

Reflections on Bolaño's Culture Industry

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Abstract: Bolaño's study of the culture industry builds on Adorno and Horkheimer's "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception" linking it to Habermas' and Enzensberger's work. The key to Bolaño is the working out of the double task of what might be called "media capitalism", namely merging the circulation of commodities through marketing and advertising to the ideological task of pro-capitalist propaganda that, at least ideologically sustains capitalism. Significantly, this double task occurs through "the same channels" of communication as Bolaño argues and is, at least, institutionally set up through an interest symbiosis between corporations that manufacture and sell commodities and media corporations. Both are organisations dedicated to shareholder-value and profit-maximisation. Using the example of the most eminent technological innovation during the post World War period (television), Bolaño shows how and why capitalism can no longer simply be capitalism but—as a structural imperative—has to rely on the media. With that, even corporate mass media become part of the system of "media capitalism". Bolaño sets the key tasks of future theory development in the area of capitalism and communication, namely the development of the comprehensive theory of media capitalism.

Keywords: culture industry, information, capitalism, advertisement, ideology

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While there have been fruitful "Bolaño-Fuchs" exchanges on digital labour (tripleC 13/1), this review focuses on Bolaño's recently published book on the culture industry that, for the first time, makes his illuminations on the double role of the culture industry in enhancing consumerism paralleled by sustaining capitalism ideologically accessible to an English audience. To many, the book's title—culture industry—carried the obvious connotation to Adorno and Horkheimer's "The Culture Industry" (1944). But Bolaño offers more than simply an updated version of Adorno/Horkheimer's initial work. While remaining closely linked to Adorno and Horkheimer and engaging with the next generation of the Frankfurt School (e.g. Habermas), Bolaño starts with contradictions. This is followed by the role of the culture industry under monopoly capitalism and its functions. Chapter four examines the political economy of the culture industry emphasising the move from production to competition (chapter five) and the role of intellectual work in chapter six before concluding with communication and capitalism in the 21st century.

Acknowledging Christian Fuchs, John Bellamy Foster and tripleC, Bolaño's "political economy of communication" goes to the heart of Marxist theory as he notes in the foreword. Bolaño agrees with "Jean Paul Sartre [who] once said, "Marxism remains the philosophy of our time because we have not gone beyond the circumstances which engendered it". With this, Bolaño aligns his work to Adorno, Horkheimer and Marcuse and to the increasingly social-democratic and capitalism-accommodating Habermas. Next to the early Frankfurt School and based on Bolaño's "Brazilian Television Market" (1988), Paulo Freire, Brazilian theatre director, writer and politician Augusto Boal, Lenin and Gramsci are important thinkers for Bolaño. With this, Bolaño discusses "two general forms of information related to mass communication, that is the advertising form and the propaganda form". While propaganda may have originated in the Catholic Church's "Congregatio de Propaganda Fide" or Congregation for Propagating the Faith (1622), one of today's key references on propaganda

remains strangely absent from Bolaño's work (Herman and Chomsky 1988; Chomsky 1991). Nonetheless, Bolaño notes,

the ideological character of information, whether direct (propaganda) or indirect (commercial advertising, which creates lifestyle, or advertising per se), is still not fully determined at this level of analysis, in which the moment of quality that characterises the appearance of the system is prevalent.

With this, Bolaño makes the double function of communication clear when it is mutated into propaganda while also—and perhaps more importantly—serving capitalism's relentless drive to push consumption. While Bolaño analyses the role of communication under these conditions, he appears to shy away from calling what he sees by perhaps a more appropriate name: ideological media capitalism. For this form of capitalism, Bolaño's double function remains essential when it creates propaganda inventing and propagating lifestyles and when it simply sells petit-bourgeois commodities. In other words, consumer capitalism is unthinkable without corporate mass media and it is equally unthinkable without providing a system stabilising ideology. Hence Bolaño's culture industry is more than just an industry. It is a sophisticated system that reinforces itself. And it is, just as Bolaño noted when quoting Sartre, still capitalism. But this is a capitalism that depends on the media as they key transmission institutions and on ideology that stabilises the entry construct. Lastly, all of this is not about culture at all. Pure capitalism has no use for culture unless it can be converted into a commodity with exchange value (Klikauer 2013, 18). But under media capitalism, even culture can be turned into a useful ideology.

While preferring the Adorno/Horkheimer term of culture industry instead of "ideological media capitalism", Bolaño remains on track with "information as propaganda, as opposed to advertising, whose character is also ideological but different, indirect, related to the creation of a lifestyle that services as the basis for constructing a specifically capitalist mass culture". And to achieve the selling-ideology link, the "same channels by which capital circulates also carry cultural goods" even though the character of these "cultural goods" are hardly ever designed for Enlightenment—as *Bildungsroman*—but as entertainment, infotainment, what Jimmy Carter's National Security advisor, Zbigniew Brzezinski once called "tittytainment, and, above all, ideology. While Bolaño highlights the "contradictions between advertising and propaganda" more often than not, both have found an "interest symbiosis" by way of linking consumerism to system-stabilising ideologies.

