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# Raymond Williams: The godfather of media studies

Martin Hirst

## An introduction to grey collar journalism

As my colleague Richard Phillipps points out there are two possible readings of this paper's title. The ambiguity is deliberate. Williams is the godfather in the gentle sense of being the venerated benefactor of an extended family to whom one turns for spiritual advice. And he's a godfather in the Coppola sense; evil incarnate. It is a title applied with more than a little respect and humour.

I acknowledge Williams' important influence on my own thinking, but like an unruly teenager, I am now rebelling against his paternalistic advice. In my eyes Raymond Williams abandoned the 'one true faith' when he rejected revolutionary Marxism in favour of an amelioratory and reformist position on the autonomy of cultural forms. By this I mean Williams' insistence, especially in his later work, on the separation of cultural production from the system of capitalist commodity production. My PhD (*Grey collar journalism: The social relations of news production*), examines the thesis that journalism can be seen as the production of a cultural artefact ('news'), but that this can best be analysed, understood and critiqued as a production process within a definable set of social, though fundamentally economic, relationships.

In this paper, I'm making several related arguments in favour of a possible theoretical framework for the analysis of journalism as work. I am suggesting that in order to understand the journalistic product, we need to understand all dimensions of the production process. My approach can be broadly characterised as a political economy of journalism.

I am also taking a position in a polemic with postmodernism, in particular some recent work by media theorist John Hartley, which directly addresses journalism as a form of cultural production. I argue that postmodernists have made a fundamental error in theory by embracing the (mistaken) idea that forms of 'cultural production', such as journalism, are somehow beyond the constraints of the economic (Hartley 1996, p. 237). Against this I posit the thesis that a grounded study of journalism must first come to terms with the 'social relations' of news production. Cultural studies would charge that my position is a form of rigid and outdated Marxist orthodoxy, derisively known as 'economic determinism'. Of course, I don't think so.

Rather, I would suggest that it's writers like John Hartley who ultimately fall back on a 'cultural determinist' position that's as flawed as the Stalinist model of economic determinism he seeks to criticise. Hartley's position is based on the false and misleading assumption that:

culture - the discursive, media, knowledge-producing and sense-making sphere of life - might itself determine such matters as class, conflict and the state (Hartley 1996, p. 237).

My aim is to show how the economic form (relations of production) does in fact determine the cultural production of media artefacts; in this case the news we read, listen to and watch.

The work I'm doing on postmodernism and the Marxist model of base and superstructure has led me to read some early works by Marxists on the relationship between 'art' and 'work'; 'class' and 'culture'; 'economics' and 'aesthetics'. There's no space here to argue this point in detail, but a short statement from *Marxism and art* (Solomon 1979) encapsulates my current thinking on this matter.

Art is a distinct form of the labour process in which - amid the myriad effusions and narcotic productions of class culture - is kept alive and materialised imagery of man's hope and of that very same human essence which Marxism seeks to reveal (Solomon 1979, p. 20).

The work of the artist, or in fact any producer of cultural artefacts - among which I include journalists and the news media - is in every instance a process of expending human labour and transforming nature via the use of tools. It is 'work' and it occurs within a confining set of economic and social circumstances. However, there is a sense in which, unlike the alienated labour of a factory or office worker, the work of an artist connects with the hopes, aspirations, fears and dreams of humanity. Thus it 'talks' to the rest of society about the human condition.

It is my contention that journalism can be positioned somewhere in between, and shares many characteristics of, the assembly line and artistic endeavour. Hence not the white collar of the professional, nor the blue collar of wharfies, but grey collared journalists. I don't address it here, but this position is taken, in part, from Harry Braverman's *Labor in monopoly capitalism* (1974) about the proletarianisation of office-type (white collar) work.

*Grey collar journalism* will argue that the function of news as a commodity (ie to make advertising space attractive to those who can use it) implies that the social relations of news production also take on this commodity form. In this sense the majority of journalists are waged or salaried workers, and their labour realises surplus value for the shareholders of that chunk of productive 'capital' (the television network, or newspaper baron). My thesis is also a critique of the postmodernist analysis of journalism and Hartley's suggestion that journalism itself has become "postmodern":

Postmodern journalism is capitalized cultural studies, semiotics with funding, a carefully controlled textualization of politics for a popular readership which is highly literate in a mediasphere where scholarship has scarcely ventured (1996, p.127).

