BEYOND PATRIOTISM: ESCAPING FROM AN IDEOLOGICAL PRISON

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Patriotism permeates almost every aspect of the culture of public communication bequeathed by the 20th century. There is probably no other principle which defines mass media output and media reception as clearly as the feeling of loyalty towards one's country, which we call patriotism. I say "probably" because we lack the empirical data about this relationship. Patriotism and the related concept of nationalism have hardly figured as variables in the assessment of news and media content. What A. D. Smith said about nationalism holds doubly true for patriotism:[1]

> One can only be amazed at the comparative lack of sociological interest and research in this field. Sociologists from Comte and Marx to Parson and Dahrendorf have neglected nationalism and even today it has not become a major locus of sociological interest (Smith 1983, 2).

It is usually in wars, often caused by nationalist hubris, and in the reporting of wars, that the phenomena of nationalism and patriotism come to the attention of communication researchers. It is as though they were then picking up the pieces of these tragedies, while soon forgetting the roles which patriotism continues to play in the life of nation-states.

In the following essay I will first explain the concept of a culture of public communication. A second part will examine the relationship between the mass media and the state. Thirdly, I will show how the ideology of patriotism imprisons public communication.

The Media Have Created Their Own Culture

The mass media, as we know them, are not some curious gift from heaven. They are what they are by virtue of specific historical processes which have been guided by specific political and economic interests. The values they enshrine and the myths they project are purposeful and part of a media culture. One such myth is the media's acclaimed objectivity. News objectivity, according to Dan Schiller, is "a cultural form with its own set of conventions"

(Schiller 1981, 5), the purpose of which is "the cultural configuration that permits readers to indulge in their **belief**" (Schiller 1981, 6).

Johan Galtung (1986, 7) has coined the term "social cosmology" in which news and other media contents are embedded. A cosmology is a doctrine and a map of the universe which tries to simplify the bewildering world we live in. A **social** cosmology is trying to do the same for the relationships we establish with peoples, nations, and cultures on a global scale. Most importantly, the social cosmology of the mass media has a "centre" and a "periphery." It thus divides the world into spaces. North America and Europe are the world's centre, which contains the elite countries of the world, most notably the USA and a number of European countries, like Britain, France, Germany, and Russia. The periphery consists of places where very little happens, and when something is happening, it is usually negative. Lots of things go wrong in the centre as well, but these negative reports are part of many others that speak of positive achievements and developments.

The social cosmology which guides our culture of public communication has also an ideological dimension. It used to be clear cut: communism versus capitalism. This was more than a conflict between East and West; its scope was global; the conflict was exported to the South. It is worth recalling at least one example from that time, lest we forget.

The British newspaper, *The Sunday Times* (13 May 1984), had an exclusive report on its front page, headlined "Starving Babies' Food sold for Soviet Arms." Below the headline was a large photograph of a naked, crying, starving baby. The reporter, Simon Winchester, wrote:

> There is mounting evidence that food sent from the West to drought-stricken northern Ethiopia is being diverted by the Ethiopian military regime to its army — and also — to an increasing extent, to the Soviet Union to help meet the regime's huge arms bill.

Winchester's sources were an anonymous Ethiopian official who had fled to Britain and a number of English public figures, whose criticism of the Ethiopian government of that time was well known. The report referred to an "emergency hearing" in the European Parliament, "at which testimony of those who are convinced that aid is being diverted, will be presented." Yet no such hearing was planned for that time. And when Ethiopia was, indeed, discussed later on, an EC commissioner explicitly criticised *The Sunday Times* report. No word about this appeared in the newspaper. The damage had been done. It was a successful attempt to fabricate a story which precisely fitted into the political cosmology and which, therefore, appeared credible: Soviet arms for Ethiopia, paid for by Western food aid, destined for babies.

The story should remind us of the lies and deceptions, which occurred almost daily in the media of East and West, and beyond, as a result of an ideology which had become part of the culture of public communication. It is a heritage which we have not completely expurgated. If evidence for that is needed, recall the reporting of the war in the Persian Gulf (cf. *Media Development* 1991).

