

- REVIEW ARTICLE -

Anti-Ideological Ideology: Sean Phelan's critique of journalism in *Neoliberalism, Media and the Political*

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Neoliberalism, Media and the Political offers an explanation for why and how established news media rarely question and challenge neoliberalism. The central argument of the book is not that journalists are unabashed cheerleaders for neoliberalism, or thoroughly duped by corporate forces, it is that the 'professional ideologies and practices' of journalists are inculcated in neoliberalism's anti-ideological and post-political discourses. Phelan maintains the journalistic 'habitus' (Bourdieu) is marked by a 'modernist imaginary' (Phelan 2014, 97), in which 'objectivity, accuracy, balance, political detachment and the watchdog principle are still important tenets of journalism practice' (Phelan 2014, 98). This imaginary means that journalists have, in effect, a natural disposition toward neoliberalism. The realist journalistic style that results from a modernist imaginary aims to be as disinterested as possible in the objects of reporting. We might say that journalists, perhaps credulously, seek to tell-it-like-it-is, rather than evaluate or assess via an interpretive framework such as marxism, liberalism, conservatism and so on. So even when journalists express political opinions—as in op-ed pieces—such expressions claim to be 'fair and balanced' and non-ideological. What this means, for Phelan, is that journalists have a blind spot with respect to neoliberalism. In Phelan's account, neoliberal ideology is the Keyser Soze of politics, to borrow from Bryan Singer's notable film, *The Usual Suspects* (1995): 'The greatest trick the Devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn't exist.'

For Phelan, neoliberalism is an ideological discourse that paradoxically functions as non-ideology. We could say that neoliberalism is thoroughly postmodern. It is coterminous with the paradoxical formulations of contemporary culture that Žižek endlessly repeats, such as in non-consumerist consumption, unbelieving belief, insecure security, and so on. The book is thus clearly located in current debates on the problem of ideology and the post-political. However, Phelan doesn't explicitly engage with this broad post-political context. Instead, he historically locates his argument in the emergence of neoliberal ideas, which he skilfully traces back to the works of Hayek and

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the Mont Pelerin society (Phelan 2014, 41-46). In my view, the book's main achievement is demonstrating how journalistic practices are caught up in the paradoxical cultural and political formations of post-political society. It will be useful to broadly sketch this post-political context. Here I will cite the authoritative work of Wilson and Swyngedouw (2014). Drawing on Mouffe (2005), Žižek (1999), and Ranciere (1999), among others, they explain that in the post-political situation:

the political—understood as a space of contestation and agonistic engagement—is increasingly colonised by politics—understood as technocratic mechanisms and consensual procedures that operate within an unquestioned framework of representative democracy, free market economics, and cosmopolitan liberalism. In post-politics, political contradictions are reduced to policy problems to be managed by experts and legitimated through participatory processes in which the scope of possible outcomes is narrowly defined in advance. ‘The people’—as a potentially disruptive political collective—is replaced by the population—the aggregated object of opinion polls, surveillance, and bio-political optimisation. Citizens become consumers, and elections are framed as just another ‘choice’, in which individuals privately select their preferred managers of the conditions of economic necessity (Phelan 2014, 6).

Phelan makes an important contribution to our understanding of the perpetuation of the ‘unquestioned framework’ of ‘free market economics’ and governance as response to ‘economic necessity’. For Phelan, at the most elementary level, neoliberalism is defined as the ‘normative assumption that politics must be ‘accountable’ to the [impersonal mechanism of] the market’ (Phelan 2014, 84; 140). What the book shows is that this normative assumption is rooted in a ‘realist’ worldview. This worldview is, as per Aune (2001), a form of knowledge production that claims ‘direct access to how things really are’ (99). The point is that neoliberal modes of thought and representation typically adopt a realist sensibility and representational style, rather than an ‘ideological and doctrinal sensibility’ (98). ‘They reflect’, Aune explains, ‘a worldview pleased with itself for “seeing through” the pretensions of poets, dreamers, and romantics’ (cited in Phelan, 2014, 99). Phelan’s argument is that this realist worldview materialises in the aforementioned modernist imaginary of news journalists.

In the post-political context, the basic problem is that journalists do not understand neoliberalism as ideology, or, more accurately, as non-ideological ideology. Following Althusser, and Laclau and Mouffe, for Phelan ideology is a form of misrecognition. Subjects misrecognise the real conditions of their existence when they assume that the social and economic order is immutable and that there are no viable alternatives to actually existing political processes. In the language of Laclau and Mouffe, ideology represses the contingency and agonistic nature of social relations, and closes down and conceals the possibility of contesting and challenging the prevailing social order.

