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Recap and Review of the 2010 Smythe Lecture

Robert Prey

As driving principles behind everything from Wikipedia, to social networking, to the open source movement, collaboration and reciprocity are at the heart of debates about the social world of the Internet. At the same time, the idea of “the commons” has received increased attention from academics and activists alike. Best-selling authors Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have recently published *Commonwealth*, the third book in their Spinoza-influenced update of global class struggle. In critical communication studies the concepts of “enclosure” and “the commons” have reinvigorated debates about the public sphere and media democracy in cyberspace.

It is from this tradition that Graham Murdock, Reader in the Sociology of Culture at Loughborough University, delivered the 2010 Smythe Lecture at Simon Fraser University on March 25, 2010. The Smythe Lecture is held in honour of Dallas Smythe who was a globally renowned communications scholar, activist and policy adviser and a founder of the field of political economy of communication in the mid-20th century. Born in Regina, Smythe initially trained as an economist. His professional career began in the United States with appointments at the Department of Labor, the Federal Communication Commission and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. He was Professor of Communication at Simon Fraser University from 1976 until his death in 1992. Upon his death, the School of Communication at Simon Fraser University established the Dallas Smythe Memorial Endowment Fund “to further the understanding of communication studies” through an invited lecture series and related activities.

Of contemporary communication scholars working in the broad field of political economy, few have had a closer professional acquaintance with Dallas Smythe than Graham Murdock. In the late 1970s Murdock took issue with Smythe’s contention that the audience was the commodity being sold by the media industries, resulting in an engaging debate between the two minds. While speaking to Dr. Yuezhi Zhao’s graduate class on the morning of the Smythe Lecture, Murdoch recalled that Dallas was not the easiest person to argue with and that he was often somewhat dogmatic about his views. In hindsight, Murdoch feels that their opposing positions on the role of the audience likely stemmed from their different disciplinary backgrounds. While Murdock is best known for his work on the critical political economy



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of communication, unlike Smythe, who was an economist working on communication issues, Murdock turned to political economy only after realizing that there were certain problems that his interdisciplinary training in art, economics and sociology were unable to answer. As sage advice to the graduate students in the class, Murdock noted that part of our duty as emerging scholars is to work on synthesizing seemingly disparate fields of thought. What we need, according to Murdock, is not more information but better frameworks of knowledge. Quoting T.S. Eliot, Murdock asked “Where is the knowledge we have lost in information?”

Later that day, Murdock expanded on these ideas while delivering the 2010 Smythe Lecture before a capacity audience at Simon Fraser University’s Harbour Centre campus. Murdock quoted Marx’s famous passage from *The Poverty of Philosophy* that capitalism ushers in “a time when the very things which till then had been communicated, but never exchanged; given, but never sold; acquired, but never bought – virtue, love, conviction, knowledge, conscience, etc. – when everything, in short, passed into commerce (Marx, 1847, p. 12). The point that commodification is the engine of capitalism, has remained central to Murdock’s work over the years. To this enduring concern, Murdock has added his reading of the French sociologist Marcel Mauss’s seminal book *The Gift*. Mauss has influenced Murdock’s thinking on how networked communities of affinity have utilized the Internet to introduce a modern version of the gift economy. While the Linux system is the most commonly cited example of this, there are countless others operating on similar principles of reciprocity.

Of course, that the Internet and new media should foster co-operation and reciprocity is nothing remarkable in itself, and should not be celebrated uncritically. People have co-operated throughout history. However, as Marx documents in his chapter dedicated to this very issue in *Capital: Volume One*, the emergence of industrial capitalism in the 19th century ushered in a new era of co-operation. “Co-operation”, Marx noted “remains the fundamental form of the capitalist mode of production” (1976, p. 454). Marx saw the industrial factory as the site where labour was assembled and the products of co-operation were offered “as a free gift to capital” (1976, p. 451). A century and a half later, the Internet has become the new site for assembling the social, where new modes of co-operative labour present corporations with an unprecedented opportunity to capitalize on voluntary work, and expand marketing networks. In his talk, Murdock provided a few examples of how corporations are feeding off of social networking and creative co-operation in order to generate profit. One example he shared with the audience was that of Fluevog Shoes’ ‘Open Source Footwear’ concept, which asks visitors to its website to send in designs for their ideal pair of shoes. According to the website, if your design is chosen, you get a free pair, and “real recognition.”

Not surprisingly, as a critical political economist Murdock regards this as a thinly veiled attempt to lower labour costs and increase brand loyalty among consumers, noting that we're encouraged to see brands as gifts from their makers. But Murdock saved his biggest criticism for media and communication scholars who have bought into the industry line of increased consumer democracy. Murdock singled out creative industries scholar John Hartley and University of Southern California professor Henry Jenkins for his most trenchant criticism. Jenkins is the lead researcher and founder of the "Convergence Culture Consortium"; an academic/business network which seeks to rethink consumer relations in an age of "participatory culture."

Murdock finished his lecture by calling for the development of a public digital commons in order to counter the co-optation of co-operation in the digital gift economy and at the same time, to reinvigorate public cultural institutions such as libraries, museums, public broadcasting, and universities. This is no doubt a highly necessary and timely intervention. However, while Murdock is refreshingly less abstract about possible solutions than others who are working in similar territory—such as Hardt and Negri—his approach nevertheless raises some vexing problems that need to be disentangled before pragmatic steps can be taken. The attraction of "the commons," at least as a coherent heuristic device, lies in its promise to transcend the opposition of private and public and the tired politics predicated on this binary. In his talk however, Murdock sometimes seemed to come close to collapsing the vital distinction between "the public" and "the commons." Perhaps an even more vexing problem is the fact that contemporary capitalism does not simply produce things but is engaged in the direct production of subjectivities. Indeed, this was also true of capitalism in the 19th century, as Marx's discussion of cooperation and the production of social relations under industrial capitalism indicates. However, it is certainly beyond debate that the contemporary production of images, information, knowledge, affects, codes, and social relationships is unsurpassed historically. If it is true that we are all neoliberals now, as some commentators have noted, then this dramatically impacts the meaning of "the gift" in our society and our ability to conceptualize and engage in acts of non-marketized reciprocity in the first place.

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