

INVENTIVITY REALITY

THE
POLITICS

MICHAEL
PARENT

INVENTING REALITY

*The Politics
of the Mass Media*

Michael Parenti

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To Kathleen Lipscomb who works so devotedly to build a better reality while rejecting the invented one. And to the memory of Philip Meranto who did the same.

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A Word to the Reader

For many people an issue does not exist until it appears in the news media. How we view issues, indeed, what we even define as an issue or event, what we see and hear, and what we do *not* see and hear are greatly determined by those who control the communications world. Be it labor unions, peace protesters, the Soviet Union, uprisings in Latin America, elections, crime, poverty, or defense spending, few of us know of things except as they are depicted in the news.

Even when we don't believe what the media say, we are still hearing or reading their viewpoints rather than some other. They are still setting the agenda, defining what it is we must believe or disbelieve, accept or reject. The media exert a subtle, persistent influence in defining the scope of respectable political discourse, channeling public attention in directions that are essentially supportive of the existing politico-economic system.

Be this as it may, growing numbers of people are becoming increasingly aware that the media are neither objective nor consistently accurate in their portrayal of things. There seems to be a growing understanding that we need to defend ourselves by monitoring and challenging the misinformation we are fed. In this book I will try to demonstrate *how* the news media distort important aspects of social and political life and *why*. The press's misrepresentations are not usually accidental, not merely the result of the complexity of actual events and the honest confusions of poorly prepared reporters. While those kinds of problems exist, another kind of distortion predominates, one not due to chance or to the idiosyncratic qualities of news production or newsmen. The major distortions are repeatable, systematic, and even systemic—the product not only of deliberate manipulation but of the ideological and economic conditions under which the media operate.

One book cannot cover all that might be said about the media. I will concentrate on national and international politico-economic class issues, saying relatively little about the racist and sexist biases in media

content (beyond what is dealt with in the first chapter). I also do not deal with the entertainment media and the many hidden ideological and political biases found therein. That subject awaits a later volume. In the pages ahead we will explore the way the press distorts and suppresses the news about major domestic and foreign events and policies, the hidden and not so hidden ideological values, the mechanisms of information control, the role of newpeople, publishers, advertisers, and government, the way patterns of ownership influence information output, and the instances of dissent and deviancy in the major media.

Rather than attempt a comprehensive canvassing of the news complete with statistical breakdowns and content analyses, I trace media performance along several basic themes, providing representative samples of how the press treats or mistreats a subject. A more systematic and comprehensive undertaking would have had the virtue of thoroughness and maybe increased precision of a sort, but it would have made for a very huge and dull volume. In any case, numerous systematic studies are cited and summarized in the chapters that follow.

This book concentrates on the more influential and prestigious news media, specifically the three major networks: the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), and the American Broadcasting Company (ABC), along with the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* (and their respective news services). These two newspapers, the *Post* and the *Times*, not only feed information to the public but to other news media as well. Occasional attention is also given herein to the newsweeklies, *Time* and *Newsweek*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, the *Los Angeles Times*, and lesser publications and broadcast media. Taken together these various outlets compose what I alternately describe as the “major media,” the “establishment press,” the “mainstream media,” the “business-owned press,” the “U.S. press,” the “national media,” or just the “press” and the “news media.” Throughout this book I use the terms *news media* and *press* synonymously to mean the printed and broadcast news organizations. It so happens that *press* is singular and *media* plural, but I mean the same by both. The term *press* however does not include the entertainment sector of the media.

The above-mentioned news organizations represent the better quality part of the establishment press, being more informative and less distorted than most of the other (more conservative) media. If this book has a bias in selection, then, it is in the direction of understatement.

If the media so preempt the communication universe, then how can we evaluate them? And who is to say whether our criticisms are to be trusted? In attempting to expose the distortions and biases of the

press, do we not unavoidably introduce biases of our own? And if objectivity is unattainable, are we not then left in the grip of a subjectivism in which one person's impressions are about as reliable (or unreliable) as another's? To be sure, there is always the danger that a dissenting viewpoint of the kind presented in this book will introduce distortions of its own. The reader should watch for these. But this new "danger" is probably not as great as the one posed by the press itself, because readers approach the dissenting viewpoint after having been conditioned throughout their lives to the sentiments and images of the dominant society. The heterodox arguments can more easily be recognized as such and are open to conscious challenge. Far more insidious are the notions and opinions that so fit into the dominant political culture's field of established images that they appear not as arguments and biased manipulations but as "the nature of things."

