

Comment

The Times and the Kingdom

Most of a country's industrial disputes are family squabbles that will only bore outsiders, and lots of our readers live outside Britain. But the story of the blitz on Britain's printers' unions by Rupert Murdoch, owner of *The Times*, *The Sun*, *The Sunday Times* and *News of the World* (to mention only his London-based papers), should interest everybody, everywhere.

'I feel like a man on life sentence who has been released by surprise,' he said on February 2. 'By surprise'? Using new technology, he had built a drastically labour-saving plant well away from Fleet Street. He had fired his 5000 now largely redundant printers after negotiations with them had broken down and they had gone on strike (as his lawyers had encouraged him to hope they would: in this way he saved himself forty million pounds in redundancy pay). After handing out an ultimatum to his journalists, he had marched them through the surrounding barbed-wire barricades and into his newly built fortress, to press the magic buttons which do many of the jobs which a few weeks ago printers would have done. Another union's men were helping him to do the rest. He had, it would seem, triumphed. What he had done had not only been as bold as a big bank robbery. It had also been as well thought out. It was no 'surprise'.

Mrs. Thatcher and the more feckless section of the British public gave him a clap. According to Dr David Owen, leader of the SDP, 'Now television must experience the same transformation that Fleet Street is going through.' What more is there to say? This is not the first time in history that a technological break-through has made throngs of skilled men dispensable almost overnight. In any case, for decades lots of people have wanted to see the printers get a beating like this: think of the number of times we have been told how overpaid they are, how irresponsible, how hostile to progress in industry (not *altogether* false accusations). And even some working-class people are pleased to see the trade-union movement as weak and divided as this event has shown it. The ugly side of what has happened is already getting forgotten.

But Murdoch's brutal exhibition of 'Rambo-style' proprietorial power should worry anybody for whom the health of our culture matters. Claire Tomalin, until this event the gifted Literary Editor of *The Sunday Times*, damned her Editor 'as a mouthpiece for a ruthless and bullying management which regards all its employees as cattle'. We should be worried because this alien style of management is going to spread. Even more, we should be worried because the quality of our way of life is closely linked with what happens in the communications business—as the Christian churches in Britain are only now beginning to become properly aware.

We face two irreconcilable prospects. We are offered fatuous promises that, thanks to the new technology, it will soon be possible to put out low-circulation newspapers to meet the wants of minority interest groups ... as if launching a newspaper were basically a matter of pressing

buttons. At the same time we see in the newspaper industry the spread of a new ethos. We may know people working on the papers that all the controversy is about who are splendid company and fairly principled and maybe even Mass attenders, but remember that a newspaper is a team production: what we really see when we open its pages are not the words of friends we respect but the personality and world-view of its management. If you care about truth and justice and yet still want to read papers run by managements that regard their employees 'as cattle', at least read them with an eyebrow firmly raised (a difficult position to keep, no doubt, but indispensable).

Unesco has given a lot of thought to the role of the mass media in society. The MacBride Report on the subject, which came out in 1980, argued that a country could not develop its culture properly if its media and communication systems were dominated by foreign organisations (as, in the Third World, is mainly the case). Not surprisingly, the Western media attacked the Report, and the subsequent talk in Unesco circles of the need for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO for short) helped to prompt Reagan and Thatcher to withdraw their countries from Unesco membership. But the Unesco debate has not only been about foreign domination of the media, but also about media domination inside countries too—about the relationship between management and content, about 'the right to communicate', and so on. The debates that have been triggered off by the recent Murdoch coup are part of a much bigger, world-wide debate.

And, surely amazingly (if we bear in mind what a poor record the Church has for freedom of speech and general openness), the only official text published by a member state to be quoted verbatim in the MacBride Report is the Vatican document of 1971 on the media, *Communio et Progressio*. And *Communio et Progressio* is closely linked to a much older concern of the Church, its exploring of the human condition. What it has to say about the importance of easy access by individuals to the media (the topic on which it is quoted) is rooted in things that the Vatican II document on the Church in the modern world said: that 'only in freedom can man turn towards what is good', that it is 'through fraternal dialogue that man develops all his talents and becomes able to rise to his destiny'.

The Murdoch coup is part of a bigger phenomenon: a new colonialism, led by a new international elite and hardly restricted by any national boundaries. (So, for the first time, even middle-class people in Britain are knowing what it feels like to be treated 'as cattle'.) What makes the Murdoch coup especially significant is that it raises questions about the role in society of the media, the principal weapon of this new colonialism. But fighting the influence of a system or organization that regards the people in its control 'as cattle' is also part of a bigger phenomenon: Christianity. For very basic Christian reasons, yes, *Christian* reasons, this new colonialism and its colonels must be fought and fought.

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