Since the implosion of the system of state controlled socialism in East and Central Europe and the disappearance of the Cold War, our culture of public communication is gradually changing, and this in two directions. The dominant ideology is now "the free

market economy," which basically means freedom for individual enterprise, and more freedom for financial speculators and transnational corporations. The second direction is a new division of the world between the good and the bad, friends and enemies. Parts of the Arab world bear the brunt of this. Their leaders are demonised, regardless of what they are doing. But enemies are also created as a result of economic competition and rivalry. Japan's markets must open to US imports, though Japan adheres to the agreements of the World Trade Organisation. Reporting on Japan and its economy by US media is now fraught with problems.

Among the many influences and constraints that affect our media culture, none is more penetrating and elusive than patriotism. But before this can be assessed properly, the multiple linkages between mass media and the State need to be evaluated.

Mass Media and the State

One of the great media myths of our time is the notion of the mass media as the "fourth estate" viz., the "watchdog" of government. "The romantic image of the 'adversary press' ... is a myth: 'functional' for certain purposes, but wholly inaccurate as a model of what newsmen actually do or can hope to achieve" (Paul H. Weaver, quoted in Dennis and Merrill 1991, 22). Governments are the media's most important social actors, and speak through the media as a matter of course. The assumption that the media are a guarantee against government secrecy and abuse of power, and thus assure freedom of information in the service of responsible government, is misplaced.

Timothy E. Cook goes so far as to say that the American news media are, in effect, governmental institutions. State and media exist in a symbiotic relationship within which the State provides information and the media decide whether or not to print or broadcast it. As Cook puts it: "The American news media need government officials to help them accomplish their job, and American politicians are now apparently finding the media more central to getting done what they want to get done" (Cook 1991, 18). Frequently the media operate not only as a way of informing the public, but as a method of sharing information within the elite groups (see Downing 1986, 157-158). The government, in fact, relies on the media as a way of communicating within itself and with the elite establishment.

The government also uses the media as part of its strategy to put its policies into effect. As Cook notes, the government can use the media to criticise another country over its policies and actions, or to place an issue on the agenda, usually an issue on which it is likely to perform better than any existing opposition groups and parties.

The media, on the other hand, rely on the government as a "credible" source of information:

> ... journalists end up judging the utility of information at least as much by who says it than what it says. An "authoritative source" is an individual given a leading role in the narrative of that newsbeat. Someone in an official role within the government hierarchy tends to endow information with the credibility of his or her position within the hierarchy and/or with his or her involvement in the decision-making process; that same person outside that position saying the same thing would be more likely to be seen as providing speculation or hearsay (Cook 1991, 16; see also Bennett 1983).

Given that the media often (though not always) act as a glorified bulletin board for the State, those outside the State system, and those without power, are unable to make their voice heard — unless they become the helpless victim of disasters. Only those in public life (i.e., the politically or economically powerful, and the stars of entertainment and sport) have the right to articulate their views and opinions (Scannell 1989, 12).

Slavko Splichal argues that the State is, indeed, a mechanism of control over communication and information, but that equally information controls the State:

> *The power of the State is apparently counter-balanced, or reduced by the growing **complexity** of the social systems and their environment: more and more internal and external information is needed for the same relative level of control in/over society. In the developed part of the world, globalisation which is largely based on informatisation reduces (at least relatively) rather than expands the State power. At the same time the new information sector in society and the restructuring of the economy add new functions to the State. Thus the apparatus of government and its power to control expand due to the same process of informatisation (Splichal 1991, 4).*

Though the State does not exercise total control of information and media, it relies on them in order to function. The State and the media interact with each other — but in a manner that does not allow proper participation by the general public.

In the last ten or so years, a great distrust of State involvement in the media has arisen, as is demonstrated in the crises affecting the concept of public service broadcasting. Garnham argues that the idea of public service broadcasting is in crisis as a result of the loss of faith in the State as a credible actor in social life (Garnham 1990; see also Rowland and Tracey 1990).

