone la idea de que el rol de los medios en la construcción de normas sobre prácticas de consumo y basura es determinante y necesita ser incorporada a las teorías sobre la crisis de la economía y la ecología.

Palabras clave: Crisis, Capital, Economía política, Ecología, Basura, Medios de Comunicación.

1. Introduction: There Is No Alternative

Six years into what is sometimes termed the 'Great Recession', it has become clear that the very neoliberal policies understood to have caused economic instability have remained alive and well. Indeed, the extension of these policies is frequently deemed the only solution to the continuing economic crisis. This state of affairs even has a name – TINA – in honour of apologists who still tout that *There Is No Alternative*. Whilst many alternative or non-mainstream economic analysts have pointed out that austerity measures put in place in many economies, especially in the EU, to prop up the system are only compounding the problem, the footing of the bill of private debts by public citizenry is proclaimed as the only way to jump-start countries back to economic growth.

Despite accounts that stress the failures of austerity measures, the analysis of the current crisis in mainstream economics has revealed 'the paucity of what passes for academic economic theory' (Choonara 2009). In the face of this paucity, there has been a revival in Marxist political economy that robustly contributes to the analysis of the current crisis, largely charging itself with the complexities of financialisation (see Choonara 2009, 2011 and 2012 for summary accounts of same). However, these accounts and analyses do not often garner media attention, with the mainstream media such as TV/radio broadcast news, journalism, and online streams of major media outlets tending to reflect the offerings of mainstream economics, by adopting the conventional economic analysis uncritically. This description of the dominant drift is not intended as a generalising of all media – exceptions can and do provide counters to the dominant discourse. However, tendencies in mainstream media, including digital media, are towards a similar 'paucity' of critique that has been levelled at the economics domain.

It is important to analyse and critique these tendencies, given that the dominant discourses of the 'information society' and the 'digital age' promise the end of old dominant, hegemonic discourses whilst stressing the potentials of digital and networked media to supply us with endless streams of alternative and enlightening perspectives. Certainly, the media and cultural industries act as a site of idea-making and generation of normative economic practices around consumerism, particularly through advertising in its increasingly sophisticated forms. Therefore, these industries comprise an important domain through which to investigate potentials and limits to critiquing unsustainable economic and ecological practices

amidst the ongoing crises of those systems. Contrary to the 'information society' hubris, it is simplistic to assume that unilaterally positive media interventions around critical economic and ecological issues are possible, when their relative positioning in the economy is adequately investigated. Indeed, when the political economy of media and communication is examined, these industries can be seen as acting within the economy as a 'cultural apparatus' in the service of capital (Baran and Sweezy 2013b: 45). Thus, a critical analysis of the position of media relative to the overall economy reveals a set of industries complicit in encouraging waste through the 'sales effort' (Baran and Sweezy 2013a: 34) whilst being increasingly concerned with making profits over making news. Therefore, any rush to the conclusion that positive change in economic and ecological practices can happen through the adoption of strategies that hinge on media influence is highly simplistic and misleading.

2. Economic Crisis and the Hegemony of TINA

2.1 A Helping Hand or Accumulation by Dispossession?

As the economic crisis unfolded, not only private banks but entire states requested and received bailouts from various institutions such as the EU's European Financial Stability Facility and the International Monetary Fund (IMF). These bailout requests proved that the extent to which faith was placed in the markets' ability to self-recover was wholly unwarranted, poking gaping holes in the viability of neoliberal fiscal policies. In ironic move, bailout conditions put in place were typically neoliberal in scope, with assumptions that this was the only way forward. Indeed, under neoliberalism in general, this state-finance nexus that sees state agencies taking advice from financial institutions, is assumed to be the only way of keeping capital flowing (Harvey 2010: 49). This arrangement is deemed legitimate and above board, furthermore, through the involvement of supra-state agencies such as the IMF. Notions of 'accumulation by dispossession', or forced dispossession through violent or coercive means have been considered a thing of the past in an advanced and 'rational' economy. Arguably however, this practice is alive and well in neoliberal policies such as privatisation of state resources that were previously considered 'common property resources' (ibid.). Frequently, part of the IMF 'recovery' strategy stipulates the privatisation of natural resources such as water, forestry and gas. In line with the general rules of neoliberal capital, resources considered part of the 'commons' which traditionally included health and education, are increasingly handed over to private interests for their administration and profit-making, if not outright ownership. Thus, projects that were developed under socialised conditions are removed from social control, thus dispossessing the citizenry whilst facilitating private interests who had no hand in their development. An extension of this is evident in the vulture capitalism practiced by private equity groups, whose role is to take over public companies, 'rationalise' the workforce, asset strip the company and then return the company back to the public domain once it is profitable to do so (Harvey 2010: 50).

