

Radio as an Emancipatory Cultural Practice

Marc Raboy

From the *Arbeiterradiobund* of Weimar to the *radios libres* of France, Belgium, West Germany, and Italy in the 1970s, radio has been used as a means of social and political intervention in Western Europe. At the same time, from Algeria to Latin America, from Vietnam to Afghanistan, radio has been an important weapon in revolutionary struggles against colonial powers. In North and South America, meanwhile, community radio occupies a critical, although marginal, space at the edge of the cultural colossus.

Where did these stations come from and where are they headed?

REVOLUTIONARY RADIO

The use of radio as a means of propaganda and ideological support for armed struggle is the oldest, clearest, and least ambiguous kind of "alternative" radio. During the Second World War, radio was an important propaganda and counter-propaganda tool of both sides, and also a tool of resistance. After the war, when the CIA began regular monitoring of "clandestine stations" throughout the world, virtually every imaginable revolutionary guerrilla group, left and right, had its radio. Some of the examples that turned up on CIA monitors in the 1940s and '50s include the Irgun, the IRA, Slovakian anti-communist nationalists, Spanish Republicans in exile, Basque separatists, and Kurdish rebels.

Fritz Fanon detailed the important psychological role of radio in the Algerian war of liberation: Up until the start of fighting in 1954, radio was considered a tool of colonialism, to the point where lack of ownership of a radio was a mark of resistance among upper-class native Algerians. Then, one day in 1956, leaflets appeared in Algiers announcing the launching of "la Voix de l'Algerie," the Voice of Algeria. Suddenly the situation was reversed, and soon the colonial authorities had to outlaw the sale and purchase of radio stations.

educational radio, public radio has taken a significant spot in the spectrum. U.S. public radio is unlike any other; it has no direct connection to the state, as the term implies in the general Western context. One out of every eight radio stations in the U.S. is public, or non-profit, but nearly three quarters of these are on college campuses. Most of the others belong to either National Public Radio or the National Federation of Community Broadcasters. It is the latter and tiniest group, representing less than one percent of all radio stations in the U.S., that presents a most instructive example of community radio.

Unlike the other public stations, community radio stations in the U.S. have no institutional affiliation. They are independent and see themselves as social animation tools of community development, serving a media-poor public of minorities and lower classes. The community radio stations are not only an alternative to commercial broadcasting, but also to public radio, the official alternative to the commercial system that was reorganized as such by federal legislation in 1967. The NFCB was created by a dozen scattered stations in 1975, and has grown steadily since then. Unlike the mainstream public radio, the community broadcasters have a clear socio-political agenda, and in fact undermine the legitimate function of mainstream public radio. These stations are financed by listeners, foundations, and government subsidies for which they are eligible under funding programs for public radio.

U.S. community radio dates from the founding of anarchist/pacifist KPFA in Berkeley. This listener-sponsored station is today one of the mainstays of the Pacifica Foundation, which has been under sharp attack from the right since the Reagan era. After a right-wing organization, Accuracy in Media, accused Pacifica of broadcasting "filth, racism, and communism" in 1981, a *National Enquirer* exposé screamed "Your Tax Dollars Support Red Broadcasters." A right-wing lobby, the American Legal Foundation, has been trying to get the FCC to refuse renewal of Pacifica's Washington affiliate's license. The media has become a public battleground in post-Reagan America, pitting groups like the Coalition for Better Television against the left-leaning National Citizens' Committee on Broadcasting. The government is trying to break down the 60-year-old idea that broadcasting is a "public trust" (even though it has always been entrusted to private interests!) through measures like deregulation. In this context, community radio is an involved political player.

