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Simon Dawes, Sean Phelan

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# Liberalism and neoliberalism

Sean Phelan & Simon Dawes

## Summary and keywords

Liberalism can be described as the hegemonic common sense of communication research. The political philosophy and ideology that shaped the establishment and trajectory of American democracy was inscribed in the US-foundations of the field. And it was internalized in a teaching curriculum – the vaunted “liberal arts” degree – that inculcated the liberal reflexes of the professions and institutions that employed communication graduates.

However, for critical communication scholars – all the way back to the Frankfurt School – liberalism has functioned as an exemplary ideological antagonist: a signifier of Western political values inseparable from the workings and class dynamics of the capitalist system. This interrogatory view of liberalism underpinned the historical distinction between critical and administrative communication research (Scannell, 2007, p. 16); the former signified a willingness to interrogate the presuppositions of a liberal democratic capitalist social order that were essentially taken for granted by the latter. It also textured the emergence of British cultural studies in the 1970s and 1980s, which questioned the pluralist assumptions and motifs of liberal media and journalism cultures (Hall et al, 1978).

In contrast, neoliberalism is sometimes constructed as an ideological antagonist of both critical theorists *and* progressive liberal identities. Marxist scholars conceptualize neoliberalism as a particular historical regime of capitalism, more corrosive and iniquitous than the “embedded

liberalism” of the post-war era in Europe and the US. Similarly, socially progressive liberals criticize neoliberalism for subordinating public life to “free market” forces, and displacing the welfare state commitments of the Keynesian era.

Some on the political left collapse the distinction between liberalism and neoliberalism, seeing them as simply two ways of ideologically justifying capitalist rule. Conversely, some of those most likely to be identified as neoliberals are motivated by a deep hostility to political liberals, particularly in right-wing political discourses where liberal operates as code for left-liberal, even socialist, values that are directly opposed to a free market identity.

Any discussion of the relationship between liberalism and neoliberalism must therefore start by recognizing the contested and nebulous nature of both categories, and their variegated use as signifiers of political identification *and* disidentification. We begin by outlining some of the philosophical foundations of liberal thought, highlighting the historical tensions between discourses that privilege economic freedom and those that stress the social character of liberalism. The next section considers different critical perspectives on liberalism, including discussions of the limitations of the account of free speech and press freedom inherited from 19<sup>th</sup> century liberals.

We then examine neoliberalism’s status as a distinct political project that reshaped Western and global political economy from the 1970s onwards, but which had its intellectual origins in 1920s and 1930s debates about the nature of liberalism and its antagonistic relationship with socialism. We follow that with an overview of research on neoliberalism and media, where, as in other fields, neoliberalism is commonly invoked as a name for the dominant ideology and social formation. The penultimate section identifies the outlines of a future research programme for critical communication researchers, based on critical interrogation of the relationship between

neoliberalism and liberalism. The article ends with an overview of further reading suggestions for those interested in making their own contributions to the field.

The nature of our topic necessitates an interdisciplinary register, where we move between general reflections on liberalism and neoliberalism to questions of particular interest to communication, media and journalism researchers. We do not attempt to somehow refer to all the communication research of relevance to our topic. Liberalism's hegemonic status would make that an impossible task. Liberal assumptions are arguably most authoritative when they are not named at all, but simply presupposed as part of the common sense framing of the research question.

**Keywords:** liberalism; neoliberalism; media; journalism; Marxism; political economy, cultural studies; governmentality, ideology.

### **Conceptualizing liberalism**

The term liberalism first gained currency in the early 19th century (Freeden & Stears, 2013) to give conceptual definition to a political philosophy that privileged individual liberty, property rights and market freedom over mercantilist trade restrictions. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the concept was "transfigured" into the "most authentic expression" of Western societies, conjoined with democracy under a "liberal democracy" banner (Bell, 2014, p. 704) that was declared the ideological victor of the Cold War with the Soviet Union (Fukuyama, 1989). The historical origins of the concept illustrate a clear affinity with how the term neoliberalism is used today. Yet liberal theories constitute a diverse ideological spectrum that encompasses different understandings of politics, freedom, constraint, ethics, rights, and progress (see Fawcett, 2014; Gaus, 2004 & Gaus et al., 2015; Gray, 1986), and disagreement over the historical origins of a truly liberal model of

governance (Starr, 2007). Liberals disagree on the appropriate extent of state involvement in socio-economic life, on the relation between property and liberty, and on fundamental conceptions of the good and the right. Liberalism is best understood as a “complex, multifaceted phenomenon” that can be conceptualized, among other things, as a “polyvalent conceptual ensemble in economic, political, and ideological discourse”, a “strategic concept for restructuring market-state relations”, and a “recurrent yet historically variable pattern of economic, political, and social organization” (Jessop, 2002). It rarely, if ever, exists in pure form, usually coexisting with elements from other discourses, strategies, and organizational patterns (Bell, 2014; Freedden & Steers, 2013; Jessop, 2002). Bell (2014) argues that the “history of liberalism...is a history of constant reinvention” (p. 705), exemplified by the shifting genealogies of the concept throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. While John Locke’s “foundational role in liberalism is today a leitmotiv of political thought, promulgated by critics and adherents alike” (p. 693), Locke was “not widely regarded as a liberal” in either Britain or the US “until nearly a century after liberalism emerged as an explicit political doctrine” (Bell, 2014 p. 695).

Liberals typically see individual liberty as a *natural* human state; in some conservative and libertarian iterations it is construed as a God-given right, a sacred principle that comes before any regime of government. When debating a particular issue, there is an a priori assumption in favour of liberty, while the burden of proof lies with those who argue for any form of restriction or prohibition (Mill, 1963, p. 262). Yet, liberals do not necessarily argue that ‘natural’ freedom should be unlimited, because that would lead to a chaotic social order in which all could interfere with all, and the liberties of the strong would suppress those of the weak (Berlin, 1984, p. 17). Thus ‘paradigmatic liberals’, such as John Locke and John Stuart Mill, were willing to accept that modest limitations of liberty could be justified, while ‘qualified liberals’, such as Thomas Hobbes, accepted that even drastic limitations could potentially be justified (Gaus et al, 2015).

Liberals have tended to see the freedom of society as depending upon two principles: firstly, that individual rights are absolute, but individual power is not; and secondly, that frontiers should be drawn “within which [the rights of] men [sic] should be inviolable” (Berlin, 1984). The focus is therefore on what Isaiah Berlin famously termed the negative and positive concepts of liberty (Gray, 1980), in contrast to an older, republican concept of liberty (Skinner, 1998), whereby to be free is to not be enslaved, dominated or subject to the arbitrary power or domination of another. Negative liberty signifies a horizon of private life that must be curbed from public authority: an ‘area within which the subject...should be left...without interference’ (Berlin, 1984 p. 15). It represents a domain of “freedom from” coercion (Hayek, 1960), whether in the form of prohibitive states, repressive religious strictures, or an individual acting in ways that seek to undermine the freedom of another. In contrast, positive liberty embodies a regime of ‘freedom to’, a freedom that is enabling of the subject, where the individual is given the power and sovereignty to challenge “the source of control or interference” (Berlin cited in Sandel, 1982, p. 15). Negative liberty is thus an ‘opportunity-concept’ (Taylor, 1979): it captures the opportunities that are already available to individuals within a private realm, and which are safeguarded by a state that assumes the politico-judicial role of ensuring the absence of coercion. Positive liberty, on the other hand, is an ‘exercise concept’ (ibid), whereby an individual is free when they are autonomous and can act reflexively according to their own will. For Berlin, these are not just two different ways of saying the same thing, but “two profoundly divergent and irreconcilable attitudes to the ends of life” (Berlin, 1984, p. 29) at the heart of liberal theory, neither of which can be fully satisfied.

