

Cultural Imperialism and Communication Research:  
an international perspective\*

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Introduction

When I was in the United States, I was drawn to works by Charles Reich, Alvin Toffler, Faruqi and Nasr. I was particularly fascinated by "The Greening of America" and "The Future Shock" more than communication books which I should have given attention to. And, when I was in Britain, again my attention was distracted from my study, and was drawn to writings of C. Wright Mills, Armand Mattelart, Bottomore, Nisbet, Ebrahim and, last but not least, the great book, Al-Quran.

To me they all have one thing in common. They discussed and talked about man; his relationship with his society; with his environment; and with himself. Except for the Al-Quran, in addition to discussing the three, also emphasised on man's relationship with his Creator.

Mills

Mills wrote, I quote:

"Nowadays men often feel that their private lives are series of traps. They sense that within their everyday worlds, they cannot overcome their troubles, and in this feeling, they are often quite correct; what ordinary men are directly aware of and what they try to do are bounded by the private orbits in which they

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\* Kertaskerja ini telah dibentangkan di Seminar Pendidikan Komunikasi, Jabatan Komunikasi UKM, 2-3hb. Mac 1987.

live, their vision and their powers are limited to the close-up scenes of job, family, neighbourhood, in other milieux, they move vicariously and remain spectators. And the more aware they become, however vaguely, of ambitions and of threats which transcend their immediate locales, the more trapped they seem to feel." (Mills, 1980: 10).

Emphasising relationships that exist between history, man and society, Mills add:

"Underlying this sense of being trapped are seemingly impersonal changes in the very structure of continent-wide societies. The facts of contemporary history are also facts about the success and the failure of individual men and women. When a society is industrialised, a peasant becomes a worker; a feudal lord is liquidated or becomes a businessman. When classes rise or fall, a man is employed or unemployed; when the rate of investment goes up or down, a man takes new heart or goes broke. When war happens, an insurance salesman becomes a rocket launcher; a store clerk, a radar man; a wife lives alone; a child grows up without a father. Neither the life of an individual nor the history of a society can be understood without understanding both.

Yet men do not usually define the troubles they endure in terms of historical change and institutional contradiction. The well-being they enjoy, they do not usually impute to the big ups and downs of the societies in which they live. Seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history, ordinary men do not usually know what this connection means for the kinds of men they are becoming and for the kinds of history-making in which they might take part. They do not possess the quality of mind essential to grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world. They cannot cope with their personal troubles in such ways as to control the structural transformations they usually lie behind them." (Mills, 1980: 11)

## Reich

If Mills talked about men, environment and society, Reich talked about individual and cultural revolutions; about "crises" of the American society resulting in disorder, corruption, hypocrisy, war, poverty, distorted priorities, law-making by private power, uncontrolled technology and the destruction of environment.

These, Reich claimed led to the decline of democracy and liberty and the feeling of "powerlessness;" (or hopelessness?), the creation of artificiality of work and culture; absence of community, and, finally, loss of self.

Reich blamed industrialisation and the creation of giant state corporations (and multi-nationals?) which was responsible for the societal "ills," and thought that the "New Deal" had never been able to touch the deeper problems of American life. Instead, he argued the "New Deal" furthered the creation of a hierarchical elitist society whose principles contrasted with those of democracy and equality. (The Watergate and Iran-gate affairs clearly illustrated Reich's contentions and apprehensions).

Reich also attacked apathy and indifference and urged direct involvement and responsibility to bring about what he called a "higher reason, a more human community, and a new liberated individuals," by creating a "new enduring wholeness and beauty" among individuals and a "renewed relationship of man to himself, to other men, to society, to nature and to the land."

Reich also called for the changing of goals - the search for self; for honesty, and responsibility under his "Consciousness III" plan which centered upon the mind and spiritual cleansing, that is "soul" and "mental" cleansing - involving uprooting of one's culture. He believed once man has cleaned himself spiritually and culturally, he could then look forward to changing the political structure of the society, as a "final act."

### Ebrahim

Another scholar, Maulana Mufti Ahmed Ebrahim Bemat, writing on the "Causes of Calamities and Their Cures" thought these were mainly due to greed, materialism and egotism; which he termed as "earning excessive profits, world good, and fame." (Ebrahim, 1980: 12).

He said that in the rat-race today, one's brothers and sisters may be considered his rival; and that one may even speak ill of him, start quarrelling and go to court, waste time, giving his own greatness and reputation instead of remembering his Creator. Isn't this happening now in our midst today? (See the New Straits Times report on Sarawak, 15 March 1978) and the often reported news about money politics.

### Cultural Imperialism

Now, what have all these got to do with the topic I am asked to address - Cultural Imperialism and Communication Research? They do have. First, I see these phenomena - the observations on man, environment, and society by these scholars merely as symptoms rather than the true cause or causes.

