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Theory In Action

GUEST EDITOR: JAY CORWIN

IN THIS ISSUE

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Theory In *Action*

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Dedicated to the memory of my professor, Beate Waller (1922-2009), for whom literature was liberation. She lives forever in her garden apartment next to Queens College, with the words of Tolstoy and Galczynski.

Jay Corwin

GUEST EDITOR JAY CORWIN

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Vol. 3, No. 1 **January 2010**

GUIDLINES FOR AUTHORS

General

Theory in *Action* is an interdisciplinary, peer-reviewed journal, whose scope ranges from the local to the global. We do not privilege any particular theoretical tradition or approach and there are no strict word or page limits for our articles. We publish papers that connect academic scholarship with activism, what R.K. Merton calls 'theories of the middle range.' We value radical and unconventional ideas, expressed in different styles, whether academic or journalistic. Furthermore, we are interested in how theory can inform activism to promote economic equality, create democratic political structures and promote self-organization and direction. We seek to promote racial, ethnic, and gender equality as well as resistance to all forms of injustice.

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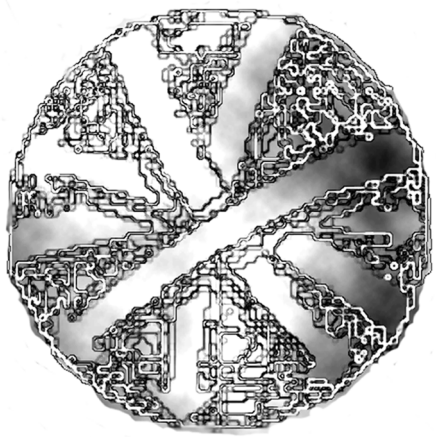

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"Putting Theory into Action!"

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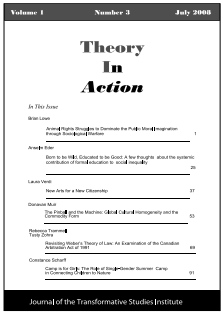

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Introduction
New Essays for a New Century

Jay Corwin[1]

During the seventies and eighties, academic articles tended to cling to models of reception offered by French critical theory and, to a lesser extent, by Russian formalism and Saussurian linguistics. Rarely now does one hear of the signifier and signified, surveillance, polyglossia. In that era, an article about a work of literature may have been a threnody of tightly strung neologisms, questions posed but left unanswered or hinted at through quotations by popular cultural theorists. Clarity of thought had been supplanted by sonorous jargon. The Prufrock peach that critical analysis had become was momentary; a breaking away from an earlier, rigid and sometimes starchy means of interpretation, but the new model had later become rigid and uninviting.

21st century visions of literature are perceived through eyes that have witnessed the fall of the Berlin Wall, the shrinking of the ozone layer, global warming, and the resultant generational move away from the self towards a collective consciousness. Reactions to the postmodernist vision of arts and culture were varied. Stanislaw Lem's 1974 dissection of Tzvetan Todorov's theory of Fantastic Literature is one example[1] of dissatisfaction with theories generated mainly by the French. Victor

[1] **Jay Corwin**, Ph.D., is Senior Lecturer of Spanish at the University of Waikato in Hamilton, New Zealand. He received his Ph.D. in Spanish from Florida State University in 1995. His first book was La transposición de fuentes indígenas en Cien años de soledad [The Transposition of Indigenous Sources in One Hundred Years of Solitude], (Romance Monographs number 52, 1997). He recently gave a keynote presentation at an international conference in Lima, Peru, to mark the fortieth anniversary of the publication of One Hundred Years of Solitude. His recent publications include articles about the works of Gabriel García Márquez, Juan Rulfo and other contemporary Latin American novelists. He is currently working on a book about myth in the novels of Gabriel García Márquez, and editing a volume of essays on One Hundred Years of Solitude for Rodopi Press's Dialogue Series.