Without going into detail, I think that Hartley's suggestion is ludicrous. I've argued elsewhere (Guerke & Hirst 1996) that it's no coincidence that "cultural studies" appears prominently in John Hartley's theorisation ("textualization") of journalism. To suggest as he does, that one 1994 edition of French *Vogue*, edited by Nelson Mandela, constitutes a new form of "Postmodern political journalism" (p. 127); or that a random collection of stories about Kylie Minogue and Sophie Lee constitutes a highly personalised and sexualised new form of journalism, speaking directly to the "quintessentially Australian 'class' which lives in 'the' suburbs, the petit bourgeoisie," (p. 188), is highly debatable.

If they're not in "the" suburbs, where does Hartley think that other "quintessentially Australian" class, the proletariat, has gone? Do Melbourne wharfies, as Peter Reith would have us believe, really live in glamorous and expensive inner-city apartments? Do 'ordinary' workers mix with the 'glitterati' in the 'high roller' room of Star City casino? No, they die ugly deaths on the footpath outside.

Apart from being fundamentally wrong about the true nature of class and class struggle in Australia (trust me on this), *Popular reality* makes only passing reference to media industries and no mention at all of what journalists actually do, or how their work is constituted. This aspect of postmodernism, its potential impact on journalism theory, is the more important focus of this paper.

I want to begin the argument for a Marxist model, of journalism as work, by discussing the origins of postmodernism as a theorised explanation for ongoing and fundamental crises in contemporary capitalism. Like all theory it can never replicate the real and therefore remains partial. Other chapters of my thesis will deal with this issue more carefully, but in outline my premise is that the end of the cold war has left all the old ideological certainties in ruins. Postmodernism is an intellectually defeatist response to this uncertainty. I think Raymond Williams sums it up nicely, he describes postmodernism in art and literature as:

'these debased forms of an anguished sense of human debasement' (Williams 1983)

We know what he means: from Quentin Tarrantino's *Pulp Fiction* coming to TV in an episode of *ER* to Justine Ettler's novel (1995) *The River Ophelia*.

And just in case you missed it, here's what my favourite postmodernist, McKenzie Wark said about this book in *The Australian* Higher Education Supplement (30 August 1995):

Justine Ettler's *The River Ophelia* (Picador) has been reviewed as if it were art masquerading as trash, but it is quite the other way around. [ie: It's trash masquerading as art]... It is a Nietzschean shriek of laughter, in a woman's voice no less, that should send a cold shiver up the spineless back of any book that still parades pious, liberal feminist niceties.

To which I echo the *Communist Manifesto*: "All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned".

In stark contrast to Wark's praise, British Marxist Lindsay German suggests that the postmodern phenomenon is no more than the artistic vision of a society, "where the market is universal, where the system itself is conservative and resistant to change, where the basic needs of millions cannot be met despite technological advance." In such a climate, "artists are bound to reflect the fragmentation and atomisation of the that society" (German, p. 41). The techniques, so celebrated by postmodernism in art and literature; pastiche, montage, deconstruction, an "ironic and detached view of the world" (German, p. 40) are in fact integral to post-war modern art. So, in short, there's nothing really new in postmodern art forms. Further, there has been no fundamental (revolutionary) break with modernism, which is the cultural form most closely aligned with commodity production and late 20th century capitalism. Having said that, I want to concentrate on post-modernism as theory:

Angela McRobbie defines post-modernism as:

an aesthetic/cultural movement whose impetus derives from the break it marks out with modernism and the avante-garde, and whose impact lies in its turning away from linearity and teloeogical progress towards pastiche, quotation, parody and pluralism of style, with postmodernity as a more general condition (1994, p. 24).

In this light, she suggests:

one of the questions that remains unasked, is precisely that of the status of the future of Marxism in the 1990s (p. 25).

McRobbie argues that postmodernism in theory has given its adherents the space and tools to explore the subtleties of Marxism. Her critique suggests that Marxism relies on a "form of economic reductionism in cultural theory". Of course, I disagree with this.

