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Between the Center and the Margins: Todd Gitlin and the Politics of Communication

Christopher W. Anderson*

Department of Social and Political Science, University of Milan (Italy)

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Abstract

What role does the media play in shaping public life, in guiding the practices of democracy, and in maintaining or disrupting the capitalist economic system? How does the media interact with both social movements (groups of people dedicated to *changing* one or all of these macrosystems) and public intellectuals (people dedicated to *thinking* about these systems)? How do all three groups relate to each other? And when one group changes — when there are alterations in the structures and practices of the media, intellectuals, or social movements — how do the others change alongside them? These questions and others like them preoccupied American sociologist and communications theorist Todd Gitlin, and through an examination of both Gitlin's career and his intellectual trajectory we can see some of the answers he provided: both the ways he rose to the challenge of understanding the sociology of late 20th century media, and the ways in which he fell short.

Keywords: 1960s; Communication; Ideology; Public Intellectuals; Social Movements.

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* Christopher.Anderson@unimi.it

1 Introduction

What role does the media play in shaping public life, in guiding the practices of democracy, and in maintaining or disrupting the capitalist economic system? How does the media interact with both social movements (groups of people dedicated to *changing* one or all of these macrosystems) and public intellectuals (people dedicated to *thinking* about these systems)? The American sociologist and communications theorist Todd Gitlin thought hard about these questions, and his career was dedicated to pondering the complex relationships between media systems, public intellectuals, social movements, and political institutions. Through an examination of both Gitlin's career and his intellectual trajectory we can see some of the answers he provided: both the ways he rose to the challenge of understanding the sociology of late 20th century media, and the ways in which he fell short. We can also see how the answers he gave to these questions matter today, in a world where the dynamics between the media, politicians, and universities are more important than ever.

Gitlin was an American sociologist, communications scholar, and public intellectual whose life can be said to be divided (both personally and intellectually) between Northern California and New York City. He was born in 1943 and died in 2022.[1] He began his academic career at the University of California, Berkeley, where he helped found the study of communications and the media as a discipline, and he ended it at Columbia University. His trajectory was forever marked by his involvement in Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in the early-to-late 1960s, and an activist perspective and generally "leftist" orientation was always a part of his work. Like many of the founding generation of media and communications scholars, Gitlin obtained his PhD in Sociology with a dissertation that used an analysis of the media to probe larger and more properly sociological questions; also like many of these founders, his disciplinary home moved from sociology to communication as part of the more general emergence of "media studies" as a field in 1980s and 1990s. On a personal note, Todd was also my dissertation adviser from 2005 until 2009, and it is thus appropriate that this article appears in a special issue of *Sociologica* on mentoring.

This essay argues that Gitlin was not simply focused on the media, or even journalism, as are so many communication scholars today. Rather, he was interested in the media primarily insofar as it acted as a facilitator of change, or as something that blocked change. He was equally interested in the role played by people paid to think about larger social systems and social structures, and the way that the media transformed this act of "thinking" and this act of "changing", making it more or less serious and more or less effective. Gitlin never had one answer to these questions. Rather, his career can be divided into four parts, phases in which he attempted to understand media-society relationships in different ways and using different theories. First, he wrote several important books under the banner of hegemony theory, with a focus on first the news media and later the entertainment industry. He then turned his critical attention to intel-

1. A number of recollections of Todd, of a personal and political nature, appeared in a variety of publications soon after his death, including his obituaries in the *New York Times* (Seelye, 2022), *Dissent* (Editors, 2022), *The Washington Post* (Dionne, 2022), *The Nation* (Alterman, 2022), and *The New Republic* (Isaac, 2022). In a more scholarly vein, a memorial for Todd was held at the 2023 ICA in Toronto and collected in a 2024 issue of *The Communication Review*. Essays there cover a number of the themes presented here, including the origins and legacy of hegemony (Hallin, 2024), the impact of *The Whole World is Watching* on the field of media studies (Douglas, 2024), and the intellectual turning point that was *Media Unlimited* (Benson, 2024). The essays there also discuss Gitlin as a teacher (Schudson, 2024), advisor (Press, 2024), critic (Madenga, 2024), and activist (de Nadal, 2024). In a final irony, a memorial for Elihu Katz, Gitlin's old intellectual adversary, was held at the same Toronto conference.

