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**Discussion Of Media Imperialism :
A Revitalization Of 19th Century German Thought?**

By

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A REVITALIZATION OF 19TH CENTURY
GERMAN THOUGHT?

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1. Current Discussion of Cultural and Communications Imperialism

The issues raised by the concept of cultural imperialism have become topical within the context of dependency theories. Cultural imperialism is in operation, as the dependency theorists see it, when the culture of a nation at the center is unilaterally imposed on the peripheral countries at the expense of their cultural integrity. Emphasis is on extra-national forces (such as transnational corporations) that are considered as being responsible for the creation and maintenance of unbalanced communication flows. The media-imperialism approach is an attempt of framing the problem of dependency in the media sector. Well coordinated, targeted actions by the U.S. military - industrial complex are regarded as evident. Thus Herbert I. Schiller 1) and Armand Mattelart 2) regard communications imperialism as a deliberately planned attempt by U.S. military - communication conglomerates to ensure commercial, military and political superiority. Currently they see a sort of cultural aggression going on, in the course of which the weaker societies would be absorbed, culturally speaking, into the capitalistic modern global system.

2. Cultural Imperialism Discussion of the German Romantic Age

The current discussion of cultural imperialism is in no way new. It can be traced back to the 18th and early 19th century as far as Germany is concerned. In the mid of the 18th century, Germany was not a nation-state, to the contrary, it consisted of dozens of small states. But in Germany a feeling of national identity and of national unity was evolving. Poets, scholars and the educated classes promoted the "Deutsche Bewegung" ("German movement"). Germany of those days can be characterised not as a nation-state but as a nation-culture.

The theoretical socio-linguistic arguments of the German Romantic Age are primarily stemming from the thinking of Johann Gottfried Herder (1744-1803) about keeping the German language free of foreign influences - with the desire thus to preserve or restore the cultural identity of the German people. The German Romantic Age was closely linked with a brightly flaming enthusiasm about the concept of fatherland, which called for (against Napoleon) political liberation. One of the determinant theoretical fundamentals for German nationalism was laid by Johann Gottfried Herder in 1771 in his "Treatise on the Origin of Language." Language, said Herder - and here he was in diametrical opposition to the age's ruling doctrine - is not a creation of God; in each case of a national or regional tongue it is the expression of a special way of thinking - which in turn has been shaped by the differing life-experiences and national characters of various peoples. A similar philosophy of language is put forward by August Wilhelm Schlegel (1767-1845) in the "Lectures on Belles-Lettres and Art" (1801-1804). We shall later turn to the argumentation of Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835), whose philosophy of language anticipated the theory of linguistic relativity. Beyond doubt Humboldt was the more important theorist of language; but Herder directly influenced the German Romantic Age.

Language for Herder is an instrument that came into existence at the moment when the human being sought to express perceptions and feelings. Language and speech is something that lives; and language is of key significance for the identity of the human being. Language links things and events with the feelings that they evoke. At the same time, Herder sees speech as the determinant indication of the existence of a nation. The presence of a language of a people's own justifies the claim to a sovereign state of their own. For a people ceasing to speak their mother tongue and preferring to speak a foreign language (e.g. French as the German political elite and most of the cultured of those days did) is equivalent to destruction of their own culture. If a people give up their native tongue and have forgotten their own original characteristics, they are doomed to lead an artificial life. A people that surrender their language in favour of the language of another people lose their essential quality of being, and can no longer preserve their own characteristics. Herder launches sharp polemics against the tendency of some of his German contemporaries to seek to imitate the French language and culture.

Johann Gottlieb Fichte (1762-1814), the philosopher of the German Romantic Age, in 1807/08 delivered, in Berlin, his "Speeches to the German Nation" - addressing a political unity that at the time did not exist at all. Fichte's thesis is that the mere taking over or the co-existence of foreign words can already undermine a people's political morals. Foreign words are used, Fichte asserts, without the user being clear about their exact connotations. This can lead to severe confusion. Fichte gives as three examples the words that in English are usually rendered as "humanity", "popularity", and "liberality". He points out that in German the respective Menschlichkeit, Leutseligkeit, and Edelmut can have quite other meanings than the English 'equivalent's'. (On this point standard modern German-English dictionaries would seem to support Fichte. While Wildhagen and Heracourt translate Menschlichkeit as 'humanity', they note that in German the word can also mean 'human nature'. Again, Leutseligkeit for 'popularity' is also inexact : Leutseligkeit can connote 'affability', 'cordiality' - neither quite the same as 'popularity' - and also 'condescension'.