## Raymond Williams: the godfather of cultural theory

One of the earliest exponents of the postmodern position is Raymond Williams. Williams grappled with the base-superstructure model for most of his full and active life. Eventually rejects a determining role for the base (forces + relations of production) in favour of a more Althusserian position of co-determination between economy and culture.

Williams separates 'culture' from the relations of production. It becomes disembodied and autonomous. This leads to his focus on artefacts and cultural production in and of itself.

Andrew Milner's *Cultural Materialism* (1993), first drew my attention to the crucial theoretical conflict over 'base' and 'superstructure' in Williams' work. At its heart is Williams and Milner's eventual rejection of a

'determining' role for relations of production in the relationship between 'base' and 'superstructure'. Milner writes of "the central but false tenet of virtually all hitherto existing Marxist cultural theory, that of a determining base and a determined superstructure" (1993, p. 69).

It is Raymond Williams, especially from about 1977 onwards, who provides postmodernists with their theoretical armour against Marx. The link can be traced through a number of Williams' positions; the development of 'cultural materialism'; a confusion between competing definitions of 'culture'; and his initial support for, and later abandonment of, a 'determining' role for relations of production. I suggest that once the concept of over-determination, by relations of production, is removed and 'cultural production' becomes co-determinant within the social formation; the relevance of class, to both politics and theory, is lessened.

Postmodernism, in its "playfulness" (McRobbie 1993, p. 3), abandons a fundamental principle of Marxism; that history is driven by class struggle and therefore the 'world historic' role of the conscious proletariat lies in emancipating labour from the commodity form, once and forever. The key to this postmodernist dilemma may very well be in their very hands, but hidden from their view. Andrew Milner puts it very well in an unconsciously borrowed 'term of abuse' (Williams 1983a, p. 157); postmodernism only exists within, 'the very conditions of its theoretical novelty' (Milner 1993, p. 69).

There is a consistent confusion in Williams and in much postmodernist theory between 'culture' as 'society' and 'culture' as the 'artefacts' of the process of 'cultural production'. This is evident in the way that Williams jumps between two conceptualisations of culture: from 'culture' as the sum total of lived experience (1983b, p. 140); to the artefacts of 'popular culture' as "jokes and gossip, of everyday singing and dancing, of occasional dressing-up and extravagant outbursts of colour" (1983b, p. 146).

The dichotomy in cultural studies, between culture and society is itself the product of postmodernists taking on the modernist ideology that puts 'culture' on a pedestal outside both politics and economics (Milner 1993, p. 3). Hence, we might suggest that the postmodernist fetishism of cultural theory, to the exclusion of political economy, is the re-ification of culture as somehow 'outside' economics and therefore not subject to what Marx describes as the 'iron laws' of history.

Within postmodernism (and cultural studies more generally) there is a fascination with phenomena divorced from their material, 'generative' sources. Milner (1993, p. 4) suggests that this is 'initially the creation of European Romanticism' and its trajectory into postmodernism is observable in art, architecture and literary criticism. This can be linked to Raymond Williams' critique of the Marxist base superstructure model and in retrospect to Hartley's argument in *Popular reality* about journalism's role in the Enlightenment, particularly the French revolution, 1789 to 1794 (Hartley 1996, p. 77).

Milner's excellent appraisal of Raymond Williams agrees with his rejection of the "economic structures" of the base determining "all other social life" (Williams 1983a, p. 101). This central concept of Marxist thought is dismissed as one of the more "extreme positivist versions of a wholly or generally predictable process [that] have produced correspondingly reductive versions of the 'play of events' which are called...empiricism or pragmatism" (Williams 1983a, p. 101).

However, as Milner notes, Williams was not against the base and superstructure proposition from the beginning. In *Problems in materialism and culture* (1980) Williams summarises a version of the formula that allows for specified 'determination' by the 'base'.

