

Critical Forum

Daniel Czitrom, James W. Carey, and the Chicago School

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In this short essay, I want to make two claims. The first is that Part Two of *Media and the American Mind* is profoundly influenced by James W. Carey's approach to communication research and its history. The second claim follows from the first: *Media* is as much a brief for an interpretivist social science as it is, by self-description, an intellectual history. By saying this, I do not mean to dismiss the book, nor to downplay its status as one of the only serious and rigorous histories of the field. Were he writing the book today, Czitrom might still experience the "eerie sense of intellectual isolation" he felt 25 years ago (p. xiii). Unlike the thin and self-serving histories that the book displaced—written, most often, by key figures in the would-be discipline—*Media* furnished the context from which the field's governing ideas emerged. Here I apply that same contextualizing impulse to Czitrom's book itself.

James Carey, of course, has made an enormous impact on the field in America. Partly this is due to his graceful prose, but his influence derives as much from the field-specific voice he gave to a methodological dissent issued across the social sciences in the 1970s. With more or less force, every social science discipline registered a protest against the confident scientism of the postwar decades—a backlash against natural science envy and blind faith in quantitative methods. In each field, insurgents elevated history and particularity over explanation and the search for timeless laws. To their opponents they affixed pejoratives like "positivist" and "behaviorist." The new, more humanist and interpretive social science drew upon, and contributed to, a much broader recognition across many fields that knowledge and interest are entangled with one another.

The dissent, of course, was partly political, and often dovetailed with the New Left critique of Cold War liberalism and the putatively "objective" scholarship that it underwrote. But the 1970s interpretive turn in method was not in every case aligned with leftist politics. In mass communication research, Marxists like Dallas Smythe

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and Herbert Schiller clung to a more-or-less traditional picture of social science, while political moderates like Carey advanced the interpretive cause.

Carey's famous "cultural approach to communication" is, then, just one among many such interpretive programs of the period. His version is an original mixture of pragmatism and various bits of the phenomenological tradition, but its outsized role within communication research owes a great deal to his role as translator for a field notably bereft—then and now—of broad intellectual literacy. Carey (1989) places himself on the far side of the "ragged ambulating ridge dividing the Enlightenment from the Counter-Enlightenment—Descartes from Vico, if we need names" (p. 70). He has in mind the Cartesian model of the individual knower, set against the view that the world we know is the world we make, together. In methodological terms, for Carey (leaning heavily on Clifford Geertz) the task of social science cannot be to grasp some mind-independent reality, but instead must be to reconstruct the meanings people make collectively, through symbol—"to try to find out what other people are up to" (p. 85). Human individuality, to Carey, is bound up in symbolic interaction, and the very persistence of societies depends on this ongoing, expressive back-and-forth. For Carey, then, the methodological is the political: the deeper purpose of communication is to maintain fragile cultures, in the ritual sense of the "sacred ceremony that draws persons together in fellowship and commonality" (p. 43).

It is not surprising that Carey turned to intellectual history to illustrate what he calls "the fundamental divide among communications scholars" (p. 73). He was, in the 1970s, an insurgent, fighting to break the monopoly held by the field's long-dominant behavioral science approach. What he did, of course, was to narrate an alternative history centered on Charles Horton Cooley, John Dewey and the Chicago School of sociology—identified by Carey as a rich tradition of thinking about communication that was, however, swept aside by the emerging "effects" tradition in the late 1930s and quickly obliterated from the field's memory. Carey had recast that "fundamental divide" in historical terms, with his particular version of the Chicago School asked to stand in for interpretive communication research. Dewey, Cooley and Park furnished Carey with an eminently usable past, displaced and recoverable—"buried treasure," to borrow Kurt Danziger's (1990) term (p. 178).

In Carey's (1989, 1996) retellings, Walter Lippmann is the chief villain, and normally set off against Dewey. See Jansen (forthcoming) for Carey's role in the field's misreading of Lippmann, especially in establishing the "Dewey-Lippmann debate" trope. Carey's Lippmann commits the "classic fallacy of the Cartesian tradition"—the view that our knowledge should correspond to some external reality—and his bleak and antidemocratic politics flow from this epistemological mistake (1989, p. 77). To Carey, Lippmann is the intellectual godfather to the quantitative and individualist "effects" tradition that displaced Dewey and the Chicago School.

