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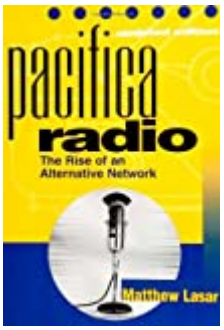
Jeff Land. *Active Radio: Pacifica's Brash Experiment.* Minneapolis, Minn: University of Minnesota Press, 1999. xiii + 179 pp. $16.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8166-3157-5.



Matthew Lasar. *Pacifica Radio: The Rise of an Alternative Network.* Updated Edition. Philadelphia, Penn: Temple University Press, 2000. xvii + 304. $19.95 (paper), ISBN 978-1-56639-777-3.

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"The Dialectics of a Pacific Ideal"

One only need to tune up and down the AM and FM band these days to sample the current state of radio in the United States. As Bleek Gilliam (played by Denzel Washington) in "Mo' Better Blues" stated: "It's amazing how many KISS or B-103 radio stations there are. Jesus Christ! Did people run out of call letters or what?" Not only have people run out of call letters, but they have, since the 1980s, homogenized, or "run out" of creative radio programming. AM radio is now dominated by talk radio, religious programming, and so-called nostalgia radio (a variation of the muzak stations that played orchestrated versions of popular songs). FM radio, on the other hand, has become the most popular frequency for music – due in large part to high quality of sound.

However, commercial stations which occupy both frequencies have become increasingly reliant on the trappings of niche marketing, strict formatting, arbitron ratings (a ratings system that ranks stations by the amount of time listeners tune into a station. These ratings are then used to set advertising rates), controlling the "rap" DJs use to establish their identity (and the identity of the station), and the importance of commercial sales in maintaining a station's presence on the air. In a thumbnail way, this is the economic structure commercial radio stations use to turn a profit in the highly competitive market of radio. The other way staying on top of the market is by buying up the competition.

Since the Telecommunications Act of 1996, station owners can buy up to eight stations in a radio market. This consolidation of money, power, and content has an enormous effect on the communities these stations serve. In their effort to consolidate, many stations have sacrificed thoughtful music programming for a more standardized approach to formatting. Now when you drive through the country, the chances that the music your listening to is pulled down from a satellite and broadcast over a formerly locally owned station is quite high. This cookie cutter format is not confined to music programming.

Even in the so-called democratic formats of talk radio, which is overwhelmingly represented on the AM band, callers are allowed roughly a minute to make their comments – barely qualifying as a conversation. Commercials, traffic, weather, news, and even more commercials (they are usually slipped in between traffic, news, and even weather reports) severely cut into the time talk formats have for a sustained dialogue. I would venture to guess that the majority of Americans – even those who fancy themselves intellectually enlightened – conditioned by this kind of radio formatting, shrug and say "that's the way things are."

It may come as a surprise to know that one of the early criticisms of commercial radio came from Herbert Hoover – who was Secretary of Commerce in charge of federal regulation of broadcasting in mid-1920s. Indeed, according to Jeff Land, in *Active Radio: Pacifica's Brash Experiment*, the initial fear of commercial radio's power seemed to emanate from conservative and corporate sectors of American society. Hoover was concerned that the service radio provided would be "drowned in advertising chatter." (p. ix). Others, like W.G. Cowles, who was the head of the Zenith Radio Corporation, believed that advertising would open the door to "Bolshevist propaganda" and would threaten not only national security, but also "poison the minds" of the American public. (ibid.) Conservative reaction to technological innovations that have a capacity to influence the opinions of the general public are certainly not new, nor have such critiques decreased over time (just revisit that "ancient" time when the popularity of the internet threatened to undermine the moral center of young folks with easy access not to so-called unAmercian ideologies, but pornography).

Where there is a critique from conservative forces, there is usually an equally forceful critique from progressives as well. Commercial radio can certainly be faulted for being drowned in "advertising chatter" – as Herbert Hoover noted. However, according to Land, progressives feared that the dominance of "mindless entertainment" in radio would close off the possibility that radio could function in truly revolutionary ways (i.e., achieving personal transformation, social justice, creative expression, and international solidarity in a post-war world).