Ethically speaking, the mass media are not responsible to the State but to the public. They cannot be seen in simple terms of either government mouthpiece or government adversary. They should, instead, be understood as an essential service to the public, ensuring the provision of information and debate that is a precondition of active citizenship or civil society.

The Ideology of Patriotism Imprisons the Media

No matter how critically one views the relationship between the media and the nation, or the media and the State, the fact remains that there is a universal human need for belonging. The essentially social nature of the human being needs a family, a community, a people, a nation. Not just belonging to a nation but being co-responsible for the nation's institutional political arrangements and structures that we call State, is one of the principal dogmas of modernity. "Everyone has the right to a nationality" says Article 15 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948); and "no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality." In his study of the history of nationalism, Ernest Gellner comes to the following conclusion:

> *Nationalism — the principle of homogenous cultural units as the foundations of political life, and of the obligatory cultural unity of rules and ruled — is indeed inscribed neither in the nature of things, nor in the hearts of men, nor in the pre-condition of social life in general, and the contention that it is so inscribed is a*

falsehood which nationalist doctrine has succeeded in presenting as self-evident. But nationalism as a phenomenon, not as a doctrine presented by nationalists, is inherent in a certain set of social conditions; and those conditions, it so happens, are the conditions of our time. ... To deny this is at least as great a mistake as to accept nationalism on its own terms (Gellner 1983, 125).

What are these terms? The "principal fiction" of modern nationalism is, according to Horsman and Marshall (1994, 45), that the nation-state presupposes "ethnic, racial, linguistic and cultural homogeneity...The borders always give the lie to this construct." If soil and blood express the darker side of nationalism, so does the demand for absolute loyalty towards the State, or the claim that any other social identity has to be submerged into the ultimately defining identity with the nation state. These claims, alas, have become part of the notion of patriotism.[2]

How patriotism affects public communication can best be demonstrated by an example. In 1975, David Astor, at that time editor of the British Sunday paper *The Observer*, wrote an article with the title "The Unutterable." He described the attitude of the American news media towards the war in Vietnam at the height of the conflict. It was considered their patriotic duty to provide legitimisation for that war. Astor wrote:

What nobody of any consequence can be found to have said publicly in America throughout all this time was that the situation was entirely hopeless, that no compromise solution was likely to survive for more than months, and that the collapse of the whole South Vietnam society into the hands of the Communists ... must be accepted as inevitable. The opponents of America's catastrophic war were unable publicly to admit, while the war was still on, that all the American lives had been lost for nothing. With no Congressman or journalist willing to tell the American public this truth ... it is not altogether surprising that Presidents and Secretaries of State hoped against hope that some less terrible ending would be found. Successive administrations failed to reach the right conclusion partly because there was no public awareness of the totality of the catastrophe to make it easier to utter the almost unutterable (Observer, 27 April 1975).

Silence can be a way of deceit, a method of falsifying reality, a refusal for what Vaclav Havel (1986) calls "living in truth." If this is what patriotism requires of media workers, then patriotism is a major ethical problem for public communication.

In the case of another, more recent conflict, the US invasion of the Caribbean island of Grenada, Marlene Cuthbert reported that the press in each of six countries took an editorial stand which accurately reflected the attitude of their respective governments. As a result, press coverage of the invasion differed in Canada and European countries from US press coverage. Coverage in Caribbean countries depended more or less on whether a country had committed troops to the US-led invasion force. Cuthbert concludes:

In covering the crisis in Grenada, the media of each nation or region reacted from the perspective of the perceived interests of their own national system. The journalists of each media house had to find words to report the complexity of external reality. Despite the very different pictures painted in the various regions, although there were undoubtedly individual exceptions, it seems

unlikely that the journalists were deliberately distorting or slanting news. But, however, committed they are to truth, the journalists' very selection of facts, and choice and organisation of words, necessarily involved interpretation, and interpretation introduced different perspectives which grew out of their ideological differences (Cuthbert 1985, 33).