Farías's 1987 tome, *Heidegger et Nazisme*, spells out the deep commitment of Heidegger to the Nazi party he belonged to in the 1930s and beyond. It is what Joseph Grange commented on as follows: "Is there anything in Heidegger's philosophy that would have made his involvement with the Nazis impossible? The answer, tragically, is no, and therein lies postmodernism's scandal"[2]. David Hirsch's *The Deconstruction of Literature: Criticism after Auschwitz,* published in 1991, expounds further on the direct involvement of Heidegger and Paul de Man in Nazism. In the same year Camille Paglia emerged in full combat gear as the Academic Queen of Mean. Her 1991 essay, "Junk Bonds and Corporate Raiders: Academe in the Hour of the Wolf," [3] vivisects the flaws of post-structuralism in a 78 page rant that reads like George Carlin high on the Classics. The notorious Sokal affair[4] proved another serious blow to the way we once were forced to think and write, if we were to write at all. The same year saw the creation of the "Postmodernism Generator," created by Andrew Bulhak to produce meaningless essays employing grammatically correct sentences littered with postmodern neologisms[5].

Our new century has an altered vision of the world. We speak of September 11th in the United States and elsewhere as a turning point in the way we view life. That moment would have marked for many, as it did for me, the end of the 20th century, and the way we perceive its writings. I did not personally witness the destruction of the World Trade Center, but watched the news on the BBC and CNN. The day it happened I phoned a friend who lives in Jersey City, New Jersey. She told me of the plumes of black smoke, the near loss of her husband who had missed his usual 8:20 path train to the World Trade Center because he decided fatefully to clean the cat box. His fellow 8:20 riders died that morning. Those conversations humanized this for me, and for many months she recounted her nightmares of buildings she watched burn and collapse from the windows of her apartment. Because I read her accounts of the moment and its aftermath, and I know the person she was before and who she became afterwards, this is the person whose words marked the change of my century.

It is no longer acceptable to feign indifference to the have-nots, or to condescend to the "other," which is in fact ourselves.

Collective consciousness has replaced paranoiac visions once implicit in ideas of "surveillance" and "the other," terms that no longer bear meaning except in reference to an old, apocalyptic vision of the future. Now, instead of referring to a past that never was in nostalgic writings of bygone eras, we may refer to the older era of analysis as heralding a future that would never be. Our post September 11th world is not apocalyp-

tic, only a bit sadder for the wear, and more conscious of real concerns over scarcer resources, and the need for a movement of thought that transcends the last generation's questionable ideals, one which embraces generosity of spirit as divinely inspired.

There is no need to coin a term for a generation which has barely begun, although we might recognize that the current era is marked by a rejection of slogans and standard bearing, replaced by a global village mentality. This is clearly pointed out by Fadwa Gad in her essay on Mahfouz's *Palace Walk*. Gad's projection of the Egyptian middle class and its sense of protectiveness over the figure of the Father, well illustrated in Mahfouz's trilogy, cannot be understood when removed from its cultural context, which is literally as old as the pyramids, distinct to other Arabic speaking nations as it is to the West. Gad makes clear that we cannot pretend to understand the symbolism of a nation without understanding the nation and its spiritual centres. Gad's point is clear: there is no understanding without mutual respect.

We view similarities in a very beautifully written essay by Rodica Grigore about the tensions of East and West in Shusako Endo's *Silence*. The only possibility for acceptance of Western religious beliefs in 16th century Japan is nativization and syncretism. It is an external view of Japan and the Portuguese efforts at evangelization, but written with careful attention to detail, sensitivity, and with respect for Endo, his work, and his personal struggles implicit in the novel. Endo's is a vision of the Divine that is both Western and Japanese, a point made in flawless English by a Romanian scholar who deserves recognition in literary and academic circles.

Both of these essays centre on collective consciousness: in the first, Gad illustrates the impenetrability of the Egyptian family, and in the second, Grigore hones in on choice of the priest to dismiss his pride and convictions in order to spare the lives of victims of torture whom he is charged with protecting. These ideas are mirrored in Michael Meyer's essay on the culture of deception surrounding the American Dream, illustrated in Steinbeck's *Winter of Our Discontent* and mirrored by a Sondheim musical, *Into the Woods*. Meyer's knowledge of Steinbeck is vast, and his understanding of Steinbeck's critical view of American society is firmly grounded. He writes from an admirable position as one of America's foremost scholars on Steinbeck. Meyer presents the possibility that Steinbeck's critical view of the nation flowed into the musical theatre of a genius who loved the author's books. It is more than plausible that most teenagers of the 1950s would have been aware of the filmed versions of *The Grapes of Wrath* and *East of Eden*, both monumental as

their points of origin. Steinbeck's love of the nation was seasoned with criticism over deceptive tactics used to attain an American Dream. The remedy is also suggested, as Steinbeck and Sondheim both note, and Meyer highlights: an ethics of responsibility towards the larger group.