In constructing his picture of the School, Carey points to certain institutional overlaps—like Cooley, Dewey, and Mead at the University of Michigan and, later, Dewey, Mead, and Park at Chicago. The account heavily accents Cooley, Dewey and Park in particular, and emphasizes the School's descriptive (and qualitative) richness and, above all, its argument for a kind of over-the-wire *Gemeinschaft*—mass

communication as a substitute for older, more traditional forms of social glue. Carey (1996) called the Chicago School's "the most useful view of communication and the mass media in the American tradition" (p. 24), and it is easy to see why: by his telling, Dewey and the Chicago School come off as his interpretivist forebears, sensitive to the binding role of communication as ritual.

I do not want to dismiss the value of Carey's recovery effort; buried treasure is a good thing, and the long-dominant behavioral science model *had* entombed prewar thought in caricatural slogans ("hypodermic needle," "the mass society theory") that Carey helped debunk. But his picture of the Chicago School is a heavily edited one. Carey had his present purposes, and they shaped the "Chicago School" he so eloquently taught us. In this he is not alone, as Lyn Lofland (1983) has remarked: "... the 'Chicago School' is a kind of projective device; descriptions of it seem to reveal as much about those doing the describing as about the phenomenon itself" (p. 491; quoted in Abbott 1999, p. 13).

As Andrew Abbott (1999) describes in his excellent history, the idea of the Chicago School was a retroactive creation of the early 1950s, when the department briefly embodied the traits it projected onto its past: "Meadean, dogmatically qualitative, and perhaps even dogmatically ethnographic" (p. 14). The prewar department was, by contrast, far more complex and eclectic—a "melange of contradictory viewpoints," in Howard S. Becker's (1999) phrase (p. 8). Carey probably overstates the links between Cooley, Dewey, and Park, partly by implying intellectual collaboration when the overlap was sometimes geographic. Carey leaves the impression that Chicago sociology was preoccupied with mass communication, even though the topic was relatively neglected. Park's views on social science, and Dewey's too, were hardly loyal to the *verstehen* ideal suggested by Carey. And so on.

Czitrom's treatment of the field's history, and the Chicago School in particular, is far more nuanced, but follows the contours of the narrative put forward by Carey in support of his "cultural approach" to communication. *Media* had been Czitrom's dissertation in history at the University of Wisconsin, and Carey clearly helped orient Czitrom, an outsider, to the field, as the book's Preface acknowledges.

Here is an excerpt from the opening page of *Media*'s Part Two:

In the 1890s, a trio of American thinkers began the first comprehensive reckoning with modern communication in toto as a force in the social process. Charles Horton Cooley, John Dewey, and Robert Park each ascribed enormous significance to the sum of recent advances in media technology, and each placed the implications he saw at the center of his larger social thought. Together, they construed modern communication essentially as an agent for restoring a broad moral and political consensus to America, a consensus they believed to have been threatened by the wrenching disruptions of the nineteenth century ... (p. 91).

Many of the same connections between Park, Dewey, and Cooley are stressed in the chapter, as is the impression of intellectual continuity and collaboration. Lippmann is portrayed as Dewey's antidemocratic opponent (p. 110), and as a key precursor to the effects tradition (pp. 123–4). Dewey's later stress on the affinities between "communication" and "ritual and communion," writes Czitrom, is the aspect of

his thought “most valuable today as a means of understanding the potential appeal of modern media” (pp. 120–1).

In his chapter on the “effects” tradition, Czitrom faults the “ruling behavioral model” for its deficiency in “exploring the spheres of meaning and the relationship between communication and the social order” (p. 146). Its “rather narrow model” explained communication “as essentially a process of persuasion” (p. 132), and is “surely inadequate for confronting the realms of value and meaning” (p. 145).

Czitrom’s history, 25 years later, remains fecund and nearly peerless in its combination of real learning and archival digging. In reviewing *Media* back in 1984, Michael Schudson observed, “If Czitrom has any axes to grind, he has kept them in his knapsack” (Schudson, 1984, p. 992). Schudson was surely right, but Czitrom’s narrative is, in part, Carey’s narrative, and *Media* helps make his case for an interpretivist field. This matters because, though everyone may have their “own private Chicago” (Becker, 1999, p. 8), Carey’s Chicago remains ours.