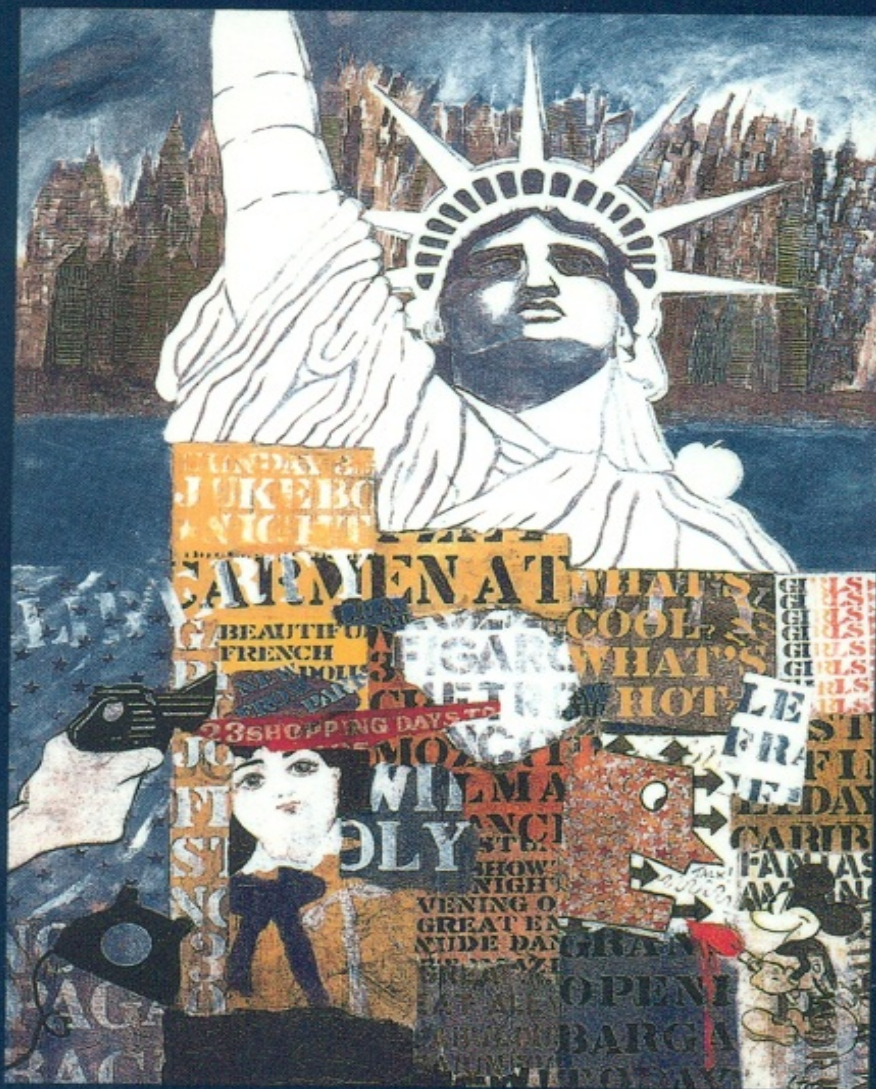


THE MEDIA AND MODERNITY

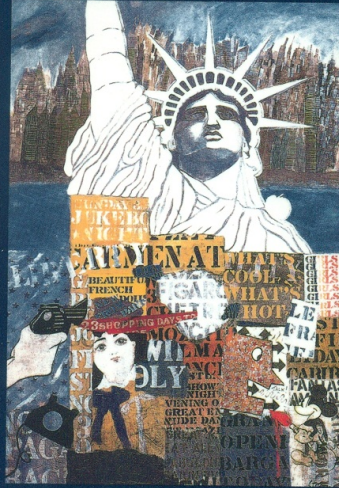
A SOCIAL THEORY OF THE MEDIA



JOHN B. THOMPSON

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Polity

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Contents

Preface

Introduction

1 Communication and Social Context

Action, Power and Communication
The Uses of Communication Media
Some Characteristics of 'Mass Communication'
The Reordering of Space and Time
Communication, Appropriation and Everyday Life

2 The Media and the Development of Modern Societies

Some Institutional Dimensions of Modern Societies
Communication, Commodification and the Advent of
Printing
The Rise of the Trade in News
The Theory of the Public Sphere: A Preliminary
Assessment
The Growth of the Media Industries: An Overview

3 The Rise of Mediated Interaction

Three Types of Interaction
The Social Organization of Mediated Quasi-interaction
Action at a Distance (1): Acting for Distant Others
Action at a Distance (2): Responsive Action in Distant
Contexts

