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http://www.counterpunch.org/2017/03/16/class-media-and-the-u-s-election/print/

Class, Media and the U.S. Election

By Teresa L. Ebert – Mas'ud Zavarzadeh
March 16, 2017

In the opening of his essay, "From Realpolitik to Dingpolitik," Bruno Latour writes that some "political conjunctions" are "so hopeless that it seems prudent to stay as far away as possible from anything political and to wait for the passing away of all the present leaders, terrorists, commentators and buffoons who strut about the public stage."

Is this one of those events? Can we "wait" for the other "event"?

The unexpected arrival of the event, like the arrival of any event, is layered in many material relations all of which, however, include discursive representations of the event .

During the election, the media constructed a counterfeit world out of a counterfeit objectivity. The simulated world imploded on November 8. The gap between the reported world and the life world seems inexplicable.

Or does it?

Inexplicable in relation to what? In a cognitive environment in which a commentator performs a requiem for facts—"There's no such thing, unfortunately, anymore of facts" (The Diane Rehm Show, November 30, 2016)—what are the terms of the "explicable"? Or, is the very idea of the "explicable"—what can be understood by rational analysis—a dead legacy of the modernist politics of truth?

In the post-truth world of advanced capitalist democracies, it is "no longer a question of a false representation of reality," Jean Baudrillard writes, "but of concealing the fact that the real is no longer real, and thus of saving the reality principle."

"Truth," in this "post" culture, is now the falsehood by which reality is maintained as real.

If the gap that has opened up between the media-made world and the empirical world is ontological and not representational, is it then fair and sensible to hold journalists accountable for it? Did they not simply describe the event as it occurred?

Yes, it is fair and reasonable to hold journalists accountable for the counterfeit world of the election they constructed by their descriptions. Description is writing, and with writing (arriving in the public world) comes political and ethical accountability.

Journalists, overwhelmingly, used the alibi of objectivity to stay on the surface of appearances. Even their "investigative" reports rarely explained "why" and were nearly always limited to "how." But, it was the "why" –the causes—that needed to be explained. Why were things happening in the way they seemed to be, and why were people experiencing them the way they said they did?

In confining their investigations to "how"—how Trump managed to profit from his bankruptcies, for instance—the process and not the cause became the subject of investigation.

Explanations ("why") would have unveiled the underlying "logic" of his practices and educated voters about the way he had systematically defrauded people and now, using the same "logic," had become a (counterfeit) "populist" defrauding them again, this time on a grand scale.

Explanation is not a subjective taking sides. It is an analysis of the sides.

Some journalists did, of course, explain and engaged the "why." However, they explained the events and issues commonsensically. The reality of the election was too complex for commonsense. Journalists seemed reluctant to go beyond the commonsense for fear that they would seem to have abandoned objectivity and therefore would, in turn, be abandoned by readers. Reporting (especially investigative reporting) is supposed to educate the readers about the limits of the commonsense not trap them further in its grip. Journalists needed explanatory concepts not commonsensical tags.

Some, for example, reported on what they called the (white) "working class." However, they understood class commonsensically as income, jobs, and, most limiting, as "education." These are all important issues, but they are effects of class. Journalists needed a concept that could explain the causes of class and cut through these experiential effects. "Experiential" does not mean that journalists were thoughtless or that income, jobs or education are trivial issues. It means that journalists, like the people on whom they were reporting, were worried, even scared, about using class in a more explanatory sense because such a concept of class would have revealed something even more frightening about the current situation in the United States than the election of Donald Trump.

A rigorous concept of class that goes beyond commonsensical stratification, would have shown how American "society as a whole is more and more splitting up into two great hostile camps, into two great classes directly facing each other" (*Manifesto of the Communist Party*). The (objective) reporting on the election was (subjectively) aimed at a reconciliation of the two "hostile camps" rather than a resolution of the antagonisms or an explanation of why the antagonism was ontological and thus beyond resolution. In other words, journalists who avoided explaining issues because it would have violated codes of objectivity, were actually reporting based on their own subjective political views. They were taking sides by describing instead of explaining.

Journalists took sides by avoiding class in any sense other than a commonsensical one. Engaging any serious concept of class would have ruined the commonsensical myth of America and raised the specter of society in a class war. But in the real world in which we actually live, an intense, violent class war is occurring. But in the fake world of descriptive journalism there was no class war, only cultural differences.