These ideological tensions are evident in the differences between two of the most influential expositors of liberal theory, Locke and Mill (Schuck, 2002). Writing in the 17th century, Locke saw individual liberty as defined in terms of private property, contract and market – in other words, by

individual ownership of economic possessions that could not be arbitrarily usurped by the state. Freedom for Locke amounted to more than absence from external restraint; it also meant living in conformity with a non-arbitrary law (to his left critics, a proto-capitalist law) to which the individual had consented. Adapting Locke's insights to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Mill likewise stressed the importance of negative individual liberty – understood primarily as freedom from the state – and famously stressed the importance of freedom in the domain of speech, press and choice (ibid). However, Mill also departed from a narrow individualist understanding of liberty, by treating individuality and self-interest as the source of social as well as personal well-being. His 'enlightened' conception of citizenship has consequently been referred to as 'liberal republicanism' (Dagger, 2002) because of its emphasis on the educative and intersubjective dimensions of active civic engagement, although Mill's philosophy should be distinguished from Rousseau's 'austere' republicanism, which emphasized the good of the community *over* that of the individual. Nonetheless, Mill's embrace of a concept of positive liberty was later strongly critiqued by neoliberal theorists like Hayek (1960), who saw negative liberty as the only politically coherent element of a system of market-based freedoms.

Drawing on the republican tradition in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Immanuel Kant connected personal autonomy with political legitimacy to develop the idea of the public use of reason (Habermas, 1989, p. 99). He helped embed liberal assumptions at the heart of Enlightenment thinking about the democratic importance of "the principle of publicity" (Muhlmann, 2010, p. 51); what under the influence of Mill was later codified as a liberal theory of 'press freedom' that made politics a 'public' affair and promised a free market in ideas (Habermas, 1989). Kant broke with Rousseau's view of public opinion as derived simply from a permanent and consensual assembly of passive citizens, rather than from any critical debate that occurred there. For Kant, it was precisely the rational-critical debate of an enlightened public that could form the basis for public opinion; 'human beings'

were only constituted as 'citizens' whenever they engaged in deliberation concerning the affairs of the 'commonwealth' (ibid, p. 106-107). Thus the concept of the public sphere emerged as a key organizational principle of the liberal constitutional state, with civil society, including the market, established as the sphere of private autonomy. In the sociological conditions that Kant deemed necessary for a public sphere, paramount was its dependence upon the social relationships among an elite of freely competing commodity owners and traders. This took the historical form of a bourgeois revolution that established a sphere of liberal autonomy insulated from the arbitrary power of the state, which was strongly embedded in capitalist mores and practices (ibid).

Contemporary liberal theorists continue to debate the importance of autonomy and value to the definition of liberty. Gaus et al (2015) point out that the positive ideal of freedom as autonomy, as differently articulated by Rousseau, Kant and Mill, is today sometimes combined with an otherwise distinct but equally positive conception of freedom as the 'ability' and 'effective power' (Tawney, 1931) to pursue one's own ends. This latter concept, which insists that an individual who is too poor to do something cannot really be considered free, has profound implications for liberal arguments about the allocation of material resources, and represents a clear point of difference with neoliberal theories of freedom (see Hayek, 1960, p). Another source of dispute within liberal political philosophy has been the different conceptions of value held by utilitarians, on the one hand, and Kantians on the other. Kant argued against an instrumental defense of freedom and rights in favour of an ethical appreciation of the differences between individuals, and an affirmation of individual rights over the general welfare. In contrast, utilitarians such as Bentham and Mill insisted on the greatest good for the greatest number, prioritizing individual rights only insofar as they contribute to the general welfare, thus aggregating rather than judging individuals' values (Sandel, 1982, p. 2-3).



Aside from such debates over the very conception of liberty, liberals are also divided over the role of private property and the market. The 'old' or classical liberals of the 19th century held not only that individual liberty and private property are intimately related (Gaus et al, 2015), but even that private property is the only effective means for the protection of liberty, and, further, that all rights are always-already property rights. Although classical liberalism is often associated with free trade, the gold standard and a libertarian aversion to any form of state intervention, utilitarians such as Bentham (1952) and Mill accepted various forms of state intervention as necessary to alleviate the conditions of the worse-off members of society. Where these two iterations of liberalism largely converged, however, was in presupposing an individualist philosophy, where society was primarily seen as the sum of its individual component parts (Mill 1963, p. 879; see also Bentham, 1970; Gaus et al, 2015)

On the other hand, the so-called 'new' liberals of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, figures such as T.H. Green, L.T. Hobhouse, and John A. Hobson in the UK and Lester Frank Ward in the US, went further and challenged the integrity of the links between liberty and property, as well as between individuals and society (see Freeden & Steers, 2016; Gaus et al, 2015). They were emblematic of what Karl Polanyi (2001) described as a democratic counter-movement against the harmful effects of "free market" liberalism, which looked to the state as an enabler of positive freedoms and social progress. This iteration of liberalism questioned the stability of market mechanisms, critiqued the inequality-generating capacities of property rights, valorized the increasingly democratic and representative western governments' attempts at economic planning, and stressed the necessity of redistributive programmes in achieving social justice (Gaus et al, 2015; Freeden and Stears, 2013). In place of the radical individualism of classical liberalism, a more 'organic' view of society emerged within liberal theory, which blurred distinctions between liberal and social democratic philosophies. The development of the mid-twentieth century's compromise between capital and

labour – as embodied in the New Deal and the Keynesian welfare state – was a defining product of new liberalism’s attempts to ‘re-embed’ the market within society and under social control (Polanyi, 2001).

The uptake of John Rawls’ work since the 1970s, especially his emphasis on social justice and the links between freedom and equality (Sandel, 1982), illustrates the enduring tensions in the liberal tradition and the contemporary political differences between neoliberals and progressive liberals. Kantians like Rawls distinguished between the ‘right’ and the ‘good’: that is, between a “framework of basic rights and liberties, and substantive conceptions of the good that people may choose to pursue within the framework” (Sandel, 1982, p. 3). Sandel suggests that a rights-based ethic has been institutionally privileged in recent decades, with basic human rights doctrine replacing utilitarian and substantive measures of liberal progress. This has sometimes enabled an internalization of progressive idioms and discourses within neoliberal regimes, as illustrated by right-wing support (at least in some countries) for same sex-marriage, and hybridized identities like “neoliberal feminism” (Rottenberg, 2014). Within this rights-based conception of liberal progress, however, there are fundamental disagreements between egalitarians such as Rawls, who support the welfare state (social and economic rights as well as civil liberties), and economic liberals such as Hayek, who privilege a market economy based on private property. The hegemony of the latter perspective in recent decades explains the increasingly common circulation of ‘neoliberalism’ as a name for our current historical epoch, as a mark of difference from the political and ideological heterogeneity of the liberal tradition.

### **Critiques of liberalism**

Liberalism has been criticized primarily for discouraging political participation, valorizing private self-interest, and propagating inequality (Schuck, 2002), and for hiding its political partiality behind a “universal philosophy of openness” (Chambers & Finlayson, 2008; see also Connolly, 2005; Mouffe, 2005). In more forceful polemics, it has been denounced for its ideological hypocrisy, as exemplified by the historical complicity of liberal theorists and propagandists with political regimes that legitimized racial chattel slavery (Losordo, 2014) and denied the rights of women. Among communication and media scholars, (neo)liberalism has been critiqued for its propagation of a market-based ideology that reduces freedom of the press, assembly and movement to property rights, and which casts any form of public intervention, regulation or ownership as a threat to liberty. In its most triumphant form, ‘press freedom’ is fetishized as an unconditional right; invoked to defend various rights (the right to offend ethnic minorities, the right to invade the privacy of anyone in the public eye, the right to maintain an ineffectual system of self-regulation) that are nominally conceived as individual rights, but which are primarily an ideological cover story for unaccountable forms of corporate power.