When exposed to a view that challenges the prevailing message, the reader is not then simply burdened with additional distortions. A dissident view provides us with an occasion to test the prevailing beliefs, to contrast and compare and open ourselves to information and questions that the mainstream media and the dominant belief system in general have ignored or suppressed. Through this clash of viewpoints we have a better chance of moving toward a closer approximation of the truth.

In addition, we have the test of experience itself. Common sense and everyday life oblige us to make judgments and act as if some images and information are closer to the truth than others. Misrepresentations can be eliminated by a process of feedback, as when subsequent events fail to fulfill the original images. For instance, after decades of mass media alarms about Red Menace threats that subsequently never materialized, we can raise some critical questions about the objectivity and reliability of the press regarding the issue of anti-communism and the cold war. (As indeed I do; see chapters 6, 7, and 8.)

There is also the internal evidence found in the press itself. We can detect inconsistencies in the press by drawing from other reports in the same mainstream press. We can note how information that supports the official view is given top play while developments that seem not to fit are relegated to the back pages. Also, like any liar the press is filled with contradictions. Seldom holding itself accountable for what it says, it can blithely produce information and opinions that conflict with previously held ones, without a word of explanation for the shift. We can also learn to question what the establishment press tells us by noting the absence of supporting evidence, the failure to amplify and explain. We can ask: Why are the assertions that appear

again and again in the news not measured against observable actualities? We can thereby become more aware when and how the news media are inviting us to believe something without establishing any reason for the belief.

Much of the evidence herein has been gathered from extensive and detailed studies produced by academic scholars, journalists, and other independent investigators. Also helpful has been the information provided in such dissenting publications as the *Nation*, the *Progressive*, *Political Affairs*, *In These Times*, the *Guardian*, the *Daily World*, and *Mother Jones*—publications that have proved right more often than not on a wide range of issues that the major media regularly misrepresent.

Some readers will complain of this book's "one-sidedness." But if it is true that "we need to hear all sides and not just one," then all the more reason why the criticisms and information usually suppressed or downplayed by the American press deserve the attention accorded them in the pages to follow. In any case, it can be observed that people who never complain about the one-sidedness of their mainstream political education are the first to complain of the one-sidedness of any challenge to it. Far from seeking a diversity of views, they defend themselves from the first exposure to such diversity, preferring to leave their conventional political opinions unchallenged.

A former member of the Federal Communications Commission, Nicholas Johnson, once urged people to "talk back" to their television sets. We can talk back to all the media a lot better and demand a lot more only when we know how we are being manipulated and why we are being lied to. This book is an attempt at understanding how and why the media are the way they are so that we might better defend ourselves not only by talking back in the privacy of our living rooms but by organizing and struggling to become the active agents of our own lives and the creators of our own reality.

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From Cronkite's Complaint to Orwell's Oversight

The mass media in the United States are privately-owned, profit-making corporations—like so many other institutions in our capitalist society. To understand how the media function, we need to understand a few things about the capitalist system itself. Most of the land, labor, natural resources, and technology of this and other nations are controlled by a few giant corporations and banks for the purpose of making profits for their owners. This process of capital accumulation, the essence of the capitalist system, in turn, exerts a strong influence over our political and social institutions. The news media seldom talk about this (and we shall see why), but it is time we did.

CAPITALISM AND CULTURE

The capitalist class, that tiny portion of the population that lives securely and affluently principally off the labor of others, has a commanding say in how and for whom the wealth of the nation is produced. The imperatives of the private market determine the kinds of jobs that are (or are not) available; the wages we earn; the prices, rents, and mortgages we pay; the quality of the goods and services we get; and even the quality of the air we breathe, the food we eat, and the water we drink.¹

