

## Method Against Method

by Niels Jacob Harbitz

Marshall McLuhan was, arguably, the first to grasp the full, radical implications of mass media for contemporary life. At his funeral, one of his contemporaries called him 'a pyromaniac of the imagination. McLuhan started prairie fires all over our intellectual landscape'. His remarkably prescient account of how the communication technologies were changing - and would continue to change - our world, briefly made him one of the world's most celebrated minds.

Today, some sixteen years after his death, and twenty-five years after his heyday, McLuhan is back with a vengeance. Once again his reputation is on the rise as people return to his work to learn from a startling series of insights into the effects of media on culture and society.

But its content, not its form, is what is most significant about McLuhan's work: that is, McLuhan's *method*. McLuhan chose the aphorism as the form in which to present his ideas because he wanted to teach, not tell or entertain. 'For instruction' he said, 'you use incomplete knowledge so people can fill things in. . . . There's no participation in just telling: that's simply for consumers. . . . The aphoristic style . . . gives you the opportunity to get a dialogue going, to engage people in the process of discovery'.

His style of thinking, talking and writing made him uneasy with the tags and titles attached to him: analyst, historian, philosopher, or sociologist. There is no grand theory in his work. Instead, McLuhan regarded himself (as did the sympathetic parts of his audience) as more of a poet, presenting a set of metaphors that triggered individual, and potentially very different interpretations.

'I don't explain, I explore', McLuhan said. 'I'm probing

around to see what's happening'. By using 'probes' rather than presenting 'hypotheses', or even stating 'conclusions', he waved off, from the outset and very effectively, every potential critic. On being asked what he meant, he frequently responded that one should beware of clarity. 'A man speaking to you in clear language



is clearly using obsolete ideas.' The age of experts, specialists and particularists is over, he argued. 'People are terribly wrong when they try to read me as if I said anything.'

McLuhan also gave priority to form over content in his interpretation of the language-reality relationship. Language (form) he thought, has an absolute domain over reality (content). Language lives its own independent life, separate from reality.

With the content-form relationship taken to such extremes, it is unsurprising that McLuhan's methodology was unconventional. He believed neither in testing nor in research. If someone appeared to contradict his ideas, he would simply change the subject.

In his books, he eschewed the traditional literary format. He rejected linearity, sequential advancement of argument, and the presentation of a sustained point of view. In *The Gutenberg Galaxy. The Making of Typographic Man* - a book with no chapters, just 279 pages of type punctuated by bold-faced quotations - he put forward what he called 'a mosaic or field approach'. 'I do not move along lines', he said. 'I use points like dots in a wire photo. That is

why I must repeat and repeat my points.' In his work there isn't a single idea, sentence, or phrase that is meant to be read or understood in isolation. Every thought of his inexorably echoes, circles and shifts into many others.

As if to defend the structure of his texts, McLuhan stated that 'the gap is where the action is. The connection is a hang-up.' He developed this statement further by referring to the figure-ground relationship developed in Gestalt psychology: the figure tends to get all the attention, despite the fact that, more often than not, it cannot be understood without knowledge of the ground from which it stands out. The 'out-of-awareness' aspects of communication are what matter. The content, or the figure, on which one is focused, is often almost meaningless.

'Cogito interruptus' is the name Umberto Eco gave to McLuhan's method. It has also been suggested that he brought into academic writing the strategy of his soulmate James Joyce: the stream of consciousness. McLuhan's superior imagination and intellectual courage brought him further than most. But, in terms of comprehensibility, we might also conclude that he was his own worst enemy. When it mattered most, he seemed not to have the patience to clarify his most subtle or visionary insights. One of his 'probes' states that 'the breakthrough is in the breakdown'. Unfortunately, in his work the distinction between breakthrough and breakdown is not always clear.

This makes all the more sadly ironic one of his last public statements, in a cameo appearance in Woody Allen's *Annie Hall*. Pulled in front of the camera by the Allen character to respond to a know-all lecturer in media studies, McLuhan tells the show-off: 'You know nothing of my work'.

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## REVIEW

### Transnational Citizenship

by Graham Thom

Rainer Bauböck

*Transnational Citizenship: Membership and Rights in International Migration.* Cheltenham: Edward Elgar, 1994.