In Foucault’s (2009) lectures on the genealogy of liberal governmentality, understood as a new form of political rationality that appeared in the 18th century (Tierney, 2008), he traced the emergence of the idea of ‘government as a general problem’ back to the 16th century. He documented how concepts such as ‘state’, ‘economy’ and ‘society’ were increasingly problematized, and the use of statistics and calculation became defining features of a political economy regime focused on governing the ‘conduct of conduct’ (Foucault, 2009; Rose, 1999). For Foucault, liberal governmentality constructs ‘civil society’ as ‘the necessary correlate of the state’, which begins to be ‘thought of and analysed as’ a natural element of the social (2009: p. 349-350; 2010: p. 296). Likewise, ‘freedom’ acquires a new sense in the 18th century: “no longer [signifying] the exemptions and privileges attached to a person, but the possibility of movement, change of place,

and processes of circulation of both people and things" (2009: p. 49). Liberal thought develops a policy of "curbing scarcity by a sort of 'laissez-faire' ethos resonating with the principle that "One always governs too much' – or, at any rate, one always must suspect that one governs too much" (Foucault, 2010). According to Foucault, this suspicion of state regulation emerged not out of a fundamental commitment to individual liberty, as liberalism itself claims, but rather from the less noble idea that something called 'society' can be governed by other means (Tierney, 2008).

Following Foucault's lead, Barry et al. (1996) treat liberalism less as an epoch or a political philosophy of rights and liberties, and more as an ethos or a rationality of how to govern, which enables different classical, welfarist and advanced (or neoliberal) variants. Classical liberalism's supposed separation of state and civil society, and the state's self-limitation in terms of what domains it can intervene in (private life, the market, etc.), is subsequently interpreted as the recognition that society cannot be penetrated through traditional forms of 'sovereignty' or 'discipline', but rather necessitates new forms of implicit manipulation. At the same time, liberal governmentality also aims to ensure the existence of a political public sphere for critical reflection upon the state, consistent with the liberal ideology of preserving the autonomy of society from state intervention. Rather than representing a 'withdrawal of government', therefore, the emergence of the distinctions between public-private and market-state, and the very construction of 'society' as an object of analysis, is understood as a consequence of a 'particular problematization of government' (ibid, p. 9). Long before the influence of Foucault, Polanyi (2001) articulated a not dissimilar critique of the economic liberalism of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The rhetoric of "laissez faire" obscured a more complex governmental architecture, structurally dependent on the political agency of the state despite the official doctrinal hostility to state intervention.

In addition to revisionist histories of liberalism, critics have also drawn on alternative traditions to identify weaknesses or gaps in liberal theory. Communitarian critics, for instance, question Kantian liberals' priority of rights over good, as well as their privileging of the figure of the free-choosing individual, and develop instead a fuller or 'thicker' account of citizenship in terms of community. Liberals and communitarians differ fundamentally on the question of whether membership of the political community rests on the individual or the community (Delanty, 2002a; 2002b; Walzer, 1994) – a chicken and egg type question: which comes first, the individual or the community? While the rights-based ethic developed its account of individual autonomy through a critique of the utilitarian reduction of the individual to the sum of multiple desires, communitarians emphasize the ways in which individuals are constituted in part by their communal affiliations. In contrast to both libertarian liberals who defend the sovereignty of the private economy, and egalitarian liberals who defend the welfare state, communitarians are sceptical about the concentration of power in either market or state, and critical of the erosion of intermediate forms of organic community (Sandel, 1982).

For his part, Marx articulated a clear socialist alternative to a liberal-capitalist model of the political community, and liberals have typically been pejoratively represented in Marxist thought and rhetoric (Williams, 1983), not least for their erasure of class differences. In Habermas' reading of the socialist counter-model, public control is extended to the non-property owning portions of civil society. Autonomy is no longer based on private property or a sphere of private autonomy but founded in the 'public sphere' itself; as he puts it, 'private persons [come] to be the private persons of a public rather than a public of private persons' (Habermas, 1989, p. 128-129). Thus, instead of state citizenship being a function of naturalized property rights, the freedom of private people becomes a function of their role as citizens of society. As such, the public sphere no longer links a

society of property-owning private persons with a state; rather, the autonomous public of citizens secures for itself a private sphere of personal freedoms.

The republican tradition, based on the model of the public realm as a self-governing polis of active citizens, has also proven to be a useful source for critiquing liberal discourses that privilege negative liberty and market-centric freedoms (Skinner, 1998, Viroli, 2002, Pettit, 1997). The liberal model of sovereign power, which confers citizenship rights on a society of private individuals, had its origins in the passive vision of citizenship assumed in the Roman Empire (Weintraub, 1997). The Empire's autocratic notion of an all-powerful sovereign, premised on a separation of rulers and ruled, has plenty of correlates in other civilizations and in different periods of Western history. Classical moral and political philosophy, however, has tended to approach politics from the perspective of a participatory Republic, defining the citizen as one who – in Aristotle's words – is capable both of ruling and of being ruled (Baehr, 2000, p. xxx). Thus in contrast to liberals' and communitarians' differentiated conceptions of citizenship with community membership, republican citizenship entails the active participation and collective decision-making of equal members of a 'willed community' (Weintraub, 1997, p. 12-13).

The recent revived interest in republicanism tends to blame liberalism for the contemporary decline of citizenship and the reduction of politics to the self-interested calculations of the marketplace (Dagger, 2002). Republican critiques of liberalism often bemoan the erosion of 'true' (civic) citizenship in liberal countries – citing the liberal emphasis on individual rights and liberties as causes of a decline in civic virtue – and instead champion a 'commitment to the common good and active participation in public affairs' (ibid, p. 149). Republicans therefore add to the liberal focus on freedoms and rights a 'thicker' ethical dimension, which sees a vibrant, active polity as a necessary feature of any normative conception of the good society.

Building upon liberal, republican and Marxist traditions, Jürgen Habermas' account of the public sphere has been a very influential theoretical paradigm among media and communication scholars in enabling an alternative normative account of media democracy. It has armed proponents of public media and independent media regulation with emancipatory arguments to challenge those of the press freedom absolutists and privatizing marketeers (Collins, 1993). In contrast to liberal narratives of the press that see a history of increasing freedom and progress, Habermas' analysis of the decline of the public sphere under capitalism is not only critical of press content and behaviour, but also of the theory of press freedom itself.

Like Marx, Habermas recognized the emancipatory benefits of a bourgeois revolution, which saw the press achieve its freedom from the state, and made politics a public affair. However, by the end of the 19th century, the rise of the press barons and a decline in content standards had already cast doubt upon the democratic legitimacy of a market-based media system as an institutional expression of public opinion. Institutions such as the press had been originally "protected from interference by public authority by virtue of being in the hands of private people" (Habermas (1989: 188). Yet Habermas argued their critical functions were subsequently threatened by "precisely their remaining in private hands" (ibid.), so that, as a result of increased commercialization and concentrated ownership, they have become "...the gate through which privileged private interests [invade] the public sphere" (p. 185). As conflicts hitherto considered private emerged in public, the public sphere became an arena of competing private interests. The process of enabling a reasoned public consensus degraded into forms of strategic compromise and manipulation, so that scepticism about the importance of a free press, and the autonomy of its representation of public opinion, grew. From this perspective, the liberal narrative of press freedom

masked a new regime of market power, which most suggest has assumed an even more pernicious form in the neoliberal era (see below).

As different scholars have argued (Curran, 1979, 1991, Curran and Seaton, 2003, Keane, 1991; Thompson, 1995), the liberal theory of press freedom makes a series of unconvincing assumptions about the status of the press as an expression of public opinion, agency of information, and independent watchdog on power. Because liberal theory conflates freedom of the press with the commercial freedoms of media owners, freedom from state regulation fails to protect the press from the negative effects of market competition and the need to cut costs and boost profits. It also allows media owners to pursue their own private interests (i.e. their speech rights are privileged over all others), and use their power to steer public policies in a market-friendly direction, thus granting them even greater political power in the name of press freedom. Such manifestations of 'market censorship' (Jansen, 1991, Keane, 1991) undermine the liberal theory of press freedom, particularly when it is invoked as an unconditional right that annihilates the power differentials between corporate speech rights and the speech rights of (in the best sense) ordinary citizens.

### **Situating neoliberalism**

The elections of Margaret Thatcher in 1979 and Ronald Reagan in 1980 are regularly identified as defining moments in the political emergence of neoliberalism (see Harvey, 2005). Narratives of the birth of neoliberalism sometimes cite developments beyond the Anglo-American context, most notoriously the Pinochet regime established in Chile after its coup of the Allende government in 1973 (see Harvey, 2005; Klein, 2007). Yet, the ascent of neoliberal policies and ideology in the 1970s and 1980s had a much longer pre-history, which predated World War 2 and took a clear



institutional form in the post-war era. Neoliberalism was forged in an intellectual atmosphere committed to both a revival of classic liberal ideas *and* a critical evaluation of the legacies of laissez-faire liberalism (Friedman, 1962, Friedman 1951; Hayek, 1944, Hayek, 1960).