Journalists thus reproduce ideology when they write as if there are no alternatives to neoliberal social and economic policies and processes. As opposed to an ideological disposition, an ethical disposition would adopt openness to the radical contingency of social relations and the possibility for alternative ways of living and organising social spaces and practices. The ideological character of journalistic practice is strangely compounded, Phelan contends, in that in recent years ‘ideological’ has become a pejorative shorthand term for dogmatism, detachment from the public good, and subservience to a naïve political agenda (Phelan 2014, 93). The problem is that the adoption of neutrality within journalistic practice means that the grounds for challenging and questioning neoliberalism have been removed. Neoliberalism is rarely named in established news media let alone posited as ideology. In effect, journalists produce an anti-ideological ideology. Journalism’s modernist imaginary is thus plainly paradoxical. As Phelan is at pains to point out, if journalists ‘reproduce neoliberalism [. . .] more recognition needs to be given to how they often do this by paradoxically distancing themselves from neoliberal logics—indeed, *ideology* in general’ (Phelan 2014, 80).

To demonstrate this paradox, Phelan takes up the work of Laclau and Mouffe (1985), and Glynos and Howarth (2007). He formulates neoliberalism as a discursive regime. This formulation is productive in several ways. Firstly, it is attuned to the nuances of neoliberalism. Phelan provides a basis for explaining, for instance, why it is that neoliberalism has taken hold internationally in uneven ways. Secondly, it opens up a clear path for critiquing contemporary news journalism. Instead of less than satisfactory denunciations of tabloidization and corporatisation, Phelan makes the more fundamental claim that journalistic objectivity itself is flawed. This suggests that journalists cannot simply adopt a critical attitude without altering the realist form of reporting itself. The problem of critique ought to be linked to ontological assumptions about the nature of reality and the limits of representation. And thirdly, Phelan’s engagement demonstrates the explanatory and critical power of a post-structuralist form of social science. This is a mode that rails against the instrumentalisation of knowledge in the university, the valorisation of science above the arts and humanities, and the increasing suspicion of hermeneutics and critical theory. As Vattimo and Zabala contend, ‘the most interesting feature’ of the neoliberal turn to ‘realism is not only its expression of fear (and therefore the demand for security) but also’ its ‘conservative nature’ (2011, 27). Phelan’s ‘ontological-level analysis’ (Phelan 2014, 60) resists the realist turn and aims to engage with the political.

Briefly, Phelan’s ontology of socio-political reality consists of two dynamic processes (see Glynos and Howarth, 2007, 109-20). Socio-political reality is, in this ontology, inherently unstable. Social and institutional order emerges out of disorder and maintains itself by repressing disorder and the contingencies it produces. Contingencies are never completely eliminated and, because of this, order is always incomplete. This means that the process of producing order is ongoing; there is always something to be

done. Governance is thus always dynamic and reactive. It seeks to limit or strategically employ the on-going dislocations produced by contingencies. Contingencies come in many forms, from natural disasters to economic crises, from social upheaval to the unintended consequences of war, and so on.

The first of the aforementioned processes involves an antagonistic struggle between the *political* and *social* dimensions of socio-political reality. Situations are political when there is a public contestation around responses to contingency, or a challenge to prevailing norms and demand for the institution of new practices. The political is antagonistic toward an other, what it aims to not be, and attempts to activate contingency as it builds toward radical change. Conversely, the situation is social when public contestation is non-existent and contingencies are closed down in the interests of the prevailing hegemonic order. The second process involves the tension between the *ideological* and the *ethical*. Here again the tension revolves around contingency and how social subjects relate to it. Subjects are ideological when they are complicit in concealing radical contingency and the possibilities it opens up. Subjects are ethical when they remain open to contingency and political change.

How does neoliberalism figure in this ontology? For Phelan, neoliberalism is a form of politics that journalists, by and large, are complicit in concealing. Neoliberalism is ideologically rather than ethically framed. On one axis, neoliberalism is a deterritorialising force. Since the 1980s, it has been the basis for undoing the institutions of the welfare state and establishing a new hegemony within socio-political life. On the other axis, neoliberalism is ideologically constructed as necessary, inevitable, as a social rather than political force. This is a paradox because neoliberal discourses clearly behave politically. The antagonistic dimensions that mark the neoliberal imaginary are clear evidence of this. Neoliberal discourse pits itself against threatening others such as socialists, statisticians, and left wing ‘do-gooders’. These antagonists, Phelan tells us, ‘are also cast as the sponsors of a wider set of scapegoats’ (Phelan 2014, 63). These include: dole bludgers, single welfare mothers, immigrants, and the underclass. Neoliberalism is constructed, in fact, around a set of oppositions: anti-intellectual, anti-elitist, and anti-ideological (Phelan 2014, 63).

