

John D. Jackson, Greg M. Nielsen and Yon Hsu. *Mediated Society: A Critical Sociology of Media*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011. 288 pages. \$50.

Anyone even remotely involved in teaching homiletics these days would be foolish to ignore the vast critical resources available in communication and media studies. The question of finding a text which succinctly surveys sociological material analyzing what Max Horkheimer and Theodore Adorno and the Frankfurt School famously called the “Culture Industry” can be a daunting task, particularly for those trained, like most homileticians, in divinity schools. Typically, we invest ourselves with understanding the critical apparatus of mass culture more or less piecemeal: perhaps some early look at Marshall McLuhan or Max Weber as an undergraduate, and then, for the more adventurous, some conversations about Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida with our literary friends.

*Mediated Society: A Critical Sociology of Media* does a fine job in bringing into synthesis an unimaginably complicated conversation concerning media “as an intervening force in our lives and as being constructed from complex interests that extend far beyond our immediate experience.” (5) The book is part of a series in Canadian sociology which brings together a variety of scholarly perspectives on particular issues. Yet despite what sounds like a rather particular, indeed, national Canadian project designed for a national audience, the present volume manages to cover (especially in its first half) a great deal of relevant information about how media functions in the public sphere. I will have more to say about the Canadian focus of the text momentarily.

In my estimation, *Mediated Society* is a useful addition to the expansive bibliography examining the role of communication in contemporary culture and owes much of its ability to make difficult material “reader friendly” by using a format which is clearly designed for the classroom. The book is neatly divided into three sections and eleven chapters. “Sociology, Media and Citizenship” surveys classical sociological resources and from what the authors call “both media centered and decentered sociological and philosophical principles.” (27) As we might expect, there is a great deal of information to be treated here, including media in the public sphere, the culture of consumption and the new media and political violence. This section allows for a basic vocabulary for the student to begin grasping the enormous hegemony media has leveled in the last several decades, together with the major (mostly Marxist) critical players, such as Georg Simmel, Pierre Bourdieu and Stuart Hall.

The second section, “Media Events and the Sociological Imagination” builds on the earlier chapters with a look at both globalization and the role of national media. In regard to the latter, the authors are particularly interested in the way in which national media frames, facilitates and creates platforms. “National media institutions tend to produce a collective identity in order to mobilize citizens for large-scale projects and to distinguish peoples and practices.” (146) In keeping with the object of this series in Canadian Sociology, the authors spend a good deal of time on Canadian media, which some U.S. readers of *Homiletic* might find rather daunting. I am of two minds concerning the detailed and extensive reports on, say, urban media events using Toronto and Montreal as case studies. Read one way, non-Canadians might be strained to imagine, precisely, the society being mediated; contemporary communication and cultural studies often rely on some historical and experiential cultural coordinates to anchor the reader to an analysis. To be frank, I think that an American graduate student in a school of divinity would be awash in the sea of deconstructing local urban media events in greater Toronto. But read another way, media studies have been overwhelmingly driven by American

academia. Indeed, Walter Benjamin's masterful essay, "Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," together with other neo-Marxist studies are more than frequently invoked by film and cultural historians in order to discuss Hollywood's own (re)framing of contemporary America. It is indeed an honest to goodness pleasure to see another national perspective on media and society. Maybe the most ironic insight I can suggest here is to point out how provincial and insular the American academy can be in regard to communication. We really do think it is all about us. Depending on the composition of the students in the class (taking into account ability, background and interest), an inquiry into another national media might prove even modestly revolutionary in the classroom, especially for ministry students. At the very least, the scrutiny of the cultural hermeneutics of our Canadian brothers and sisters would help American students with a more or less objective gaze at another, less well-known, mediated society.

The potential difficulties in grasping Canadian cultural politics notwithstanding, there are other successes in the book which should be pointed out as well. I really liked a feature that I regard as underutilized in education: the presentation of learning goals before each chapter. By providing a list of about six or seven "learning objectives" before each chapter, in advance, the student is able to grasp the overall thrust of the chapter, as well as conceive what to expect as a consequence of its content. These learning objectives, such as "To consider the gap between real and imaginary audiences" also serve as organizational signposts, orienting the learner through some complex ideas, names and philosophies. Additionally, there is a summery at the end of each chapter as well as "Enhanced Learning Activities." These exercises provide the student and teacher with more than enough material for personal application and investment in the previous chapter. Along these lines, if the professor was so inclined, he or she could certainly substitute an alternative pedagogical strategy, especially when it comes to investigating particular (U.S.) television programs or films with which the class is more familiar.

As much as we know the impact of a global and national mediated society, it is also illusive. Much like a computer whose technology is out of date the moment the customer walks out the door, texts on media are forever in need of updates. *Mediated Society* manages to incorporate enough pedagogical tools in its 250-plus pages to help students to *think* about media, even though there are sections in the book already in need of an update. I am thinking here of the practically endless uses of the Internet and, particularly, social media, which has already had a direct influence on preaching the word. We can study the development of social media, but not even begin to scratch the surface of its table of offerings. Last year witnessed an unprecedented use of *Facebook* in the Arab world to strengthen political revolutions and dismantle long-standing regimes. This is the other side of the mediated society, in which the hegemonic nightmare of mass culture envisioned by the Frankfurt School and others is turned upside down and becomes a tool for democracy and justice. I have no doubt that Jackson, Nielsen and Hsu will have strategies to help many of us comprehend the advancement of that next media revolution. They have probably already managed to get their students to imagine future consequences.

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