lectuals themselves and the university system. Third, he engaged in an analysis of "the media" as a general and omnipresent cultural form. Fourth and finally, he attempted to construct an (aborted) project on the public and the public sphere. I turn to a discussion of each of these periods in the sections below. Uniting them all is a concern with the relationship between *insiders* and *outsiders* — both social forces inside and outside the media and political system, and well as the problematic status of late 20th century intellectuals who were both inside and outside systems of power.

2 Framing and Hegemony

Todd Gitlin began his career as a media sociologist with a piece of disciplinary critique. "Media Sociology: The Dominant Paradigm" (with its attack of the so-called "limited effects" tradition in media research and by extension on the giants of the communications field, Paul Lazarsfeld and Elihu Katz), is clearly the work of a young scholar who has read the research literature about his chosen area of focus and has come away dissatisfied, to put it mildly. For Gitlin the idea that the media only has a limited effect on the social, political, and cultural world is so clearly ludicrous that believing it must be the result of a special act of self-deception. This idea — that the media does something profound to the world — was to lead Gitlin to the notion of the news frame, to his ideas of hegemony and his embrace of Gramsci, and eventually to his more "media-ecological" position later in his career.

At the dawn of his career in the 1970s, Gitlin's fundamental positive contribution to media sociology (and to sociology in general) was to operationalize the notion of the "news frame" and to ground that operationalization in a larger understanding of ideological hegemony. In his first book, *The Whole World Is Watching*, Gitlin argues that the mass media simultaneously trivialized and empowered the 1960s New Left, using its capacity to frame reality in ways that benefitted the system, which through feedback loops made the media image into the eventual lived reality. This, I would say, is the common understanding of the news media's relationship with politics today, and it now approaches the status of something like "common sense" for political activists and citizens alike. Amidst the over-mediated public sphere of the 21st century (Couldry & Hepp, 2016), in which every activist and politician seems to moonlight as a media critic and a frame analyst, it is easy to lose our perspective on exactly how radical this intellectual move was at the time. It was a move that was as much synthetic as it was conceptually original and involved Gitlin's fusing of several distinct sociological perspectives into a powerful (and much copied) conceptual mode of analysis.

At the center of framing as a concept stands Erving Goffman, whose 1972 book *Frame Analysis* was published at exactly the moment when an up-and-coming generation of media scholars — Gitlin, Gaye Tuchman, Herbert Gans, and others — needed a properly canonical citation for their emerging analysis of journalism as socially constructing the social system. In a pregnant citation in her 1978 article, Tuchman quotes Goffman's definition of the frame as "the principles of organization which govern occurrences — at least social ones — and our subjective involvement in them" (Tuchman, 1978, p. 253), and ties this into the workings of the "news net" (or as we would call it today, the social organization of news work), a structure which helps *frame* "strips" of social life and transforms random occurrences into "news". Or, as Gitlin puts it, frames are journalists' "little tacit theories about what exists, what happens, and what matters" (1980, p. 6), conceptual orientations and guardrails that shape the actual presentation of a coherent news story out of the welter of potentially random world events. Beyond his user-friendly redefinition of frames and framing, Gitlin's main contribution to framing re-

search is two-fold. He operationalizes the content of media frames by analyzing the content of news stories rather than simply studying what journalists do. And he ties journalistic framing into a larger understanding of ideological hegemony. The first contribution, that frames can be understood via content analysis, has become a backbone of media sociology. But the second contribution, the idea that frames have a relationship with ideological hegemony, is more controversial. Indeed, as we shall see, Gitlin himself was to eventually abandon the concept of hegemony.