In "monopoly capitalism and the culture industry" Bolaño emphasises that post-WW II monopoly capitalism that was once linked to the welfare state was paralleled by a single technological advancement turning out to be the ultimate machine of ideological transmission: television. With work intensification under neo-Fordism that defined working lives after WW II in many advanced economies, television served "the need for relaxation and entertainment on the part of consumer strata with relative little education". Under the heading of "the affluence society", the ideological apparatus of corporate mass media was set to work towards "lifestyle" changes directed towards "what the bourgeois ideologist call the consumer society" ending with the pathological trimmings of Affluenza (deGraaf et al. 2005). As predicted by Karl Marx, capitalism—especially when converted into media capitalism—is able to "penetrate traditional lifestyles", something that Habermas calls the "colonisation of the lifeworld".

On this Bolaño notes Enzensberger's seminal but largely ignored masterpiece "The Consciousness Industry" (1974) but he somewhat under-emphasises its theoretical significance. Enzensberger's sharp analysis of the culture industry led him to show the ideological influence that corporate mass media exercise on society. Enzensberger provides a vital piece in the puzzle that completes the picture of media capitalism because he not only shows the link between "capital circulation" (Bolaño) in advertising and ideological propaganda (Chomsky) but also how the media have gained in importance for capitalism after Habermas' "Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere" (1988) was successfully completed during the 20th century. As a consequence, a theoretical project linking Habermas,

Bolaño, Enzensberger and Chomsky to show the transformation of capitalism into media capitalism is still outstanding.

In “the culture industry and its functions”, Bolaño relies on “Brecht, Benjamin, Gramsci and Enzensberger” to analyse what Althusser would have called “the mass media apparatus”. Once linked to capitalism, the mass media apparatus becomes an overall structure leading directly to media capitalism. While for Althusser the state played an important part in “the ideological state apparatus” under Hayek’s political catechism of neo-liberalism, the role of the state in the media industry has declined so that media capitalism can organise its own affairs relatively unhindered by the state. In that way, capitalism can make full use of corporate mass media. And on that Bolaño is absolutely correct when noting that communication and perhaps the transition of capitalism into media capitalism remain “blackspots of western Marxism”. Unrecognised by many, not only “managing demand via advertising [has long become] a vital need of monopoly capitalism”, but its ideological function is also a vital need to stabilise (Offe) and pacify (Marcuse) capitalism.

Perhaps Bolaño is on safe grounds when arguing that “advertising originates in the capitalist production sphere and not the commodities circulation sphere” given the example of Apple where marketing experts are the decisive part of any product development. For Apple and for many others it remains vital that “advertising’s immediate objective is to convince the individual that he/she must consume”. Perhaps without that Apple would have ceased to exist decades ago. Under Managerialism, the creation of consumers is called “blue ocean strategy” (Kim and Mauborgne 2015).

In “the political economy of communication and culture”, Bolaño outlines the French school of communication studies analysing corporate mass media as “meaning makers that is, a producer of meaning [...] a primordial ideological function”. This is followed by “from production to competition” where Bolaño tells the story of television and other media concluding with “advertising and propaganda...the entire system is organised in a way that guarantees results”. Bolaño’s “entire system” exists because of an interest symbiosis between key players of media capitalism, namely producers of commodities, corporate mass media and so on. All have virtually the same interests: sustaining capitalism, shareholder-value and profit-maximisation. Today, their “entire” system spans the globe—increasingly without exception. Unfortunately, Bolaño cuts short of developing what he correctly sees into a full fledged system of media capitalism.

“Subsumption of intellectual work and the political economy of the internet” analyses the role of intellectuals by stating, “the essential linked nature of the political domination, economic exploitation and ideological reproduction processes of the capitalist form of information has not changed because of the development of information technology”. In other words, capital is still capital and labour is still labour and the interest of both remains oppositional. Bolaño’s four-page conclusion notes that “the culture industry is part of a system of communications which is the material manifestation [of] the historical conditions of monopolistic capitalism [defined by] an unprecedented expansion of the culture industry [that] took place in the post second world war period”.

In conclusion, Bolaño’s sharp analysis has detected fundamental changes in capitalism that occurred under the widespread introduction of television during the post WW II era. This has changed capitalism more fundamentally than noticed by many critiques of capitalism whether of Marxist or non-Marxist persuasion. Based on the seminal essay on the culture industry by Adorno and Horkheimer that was—at least partly—followed by a young Habermas and developed by his close friend Enzensberger, Bolaño successfully illuminates the double task of “media capitalism”. This is found in the link between advertising and ideological propaganda. Once ideology (propaganda) and commodity circulation (advertising and marketing) are linked to the monopolistic concentration of corporate mass media, a more rounded picture of 21st century capitalism emerges. On the basis of Bolaño’s work, the future task of theory development is set with the task of developing Adorno/Horkheimer’s, Habermas’, Enzensberger’s and now Bolaño’s work further into a fully developed theory of “media capitalism”.

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About the Author

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Thomas Klikauer teaches MBA students at the Sydney Graduate School of Management (University of Western Sydney, Australia). He is the author of “Managerialism” (Palgrave 2013), six other books and numerous articles. Currently, he is working on a book called “media capitalism” as a preliminary and somewhat pre-embryonic introductory study that might deliver a few initial thought contributions as a precursor to the possibility of a developed theory of something that might eventually be called “Media Capitalism—Critique of the Political Economy”.