Plehwe (2015, p. 10) traces the earliest use of the term – in the sense now familiar to us – to a 1925 book by the Swiss economist Hans Honegger. Interwar Vienna was a key intellectual site in the embryonic emergence of neoliberalism. The Austrian economist and political philosopher, Ludwig von Mises, articulated a defense of liberal ideas in light of what he saw as the disparaging view of liberalism cultivated among left-wing intellectuals, and the institutionalization of policy regimes that undermined individuals' economic freedom (see Gane, 2014). A principled commitment to free trade and the free market had to be the cornerstone of any authentic liberal vision, he maintained, contrary to what he saw as the contamination of liberal ideas by socialist and statist doctrines in the work of Mill and others. Like his better-known protégé, Friedrich Hayek, von Mises' argument in favour of market competition was an epistemological one (see Gane, 2014; Mirowski, 2013; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2015), in opposition to the idea of a centrally planned economy controlled by the state. Market mechanisms enabled adjustments in price that were responsive to the situated knowledge and choices of individual economic actors, they contended, rather than beholden to the illusory, and ultimately dangerous, figure of an all-knowing state.

The argument that the market enabled a more desirable and efficient form of social order centered von Mises' and Hayek's participation in the so-called "socialist calculation debate" of the 1920s and 1930s (Cockett, 1995; Davies, 2014), where they set out to demonstrate the epistemological incoherence of socialist economics (Gane, 2014). An ideologically diluted version of the same state/market antagonism shaped Hayek's debates with J.M Keynes, which pitched the former's epistemological confidence in the self-coordinating powers of the market against the latter's vision

of a progressive liberal state that directly intervened in market processes (Cockett, 1995; Cockett, 1995). Hayek's dispute with Keynes, his then colleague at the London School of Economics, gave the Austrian School argument a new visibility among intellectual and policy making elites in 1930s UK, energized by Hayek's desire to strategically align his position to what he saw as the best impulses of English liberalism. The wider intellectual interest in reviving the political fortunes of liberalism was illustrated by the participation of Hayek and von Mises in a colloquium in honour of Walter Lippmann in Paris in 1938, convened in response to the French translation of Lippmann's 1937 book, *An Enquiry into the Principles of the Good Society* (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2015). The term "neoliberalism" was explicitly used (Plehwe, 2015, p. 13) to describe the attendees' shared political convictions; their wish to move beyond the problematic separation of market and state in laissez-faire doctrine.

The start of the war in 1939 thwarted the immediate development of a neoliberal identity and programme. However, the publication of Hayek's book, *The Road to Serfdom*, in 1944 gave the "new liberal" argument a revived intellectual focus, which directly informed the rhetoric of the Conservative party at the 1945 British election (Cockett, 1995). Like von Mises, Hayek saw socialist, and social democratic, ideas as embodying a threat to liberal freedoms (Gane, 2014). He stressed the inherently totalitarian logic of socialism because it appeals to collectivist principles that, even when well intentioned and rationally justified, have coercive effects that undermine individual freedom (Hayek, 1944; 1960). Socialist theorists and politicians invoke a dubious notion of political freedom, he argued, which privileges the liberty of the collective and displaces the political importance of individuals' economic liberty. Hayek departed from the purer market libertarian script of von Mises (Gane, 1914), and offered more than a blanket condemnation of state intervention in the market. Rather, he formulated the outlines of what would become the defining problematic of neoliberal thought and politics: instead of planning against the market, how might

the state plan *for* the market and institutionalize a social order that supports market norms, practices and subjectivities? (Friedman, 1951; Friedman, 1962; Hayek, 1944; Hayek, 1960)

Hayek's polemical intervention did not have its desired effect on the outcome of the 1945 British election, and Britain embarked on a Keynesian trajectory that would define the post-war epoch (Cockett, 1995). Nonetheless, the publication of *The Road to Serfdom* (including the subsequent publication of a US edition by the University of Chicago Press in 1945) generated wider interest in reviving liberal economic principles, which crystalized in the establishment of the Mont Pelerin Society in Switzerland in 1947 by Hayek and others, including von Mises, Milton Friedman, Frank Knight, Michael Polanyi (Karl's brother) and Karl Popper (Cockett, 1995; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2015). The society established an institutional space for the incubation of neoliberal thought, which was focused more on winning the long-term "war of ideas" (George, 1997; Rodgers, 2011) against socialism and social democracy, rather than immediate policy victories. The society was selective in its membership and parsimonious in its formulation of a written programme (Plehwe, 2015). It enabled the creation of an elite neoliberal class, an assorted membership of academics, politicians, business executives and journalists who would go on to play crucial roles in the establishment of a transnational network of neoliberal think-tanks that sold neoliberal policies in the media and elsewhere (Cockett, 1995; Hames & Feasey, 1994; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2015). This cumulative work prepared the ground for the emergence of different neoliberal regimes in the 1970s and 1980s, which were centred in a strong "reaffirmation of the virtues of the market and competition" (Beaud & Dostaler, 1997, p. 118). Neoliberal intellectuals and advocates were well placed to respond to the capitalist accumulation crisis of the 1970s, as national economies experienced parallel increases in inflation and unemployment that belied Keynesian assumptions. The election of Thatcher and Reagan incarnated the most state-phobic elements of neoliberal thought, championing the idea of the free market in opposition to the rule of the state, big government and trade unions. These

national shifts were given internationalist and globalist expression in the emergence of the so-called “Washington consensus” (Williamson, 1993), as neoliberal ideas were internalized in the policy prescriptions of international bodies like the International Monetary Fund, World Bank and the World Trade Organization.

Yet, we can formulate quite a different genealogy of neoliberalism if we decentre the Anglo-American context and, like Foucault (2010), consider the neoliberal character of the ordoliberal regime established in West Germany after World War 2. In the face of the market triumphalism of the 1980s, Germany’s so-called “social market economy” was sometimes represented as an ideological alternative to neoliberalism, because of its more affirmative view of the state and trade unions. Yet Peck (2010) suggests that this obscures the ideological similarities between the ideas embraced by the post-war German state and the policies that gained momentum elsewhere in the 1970s and 1980s, as well as the involvement of some of the architects of the ordoliberal model in Mont Pelerin networks. Ptak (2015) credits ordoliberals with fostering “an early understanding of the important relationship between law and economics” (p. 101) that anticipated the distinct theories of the Chicago School, and which was institutionalized in the establishment of the common European market in 1957. Similarly, the subsequent representation of neoliberalism as a uniquely Anglo-American ideology (Bourdieu and Wacquant, 2001; Lane, 2006) was belied by the fragmentary uptake of neoliberal ideas and policies in 1970s and 1980s France (Denord, 2015). The ordoliberal project of reconciling antagonisms between market and state also resonated with the general emergence of a third-way political programme in the 1990s and 2000s, which was sometimes explicitly articulated as a political alternative to neoliberalism; indeed, the notion of a third way, or “middle way” (p. 88), was originally part of ordoliberal vernacular (Foucault, 2010). However, to its critics, the third way policies of Blair, Clinton and others simply embedded the authority of neoliberal rule, and intensified the process of reconstituting the state as an agent of

market and corporate rationality (Crouch, 2011). More recently, the logic of the neoliberal state has assumed a more fiscally punitive form in the aftermath of the 2007 and 2008 financial crisis, in the guise of austerity regimes targeting welfare programmes that had survived the neoliberal era (Blyth, 2013).