It is important to stress that this process is not the 'invisible hand' of the market, as neoliberal ideology would have us believe, but happens through the state intervention and international agreements on capital movement and circulation. Institutions such as the World Bank and the IMF, the OECD and G7/G20 are influential in ensuring an 'evolving global financial architecture for an international version of the state–finance nexus' (Harvey 2010: 51). Over time, these institutions reconfigure legislation to facilitate the free flow of capital, such as in the growth of credit systems, as lending for capital investment is fundamental to continued capital expansion. Thus there is a move away from 'municipal social' projects to market-based ones, where the generation and pursuit of profits inevitably takes precedent over social consideration.

2.2 The Waste Economy

This growth in credit systems and the financial sector can be seen as a contemporary phase in the overall stage of monopoly capital (Foster 2010). Originally formulated by Paul Baran and Paul Sweezy in the 1960s, the theory of monopoly capital holds that since around the turn of the 20th century, capital has been characterised not by dynamic economic activity but by monopolistic and oligolopolistic tendencies,

and less by competition but by cartel-like operations and price-fixing. According to the theory, this has led to stagnation tendencies in capitalist economies due to excessive capacity or economic surplus generated. According to the theory of monopoly capital, consumption and investment cannot keep pace with productive capacity, and the core underlying tendency to stagnation presents itself eventually in crisis.

Central to Baran and Sweezy's analysis of the monopoly stage of capitalism is the argument that excess surplus needs to find outlets, in what they describe as the growth of the 'waste' economy. This waste economy is comprised of channels that do not provide a use-value, but are centred on exchange value that provides yet more profits without a value based in the material, 'real' or productive economy. Baran and Sweezy describe how the destruction wrought by WWII absorbed some surplus after the depression of the 1930s, and after WWII military spending during the cold war era also helped both with the absorption of surplus, and thus with veiling the general tendency to stagnation (Foster 2013b: 2). Thus, until the crisis of the 1970s, the monopoly stage was cushioned by the absorption of surplus in wasteful practices, constituting a waste economy. Also included in this part of the unproductive economy is what Baran and Sweezy termed the 'sales effort' of advertising, which included wasteful practices such as 'spurious product differentiation, artificial physical and/or "moral" obsolescence' (Baran and Sweezy 2013a: 35).

It is important to note that when this theory was advanced, industrial capital predominated, with industry able to finance investments through profits, with little or no need for finance. However, when the underlying stagnation presented itself in the late 1970s, a new and unanticipated stimulus of financialisation emerged, whereby 'unable to find profitable outlets for their investment-seeking surplus within the productive economy, corporations/capitalists, sought to augment their money capital by means of financial speculation, while the financial system in its turn responded to this increased demand for its "products" with a bewildering array of new financial instruments—including stock futures, options, derivatives, hedge funds, etc (Foster 2006: 8-9). Thus, by the 1980s, the economy had as a significant component 'a financial superstructure that increasingly took on a life of its own' (ibid.). However, this autonomy was relative, with eventual connections back to the 'real' economy. Nonetheless it can be seen as a distinct phase in the overall stage of monopoly capital, Foster terming the phase 'monopoly-finance capital' (Foster 2006). In this phase, financialisation is formulated as another symptom of the underlying stagnation tendency of the monopoly capital stage. Thus, financialisation can be thought of as occurring in parallel with the tendency to stagnation. The contemporary centrality of finance in the economy can be seen as another symptom of the monopoly stage as surplus transfers from the 'real' economy into the finance economy.

It must be noted however, that the waste economy not only has an ephemeral dimension in its current incarnation as increasing financialisation but a tangible dimension in resource use, industrial waste and consumer waste in a 'throwaway' culture. Just as shopping was the most patriotic act an American could have done post 9/11, in the phase of monopoly-finance capital the indebted citizen is once again charged with driving the economy back to growth while placing unprecedented stress on the finite resources of the ecosystem.

Waste therefore constitutes a significant part of the contemporary economy, with the 'real' economy propping up this increasingly significant aspect. However, this does not solve stagnation tendencies, and it is the case that 'historical experience suggests that while the financial expansion has helped to absorb surplus it has not been able to lift the productive economy out of stagnation to any appreciable degree—so the two realities of stagnation and financial explosion coexist' (Foster 2006: 10). The relative decoupling of the financialised part of the waste economy from the productive economy not only undermines 'real' wealth further but because the waste has a physical dimension generates a 'socio-ecological malaise that is spreading in all directions at once' (Foster 2013b: 2). It is to this socio-ecological malaise, and waste in this context, that we now turn.

3. The Socio-Ecological Malaise

3.1 Innovation as Elixir and the Production of Nature

In mature capitalist economies characterised by stagnation tendencies and a need to find areas of waste to absorb capital surplus, technological innovation is seen as a necessary elixir to drive growth and consumption. This is seen in the predominance of technological determinist perspectives in the media and policy discourses (see Preston 2001 for an account), to the marginalising of discussions of the potentials of social and cultural innovations. In ecological matters the 'technological fix' also commands sway, with 'eco-modernisers' propounding the view that technological invention will solve the myriad dimensions to the ecological crisis (see Hamilton 2013 for accounts of promethean attempts to find techno-fixes to same).