4 The Transformation of Visibility

The Public and the Private

Publics without Places: The Rise of Mediated Publicness
The Management of Visibility
The Limits of Control: Gaffes, Scandals and Other
Sources of Trouble

5 *The Globalization of Communication*

The Emergence of Global Communication Networks
Patterns of Global Communication Today: An Overview
The Theory of Cultural Imperialism: A Reassessment
Globalized Diffusion, Localized Appropriation: Towards a
Theory of Media Globalization

6 *The Re-mooring of Tradition*

The Nature of Tradition
Tradition and the Media (1): Tradition Destroyed?
Tradition and the Media (2): Tradition Dislodged
Migrant Populations, Nomadic Traditions: Some Sources
of Cultural Conflict

7 *Self and Experience in a Mediated World*

The Self as a Symbolic Project
Non-reciprocal Intimacy at a Distance
Desequestration and the Mediation of Experience
New Options, New Burdens: Living in a Mediated World

8 *The Reinvention of Publicness*

Publicness Beyond the State
Visibility Beyond the Locale
Towards a Renewal of Democratic Politics
Towards an Ethics of Global Responsibility

Notes

Index

Preface

This book is an elaboration and refinement of some of the ideas initially sketched in my *Ideology and Modern Culture*. There I put forward the view that, if we wish to understand the cultural transformations associated with the rise of modern societies, then we must give a central role to the development of communication media and their impact. In this book I seek to redeem this claim. I examine in some detail the nature of communication media and their changing forms; I discuss the emergence of the media industries and analyse some recent trends; but above all I try to show that the development of the media was interwoven in fundamental ways with the major institutional transformations which have shaped the modern world. My primary concern is to explore these interconnections, to trace their contours and consider their implications, and hopefully to shed some light on our contemporary, media-saturated world while avoiding a myopic preoccupation with the present.

I owe a substantial debt to numerous friends and colleagues with whom I have discussed these issues over the years, and who took the time to read and comment on earlier drafts of the text. Lizbeth Goodman deserves special mention: she gave me many helpful suggestions and has been a constant source of encouragement and support. Conversations with Anthony Giddens and David Held helped to shape the concerns of this book; they also read an earlier draft and provided much valuable feedback. Peter Burke, James Lull, William Outhwaite and Annabelle Sreberny-Mohammadi were generous with their time and their

comments; I am grateful to them for their probing criticisms and their numerous references to relevant works in their areas of expertise. Michelle Stanworth, Henrietta Moore, Helga Geyer-Ryan and Peter and Karin Groombridge have been wonderful friends and have always advised me well. I should also like to thank Avril Symonds for her patient word-processing; Ann Bone for her careful copy-editing; and the many people at Polity Press and Blackwell Publishers - especially Gill Motley, Julia Harsant, Nicola Ross, Pam Thomas, Lin Lucas and Ginny Stroud-Lewis - who have helped, at one stage or another, to prepare this book for publication.

J.B.T., Cambridge, December 1994

Introduction

‘I have said that, in my opinion, all was chaos, that is, earth, air, water, and fire were mixed together; and out of that bulk a mass formed – just as cheese is made out of milk – and worms appeared in it, and these were the angels. The most holy majesty decreed that these should be God and the angels, and among that number of angels, there was also God, he too having been created out of that mass at the same time, and he was made Lord...’¹ These words, spoken by a sixteenth-century miller from Montereale, a small village of the Friuli in what is now northern Italy, strike us today like the remnants of another age. It is not easy for us to take seriously the vision of the world they convey, or to understand why the person who uttered them – one Domenico Scandella, also known as Menocchio – should have to pay so dearly for his eccentric beliefs. (Menocchio was interrogated, imprisoned and eventually put to death.) But despite the distance that separates our world today from the world of this sixteenth-century miller, there is a social trait of fundamental importance that ties him to us. For, unlike many of his fellow villagers, Menocchio could read.

Among other things, Menocchio had read *Il cavallier Zuanne de Mandavilla*, a translation of the popular book of travels attributed to Sir John Mandeville. Originally written in the mid-fourteenth century, the book was reprinted many times in the sixteenth century and diffused widely throughout Europe. Here Menocchio had read of distant lands where people practised different customs, obeyed different laws and held different beliefs; he had read of

places where some people worshipped the sun, some worshipped fire and some worshipped images and idols; he had read of islands apparently inhabited by cannibals, pigmies and men with the heads of dogs. These descriptions deeply troubled Menocchio and led him to question the foundations of his own beliefs. They provided him with a window on to another world, a world into which he could step temporarily and from which he could view – with the kind of discomfort that often accompanies the discovery of alternatives – the world of his daily life in Montereale.