Melanie Marotta makes similar points in her interpretation of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower*: collective conscience is the basis of the novel. Adding to that, Marotta presents credible arguments for better group survival through a marriage of nature and technology, which takes the ideas from the notion of collective responsibility to means of best attaining it. Butler was notable as a science fiction novelist, and possibly the only African-American woman to have achieved great success in the genre. Biographical details aside, the quality of Butler's writing assumes for the novelist a great position in American letters, and broadens the spectrum of examination in this volume, much of which is presented here from physical, temporal, geographical or ethnic distances.

Suzie Remilien addresses the shifting role of women in detective fiction, choosing as a base the well known works of Dorothy L. Sayers, specifically the Harriet Vane novels for which she is best known. Remilien's treatment of gender in these works comes through the author's divergence from the standards of detective fiction and her crossing into mainstream fiction, with a female protagonist. It is a 21st century take on works penned in the 1930s and 1940s, and specifies the contribution of Sayers to detective novels and mainstream fiction. It is a fact that male and female authors were subject to different standards in the reception of their works. Remilien brings to light that it is the quality of the writing, not the gender of the author, which is most important in addressing the aesthetics of a novel, and she demonstrates the movement in Sayer's fiction away from confining norms and towards a universal standard of writing.

Chris Schulenburg's essay on the Puerto Rican novel, *La guaracha del macho Camacho*, examines the notions of physical space in a once fortified city in the Caribbean. This space is noted by Schulenburg to include physical spaces where persons artificially separated by money and social status may freely converge: traffic. Like all the above mentioned essays, this one focuses on responsibility of individuals for the larger society. The themes in Schulenburg's essay converge on the poignant issue of responsibility of the haves for the have-nots implicit in the plot of the novel, and where the physical space converges with the spiritual, so to speak.

The most pointed example of responsibility is in Mihaela Gligor's essay on the early history of Mircea Eliade, Romania's best known scholar

of the 20th century. Gligor balances Eliade's tenuous association with the nefarious Iron Cross, an early flirtation with the sort of ubermensch ideals that fascinated Adolf Hitler, with his later contributions to the study of world religion. It is not apologetica, but an attempt by an impressive young scholar to clarify the relations of the young Eliade and demonstrate through his writings and records that he was not a member of the Legion of St Michael, aka, Iron Cross, but rather a witness to its ugly excesses, and that his responsibility in the matter was of someone who perhaps did not distance himself enough from the organization and who paid the price of a later tarnished reputation. Here again the centre of focus is individual responsibility for the collective benefit of the large social group.

These essays, as noted, originate in the US, Romania, and the United Arab Emirates; the subjects are English, Egyptian, Japanese, Puerto Rican, American, Romanian, mainstream novels by Nobel Laureates, science fiction, detective fiction, ethnographers, female authors, male authors, female protagonists, male protagonists. But the unifying theme may be reduced to individual and group responsibility, either in the historical treatment of real persons (Sayers and Eliade) or characters in novels. This was purely accidental, as there was no particular theme requested in the calls for papers, only major authors or works of the 20th century for a volume of *Theory in Action* called "20th Century Literature in the 21st Century Eye."

These widely scattered essayists have offered in their writings an idea of what may be a central focus of modern thinking, swaying from the excesses of postmodernism and entering a phase that seeks a global culture of responsibility, critical of self and protective of nature, including humanity. Unlike the anti-clerical humanism of the 19th century, there appears to be no culture of religious or anti-religious sentiment implicit in these articles, only a lateral acceptance of religious thought within the wider ethical dimension of the place of the individual in the wider sphere of humanity and the natural world.