In his account of the “neoliberal thought collective”, Mirowski (2013, 2015) stresses the protean nature of neoliberalism – its openness to diverse articulations that are not reducible to the image of a unitary “free market” ideology or a self-contained policy blueprint. Even the Mont Pelerin society was marked by ideological tensions between “the Austrian-inflected Hayekian legal theory, the Chicago School of neoclassical economics, and the German ordoliberals” (Mirowski, 2013, p. 43) (see also Davies, 2014, Van Horn, 2015) that sometimes threatened to split the network. Despite once embracing the label (see Friedman, 1951), putative neoliberals rarely avow the term as a marker of political identity; rather, neoliberal ideas have been articulated under different doctrinal headings, such as monetarism, supply-side economics and rational choice/public choice theory (Beaud & Dostaler, 1997), or in contemporary discourses of the creative city (Peck, 2010), entrepreneurial self (Mirowski, 2013), quantified selfhood (Beer, 2015), national branding (Phelan, 2014) and the sharing economy (Broekhuizen et. al, 2015). Like the concept of liberalism, neoliberalism is therefore best theorized as a heterogeneous concept – the name for a cultural formation and ideology that escapes easy definition, because of its capacity to dynamically adapt to the political context and appropriate the fragments of other political ideologies and discourses. In recent literature, analytical attention is increasingly focused on processes and developments that neoliberalize the social order, against the image of a monolithic neoliberalism that is given undifferentiated expression (Peck, 2010).

Across its variegated articulations, neoliberal regimes are consistent in affirming the value of market competition in different social scales and contexts (the state, the organisation and the individual), and in treating economic efficiency as the primary calculus of public value (Davies, 2014). Political and cultural identification with other value systems is progressively eroded, as illustrated by social regimes – including media regimes – that lose any sense of coherent normative alternatives. Neoliberalism is therefore much more than an economic programme; rather, it represents a political and cultural blueprint for constructing the very image of the social presupposed by neoliberal theorists, and reconstituting the very meaning of “liberal democracy” (Brown, 2005). Politics is paradoxically recast in a neoliberal frame – in an anti-political sensibility that is deeply suspicious of any normative vision that threatens the (politically constructed) autonomy of market reason (Davies, 2014, Phelan, 2014)).

### **Critical perspectives on neoliberalism and media**

Media and communication scholars have primarily conceptualized neoliberalism as an economic ideology, system and formation, usually taking their cue from the dominance of a Marxist analysis of neoliberalism across the social sciences and humanities (see Harvey, 2005). Much of the research has been framed from a political economy/critical political economy perspective (itself a site of theoretical heterogeneity; see Wasko, Murdock & Sousa (2011)), though shorthand descriptions of neoliberalism as a “free market ideology” have a wider currency in the field. The dominant theoretical account is perhaps better described as quasi-Marxist, because of its manifestation as a general critique of neoliberal capitalism that lacks the doctrinal force of earlier Marxist critiques of liberal-capitalist media (see Garland & Harper, 2012).

Political economy researchers treat neoliberalism as a particular regime of capital based around a reconstitution of the relationship between market, state and labour (see, for example, Andersson, 2012; Briziarelli, 2014; Cammaerts & Calabrese, 2011; Fenton, 2011; Freedman, 2014; Hope, 2012; McChesney, 2012; Peck, 2015, Roberts, 2014). Serving “the market” becomes paramount, the state is recast as its enabler, and flexible, precarious work regimes become the norm in media industries and elsewhere. Neoliberalism signifies an elite-driven social order re-encharmed with the notion of the free market, in a fashion that recalls the laissez-faire liberalism of the late 18th and early 19<sup>th</sup> centuries (McChesney, 1998). It represents the political institutionalization of a more brutal and finance-driven form of capitalist rule (Compton & Dyer-Witheford), thus signaling a clear historical departure from the comparative social securities and industrial base of the “embedded liberalism” of post-war Euro-American political economy (Preston & Silke, 2011).

Under neoliberalism, facilitating the “privatization, deregulation, liberalization, and globalization” (Pickard, 2007, p. 121) of markets became the defining principles of state media policy. Governments across the world displayed (and display) an increasing willingness to remove legislative impediments to the commercial objectives of media corporations, especially any progressive policies that upheld a concept of “public service” media in opposition to market forces (Barnett, 2002; Freedman, 2008; Hesmondhalgh, 2013; Leys, 2001). Neoliberal assumptions were also internalized in the governance of media institutions that remained in state-owned hands, illustrating an enthusiasm for market competition also evident in other public institutions like the university. In extreme cases, the principles of public service media were effectively abandoned (see Thompson, 2012), as state-owned media operated in a profit-making fashion that rendered them indistinguishable from any other commercial broadcaster.

Neoliberalism has been deployed as a descriptive and explanatory concept in analyses of a diverse range of media topics, including media ownership (Herman & McChesney, 1997), media policy and regulation (Freedman, 2008), media financialization (Compton & Dyer-Witheford, 2014), intellectual property rights (Hesmondhalgh, 2008), news production (Fenton 2011), infotainment (Thussu, 2007), multiculturalism (Lentin & Titley, 2011), press freedom (Dawes, 2014a) and reality television (Gilbert, 2011). Studies typically stress the detrimental social, economic and cultural impact of a neoliberal media system where media production is increasingly governed by narrow economic values. In one sense, political economy analysis of neoliberalism follows Marxists' historical critiques of the complicity of liberal media conventions with the capitalist system. Yet, most scholars highlight how these tendencies have been exacerbated in the neoliberal era. These pressures have intensified further with the emergence of an internet-enabled system of "surveillance capitalism" (Zuboff, 2015), where everyday media consumption and participation is subsumed into the commodification mechanisms of digital media platforms like Google and Facebook (Dean, 2009; Garland & Harper, 2012; Robert, 2014).

Political economy analyses of media and neoliberalism are usually underpinned by a critical conception of ideology (see, for example, Dean, 2009; Peck, 2015, Preston & Silke, 2011). Neoliberalism is conceptualized as the legitimating ideology of a transnational corporate class (Harvey, 2005)- the 1% of the Occupy Wall Street slogans - who own and control the bulk of the world's wealth, including most of its media resources. This ideology officially consecrates the values of consumer choice, individual freedom and market competition. But the promise of a market-utopia systematically obscures the conditions of "actually existing neoliberalism" (Brenner & Theodore, 2002), based on corporatized, quasi-monopolistic media structures dominated by a small field of market players (Hope, 2012). Neoliberal ideology is thus equated, in an archetypal Marxist fashion (Eagleton, 1991), with ruling class ideas that mask the real conditions of social life



in neoliberalized societies. These ideas are ingrained in the discourses, perspectives and norms that are privileged in corporate media spaces (Chakravartty & Schiller, 2010;); though, at the same time, they are never absolutely dominant because of liberal journalistic values that necessitate some coverage of contrary perspectives (Freedman, 2014).

While (critical) political economy is the name for a specific theoretical approach in media and communication studies (Mosco, 2005), the structuralist impulses of the tradition – i.e. the simple use of neoliberalism as a name for the dominant social structure – have been absorbed in the wider literature. All research on neoliberalism can in some sense be described as political economy analysis, since no one would argue that the economic aspects of neoliberalism can be analysed separately from their political dimensions, or independently of their social and cultural dynamics and manifestations. Grounds for theoretical dispute instead arise in different conceptions of the relationships between politics, economy, culture and society, especially in divergent assessments of the weight and autonomy of the economic explanations that centre the political economy tradition.

The historical differences between political economy and cultural studies in media and communication studies (see Grossberg, 1995; Garnham, 1995; Murdock, 1995, Carey 1995) give us one route into thinking about the differentiated character of research on neoliberalism. Although the antagonisms between both approaches have waned over time, they had their origins in the attempts to make political and analytical sense of the neoliberal turn (Murdock, 1995). Cultural Studies emerged as a theoretical rival to political economy in the crisis atmosphere of 1970s Britain, grounded in the work of Stuart Hall and his colleagues at the Birmingham Centre for Cultural Studies (Hall et al, 2013[1978]). Hall (1988) sought to develop a critical analysis of the social formation that went beyond the limitations of a Marxist “economism”, which he argued appealed to dogmatic theoretical formulas about the nature of capitalism over and above any open-

ended analysis of the forces at work in a particular historical conjuncture. Birmingham School cultural studies retained a Marxist focus on the political constitution of the social totality, drawing on the then comparatively neglected work of the Italian Marxist theorist, Antonio Gramsci, alongside the distinct theorizations of ideology and politics formulated by Louis Althusser and Ernesto Laclau (see Morley & Chen, 1996). The result was a critical approach more attuned to the political and cultural work involved in dynamically making the social order, and less bound to the rigid class-assumptions of orthodox Marxism. The concept of ideology assumed a new theoretical import, no longer equated with a relatively superficial domain of rhetoric and ideas, but recast as central to the social production of forms of neoliberal(ized) subjectivity (Hall, 1998). Associated concepts like discourse, text, rhetoric, hegemony, interpellation, signification, subjectivity and polysemy became staple elements of a new theoretical vocabulary for analysing media and popular culture, which stressed the capacity of audiences to offer different readings of media representations, against the image of a passive audience overwhelmed by the propaganda of capitalist media (Hall, 1980; Morley & Chen, 1996).