The Pacifica group and other NFCB members say they are seeking to move people and change their consciousness. Their goal is to serve as an equalizer between stations otherwise as different as Berkeley's KPFA, El Salvador's Radio Venceremos, and the urban guerrilla stations of Western Europe. They represent the worldwide political stream of the radio movement as well as the cultural stream, whose purpose is to create a space for alternative forms of cultural expression—forms too unorthodox or unprofitable to find room on

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Radio enjoyed a special place in the Cuban Revolution. No less than nine clandestine stations were broadcast to Cuba, six anti-Castro and three revolutionary, including the famous Radio Rebelde, set up by Che Guevara in the Sierra Maestra in February, 1958. Guerrilla radio has since been a regular fact of Latin American struggles. In Nicaragua, Radio Sandino used mobile transmitters to communicate with guerrilla forces and throw the Somoza guard off balance.

Today, the tradition continues in the Morazan mountains of El Salvador, where the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) broadcasts Radio Venceremos. Radio Venceremos began regular broadcasts from FMLN-controlled territory on January 10, 1981, after a year of sporadic "people's revolutionary radio" broadcasting in the capital. It has been on and off the air since then, depending on the fortunes of war, and is a prime target of government repression. During the 1982 elections, when the army was unable to contain its activities, United States vessels offshore began jamming Radio Venceremos' broadcasts.

Radio Venceremos is classic "revolutionary" radio. As the voice of an armed rebel movement, it conveys vital information and offers political education programs with an emphasis on the communication-related needs of the revolution. The problem with this type of radio is that the revolutionary context severely limits the possibility of democratic participation, and lends itself too easily to institutionalization as "party radio" after the revolution.

COMMUNITY RADIO

"Community" radio is practiced in many parts of Latin America—for example in Bolivia, which in spite of its desperate poverty has a well-developed community radio system existing alongside state and commercial systems. Since the 1950s, radio has been used by Bolivian miners in the course of their struggles and many mining towns have for varying periods sustained decentralized, autonomous, self-managed stations in the face of military dictatorship.

A different type of community radio is practiced in North America. In Canada, community radio takes the form of minority cultural development. Community radio is a (provincially) state-sanctioned alternative in Quebec, where in some parts of the territory it constitutes the main local station. Under the sign of community, autonomous radio has found its way into over a dozen Inuit and dozens of Indian settlements of the Quebec and Canadian north. It is also present on several college campuses and in two cities of the English Canadian south (Vancouver and Kitchener).

The American situation is different also. Almost all radio in the U.S. is, of course, private/commercial. Since the 1950s, when the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) decided to open certain FM channels for non-profit,

In Italy, radio was first used as a political tool in 1975 by organized extremists and alternative movement groups determined to build something different from and independent of the official ideological apparatus and the Italian state. The illegal stations were severely repressed at first, but nevertheless some 300 were broadcasting by the time of the 1976 legislative elections, no doubt influencing (or reflecting—it's never quite clear) the gains of the left in those elections. In a climate of political crisis, Italy authorized the free stations, so long as they remained local and did not interfere directly with the state monopoly, RAI. This first European deregulation, as it were, was to become the prototype of a new problem. The opening of the airwaves invited private entrepreneurs to invade a space hitherto restricted to the state and the outlaws. Soon Italy's alternative stations—and the public service stations—were marginalized as 3,000 commercial stations filled the air.

The French free stations of the mid-to-late 1970s saw themselves as media of social and political intervention. The first to transmit regularly was the Paris-based ecologists' Radio Verte, which went on the air in 1977, and was soon followed by stations like Radio Lorraine-Coeur-d'Acier, set up by steelworkers in Longwy, and Radio Verte Fessenheim, set up by activists opposing nuclear installations in Alsace. By September 1977, the first free radio federation, L'Association pour la Liberation des Ondes (ALO), was founded.

Throughout the Giscard regime, police and guerrilla broadcasters played cat and mouse, and in 1978, the government instituted strong repressive legislation. Soon after, the Socialist Party identified the media issue as a key source of political dissension in France and set up Radio Riposte. When François Mitterand was elected President in May 1981, one of his first gestures was to grant amnesty to several dozen people facing charges of violating the state broadcasting monopoly—including himself, arrested in a raid on Radio Riposte studios while he was on the air.

In Belgium, clandestine stations began to emerge from hiding in 1978 and flout the state monopoly openly. When police tried to raid the first permanent animation radio, Radio Louvain-La-Neuve, hundreds of students spontaneously protested and physically prevented the police from entering the station.