Using a thin concept of class, journalists buried class under the debris of frivolous speeches, polls, slogans, debates, and the primal emotions of the campaign rallies. The world that emerged from this trivializing of class was a spectral world; a ghostly world of apparitions and phantoms: a real world without reality. In the name of objectivity, journalists had described the election from the outside and equated people's "lived experience" of their everyday with reality itself. If it is "experienced" by someone, they assumed, then it must be real.

No, it is not.

What is "experienced" are tissues of ideology because "experience" is not self–clear. It is mediated by terms that are integrated into the commonsense in order to benefit the existing order of things. The experiences of people have to be explained—even their own experiences of themselves as "middle class."

The "middle class" is a cultural illusion. To say there is no "middle class" makes no "common sense." But in capitalist democracies there are, at root, only two classes: those who sell their labor for wages to make a living and those who purchase other people's labor and make a profit from using it. The commonsense reports about angry "non-college" (white) working-class men targeting "college educated" (white and non-white) women need to be explained. The "experiences" of difference and displacement have to be examined. Explanation reveals how all these culturally opposing people are economically in the same class relations even though the income or education of one may be more than another. They all live by selling their labor to capital. The sales manager, factory worker, software designer, health worker, oil worker, teacher (whether college-educated or not, male or female, white, Asian, Latino/a, or black) are all in the same labor relation, selling their labor to live. While one may be temporarily more valued by capital than the other, all are economically precarious and can be downsized or pink-slipped, face food insecurity, indebtedness, or a mortgage crisis, even homelessness, with a loss of wages or a shift in capital's profit returns.

To the commonsense this sounds nonsensical because the focus on lifestyle hides this shared class reality. Inequality, in short, needs to be explained not simply described. Explanation needs to examine how inequality is not caused by distribution (lifestyle) but is rooted in production (class). Explanation needs to cut through surface details to understand how the differences that most affect the necessities of life are between those who must sell their labor to live and those who have the means to buy other people's labor and profit from it. Yes, income, jobs and education matter, but they are secondary to this root class conflict that affects all working people. Descriptions of lifestyle differences appear objective, but actually bury reality under detail after detail. Explanation needs to unpack the differences to understand the commonality of labor relations among all who sell their labor to capital. Explanation enables a shared understanding of root realities; it opens the possibility of solidarity among differences.

This is the job of journalists because journalists are public explainers—public educators—not cartographers of the surfaces of culture or stenographers of experiences.

In his *Poverty of Philosophy*, Marx provides a strong concept of class. He argues that economic conditions produce "a common situation, common interests" that form a class. But such a class is only a class-in-itself. It is a class without self-knowledge of itself as a class; it is unconscious of its own interests and the significance of its objective experiences. Such a class is not yet a class-for-itself since it lacks class knowledge—understanding one's objective experiences objectively in materialist relations and not interpreting it through cultural "values." Values do matter. They are, however, normalizations of economic relations. Explanation is the transvaluation of all values.

Without class self-knowledge, a class is manipulated into acting against itself. In an analysis of the election, the *Washington Post* (December 20), writes about "a store owner" in Kentucky "whose husband awaits a lifesaving liver transplant" and has insurance through Obamacare. She had voted for Trump who promised to dismantle Obamacare. Now she is scared, "what are you to do then if you cannot. . .purchase, cannot pay for the insurance?"

The reporting on the election should have explained the relation between voting and its material consequences for the everyday reality of people's lives. The reporting should have helped, by explaining the underlying logic of events and policies, to produce class knowledge in voters. This is not violating objectivity. It is accepting accountability which comes with any act of writing. Counterfeit objectivity—recording details, in the name of objectivity, instead of explaining the larger structures of which details are a part—fetishizes the existing order of things.

To inform people is not just to describe the events and issues. To inform is to explain the connections between events and what matters most to families. Explanation exposes the way "political correctness," for example, acts as a smoke screen in the efforts to repeal Obamacare and transfer the money from the working class to the owning class.

Using details without connecting them to each other, journalists invented a counterfeit "working class" that shouted in campaign rallies and kicked people who protested. They obscured the

objective class conditions that caused all the kicking and screaming of working people against other working people who were culturally different.

Journalists are public educators, not narrators of primal experiences.

"It is essential" now, to use Marx's words, "to educate the educator."