There can be no doubt that Menocchio was a man of uncommon imagination. His strange cosmogony was his own creation, and his ideas were probably viewed by his fellow villagers with a mixture of caution, bewilderment and awe. In the course of his interrogation, Menocchio repeatedly insisted that his ideas were his own invention ('Sir, I have never met anyone who holds these opinions; my opinions come out of my own head'), but this was only partly true. For Menocchio had read many books and culled many ideas from them. His vivid imagination had reworked these ideas, infused them with meaning, mixed them together with one another and with ideas drawn from the oral traditions of rural life. Menocchio's views were undoubtedly the product of a unique and restless mind, but they were made possible by a social transformation whose origins lay elsewhere and whose impact extended far beyond the villages of the Friuli.

By the time that Menocchio's trial began in 1584, printing presses had been in operation throughout Europe for more than a hundred years. They were producing a growing avalanche of printed materials which would gradually transform the life conditions of most individuals. Initially the impact of print was felt most strongly in the large urban centres, among educated elites who held the reins of power. But printed materials spread quickly, and it was not

long before ordinary individuals like Menocchio – this self-taught miller of humble origins – were able to gain access to the worlds opened up by print. However strange Menocchio's opinions may seem to us today, he was the harbinger of a new era in which symbolic forms would spill far beyond the shared locales of daily life, and in which the circulation of ideas would no longer be restricted by the exchange of words in contexts of face-to-face interaction.

My aim in this book is to trace the contours of this and subsequent transformations in what I shall describe as the social organization of symbolic power, and to explore some of their consequences for the kind of world in which we live today. I shall try to show that the development of communication media – from early forms of print to recent types of electronic communication – was an integral part of the rise of modern societies. The development of communication media was interwoven in complex ways with a number of other developmental processes which, taken together, were constitutive of what we have come to call 'modernity'. Hence, if we wish to understand the nature of modernity – that is, of the institutional characteristics of modern societies and the life conditions created by them – then we must give a central role to the development of communication media and their impact.

It is perhaps surprising that, among the works of social theorists who have concerned themselves with the rise of modern societies, there are so few which have treated communication media with the seriousness they deserve. There is a substantial body of work by social and cultural historians on the impact of printing in early modern Europe and elsewhere, and there is a large literature dealing with more recent developments in the media industries; but in the writings of social theorists, a concern with communication media is most noticeable for its absence. Why this neglect? Partly it is due, no doubt, to a certain

attitude of suspiciousness towards the media. For theorists interested in long-term processes of social change, the media may seem like a sphere of the superficial and the ephemeral, a sphere about which, it may seem, very little of any substance can be said. But there are other reasons, more deeply rooted historically and intellectually, which help to explain this neglect.

When social theorists today reflect on the broad developmental contours of modernity, they generally do so in ways that are profoundly shaped by the legacy of classical social thought. They take their terms of reference from the work of authors who, writing in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, were struggling to make sense of the industrial societies taking shape around them. For the most part, the classical social thinkers did not attribute a significant role to the development of communication media. For them, the key cultural dynamic associated with the rise of modern societies lay elsewhere: it consisted above all in processes of rationalization and secularization, through which modern societies would, it was thought, gradually discard the traditional encumbrances of the past. This was a lofty vision, a grand narrative in the tradition of epic story-telling, which pitched the progressive forces of reason and enlightenment against the darkened ramparts of myth and superstition. And it is a vision which has continued to grip the theoretical imagination, dividing contemporary theorists into opposing camps of those who wish to defend and refine the narrative and those who are inclined to reject it as another myth.

The account I shall offer here shares little in common with the high drama of the grand narrative. In contrast to this somewhat ethereal battle between the forces of reason and myth, I shall be concerned with a series of developments which can be reasonably well documented and which have clear institutional bases, from the small

printing presses of the late fifteenth century to the huge communication conglomerates of today. I shall be concerned with the gradual expansion of networks of communication and information flow, networks which, since the mid-nineteenth century, have become increasingly global in scope. I shall be concerned with the ways in which these networks are interwoven with other forms of power – economic, political and military – and how they have been used by actors, both individual and collective, to pursue their aims. But I shall also be concerned to show that, notwithstanding the worldly character of these developments, their consequences are far-reaching.