Capitalism's purpose is not to create jobs; in fact, capitalists are constantly devising ways of eliminating jobs in order to cut labor costs. Nor is its purpose to build communities, for capitalists will build or destroy communities as investment opportunities dictate. Nor is capitalism dedicated to protecting the family or traditional life, for no system in human history has been more relentless in battering down ancient practices and destroying both rural and urban home-grown cultures. Nor is capitalism intent upon protecting the environment on behalf of generations yet to come; for corporations will treat

the environment like a septic tank in order to cut production costs and maximize profits without regard for future generations or for the generation enduring it all today. Nor can we say that capitalists are committed to economic efficiency as such, since they regularly pass on their hidden diseconomies to the public in the form of overproduction, overpricing, pollution, unemployment, population dislocation, harmful products, and personal injury. And as the military budget shows, they actively court waste and duplication if it brings fatter contracts and bigger profits.

Capitalism has no loyalty to anything but its own process of capital accumulation, no loyalty to anything but itself. Nor could it be otherwise if one wished to survive as a capitalist; for the first law of the market is to make a profit off other people's labor or go out of business. Private profitability rather than social need is the determining condition of capital investment. Throughout history, the accumulation of wealth has brought with it a growth in organizations designed for the protection of wealth, starting with the bands of armed men whom Engels correctly defined as the essence of the early state. Marx and Engels understood that the state has several functions: It carries out tasks that cannot be performed privately, and it tends to the common defense of the people. But a major purpose of the state in class society is to protect those who own the wealth of a nation from those who labor.²

It may come as a surprise to discover that throughout most of the seventeenth, eighteenth, and early nineteenth centuries, leading bourgeois philosophers and economists understood and openly stated, as did John Locke in 1690 that "government was created for the protection of property," and Adam Smith in 1776 that civil authority "is in reality instituted for the defense of the rich against the poor, or of those who have some property against those who have none at all." As class differences become more pronounced, Smith observed, so does the need for a state: "The acquisition of valuable and extensive property . . . necessarily requires the establishment of civil government."³ And as the scope of capitalism widens, so does the state—from principality to confederation to nation to an international network of counterinsurgency client states—in order to make the world safe for capital accumulation.

Even within a political system like ours which allows for mass electoral participation, the rich are able to exercise an extraordinary influence over the leaders of government. In fact, they usually *are* the leaders, directly occupying the top legislative, judicial, and executive positions, including governorships, cabinet posts and the presidency itself. In addition, the immense sums of money at their disposal allow

them to dominate both political campaigns and the policymaking process with lavish contributions and well-paid lobbyists.

Even more important, business *as a system*, as a way of organizing property, capital, and labor, is a pervasive social force and not just another of many interests in the political arena. It occupies a strategic position within the economic system: in a sense, it *is* the economic system. So on most major politico-economic issues, business gets its way with government because there exists no alternative way of organizing the economy within the existing capitalist structure. Because business controls the very economy of the nation, government perforce enters into a unique and intimate relationship with it. The health of the *capitalist* economy is treated by policymakers as a necessary condition for the health of the nation. The goals of big business (rapid growth, high profits, and secure markets at home and abroad) become the goals of government, and the "national interest" becomes identified with the dominant domestic and overseas capitalist interests. In order to keep the peace, business may occasionally accept reforms and regulations it does not like, but government cannot ignore business's own reason for being, that is, the accumulation of capital. In a capitalist system, public policies cannot persistently violate the central imperative of capital accumulation. Sooner or later, business as a system must be met on its own terms or be replaced by another system.

Today, knowledge of the relationship between wealth, class, and state is suppressed like a dirty secret; or it is dismissed by officials, opinion makers, and news pundits as just so much Marxist ideological mouthing. The accepted posture is to minimize or deny the linkages between capitalist economic power and a supposedly democratic state, between private wealth and public authority. But in truth the power of money prevails over the needs of the people in more ways than are usually acknowledged; and the existing state can no more be neutral toward, and independent of, those who control the economy than can the other institutions of society.