If there is a thought further to this that should be expressed at this point, it is one of gratitude. This author wishes to express his thanks to Ali Shehzad Zaidi and John Asimakopoulos for their assistance in the preparation of this edition, and also for their reception to the initial idea of a special literary edition of *Theory in Action*. This has brought me into contact with interesting scholars from far reaches whose work converged via email in my office in New Zealand, and brought one pleasurable read after another. My thanks, in the words of my Tlingít forebears: *gunalchéesh*.

ENDNOTES

[1] http://www.depauw.edu/SFs/backissues/4/lem4art.htm. Accessed 11/18/2009.
[2] Joseph Grange. Philosophy East and West, Vol. 41, No. 4, The Sixth East-West Philosopher's Conference (Oct. 1991), pp. 515-522.
[3] *Arion*, Third Series, Vol. 1, No. 2, (Spring, 1991), pp. 139-212.
[4] A link to Professor Alan Sokal's article in which he describes his experimental article which was published as a hoax. Accessed 12/2/2009.
[5] Accessed 12/2/2009.

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Robert W. McChesney. *The Political Economy of Media: Enduring Issues, Emerging Dilemmas*. New York: Monthly Review Press, 2008. Pp. 589. $19.95 (paper). ISBN 978-1583671610

Reviewer: David Weiss [1]

> "There is an opportunity before us to reinvigorate journalism and, with that, democratic governance in the United States. But we need to correctly understand the source of the problem to prescribe the solutions … [W]ithout viable journalism we not only make democracy unthinkable, we open the door to a tyranny beyond most of our imaginations. I argue herein that the political economy of media is uniquely positioned to provide the insights necessary for constructive action."
> Robert McChesney, *The Political Economy of Media*, 118.

Robert McChesney opens his 589-page tome by acknowledging that "whereas some readers may devour the book from beginning to end…many readers will be as likely to read only a handful of chapters, or read the chapters out of order" (8). For better or worse, and despite having separately read and taught sections of this book, I chose to read *The Political Economy of Media* (henceforth, *TPEOM)* from front to back.

Doing so revealed the book's flaws as a collection (as I detail below), yet also its strengths—or, more accurately, the strengths of its author's ideas, the depth of his copious research, his profound and broad knowledge of media and economic history and theory, his personal and professional devotion to education in all the best senses of that word, and his commitment to bringing the fruits of his academic labor to bear on the process of social, political, and policy change. For Robert McChesney is

[1] **David Weiss** is Assistant Professor of media studies at Montana State University-Billings. His research encompasses critical approaches to mediated and other public discourse, particularly debates over identity and representation; political communication; religious rhetoric in the public sphere; and governmental/legal language. He is currently editing a book about religious discourse in Democratic Party politics and co-editing a collection of essays about the rhetoric of American exceptionalism. Address correspondence to: David Weiss; e-mail: dweiss@msubillings.edu.

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not merely a brilliant scholar and perhaps the foremost political economist of media of our time; he is a passionate advocate and tireless activist for media reform, embodying personally the claim he makes (repeatedly) throughout *TPEOM* about the study and critical analysis of political economy being inextricably linked to political and social action and reform. In McChesney's words, "the political economy of media has always been about the task of enhancing participatory democracy; media and communication systems are a means to an end, with the end being social justice and human happiness . . . It is only in the context of people coming together to struggle for social change that depoliticization is vanquished and victory becomes plausible, even inevitable" (151, 153).

McChesney, an endowed professor of communication at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, is also host of a weekly radio show, *Media Matters*; the co-founder of Free Press, a leading media-reform organization; and a fixture on the public radio and live lecture circuits, where he speaks regularly about media, journalism, and politics—and most recently, about net neutrality, an issue for which he is a tireless advocate. His writing frequently informs speeches and position papers on issues of media reform and regulation delivered by U.S. senators and representatives. Fittingly, *TPEOM* reflects, even exemplifies, McChesney's approach to media political economy as a field of study that inevitably imbricates theory and political and social action.