In view of this, I shall touch on cultural imperialism only as a passing observation to the whole human debacle or dilemma. I feel there seem to be a kind of "Grand Design" by the power that be in the world today to try to undermine weaker and poor nations, and finally control the world (?) directly or indirectly or, if necessary destroy those who oppose them. (What happened to Bao Dai of Vietnam and Allende of Chile are good examples). And this "Grand Design" is done through various means which I shall call the "tentacles."

This "Grand Design" appears to be consistent with Brecht's claims on the purpose of the capitalist mode of communication which he says was in keeping with the desire to "subjugate the minds while hardening the

hearts." (Mattelart, 1979: 25). Brecht's claims could be true if one ponders a while upon statements made by various people at different times. For example, in 1910 the civilian governor of the Philippine Islands, William Howard Taft, who one year later was elected president of the United States, declared before the American Senate: "One of our great hopes in elevating those people (the Philippinos) is to give them a common language, English, because through the English language certainly, by reading its literature, by becoming aware of the history of the English race, they will breathe in the spirit of Anglo-Saxon individualism." (Mattelart, 1979: 26).

This statement could have been dismissed as a myth if I had not read a similar tone of assertion made during the colonial era of India as quoted by B.D. Basu, writing on the "History of Education in India Under the Rule of the East India Company," he wrote, I quote: "We must do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, opinions, words and intellect." (Sulaiman, 1979: viii). And, nearer home, in Malaysia or Malaya then, Richard Winstedt wrote in almost similar vein about the education system. He said let the Chinese be the compradores, the sons of Malay farmers be slightly better farmer than his father, the Indian be in the estates.

#### Independent or Dependent?

The question now is whether this idea about colonialisng the mind is real and still in practice? I say, yes. Despite our independence, we are still dependent. As they say: if the American sneezes we catch cold. Yes, we are still dependent and responsive to our former masters if not Superpowers of the world, whether directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, because the root of mental or cultural imperialism has sunk so deep in our minds that we are no longer conscious that it is there and is with us. I say that mental subjugation and hardening of the hearts

is real; although now it is a little more subtle, sophisticated and indirect. It is done through, as you have seen, the language, followed by technology-mass, mass media, mass or popular culture and advertisement - backed by the "organic" intellectuals or elites, administrative, economic, legal and educational apparatus specially designed for the perpetuation and an indirect control of the systems - the "tentacles."

### Imperialism

Imperialism could be defined as the erosion of the cultural identity and vitality of nations on a daily basis by the insidious penetration of a particular way of viewing life, and precisely believing in the universality of its values and imposing them as if they were self-evident truths, as if corresponded to the natural and happy evolution of things. In other words, imperialism is a means to deculturalise man through his mind. It is a form of cultural invasion; a form of subtle and an indirect subjugation and control of man by man, and of nation by nation through his mind. Isn't this what we are witnessing today? The "Solid Gold," "Top 40 Videos," the "Breakdance," "Dallas," "Dynasty," "I Love Lucy," the "Western," (where the Red Indians are always the no-gooders and marauders), the "Capatain Marvel," the "Spider Man," "Donald Duck," etc. .... so much so that we are consciously or unconsciously uncritically imitating, copying, repeating without ashamed something that is alien to us, to our culture, in the name of keeping up with the time; in the name of progress and modernisation and in the name of development. Isn't these a form of ideological influence, a form of mental colonisation, a form of cultural imperialism? The American sociologist, R. K. Merton, attempting to define the limits of the discipline of "communication sciences," compares the sociology of communication with the sociology of knowledge. The former, he asserts, is located geographically in the new world and the latter in the old world (Merton, 1957).

It is known that communication studies and research are generally sociologically and psychologically-based. In fact the root of communication research is sociological. Thus research, particularly empirical research - the positivistic administrative research to which most of us were exposed to and practice, is undoubtedly another tool or "tentacle" in the "Grand Design" to enhance and perpetuate cultural imperialism - a policy used as a mean to control political and economic affairs of a country - especially the weak and poor ones. For, as is known, the basis of empirical research in social sciences is to study man's behaviour. This is because to combat the ills of early capitalism, a policy-oriented research is "inevitable;" men have to be understood, their behaviour analysed and generalisations made out of the raw statistical data that is gathered. That is, simply put, man and man's behaviour must be controlled, (be digitised or robotised?) What is the effect of all these? It is, no more and no less, an indirect process of dehumanising man! Is it any wonder why there is corruption, hypocrisy, conceit, arrogance, individualism, oppression, money-politics everywhere, and a feeling of distance between and amongst once close friends, relations, neighbours, and nations because one is in a position of wealth and power, and the other is not?

### History

The emergence of societies from feudal to capitalist states in Europe and America was primarily responsible in shaping the thinking of most sociologists and philosophers alike in their attempt to understand society and deal with their "spatio-temporal" problems. As such, early urbanisation, industrialisation and its consequent problems was a driving force in American sociology, which is characterised by piece-meal and scientific attempts to understanding and solving these problems.