Discussions of neoliberalism in cultural studies are therefore marked by a distinct theoretical vocabulary, where its significance as a form of discourse, subjectivity and – more recently – affect is emphasized (Anderson, 2015; Gilbert, 2011). These concepts are sometimes incorporated into Marxist analytical frameworks (Cloud, 1994; Hearn, 2011; McGuigan, 2014). Yet, their prominence was at the heart of the theoretical dispute between media and communication scholars who embraced post-structuralist, post-modernist and post-Marxist theories, and those who retained a fidelity to Marxist theory. Cultural studies scholars criticized what they saw as political economy's tendency to see media, culture and discourse as epiphenomena of economic processes, ultimately of secondary importance to an analysis of capitalist mechanisms and institutions (Grossberg, 1995). Conversely, political economy scholars critiqued cultural studies for spawning its own form of

analytical reductionism, where “everything” seemed to be explainable as text or discourse (Garnham, 1995). Hall’s desire to produce a different kind of critical analysis of capitalist societies had, some argued (see Philo & Miller, 2000), produced a media studies orthodoxy that wasn’t interested in talking about capitalism much at all, because of a phobia about the dangers of totalizing and essentialist analysis that sometimes morphed into glib celebration of audiences’ capacities to resist hegemonic media representations. Philo and Miller (2000) argued that media scholars’ focus on capitalist political economy, and even ideology (see Downey, Titley & Toynbee, 2014) was displaced by theoretical tendencies that, despite a veneer of theoretical radicalism, were ultimately complicit with the tenets of market pluralism.

It may be fair to say that one consequence of the cultural studies turn of the 1980s and 1990s (which had an impact on a wider set of critical interpretative approaches) was a relative break from the Marxist political vocabulary of capitalism and class, in favour of a heightened attention to gender, sexuality, race, and ethnicity as loci of identity politics. Yet, critical media and communication scholars have remained focused on analysing the politics of the social totality (Hall, 2011), even if this totality is perhaps now more likely to be called “neoliberalism” rather than “capitalism”. Garland and Harper (2011) question the value of the “discursive substitution” (p. 413), because the concept of neoliberalism sometimes presupposes a simplistic state/free market binary that obscures the role of the state in maintaining the capitalist system. Contrary to the assumption that the dominant theoretical account of neoliberalism has been Marxist (see Flew, 2009; Flew & Cunningham, 2010), they argue that critiques of neoliberalism have been too quick to presuppose liberal democratic assumptions, invoking “democracy” as the solution without clearly grasping its co-opted condition in media regimes (see also Dean, 2009). Garland and Harper (2012) valorize the comparative clarity of the “ideological battleground” mapped out in the media and communication studies debates of the early 1980s, when a theoretical division between Marxism and liberal

pluralism was the defining antagonism of the field (p. 413). Thus, they suggest that the concept of neoliberalism deflects media scholars' attention from a more fundamental ideological conflict with liberalism, as the political corollary of capitalist rule.

Foucault's concept of governmentality has offered an alternative theoretical grounding for critical analyses of neoliberalism, sometimes positioned in opposition to the top-down assumptions of Marxist analysis and the different conceptions of ideology analysis advanced by political economy and cultural studies scholars (Dawes, 2016; Ouellette & Hay, 2008). Foucault (2009) shifted attention away from what he saw as the French left's obsession with the 'state' as a unitary site of power, and instead towards the ways in which 'government', as both internal and external to the state, makes possible the redefinition of what is within and outside of the competence of the state; in other words, what is public and what is private (p. 103). The 'Anglo School of Governmentality' (Barry et al, 1996. p. 7) associated with the work of Nikolas Rose and colleagues, found in Foucault's approach a more adequate way of capturing the productive, individualizing aspects of power that make possible a series of positive and tactical interventions, in contrast to the predominantly negative aspects captured by ideology critique. Emerging in tandem with the shift to neoliberalism, or what Rose (1999) preferred to describe under the heading of "advanced liberalism", governmentality scholars sought to understand the character of governmental intervention into the lives of individuals in 'liberal' societies, which otherwise ideologically proclaimed the limits of the state and the privacy of the individual (Miller & Rose, 2008. p. 1),

Governmentality scholars argued that Hall's ideological critique of Thatcherism missed the ethical and technical character of neoliberalism, and the ways in which neoliberalism constructively aligns diverse interests (Barry et al, 1996: 11). This approach moved theoretical attention away from the abstractions of political philosophy, and towards governmental rationality and the close analysis of

mundane techniques and technologies for governing social life. Contrary to the notion that a public service and social welfare ethos no longer play such a pivotal role in the neoliberal way of governance (Miller & Rose, 2008: 82), governmental researchers suggest that neoliberalism does not necessarily preclude their continued existence in some iteration – in the form of a politically reconstituted state that retains its sovereign form and takes on new functions. Therefore, rather than simply a rejection of the policy failures of central planning, the neoliberal critique of the welfare state is better appreciated as a critique of the ideals of knowledge and power that these rationalities embody (Miller & Rose, 2008: 81). The reduction in welfare state intervention in neoliberal regimes is reconceptualized as less a matter of the state losing its powers of regulation, than the reorganisation and restructuring of governmental techniques, and the shifting of competence onto responsible and rational individuals (Lemke, 2001: 201-202). In place of a simple opposition between the individual and the collective, both are recast as moral-responsible and rational-economic actors (Lemke, 2001: 201); interlocking scales of a governmentality system that reconstitutes, rather than renounces, the dichotomies of “public-private” and “state-society” (Lemke, 2001).

Different media and communication scholars have drawn on the governmentality literature to explore the place of media formats, genres and policies in cultivating a neoliberal ethos of citizenship. Ouellette and Hay (2008) suggest that so-called reality television formats (see also Couldry, 2010, Gilbert, 2011) are best grasped as sites of “highly dispersed” (p. 473) governmentality for how people should live in neoliberal societies, and submit to the performative demands and expectations of the neoliberal workplace (McCarthy, 2007). The subjectivities appealed to in these and other cultural forms – social media, for example (Hearn, 2011) – are traceable to public policy objectives (Sender, 2006), because of how they valorize individualistic, entrepreneurial and consumerist ways of being, and a perennial quest for self-actualization and

self-improvement. Yet, they are also the product of a relatively autonomous interplay of commercial and social forces that can allow for different forms of political agency, and potentially enable “counter-rationalities” (Leistert, 2013, p. 59) to the political rationality of neoliberalism.

Some critical political-economic media scholars, such as Des Freedman (2008), suggest that the reification of neoliberalism as something that is socially dispersed and manifested everywhere risks conflating distinct aspects of neoliberal thought and missing the links between ideas and practices (p. 42-45). He instead recommends understanding neoliberalism (Freedman, 2008, p. 41) as a range of discourses that legitimate the market, delegitimize the social (Couldry, 2006), and increase social inequality, with the aim of transforming the balance of forces so as to facilitate capital accumulation (Harvey, 2007) and subordinate public institutions to private interests (Freedman, 2008, p. 223-224).