Fichte's third example, for the English 'liberality' Edelmut, has among its dictionary definitions the near equivalent 'generosity', but also the somewhat pompous 'noble-mindedness' and - sometimes connotative of condescension - 'magnanimity'.) By contrast, Fichte continues, a people that speak their original language are in a position to safeguard their uniquenesses. For Fichte there is only one conclusion : The language must be kept free of foreign influence. For if the ability to speak one's own tongue is lost, a people is doomed to decline.

In Germany, fruitful soil was ready for the arguments of Herder and Fichte. For at that time there were two political goals that could be served by such a philosophy of language: 1. The creation of a unified German nation-state, putting an end to the German pattern of small states. 2. The defence against a cultural superimposition by France. The latter purpose - protectionism against cultural imports from France - is observable precisely in conjunction with the German wars of liberation, in the course of which many German writers exhibited a boundless hatred of everything French. (This phenomenon certainly reflected a kind of reactive behaviour : German writers of the day did not enjoy very high social esteem. The German aristocracy spoke French and embellished his environment with French authors; prime example is the relationship between Frederick the Great and Voltaire). Ernst Moritz Arndt (1769-1860) mocks the efforts of the Germans to take over French culture. He calls for a political crusade against the French. 'Turnvater' Friedrich Ludwig Jahn (1778-1852) even asserts that anyone who would have his daughter learn French would entice her to prostitution.

These few examples of German Francophobia at the start of the 19th century indicate many parallels with the current discussion of cultural imperialism. The goal in that earlier time was typically nationalistic: The motivation was to liberate the people from alien

influence, and thus to attain a regeneration of the nation. Comparably, today's discussion of cultural imperialism also necessarily always has nationalistic (or anti-colonial) elements. The discussion concentrates on the foreign, the damaging influence of which must be countered. The autochthonous culture purists regard foreign cultures as a kind of illness that would corrode the identity of their own nation. The authors who do battle with cultural imperialism often do not take in to consideration that there are many empirical evidences of the occurrence of a cross-fertilisation of cultures. For example in the ancient Mediterranean world it was precisely such civilisations as Greece and Rome that, open to foreign influences, were themselves the most dynamic and vital cultures.

3. Cultural Protectionism: Friedrich List

Concerning the global film and television market, the superpower status of the Americans cannot be a point of discussion. 3) The distribution of TV programs can be characterised as a one-way street. Along with this offering of entertainment, at the same time political and cultural attitudes and values are imported - and this occasions various authors to speak of cultural invasion, cultural levelling, cultural imperialism or picture-tube imperialism. That such a situation of alleged cultural imperialism via TV will hinder the creation of national identity in developing countries is a matter of fact for Schiller. 4) Referring to Friedrich List, he calls for cultural protectionism, which, like the trade protectionism of an earlier era, is said to have an educational function. Only once the culture is 'ripe' will it be times to take up free 'cultural trade' with foreign countries.

Without getting involved here in the history of economic doctrine, it has to be noted that David Ricardo (1772-1823) determinantly influenced the doctrine of international trade.

Ricardo not only argues that the international division of work is a source of wealth. He also upholds the theory that international trade is advantageous for all concerned even when a country is superior to a trading partner in all spheres of production. Thus Ricardo argues that for foreign trade other laws apply than for trade on the domestic market. While the domestic trade's relationship of exchange is determined by the working power required for production of the commodities involved, in foreign trade a commodity requiring more work can be exchanged - advantageously for both countries - against a commodity requiring less work. If both countries now specialise in the production of goods that each country respectively can produce more advantageously than, Ricardo continues, both countries can consume a greater amount of commodities than would be the case without international division of labour. 5) This 'Law of Comparative Costs', which was modified somewhat by John Stuart Mill, is still valid today in the theory of international trade. The quintessence of the law: Even for countries that are superior in all branches of production, the international division of labor is advantageous.

