

Reflections on Phelan's Neoliberalism, Media and the Political

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Abstract: Seeking to overcome the “Blindspot of Western Marxism”, Phelan’s insightful book discusses neo-liberalism, the media, and the political by defacing neo-liberalism, analysing journalism using neo-liberal media control of New Zealand and Ireland (the so-called Celtic Tiger) as well as the case of “Climategate” as prime examples. The core argument of the book is to relate neo-liberalism to media and the way it colonises the public, which Phelan calls “the political”. On the example of human freedom, Phelan shows for example, how neo-liberalism has defaced freedom by focusing on the negative—as the absence of state interference. Phelan also shows how freedom became a one-dimensionality being associated with market freedom. With a most illuminating chapter on journalism under neo-liberalism, Phelan concludes that it is not moralising that challenges neo-liberalism but instead what is demanded is using people’s experience of everyday neo-liberalism leading to a disidentification with neo-liberalism’s one-dimensional and oppressive ideology.

Keywords: neo-liberalism, mass media, New Zealand, Ireland, Climategate, the political, ideology, journalism

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Perhaps ever since Smythe’s seminal essay on Communication as the “blindspot of Western Marxism” (1977; Fuchs 2014), the idea of combining Marx’s economic analysis with corporate mass media is—slowly but surely—making progress. Phelan’s book can be seen as a further step into the direction of eliminating this “blindspot”. He accomplishes this task through eight chapters discussing neo-liberalism, media and politics. In his project the concept of “disfiguring” takes on significance as the introduction outlines. This is followed by investigations into neoliberal discourses and neo-liberalism’s logic in chapters two and three. Using the example of New Zealand, chapter four highlights the pathologies of “media democracy” while chapter five examines the “journalistic habitus” under neo-liberalism relating it to the often-rehearsed myth of “free media” in chapter seven. The closing chapter examines the “neoliberal nation” of Ireland when highlighting the ideological “national-vs.-globalisation” contradiction. All this is rounded up by a conclusion that argues for radical pluralism to challenge neo-liberalism.

Most obviously, corporate mass media play a decisive role in translating the Hungarian aristocrat Friedrich von Hayek’s political catechism of neo-liberalism into reality. Without well engineered mass support, the Hayekian move from “the road to feudal serfdom” to “the road of market serfdom” would have remained what it is: an obscure belief-system. Perhaps because of the essential role of the media in Hayek’s ideological project, “this book links neo-liberalism to two other grand objects: the media and the political” (2) arguing that “neo-liberalism signifies how economic logic has colonised the logic of the social rendering social, human and planetary life increasingly subordinate to the instrumentalist rationality of the market [as a consequence] social life is disfigured” (3). Since neo-liberalism is the core theme of the book, “articulating neo-liberalism” briefly retells the story of neo-liberalism following Harvey’s (2005) “Brief History of Neoliberalism”.

On this basis “neoliberal discourse” is “highlighting neoliberal’s emphasis on winning the war of ideas” (36) in which freedom is shifted away from human freedom and towards market freedom so that freedom becomes one-dimensionally associated with the free market and “freedom from coercion, especially the coercive actions of the state” (38). The once Hegelian idea of the state as guarantor of human freedom has mutated into an obstruct of a radically

re-framed and “Orwellianised” form of freedom that has now become associated with market freedom. Key figures and institutions in the neoliberal project of defacing freedom are the aristocratic pair of Hayek and his ideological godfather Ludwig Heinrich Edler von Mises (the “Edler” meaning nobility, i.e. we exploited peasants for centuries), but also Milton Friedman, Michael Polanyi, Karl Popper, the former German chancellor Erhard as well as the “Mont Pelerin Society of 1947” (43). With the assistance of Richard Nixon friend, “novelist and philosopher Ayn Rand [they] fostered the neoliberal self-image as the intellectual shock troops” (45).

While Hayek’s “serfdom” pamphlet hardly contains any logic but instead a crypto-religious belief-system when simply advocating the destruction of the welfare state and trade unions, for example, Phelan’s “neoliberal logic” chapter sets out to detect this non-existing logic. But things get more real when New Zealand is discussed as one of the prime examples of neoliberal colonisation even though Pinochet’s mass torture chamber of Chile would have served the same and perhaps would have been even more illustrative (Hayek 1978). While New Zealand’s conversion toward neo-liberalism did not include crypto-fascist means, its colonisation was engineered by corporate mass media as Phelan shows when “market new-speak” (70) presented neoliberal deregulation, diminishing the welfare state, attacking trade unions, etc. as a success story while conveniently hiding the pathologies this programme created. For that, compliant journalists have been useful. Perhaps one of the most insightful chapters in Phelan’s book is on “the Journalistic Habitus” noting:

