

Book Reviews

**John A. Lent (ed.):
A Different Road Taken. Profiles in
Critical Communication**
Boulder, Westview Press, 1995, 319 p.

Lent's book presents five veterans of communication research. They are Dallas Smythe, George Gerbner, Herbert R. Schiller and James Halloran, until, adapting the words of the famous Finnish national writer, Aleksis Kivi in his *Seven Brothers* "last came the tip of the tail, little Kalle, slippery fish", by which I mean Kaarle Nordenstreng. The profile drawn of each of these is the interview conducted and edited by Lent, which is accompanied by an assessment, written by a colleague or disciple of the work and significance of the person in question and an article by another colleague on what critical communication research is all about and in what condition it currently finds itself. The overview of Nordenstreng's work, for example, was written by Walter Kleinwächter, while the article relying on critical research connected to Kalle is by Taisto Hujanen.

What is essential about the brothers is that each of them had his effect on the breakthrough of the 1960s and 1970s when the MCR tradition, which had ruled in a state of hegemony, faced the challenge of the neo-leftist critical direction, which set about it in no uncertain terms. Of the five it was notably Halloran and Nordenstreng who stood out as critics of the MCR tradition, the latter not least in his *Gazette* article "Communication Research in the United States" of 1968. These two have also been more assiduous than the other brothers in setting lines for research policy, although each has his own special field in communication research: Halloran in television and violence and also the relation of communication and youth, and Nordenstreng in international communication and also communication ethics and policy.

These brothers who put a spoke in the wheel of the MCR tradition are reminiscent of Hovland, Lasswell, Lazarsfeld and Lewin, who were dubbed the founding fathers of the tradition in that they, too, have a background other than purely journalistic: Smythe and Schiller came into the field from economics, Halloran from sociology, Nordenstreng from psychology, while Gerbner's background includes an orientation towards the humanities and literature. As is understandable in the light of their background, Smythe and Schiller made a particular contribution to the development of the political economy of communications in the spirit of new leftism. Schiller became known as the developer of the theory of cultural imperialism: he devoted himself particularly to the capitalist-economic structures of transnationalizing communication and the hegemonic position of US communication achieved thereby on world markets.

Smythe's research work also addressed the activity of communications in capitalist economy. His notion of how commercial communications produce audiences as commodities, which they then sell to the advertisers, has become particularly well-known. However, this notion is not entirely original, as many have believed: in Germany in the nineteenth century, for example, Karl Bücher represents the same view, although he regarded the advertising space, instead of audiences, as the commodity sold by the newspapers with the aid of their editorial material. Thus it may not be stated that Smythe invented the wheel once again in exactly the same form which it received in the hands of Bücher.

Gerbner is of interest especially as an individual who both in his own work as well as in the project on cultural indicators which he led sought to realize the idea, nurtured by Lazarsfeld in his time, of the joint activity of critical and administrative research. The indicator project includes a theoretical articulation of the thoughts of the Frankfurt school of the recur-

ring forms of mass culture as a molding force of people's conceptions – namely that that flood cultivates audiences' conceptions in the direction of the material which recurred therein. The administrative facet in the project was represented, for its part, by empirical research of the cultivation effect of television violence, and its results, giving rise as they did to ample debate and criticism, indicated that the critical notion of communication as a powerful cultivator was not unfounded.

Halloran and Nordenstreng influenced the development of the critical approach possibly more as critics of the MCR tradition and as "generators of ideas", who programmatically outlined new openings than by producing in their own work theoretical and research innovations of the same caliber as those of the other brothers. Nevertheless, their contribution must not be underestimated – without it it would hardly have been possible for critical research to challenge the MCR tradition as forcefully as was the case at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s. The top team in critical research needed not only its forward line in theory and research consisting of Gerbner, Schiller and Smythe; its attack needed the backup of Halloran and Nordenstreng.

The persons presented in Lent's book have been the undeniable driving forces of our field. I found

their interviews in the book very interesting; on the other hand the evaluations of their work I found excessively deferential, ceremonious, indeed bordering on the tone of an obituary. Critical researchers should indeed be evaluated critically (to my annoyance I find that I, too, have slipped into too laudatory a style). The articles on critical research written to the profiles certainly shed light on the form which is targeted at the communication structures instead of more concrete questions of production, texts or reception. However, the outcome might have been more interesting if, instead of writing review articles, the authors of them had discussed the situation of critical research together. The book would also have benefitted greatly if in place of Lent's rather summary introduction had been a detailed review of mass communication research to the point at which the five brothers presented in the work came out into the arena.

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