In this case the base is not merely economic; it covers the primary reproduction of society; the superstructure is a whole range of cultural practices and determination occurs in the setting of limits, or the exertion of pressures by the base on the superstructure (the dialectic). Thus at various 'moments' we see the relative autonomy, or strength, of competing social forces. As Milner (1993, p. 61) notes, this rightly reintroduces the element of 'agency' (conscious activity by 'emergent' social forces) into Marxist theory after the years of Stalinist wilderness. But at the same time it signals, for Williams, a move away from the orthodox Marxist position of the economic base as the relations of production and towards a more abstract, literary 'cultural theory'.

In keeping with his subject, Milner relates his exposition to examples from Raymond Williams' many works of literary criticism: in particular, to his argument with the French structuralists (Milner 1993, p. 65). The structuralists, Williams accuses, reduce the production of literary and other 'cultural' works to their moment of consumption (Milner 1993, p. 66). However, both Williams and Milner themselves miss the connection of this reductionism to their own positions. In no sense can production be reduced to consumption; and one step further, without production there can be no consumption.

While correctly criticising the structuralists notion of a "decentred author" (Williams 1977, p. 198; Milner 1993, p. 66) they adopt its postmodernist variation: the decentred 'cultural' individual, not 'workers'. This manifests as a celebration of 'difference' and a denial of the 'commonality' engendered by global relations of production. Here determination is crucially important. In his own review of Williams' work, Terry Eagleton (1989) defends the base-determination-superstructure formulation against what he says is Williams' circularity, caused by allowing "cultural production" equal determinative force with the relations of production (Williams 1980, p. 245; Eagleton 1989, pp. 168-169).

Williams and Milner apply the term 'cultural materialism' to their theoretical break with Marxism on the

question of base and superstructure. Milner indicates that for Williams this was a necessary response to already existing postmodern cultural forms, which were a by-product of advanced capitalism: a response to radical changes in the social relations of cultural process (Williams 1980, p. 245; Milner 1993, p. 67). In response I would ask are these changes really a radical departure from the normal process of capital accumulation and regeneration?

Williams argues that the commodification of cultural production reaches its apogee with the arrival of postmodernism; and that in this period art forms and popular entertainments become “debased forms of an anguished sense of human debasement” (Williams 1983, p. 141). While I can agree with Williams up to this point, I disagree strongly with Milner’s qualification that this phenomenon is “unamenable to analysis in terms of any base/superstructure metaphor” (Milner 1993, p. 68). I argue that the general features of a ‘postmodern’ cultural landscape can be explained quite easily by reference to the political economy of Marx and the work intellectuals who continue to promote his methods and explore his many insights. This, not postmodern diletantism, is the real Marxist tradition.

## Alex Callinicos and Classical Marxism

In *The postmodern condition*, Frederick Jameson’s arguments are along the lines that postmodernism is the logical cultural outcome of multinational capitalism, where social relations have been fragmented. His starting point is the twin crises of representation that bedevil late capitalism. The crisis of economics, which manifests itself as declining rates of profit and the rising organic composition of capital; and the crisis of ideology, the de-legitimation of existing models of civil society and the state (what Habermas calls the public sphere, and Hartley the semiosphere) - both Stalinist and liberal-democratic - by the end of the Cold War.

However, whether or not we are in an actually existing ‘postmodern’ world, the central question for Marxist social critics must still be: What are the prevailing relations of production? There are a number of responses to this question; the postmodern relies on an interpretation of what’s come to be known as post-Fordism, or a theory of post-industrial society.

The post-Fordist response to the crisis of legitimation is that industrial capitalism is over, this is the age of information capitalism. A number of consequences follow from this:

- consumption, not production is determinant;
- there’s a multi-skilled core workforce of ‘relatively’ privileged white and male workers, the rest are peripheral and shade into the so-called ‘underclass’ at the bottom end; women and minorities especially miss out;
- the state has been weakened by new methods of ‘private’ production and consumption and the internationalisation of capital;
- cultural life has become more fragmented and pluralistic.

My thesis suggests that in order to sustain this argument the theory of the postmodern must also argue that postmodernism predicated on a break with the modern. That is with the production and social relations of commodity production; postmodernists should be able to argue that the ‘postmodern world’ is founded on a fundamentally different production system to that of monopoly, or ‘late’ capitalism. I haven’t got the space here to defend the whole idea, but I argue that postmodernism (if it is anything at all) is a deliberate intensification of commodity fetishism - via advertising and the commercialisation of ‘popular reality’ - that assists dysfunctional ‘capital’ to squeeze the last drops of profit from an almost fatal economic malaise.