Neoliberalism is (and has been) internalised in different ways:

- in the political regulation of media policy regimes aligned to corporate priorities;
- in the political subjectivity of media owners, managerial and editorial elites;
- in the general decline of journalistic beats (labour reporters for instance) aligned to the social democratic state;
- in the increasing commodification and marketisation of journalism and journalists;
- in the weakening of public service broadcasting and public interest news;
- in the normalisation of a culture of infotainment and news spectacle;
- in the emergence of a journalism of neoliberal partisans;
- in the relative invisibility of working-class narratives in mainstream journalism;
- in the co-opted and promotional register of business journalism;
- in the mainstreaming of financial news;
- in the privileging of neoliberal news sources;
- in corporate public relations strategies; and
- in media presentations that privilege neoliberal logics (89).

All of this is presented by the “peddlers of various myths—the myth of the free press, the myth of the watchdog, the myth of the objectivity [and] the myth of investigative journalism” (90). This is ideologically camouflaged through the myth of free choice underpinned by crypto-scientific ideas such as “game theory [and] rational choice principles” (114) establishing “anti-politics and media cynicism” (117). As the neoliberal hobbyhorse of “Climategate” shows, this has moved the traditional neoliberal equation of “politics + state + money = corruption [to] science + politics + state + money = corruption” (131). Climategate took out corrupt corporations by focusing rather one-dimensionally on the state and scientists who are framed as cynical and motivated by self-interest. In other words, neoliberal corporate mass media have truly established what Orwell foresaw all those years ago. Orwell’s “Ministry of Love” was the place where you are tortured. Now it is the state and scientists who are corrupt—no longer polluting corporations as they—not corporations—follow their self interest. In sum, corporate mass media protect their own, namely other corporations. This has very serious consequences for Phelan’s “political”.

How politics has become subservient to the all powerful corporate mass media is shown in “neoliberal imaginaries” when Phelan notes that no less than “27 meetings took place between [British Prime Minister] Cameron and [Rupert Murdoch’s] News Corporation executives in the first year of office, augmented by an additional 86 meetings between

different government ministers and News Corporation staff" (135). Representing HMV (His Master's Voice) Cameron was recently re-elected—supported by the Murdoch press. Set against all this is the hope that “the attempts to push society in a certain direction will result in its moving all right, but in the opposite direction” (154). This did not work in Great Britain. But, it still can happen as recently in Greece when 60% of the Greek people voted against the Euro dictate of neoliberal austerity despite an overwhelming media barrage to support it. The aforementioned hope can also be seen in open Democracy (150) for example.

Where this hope—again—did not materialise is Ireland when it was converted into a faithful appendage of neo-liberalism by corporate mass media. Corporate mass media have framed its neoliberal colonisation as “the Irish Celtic Tiger” (159). Like in the case of the much celebrated Enron corporation as “the model company” only days before its spectacular collapse followed by the arrest of George Bush’s friend “Kenny Boy” (Enron CEP Kenneth Lay), the Celtic Tiger myth was held up by corporate mass media. Phelan notes “the post-2007 collapse of the Irish economy, when it was still celebrated as one of the defining success stories of globalisation” (159). Perhaps key to understand all this is Bourdieu’s “orchestra without a conductor” (171) as there is no smoke-filled backroom where evil capitalists meet hedging obnoxious plans. Rupert Murdoch, despite his global media power, is not neo-liberalism’s semi-fascistic “Líder Máximo” of media capitalism. There is no grand conspiracy theory. Instead there is, as Bolano (2015) recently indicated, an interest coalition between corporations that manufacture things (e.g. General Motor, Exxon, etc.), corporations that advertise things (e.g. Saatchi and Saatchi, etc.) and corporations that broadcast ideology (NewsCorp, etc.).

Set against this is Phelan’s concept of emancipatory pluralism as “militant and critical pluralism disrupts the repressive pluralism of neoliberal regimes, alert to the visceral and affective register of politics and symbolic violence of neoliberal reason” (192) often enshrined in the “one-dimensional market discourse” (193). Meanwhile Phelan is assuring us that neoliberal corporate mass media “will not be defeated with moralising narratives of our own” (195). Instead, it demands “constructing modes of political identification and disidentification that resonate with [...] people’s experience of everyday neo-liberalism” (195). In conclusion, Phelan’s book is exquisite on ascertaining the hallucinogenic ideologies and pathologies of neoliberal corporate mass media but cuts short on Marx’s thesis that “philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it”.

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