This has led to a situation whereby the fetishism for technological innovation is 'fed upon to the degree that innovation itself becomes a business that seeks to form its own market by persuading each and every one of us that we cannot survive without having the latest gadget and gismo at our command' (Harvey 2010: 91). Thus, the return to growth in capitalist economies has become increasingly dependent on consumption of the latest technological innovations. However, it is now well established that the marks that this 'century of the self' has left on nature are all but indelible. The very system that has used the 'free gifts' of nature for accumulation, at once treats nature as an externality. The system is built fundamentally on growth, and in its quest for new sites for both accumulation and absorption of capital, has expanded spatially, transforming swathes of the earth for incorporation into the system. When one region has supplied all it can, capital moves on, leaving its detritus behind in a visceral manifestation of the waste economy. Thus, with its innovations that perpetuate and expand possibilities for growth, capital also transforms the earth upon which it acts. Added to that, the material and spatial dimensions to growth are cumulative, with the iterations of growth over time being more and more profound spatially and materially over time (see Harvey 2014: 222-245 for a comprehensive overview of this argument).

We can consider the 'production of nature' as part of the economic process of capitalism. Yet capitalism 'externalises' nature, and indeed the capitalist system sets norms on our perceptions of nature as 'other' or 'out there' to be dominated, controlled and manipulated for human, or specifically, capitalist ends, often under the guise of innovation. As Neil Smith eloquently notes:

> Much as a tree in growth adds a new ring each year, the social concept of nature has accumulated innumerable layers of meaning in the course of history. Just as felling the tree exposes these rings – before the timber is sent to the saw mill for fashioning into a human artefact – industrial capitalism has cut into the accumulated meanings of nature so that they can be shaped and fashioned into concepts of nature appropriate for the present era (Smith 2008: 11).

Thus, the concepts that situate humans outside nature, and nature as 'other' and subject to domination, are manifestations of the logic of capital, while also functioning as helpful conceptual accessories to capital expansion. Smith notes that the 'old concepts of nature are less vanquished than co-opted to the present purpose', in a process that instrumentalises nature and reduces its complexities to a dualism (Smith 2008: 11). On one hand, nature is seen as 'universal' and in another it is seen as 'external'. It is universal in that it surrounds us and is everlasting and ever bountiful for our use amidst its domination, whilst at once it is external in that it is pristine and god-given, and thus not under our stewardship for protection or preservation (Smith 2008: 11). It can look after itself. In this ideology, nature is also external in that it is uncivilised, unlike humans, and therefore a wild system to be dominated, tamed, and fashioned to our will, rather than being looked after. Despite this dualistic conception, each concept dialectically depends on the other, in that once nature is externalised as other and objectified, it becomes something to be tamed and used as a universal and everlasting good. However, even as this conceptual externalisation occurs, humans are

deeply embedded in natural processes whilst at once those processes are veiled from them in the capitalist production process. Indeed, 'nature has been tamed enough now that the hostile connotations are generally reserved for extreme, infrequent events such as high seas, floods, and hurricanes' (Smith 2008: 28).

This position indicates that a holistic and non-reductionist conception of nature is largely precluded in the current economic system. A dialectical relationship has been reduced to dualities of 'nature versus society' or 'economic versus ecological crisis'. It is also seen in discourses of 'the environment', that implies a separate system outside the borders of capitalism. The economy is thus seen to affect the external, othered environment, or vice versa, where the environment is seen to affect the possibilities of continual and perpetual growth in the economy. Whatever the starting point, the premise is of dual autonomous systems that are converging in an 'epochal crisis' (Foster 2013b).

3.2 Dualism and Dialectics of Nature

Foster's perspective takes the normative position of a dual system as a departure point that attempts to transcend dualistic thinking on matters economic and ecological. Pointing to this conceptual dualism between systems, he observes how 'an urgent necessity for the world today is [...] to develop an understanding of the interconnections between the deepening impasse of the capitalist economy and the rapidly accelerating ecological threat – itself a by-product of capitalist development' (Foster 2013b: 1). This perspective acknowledges the pervasive impact of our economic development on the environment. While at first glance this position may seem dualistic, Foster foregrounds the imperative of dialoguing with the two conceptual domains of economy and ecology in a dialectical way to analyse how the economy and the environment are deeply interconnected. Foster emphasises the need to dialectically engage with the historically-rare convergence of these two concerns, usually treated as separate. He reminds us that 'the material conditions of society as a whole are undermined, posing the question of a historical transition to a new mode of production' (ibid.: 1). Such an epochal crisis also signaled the transition from feudalism to capitalism (Moore 2002) and therefore needs to be treated dialectically in order to best understand the complex processes and interactions between economy and ecology.