Indeed, the belief that radio could initiate social and political change was taken seriously by Lewis Hill, founder of Pacifica radio, son of a wealthy oil family from Oklahoma, Stanford student, and conscientious objector during World War II who worked in the Civilian Public Service camps in Coleville, California during World War II. In Coleville, Hill was able to explore his commitment to pacifism, and eventually took not only his commitment, but also an ideology of pacifism to the Bay Area where he and others would attempt to transform the world by introducing people to innovative radio programming that centered around democratic ideals.

Using novel techniques like listener sponsorship, live audience call-in shows, and using the FM band as an alternative source for information, music, and discussion, Hill was able convince a group of like-minded individuals to help realize his vision of a pacifist radio station in Berkeley, California. Land's account of Pacifica's experiment in social transformation chronicles the rise of the network from one station in Berkeley to five across the nation (there are over 60 affiliate stations now) in a general way, and he includes many important innovations in radio journalism. Among them was the reporter as "participant- observer" in the 1960s.

KPFA, the Pacifica station located in Berkeley, was arguably the leading alternative media outlet during many social protests of the early 60s in the Bay Area. For example, KPFA provided uninterrupted, and sometimes, unedited coverage of the (San Francisco) anti-HUAC demonstrations in 1960, the anti-Vietnam protests in 1963, and the Free Speech Movement in 1964 at U.C. Berkeley. In many ways, C-Span, and the 24 hour news channels on television owe a debt of gratitude to KPFA. Nowadays, unedited coverage of an event is a ratings grabber. During the 60s, however, KPFA was, at times, a megaphone for mobilizing groups and individuals who rebelled against restrictions on their freedoms of speech, political expression, or opinion of war.

Prior to the 60s, KPFA attempted to change the world not though direct action, but through dialectics. This dialectic had a democratic thesis wrapped up in a kind of platonic "revolution from the top" antithesis. Bringing

these two opposing forces into a synthesis was the radio host who attempted to decrease conflict in society through dialogue with individuals who represented opposing political and social viewpoints (p.6). However, this dialectical method of reducing conflict in society gave way to a one-sided critique of American foreign policy – especially the Vietnam war.

The effect the war had on KPFA's (and its sister station in New York, WBAI) programming was quite profound. Much of its success as a fledgling network is due in large part to the Vietnam war – as were changes in its on-air content. The staff was split between the more "elitist" broadcasters, who adhered to a more analytical style of broadcasting, and the politicos, who, according to Land, were "political agitators… generally less concerned with the formal elements of broadcasting than with the righteousness of their message" (p.125).

This new breed of broadcaster signaled the beginning of Pacifica's third incarnation: community radio – defined as representing "un and underrepresented groups in the metropolitan area" (p. 129). Despite the periodic conflicts and the changes in programming style, Land has a clear admiration for the public service Pacifica provides for left-leaning and politically progressive individuals. However, Land's admiration may have caused him to overlook some factual and theoretical problems in his book. There is one mistake that demonstrates that Land did not research California history as thoroughly as he should have. Land mentions S.I. Hayakawa was a "professor of linguistics in Berkeley" (p. 78) who helped start a group called Friends of Free Radio. While the latter part of that sentence may be accurate, the former is not. Hayakawa was a professor of semantics who taught at San Francisco State College and lived in Mill Valley in 1963. Later, of course, he became president of SF State during the student and faculty strike in 1968/69.

My theoretical concerns occur toward the end of the book where Land states: "war grips the human imagination with the horrible thrill of participating in a massive, brutal contest of…the battlefield. Pacifism must demonstrate equivalent brashness to galvanize the passions."(p. 145). These passions will presumably be channeled through the voices of dialogue. However, if our violent instincts (i.e., passions unleashed during war) are sublimated into the realm of speech, then will not dialogue (however that is defined) become a new weapon for the expression of our violent urges? Would speech become more unrestrained, partisan, or inflammatory, thus undermining the nature of a pacific ideal?