In Belgium too, the government moved in 1981 to regulate the radio situation, anxious, as were the French, to avoid an "Italian" situation. A tremendous paradox has since emerged in most of Western Europe: Is it necessary for the state, playing the role of guarantor of non-commercial difference and defender against the tendency of an uncontrolled marketplace, to favor commercial offerings? (From where I sit, it is tempting to refer to this situation as Canadianization of the air.)

One exception is Germany. Here, radical radio continues to exhibit its sharpest contradictions. In Germany, independent, non-commercial radio is

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mainstream airwaves. Both streams contain emancipatory aspects. Only in very rare cases, usually at specific exemplary moments, do they merge.

RADIO AGAINST THE STATE

Radio developed as a state monopoly in most of the Western world (the U.S. is the notable exception). As a result, radio became either a high culture medium, as in the United Kingdom, or a political extension of the state, as in France. By the mid-'60s, dissatisfaction with both types of public monopolies led to illegal private efforts to create alternatives.

One of the first breaks with the European monopolies was the creation of the English offshore pirate station Radio Caroline in 1964. Its target was innocent enough: the stuffiness of the BBC. Soon there were a dozen stations broadcasting from floating offshore bases. They were never political as such. The BBC eventually took this action-critique seriously enough to completely change its program style, but only after legislation had crushed the pirate station movement in 1967.

The commercial broadcasting lobby in Great Britain was more successful, and in 1972 the BBC monopoly was broken with the creation of private broadcasting and the Independent Broadcasting Authority. Today there is a raging debate in Britain over the shape and form of a new entity: local broadcasting. A blue-ribbon committee charged with reviewing the British broadcasting system recommended in 1977 the creation of a Local Broadcasting Authority, under which local radio would be independent of both BBC and IBA. The recommendation has not been carried through, and a popular movement has since developed in support of the demand for non-commercial local community radio, politically independent of both capital and state.

The primary struggle in this case is over the political control structure of the radio, and the assumption is that this will alter the content of radio. It inevitably does, but the content is widely variable, as situations in France and Italy, for example, show.

On the European continent, commercial radio developed with peripheral stations based in small principalities like Luxembourg and Monaco, beaming their signals to large, lucrative markets like France. This satisfied a certain consumer need for an alternative to the highly political French state broadcasting system . . . until May '68.

In the wake of the May upheavals, an entirely new set of alternative needs was identified: social, political, cultural, and ideological. These needs had nothing to do with commercial interests, and could in no way be accommodated within the official system. By the mid-'70s, a vast trans-national movement of illegal, clandestine radio had developed, most strongly in France, Belgium, Italy, and the German Federal Republic.

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still illegal. Free stations—most of them launched by political movements in the 1970s, beginning in Berlin in '75—are persecuted by police and authorities in a situation that is the most repressive in Western Europe. The German stations, consequently, are still all political, in the tradition of early French, Belgian, and Italian *radio libres*. In Germany (as in South Africa), it is a criminal act to listen to illegal stations, and listeners are liable to have their offending radio sets confiscated.

CAN RADIO BE A GOOD THING?

Community radio is peculiarly North American, appealing to the sense of belonging fostered by the geographically limited and self-managed communities typical of New England towns and Québécois villages. Popular radio, on the other hand, is more meaningful to the movements in Africa, Latin America, and Mediterranean Europe, and refers to political opposition and struggle against the political authority incarnated in traditional radio. Free radio, thirdly, connotes the struggle to occupy a free-speech space outside the authoritarian structure of state radio monopolies. In Anglo-Saxon cultures, "pirate," "alternative," "sidewalk," and "participatory" are all terms used to name the democratic impulse to radio.

Radio thus takes on a different emancipatory focus in different social and political contexts: as human and cultural expression, as social and political intervention, as community-building, as a tool of revolutionary struggle. Rather than look for a common thread in these diverse experiences, perhaps it may be most useful to simply marvel that in the present global context people are able to resist the dominating tendency of mass communication at all.