In Foster's formulation, the theoretical concern lies with understanding the epochal nature of this crisis. In this light, nature is 'in' capital, in that nature is brought into, and internalised into capital, and not deemed external to it for the purposes of appropriation. Indeed, this perspective can be seen as close to Smith's (2007) 'production all the way down' where he argues that the commodification of nature is not a minor feature of social arrangements but has become generalised into a 'global ambition' (Smith: 2007: 7). More recently, Harvey (2014) foregrounded the production of nature perspective in acknowledging how nature is *in* capitalism and is 'internalised within the circulation and accumulation of capital' (Harvey 2014: 247). Thus, nature itself can be reconfigured in capital through, for example, genetic engineering, chemical use on the land, and the remaking of environments into built environments. For Harvey, this in itself is not unnatural, observing how 'many organisms actively produce a nature conducive to their own reproduction and humans are no exception' (ibid.). However the social and natural interactions under capital are quite particular in that 'capital, as a specific form of human activity, does the same, but increasingly in the name of capital and not of humanity' (ibid.).

This perspective is pertinent and useful as it justifies the emphasis here on involving ecological issues in theories of crisis formation, especially in the contemporary period. Foster's perspective is different in its starting position to the work of Jason Moore, who nonetheless agrees with Foster that there is an epochal crisis, of which capitalism and the environment are constitutive. However, Moore stresses the need to consider capitalism as an ecological regime, existing *in* nature rather than considering a Cartesian dualism, a view of which he accuses Foster of holding (Moore 2011). However, this accusation of dualism approaches semantics, as a truly dialectical approach would see nature *in* capitalism every bit as much of a dialectical function as Moore's concept of capitalism

in nature. The dialectic unveils and makes manifest the interconnectedness of the two concepts, with their internal processes, contradictions and tensions. Thus, they are both *in* each other, and to start with one area of inquiry rather than the other does not necessarily constitute a dualism. Indeed, Foster's analysis of this particular crisis situates a capitalist one that is made epochal once the ecological dimension is introduced into a dialectical analysis. Therefore, analysis of this capitalist crisis is made more thorough with the necessary inclusion of the ecological tension and contradiction therein, which heretofore was excluded from crisis theory.

Harvey and Smith analysed the spatial dimension to capitalist production, with capital in a constant global and spatial flow that affects nature through its action on it. Until this crisis, capital's evolving logic did not face the internal contradiction of absolute global natural limits, but local ones that could be transcended and thus externalised. Indeed, Moore is strong on this point. What makes this crisis epochal is that for the first time, capital is now known to be challenging absolute limits of the planet in a series of tipping points and in doing so, is dangerously flirting with the absolute capacity of the planet's ability to replenish itself.

3.3 From the Dialectical to the Metabolic

Interpretations of the argument over dualism versus the dialectic with respect to economy and ecology partly lies in how Marx discussed capitalist production in terms of a social process that takes place within 'the universal metabolism of nature' (Foster 2013b: 5). As Foster explains, quoting Marx, 'material use values were appropriated from "the natural world" and transformed by production into social use values to fit "human needs". This constituted "the universal condition for the metabolic interaction between nature and man, and as such is a natural condition of human life."' (ibid.). Thus, nature provides real wealth independent of human intervention, in a metabolism that can exist without humans at all – although it would be a different metabolic system without humans. In this way, Marx's observations encompass both the capitalism *in* nature and the nature *in* capitalism perspectives. Capital is an ecological regime that transforms nature 'all the way down', but its processes also take place within nature and is thus influenced by it. Marx was aware of this relationship as an absolute and non-negotiable one, and one to which society must conform. Otherwise it is subject to an '"irreparable rift in the interdependent process of social metabolism" associated with capitalisms transgression of "the natural laws of life itself."' (ibid.). Marx's concept of metabolism thus provides a way of acknowledging that production is a social process dependent on the resources from which humans produce. If humans degrade the resources to total depletion, production by humans will no longer be possible.

Foster observes that Marx's 'metabolic rift' theory, (the rift between nature and society) has been used to analyse the ecological crisis, but it has not been employed to discuss commodity capitalism and the issues of 'use-value production' (Foster 2013b: 5). Therefore, a key enquiry hinges on the evolution of capitalism from a more primitive exchange mechanism to a sophisticated financialised system, and how that has interacted with the environment in terms of increasing levels of waste. Therefore, in order to understand metabolic rift in its evolving economic context, we need to consider the shift in types of capitalism from competitive capitalism to capitalism in its monopoly stage, including the monopoly-finance phase and the waste economy. This view is compatible with Moore's World Systems approach.