By "operationalizing" framing research, what I mean is that Gitlin chose not to solely concentrate on the newsroom workplace conditions under which framing processes operated (as in Tuchman) or the larger professional codes that made particular frames seem like journalistic common sense (as in Gans). Instead, he analyzed the creation and deployment of journalistic frames by looking at media texts themselves. By saying this, I do not claim that Gitlin invented content analysis (for a disciplinary history of these methods, see Krippendorff, 2013); rather, my argument is that he pioneered new ways of researching about what journalists wrote, describing "what actually happened" *compared* to what they wrote, and speculating about what there might be differences between the journalistic content and the actual lived structure of a particular event. To be clear, as a basis for discussing what actually happened, Gitlin is sometimes using *his own participation in SDS protest events themselves* as the framework for building a comparative analysis. It is something like the moment in the film *Annie Hall* when the real-life Marshall McLuhan is dragged on camera by an exasperated Alvy Singer to confront the pontificating academic with what McLuhan actually thinks. This comparison between the event and the frame, rather than between various competing mediated frames, would be deeply influential upon social movement and mass media researchers in the 1980s.

So, why do journalists choose the frames they do? Gitlin's answer to this in *The Whole World is Watching* is his second, more controversial contribution to media sociology. The argument is that journalists are ideological actors that reinforce the hegemony of the capitalist system. As he writes in "Television's Screens: Popular Culture and Hegemony" (2017 [1982]), citing theorists ranging from Gramsci to Raymond Williams to Stuart Hall, "by hegemony I mean the process in which a ruling class — or, more likely, an alliance of class fractions — dominates subordinate classes and groups through the elaboration and penetration of ideology into their common sense and everyday practice". In journalism, the relationship between hegemony and framing is summed up this way:

> [News sources] are segmented and exist in history; journalists' values are anchored in routines that are at once *steady* enough to sustain hegemonic principles and *flexible* enough to absorb many new facts; and these routines are bounded by perceptions of an audience's common sense and are finally accountable to the world views of top managers and owners [...] everyday frames and procedures suffice to sustain the legitimacy of the economic-political system as a whole (Gitlin, 1980, pp. 272–273).

But it isn't just journalism that serves as a reinforcement of hegemonic power, and it isn't even the most important aspect of the cultural apparatus that turns a particular ideology into "common sense". In Gitlin's second book, *Inside Prime Time* (1983), he takes arguably his most in-depth look at the output of popular culture (in the form of network television) and the role this output plays in building a hegemonic consensus. The book is deeply empirical and almost overwhelming in its level of detail; a more sustained theoretical argument about the

ideas lying behind the book can be found in the aforementioned article "Television's Screens" (Gitlin, 1982).

> Hegemony is a process of organization in which cultural elites occupy top positions and supervise the work of subordinates in such a way as to draw their activity into a discourse that supports the dominant position of the elites; at the same time, hegemony cannot operate without the consent of those subordinates. Hegemony takes place behind the backs of its operatives; it is a silent domination that is not experienced as domination at all. Hegemony is the orchestration of the wills of the subordinates into harmony with the established order of power. The system of popular culture is one important domain through which the terms of hegemony are affirmed and negotiated. The process of renegotiation is mandatory because the hegemonic ideology in liberal capitalist society is inherently contradictory and changeable (p. 4).

Inside Prime Time, "Television's Screens", and a third article, "Prime Time Ideology: The Hegemonic Process in Television Entertainment" (Gitlin, 1979), were the high-water marks for Gitlin's reliance on the concept of hegemony in order to understand, as we wrote earlier, the manner in which unjust societies reproduce themselves. As Gitlin noted in a 2020 interview with this journal (Chang et al., 2020),

> when I was first writing about media in the 1970s, in my dissertation, I was operating on the premise that the way in which media operate on people is primarily through ideology, through framing, through conceptual impact, and I wrote on that premise. For many years thereafter, some intuition about the shortcomings of that approach nagged at me. I came to think my initial approach to media was too intellectualized" (p. 253).