We certainly see this happening in the realm of talk nowadays, where so-called dialogue formats are often forums for individuals to vent the "frustration du jour" with commentary by the host in support or opposition to the caller's perspective. Reason, dialogue, and an ability to come to some conclusions are rarely invoked in a talk format. And if "community radio" – really a variation of identity politics – is to be the beacon for social justice, personal transformation, international solidarity, and, ultimately, a pacifist utopia, then shouldn't such a dialectic or dialogue be more cosmopolitan rather than serving this or that community in the course of the programming day? Pacifica has certainly understood this to a degree and it is reflected in programming focused on analyzing news events. However, Land does not include examples of contemporary Pacifica programs that do not fit the "community radio" mold in his concluding pages, and that is unfortunate, because programs like "Democracy Now" and newscasters like Larry Bensky on KPFA do not fit neatly into a particular community format.

However, this is a mild criticism of what is generally a good survey of Pacifica's fifty year history. Land has clearly laid the groundwork for future studies that examine a particular era of Pacifica's programming evolution. One of the subtextual strengths of Land's book is the way in which he chronicles how the structural changes at KPFA and WBAI (and its on-air content) are more a reflection of the democratic movements and their collective critiques of our world than the failures of one or another method of achieving the pacific idea for which founders of these stations strove. Perhaps that is why Land is so optimistic and filled with admiration of Pacifica's history. In his hands, it is clearly the story of the inextinguishable flame of left-leaning progressive ideals.

If Land's book is a paean to Pacifica's history, Matthew Lasar's *Pacifica Radio: The Rise of an Alternative Network* is a critical assessment of Pacifica's early years. Lasar was a reporter for KPFA in the 1980s and one would expect that he, and not Land, would write a love letter with footnotes to the Pacifica network. However, this is not the case. Lasar has written a much more balanced account of the Pacifica network than his counterpart, and, on the whole, his work represents the kind of detailed scholarship that provides historical narrative with a theoretical underpinning. Most historians find the word "theory" an anathema in their vocabulary, but by and large most engage in a kind of theorizing when they reconstruct the past. Whether it's a hero driven narrative, or filtered through categories of race, class, and gender, or, like Lasar's account of Pacifica radio, a dialectic

history, historians are not always the strict empiricists they claim to be.

Lasar's tale is actually a hybrid of dialectic history and a hero driven narrative. The time period he focuses on is primarily the 1950s, and it is that period where this kind of history can be effective. After all, this was an age where a kind of Manichaean division of the world – reinforced through social and political pressures – created rigid ideological barriers that clearly illustrated that there was not only good and evil in the world, but to exercise free speech rights or to take a dissenting opinion resulted in a large scale rejection of what Lewis Hill metaphorically called "the Man at the Door." That is to say, "a person with a different point of view or a deadly 'alien enemy.' " (p. xiv). To prevent people from completely retreating into their fears, Hill believed that dialogue with what was considered a threat in society could save the world from destroying itself– or at least decrease the occasions for war. Dialogue would breakdown ideological barriers to understanding and decrease the level of violent conflict in the world.

Lasar nicely illustrates the way in which this counter ideology was cobbled together from elements of Ghandian pacifism, anarchism, and cooperativism, and filtered into the programming of KPFA in the 50s. Hill and the other founders believed that given a forum where creative exchanges, free speech, and individual rights could thrive – in other words "unpopular ideas" – they could counter the politically and socially oppressive effects of McCarthyism. Lasar points out that Pacifica's founders were not liberals, or communists as some had charged. Rather, they were strictly anti-authoritarians who had sympathy for New Deal liberalism but were critical of the growing power of the military and bureaucracy in the United States. They were also on guard against a Communist Party take over of the station, and their vigilance against the CP was noted by the FBI in their report on communist influence in the station's programming and operations (p. 4).