The Grenada invasion marks an interesting point in war reporting. For the first time in modern history the military took complete command of the news. This led to protests by the American media. They condemned the military's news management but, in general, justified the war. *The New York Times* (4 November 1983) wrote: "Grenada was one invasion we can justify ... It was the culmination of a three-year policy of confrontation that helped undermine the stability and civility of the (Grenada) government whose people we now rescue."

When journalists actively endorse the patriotic line, they sometimes do so in defiance of public feeling. Dave Hill has observed how the Western press backed Allied action in the Persian Gulf with the claim that its "patriotism" reflects that of the public — despite evidence of a more confused and diverse range of public opinion than the media acknowledge (Hill 1991).

The patriotic line of journalism also prevents journalists from presenting both sides of the story, and attempts to give the "enemy's" point of view are often met with the charge of recycling enemy propaganda.

Another feature connected with the patriotic imperative is the stereotyping of "the other," and, in cases of conflicts, the stereotyping of the enemy or, to say the least, the legitimisation and reinforcement of existing stereotypes. This became particularly evident during the war in the Persian Gulf. Circumstances led themselves to such stereotyping, because the less we know about other cultures, races and faiths, the easier it is to project the image we wish, or find opportune to use.

Stereotyping during the war in the Persian Gulf, and ever since, focused on one man. Saddam Hussein became the incarnation of all evil, and anything could therefore be said about him without any substantial proof. His vilification also implied his "otherness," as Arab and Muslim.

Stereotyping the enemy in the Gulf War extended to other Arab countries and their leaders when they did not side with the American alliance. The US media denounced them as virtual enemies. This was particularly the case with Jordan and the Palestinian leadership. If such stereotyping is deemed expedient or even necessary to uphold patriotism, then there is something basically wrong with this ideology.

The most amazing aspect about nationalism and patriotism is, however, not the deceptions, lies and stereotypes of the "other," which are associated with them. What is truly astounding is that most people are not even conscious of how patriotism manipulates the media. This is what I mean by the prison culture of public communication. By way of conclusion, I would like to illustrate this with a parable.

Conclusion

Try to imagine yourself as an inmate in a prison. In fact, you have been in prison all your life. You were born there and grew up there. You live there with many other prisoners. But neither they nor yourself really know **why** you are there.

You catch glimpses of the outside world, and you wonder what it is like out there. But the fact that you really do not know it, does not worry you excessively. Because you consider the state of prisoner as normal, the prison becomes your natural habitat. As prisoners, you do not have newspapers or radio and television sets. But there is an intercom system in your prison. The governor tells you everything that is going on outside. He should know; he is well informed.

Occasionally new prisoners join you, usually for a short time. They tell you the strangest tales of what is happening outside, stories which confuse you. You are glad when they leave again. Then you appreciate all the more the reassuring voice of the prison governor over the intercom.

This world view from prison is a metaphor of our news culture. We see and hear very little of what is really going on in the world, and what we see and hear are unconnected fragments of an often distorted reality.

Again, the real tragedy of this situation is that we consider it normal, that, like life prisoners, we trust the media's intercom system.

The prison is also a metaphor of the motherland, fatherland, **la patrie**, which claims our loyalty, whose "national interest," always defined by the State rather than the people, should guide us in our actions as journalists and even as media researchers. We normally take this for granted. It is the world we live in.

Fortunately, there are people and groups, who, from time to time, are determined to break out of this prison; they start digging tunnels so that they can escape their prison. And when they see the real world they want to tell the real stories of all God's people, unblinkered by the codes and norms of nationalism and its ideological underpinning, patriotism.

Notes:

1. A noteworthy exception is the issue of *Media, Culture and Society* (Vol. 9 No. 2, April 1987) devoted to the theme of nationalism. Also see, *Media Development* on "Communication and the State" (Vol. 38, No. 3, 1991) and "Ethno-religious Conflict and the Media" (Vol. 39, No. 3, 1992).

2. An extreme manifestation of State power at a time of socio-political unrest is the "national security state," a term coined in Latin America in the 1970s. See Jose Comblin (1979).

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