What Phelan reveals is that neoliberal politics defines itself negatively. Positive definitions are much harder to find, and if they are posited they generally overstate neoliberalism’s rigidity. As a consequence, many have suggested that the term is not useful at all (Phelan 2014, 26). Phelan confronts this problem and maintains that instead ‘of over-relying on appeals to a reified “neoliberalism”, it is more analytically productive to conceptualize neoliberalism as a series of discursive “logics” that are always hegemonically articulated with other discursive logics [. . .] often in messy and paradoxical ways that do not neatly cohere’ (Phelan 2014, 57; 59). In discourse analysis the term ‘logics’ is employed in place of ‘mechanisms’ or causal ‘laws’. Logics consist of the ‘purposes, rules and ontological presuppositions that render a practice or regime

possible and intelligible'. In other words, logics support practices; they provide the conditions that 'make that practice "work" or "tick"' (Glynos and Howarth 2007, 15).

Logics also work in the context of the aforementioned tensions between the *political* and *social*, and *ideological* and *ethical*. Following Glynos and Howarth (2007, 105-06), Phelan adopts a threefold typology of logics: social logics, political logics, and fantasmatic logics. When articulated together, Glynos and Howarth explain, these logics 'characterize practices' and 'explain how and why they change or resist change' (2007, 106). Social logics consist of the rules and purpose of various practices. We could describe journalism's commitment to realism, described above, as a social logic. Political logics explain how the prevailing order is defended or challenged. The neoliberal logics outlined by Phelan, which I list below, are political, in the sense described here. They arise to justify change ('we need to restructure to be more competitive'), or defend the existing order ('free trade agreements are for the benefit all'). The same neoliberal logics can also be social, when they explain the purpose and rules of existing practices. And fantasmatic logics account for why existing social practices hold sway over subjects. Fantasy involves the affective attachments of subjects to a particular discourse. We could point to nationalist discourse as an example ('New Zealanders are proud of the Trans Pacific Partnership'). Phelan doesn't explicitly explore fantasmatic logics throughout the book, apart from an excellent account of 'fantasmatic figures as archetypal enemies of freedom.' Hayek and Friedman's 'hostility to intellectuals', Phelan maintains, became 'the template for a gallery of antagonists: the "dangerous ideologue", the "critical academic", the "priggish moralist", the "well-intentioned do-gooder", and so on' (146). Instead, Phelan turns to Bourdieu and sociology to account for journalism's relationship to neoliberalism. This is a crucial turn, since Phelan's thesis is not that journalists are affectively attached to neoliberal discourse, it is that they are basically blinkered by standard journalistic practice. He rightly, I think, understands that journalists are not directly invested in neoliberal discourse; their relationship to neoliberalism is oblique. Still, the practices of journalism are themselves made meaningful through fantasmatic figures. Phelan's thesis would be deepened by an exploration of how, through fantasmatic logics, journalists identify with journalism and its role in society.

Phelan identifies five neoliberal logics: market determinism, commodification, individualisation, competition, and self-interest (Phelan 2014, 61-62). The point about these logics is that they are articulated in uneven ways across a range of political practices. Neoliberalism is slippery and strategic, tough to grasp and difficult to struggle against. The strength of Phelan's account is that it resonates with the paradoxical nature of our post-political times. He rightly maintains, 'there has never been a "pure" neoliberalism, and to presuppose such a thing is to construct a convenient straw man'. The detrimental effect of such a construction is that it produces polarisations and 'allows other neoliberalized identities to [strategically] present themselves as comparatively reasonable, pragmatic and non-ideological' (Phelan 2014, 75).

To demonstrate how journalism is complicit with neoliberalism's slippery and paradoxical formation, Phelan presents five compelling case studies, drawn from the news media of New Zealand, England, and Ireland. In the first, he outlines how Don Brash's 2011 return to politics in New Zealand is 'neoliberalized' by news media. Brash is constructed as a fringe figure, and an extremist with an ideological agenda. This allows the Prime Minister, John Key, to be constructed as a reasonable and pragmatic centrist. Wary of ideologues, journalism's anti-ideology ideology effectively reproduces the fantasmatic figure of the enemy of post-political necessities of the market.

