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BOOK REVIEWS

A CULTURAL APPROACH TO CAREY

JAMES W. CAREY AND COMMUNICATION RESEARCH: REPUTATION AT THE UNIVERSITY'S MARGINS, JEFFERSON POOLEY (2016)

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Self-archived <http://www.jeffpooley.com/pubs/pooley-carey-reputation.pdf>, Free

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Few scholars in the field of communication are as widely read, cited, and assigned as the late James Carey. His classic essay 'A cultural approach to communication' (2009) appears as required reading on the first week of my media theory syllabus for first-year doctoral students, and a quick Google search confirms that this impulse is nearly universal; for those of us trying to exemplify our field to newbies, Carey's work is essential.

Yet, when the students assemble in the classroom during that first week of fall semester, the task of explaining Carey's significance to the field always presents a bit of a challenge. He didn't break new ground on any methodologies – in fact, most of his best known work doesn't even have a discernable methodology. Nor is he an exemplary theorist. While Habermas aptly introduces the public sphere, Hall epitomizes audience agency, and Haraway forces us to confront the ghosts in our machines, nothing in 'A cultural approach' or any of Carey's other works remotely approaches a fleshed-out theory, in the sense of a model for how the world around us is expected to work, let alone a template for students to follow in crafting their own research. So what did he do, exactly? And why do we all feel so compelled to hold him up as a paragon for our aspirants?

This question is the driving force behind Jefferson Pooley's thoughtful, painstakingly researched, and highly engaging new book, *James W. Carey and*

Communication Research: Reputation at the University's Margins. In his words, the book is an 'attempt to understand the unusual if also undeniable significance that Carey holds for so many communication scholars' (vii). Yet, in its efforts to address this fundamental question, the book succeeds at answering many more. It is in equal parts a loving portrait of a complex and mercurial personality; a diligent exploration of a celebrated scholar's intellectual journey; and a sustained self-enquiry into the nature and function of the broader field of Communication Studies.

Pooley, a lucid and compelling writer in the vein of Carey himself, manages to tell several stories at once, each reflecting a different facet of Carey's life and work. At the heart of the book is a portrait of its subject as a young, middle-aged and old man. Throughout his transdoctrinal journey from promising young advertising researcher to journalism studies elder statesman, certain aspects of Carey's character remained not only consistent, but crucial: his deep association with his working-class, Irish Catholic upbringing; his omnivorous intellectual appetite; and his almost romantic yearning for a cultural environment that combined the organic qualities of local custom and tradition with the pluralism and power of national and global media.

Pooley also does an excellent job demonstrating Carey's consistent flair for intellectual 'ventriloquism' (42). Over the course of his career, the scholar reached far beyond his field (reaching upwards, according to Pooley's painfully pessimistic view of Communication Studies' elevation in the scholarly topography), deploying voices from economics, philosophy, sociology and elsewhere to help bolster and amplify his evolving world-view. Particular attention is paid to Carey's disciplinary hopscotch as he jumped from Talcott Parsons's high-minded structural functionalism to Harold Innis' technological determinism to Clifford Geertz's cultural symbolism to Richard Rorty's revisionist American pragmatism. Through these changes, Pooley deftly communicates both the conceptual acrobatic skill behind these leaps and pirouettes, and the underlying consistency of purpose and character that unites them.

Another important theme in the book is Carey's role in defining and promoting American 'Cultural Studies' as a field. Though originally little more than 'a make-shift label for a group of thinkers that he had come to admire' (41), the project of redefining Communication Studies away from what he would later call the 'transmission model' and towards a more culturalist approach was a crucial arc in Carey's intellectual development, and one of his greatest professional achievements.

That Carey's vision of Cultural Studies bears only a passing resemblance to the Cultural Studies exemplified by the Birmingham School and other continental and/or Marxist scholars is not an accident of history, nor a mere oversight. To the contrary, Pooley demonstrates that Carey's development of this scholarly framework coincided with his growing 'antipathy for Marxism' (60) and a burgeoning commitment to 'useful ethnocentrism' (201) and 'American specificity' (202). In other words, Carey's American Cultural Studies was explicitly a 'third way' (206) between what he viewed as the Scylla and Charybdis of Communication Studies, with clinical scientism on one side and doctrinaire Marxism on the other.

Finally, the book makes a strong case that Carey's greatest strength was neither as theorist nor practitioner, but as storyteller. Like Carey's own career, Pooley's telling of it ladders up to the assembly and publication, in 1989, of *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, which both summarized and streamlined Carey's serpentine journey and scattered academic record.

His subsequent rapid elevation to the Communication Studies pantheon was, Pooley argues, attributable primarily to the elegance and poetry of his prose, which stood out as an 'implied rebuke to the polysyllabic drudgery of the standard journal article' (222). The stories might not all have been *true* in the strictest sense – for instance, Pooley applies his exegetic talents to revealing the mythologizing and elisions that went into the much-beloved and oft-invoked discussion of Lippmann vs Dewey in Chapter 3 of *Communication as Culture*. Yet if the facts were twisted a bit, it was only to serve a larger truth, in this case illuminating what Carey (2009: 74) refers to as the disciplinary 'fault line' between 'objectivism and expressivism'.

Ultimately, Pooley argues, it was Carey's pursuit of these higher truths, at the expense of the typical trappings of communication scholarship, that make him extraordinary, and worthy of canonization. Carey has, in Pooley's estimation, become a 'metonym for cultural inquiry' (206). If anything, this is an understatement. The point of Pooley's narrative, and the answer to the question established at the outset of his book (and of this review), is that Carey – in all his glorious contradiction and throughout his many doctrinal reinventions – was the closest thing we have ever seen to a living avatar of Communication Studies as a field, even as he served as one of its greatest and fiercest critics.

I was lucky enough to be a student of Carey's, in the late 1990s, at the Columbia University School of Journalism. I knew nothing of his scholarly work at the time, nor did I have any inkling that I would soon become a Communication scholar myself. To me, he was just a captivating speaker, and a passionate advocate for what he called 'public journalism'. The thing I remember best about him was his voice, which was always tinged with the threat of laughter and tears.

Several years later, when I was a doctoral student at USC, I saw Carey at the International Communication Association annual conference. I rushed over to him and pumped his hand, gushing about how profoundly inspiring I found his work and telling him that I was a former masters student of his. He shook my hand gamely, but seemed perplexed that I should make the fuss. In a room full of eminent and aspiring scholars, he didn't seem especially anxious to stand out.

Now, more than a decade after Carey's death, his role in the canon is firmly cemented, and I witness firsthand the power of his ideas in a fresh batch of young scholars each year. I see his legacy in my own work, as well – in my desire to transcend disciplinary constraints, in my conflicted epistemologies, in my consistent attention to the ritual and communitarian dimensions of communication systems. I often find myself wishing he were still with us, if only to see what he'd make of social media's democratic promise, as well as the dire threats engendered by fake news, filter bubbles and ubiquitous online surveillance. Would he have the courage to continue believing in the viability of community on a national scale, and in the media's central role in sustaining it? What new, far flung schools of thought would he colonize, to further strengthen our field's interpretive capacities? What kinds of stories would he tell?

Unfortunately, Carey himself is no longer capable of weighing in, but if our field has anything of value to add to the increasingly contentious debates about communication, culture and technology unfolding daily on a global scale, we have him to thank for it. And now, thanks to Pooley's excellent new contribution, though Carey may no longer be one of our storytellers, he is an essential part of our story.

REFERENCE

Carey, J. W. (2009), 'A cultural approach to communication' *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, rev. ed., New York: Routledge, pp. 11–29.

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