A central argument of this book is that we can understand the social impact of the development of new networks of communication and information flow only if we put aside the intuitively plausible idea that communication media serve to transmit information and symbolic content to individuals whose relations to others remain fundamentally unchanged. We must see, instead, that the use of communication media involves the creation of new forms of action and interaction in the social world, new kinds of social relationship and new ways of relating to others and to oneself. When individuals use communication media, they enter into forms of interaction which differ in certain respects from the type of face-to-face interaction which characterizes most encounters of daily life. They are able to act for others who are physically absent, or act in response to others who are situated in distant locales. In a fundamental way, the use of communication media transforms the spatial and temporal organization of social life, creating new forms of action and interaction, and new modes of exercising power, which are no longer linked to the sharing of a common locale.

It is easier to call attention to this transformation in a general way than it is to analyse it rigorously and to follow

through its implications for social and political life. Many of the chapters that follow are an attempt – certainly partial, and no doubt faltering in places – to analyse this transformation and to explore its wider implications. The first two chapters prepare the way, both theoretically and historically. In [chapter 1](#) I analyse the nature of communication media within the framework of a more comprehensive social theory; this chapter lays the foundations for a social theory of the media by analysing the structured social contexts within which all communication – including mediated communication – takes place and with reference to which it must be understood. [Chapter 2](#) shifts the analysis on to a historical plane. Drawing on the theoretical framework elaborated in the first chapter, I offer a broad reinterpretation of the main transformations associated with the rise of modern societies, placing particular emphasis on the development of media institutions and on the growth of new networks of communication and information flow.

In [chapter 3](#) I develop the argument that the use of communication media has created new forms of action and interaction in the modern world, and I try to analyse these forms as rigorously and precisely as possible. The argument is pursued in [chapter 4](#), where I explore the impact of communication media on the relation between the public and the private and on the changing nexus of visibility and power. I try to show that phenomena which have become pervasive and troubling features of the political arena today – such as the frequent occurrence of scandals of various kinds – are rooted in a series of fundamental transformations concerning the mediated visibility of power.

The development of communication media has not only rendered power visible in new ways, it has also rendered it visible on an unprecedented scale: today mediated visibility is effectively global in scope. This circumstance is the

outcome of a complex process of globalization whose origins can be traced back at least as far as the mid-nineteenth century, and whose characteristics and consequences are the concern of [chapter 5](#). Here I seek to show how the globalization of communication was interwoven with other developmental processes constitutive of modern societies; and I argue that, if we wish to understand the consequences of these developments, we must take account of the specific contexts within which globalized media products are received and understood.

Chapters 6 and 7 are concerned to explore some of the ways in which the development of communication media has affected the daily lives of individuals. In [chapter 6](#) I focus on the nature of tradition and its changing role: has the growing diffusion of media products helped to undermine traditional ways of life, as many commentators have assumed? Or is there a sense in which the media have breathed new life into traditions, uprooting them from their contexts of origin, embedding them in cultural diaspora and providing individuals with sources of identity which are no longer linked to particular locales? [Chapter 7](#) is focused on the nature of the self and on the ways in which the process of self-formation is affected by the profusion of mediated materials. What is it like to live in a world where the capacity to experience events is no longer determined by the possibility of encountering them on the time-space paths of daily life?

The final chapter addresses questions of a more normative kind concerning the role that media institutions can play, and ought to play, in the cultivation of an autonomous and responsible way of life. I argue that many of our traditional ways of thinking about social and political matters are shaped by a certain model of public life which stems from the ancient world, from the *agora* of classical Greece, and which envisions the possibility of individuals

coming together in a shared space to discuss issues of common concern. But this traditional model of publicness as co-presence bears little resemblance to the practical realities of the late twentieth-century world. Today we must reinvent the idea of publicness in a way that reflects the complex interdependencies of the modern world, and in a way that recognizes the growing importance of forms of communication and interaction which are not face-to-face in character.

Throughout the book I have drawn on a rich and varied literature in cultural history and the history of communications, in communications theory and research, and in contemporary media and cultural studies. But this book was written primarily as a work of social theory, not as a contribution to a specialist literature in the field of communications. I have tried to redress the neglect of communication media within the literature of social theory and to show that, if we take the media seriously, we find that they have serious consequences for some of the core concerns of social and political thought. At the same time, while wishing to redress the neglect of the media, I have tried to avoid an equally one-sided preoccupation with the media, as if one could plausibly study the development of communication media independently of broader social and historical processes. Social theory has as much to offer communications research as it has to gain from it; and a social theory of the media may help to situate the study of the media where, in my view, it belongs: among a set of disciplines concerned with the emergence, development and structural characteristics of modern societies and their futures.

