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## Financial autocracy and its media clergy

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‘Their (media outlets’) autonomy is reduced to the institutionalization of a functional casuistry that gives legitimacy to the powers that be. It is in this sense that I contend that the power of financial aristocracy is complemented by the power of media clergy’.

I have calqued the title of this piece on a statement I heard at the M’PEP conference organized in October 2011. I believe the theme conveyed by that statement deserves to be developed. It seems to me that there is an irrefutable parallel between our contemporary society and the situation that prevailed in France on the eve of 1789. At that time, decision-making authority resided with the landed aristocracy (nobility who stood by their King). Nowadays, this power rests with the financial “plutocracy” in positions of power in capitalist monopolies the world over. In France of yesteryears, this power was the preserve of “nobles of the robe”— bourgeoisie dressed in aristocratic robes. Today, the power of capitalistic monopolies is in the hands of the “political class”, made up of bona fide financiers ( in the ordinary finance sense of the word), associated with politicians from the traditional right wing and those from the electoral left. As for the aristocratic/ monarchical political power of the Old Regime in France, it was sustained by the clergy (of the Catholic Church in France) whose role was to give the regime a semblance of legitimacy by developing an appropriate casuistic rhetoric. Today, the onus is on the media to play this role. And the casuistry that it develops to accomplish this task and give the dominant power a veneer of legitimacy is characteristic of traditional methods devised by the religious clergy.

The purpose of this paper is to analyze the role played by “media clergy” in contemporary society. The subject of the “nobility of the robe” whose role is played today by politicians could be treated in the same vein.

### DOES MEDIA POWER EXIST?

A cursory look at global reality across historical timeframes would reveal the coexistence of multiple power structures. For example, in our contemporary world, economic power exists side by side with political power structures—legislative, executive, judiciary—exercised through established institutions that may be democratic or undemocratic. An example would be the power that ideological schools of thought and beliefs (religious and others) wield over people. Another example would be the power of the media that disseminates information, selects and, makes commentary about it.

Recognizing this plurality is an extremely banal task. The real question that begs to be asked is the following: how do these powers, diverse as they are, get organized to complement each other in the functions they fulfill in the construction of the social fabric, or otherwise enter into confrontation in the field? Undoubtedly, the response to this question can only be concrete; in other words, it deals with specific societies at specific historical periods. The reflections that follow focus on the articulation of relations between media powers and facets of social power structures in contemporary capitalist societies.

One more word on the notion of media power: there is abundant literature out there that analyzes the diverse qualifications of human beings, including their homo comunicans character. The implication of this is that the volume and intensity of information to which human beings have access, without taking into account what they were in the past, would have really transformed human beings and society. This may be an exaggeration, given that from the onset, human beings have always identified with the power of speech, means of communication par excellence. It ensues from this affirmation that the proposition regarding the volume and intensity of information are by its own definition correct and by this token endows the media, which is the essence of its existence, some power as well as increasing moral, political and social responsibilities. However, this

observation does not preclude the pertinence of the following question: how does this power relate to others?

#### MEDIA POWER IN A CONTEMPORARY CAPITALIST SYSTEM: MYTHS AND REALITIES

Media power like all power structures, is not—has never been, and cannot be “independent.” I am not implying that media power is “under the aegis” of another power structure (political, religious, or economic). No, media power can be—and actually is generally autonomous. What I meant to say is that in its functions it enjoys some autonomy that is inherent to it; which is distinct from the reproductive logic of other power structures. This autonomy is analogous with the autonomy enjoyed by the Catholic clergy in France under the Old Regime. The clergy in France functioned like other religious clergies of the time. This is the role the new media clergy plays today.

Media autonomy translates into ethical deontology. In this perspective, there are media outlets that are at the “beck and call” of others; there are some that are not. This notwithstanding, this autonomy – which is a democratic ideal for its practitioners—is not synonymous with the notion of media independence, which is an absolute concept, whereas the concept of autonomy implies articulation (interdependence) between different powers, including the media. Thus, the whole notion of articulation remains central and unavoidable.

Now, I maintain that in the contemporary capitalist system (the one in which we have lived, for about forty years), a superior power appears to have imposed itself on the rest. It subordinates all these other powers and makes them comply with its dictates. Of course, I am referring to a strong trend and not a state of *fait accompli*. This is because resistance to the articulation of this tendency is strong, and perhaps becomes re-enforced over time.

The supreme power to which I am making reference here is that of “globalized financial monopolies.” For more precision on each of the notions raised above I would refer readers to my recent work “La crise, sortir de la crise du capitalisme ou sortir du capitalisme en crise” (Amin, 2008).

In brief, I would say that we are dealing here with economic power, and this power is the product of the evolution that results in the extreme centralization of prosperity and management of capital, with no similarity to what it was only half a century ago. These monopolies (or oligopolies if you prefer to use this term) directly or indirectly control the entirety of the productive systems (and this is new), not only at the level of dominant traditional capitalist ventures (the most “developed countries” brought together under the umbrella of the triad United States/ Europe/ Japan) but also at global level. Certainly, this tendency is taking concrete shape through economic and political action strategies—and has to face resistance from emerging economies like China and others).

