

The communications counter-revolution

We face a social crisis of communication. Not only do the means of mass communication not belong to us but they are being used against us.

As global media have developed, enabling words and images to be conveyed to millions of people in a matter of seconds, the words used have become increasingly more sloganised and contrived to delude, the imagery more tranquillising in its banality and stupefying in its detachment from historical context.

As the world becomes a global village, linked by newly accessible technologies from the mobile phone to the Internet, the most powerful use of these technologies has tended to promote the envelopment of mass consciousness by corporate ideology.

As the symbols of constitutional democracy come to dominate the globe, seemingly confirmed by newly-acquired voting powers from Moscow to Soweto to West Lothian, the empowerment of the ballot is insidiously undermined by the neo-feudal absolutism of the press barons and media moguls: the new stratum of the ruling class which controls the dogma of the news agenda. Rupert Murdoch's News International, to exemplify the point by reference to the biggest and baddest, has global assets of \$15 billion and now controls the major newspapers in Britain and Australia, the biggest news broadcast network in the USA and by far the most significant private media organisation in Asia.

As global literacy rates increase, and huge hopes are placed upon the potentiality of science as a method of liberation from disease and diminished opportunities, the lexicon of the communications industry has converged with the language of the manipulative advertising industry which has denuded language of depth or integrity and prostituted speakers and writers in the service of crude market targets.

The consequence of all this is a public which is increasingly bemused by and untrusting of the channels of mass communication; which finds itself the recipient of a monological, one-way conversation, presented as communication; which has come to regard truth as being either the monopoly of a mediating elite or else so relative that nothing can be really true; which has become so soundbitten by political messages delivered to fit the crass measurements of the tabloid headline that enthusiasm for such political babble has become as perverse as commitment to a brand of baked beans or loyalty to a fast-food chain.

For most people the world of politics (for, politics seems indeed to inhabit a separate, remote and misty planet) seems terribly drab and empty and meaningless and alienating and dishonest. Politicians are never useful, except as pawns who might drive away the even more useless. Political activity is seen as an obsession for the disturbed: the rule-bound, the myopic, the ones who get their kicks from power games. Politics is an irritation or a threat, but never a resource of strength or hope.

The language of politics, as it has become compressed to the point of sounding half like gibberish and half like fraud, is not taken very seriously except by those who deal in its currency and have come to realise that it is a code of impotence reflecting the timidity of statecraft before economic powers which operate only in the global

language of numbers.

Soundbite culture

Why has the culture of the soundbite arisen? Firstly, because political leaders have come to realise, albeit gradually and with a conspicuous absence of humility, that they can lead nobody nowhere. The market leads; they follow. To dance to the tune of capital entails a minimum of choreographical creativity and to sing to the tune calls less for the oratory of Cicero than the verbal banality of Saatchi or Mandelson.

Secondly, because ideas have become detached from political life. What George Bush called 'The Vision Thing' was a recognition of what he lacked, not what he had. The words needed to convey the contemporary political visions of the future, fantasies of myopia as they are, are few and uninspiring. "Gahd Bless America!" "New Labour; New Britain" "One Europe; one people" "The Lady's Not for Turning" "Things Go Better With Coke"? It is a world led by second-rate advertising copywriters.

For, when you have nothing to say there is much to be said for saying nothing. But in order for the political mimeshow to become audible, for the sake of putting background noise, however disjointed, to the increasingly dominating imagery of the photo-opportunity, something, however brief and pointless, must be uttered.

Thirdly, there is a belief amongst those who produce the media and design the news, that the public is incorrigibly stupid, happy only when offered infantile distractions from reality and capable of taking in only the most simplistic and compressed smidgeon of sound before rubbing our eyes and demanding an appointment with the Page Three girls. The public are regarded as half-baked cretins. The workers are witless and best offered football reports and Royal fairy stories: the tabloid valium for the dispossessed.

And because the news producers worry that our attention spans will collapse under the strain of more than a few minutes of political discussion, they ensure that such unmanageable bites of sustained argument never reach us. In the 1964 General Election--the first in which the major political parties prepared themselves for a TV campaign--the average excerpt from a political speech on the television news was eighty-seven seconds. These days an eighty-seven second excerpt is unheard of. By the 1979 election the median length of speech extracts on the BBC News was 45 seconds and on ITN 25 seconds. In the 1992 election the average length was heard was down to 18 seconds. In the last US presidential campaign no contender was quoted for more than 7 seconds, except during the deadly boring presidential debates in which they recited their pre-rehearsed soundbites with the conviction of a waitress in an American restaurant telling you the day's specials on the menu.

The problem is not, of course, that one wants to hear politicians for more than twenty seconds. Fifteen seconds of John Major felt like a lifetime in a cell with him. The media producers are quite right: too much of this makes our heads ache and we run out into the street committing road rage. Faced with such intellectual vacuity and emptiness of vision there is much to be said for the most extreme brevity. The problem is quite simply that the most extreme brevity is fine when you are contrasting Coke with Pepsi or advertising baked beans which don't make you fart or asking if you prefer Oasis or Blur, but it is inimical to and destructive of the kind of

reasoned, scientific judgement required from people who are called upon to make serious democratic choices.

No time for reason

Reason – the capacity to exercise our unique human capacity to organise our thoughts – to remember – to envisage and plan – to think and speak conceptually – to share thought through words – to use words to differentiate the self from the outer world and experience from fantasy – these hugely potent, definingly human, boundlessly creative forces which comprise reason will only wither and die if they are constrained by the inane language and crass imagery which sells jelly babies and New Labour.

