CHAPteR 7

Did Somebody Say Neoliberalism? On the Uses and Limitations of a Critical Concept in Media and Communication Studies

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The media and communication studies textbooks of the early 1980s constituted an ideological battleground for the struggle between liberal pluralism, on the one hand, and Marxism, on the other (see, for example, Gurevitch et al. 1982). Under the influence of European critical theory and British cultural studies, Marxist communication scholars talked of capitalism and class struggle, and accused pluralists of underestimating structures of domination (Hall 1982). With stronger roots in US sociological tradition, pluralist media critics advocated for democracy, chastising Marxists for their economic determinism or functionalism. While it is certainly possible to read the history of the relationship between Marxist and liberal pluralist approaches to media and cultural studies in terms of a series of rapprochements and overlaps (McLennan 1989), there can be little doubt that in recent decades, the pluralist perspective has all but vanquished its erstwhile ideological competitor.

Marxism has always, of course, been marginalised in media and communication studies. In the twentieth century, for example, McCarthyism in the US and the Radikalenerlass in Germany restricted the activities of Marxist communication scholars. Nevertheless, in the 1960s and 1970s, Marxism was a driving force in workers’ struggles and a tangible presence in the academy. The critical marginalisation of Marxism became particularly apparent with the ebbing of class struggle in the 1980s and 1990s. In these decades, the disciplines of media and cultural studies, under the sway of a celebratory postmodernism, came to distinguish their pluralist wisdom from the supposedly “elitist” positions of the different Marxist traditions, continually emphasising the eclectic nature of their own standpoints and of the media cultures they critiqued. According to the pluralist paradigm, the newspaper reader, the television viewer, the radio listener are free to consume culture as active, empowered, resistant audiences in a marketplace of ideas underpinned and sustained by liberal democratic ideology. Following on from this there is the recognition that capitalism may have some shortcomings, but it is “the best we’ve got” and so must be made the best of: the capitalist system and its media institutions are seen to represent the best possible arrangement of things. The popularity of
this perspective in the cultural studies milieu of the 1990s has reconfigured the ideological co-ordinates of cultural and media theory, so that for many critics today, the task of media and cultural criticism is no longer to critique capitalism, but to defend the principles of “democracy” and “pluralism” against unwelcome encroachments of the market – encroachments often understood as so many manifestations of “neoliberalism” or the “neoliberal agenda.”

Indeed, the hegemony of pluralism in media and cultural studies has been accompanied by some telling terminological shifts. The word “capitalism,” for instance, has all but vanished from the lexicon of the left – as sure a sign as any, as Slavoj Žižek (2007, 212) notes, of capitalism’s ideological triumph. In the 1990s, as Boltanski and Chiapello (2005, ix) observe, “the term [capitalism] was simply struck from the vocabulary of politicians, trade unionists, writers and journalists – not to mention social scientists, who had consigned it to historical oblivion.” Today, we would suggest, the term “neoliberalism” has largely replaced “capitalism” (and its more optimistic variant “late capitalism”) in media and cultural studies discourse and the former word now appears in contexts where once we would have expected the latter. In an article on media ideologies, to take just one example, the prolific discourse analyst Teun van Dijk (2006, 121) discusses how media audiences recognise “racist, sexist or neoliberal” arguments. As such formulations suggest, the Marxism/pluralism dyad of yesteryear has largely given way to a new paradigm structured by the binary opposition between neoliberalism, on the one hand, and democracy (or, sometimes, in the Laclauian formulation, “radical democracy”), on the other. Today, it is neoliberalism, rather than capitalism as such, that preoccupies many academics working in the fields of media and cultural studies. As one leading media scholar, Natalie Fenton (2009, 56), puts it, “if media studies must do anything, then it must analyze and explain the cultural and political significance of [the] neoliberal market doctrine.”

In itself, this enterprise is not necessarily misguided. In fact, as we argue below, much valuable work in media and cultural studies has proceeded on this basis. Yet even among critics who have embraced the term, neoliberalism is sometimes hazily defined and its conceptual intelligibility is often taken for granted (Mudge 2008). This chapter tries to clarify the relevance and utility of the concept of neoliberalism for critical scholarship in media and cultural studies, questioning whether the hegemonic acceptance of the term offers any genuine increase in critical purchase or explanatory power to critics of capitalist society and its media. In particular, it is argued that it has become something of an accepted practice in media and cultural studies to identify “neoliberalism” – rather than capitalism per se – as the ultimate target of critique. In Fenton’s terms, neoliberalism is a “market doctrine” which has supplanted an earlier