Outside critics seemed to agree. In what must have been a delicious moment of revenge, Elihu Katz (whom Gitlin had savaged seven years earlier in his aforementioned article on the "dominant paradigm" [1978]) uses a review of *Inside Prime Time* to assess how well Gitlin's counter-theory to the media effects model fares when put into practice (Katz, 1985). The evidence in the book "is all rather anecdotal, [and] there is no mention of the hegemonic potential of television's messages", Katz concluded with devastating understatement (Katz, 1985). This perspective was echoed by a second reviewer, Donald Lazare, who complained that "in sum, what could have been the most illuminating analysis yet written about TV as a cultural and political force gets blurred by minutiae, in much the same manner that important issues get blurred by TV itself" (Lazare, 1984). Thirty years after Katz and Lazarsfeld, key voices in the field of media research began to argue that the entire connection between hegemony and framing was empirically unproven; that the scope of framing research had become too big, too unwieldy, and too concerned with the persuasive power of messages rather than simple variations in their content. For some of the scholars that came later, the entire line of thought about the relationship between frames and ideology had to be dropped (Cacciatore et. al., 2015).

Barely five years into his forty-year intellectual journey, then, hegemony and ideology no longer seemed to provide satisfying (or empirically workable) answers to Gitlin's animating question about the relationship between those who stood *within* the dominant social system and those (like himself) who maintained a more ambiguous relationship to it. His search for a replacement for these concepts would occupy him for the remainder of his career.

3 Intellectuals and the University System

The Big Chill, the lauded American film looking at the adulthood of a group of formerly idealistic 1960s' college students, premiered in 1983, less than twenty years after the start of what we conventionally think of as "the 60s". Gitlin's memoir-history *The Sixties: Years of Hope, Days of Rage* was published three years later in 1987. Ronald Reagan had won reelection in 1984 in a landslide; in Gitlin's (1987) words, "my generation now numbers teachers (for the moment) more activist than their students" (p. 438). It was clear that a process of reassessing the 1960s was underway. *The Sixties* also helps us see one of the fundamental paradoxes of Gitlin's own intellectual positioning, a paradox that emerges clearly in his writing and is also a source of its strength. All of Gitlin's work on the social movements of the anti-war period, from *The Whole World Is Watching* to *The Sixties*, turns on his own status as both a movement insider (the President of SDS in its smaller but formative years, and an organizer of one of the first major anti-war marches in 1965) and an outsider (shunted to the margins during SDS's period of greatest militancy and greatest public relevance). This uneasy hovering between the center and the periphery is a facet of Gitlin's scholarship we will see again.

For Gitlin, his own reassessment of the 1960s in *The Sixties* might be seen as a correction to what he called his own "over-intellectualized" theories of hegemony and media. For this new Gitlin the flaw in his own thinking about the failure of the New Left was not simply his own reliance on theories of hegemony. Rather, the bigger problem with the explanatory arrow in his scholarship was that it seemed to imply an idea that the media could be seen as the primary cause of the failure of the American Left. The internal politics and choices of the 1960s anti-war movement also played a role in their successes and failures, not simply the manner in which they were framed by the press. What Gitlin hoped to do in *The Sixties* was "to talk about the movement directly, not through the window of media relations [...] I resist and criticize a form of media research in which you simply demonstrate a skew to a form of coverage and then rest your case: voila', ideology" (from Stephen D. Reese's *Interview with Todd Gitlin*, April 1994).

This focus on the internal dynamics of the American Left was the driving narrative throughline of *The Sixties*, and it was to play an important role in all Gitlin's subsequent writing on politics. This focus manifested itself in two ways. The first was political and prescriptive. For Gitlin, there were really always two Lefts. The first was sober and serious (though still radical and avant-garde), close to the concerns of ordinary people, and cognizant of the role played by electoral politics and coalition building in the success or failure of political programs. The second was obsessed with style and cultural politics, over-estimated the importance of ideas, and tended to blame the political failures of radical politics on the stupidity of ordinary people, the machinations of the media, or both. This dynamic is summed up in the *Big Chill*-esque analysis of the successes and failures of the New Left in the 1994 book *The Twilight of Common Dreams: Why America is Wracked by Culture Wars* (Gitlin, 1994), and in particular in his pithy phrase "while the Right has been busy taking the White House, the Left has been marching on the English department". A focus on *cultural* victories, on the "long march through the institutions", and on stylistic practice was, for Gitlin, one of the major reasons for the failure of a leftist-program throughout the 1980s and 1990s.