In developing the arguments in this book I also draw liberally on the literature of contemporary social and cultural theory. But there are three traditions of thought which are particularly relevant to my concerns, and which

have helped to shape the general orientation of my account. One is the tradition of critical social theory stemming from the work of the Frankfurt School.² I doubt whether much can be salvaged today from the writings of the early Frankfurt School theorists, such as Horkheimer, Adorno and Marcuse; their critique of what they called 'the culture industry' was too negative and was rooted in a questionable conception of modern societies and their developmental trends.³ But Habermas's early account of the emergence and transformation of the public sphere is a work that still merits careful consideration.⁴ The great strength of Habermas's early work is that it treats the development of the media as an integral part of the formation of modern societies. He argued that the circulation of printed materials in early modern Europe played a crucial role in the transition from absolutist to liberal-democratic regimes, and that the articulation of critical public opinion through the media was a vital feature of modern democratic life. There are many respects in which Habermas's argument is unconvincing, as we shall see; and I think it is clear that his argument could no longer be sustained in anything like its original form. But the vision which lies behind Habermas's account is one that continues, with some justification, to command our respect.

A second tradition of thought on which I draw loosely here is a tradition stemming from the work of the so-called media theorists. The most well known of these theorists was, of course, Marshall McLuhan; but the most original and insightful was probably McLuhan's compatriot and mentor, Harold Innis. Writing in the 1940s and early 1950s, Innis was one of the first to explore systematically the relations between media of communication, on the one hand, and the spatial and temporal organization of power, on the other.⁵ His theory of the 'bias' of communication – simply put, that different media favoured different ways of organizing political power, whether centralized or decentralized,

extended in time or space, and so on – was no doubt too crude to account for the complexities of the historical relations between communication and power. But Innis rightly emphasized the fact that communication media as such are important for the organization of power, irrespective of the content of the messages they convey. This approach has been taken up and developed by others – by McLuhan, certainly, but also by more recent theorists like Joshua Meyrowitz, who insightfully combines an analysis of electronic media inspired by McLuhan with an account of social interaction derived from Goffman.⁶ This tradition is less helpful, however, when it comes to thinking about the social organization of the media industries, about the ways in which the media are interwoven with the unequal distribution of power and resources, and about how individuals make sense of media products and incorporate them into their lives.

The third tradition which informs my account is that of hermeneutics, a tradition concerned, broadly speaking, with the contextualized interpretation of symbolic forms. Among the recent contributions to this tradition I include the work of Gadamer and Ricoeur, but also the more ethnographically oriented writings of Clifford Geertz.⁷ Hermeneutics highlights the fact that the reception of symbolic forms – including media products – always involves a contextualized and creative process of interpretation in which individuals draw on the resources available to them in order to make sense of the messages they receive. It also calls our attention to the fact that the activity of ‘appropriation’ is part of an extended process of self-formation through which individuals develop a sense of themselves and others, of their history, their place in the world and the social groups to which they belong. By emphasizing the creative, constructive and socially embedded character of interpretation, hermeneutics converges with some of the

recent ethnographic work on the reception of media products, while at the same time enriching this work by bringing to bear on it the resources of a tradition concerned with the link between interpretation and self-formation.

Some readers may find it surprising that in a book concerned with social theory and the media I draw so little on the literature generally referred to (no doubt rather crudely) with the labels 'post-structuralism' and 'postmodernism'. This is not the place to spell out the reasons for my dissatisfaction with much of this literature; some of these reasons will emerge in the pages that follow. Here it will suffice to say that, for all the talk of post-modernism and postmodernity, there are precious few signs that the inhabitants of the late twentieth-century world have recently entered a new age, and that the doors opened up by the advent of modern societies have now closed behind them. If the debates sparked off by postmodernism have taught us anything, it is not that the developmental processes characteristic of modern societies have propelled us beyond modernity to some new and as yet undefined age, but rather that our traditional theoretical frameworks for understanding these processes are, in many respects, woefully inadequate. What we need today is not a theory of a new age, but rather a new theory of an age whose broad contours were laid down some while ago, and whose consequences we have yet fully to ascertain. If we put aside the fashionable rhetoric and focus our attention on the deeply rooted social transformations that shape our lives, we may find that we share more in common with our predecessors – perhaps even with the ill-fated miller from Montereale – than some contemporary theorists would like us to believe.

