

Book review

Phelan, S. (2014). *Neoliberalism, media and the political*. London: Palgrave MacMillan. 242 pp.

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A volume like this has not only been long overdue, but the urgency of its problematic is witnessed each and every day. The handling of the Greek crisis by the European institutions in the summer of 2015 has once more revealed the strength of what Phelan refers to in his introduction as “the emergence of a hyper-neoliberal austerity politics, mocking earlier speculation about the ‘end’ of neoliberalism” (p. 3). Indeed, the goal Phelan sets out for this volume is to take neoliberalism as an object of inquiry, while exceeding (and thus challenging) the two most widespread (although contradictory) assumptions in theory and society: the idea that we have reached an era of post-neoliberalism on the one hand, and the idea of neoliberalism as an all-encompassing dominant ideology, consciously advocated and reproduced by all social systems and institutions, on the other. Furthermore, although neoliberalism has been the general ideological direction of travel in the West for over three decades, the lack of attention in media and communication studies (or academia in general) for neoliberalism as an analytical concept is, at its very least, utterly surprising. The strength of this volume is that it provides the necessary tools and categories for understanding and explaining this predicament.

By focusing on the relational dynamic between neoliberalism, media and the political, Phelan puts forward neoliberalism first and foremost as a *political* rationality, while engaging primarily with post-foundationalist, discourse-theoretical, field theory and radical-democratic assumptions. The added value of this volume lies especially in two particular contributions it makes to understanding the problematic of neoliberalism, media and the political in the 21st century, which are inextricably entwined. First, the combination of a discourse-theoretical approach with Bourdieu’s field theory has the advantage of analyzing neoliberalism as a discursive phenomenon characterized by a particular material composition. This allows Phelan to investigate and demonstrate how particular institutional regimes, practices, subjectivities and dispositions, either consciously or unconsciously, reproduce neoliberal political rationality. Second, the volume consistently and rigorously distinguishes between two ideal types of neoliberalism in terms of different political-intellectual formations: a

(former) normative, antagonistic neoliberalism on the one hand and a (contemporary) naturalized, post-ideological and post-political neoliberalism on the other. Throughout the volume, Phelan meticulously reveals how the normalization and naturalization of actually existing, that is, post-ideological, neoliberalism is dependent upon specific resonances between its logics and the logics of the journalistic habitus and field. These come down to a convergence of ‘realist’ styles and dispositions, which are based on a market realist and antirhetorical rhetoric, a pragmatic (rather than ideological or political) identification with neoliberalism, and the cultivation of an anti-ideological position. In mainstream journalism, this has resulted in the internalization of presumably ‘objectively necessary’ and ‘politically neutral’ neoliberal logics. In other words, this volume succeeds in extending and deepening the argument from the classic *Policing the crisis*-volume (Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978) with regards to how dominant ideological assumptions and preferences are reproduced in the mundane application of mainstream journalistic practices and values themselves, rather than through the explicit journalistic identification with a political ideology.

The volume is divided into eight chapters. The opening chapter elucidates how neoliberalism has been conceptualized in the existing critical media and communication studies literature, by distinguishing between three schools of thought: critical political economy, cultural studies and governmentality perspectives. Interestingly, this chapter also discusses those authors that critique neoliberalism either as an explanatory variable or as a straightforward position of critique. Phelan concludes by setting straight that he distances himself from any reified category of neoliberalism and therefore operationalizes the concept as neoliberal(ized) “logics that are always contextually articulated with other political, social and fantasmatic logics” (p. 32). The second chapter introduces and engages with Ernesto Laclau’s discourse-theoretical concepts and subsequently provides an associated historical overview of neoliberalism as a political-intellectual formation. In other words, in a single chapter the author succeeds in situating concepts such as ‘the political’, hegemony, the logic of equivalence, the logic of difference, antagonism and heterogeneity on the one hand, and in illustrating them by distinguishing between “actually existing neoliberalism” in terms of the Mont Pelerin Script (including Thatcherism and Reaganism) and in terms of Third Way imaginaries. The author supplements his theoretico-philosophical journey with some empirico-methodological reflections in chapter three where he develops the concept of neoliberal(ized) media and journalistic logics. Furthermore, this concept of logics is enriched with Bourdieu’s field theory as to be able to grasp the dynamics of social reproduction, or to put it differently, to take into account the reproduction of these

logics in particular objects, institutional regimes, practices, subjectivities and dispositions.

The following five chapters form an empirical illustration of Phelan's arguments, with each dissecting a particular case. The first empirical chapter focuses on how neoliberal logics of political marketing and individualization structure the reporting of a particular political event in New Zealand, illustrating amongst other things, the authority in media regimes of a naturalized post-ideological neoliberal discourse. Chapter five focuses on a particular Irish journalist's reporting about austerity politics. It shows how the internalization of a logic of market determinism in the journalistic habitus takes place in a pragmatic, realist register and this to such an extent that it becomes the embodiment of TINA (There is No Alternative). The role of two blogs with regard to the so-called Climategate scandal is the focus of chapter six. In this chapter, Phelan argues how a neoliberal logic of self-interest, based on rational choice assumptions, engenders a culture of anti-politics, thereby resulting amongst others in cynical media representations of climate change scientists and other public figures. Chapter seven focuses on the reporting about the Leveson Inquiry into the UK press in UK newspapers. It shows how the concept of press freedom in this context is generally interpreted as freedom *from* government and *of* the market, and more particularly, of global media corporations. It also shows how a logic of self-interest serves to denunciate anyone who steps forward to advocate a positive interpretation of press freedom (related to a notion of the public interest) for being driven by self-interested motives only. Finally, chapter eight reveals the role of 'media rituals' and banal nationalism in the construction and naturalization of the "Irish Celtic Tiger" imaginary. Consequently, this particular neoliberal formation's narrative is what came to represent Irish modernity and national liberation in the Irish social imagination. In his conclusion, Phelan reflects both on how radical-democratic media politics might look and on the political and analytical consequences of the volume's focus on neoliberalism as the object of critique.

The volume's main limitations are: One, the exclusive focus on Anglo-American media spaces, with their particular anti-intellectual and anti-elite nature, which makes them different than, for example, continental Europe. Two, the exclusive focus on mainstream media and journalism practices, which creates the impression that all media practices contribute to the naturalization of neoliberal logics (which would go against Phelan's own assumptions, as stated in the introduction). Three, the general lack of methodological detail, which limits the applicability of its analyses to other cases. Last but not least, the lack of reflection on the implications of choosing to start from Laclau's conception of discourse theory instead of, for example, Critical Discourse

Analysis. This is evident also in the lack of breath and depth of the review of cultural studies-related media and communication literature in the first chapter. Finally, it is also worth emphasizing that the language in this volume is quite challenging for non-native speakers or those less immersed in the topic at hand, both in its resourcefulness and complexity. Consequently, this volume mainly targets other scholars and graduates rather than undergraduates or students in general.

Reference

Hall, S., Critcher C., Jefferson, T., Clarke, J., & Roberts, B. 1978. *Policing the crisis. Mugging, the state and law and order*. New York: Holmes & Meier.