

Chapter 1

Political Economy of Communication

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ABSTRACT

There are different approaches and schools in the field of mass communication. Political economy, in itself, is divided into a liberal or classical political economy and a critical—Marxist—political economy. According to the Marxist-oriented critical political economy approach, the economic basis of a society determines the superstructure of that society such as state, politics, culture, and ideology. Since media is very important in producing and reproducing existing relations of property and power in capitalist societies, it is important to analyze the media with a political economy approach. Briefly, in the context of the system of political economy of communication, the effects of capital and state on media contents are explained. In this section, after examining the origins and historical development of the field of political economy as a critical social science, the characteristics of contemporary critical political economy are put forward.

INTRODUCTION

There are different schools and approaches in the field of communication. These schools can be roughly divided into two main camps: mainstream and critical approaches. Mainstream approaches, which are also considered as administrative studies, use the empirical method, such as agenda setting (McCombs and Shaw, 1972), uses and gratifications (Blumer and Katz, 1974) and cultivation analysis (Gerbner, 1998). Critical camps include cultural studies (Frankfurt School, Birmingham Center for Contemporary Cultural Studies) and political economy. Political economy also differs in itself from liberal or classical political economy and critical (Marxist) political economy (Wasko, 2004).

According to the Marxist-oriented critical political economy approach, the economic basis of a society determines the superstructure of that society, such as the state, politics, culture and ideology. Accordingly, those who control the means of material production in capitalist societies control the means of intellectual production (Marx and Engels, 1976a). Therefore, in capitalist societies, the two basic

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dynamic mechanisms affecting the production process of the media and cultural industry are the market mechanism and the state apparatus. Hence the critical political economy approach places the issue of property and power at the center of media and communication research. Today, the media is monopolizing and globalizing. This has a limiting effect on media content and the meaning of texts. In short, the ownership structure of the media has political implications. Since media are very important institutions in producing and reproducing the existing relations of ownership and power in capitalist societies, it is important to analyze the media with a critical political economy approach.

The purpose of the political economy approach of communication is to explain the effects of capital and the state on the media contents in the context of the system in which they organize and operate. Because media organizations are bound to the relations of ownership and power that affect the relations of production, distribution and consumption in the field of media. For this, the field of mass communication is an area where the relations of property and power should be examined. All kinds of material and intellectual resources, including communication sources, are distributed by the power. The struggle over resources is shaped by the power. The political economy approach of communication is to examine the relations between political, economic and communicative systems and the institutions and organizations that make up them with a historical, holistic and systematic approach.

In this section, after examining the origin and historical development of the field of political economy of communication as a critical social science, the features of contemporary critical political economy are introduced. Then, within the scope of the studies conducted in the field of political economy of communication, the contribution of critical political economy to the studies in the field of communication and the economic and political functions of the media in capitalist societies are evaluated.

WHAT IS POLITICAL ECONOMY?

Political economy is a social science, which examines the social relations established between people in the production process. All other social relations are determined according to the relations of production. The relations of production express the ownership of the means of production and the products of labor. Since private property is dominant in capitalist societies, relations of production are in essence relations of exploitation. Political economy examines not only the process of production, but also the relations of exchange, distribution and consumption of goods produced. However, production is decisive according to consumption. Production always comes before consumption and creates the need for consumption. Consumption also affects production. Goods that are not consumed are not produced. The distribution is also determined by production. Distribution is an integral part of production. The distribution of the means of production precedes the distribution of the products. The way in which the means of production are distributed to people, social groups and classes, which is decisive in distribution, is decisive. Exchange and distribution are elements of production and production, exchange, distribution and consumption form unity. The task of political economy is to introduce economic laws that condition production, exchange, distribution and consumption. These laws are historical and vary according to social conditions (Marx, 1977).

Political economy determines the economic laws that dominate the production, exchange, distribution and consumption of tangible goods at various stages of development of societies. The liberal political economists which feed on Adam Smith's views, are only interested in the production of material goods. Critical political economists however, analyze the relations of production established between people in

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