The Marxist alternative to the postmodern explanation of delegitimation is, at the same time, a rebuttal of crude/vulgar economic determinism. Two most prominent exponents of this position are Chris Harman and Alex Callinicos. They are British socialists and academics who are virtually ignored by their contemporaries in cultural studies and postmodern theory. For example, Callinicos wrote *Against Postmodernism* in 1989, but I have not yet found one postmodernist who’s read it, or is prepared to tackle it in reply. His latest book, *Theories and Narratives* (1995) takes this critique of postmodernism even further. I imagine it will be largely unread by the very group it is attacking.

In *Against postmodernism*, Callinicos is sharply critical of the post-Fordist notions of ‘deindustrialised’ capitalism. He calls it “mind-numbing reductionism” which “grossly exaggerate[s] the extent of the changes involved [in capitalism] and fail[s] to theorise them properly” (1989, p. 135).

There is a wealth of empirical evidence that manufacturing has not disappeared in favour of ‘service’ economies, especially when capitalism is examined as a global system. Postmodernism’s blindness to these issues is exemplified in a recent issue of *21C* (#25, n.d.) where McKenzie Wark wrote on “Pop politics”, extolling the virtues of the ‘virtual’ world. I am keenly looking forward to writing a detailed critique of this idea (a carry over from *Virtual reality* and *Virtual republic*); the title will be “But somebody’s got to make the Tamogochi”; and its central point that the ‘virtual’ is founded on the real. In this case ‘virtual pets’ (Tamogochi) are manufactured by men, women and children in appalling conditions, for slave wages; yet they are marketed and sold for vast profits. In terms of this paper similar arguments can be made for much of the ‘fashion’ media championed by John Hartley in *Popular reality*.

## A short note on Base and superstructure

It is time to bite the bullet and confront the base/superstructure monster, and at this stage I must say that here I am relying primarily on recent interpretations of Marx and Engels. I will return to the spring another time. I have briefly outlined my initial ideas on base and superstructure in the few remaining pages. There are 'working diagrams' that go with this material, but I'll save them for another time. I have adopted a shorthand code for dealing with some of these concepts and acknowledge several pieces by Harman and Callinicos that profoundly influence my thinking.

The economic base is simply the forces of production (labour plus technology) [F/p] + relations of production [R/p] This is a dynamic relationship in which the production of commodities for profit can continue until conflict created by the unequal and exploitative system in which production is socially organised causes stagnation at the level of further development of the forces of production. As Harman notes, this is a wholistic system, involving humanity in the creation of an inherently unstable economic and cultural edifice (society, or 'lived culture'); he says "there is a certain sense in which it is impossible to separate material production from the social relations it involves" (Harman 1986, p. 19).

Contradictions within the base, between the forces of production (our relationship with nature) and the relations of production (our relationships with each other), "find expression in arguments, organised disagreements and bitter struggle between people" (Harman 1986, p. 27). This is no more than a restatement of the line taken by Marx that in any class society - based on the unequal and private distribution of power and wealth - the specific form of the extraction of surplus value determines both the economic and cultural relationship between rulers and ruled. In *Making History* Callinicos says "consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life, from the conflict between the social forces of production and the relations of production" (1987).

Callinicos defines superstructure as "any non-economic phenomenon is part of the superstructure if that can be explained in terms of the economic structure" (Callinicos 1987, p. 174). I understand this to mean that the superstructure imposes limits on the changes that can take place in the relations of production. For example, in a liberal-democratic country like Australia the class-based organisation of the state and civil society acts as a brake on the development of the forces of production.

The economic crisis compels the bourgeoisie to use its hegemonic means of control (including the media) to vainly go on reproducing and enforcing the exploitative and alienating relations of production that prop up their increasingly useless existence. I need go no further than to mention in the same sentence John Howard, Ferdinand Marcos, Manuel Norriega and President Soeharto to underscore the continuing relevance of this point.