In an attempt to come to some sort of synthesis of ideological perspectives, Pacifica's founders tried to reconcile the Tocquevillian tension between liberty and equality in American democracy. To do this, they recruited individuals who represented libertarian or anarchist views and programmed folk music to appeal to recent transplants to the Bay Area from the American southwest. By using culture as a means for social change, Pacifica attempted to offer their listening community a real example of a pacifist world in a post-war suburban experience. Thus, they focused on linking their programming to the communities the station served and the daily lives of people.

By showcasing diverse viewpoints directed toward a large demographic (i.e., from small children to adults), KPFA endeavored to demonstrate how dialogue, careful and reasoned thought, and authentic musical expressions, could reassure people that there was an alternative to a world where demagogues and fools essentially controlled the national microphone (p. 108). This, and many other examples like it, demonstrate how Lasar is able to identify a theoretical notion that Hill, et al. were trying to address and then connect it to some concrete data from Pacifica's archives. Lasar offers enough detail in sections dealing with, say Pauline Kael or Alan Watts, to satisfy the empiricist and the theorist alike.

However, despite the deftness with which Lasar organizes his narrative, the history of Pacifica's rise from a loose collective to a national radio network was not as smooth as this ascent suggests. While individuals like Hill, Elenor McKinney, Richard Moore, Alan Watts, Felix Green, Pauline Kael, and Elsa Knight Thompson set about to change radio with their unique, erudite, and critical perspectives on American culture, having all these individuals under one roof did not result in the pacifist utopia envisioned by the founders of the station. Fearing that reasoned criticism was being replaced by showmanship (exemplified by Alan Watts' becoming a cult figure who attracted groupies and followers), Richard Moore, Lewis Hill, and Elenor McKinney moved to reform the structure of the station by giving Hill the authority to organize the staff and operate the station. This power grab was met with a good deal of hostility by the staff as they saw their pacifist/anarchist collective become just another top-down corporation. The "palace revolution" that ensued resulted in a number of resignations, but after the proverbial carnage (i.e.,firings, resignations, and self-terminations) Hill's corporate designs triumphed over pacifist and anarchist ideals – although his triumph was short-lived.

By the early 60s, the station transformed itself into a forum where sexuality, race relations, drugs, nontraditional lifestyles, and critiques of the national security state were presented as an alternative viewpoint in the Bay Area. By the end of the 60s (and into the 70s and 80s), this kind of post McCarthy freedom, where individuals articulating their individuality in terms of humanness and creativity fostered in conjunction with other like-minded individuals, evolved into identity politics where

authenticity was found in solidarity with ones' separate community.

Despite the excess of dissent, and Pacifica's movement away from the dialogical foundations of their ideology, Lasar ends his book on a sanguine note. Believing that the communities that comprise Pacifica's staff reflect the "complexities of life," Lasar is heartened that the diversity represented on the airwaves demonstrates that life "cannot be contained or explained by one philosophy or political system of thought" (p. 228). On some level, I'm sure the pacifists and anarchists who founded Pacifica would be pleased with the way in which the network is centered around the complexities of life. However, they might not be too thrilled with the way these communities have attenuated dialogue and understanding with "the Man at the Door" in favor of an authentic (but uncritical) experience of a congeries of particular communities. Although, given the recent protest by KPFA employees against Pacifica's plans to institute another top-down plan for managing the network – which Lasar explains n a postscript in the updated edition of his book –Hill and company might not have frowned upon the efforts of Mary Frances Berry [Chair of the governing board at Pacifica radio] to over-centralize Pacifica's authority in an effort to expand its listenership.

Now that radio programming is essentially niche-programming (that is to say, programming directed at a particular community - even if that community is defined by material tastes), the time seems to be right for a kind of radio that provokes and prods individuals not to be outraged by this or that turn of events, but one which engenders dialogue, analysis, and understanding of those things that are considered threats in society. This may be the alternative that left-leaning progressives need; an alternative that can be located KPFA's past.

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