The focus on the internal dynamics of the Left also manifested itself closer to home, in a critique of the academic enterprise itself and, in particular, of scholarly forms of communication. For many years, especially as I was beginning my own academic career, I wondered: why is Todd not publishing in this journal — or in any academic journals, from what I can tell? Why isn't he going to this or that conference? What is the nature of his own engagement with

the academic profession? And this is why I wish I had found earlier this 1990 article, "Who Communicates What to Whom, in What Voice and Why, About the Study of Mass Communication?". It is actually one of the *last* articles he published in a "traditional" journal, and to some degree, it is a goodbye. Academic writing deliberately cultivates obscurity, he argues, and this fostering of pedantic jargon is itself a political stance. "Writers tend to write in styles they see published in the journals that serve as gatekeepers of their professions" (Gitlin, 1990, p. 194). Why would any profession make itself purposefully illegible? For Gitlin, the answer lies in part in the belief that only thinking which can be understood by as few people as possible will serve as a mark of the intellectual elite; paradoxically, this style will then somehow "infiltrate" the minds of ordinary people, which itself will be somehow accomplishing the revolution. The failure of academic writing is not simply a supply or demand problem, however. The larger problem is structural, in the decline of a larger public or even *public sphere* to which more accessible academic writing can be addressed. "One of the striking things about the academic communications discourse — critical or administrative — is how little it is committed to engaging, animating, provoking its publics", he writes. "And so, the self-enclosure of university culture remains an obstacle to public intellectual life — as the erosion of public intellectual life renders self-enclosure comfortable" (p. 193). That question of the public — who was the abstract entity toward which either critical scholarship or political action ought to be addressed? — was to reemerge in the final years of Gitlin's life.

4 Media Ecology

I had always assumed that *Media Unlimited: How the Torrent of Images and Sounds Overwhelms Our Lives*, published in 2002, was the culmination of Gitlin's seven-year tenure at the Department of Media, Culture, and Communication (MCC) at NYU. At that time, MCC remained closely tied to the "media ecology" school of media studies research, a tradition which drew on the theories of Marshall McLuhan, Neil Postman (who was at NYU and chair of the department at the time of Todd's arrival), Walter Ong, and James Carey. If such an eclectic cluster of thinkers can be classified together, it might be in the fact that they tended to see "the media" operating as a larger environment rather than as a series of channels conveying distinct messages — what we might call today a "socio-technical assemblage" or an "ambiance". The perspective is humanistic rather than social-scientific, and one that understands the media, not as journalism or prime-time television or the news, but rather as a long-term actor that eventually reshapes the entire human relationship with reality. This is surely true of *Media Unlimited*. In an opening anecdote, Gitlin tells the story of a smuggler who regularly drove trucks up to the border, where they were inspected by customs and found to be perfectly legal and free of contraband goods. At last, on the border agent's final day on the job, the smuggler confesses he was smuggling trucks all along. What is important about the media in the late 20th century is not the content of media messages, nor is it the way in which this content is framed journalistically, but rather the sheer omnipresence and overstimulation of the media itself. This, in a nutshell, is the media ecology perspective, one that was common at NYU when Gitlin joined it.

According to the reminiscences of Rodney Benson, however, Gitlin's interests in these more environmentalist media theorists began before he left Berkeley. "In the spring 1994 graduate seminar in the Sociology of Culture and Media I took with Todd", he writes, "we read an eclectic array of texts that I can now see marked the beginning of the dramatic new direction in his thinking that ultimately led to his book *Media Unlimited* (Gitlin, 2002). For example,

we read Joshua Meyrowitz's *No Sense of Place* (Meyrowitz, 1985) and Marshall McLuhan, not authors typically discussed in sociology seminars" (Benson, 2024).