However, having said that I wish to add that for Chris Harman and Alex Callinicos there is no mechanical interpretation of economic determination. German (1991) clarifies what is meant by determination of the superstructure by the base as:

an understanding that ideas [cultures] do not arise from nowhere, but are the product of real social relations between real human beings.

The economic system or mode of production is both fundamental and gives rise to all sorts of institutions, ideas and cultural forms, which fit that system (German, introduction to Trotsky's *Literature and revolution* 1991, p. 29).

Alex Callinicos describes this methodology as "philosophical naturalism", which sees human beings as "continuous with the rest of nature"; understandable through the shared methods of the physical and social sciences and "seeking to explain human thought, language and action as far as possible by setting them in their physical and social contexts" (1995, p. 8).

Everyone chooses his or her favourite quotes from Marx to defend a position, or denigrate an opponent. As cultural theory developed and moved away from Marxism, the quotes became more selective. It is necessary now to examine the arguments put forward by those who defend an 'orthodox' view of the base/superstructure theory and what better place to start than with a quote from Marx:

Constant revolutionising of production, uninterrupted disturbance of all social conditions, everlasting uncertainty and agitation distinguish the bourgeois epoch from all earlier ones. All fixed, fast-frozen relations, with their train of ancient and venerable prejudices and opinions, are swept away, all new-formed ones become antiquated before they can ossify. All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie all over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere.

This passage from the *Communist Manifesto* (Marx, K. and Engels, F. 1965) is often quoted in part, but in full it elaborates the sense in which Marx and Engels would prefer us to use the notion of determination.

To finish, another short quote from Alex Callinicos:

'Feminists and black nationalists often complain that the concepts of Marxist class theory are "gender blind" and "race blind". This is indeed true. Agent's class position derives from their place in production relations, not their gender or supposed race. But of itself this does not provide grounds for rejecting Marxism, since its chief theoretical claim is precisely to explain power relations and forms of conflict such as those denoted by the terms "nation", "gender" and "race" in terms of the forces and relations of production.' (1987, p.177)

Callinicos is a strong supporter of attempts to 'totalise' Marxism, ie: to give it explanatory powers beyond the merely economic, I think he's right to do so. The grand-narrative is not dead, history is not over and class struggle is still the driving force in social relations.

### What's this got to do with journalism theory?

Of course this is the \$64 question. At this stage I am proposing some tentative conclusions that will be further explored in the planned development of my thesis. In point form they can be summarised as:

Journalism is a labour process that is defined by the generalised social relations of commodity production. By analysing the nature of journalism as 'work' one can develop a better critical understanding of the politics of journalism.

By the 'politics of journalism' I mean the role of journalism as a form of Hartley's "popular reality" that has both explicit and implicit ideological functions (the role the media plays in averting or exacerbating the on-going crisis of 'legitimation' surrounding 'late capitalism').

In a broad sense news is an archetype 'cultural commodity' produced according to the 'rules' of capital. Therefore news workers, including journalists, sub-editors, etc., are also workers in the Marxist sense of being productive labour organised to produce surplus value for the owners of the enterprise.

The exploitative and alienated nature of labour in a capitalist mode of production might be expected to exist in any newsroom organised according to the principle outlined above. Consequently, a study of working conditions in the news industry might produce some useful material about the relationship between the production process (Warren Breed's "social control in the newsroom") and the selection, framing and placement of news content analysed from the perspective of news as "popular reality" and as a component of ruling class hegemony.

It follows that news is perhaps 'contested', in the sense that journalism is buffeted by contradiction and competing social pressures for the hearts and minds of the news workers. I would expect there to be some evidence of this given my exposition of a 'duality' to news as a product of a cultural, yet distinctly commodity-based production process.

This argument is yet to be tested but a number of indicators, such as the Henningham and Schultz surveys over several years and my own interviews with political journalists, suggest it is worth pursuing.

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- Please note:** This paper does not rely only on a reading of this work by Williams. In editing the paper I have removed references to several of his other books. However, I would like to note the following texts: *Keywords* (1983); *Problems in materialism and culture* (1980; *Orwell* (1984 revised edition); *The politics of modernism: Against the new conformists* (1989).

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