The first world war gave the impetus to the Chicago School of Sociology in their interest in social research to "improve" society, in that the war produced more problems than the "invisible hand" of the market forces could deal with. In this respect, both sociology and social psychology became the prime tools of understanding problems of society and "computed solution" thought to be and should be the answer. The research methods have become more quantitative, sampling considerations have facilitated generalisation of research results, and research sponsorship became necessary as scholarly investigation became a team work effort. Thus, sociology and social psychology became fully institutionalised as the "social engineers" for social development and societal change. Issues like production, race relations, prostitutions, crimes, etc. were studied. In mass communication its process, channel, audience, and effects became the cornerstone of research. It was based on August Comte's - the father of sociology - approach to social science study which, he thought, should be like "social physics," by studying the "functional relationships of institutions" within society, which he referred to as "statics." Comte also thought sociology should follow the process of social revolution which he called "dynamics." As can be seen, the whole social science study approach of Comte and others that followed after him had the overtone of "Darwinian" theory of the "survival of the fittest," in that social phenomena were studied compartmentally, like studying the wave from the sea. Thus, we have the sociology of industry which, in conjunction with social psychology, tries to understand the psychology of factory workers so as to facilitate more productivity, which was then lagging because of the depression.

#### Empirical Research

The nature of empirical research is policy-oriented. It is not a policy research. Policy-oriented research in communication as I had said earlier, studies processes, channels, audiences, and effects which are mainly administrative. This approach is basically derived from Lazarsfeld's famous axiom: "Who



says what, to whom, in what channel, with what effects?"

On the other hand, policy research studies structure, organisation, and control, that is where one asks question about the validity of the system, challenges predominant values, or suggest alternatives; instead of merely seeking to bring about the efficient execution of policy, to make the existing administrative machinery more efficient and exploiting of man by man more effective.

Admittedly, although both approaches - the empirical and critical - to research do and could contribute to the betterment of knowledge and understanding of man, his environment, and society, a more thorough, holistic and inter-disciplinary approach could be more meaningful and realistic. For, in the final analysis, nothing happens in a vacuum; nor could man be value-free or objective, as is often expected and thought of him by the empirical researchers. Man being man, colouring and discriminating form parts and parcels of his failings. Be they as it may, nonetheless imperfections in man will forever remain. For, he is a social animal; a product of his environment and society. As such, he could not be made to be perfect in every way, though he could strive to be so. He is not a machine. He has feelings and emotions. He is God or Allah-created. He could not be made perfect emotionally or psychologically. He could not be made perfect, even rationally. If so, no innocent man could go six feet above the ground and healthy man six feet below. If man is perfect let him create something from nothing - like the stars, the moon and the sun, or even a tree; to name a few. Man could only create something from what has already existed - atom, neutron, proton; human sperm to test-tube baby. Not the sperm itself! Man could only propose. He may dispose. Hence why Muslims see culture not just as a way of life as is usually seen by most people that are not familiar with Islam, but is a way of life - encompassing their relationships with man, environment, himself, and, most importantly, his Creator. Every Muslim is urged to study and to know

these relationships. Hence, there is a hierarchy or priority in knowledge-seeking or pursuing in Islam. There is one which is obligatory, which every Muslim must know; and the other, is voluntary. Every Muslim should and must seek to know his Creator. But, while every Muslim is encouraged to know worldly knowledge so long as it contributes to his wellbeing and enlightenment - physically, mentally, materially and spiritually - which would also finally lead him to know his Creator, this is not compulsory. The reason being, as pointed out by Naquib (1978) the first, the obligatory knowledge, would contribute only good things to the human race, the other - the voluntary knowledge - need not necessarily be so.

### Conclusion

It appears that the war against popery in the days of the French Enlightenment has been extended to this day. The all-out war wedged against religion in those days was based on four propositions: First, the replacement of the supernatural by the natural; of religion by science, of divine decree by natural law, and of priests by philosophers. Second, was the exaltation of reason, guided by experience as the instrument that would solve all problems; whether social, political or religious. Third, was the belief in the practicability of man and society and, accordingly, the belief in the progress of the human race. And, finally, there was humane and humanitarian regard for the right of man, and especially the right to be free from the oppression and corruption of governments - a right claimed by blood in the French Revolution (Nisbet, 1979: 5).

But, as long as man thinks he is the master of the world and keeps on fighting against nature, he will always potentially remain a danger, not only to himself, but also to his fellowmen, and the universe generally. In the long run, this might lead to his own destruction.

Finally, I am always reminded of the following verse in the Al-Quran, which I think should be a good food for thought to those who care to ponder and to know:

"Verily, this is My Way,  
Leading straight; follow it;  
Follow not (other) paths;  
They will scatter you about  
From His (great) path;  
Thus doth He command you,  
That ye may be righteous."

(Translated: Yusof Ali, 1968: 336)

This calls for a deeper understanding of our position today - politically, economically, socially and/or culturally - and, if need be, serious thinking about "overhauling" or "restructuring" them so that they be consistent with the overriding needs and aspirations of our nation based on the principles of Rukun Negara and accepted universal values of other progressive and "balanced" nations.

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