Thorstein Veblen 'argued that the production of waste [...] had become integral to the new corporate economy as a means of enhancing sales and profits in face of limited demand' (Foster 2013b: 6). As seen earlier, this perspective was expanded upon by Baran and Sweezy, who observed how the increasing spending on the so-called waste economy served 'as a means of surplus absorption' in the economy (ibid.). Such waste spending included military spending, but also implicates the media and cultural industries including the advertising industry as a 'cultural apparatus' that served to absorb surplus in the monopoly stage. When we consider the metabolism of monopoly-finance capitalism, we see that in this

phase, use value is no longer a 'rational expression of production costs' (ibid.). Use value has become metabolised into the system to such a degree that it can be difficult to extract from advertising and sales costs. Thus, 'an ever-larger proportion of what were considered costs of production were in fact forms of waste imposed by the system' (ibid.), including the proportion of wages dedicated to this surplus portion (see Foster 2013a: 112 for an account of this). This has increasingly required waste economy practices of advertising and marketing, but has furthered the metabolic rift through ecologically unsustainable practices as built-in obsolescence. Such unsustainable practices can be considered products of a fevered metabolism that is geared towards promoting and increasing consumption in order to maintain itself. To the extent that the media and cultural industries as the 'cultural apparatus' of this monopoly capital stage are fuelling the fever of this metabolism is to where we now turn our attention.

4. Feeding the Fever? The Media and Cultural Industries

4.1 A Fevered Metabolism – The Growth Fetish

The drive for growth is fundamental to the capitalist economy, in that a no-growth capitalist economy is an oxymoron (Harvey 2014). This built-in rule necessitates the encroachment of markets into more and more spheres of life over time, as more sites for commodification are identified (Sandel 2013). This 'growth fetish' (Hamilton 2003) is also touted as the harbinger of happiness, promising a better life, indeed the 'good life'. In this ideological landscape, not only are constructed needs (or 'demand') defined as innate or naturalised, but growth becomes fetishised as an equivalent to progress, and thus to question growth is deemed at best, regressive. However, it is widely established that despite the raising of material living standards that have gone along with sustained growth, happiness is flatlining, and rather than bringing social progress, the fetishising of growth 'fosters empty consumerism, degrades the natural environment, weakens social cohesion and corrodes character' (Hamilton 2003: x). The role of consumerism and advertising are key in this process, in that 'the compulsion to participate in the consumer society is not prompted by material need or by political coercion: it is prompted by the belief of the great mass of ordinary people that to find happiness they must be richer, regardless of how wealthy they already are' (ibid.: xvi).

When considered in political economy terms, Baran and Sweezy, in analysing how the 'sales effort' of advertising promotes wasteful practices and unnecessary consumerist desires, implicate the media and cultural industries under monopoly capital as a 'cultural apparatus' in the service of the waste economy. This 'cultural apparatus' is pervasive through media forms from book publishing to television and, in contemporary culture, contrary to 'information society' ideology, digital media (e.g. Castells 2009). It is thus important also to note that the evolution of the cultural apparatus extends to contemporary forms of media. In an age of increasing mediatisation, the extension of this cultural apparatus becomes further naturalised, normative and accepted. This is the danger of such an apparatus, with the digital media of the 'information society' far from exempt from acting as a cultural apparatus, especially when technology oligopolies control public data, whilst also acting in the service of the state through complicity in the implementation of surveillance 'back doors' into their systems architecture.

A key characteristic of capitalist or corporate media as a cultural apparatus is that such media intends to 'to reach and influence the largest possible audiences' (Baran and Sweezy 2013a: 40), rather than serving educational or informational materials to audiences. This aim, rather than promoting alternative, radical or even democratic views 'motivates the promotion of least controversial, hackneyed, and corny productions' (ibid.) in the service of profit-making. Even when the materials are shocking, lurid or extreme in content, they are conservative in terms of critiquing existing structures and thus should not be confused with notions of such media being in any way rebellious or radical in terms of political economy (Baran and Sweezy 2013b: 61). Rather they are just debasing (ibid.: 45).

The necessary expansion of the waste economy sweeps the media and cultural industries along with it, and the conglomeration of the media industries seen since the 1950s is, arguably, a manifestation of monopoly capital in this sector. Indeed as Baran and Sweezy concluded after a systematic empirical analysis of the financial documents of the television companies in the US, 'television broadcasting [...] though a far younger cultural apparatus, was not an emerging oligopoly, as in book publishing, but had already been established by government policies as a tight oligopoly (Foster and McChesney 2013: 16).

In contemporary times, the media and cultural industries are also implicated in the production of waste for the absorption of profits. The 'cultural apparatus' by necessity does not concern itself with promoting less wasteful and consumptive norms. Rather, by needing to appeal to the widest of audiences, it promotes the absorption of excess productive capacity through consumerism. Thus, when faced with an ecological crisis, this cultural apparatus is badly placed to operate as potential sites for necessary social change, but rather is more concerned with creating a 'mass society culture' centred on commodification and incorporation of more and more domains into the realm of the market (Foster and McChesney 2013: 4).