This qualitative transformation has reduced the relative space of autonomy that political power traditionally benefitted from within the triad under consideration (an autonomy that gave meaning and significance to “bourgeois democracy,” worldview, current trends, “consensus”, on religious beliefs, in short, “trends of the time”).

To put this differently, what is unfolding is not what is called “a market economy,” rather it is a “market-oriented society.”

Within this framework, the media—as well as political organizations—realize that its autonomy has diminished, relatively speaking. Without necessarily becoming instruments “at the beck and call” of others, they find themselves in situations where they have to fulfill useful functions that are necessary to guarantee the success of deployments of supreme powers of global monopolies.

Thus, we are not living in an era of advanced democracy; on the contrary, we are witnessing the disfigurement and retrogression of democratic values. A citizen who tries to understand the true state of affairs is subjected to tribulations that make him feel depoliticized. But there is no democracy without politically savvy citizens who are capable of thinking creatively and conceiving alternative ways of doing things coherently and differently. In lieu of these kinds of individuals one finds passive people (devoid of authentic freedom) reduced to the status of passive consumers/spectators. These individuals are often asked to endorse a consensus, in fact, a false consensus which is nothing but a reflection of the sacrosanct demands of the executives in global monopolies. In this scenario, elections are transformed into a farce, in which “candidates” whose managerial modus operandi in the organization of power structures shows signs of the existence of para-personnel aligned behind the same consensus. The apogee of this farce is reached when “notation agencies” (in other words, employees of these monopolies) identify the limits of feasibility.

Now, sadly enough, major media networks are part and parcel of the distillation of this unilateral thought pattern, the stark contrast of critical thinking. Certainly, the media does not resort to falsehood. Respectable media outlets steer clear of malpractices. But they do pick and choose, and their commentaries constitute the messages the public expects from them. Therefore, their autonomy is reduced to the institutionalization of a functional casuistry that gives legitimacy to the powers that be. It is in this sense that I contend that the power of financial aristocracy is complemented by the power of media clergy. One could provide countless examples of instances of media casuistry that hails criminal judges as champions of democracy (like the judge in Libya who passed a death sentence on Bulgarian nurses), and presents Arabs such as the Sultan of Qatar and the King of Saudi Arabia as advocates of democracy. It is hard to imagine a more effective farce than this one.

An example of casuistry by media clergy is the question of intervention (military, humanitarian, economic, etc) by imperialists in the affairs of the South. It is forbidden to open a debate on the real motives behind these interventions, notably in matters relating to access to the natural resources of the countries in question, or the establishment of military bases there. It should be noted that the reasons for these interventions are often only those given by Western powers. As far as democratic precepts are concerned, these powers expect southerners to take their word at face value. “Democrats” do not tell lies. They make you believe or make believe that these interventions have been agreed upon by the international community. It is forbidden to remind people that this international community is represented by no one else but the ambassador of the United States as well as ambassadors from small allies from the European Union/ NATO, at times supported by a few countries like Qatar. It is necessary to believe or make believe that the real motives behind these interventions are presented to us by intervening forces: liberate a people caught in the lair of a bloody dictatorship, promote democracy, come to the aid of victims of repression. From the onset, the media assumes the posture of “analyst” (in fact, of phony analysts of reality). The role of the public, then, is to observe to see whether or not the intended objectives have been achieved; whether serious blunders have been committed and whether unforeseen obstacles have stymied the accomplishment of set goals. Great casuistry that prevents role-players from taking the debate to the field: what the real motives behind these interventions are.

#### NEED FOR MEDIA NETWORKS THAT WORK TO RE-POLITICIZE CITIZENS

During the French Revolution, members of the “lower clergy” dissociated themselves from the hierarchy of the aristocracy of the time to contribute to the formation of a new citizenry endowed with the capacity to engage in real critical thinking. A similar process is noticeable in the media today. There is no question that proponents of media’s new deal that would be truly democratic are up against stiff competition from the “big media” that has access to huge financial resources. One can only salute and support the contributions made by this minority.

An honorable media power conceives its responsibility as analogous to that of independent and politically conscious citizens who have the wherewithal to contribute to the construction of what I have code-named with peers in the Forum Mondial des Alternatives the convergence of struggles with respect for diversity. The point here is not to subscribe to a single school of thought—that which strives to provide legitimacy for the practices of global monopolies—another singular thought pattern. It is not an appeal to juxtapose ideas and projects that are considered equally legitimate. The point is to engage in patient and sustained work in a bid to contribute to the development of critical thought that is likely to give direction to social and political struggles geared toward the emancipation of spirits and human beings, individually and collectively, in their common struggle. The notion of diversity as used here is not restricted to the choice of specific battlefields. Our conceptualization of diversity harbors the idea of appreciating instruments of social theory conceived to deepen the analytical thought pattern on the real world. It also takes into account the meaning provided by all and sundry on the perception of desired emancipation. Then and only then would the media acquire power that could be wielded responsibly in order to give recognition to the quest and definition of immediate objectives in the struggle and in long-term perspectives to which the media wants to subscribe.

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Amin, S. (2008). “La crise, sortir de la crise du capitalisme ou sortir du capitalisme en crise”, *Le Temps des Cerises*”