Freedman (2008) insists on the necessity of a singular conception of neoliberalism, even if he also recognizes the existence of different neoliberalisms. Yet, for Terry Flew, the term’s use has become “sloppy” (see also Grossberg, 2010); it is 'routinely invoked to explain everything from the rise of Bollywood themed weddings to competitive cooking shows to university departmental restructurings' and the propensity to 'lapse into a kind of conspiracy theory is readily apparent' (Flew in Dawes & Flew, 2016). Flew (2012; 2014; 2015b) has recently focused on Foucault’s lectures on neoliberalism, arguing they offer a much more nuanced understanding of neoliberalism than the Marxist account that, in his view, dominates media and communication research. Likewise, Dawes (2014b) draws on Foucault’s discussion of the differences between neoliberalism and classic liberalism to criticize the “rudimentary readings” (p. 705) of neoliberalism commonly propagated in media studies (see also Dawes, 2016). Contrary to the image of a simple state-market binary, he suggests Foucault’s work helps us see how neoliberalism is best understood as a particular

articulation of state-market relations, where the rationality of the latter is internalized in the policy dispositions and actions of the former.

Finally, Phelan (2014) also interrogates how neoliberalism is used as a “summary label” (Peck, 2010) in communication and media studies, and draws on Laclau and Bourdieu to analyse the different ways neoliberal logics intersect with media and journalism practices. He explores the political and cultural affinities between a journalistic habitus that disavows ideology and a post-ideological neoliberalism that does the same thing, in contrast to more ideologically strident forms of neoliberalism. Phelan takes the antipathy to socialism and social democracy in neoliberalism as a blueprint for understanding the antagonistic character of neoliberal discourse (see also Cammaerts, 2014), alongside its contradictory manifestation in a looser, third way form. The latter discourse is more easily disavowed as a form of political and ideological commitment, he argues, because of its resonances with the liberal assumptions and reflexes of the journalistic field (see also Jutel, 2015).

### **Future research: liberalism, neoliberalism and critical communication studies**

As the preceding sections illustrate, the relationship between liberalism, neoliberalism, communication, media and critique constitutes a complex, heterogeneous, and multifaceted research problematic. It invites questions about the differentiated character of liberal and neoliberal regimes and practices, and the variegated ways both signifiers are conceptualized, used, and attributed, in contemporary political and media discourse. Below are six interlinked thematics and concerns that we think could productively inform future research, especially in terms of the relationship between our two key concepts, liberalism and neoliberalism. Taken together, they open lines of interdisciplinary thought for critical communication and media studies that take us

beyond the broadstroke narratives, and sometimes cursory theorizations, that have shaped how the most recent concept of neoliberalism has been articulated in the field.

First, contemporary critiques of neoliberalism need to avoid simply rehashing a 19<sup>th</sup> century critique of liberalism, as if neoliberalism signified nothing other than a revival of a 19<sup>th</sup> century “free market” or “laissez-faire” ideology (Foucault, 2008). Instead, we need to better grasp the political, economic, cultural and historical specificity of neoliberalism, including its status as a critique of progressive left-liberal discourses and identities (Konings, 2014; Phelan, 2014) that have simultaneously been recontextualised in hollowed out forms (Brown, 2005; Fenton & Titley, 2015; Rottenberg, 2014). Dichotomies of market and state, economy and society, intervention and non-intervention, regulation and deregulation, public and private, consumer and citizen can therefore only get us so far in grasping the nature of neoliberalization (Dawes, 2014b). Rather, as Foucault (2009) and others have suggested (Crouch, 2011; Davies, 2014; Peck, 2010), we need to be attentive to a political economic rationality where the state acts like a market, and directly intervenes in the constitution of marketized and individualized forms of sociality, rather than limiting itself to a domain of non-private affairs. And, instead of presupposing a unitary ideology imposed on media and communication practices from outside, we need to recognize the immanent rationality of neoliberalized regimes.

Second, researchers need to be alert to the ideological paradoxes and contradictions of neoliberal regimes (Freedman, 2014), including the potential discordances between different neoliberal theories (Davies, 2014; Mirowski and Plehwe, 2013). Crouch (2011) stresses the inadequacy of popular accounts of neoliberalism that reduce it to the terms of a classic liberal confrontation between state and market. The binary obscures how neoliberalism embodies a “corporate takeover of the market” (p. 63), which is partly enabled by the internalization of corporate rationality



(Hardin, 2014) within state institutions and public policies. Following Harvey (2005), many communication and media scholars have highlighted the systematic gap between neoliberal theory and practice, where media policies authored in the name of free market competition have spawned oligopolistic and monopolistic media systems dominated by a small pool of corporate firms. Yet, scholars have been slower to recognize that these corporatized structures have been legitimized by Chicago School neoliberals, who take a much more sanguine view of private (as distinct from public) monopoly than the early ordoliberals (van Horn, 2015). The trend towards media corporatization therefore offers more than just evidence of the ideological incoherence of neoliberalism; it should also focus attention on the different theorizations of market competition within neoliberal thought, and the potential strategic benefits of exploiting these differences in critical analysis. For instance, one underremarked feature of contemporary policy debates is that the principles of competition, plurality and diversity in media markets are sometimes just as likely to be affirmed by neoliberalism's critics rather than its putative proponents (see Hope, 2016; Phelan, 2016). Similarly, neoclassical concepts like "market failure" can potentially be appropriated to interrogate the limits of market rationality (see Pickard, 2013), enabling a mode of critique quite distinct from analytical approaches that represent neoclassical economics as inherently, or exclusively, neoliberal. These rhetorical affinities across difference do not belie the possibility of radical democratic articulations of the principles of media diversity and pluralism that go well beyond the terms of neoliberal discourse (Karppinen, 2008; see further discussion below). However, they do suggest a potential terrain for critiquing neoliberalism that has generally been underexplored in critical communication studies, where putatively neoliberal logics, principles, and idioms, are turned against themselves to affirm non-market values and reasons (see, for example, Ferguson, 2009).

Third, the concept of press freedom offers one especially important illustration of the cultural politics of how (neo)liberal signifiers are differently articulated. Different scholars have noted how the concept of press and media freedom has been neoliberalized (Dawes, 2014; Fenton, 2011; Phelan, 2014). It's symptomatic of how neoliberals have hegemonized the language of freedom, and naturalized a negative concept of freedom that can be deeply hostile to the notion of the state as an enabler of positive freedoms. Nonetheless, the historically dominant journalism identity in Anglo-American media cultures and elsewhere (Hallin & Mancini, 2004) continues to be defined by a more open-ended liberal and Enlightenment commitment to the principles of press freedom and free speech, which cannot be blanketly reduced to the status of a "neoliberal" commitment. This perspective holds out the hope of democratically reclaiming the idea of press freedom from the excesses of its corporate and marketized appropriation, and a first amendment absolutism that delights in ridiculing the "political correctness" of progressive liberals. It also highlights the need for radical normative and ethical alternatives to the liberal tradition (Freedman, 2014), not to renounce the principles of press freedom and free speech as such (they are never absolute principles (O'Neill, 2002; Street, 2001)), but rather to recognize their manifestation in symbolically violent and racist forms that (willfully) annihilate the speech rights of different groups (Dawes, 2015). The urgency of these issues has been captured in recent debates about the need for "safe spaces" on university campuses in the US and elsewhere, sometimes in opposition to journalism's assumed authority to report on events in public spaces. Activists and their supporters interrogate journalism's liberal universalism, because of its capacity to misrepresent and stymie the political agency of different groups, and misrecognize its own gendered and racialized biases. Conversely, some left-liberals – who might otherwise be sympathetic to activists' political demands – question the seeming opposition to liberal free speech conventions (see Cooper, 2015; Read, 2015), voicing a critique that takes a derisory form in right-wing and libertarian discourses. However they are approached, these political disagreements are unlikely to be illuminated by analytical frameworks

that collapse the distinction between liberalism and neoliberalism. On the contrary, the neoliberalization of press freedom rhetoric needs to be challenged head on by critical theoretical sensibilities (see, for example, Connolly, 2005) that radicalize the best impulses of the liberal tradition.