But what has all this to do with the press? The press is one of the "other institutions" I just alluded to and one of the most important in maintaining the hegemony of the corporate class and the capitalist system itself. During the nineteenth century, as industry drew a growing proportion of the population into its sphere of work and consumption, business leaders became more concerned with seeing that cultural life coincided with the demands of industrial production and that the public's political sentiments were supportive of the existing social order. Not only would industrialists administer the work discipline of the machine, they would try to teach people proper attitudes and

loyalties. They would extend their influence over people from the factory to the political halls to the community itself.⁴

Anarchists, socialists, syndicalists, and other purveyors of radical ideas were mercilessly hounded out of the factories, schools, professions, and communities of America. Pinkertons, Klansmen, and vigilantes—often in the pay of the bosses along with police, militia, and the army were regularly employed to crush labor opposition and political dissidence.⁵ But as Napoleon once said, you can do anything with bayonets except sit on them. A class that relies solely on the state's bayonets to maintain its rule is never secure. So along with suppression, the business class enlisted to its cause such other institutions as the church, the charities, the law, the schools, and the popular press. To secure their hegemony as captains of industry, businessmen, as Stuart Ewen wrote, "aspired to become captains of consciousness."⁶

Today corporate leaders and their well-paid deputies dominate the boards and top posts of society's educational, communicational, artistic, entertainment, legal, and scientific institutions. These institutions are ruled very much like business firms themselves, by boards of directors (or trustees or regents, as they might be called) drawn mostly from the business class or those in the pay of that class. Numbering between ten and twenty-five persons, these boards have final say over the institution's system of rewards and punishments, its budget and personnel, its investments, and its purposes. They exercise power either by occupying the top executive positions or by hiring and firing those who do. Their power to change the institution's management if it does not perform as they desire is what gives them control over policy.

The boards exercise power not by popular demand or consensus but by *state* charter. Incorporated by the state, they can call upon the courts and the police to enforce their decisions against the competing claims of staff, clients, or other constituents. These boards are non-elected, self-selected, self-perpetuating, ruling coteries of affluent persons who are answerable to no one but themselves. They are checked by no internal electoral system, no opposition parties, no obligation to report to the rank and file or win support from any of the people whose lives they affect with their decisions. Yet institutions so ruled—including the nation's news organizations—are said to be the mainstay of "democratic pluralism."

In a word, the cultural order is not independent of the business system. Nor are cultural institutions independent of each other, being owned outright or directly controlled by the more active members of the business class in what amounts to a system of interlocking and often interchanging directorates. We know of more than one business

leader who not only presides over a bank or corporation but has served as a cabinet member in Washington, is a regent of a large university, a trustee of a civic art center, and a board member of a church or foundation or major newspaper or television network—or all of the above.

Those persons who believe the United States is a pluralistic society resist the notion of a business-dominated culture. They see cultural institutions as standing outside the political arena, distinctly separate from business and politics. They make much about keeping the media, arts, sciences, foundations, schools, colleges, professions, and churches free of the taint of political ideologies so that these institutions might not be deprived of their neutrality and autonomy. Since the pluralists believe that big business is just one of many interests in the political arena and one that does not dominate the state, they cannot imagine that it dominates civil society and cultural life.

But if history teaches us anything it is that the power of the propertied class never stands alone. It wraps itself in the flag and claims a devotion to God, country, and the public good. Behind the state is a whole supporting network of doctrines, values, myths, and institutions that are not normally thought of as political but which serve a political purpose. The state, as Gramsci noted, is “only the outer ditch behind which there [stands] a powerful system of fortresses and earthworks.”⁷ These supportive institutions help create the ideology that transforms a ruling class interest into a “general interest,” justifying existing class relations as the only natural and workable ones, the preferred and optimal, although not perfect, societal arrangements. So the capitalist class is the ruling class, controlling society's cultural institutions and ideational production as well as its labor, land, and natural resources.

Not entirely, however. The corporate-financial class of America is very powerful but not omnipotent. It makes mistakes, suffers internal divisions over tactics and policies, and must constantly deal with the resistance of workers, consumers, taxpayers, voters, and other protesters. The ruling class rules, but not always in the way it might want. It sometimes must make concessions to resistant publics or at least maintain an appearance of so doing. To best secure and legitimate its rule, it must minimize the appearance and use of its undemocratic, coercive power.

This hypocrisy is not merely “the tribute that vice pays to virtue.” In fact, vice never pays tribute to virtue, but it does to power—to the democratic power of the people, who with demonstrations, protests, boycotts, strikes, sit-ins, civil disobedience, and even civil disorders have struggled against regressive laws, oppressive work conditions,