In the second, we find Phelan identifying market realist signifiers in the writing of the *Irish Times's* Stephen Collins. Collins writing makes appeals to 'reality' and opposes realism to rhetoric and ideology. 'Within Collins's universe', Phelan tells us, this means 'anyone envisioning alternatives to austerity is either fooling him or herself or is a cynical opportunist, happy to cultivate 'rhetorical' and 'populist' hysteria for his or her own self-serving strategic ends' (Phelan 2014, 108). Collins's writing links the neoliberal logic of market determinism to the logic of self-interest. The dialectical effect is that self-interest is recast as vested interest opposed to the public good. The upshot is that market realism is reproduced as the public interest.

The problem of politics as post-politics is continued in the third case study of the climate-gate scandal. Phelan shows how 'ready-to-hand representations of politicians and the entire "public sector" as self-interested actors' (Phelan 2014, 132) were employed to scandalise and vilify climate change scientists. Again, a politics of oppositions—between defenders of liberty and government control—reproduces a neoliberal imaginary.

The fourth case study deals with the Leveson inquiry. Building on the distinction between negative and positive versions of freedom, with positive freedom defined as a freedom to be and negative freedom defined as freedom from interference, Phelan shows how the concept of press freedom has been colonized by neoliberalism. As set out in Hayek's *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), neoliberalism posits a negative version of freedom. The press reproduces this neoliberal version, which generally takes the form of market forces free from any unnecessary interference by the self-interested state. This obscures, of course, how freedom might be threatened by corporate power. In the case of the Leveson inquiry, Phelan contends, 'any political attempt to reinvigorate a positive conception of media freedom, motivated by a concern for the public interest, inevitably triggers the countercharge that the appeal masks a self-interested motive' (Phelan 2014, 145). And as he goes on to show, the inquiry's recommendation for a self-regulated and independent regime became distorted in the press 'as a state takeover' (Phelan 2014, 147).

In the final case study, Phelan focuses on the construction of Ireland as a 'Celtic Tiger' economy, via what he calls the 'mediated politics of the Celtic Tiger regime' (Phelan 2014, 159). This is an instructive study that traces the emergence of the term, 'Celtic Tiger', from relative obscurity in the mid 1990s to its current dominance as hegemonic signifier of the Irish economy. Phelan shows that news media is a central agent in producing a neoliberal form of nationalism. He writes, 'media did not simply describe the Celtic Tiger, they also participated in making it a social object that seeped into the texture of Irish social life, and placed the economy at the heart of a feel-good, often narcissistic national narrative' (Phelan 2014, 168).

The book concludes with some proposals for a future journalism, and, by extension, the left generally. Phelan's suggestion that 'we can learn from the neoliberals' (Phelan 2014, 195), strikes a chord with Susan George's provocative account of 'right-wing Gramscians'. She writes:

After the Second World War, virtually all thoughtful Americans and Europeans were Keynesians, Social or Christian Democrats or some stripe of Marxist. But from the early 1950s onwards, a small covey of foresighted, far-right forces realized that 'ideas have consequences' [. . .] and set out to fund scholars and writers, endow university chairs and research centers, pay for conferences and colloquia, serious journals and campus newspapers and generally create a closely-knit intellectual cadre to propagate ideas. [. . .] I call them 'right-wing Gramscians' because the neo-liberals, unlike progressives or Marxists, truly believed in the power of ideas and concepts of cultural hegemony. We now live with the consequences (George 2005, 6).

Phelan effectively tells us that the resources for critique are in plain sight; it is time for the left to believe in the power of ideas again. A left critique must work to construct counter-hegemonies, drawing upon existing 'typological articulations' and their 'different strategic disposition towards the antagonistic condition of the social' (Phelan 2014, 191). Among several possibilities, he lists an anti-corporate form of journalism, along with agonistic modes of critique that contest and refashion neoliberal logics. The language of individual freedom, for instance, can be turned back against market realism such that 'the market, rather the state' becomes 'the instrument of collective enslavement' (Phelan 2014, 194). In many respects, we can argue that the neoliberal hegemony Phelan articulates so provocatively is already beginning to wane. With the success of Bernie Sanders in the US, I say 'success' in the sense in which his candidacy for the Democrat nomination has exceeded expectations, the term 'socialism' as signifier of the ideological other has softened. 'Whatever the outcome of this race', Vijay Prashad writes, Sanders has certainly put 'the idea of 'socialism' back on to the table in American homes' (2016). *Neoliberalism, Media and the Political* is thus a timely book. It makes a crucial contribution to the study of journalism in our post-political context.

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