The move to NYU may have been as much a meeting of at least temporary fellow travelers as it was a case of a one-way direction of influence in which Gitlin absorbed the thinking of his media ecologist colleagues. Whatever the influence, however, it is clear from *Media Unlimited* that Gitlin is still seeking an explanation for the media's influence on social and political life, but using a theoretical and literary apparatus that is far broader than the already big theory of hegemony and ideology. Although eclectic and essayistic in tone, the argument of *Media Unlimited* is a simple yet profound one — the primary "impact" of the media on human life can be found in the fact that simply so much of it exists. This is a much different perspective on the media than the one found in *The Whole World is Watching* or *Inside Prime Time*. Published just as the internet was to truly make its mark on the political and social world, it is also deeply prescient. The "media unlimited" of 2002 pales before the torrent of sounds and images that overwhelms our lives two decades later.

Media Unlimited, more than any of his other media or journalism related books, shows a Gitlin entirely unconcerned with meeting the general standards of academic publishing. In that sense, it can be seen as a forerunner of today's intellectual monograph market, in which hopes for a popular breakthrough (particularly for authors writing about technology or the media) color manuscript acquisition and publishing decisions. Much about *Media Unlimited* is disappointing, underwhelming, and empirically undercooked, certainly in comparison to Gitlin's earlier more traditionally academic work. And yet, there is a core of genuine intellectual advance here, one drawing on the classic founders of canonical sociology, and one that I wish had been emphasized far more than it was. A key interlocutor in *Media Unlimited* is George Simmel, the 19th century German scholar who occupies something of an uneasy place amongst members of the sociological canon. Because Simmel was also to be a major influence on Gitlin's final, never-completed project on the public sphere, I now turn to a discussion of him in the next and penultimate section.

5 The Public Sphere

In his 1990 article "Who Communicates What to Whom, in What Voice and Why, About the Study of Mass Communication?", Gitlin references the relationship between the public and academia in his explanation for the sorry state of academic writing. The fact that academics have lost contact with the public sphere, Gitlin contends, is why they care so little about making themselves understood. "Who Communicates What to Whom" is one of the first times, to my mind, that Gitlin discusses what James Carey described as the "god-term" of journalism and public communication (Ryfe, 2016), which makes sense given that discussions of the public sphere really came into their own following the publication of Habermas's *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* in 1989. In 1998, Gitlin published "Public Sphere or Public Sphericules?" in the edited volume *Media, Ritual and Identity*, which stands as his most substantive comment on the nature of the public in an age of media consolidation, fragmentation, and digital transformation. The piece itself — which argues that rather than thinking about a single public sphere, we ought to rather consider the existence of numerous public "sphericules" — echoes work by scholars such as Michael Warner (2002), Nancy Fraser (1985), and Bruno Latour (2005) and is not particularly original. Nevertheless, it was always my first-hand impression (and I admit this impression is largely speculative and based in part on a PhD seminar taught by Gitlin and then PhD student Rasmus Kleis Nielsen on networked publics)

that Gitlin intended to pursue this work further. If he had, I suspect Simmel would have had an important part to play.

What would Simmel have done theoretically for Gitlin's understanding of the 21st century public sphere? As Gitlin interprets him, Simmel is the great phenomenologist of emotion and the money (not, *qua* Marx, the capitalist, but indeed the money) economy. In a world governed by feeling, modern men and women find themselves confronted by a variety of increasingly rationalized, formalized, and alienating infrastructures and situations, and in response adopt a blasé attitude that is really just a mask for the craving of ever more charged and powerful stimuli. The need for feelings, embedded still in the infrastructures of modernity, led to the creation of what Gitlin (2002) calls "disposable feelings".

> A society of calculation is inhabited by people who need to feel to distract themselves from precisely the rational discipline on which their practical lives rely. The calculation and reserve demanded by the money economy stimulate, by way of compensation, emotional needs and a craving for excitement and sensation (p. 41).

Gitlin's public sphere would, unlike Habermas', focus on sensation, spectacle, feeling, money, display, and the fragmentation of rational consensus; unlike similar critiques leveraged by Fraser and Warner, however, this emotional public sphere would draw less theoretical ballast from Foucault and more from Simmel.