1

Communication and Social Context

In all societies human beings engage in the production and exchange of information and symbolic content. From the earliest forms of gesture and language use to the most recent developments in computer technology, the production, storage and circulation of information and symbolic content have been central aspects of social life. But with the development of a range of media institutions from the late fifteenth century to the present day, the processes of production, storage and circulation have been transformed in certain ways. These processes have been caught up in a series of institutional developments which are characteristic of the modern era. By virtue of these developments, symbolic forms have been produced and reproduced on an ever-expanding scale; they have been turned into commodities which can be bought and sold on a market; they have become accessible to individuals who are widely dispersed in space and time. In a profound and irreversible way, the development of the media has transformed the nature of symbolic production and exchange in the modern world.

In this [chapter](#) I shall begin to explore the contours of this transformation by analysing some of the characteristics of mediated communication. I shall develop an approach to the media which is fundamentally 'cultural', by which I mean an approach which is concerned *both* with the meaningful

character of symbolic forms *and* with their social contextualization.¹ On the one hand, it is important to stress that communication media have an irreducible symbolic dimension: they are concerned with the production, storage and circulation of materials which are *meaningful for* the individuals who produce and receive them. It is easy to lose sight of this symbolic dimension and to become preoccupied with the technical features of communication media. These technical features are certainly important, as we shall see; but they should not be allowed to obscure the fact that the development of communication media is, in a fundamental sense, a reworking of the symbolic character of social life, a reorganization of the ways in which information and symbolic content are produced and exchanged in the social world and a restructuring of the ways in which individuals relate to one another and to themselves. If 'man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun,' as Geertz once remarked,² then communication media are spinning wheels in the modern world and, in using these media, human beings are fabricating webs of significance for themselves.

On the other hand, it is also important to emphasize that mediated communication is always a contextualized social phenomenon: it is always embedded in social contexts which are structured in various ways and which, in turn, have a structuring impact on the communication that occurs. Once again, it is easy to lose sight of this aspect. Since mediated communication is generally 'fixed' in a material substratum of some kind – words inscribed on paper, for example, or images captured on film – it is easy to focus on the symbolic content of media messages and to ignore the complex array of social conditions which underlie the production and circulation of these messages. This is a tendency which I shall seek resolutely to avoid. Without neglecting the symbolic content of media messages, I shall

develop an approach which emphasizes that mediated communication is an integral part of – and cannot be understood apart from – the broader contexts of social life.

In the first section of this [chapter I](#) shall outline some of the features of the social contexts within which communication in general, and mediated communication in particular, should be understood. Against this backcloth, I shall then analyse some of the characteristics of technical media of communication (section 2) and some of the peculiarities of what is commonly described as ‘mass communication’ (section 3). The fourth section will be concerned with the ways in which communication media reorder relations of space and time and alter our experience of them. In the final section of the [chapter I](#) shall explore, in a preliminary way, the relation between mediated communication and the practical social contexts within which such communication is received and understood.

Action, Power and Communication

It has become commonplace to say that communication is a form of action. Ever since Austin observed that to utter an expression is to perform an action and not merely to report or describe some state of affairs,³ we have become sensitive to the fact that speaking a language is a social activity through which individuals establish and renew relations with one another. But if communication is a form of action, then the analysis of communication must be based, at least in part, on an analysis of action and on an account of its socially contextualized character. Austin, and most subsequent speech act theorists, did not pursue the argument in this direction; hence their accounts of speech acts tend to be rather formal and abstract, divorced from the actual circumstances in which individuals use language

in the course of their day-to-day lives. Today we can take up Austin's observation only by abandoning his approach and by developing a substantive social theory of action and of the kinds of power, resources and institutions on which it is based.

The account I shall develop here is based on the assumption that social phenomena can be viewed as purposive actions carried out in structured social contexts.⁴ Social life is made up of individuals who pursue aims and objectives of various kinds. In so doing they always act within sets of circumstances which are given in advance, and which provide different individuals with different inclinations and opportunities. These sets of circumstances can be conceptualized as 'fields of interaction', to use a term fruitfully developed by Pierre Bourdieu.⁵ Individuals are situated at different positions within these fields, depending on the different kinds and quantities of resources available to them. In some cases these positions acquire a certain stability by being institutionalized – that is, by becoming part of a relatively stable cluster of rules, resources and social relations. Institutions can be viewed as determinate sets of rules, resources and relations which have some degree of durability in time and some extension in space, and which are bound together for the purposes of pursuing some overall objectives. Institutions give a definite shape to pre-existing fields of interaction and, at the same time, they create new positions within these fields, as well as new sets of life trajectories for the individuals who occupy them.