The structured tendency of this cultural apparatus to serve up the dominant discourses precludes it from discussing nature as a holistic system to which the economy is ultimately beholden. To do so would mean to question consumptive habits and potentially block off or undermine significant sites of absorption in the waste economy. Thus, if advertising channels were removed as sites of absorption, a significant portion of the waste economy would disappear, creating a problem for monopoly-finance capital and its stagnation tendencies. As demonstrated by Baran and Sweezy, the monopoly-finance capital economy depends on waste. It is now accepted that the ecosystem can no longer either produce resources in the quantities needed for the waste economy, nor can it absorb waste in the quantities required by it. The third dimension of significance in this dynamic is the media in the form of the 'cultural apparatus'. This apparatus mediates the relationship between society, the economy, and nature. To what extent this cultural apparatus can provide perspectives that undermine waste in the promotion of ecologically sound practices is questionable. This is to where we turn next.

4.2 Mediating Society and Nature

Marxist thought, such as that of Alfred Schmidt, holds that nature is socially mediated, whilst at once acknowledging that society exists within nature, in a dialectic of subject and object (Smith 2008: 33; also see Schmidt 2014). Indeed, 'Marx denoted this mediation more precisely as a metabolism or metabolic interaction, a concept which Schmidt sees as crucial to Marx's notion of nature' (ibid.). Given that nature is socially mediated, the social mediation happens to an important extent through the media and cultural industries in the contemporary setting. These industries can mediate our relationship with nature by either occluding it or revealing the complexity of its metabolism with society. Indeed, as Curran et al observe of the media industries and public knowledge, 'what the media report – or fail to report – affects what is known' (Curran et al 2009: 16).

Likewise, Garnham stresses that humans are deeply and inherently social, and that our social formations are iterative, path-dependent and irreversible (Garnham 2000: 3). Part of our social evolution has involved 'the development of the systems of inter-personal communication necessary for social co-ordination, beyond the context of unmediated face-to-face communication extended through space and time' (ibid.). Thus, media and cultural systems developed, improved and facilitated this extended form of communication as human societies grew more complex. In contemporary society, the media and cultural industries have become an integral part of the broader contemporary social formations of human beings. The study of these systems therefore provides an important insight into the socio-ecological relationships with which we are concerned here. As Garnham observes, 'who can say what, in what form, to whom, for what purposes, and with what effect will be in part determined by and in part determine the structure of economic, political, and cultural power in a society. Thus one cannot be studied without the

other' (ibid.: 4). Therefore questions of who gets to produce the information that is received by audiences is of significant importance. When the media and cultural industries act more like a cultural apparatus, questions of institutional control, influence and positioning within the broader field of capital become ascendant in assessing their capacity to either produce an 'affirmative culture' (Adorno 1991) or one with transformative potential.

For Adorno, the consideration of nature is always secondary to economic dimensions under capital, as to ensure their survival in the capitalist economic world, individuals need to adapt to it. That involves a complicity in aspects of this economic formulation – including the waste dimension – and thus they 'self-destructively promote and strengthen the very economic forces that make a mockery of their individuality' (Cook 2011: 98). For Adorno, the reification implicit in the capitalist mode of production adversely affects societal relationships, making collective action more difficult. Reification also keeps social identity at a level of the exchange relationship, manifest in conspicuous consumption, and precludes more holistic formulations of societal relations (ibid.: 99). The role of the 'cultural apparatus' is therefore central for Adorno. Indeed, Cook comments on how Adorno considered that 'adaptation to the conditions that make individuals as expendable as many of the commodities they produce or consume is reinforced by sophisticated psychotechnologies in advertising and the culture industry, and by the prevailing positivist ideology which legitimates existing conditions with its constant refrain: that is just the way things are' (ibid.: 98). Thus, when faced with an ecological crisis, this passiveness promoted by the cultural apparatus is compounded by a sense of futility in the vague apprehension of the expendability of individuals under the economic conditions of capital. The relationship between media and capital itself is therefore significant and is examined next.

4.3 Mediating Capital

It is important to consider that the media and cultural industries are not external to capital, or impervious to economic influence, but occupy a position within the broader field of capital (Bourdieu 1984; Garnham & Williams 1980) which has reconsolidated itself despite a profound crisis that has been deemed the responsibility of citizens. Added to this is a sense of relief when the media announce a recovery in the stock market, or in GDP, as it supposedly signals a positive upturn in the 'real economy' no matter the conditions of those in the 'real economy', either underemployed, in precarious labour or on zero-hour contracts. Therefore, the role of the media in this consolidation of power is of significance and urgently needs to be incorporated into crisis theory of both economy and ecology.

Even the term 'media and cultural industries' itself reflects how these communication systems are perceived under capitalism. From Garnham's assertion that these domains are social systems for extended, remote social and democratic communication, the mere change of terminology to incorporate these domains as 'industries' reveals much about how modes of social and symbolic communication are deemed not so much social entities but commodities to be presented for exchange in the capitalist marketplace. This is problematic, in that if we take a long-term historical view of the role of these industries, the project of Enlightenment depended on 'the free exchange of ideas about the world and about social relations with fellow-citizens in order to arrive at truth and a freely chosen and shared moral community' (Garnham 2000: 41).