6 Conclusion: The Politics of Being Outside

Gitlin never wrote his book on the public sphere. Indeed, for the last two decades of his life, he wrote very little that would be considered "properly" academic. This is not to say that he did not continue to think for a living; rather that, as intimated as far back as 1990, properly useful thinking could not be done through traditional academic channels. The world seemed to be falling apart; between Todd's move to Columbia University and the end of his life, he witnessed the run-up and aftermath of the Iraq War, the promise and disappointment of Barack Obama, the 2008 financial crash, the undeniable impact of global warming, the election of Donald Trump, the destruction wrought by the Coronavirus, and the backlash against the very science that sought to confront it. Before he himself was killed by that very disease, most of his writings were similar to his book *Letters to a Young Activist* (Gitlin, 2003). There was too much to do to worry about the International Communication Association (ICA) annual meeting or about this or that turgid journal. As a young PhD student being disciplined in the ways of the field, this attitude frustrated me. Now, well into my own middle age, I find it more compelling than I want to admit.

Nevertheless, and by way of conclusion, I think there are at least three intellectual areas in which Todd's writing can be generative for current academic work. The first and oldest is that it forces us to reconsider the role and power of ideology and hegemony. Like Todd, a good deal of the academic world has moved on; at best, the concept of hegemony is a victim of its own success. But perhaps we have given up too easily; at the very least, it seems the time is ripe for reauthorizing the role played by our very fragmented media system in maintaining or disrupting the political status quo. Today, there seems to be *only* disruption. But what if *that* is hegemonic as well? Answering this question would lead us to revisit some of the older theories of ideology and how they do or do not apply in the current media age.

Second, Todd's theorizing about the role and nature of the public sphere is useful insofar as it harkens back to an era of thinking about the media and politics that is usefully pre-*internet*,

pre-*networks*, and pre-*Latour*. It is anti-Foucauldian, but nonetheless, critical. Are there ways to understand the public as an emotional entity that do more than simply repeat what must, by now, be stating the obvious? Is there a relationship between structures of feeling and capitalism? To my mind, we seem to have reached an intellectual cul-de-sac when it comes to thinking about "the public", and Gitlin's work can, at the very least, nudge us out of our malaise.

Finally, and perhaps most importantly, Gitlin is useful in helping us think through what the relationship between politics, academia, and the media are and ought to be — about the relationship between being at the center of a field and about being on its margins. Throughout his life, Gitlin was near the center of the action. He was an early member, and indeed the president, of the Students for a Democratic Society. He taught at one of the leading Sociology departments in the world, at the University of California–Berkeley. And he ended his career in New York City, in the Ivy League, working at the most prestigious journalism school in the United States. And yet, despite this centrality, Gitlin was an oddly marginal figure as well. He was alienated from SDS at the moment it achieved its greatest fame. At Berkeley he was a communications scholar within the field of sociology — then as now an awkward and somewhat uncomfortable fit. As already noted, he grew increasingly distant from the mainstream of communications research and, while at Columbia, held a post at a professional school notoriously skeptical of academic research. His centrality was always shot through with marginality, and it is that dialectic of being on the inside and outside simultaneously that gives his work on the relationship between activism, academia, and power its continued relevance.

In our current age — where universities are riven by ideological contestation (far more now than when he was writing in the 1990s), when every academic seems to have the possibility of being famous online for 15 minutes, and yet where the purpose of serious intellectual craftsmanship is more uncertain than ever — his manner and mode of writing is an invitation to step back and really focus on what it is we are all up to and why. Throughout his career, Gitlin would regularly argue that there was much that was objectively terrible about the world, and yet there still existed a committed group of activists and intellectuals trying to change it for the better, to make it more just and more democratic. Todd was among this group. To paraphrase the conclusion of *The Sixties*, he never properly completed this task. But he did not give it up. In today's dark democratic times, perhaps this is something we can carry with us in the days and years ahead.

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Christopher W. Anderson – Department of Social and Political Science, University of Milan (Italy)
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-3893-8411 | Christopher.Anderson@unimi.it
https://www.cwanderson.org
Christopher W. Anderson is a Professor of Cultural Sociology and Communication at the University of Milan–Statale.