As McChesney explains in the introduction to *TPEOM* (and elsewhere, many times, in only slightly varying ways), political economy of media is

> a field that endeavors to connect how media and communication systems are shaped by ownership, market structures, commercial support, technologies, labor practices, and government policies. The political economy of media then links the media and communication systems to how both economic and political systems work, and social power is exercised, in society. (12)

However, while many scholars who categorize themselves as political economists of media limit their work to merely the (critical) study of those issues, McChesney sees—and enacts—the direct connection between his scholarly specialty and direct political action. Indeed, his definition of political economy of media does not stop with theoretical concerns and questions, but, rather, only *begins* there:

> The central question for media political economists is whether, on balance, the media system serves to promote or undermine democratic institutions and practices. Are media a force for social justice or for oligarchy? And equipped with that knowledge, what are the options for citizens to address the situation? Ultimately, the political economy of media is a critical exercise, committed to enhancing democracy.

Given this "mission statement" at the center of a discipline that, in other scholars' hands, is purely an academic pursuit, it should be no surprise that *TPEOM* serves as both a virtual encyclopedia of the theory of political economy and also a call for, and practical guide to, taking direct action.

TPEOM consists of twenty-three chapters, most of which were published as either book chapters or journal articles between 1984 and 2008, usually in somewhat different form, and often as co-authored pieces with other activist-scholars in the fields of political economy, media reform, and/or journalism. As McChesney warns in his book's preface, *TPEOM* "brings together what I regard as the best elements of much of my research in the political economy of media over the past two decades. It is not meant to be representative." This non-representative "bringing together" approach captures what is both praiseworthy and problematic about *TPEOM*, an excessively large even if not strictly exhaustive assortment of the author's writings between 1984 and 2008. For, despite McChesney's grossly understated claim that he "edited out as much repetition as possible, because I tend to return to a number of familiar themes in my articles" (8), the degree of repetition—and, in too many cases, overt recycling of content—in the book is, in fact, rather mind-numbing.

Repetition notwithstanding, the quantity and importance of the topics covered in *TPEOM*, and the consistent, direct application of theory to practice in the coverage of those topics, is impressive. The book's contents span articles and chapters about the current, sorry state of journalism both domestic and global; the history of the development of the broadcast media system in the United States (and its tragic hijacking by corporate interests); explorations of the inevitably insidious intertwining of corporate, political, and media power; ruminations about the role the Internet might or might not play in the democratization of media control and content; critical analyses of media reform movements around the world (and comparisons to the virtual non-existence of such movements in the U.S.); systematic deconstructions of neoliberalism and, in particular, the neoliberalist claim that the only truly "American" media system

is an unregulated "free-market" system (despite the fact that, as McChesney repeatedly demonstrates, U.S. media systems have *always* and only been beneficiaries of government policies granting media owners not only massive subsidies but also near-monopoly licenses); and comparisons between Left/labor movements in the U.S. and abroad—among many, many other topics.

Of particular relevance to readers of *Theory In Action*, McChesney consistently and expressly links virtually every historical fact, theoretical explication, philosophical argument, critical analysis, and statistical data point to a call for action (including, in many cases, specific directions to follow in the process of building or revising a platform for change)—even in those sections of his book not ostensibly devoted to the cause of reform. What inevitably results, though, is a reading experience that is useful but redundant, despite McChesney's intention to segment his volume into different areas of focus.

The first of three large sections, entitled "Journalism," has as its stated purpose the presentation of "research that is to assist us as we attempt to establish a media system that we can rationally expect to generate the journalism we need to engage in self-government" (23). Specific topics critically addressed in the section's five chapters include the gutting of newsroom staffs (and the inevitable result: shoddy journalism) in the pursuit of corporate profits; the "exhuming" of the century-old tradition of radical media criticism in the United States, touching on the work of everyone from Upton Sinclair to Noam Chomsky; the failure of the American press to challenge the Bush White House's claims and rationalizations during the 2002-2003 run-up to the Iraq War; and the media policies and subsidies historically and currently in place that encourage the maintenance of the status quo. This section of the book is most successful as a cohesive, thematically unified collection of essays. Still, given the repetition of what McChesney calls his "familiar themes"—most important, the critique of contemporary journalism's failure to serve as a "rigorous watchdog of those in power and who want to be in power," to "ferret out truth from lies," and to "present a wide range of informed positions on the important issues of the day" (25 and elsewhere), it is not necessary that an interested reader tackle all five of its chapters, nor that she read them in order.

