

## Power and Visibility

by John B. Thompson

Few would deny the importance of communication media in the modern world: the products of the media industries have become pervasive features of social life, and most spheres of social activity have become interlaced with relations of mediated communication. And yet, at the level of social and political theory, there has been relatively little reflection on the nature of communication media, on the role that they have played in the formation of modern societies, and on their implications for the kind of social and political life which is possible and desirable today.

Part of the task which I have set myself in recent publications is to stimulate critical reflection on the nature of communication media and their impact, from the emergence of the printing presses in early modern Europe to the expansion of global communications networks today. I develop what might be described as an 'interactional approach' to the nature of communication media. That is, I argue that the use of communication media creates new kinds of action and interaction which differ in certain respects from the face-to-face interaction which takes place in the shared locales of daily life. These new forms of interaction - 'mediated interaction' and 'mediated quasi-interaction' - are extended in space and perhaps also in time. Moreover, depending on the medium concerned, these forms of interaction allow for differing kinds of involvement on the part of individuals who participate in them.

This analytical framework can help to shed light on the historical transformations brought about by the development of communication media. Let us consider briefly the nature of 'publicness', understood here in the sense of what is visible or observable, what is open for all or many to see or hear or hear about. How has publicness changed? I try to show that, with the development of the media, the publicness or visibility of

actions or events has been severed from the sharing of a common locale, so that actions or events can acquire a publicness which is independent of their capacity to be seen or heard directly by a plurality of co-present individuals. Hence the development of the media has created a new kind of publicness - a 'mediated publicness' - which simply did not

politicians exploit this to their advantage. They seek to create and sustain a basis of support for their power and policies by carefully managing their visibility and self-presentation within the mediated arena of modern politics.

On the other hand, the rise of mediated publicness has also created unprecedented risks for political



exist before and which is quite different from the traditional publicness of co-presence. The traditional form of publicness involved the gathering together of individuals in a common locale: an event became a public event by being witnessed by a plurality of individuals who were physically present at its occurrence. In the case of mediated publicness, actions or events can be made public by being recorded and transmitted to others who are not physically present at the time and place of their occurrence.

The rise of mediated publicness has important implications for the exercise of political power, but these implications are more complex and ambiguous than they might at first seem. On the one hand, in the new political field which is partly constituted by the media, political leaders can appear before their subjects in ways and on a scale that never existed previously. The relation between political leaders and their subjects increasingly becomes a form of mediated quasi-interaction through which bonds of loyalty and affection (as well as feelings of repugnance) can be formed. Skillful

leaders. The mediated arena of modern politics is open and accessible in a way that traditional assemblies and courts were not. Hence the visibility created by the media can become the source of a new and distinctive kind of fragility: however much political leaders may seek to manage their visibility, they cannot completely control it. The phenomenon of visibility can slip out of their grasp and may, on occasion, work against them.

From this point of view, we can appreciate the significance of various forms of 'trouble' which can effect politicians in an age of mediated visibility - phenomena such as the gaffe, the leak and the scandal. Politicians must constantly be on their guard and employ a high degree of reflexivity to monitor their actions and utterances, since an indiscreet act or an ill-judged remark can have disastrous consequences. We have yet to gain a clear understanding of the nature of these forms of trouble and their consequences for social and political life. Governments racked by scandal, political leaders struggling to limit the damage caused by leaks and disclosures of various kinds: these are not conditions under which



clear political leadership can readily be demonstrated. They are, on the contrary, the conditions which may lead to weakened government and political paralysis, and which may nourish the suspicion and cynicism which many people feel towards politicians and established political institutions.

At a more general level, this account of the rise of mediated publicness helps to highlight some of the limitations of our traditional ways of thinking about social and political life.

We must recognise that the traditional model of publicness, which stems from the *agora* of classical Greece and is defined in spatial and dialogical terms, no longer provides an adequate way of thinking about the nature of public life. The development of the media has created new forms of publicness, based on new forms of action and interaction, which do not share the features of the traditional model. A gulf has opened up between our traditional ways of thinking about public life, on the one hand, and the forms of publicness which have become increasingly pervasive features of modern social life, on the other.

In my view, the only plausible way of responding to this circumstance is to free our thinking about public life from the grip of the traditional approach. We must develop a fresh account of the nature of public life in our contemporary media age, one which is based on an understanding of publicness as a non-localised, open-ended space of the visible in which mediated symbolic forms can be expressed and received by a plurality of distant others. In a world where actions can have consequences which extend far beyond particular locales, and where individuals can interact with others who are remote in space (and perhaps also in time): in such a world we must find new ways of thinking about public life, and new ways of addressing moral-practical issues, which are no longer restricted by the assumptions of the traditional approach.

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## The Post-Foundational Project

by Martyn Oliver

Very few political and social theorists, or philosophers, have given their name to the post-foundational project. At first glance, post-foundationalism seems to offer more of the same self-referential heaviness that came with postmodernism. Indeed, apprehension about post-foundationalism is understandable, considering the contradictions that emerge when even a sympathetic demystification of it is attempted. However, for those committed to the idea that deepening the democratic imagination entails a rejection of universalism and rationalism, the post-foundational project is virtually all that's on offer.

A body of work has recently emerged in political theory which, while unburdened by an explicit commitment to post-foundationalism, can be characterised broadly by criteria that, when isolated, seem to throw up something like a distinct philosophico-political project. The project consists of a discourse grounded in the claim that to seek unarguable authority for a conception of the political is not simply philosophically unsound but contravenes democratic pluralism. That is, democratic legitimacy cannot be drawn from non-contingent criteria. But, the defining feature of the post-foundational project is that it is an essentially reconstructive, not deconstructive, project. Indeed, it is precisely this leap from deconstructive to reconstructive anti-foundationalism that causes its contradictions and paradoxes.

Two main aspects of post-foundationalism threaten its feasibility as a radical political project. The first relates to tensions between the philosophical and the practico-political. Moreover, post-foundationalism depends for its logic and subsequent success on an attempt to justify a reconstruction of the democratic project by doing what it seeks to overcome: it uses the authority of an essentially epistemological claim about the

permanent invalidity of universal claims to truth to provide ultimate legitimacy for a new conception of a pluralist democracy.

Post-foundationalists could reply to such criticism by emphasising that the project depends on a critique of political rather than philosophical foundationalism. This response would be insufficient for, without the philosophical critique of rationalism and foundationalism from the likes of Heidegger, Wittgenstein and Derrida, it would make no sense as a distinct philosophico-political project; it would be almost indistinguishable from Rawlsian libertarianism and its rejection of "one moral good".

The second difficulty faced by post-foundationalism stems from its incapacity to separate itself enough from its Liberal inheritance. Its rejection of universalism means that it is committed to little more than the classical Liberal hope of procedural impartiality. Post-foundationalism's reply to this charge could be that its essentially historicist character discourages attempts to step outside the vocabulary of the democratic tradition from which its reconstructive discourse is drawn. So the charge does not provide sufficient grounds for dismissing the project. However, the self-image of the project depends upon its ability to move beyond the paradoxes encountered by postmodernism and the historic insufficiencies of Liberalism. Unfortunately, as yet this has not yet been achieved.

Yet post-foundationalism offers the only hope for political theorists seeking to rethink the democratic project in the light of recent anti-foundationalism. For post-foundationalism is a reaction to a cacophony of narratives that express uncertainty about the contingencies shaping late modern politics. But the self-referential nature of post-foundationalism is not a feature that we should embrace as a necessary condition of the project. It needs to be overcome, not absolutely, but more convincingly than current offerings.

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