Considered in this sociological context, it is evident that such free exchange deemed so central to the formation of advanced societies would not have been possible without mediated communication. Whilst domains such as journalism still propound Enlightenment notions of truth, rationality and fair detachment in reporting, market-based cultural industries challenge this ideal, and can be seen to act as a cultural apparatus. For Garnham, present-day commodification of the media marks a significant transition in public discourse and knowledge where 'the provision and domination of the means of publicity by the logic of things rather than of autonomous moral beings' (ibid.). When this becomes the dominant form of media provision, the range of what

gets produced becomes based on market demand, rather than on social appropriateness, need, or their existence as a public good. When contextualised to current economic and ecological debates, questions of what gets reported and how, take on a dimension that requires robust analysis and critique.

The crisis of neoliberal capital has not culminated in any serious or sustained review of policies towards creating an equitable and fair economy. Rather, it appears as though 'business as usual' has returned, and the failed system has reconsolidated. Those who caused the problems are still in positions of power. Structurally, little or nothing has happened to change the mismatch between real labour wages and the contradictory imperative to consume. Thus, given that this status has precluded radical overhauls of policy, the role of the media and cultural industries also need to come under scrutiny in terms of to what extent they act as a cultural apparatus in the overall economy. In a conglomerated media sector, concentration of these industries can not be considered as unconnected to concentration of power. Potentially, this power, in a nexus with economic and political power, precludes discourses of new and necessary imaginaries that take into account both the economic instability of our current economic system, and at once acknowledge the interconnected ecological dimension to this system.

When the neoliberal state has become little more than an instrument of capital, even state or public sector media are compromised by this nexus. Worse still, the privatised media sector are willing participants in the growth imperative and waste economy, and not likely to critique consumption or promote responsible attitudes to waste, as they are dependent on other corporations and consumerism for advertising revenue. Indeed, 'the role of the market is more complex and ambiguous in terms of promoting media "freedom" than it is often represented to be' (Curran et al 2009: 23). Therefore, in this structural arrangement, the mainstream media and cultural industries are unlikely to supply discourses of alternative thought that prioritises wellbeing over consumerism, sustainability over conspicuous consumption, and downsizing over depletion and waste. This tendency is especially so with market-dependent media and cultural industries, and thus their incarnation as a cultural apparatus is likely under such conditions.

Indeed, the media and cultural industries not only portray capitalism as a natural or universal system, but also portray the epochal crisis as if it has to be so – the banks *had* to be bailed out, the bill *had* to be footed through the socialisation of private debt. Critiques of this normative position appear lacking as long as these industries act as a cultural apparatus, with of course a few exceptions. The overall system under which these industries operate is rarely questioned. GDP growth is taken as a universal positive, something to be proud of, while at once the hard-won civic rights embodied in social provisions are eroded and everyday life for the average citizen is suffering under austerity. And what of the environment? Increasingly it is beginning to be acknowledged by the media that a transition to a low-carbon economy (and society) is necessary. However, the most popular accounts stress how it is to be done through 'green growth', 'sustainable consumption' and by 'reforming capitalism', rather than real critique of the system of monopoly-finance capital and its waste dimension. Given the nexus of power between the cultural apparatus of the media and cultural industries, and capital power, it is not surprising that they are relatively positioned to maintain the current system and the wasteful growth-based paradigms therein.

5. Conclusion: Cynical Acceptance or a Space of Hope?

The political economy of communication as articulated by Baran and Sweezy reveals the media and cultural industries under the stage of monopoly capital as little more than a cultural apparatus that is less about erudition, democratic communication or social progress than conformity and profit-making. Baran and Sweezy observe how the awareness of the vacuity of the products of the cultural apparatus is not enough to transcend it. Indeed, the authors identify how 'the increasing awareness of the falsehood of what is conveyed by society's cultural apparatus does not result in a heightened search for truth, reason, and knowledge, but rather in the spread of disillusionment and cynicism' (Baran and Sweezy 2013b: 62). This

is a characteristic of 'the ideology of monopoly capital' (ibid.: 63). This ideology is characterised by a 'tough, hard-boiled, matter-of-fact distrust of anything resembling an ideal, the disdain for everything that transcends the immediately tangible reality, the cynical exposure of the hypocrisy of the officially professed values' (ibid.). It is therefore a most destructive ideology that precludes alternatives. Indeed the authors argue that the 'false consciousness' of this ideology is dangerous in that even the cynicism produced from 'the apprehension of the lie' of the cultural apparatus is 'only half the truth' (ibid.). The other half of the truth which 'relates to the existing and expanding possibilities for a different, more rational, more human existence' remains, as long as this ideology is dominant, 'foreclosed' (ibid.). The cultural apparatus 'aims to make people accept what is, to adjust to the tawdry reality and to abandon all hope, all aspiration for a better society' (ibid.).