"Critical Studies" is the name of section II. As this amorphous title suggests, the issues covered in this nine-chapter section are rather diverse—everything from the history of public broadcasting and a warning about the dangers of advertising and hyper-commercialism, to a detailed statistical exegesis of the "new" digital economy, a critique of the globa-

lization of media corporations and content, and a survey of the centuries-old interrelationships between the worlds of media and professional sports. It is not always clear why some Section II essays were placed where they were—or, in some cases, included in the book at all. Chapters six and seven, for example, both explore the struggle between commercial forces and educational/social reformers for control of radio in the 1920s and '30s; in doing so, they tackle many of the issues addressed in Section I ("Journalism") and would have therefore been just as effective there. More problematically, the two chapters cover nearly the same ground, actually including identical sentences and some nearly identical paragraphs. (The chapters' titles alone should have raised a red flag for McChesney's editors: "The Battle for the U.S. Airwaves, 1928-1935" and "The Payne Fund and Radio Broadcasting, 1928-1935.") Surely a more forceful editorial team might have succeeded in convincing McChesney to leave one of these chapters out of *TPEOM*—or, failing that, in merging the contents of the two into one non-redundant essay that would still "provide a tradition to draw from as we face important questions of the relationship of communication to democracy" (212). Chapter eight ("Media Made Sport: A History of Sports Coverage in the United States"), while interesting reading, might also have been omitted from *TPEOM*, as it—uncharacteristically for a McChesney essay—offers little or nothing in the way of recommendations for leveraging its historical content into pragmatic guidelines for reform. Still, the middle section of the book provides evidence that the pressing concerns of McChesney's activist political economy of media reach well beyond the confines of journalism, extending into nearly all aspects of popular culture and entertainment, government policy, and First Amendment law.

The final section of the book is "Politics and Media Reform." A reader scanning only the table of contents of *TPEOM* might assume that it is only (or primarily) here that she would encounter proposals for effecting meaningful change in the service of participatory democracy. But she would be wrong. Indeed, by the time the reader reaches this third section, she will have already encountered McChesney's prescriptions for change (policy reforms to strengthen or enforce journalism education, media literacy progams, student media, the public broadcasting system, net neutrality, enforcement of antitrust laws, community broadcasting, and a host of others) and, in most cases, steps that must be taken by Left, labor, and other social change-minded factions to move these media policy issues to the center of their broader reform agendas. Still, in Section III, she will encounter a few new topics, such as a particularly insightful explanation for the dearth of debate in U.S. political culture about the legi-

timacy of corporate media, a fascinating account of the (sadly) anomalous 2003 citizen uprising against the Federal Communications Commission in the wake of that agency's attempt to further loosen media ownership regulations, and a stunning criticism of the Left's failure both to use the media effectively and to recognize media reform as central to its broader mission of social change. ("The Left can use media as an educational tool to explain the flaws in the existing social order and to present its vision of what a more democratic society would look like [and] can also use media reform as an issue that unites its disparate elements" (388)). Of course, if the reader is smarter than I was, and approaches *TPEOM* in a piecemeal fashion rather than reading it in its entirety from front to back, she will find in just about any Section III chapter the same useful blend of history, theory, critique, and call to action (and variations on McChesney's favorite "familiar themes") that can be found in just about any section I or section II chapter—again, for better or worse.

The advantage of the repetition (or, depending upon your perspective, the consistency) of the contents of *TPEOM* is that its facts are important, its arguments persuasive, its connections insightful, and its recommended actions appropriate and necessary—meaning that a reader who decides to peruse even just one chapter of *TPEOM* is more than likely to encounter something both convincing and useful, usually an essay that combines fascinating (and often surprising) historical background about the development of media systems and their intricate relationships to government and society; insights from political economic theoreticians and other critical scholars of the media, including but by no means limited to McChesney himself; a practical rationale for being aware of said history and theory; and, finally, recommendations for specific actions that can and must be taken to raise public awareness, challenge and change current media systems, and agitate for reform of government media policies. Indeed, McChesney's defense of his predilection to repeatedly explore past movements, struggles, defeats, and occasional victories can be applied to the project he urges into action by the publication of his own book: "Studying the structural press criticism across numerous eras [and societies] amounts to locating the indisputable common denominators of the current crisis. It is a tool for greater understanding, stronger critique, and a robust movement for that elusive goal: change" (82).

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