Quite early the German economist Friedrich List (1789-1840) came out in opposition to the argumentation behind the Law of Comparative Costs. List expounded the thesis that comprehension of the conditions for producing wealth is more important than the wealth itself. His "Theory of Productive Forces" reasons; that Adam Smith considered only activities that brought forth material values. But a nation's productive force is also dependent on that country's social institutions, the predominating values, the state of the sciences, the arts, and so on. In order to make possible an optimum development of the productive forces in the individual national economies, protective tariffs are needed, designed to shelter the national industries until they are economically mature. 6)

However, for List protective tariffs are only acceptable until the country concerned has attained the highest degree of economic productivity. Then free trade is advantageous. Until then, however, protective tariffs should shelter the national industries

from the superior strength of industry abroad, while permitting time to educate the domestic economy on making better use of its productive forces.

Those considerations aside, the thinking of Ricardo about free foreign trade was not applied in practice by the economically dominant British of Ricardo's time.

The protective-tariff thinking developed by Friedrich List found its way into the dependency theories by way of the Fascist Rumanian economist Mihail Manoilescu, whose arguments were very widely disseminated in Latin America. 7) 'In international trade,' Manoilescu, who attempts a detailed rebuttal of the Law of Comparative Costs, argues, 'industry buys, with the work of a single laborer, the work of numerous farm laborers'. 8) For agrarian countries it is advantageous, Manoilescu continues, to uncouple themselves from the world market, and to industrialise. No matter how inferior such newly built-up quality industries may be, when such industries develop in a state with an agriculture economy, the industries cannot be so inferior that they do not offset the disadvantaging that an unfavourable export pattern involves. According to Manoilescu, a country that exports goods made under conditions of good labour productivity does not, to be sure, become poorer in an absolute sense; but such a country does grow relatively poorer. The more extensively an agricultural structured country takes part in international trade, in other words, the greater its relative underdevelopment. Since a global economic harmony does not come into existence automatically, according to Manoilescu this balance must be produced 'artificially', by putting the principle of international solidarity on new foundations. Manoilescu writes : 'Above all, it is necessary not uncomplainingly to accept the world's existing injustices, but instead to take critical issues with them.' 9) In accordance with such propositions neo-Marxist authors like Mattelart and Schiller recommend uncoupling and Socialist planning. Practically all western communications systems (including tourism, media technology, and educational systems) are depicted as unacceptable for countries of the Third World. 10)

4. Wilhelm von Humboldt : Linguistic Foundations for a Position of Cultural Relativity.

Today the majority of social scientists proceed from the premise of the theoretically equal valuation for differing cultures. These scientists seek (more or less successfully) to avoid taking an ethnocentric perspective. Ethnocentrism is a term referring to the assumption that one's own culture's value system is superior to other systems of values; with this subjective approach then used as a frame of reference in evaluating other cultures. That is, the customs and norms of a particular civilisation are used as a standard for evaluating other civilisations. Cultural relativism means the study of other cultures against their respective cultural backgrounds. Precisely in the analysis of foreign cultures, research has frequently fallen into an ethnocentric-perspective. In the article on 'Changing Patterns in Research on the Third World' Elbaki Hermassi criticises what he calls the tendency of many researchers to judge development processes in the Third World by forcing them into the Procrustean bed of European experience. 11) There seem to be few fields of research in which ethnocentrism has found as much expression as in the area of development research.

Important to a discussion of the concept of cultural relativism is the Sapir-Whorf-Hypothesis of linguistic relativity. The idea behind it was first explicitly formulated by the Prussian statesman and scientist Wilhelm von Humboldt. This line of thinking starts from the premise that the articulating, and thereby also cognitive systems of 'advanced' cultures are by no means further developed than are those of 'primitive' cultures. Wilhelm von Humboldt writes : 'Thinking is not only dependent on language generally, but to a certain extent also on every individual one.' 12) In Humboldt's treatise 'Ueber die Verschiedenheit des Menschlichen Sprachbaues und ihren Einfluss auf die geistige Entwicklung des Menschengeschlechts' (On the Variety of Human Linguistic Constructions and Their Influence on Human Intellectual Development) in the first volume of his 'Ueber die Kawi-Sprache auf der Insel Java' (On the Kawi Language in Java), this approach is spelled

out further, and the position of cultural relativism expressed particularly clearly : 'Learning a foreign language ought to be gaining a new standpoint in one's previous world-view, and to a certain extent, learning a new language is that. For every language contains the entire network of concepts and the way of thought of a part of humanity. Only because one always carries over to a foreign language, to a greater or less extent, one's own linguistic perspective, this success is not felt to be pure and complete.'