The position that an individual occupies within a field or institution is closely related to the *power* that he or she possesses. In the most general sense, power is the ability to act in pursuit of one's aims and interests, the ability to intervene in the course of events and to affect their outcome. In exercising power, individuals employ the resources available to them; resources are the means which

enable them to pursue their aims and interests effectively. Hence by accumulating resources of various kinds, individuals can augment their power – in the way, for instance, that an individual may build up personal savings in order to purchase a property. While resources can be built up personally, they are also commonly accumulated within the framework of institutions, which are important bases for the exercise of power. Individuals who occupy dominant positions within large institutions may have vast resources at their disposal, enabling them to make decisions and pursue objectives which have far-reaching consequences.

Understood in this general way, power is a pervasive social phenomenon that is characteristic of different kinds of action and encounter, from the recognizably political actions of state officials to the mundane encounter between individuals in the street. If today we commonly associate power with political power, that is, with the actions of individuals acting on behalf of the state, this is because states have become particularly important centres of concentrated power in the modern world. But the importance of state institutions should not blind us to the fact that overt political power is only one rather specialized form of power, and that individuals commonly exercise power in many contexts which have little or nothing to do with the state. In so doing, they both express and help to establish relatively stable relations or networks of power and domination between individuals, and between groups of individuals, who occupy different positions in fields of interaction.

It is helpful to distinguish broadly between several different forms of power. Following Michael Mann and others, I shall distinguish four main types – what I shall call ‘economic’, ‘political’, ‘coercive’ and ‘symbolic’ power.⁶ These distinctions are primarily analytical in character. They reflect the different kinds of activity in which human beings

typically engage, and the different kinds of resources on which they typically draw in exercising power. But in reality these different forms of power commonly overlap in complex and shifting ways. A particular institution or type of institution may provide the framework for the intensive accumulation of a certain kind of resource, and hence a privileged basis for the exercise of a certain form of power – in the way, for instance, that present-day commercial enterprises provide a framework for the intensive accumulation of material resources and a privileged basis for the exercise of economic power. I shall describe institutions which provide privileged bases for the exercise of certain forms of power as ‘paradigmatic institutions’. But even paradigmatic institutions typically involve a complex mixture of different kinds of activity, resources and power, even if they are geared primarily towards the accumulation of a certain kind of resource and the exercise of a certain type of power.

Economic power stems from human productive activity, that is, activity concerned with the provision of the means of subsistence through the extraction of raw materials and their transformation into goods which can be consumed or exchanged in a market. Productive activity involves the use and the creation of various kinds of material and financial resources, which include raw materials, instruments of production (tools, machinery, land, buildings, etc.), consumable products and financial capital (money, stocks and shares, forms of credit, etc.). These resources can be accumulated by individuals and organizations for the purposes of expanding their productive activity; and, in so doing, they are able to increase their economic power. In earlier epochs, productive activity was predominantly agrarian, and the paradigmatic institutions of economic power were typically small-scale organizations oriented towards subsistence farming or towards the production of

small surpluses for trade. With the development of modern societies, the paradigmatic institutions of economic power have become much larger in the scale and scope of their activities and more varied in character, with manufacturing and, subsequently, industrial production assuming a fundamental importance.

Economic power can be distinguished from *political power*, which stems from the activity of coordinating individuals and regulating the patterns of their interaction. All organizations involve some degree of coordination and regulation, and hence some degree of political power in this sense. But we can identify a range of institutions which are concerned *primarily* with coordination and regulation, and which pursue these activities in a manner that is relatively centralized within a territory that is more or less circumscribed. These institutions comprise what is generally referred to as the state – the paradigmatic institution of political power. Historically there have been many different forms of the state, from traditional imperial states and classical city-states to the modern form of nation-state. All states, or state-like institutions, are essentially systems of authority. They involve a complex system of rules and procedures which authorize certain individuals to act in certain ways. In some cases these rules and procedures are explicitly encoded in the form of laws which are enacted by sovereign bodies and administered by a judicial system.

However, as Max Weber among others has noted, the capacity of a state to command authority is generally dependent on its capacity to exercise two related but distinct forms of power, which I shall describe as coercive power and symbolic power. Ultimately the state can make recourse to various forms of coercion – that is, to the actual or threatened use of physical force – in order to back up the exercise of political power, both with regard to external conquest or threat and with regard to internal unrest or

disobedience. The authority of the state can also be backed up by the diffusion of symbolic forms which seek to cultivate and sustain a belief in the legitimacy of political power. But to what extent do particular symbolic forms actually succeed in creating and sustaining a belief in legitimacy? To what extent are such beliefs actually shared by the various groups and members of a subject population, and to what extent is the sharing of such beliefs necessary for the stable and effective exercise of political power? There are no simple and clear-cut answers to these questions, and it is this uncertainty (among other things) which renders the political use of symbolic power a risk-laden and open-ended affair.

