

The Political Economy of Communication (Second Edition)

Vincent Mosco: London: Sage Publications Ltd., 2009. ISBN 978-1-4129-4701-5. 268pp.

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A New Classic in the Field

The political economy of communication is a subdisciplinary framework for critical scholarly engagement with the technical, social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of communication. Because of the dramatic and continuing changes that have taken place within communications as a social practice, as well as in its role as core structural feature of the global economic system, this framework has also had to change. This means, of course, that the best presentation of this framework, as provided by Vincent Mosco in 1996, would eventually have to be updated and revised. While the Second Edition of *The Political Economy of Communication*, published in 2009, will also have to be revised at some point in the future, this current version is a resource without equal.

Mosco, currently Professor Emeritus at Queen's University in Canada, was Canada Research Chair in Communication and Society and Professor of Sociology at Queens when he set out to substantially revise his already classic introduction to this field of study. Mosco's own framework for thinking about the political economy of communication is laid out upon a carefully prepared background and introduction to the field that spans six introductory chapters. This expanded introduction provides important historical details and careful expositions that outline clear distinctions between competing schools of thought.

These key insights are made readily accessible to the average reader. They are also likely to provide benefits for the more advanced readers whose own understanding of these analytical frameworks may have been distorted by some of the more rancorous interdisciplinary debates of the past.

After establishing a basis for distinguishing between the dominant neoclassical paradigm of economics and the varieties of political economy and heterodox economics, Mosco devotes considerable space to the presentation of Marxian, feminist, and environmental political economy, before examining the development of a political economy of communication. Here Mosco calls our attention to many of the historical influences that have combined to shape the particular character of the discipline within North America, Europe, and the Third World. These developmental histories demonstrate how the social and political concerns at the time triggered many of the responses of scholar/activists to the needs of progressive social movements.

The result was often an oppositional critique of dominant frameworks, such as was seen with the challenge of dependency theory to the mainstream modernization framework being promoted around the globe. Critical responses rarely went unchallenged, and on occasion, those challenges were also transformative. Mosco provides an example in the

case of the response to dependency theory. He suggests that the reaction to dependency theory eventually developed into a more widespread criticism of political economy and actually “deepened the divide between a global political economy of communication and the emergence of a global cultural studies” (p. 103). Mosco describes a number of attempts to bridge the differences between political economy, cultural studies, and public choice theory in the book’s final chapter. But first, he devotes three substantially revised chapters to the explication of commodification, spatialization and structuration; the three legs of the platform upon which his political economy of communication is built.

Commodification is readily understood as a process through which the things that we value for their use are transformed into marketable products, or commodities, that are valued in terms of the prices that consumers will pay to acquire them. The distinctions between use values and exchange values owe much to their explication within a Marxian “labor theory” of value. The commodification of media content is treated as an “entry point” into the development of a political economy of communication. The relevant terrain of study has been expanded over time to include the great variety of communication relationships, such as those between audiences, content producers, distributors and advertisers seeking to market other commodities.

Spatialization is a somewhat more challenging point of entry. As Mosco notes, very little attention had traditionally been paid to the impact of technology on the spatial relationships within the capitalist world system. However, it is in the nature of communications technology, and its role in the radical transformation of relationships across time and space, that markets and systems of governance are continually being transformed.

Changes in the production, marketing and distribution of commodities have been transformed through the expansion of telecommunications networks. These changes have required adjustments in the regulatory structures established by both governments and transnational corporations. Talk about globalization is simply not enough. A political economy of communication has to have an analytical strategy for incorporating such changes into its framework.

One response to the challenges represented by the fact of spatialization is the potential that Mosco sees in the concept of structuration generally credited to Anthony Giddens. As a fundamentally relational construct, structuration invites consideration of the relationships between agency and structure and the complex interactions between the two. Mosco explores the potential of structuration theory and its engagement with the production, use and realization of the benefits that are attributed to power. Of course, because social class, race, and gender are treated as structural features that both enable and constrain human agency, our understanding of the nature of power, including that we associate with hegemony, remains quite limited and actively contested.

Mosco’s final comments are focused on the contemporary upheavals being felt within the academy as the relationship between the arts and the sciences is being transformed by still another attempt by capitalism to “turn creativity into a profitable industry” (p. 236). As Mosco sees it, the outcome of this struggle ought to be shaped by the involvement of political economists of communication at its center. Hopefully, a good many of them will have been prepared for this struggle by their careful reading and discussion of this book.