Adorno was similarly pessimistic about the conformity of culture in the monopoly capital stage, observing how 'reinforced by the mass media, conformity to existing norms of behaviour (such as consumerism and status-seeking) and adaptation to a society that makes a mockery of each of us *qua* individual, are powerful impediments to change' (Cook 2011: 161). Indeed, in an article titled *Culture Industry Reconsidered*, Adorno posited how 'the culture industry no longer has anything in common with freedom' but rather 'proclaims: you shall conform, without instruction as to what; conform to that which exists anyway, and to that which everyone thinks anyway as a reflex of its power and omnipresence' (Adorno 1991: 104). Indeed, such was the grip of this ideology that 'conformity has replaced consciousness', thus precluding discussion alternate paradigms of social organisation (ibid.).

Regarding the relationship with nature Adorno likewise warns that a society characterised by reification is likely to attempt to control nature in the service of capital, with potentially disastrous results. As Cook describes, 'in Negative Dialectics, Adorno speaks of "a universal feeling, a universal fear, that our progress in controlling nature may increasingly help to weave the very catastrophe from which it was supposed to protect us" (ND 67)' (Cook 2011: 159). Self-interest promoted by the economic arrangements of capital was, for Adorno, no longer in the interests of society as a whole. Indeed, 'our interest in our own survival would be better served if we were to embrace the interests of the species as a whole' (ibid.: 161). This involves a recognition that 'the survival of individuals – not to speak of their flourishing as individuals – requires that they develop a far more profound sense of solidarity with all other individuals on this planet' (ibid.).

Difficult though this prospect is, it is important not to succumb to the cynicism and sense of inevitability promoted by the cultural apparatus. However totalising and pervasive this cultural apparatus appears, there exists a potential for an alternative paradigm amongst a cohort of the 'discontented and the alienated' who comprise those who 'see the current path of capitalist development as leading to a dead end if not to a catastrophe for humanity' (Harvey 2010: 240). This cohort includes those intellectuals and cultural workers who 'protest the deadening weight of power relations in the media and in institutions of learning and cultural production that debase the languages of civil discourse, convert knowledge into ceaseless propaganda, politics into nothing more than competing big lies, discourses into special pleading and vehicles for peddling prejudice and hate, and social institutions that should protect the people into cesspools of corruption' (ibid: 241). This leaves scope for media-based interventions into the dominant discourse and indeed, whilst marginal, there exist examples of such, providing important interventions into the mainstream apparatus.

However, sizeable though this cohort are, sizeable too are the obstacles, from surveillance and censorship, to the amplified commodification and privatisation of the very infrastructure and software upon which contemporary mediated communication is authored and disseminated. The cultural apparatus is therefore difficult to either circumvent or challenge directly. For Harvey, the cohort of the discontented and alienated also have to get 'their own house in order' insofar as a complicity on the part of these groups with neoliberal ideology needs to be decoupled (Harvey 2010:

241). This means that however inadvertently it has been to the contrary, there needs to be a measured assessment amongst this cohort of the potentials and limitations of the 'information society'. This becomes increasingly important as monopoly corporations in the digital domain take stewardship and ownership of information, whilst also influencing distribution through algorithms that curate and to an extent censor content intended for the end user.

Notwithstanding this caveat, Harvey considers this alienated group to be in 'a critical position to deepen the ongoing debate on how to change the course of human development' (Harvey 2010: 241) in how they can map structures of power and provide critical insights into existing structures, with the aim of informing radical change. This group is also positioned to articulate an understanding of 'the dynamics of capitalism and the systemic problems that derive from compound growth' more comprehensively than others who are discontented, alienated, deprived or dispossessed (ibid.).

In conclusion then, the media and cultural industries need to be considered in their 'cultural apparatus' incarnation as integral to formulations of crisis theories, both economic and ecological. They are fundamental to modern social arrangements, yet rather than deemed a public good, are increasingly under the sway of market forces. This is problematic when structures of capitalist power and influence – including influence over ecological decisions – have reconsolidated despite a profound crisis. In this structural arrangement, a potentially dangerous configuration exists whereby that which gets publicised, and by whom, is in the interests of maintaining and consolidating existing power relationships. This is occurring when much in the system, such as the growth imperative under capitalism, requires revising in the light of anthropogenic climate change. In Harvey's discontented and alienated cultural worker, on a temporary or zero-hour contract, a member of an increasingly precarious reserve army of labour, a product of neoliberal labour arrangements, there exists a potential source of critical engagement with current structures, and the possibility of space for alternate mediated discourse. Tentative though those potentials may be, any source of change is more likely to come from the discontented, alienated, deprived or dispossessed. It certainly has not emerged from the privileged, powerful, entitled or franchised.

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