Although there is a close historical and empirical connection between political power and coercive power, it is sensible to distinguish analytically between them. *Coercive power* involves the use, or threatened use, of physical force to subdue or conquer an opponent. Physical force can be applied in differing ways, with differing degrees of intensity and with differing results. But there is a close and fundamental connection between coercion and bodily injury or death: the use of physical force carries with it the risk of maiming or destroying the opponent. Physical force does not consist simply in brute human strength. It can be augmented by the use of weapons and equipment, by training and tactics, by intelligence and planning, etc. Historically the most important institutions for the accumulation of resources of this kind are military institutions, and the most important form of coercive power is *military power*. It is clear that military power has played an enormously important role in shaping social and historical processes, both past and present. Throughout history states have oriented a significant part of their activities towards the build-up of military power, and towards the extraction – through conquest and plunder, or

through various kinds of taxation – of the material resources necessary to sustain the institutions of armed force. Traditionally military power has been used both for the purposes of external defence and conquest, and for the purposes of internal pacification and control. In modern societies, however, there is a somewhat sharper differentiation between military institutions, which are concerned primarily with maintaining (or expanding) the territorial boundaries of nation-states, and the various paramilitary organizations (such as the police) and related institutions (such as carceral institutions) which are concerned primarily with internal pacification and control. But this institutional differentiation is by no means clear-cut, and there are many examples in recent history when military power has been used to quell internal unrest.

The fourth type of power is cultural or *symbolic power*, which stems from the activity of producing, transmitting and receiving meaningful symbolic forms. Symbolic activity is a fundamental feature of social life, on a par with productive activity, the coordination of individuals, and coercion. Individuals are constantly engaged in the activity of expressing themselves in symbolic forms and in interpreting the expressions of others; they are constantly involved in communicating with one another and exchanging information and symbolic content. In doing so, individuals draw on various kinds of resources which I shall describe loosely as the ‘means of information and communication’. These resources include the technical means of fixation and transmission; the skills, competences and forms of knowledge employed in the production, transmission and reception of information and symbolic content (what Bourdieu refers to as ‘cultural capital’⁷); and the accumulated prestige, recognition and respect accorded to certain producers or institutions (‘symbolic capital’). In producing symbolic forms, individuals draw on these and

other resources to perform actions which may intervene in the course of events and have consequences of various kinds. Symbolic actions may give rise to reactions, may lead others to act or respond in certain ways, to pursue one course of action rather disbelieve, to affirm their support for a state of affairs or to rise up in collective revolt. I shall use the term 'symbolic power' to refer to this capacity to intervene in the course of events, to influence the actions of others and indeed to create events, by means of the production and transmission of symbolic forms.⁸

While symbolic activity is a pervasive feature of social life, nevertheless there are a range of institutions which have assumed a particularly important role historically in the accumulation of the means of information and communication. These include religious institutions, which are concerned primarily with the production and diffusion of symbolic forms pertaining to salvation, spiritual values and other-worldly beliefs; educational institutions, which are concerned with the transmission of acquired symbolic content (or knowledge) and the inculcation of skills and competences; and media institutions, which are oriented towards the large-scale production and generalized diffusion of symbolic forms in space and time. These and other cultural institutions have provided important bases for the accumulation of the means of information and communication, as well as material and financial resources, and have shaped the ways in which information and symbolic content are produced and circulated in the social world.

Table 1.1 Forms of power

Forms of power	Resources	Paradigmatic institutions
Economic power	Material and financial	Economic institutions (e.g. commercial enterprises)

	resources	
Political power	Authority	Political institutions (e.g. states)
Coercive power (especially military power)	Physical and armed force	Coercive institutions (especially the military, but also the police, carceral institutions, etc.)
Symbolic power	Means of information and communication	Cultural institutions (e.g. the Church, schools and universities, the media industries, etc.)

Table 1.1 summarizes the four forms of power in relation to the resources on which they typically depend and the paradigmatic institutions in which they are typically concentrated. This typology does not purport to be a comprehensive classification of forms of power and types of institution. Moreover, as I indicated earlier, many actions will in practice draw on resources of various kinds, and many actual institutions will provide bases for differing forms of power: in the murky reality of social life, distinctions are rarely clear-cut. Nevertheless, this typology provides a helpful framework for analysing social organization and social change. And, as I shall undertake to show in the following chapter, this framework can be used effectively to analyse the institutional transformations associated with the rise of modern societies.

The Uses of Communication Media

I have characterized communication as a distinctive kind of social activity which involves the production, transmission and reception of symbolic forms, and which involves the