13) For Humboldt, then, speech is not only a tool to express intellectual content (Ergon), a content that is conceived independently of language, language is also its own autonomously functioning reality (Energeia). Humboldt's line of thought is taken up in more or less radical formulation by various authors, for example by Frank Boas in the introduction to 'Handbook of the American Indian Languages'.

14) For Edward Sapir linguistic forms determine in advance the way certain things are seen and interpreted - and thus a certain language, so Sapir, determines the way a certain people will interpret a situation. Language and experience permeate one another. In the words of Sapir : "No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered to represent the same social reality."

15) Benjamin Lee Whorf argues that people who use language with very different grammars are led by these grammatical structures to typically differing observations and differing evaluations of externally similar observations. 16) Therefore, they are not as observers equivalent to one another, they arrive at somehow differing views of the world.

Within the context of this Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis of linguistic relativity, language is regarded as an objective reality, with the help of which people structure the world. The linguistic system (the grammar is not, this hypothesis runs, a purely reproductive instrument for expressing thoughts, instead language itself shapes the thoughts. Language is a pattern for and an introduction to the individual's intellectual activity. The principle of linguistic relativity assert lastly, that logic is always relative to a certain linguistic background. From this viewpoint, Wilhelm von Humboldt's negative attitude toward

a world language is to be understood. The world language would only lead to a narrowing or an impoverishing of the thought pattern. Von Humboldt's argument can be slightly modified. His line of thought predicts a cultural homogenisation by mass media, and anticipates a worldwide prostration of the various cultures.

5. Summary and Conclusions

The current discussion of cultural imperialism is in no way new. It can be traced back to the 18th and early 19th century as far as Germany is concerned. Doing this will lead to two main lines of argumentation: 1. The protective-tariff theses of Friedrich List, which lead the emphasis away from purely economic factors and turn it toward socio-cultural aspects of economic life. 2. The theoretical linguistic arguments of Wilhelm von Humboldt and Johann Gottfried Herder. Even the much complained ethnocentric conceit of postwar research on developing countries cannot be found in the issues of the German authors.

The arguments used in the discussion of cultural or media imperialism in the context of dependency theories are in no way new. Furthermore, mass communication research does not yet have available empirically supported findings as to how modal personality structure - i.e. a country's national character - has been altered through the introduction of mass media or through the distribution of specific content. Dependency theorists consider socio-cultural differences as little as internal, dynamic social processes in developing countries which certainly can hardly be regarded as a homogeneous category. There is danger that key distinctions among differing developing countries are overlooked. The fact that cultural aspects are only treated marginally allows the supposition that these are being interpreted as a super-structure on the economic foundation, and accordingly as being relatively unimportant. This is a thought that is also central to the much maligned modernisation theories: Cultural differences are compensated for by the respective modern environment. Whilst the ideas of the German authors were of primary importance for the crystallisation of a German national

identity, there is the tendency to use the concepts of dependency or cultural or media imperialism as a magic formula with the help of which everything in the Third World that is condemned as negative can be explained. The assumption of such a perspective can definitely go against the interest of the countries of the Third World if it results in the developing countries projecting outward the blame for their own failings, and thus hindering the involved countries' implementation of the necessary political and social reforms at home.

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- 5) This concept Ricardo demonstrated with a famed example, in which Britain and Portugal trade woolen cloth and wine with each other. For the production of a unit of cloth, Ricardo calculates, in Britain 100 but in Portugal only 90 workers are required per unit of time. As for wine production, in Britain 120 workers and in Portugal 80 workers are needed per time-unit. According to Ricardo the foreign trade is also advantageous for Portugal, which is superior to Britain in the production of both commodities. Portugal, which would require 90 workers for the woolen production, can obtain British woolens for the equivalent of the output of only 80 workers, when Portugal trades its wine for British textiles. For Britain, too, the exchange pays. The United Kingdom exchanges woolens, for the production of which 100 workers are required, for wine for the production of which 120 workers would be needed in Britain.

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