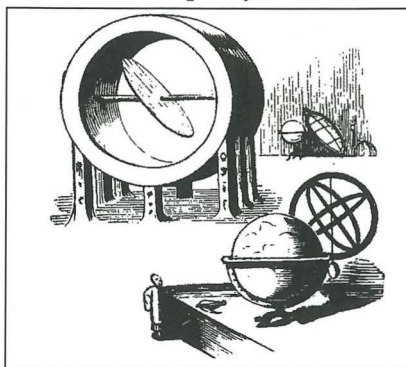
'What exactly does it mean to be a citizen?', asks Bauböck. He is interested in how citizenship is perceived both within states and in the international system of states. In examining how the two understandings relate to one another, especially under the impact of immigration, Bauböck claims that normative notions of liberal democratic citizenship have become 'transnational', that is, citizenship has expanded beyond the national frame but still does not add up to 'global citizenship as the political counterpart of the world economy'. 'Transnational citizenship', he claims, 'is the liberal democratic response to the question of how citizenship in territorially bounded politics can remain equal and inclusive in globalising societies'. He demonstrates his argument by analyzing citizenship, first in terms of membership, and, secondly, in terms of rights.

Demands for rights are seen as demands for ever more inclusive forms of citizenship. Bauböck demonstrates how this notion of inclusiveness - the basic norm of citizenship - leads to the principle of residence providing a rationale for immigrant citizenship. This means, Bauböck argues, that the *jus sanguinis* principle is incompatible with liberal democracy.

A democratic polity needs a clear-cut definition of membership, Bauböck asserts. Liberal theory shows that democracies need to be as inclusive as possible and that norms of liberalism and democracy often reinforce each other in extending membership.

But, Bauböck cautions, 'when groups have acquired membership in society but remain persistently excluded from citizenship, this is a sign that liberal democracy is in jeopardy because it lags behind social development'.

With regard to rights, Bauböck asserts that if they are to be inclusive and comprehensive they cannot be perfectly equal, because 'needs' lead to inequalities of entitlement in the field of social policy. Further, he



argues, 'only in a shared institutional framework will promises or contracts between individuals generate rights and obligations'. As such, rights depend on social recognition. Bauböck claims that 'specific to citizenship rights is that their background justification always lies in a strong norm of equality and that they always aim at legal institutionalism'. He also challenges the established notion that citizenship rights are special rights: 'although citizenship rights relate to membership in polities they are not special rights but general ones. This makes it possible to see human rights as a universalised form of citizenship'.

Bauböck asks, 'how equal must the rights of citizens be if [citizens] should be able to recognise each other as members of a polity?' Citizenship rights cannot be seen as private goods in a market economy, he answers. He outlines the substantive core of equal membership in a liberal democratic polity in terms of civil, political and social rights: 'each category of rights ought to be seen as valuable in itself, as mutually supporting of the other categories, and as indispensable for equal

citizenship in contemporary liberal democracy'.

While, for Bauböck, citizenship is a status of equal individual political membership, *collective rights* can be an element of equal individual citizenship; the state plays an important role in defining what constitutes a collectivity. Bauböck emphasizes how collective rights must build upon a common structure of individual liberties and rights and improve the position of specifically disadvantaged groups.

Bauböck's most controversial claim is that citizenship rights should include a 'right of immigration', a right grounded in the specific forms of mobility of modern society. He acknowledges that this cannot be achieved in the short term, but he insists that states should extend rather than restrict immigration rights, and in the long term aim to remove restrictions altogether. He concludes by stating that 'the underlying idea of this book has been that in the increasingly mobile societies of modernity, citizenship must be transnationalized in order to retain its significance as equal membership in territorial politics'.

Predicated on moral imperatives and normative political theory, Bauböck's argument largely ignores the political and financial costs of such a scheme. He advances an eloquent case for reducing restrictions both on international migration and the naturalization of migrants. This model of transnational citizenship, however, seems oblivious to the importance both of nationalism in a world of independent states, and of national identity as a vital component (with membership and rights) of citizenship. This failure detracts from what is otherwise a useful and important text in the study of citizenship theory.

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