To exercise reason takes time. This need for time has always been a problem for the vast majority because, under capitalism it is precisely the theft of our time which leaves us exploited and unfree and weary. So, there is a paradox: to understand why we are weary, unfree and exploited we need the time to contemplate the cause of exploitation and the hope for freedom. For the Leninists and the social-democratic reformists the problem was easily addressed: the nature of life for the majority would never permit the luxury of such reasoned contemplation, so mass socialist consciousness could never occur. The wearied workers must be led or left to rot.

For socialists, who refused to accept that authoritarian logic, the only basis for our claim that workers could and would understand the case for a new way of organising society, was that given the time to think and make sense of experience, understanding would combine with desire to create an enlightened embrace of the socialist alternative. Give people time to think and to speak and to argue and they cannot but see it as we have seen it.

But if time itself is to be sapped away by a culture of hurried messages and commercial jingles, the fascistic anthems of the marketplace, then what hope is there for reason? If language itself, in an Orwellian rape of meaning and sequential logic, becomes not a means to know more but a weapon in the armoury of those who would prefer us to know less, then reason itself falls victim to a vandalising culture which dehumanises those left to dwell in the Brave New World of the *Sun* and the organisation of mass stupidity. We would be abandoned to a cultural wilderness of endless Happy Hours but no happiness, punch-drunk street parties and feudal funeral processions as repositories for the deeply repressed miseries of the bewildered; elections and referendums with no issues and no discussion. This is the dystopian future of a society bereft of reason.

The threat of a slide to such an historical catastrophe is a menace to the reason which makes us human and to the socialist vision which could enable us to live humanely. And we do face such a threat. That is why we are unmistakably in the midst of a profound crisis of communication. Not only is it the case that the means of communication do not belong to us – in a world where very little that is worth much belongs to most of us that is hardly a revelation. But these channels of communication are being used against us. They are The Enemy Within, which can brand strikers as The Enemy Within and socialists as loonies, utopians and the merely irrelevant. It is as well to know our enemy, for struggle for the tools and language of communication has become in the course of the twentieth century the predominant battle-ground within which the shape of our social future will be contested.

The war waged by the ruling class to silence the majority is not a new one, even though it has too often been neglected by liberal historians who prefer to bathe in the still waters of liberal ideology. The battle to stifle the voices of the working class is a long and bloody one, and in many parts of the world it still goes on leaving the silenced, the maimed, tortured and the butchered corpses in its wake. But in Britain and the so-called capitalist democracies the war against the right of workers to speak has changed. The strategy now is to tolerate 'free speech' and then drown it out with the megaphones of distraction and deceit. What we are offered is a democracy in which everyone has a right to be ignored, but only the rich and powerful can insist upon being heard.

Linguistic nihilism

What kind of intellectual climate is it that is allowing the communication of hope and the vivacity of human creativity to become so neglected? The answer lies in the current mood of counter-enlightenment which has come to dominate Western thought. The arid atmosphere of what has come to be known as postmodernism is precisely the environment within which the banalities of the soundbite and the soft-focus lens can triumph over the long-learned lessons of the Age of Reason. With their disdain for rational explanations the postmodernists argue that no cause is more important in producing an effect than any other. There is no rational analysis of history; there are no social systems; there can be nothing which is reducible to the clarity of scientific transparency.

So, within this hopelessly nihilistic chain of postmodernist discourse, everything is as meaningful as it is meaningless; rationality stands on a par with irrationality; no judgement must be prioritised over any other--genocide, death camps, avoidable mass starvation, the torture of political prisoners. These, according to the postmodernists, are all merely fragmented and inexplicable phenomena which operate each in their own separate world of autonomous values. So, if nothing general can be said, language becomes diminished as a civilising force. Words can mean anything or nothing or both. The postmodernists have celebrated the so-called Death of History: the death, in short, of that fundamentally liberating Age of Reason project, to which Marx contributed so greatly, to transform history from a passive force, in which humans are mere puppets, to a creative force in which our comprehension of the process allows us to actively direct the process of social movement. For the postmodernists all of this was ultra-optimism and must now be substituted by an inert, sullen, complacent pact with the present.

This veritable revolt against the Enlightenment derides scientific logic and the quest for the dialectical interrogation of complexity and surrenders abjectly to the lunatic's logic of the marketplace and its attendant disorders. It gives rise to a notion of politics as being essentially about slogans rather than substance. For, if you really believe that there can be no substantial intervention in the making of history, what else is there to do but stand on the sidelines and pretend that your mandate is to carry out whatever happens to be taking place already?

At its worst, this is the climate in which the dark clouds of fascism can form. But not necessarily fascism in jackboots with Nuremberg rallies. It was hard to ignore a fascistic element within the mass hysteria which followed upon the recent death of a

Princess. Such mass manipulation of human feeling and well-organised collective agonising of the repressed is precisely the kind of perverse waste of human emotion and energy made permissible in a society which has come to disdain popular reason.

The politics of reasoned thought requires the capacity to distinguish between the trivial inconsequences of our enemies and the historically vital events out of which history makes us and we can make history. It requires a rejection of the linguistic nihilism of contemporary journalism which asserts like Humpty Dumpty that words can mean whatever a headline-writer wants them to mean. It requires a respect for scientific logic which considers causes and effects rather than diminishing everything to the random agenda of 'News Just In'.

Capitalism, because it would perish by the force of mass intelligence if enough people thought about it, cannot create an environment conducive to intelligent reflection. Indeed, the more it goes on, the more it will create more elaborate and sophisticated diversions from reasoned thought. And the more socialists will need to warn against those diversions and remind their fellow human beings: Your brain is the greatest weapon you possess; your ability to communicate is your tool of liberation; thinking, speaking and organising democratically and intelligently you are a force that cannot be defeated by the babble of a worn-out social system.

(December 1997)