Fourth, the question of press freedom prompts general reflection on the condition of liberal democracy in neoliberal regimes (even if neoliberalization can also take political and cultural forms that depart from a narrative script that universalizes a liberal democratic transition from Keynesianism to neoliberalism). Wendy Brown (2005) argues (see also Couldry, 2010; Rottenberg, 2014) that the progressive resources and potential of the liberal tradition have been colonized by “a neoliberal political rationality” that “submits every aspect of political and social life to economic calculation” (Brown, 2005, p. 46). Similarly, Crouch (2004) talks about a post-democratic condition (see also Crouch, 2011), where democratic rituals continue to be enacted and consecrated, but in a spectacle-driven fashion that is indifferent to the participation of most people. Fenton and Titley (2015) consider the implications of these arguments for the normative underpinnings of media studies. They suggest that media and communication scholars have failed to satisfactorily grasp that our default valorization of public sphere deliberation, pluralism, communicative freedom, participation and openness brings with it the “risk of passive consent to neoliberal hegemonies” (p. 568; see also Gilbert, 2014), because of how these liberal democratic ideals (we could also add the ideals of transparency and accountability; see Phelan, 2014) have been “hollowed out” by “market rationality” (p. 545). Jutel (2015) makes a similar argument in his analysis of the liberal journalistic field under neoliberalism. The “normative universalism” of American journalists’ commitment to notions of objectivity, neutrality, truth, and universal reason cannot grasp the political character of the reactionary forces that challenge liberal media conventions, a consequence in part of liberals’ arid conception of “the political” (see Chambers & Finlayson, 2008; Laclau & Mouffe, 2001;

Muhlmann, 2010). Freedman and Stears (2013) question the value of universalist discourses that “plac[e] liberalism ‘above politics’, while nonetheless defending the liberal tradition. In place of the abstract and politically neutered codes of Rawlsian political philosophy, they long for an ideologically combative liberalism that is cognizant of its “particularistic dimensions”, for “liberalism, at its political strongest, has always been a creed that is willing to fight against its rivals”. These different perspectives on liberal universality help us formulate the question of whether neoliberal reason has effectively colonized liberal democracy, or whether aspects of a progressive liberal inheritance – such as the concept of pluralism (Connolly, 2005; Karppinen, 2008), or even the more fraught concepts of individualism and individualization (Bauman, 2000; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Maffesoli, 1996) – might be rearticulated as part of a coherent anti-neoliberal, and anti-capitalist, politics (Phelan, 2014). They also summon the need for radical democratic theories of media that “begin to pry apart the comfortable dyad ‘liberal democracy’” (Chambers & Finlayson, 2008), and disarticulate the concept of democracy from its hegemonic attachments to the liberal tradition.

Fifth, we also need to better illuminate how both liberalism and neoliberalism are articulated as signifiers of political identification and antagonism. Let’s consider the point with specific reference to neoliberalism, a concept whose analytical status and validity has been debated in different fields (see Barnett, 2005; Flew & Cunningham, 2010; Grossberg, 2010; Phelan, 2014; Rose, O’Malley & Valverde, 2006). Instead of simply reproducing the contours of an established debate between those who affirm the analytical value of the concept of neoliberalism and those who question its coherence, critical communication theorists are well placed to decenter the question of conceptual understanding and instead hone in on the kind of communicative, discursive and political work that social actors do when they describe something as neoliberal (or liberal). Such reflexive research becomes especially important as references to neoliberalism increasingly circulate in media and

political discourses, where, to stylize the point, it is used to either signify an oppressive social order, or dismissed as a left conspiracy theory. Documenting how the signifier is articulated still allows us to illuminate how neoliberalism is (mis)conceptualized, sometimes in a cartoonish form that presupposes an ideological identity that is absolutely opposed to the state. But it would also elucidate its place in the staging of contemporary political antagonisms, both in the expression of a collective desire for political alternatives and in a reactionary sensibility that cannot see beyond the horizons of the existing social order.

Finally, communication and media scholars can potentially enrich the wider interdisciplinary literature on neoliberalism by clarifying its status as a mediated and mediatized phenomenon (see Phelan forthcoming; Phelan, 2014). The role of media institutions and practices in legitimizing neoliberalism is widely recognized by scholars in different fields. Yet, the argument often takes the form of a basic political economy thesis about the neoliberal priorities and interests of media owners, or the mediatization of social life is represented as a relatively trivial phenomena; a one-dimensional symptom of ideological capture. What is relatively absent is recognition of how neoliberalization is enabled through media representations, processes and practices (which are, of course, deeply embedded in capitalist political economy) that potentially reconstitute our understanding of what neoliberalism *is*. One way of approaching these questions is to treat mediated neoliberalism as emblematic of the shift from an abstract doctrinal understanding of neoliberalism to a practice-based focus on “actually existing neoliberalism” (Brenner and Theodore, 2001). Instead of presupposing a generalized caricature where journalists function as cheerleaders of “free market” ideology (some journalists do, of course), critical attention is focused on the paradoxical and messy ways in which neoliberal discourses and logics are articulated in corporate media spaces (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). This is where the distinction between neoliberalism and liberalism again becomes important, because of the extent to which neoliberal hegemony is

mediated by journalists' ongoing identification with liberal democratic assumptions that are construed as ideologically innocent (see Phelan, 2014). Thus, as Fenton and Titley's (2015) argument implies, centering media cultures (Couldry, 2003) reproduce neoliberal reason less so by being neoliberal, but through the neoliberalization of a journalistic habitus that is entangled in liberal assumptions and reflexes. The concept of mediated neoliberalism therefore underscores the political significance of journalistic and media practices that often go unrecognized as political, because they embody performative dispositions that are naturalized by journalists and others in media spaces. It also brings into view the discursive and performative affinities between media practices and a third way neoliberalism that is similarly articulated as post-ideological (Phelan, 2014).

### **Further reading and useful sources**

#### *Key texts by liberal and neoliberal authors*

John Stuart Mill's 19th century treatise on personal liberty, *On Liberty* (1859), which explores the limits of freedom and power, and the relation between individual sovereignty and social authority, outlined a utilitarian liberal account of basic individual liberties and the legitimate objections to government intervention. Hayek's 1944 polemic, *The Road to Serfdom* (1944), was a defining text in the emergence of a neoliberal identity, based on a defense of individual economic liberty and a forceful critique of socialism. Hayek developed these insights across a number of books, including *The Constitution of Liberty* (1960), which elaborated on the role of the state in a free market system. Milton Friedman's book, *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962) was a landmark American book in tying the idea of political freedom to the pursuit of economic freedoms. Friedman's short essay, 'Neoliberalism and its prospects' (1951), gives a succinct account of the political logic of

neoliberalism, at a time when the term was avowed by neoliberals themselves. Isaiah Berlin's essay, 'Two Concepts of Liberty' (1958), is an important reference point in clarifying the differences between negative and positive discourses of liberty.

#### *Critical and secondary accounts of liberalism*

Michael Sandel's *Liberalism and the Limits of Justice* (1982) and *Liberalism and its Critics* (1984) offer definitive accounts of debates internal to liberal theory, as well as critiques of liberalism from communitarian and civic republican perspectives. Foucault's 1977/1978 lectures on the genealogy of liberalism, *Security, Territory, Population* (published in English in 2009), offer a subversive counter-history of liberal thought.

John Gray's short book, *Liberalism* (1995, Second Edition), offers a useful overview of the liberal tradition, which, like his *Hayek on Liberty* (1998, Third Edition), significantly reevaluated its assessment of (neo)liberalism across editions. Written for a general audience, Edward Fawcett's *Liberalism: The Life of an Idea* (2014) presents a wide-ranging overview of the different historical and political iterations of liberalism. Paul Starr's *Freedom's Power: The History and Promise of Liberalism* (2007) offers a strong defense of the countervailing tendencies of a constitutional liberal tradition, against the doctrinaire anti-statism of "laissez-faire" liberalism.

#### *Critical accounts of neoliberalism*

David Harvey's *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (2005) remains a defining text in crystalizing a Marxist, class-based analysis of neoliberalism. Foucault's 1978/1979 lectures on the genealogy of neoliberalism *The Birth of Biopolitics* (translated in English in 2008) have been particularly

influential on those seeking a more empirical, less normative account of neoliberalism's emergence. In recent years, there has been a flurry of excellent historical accounts of the intellectual and institutional development of neoliberal thought, including Jamie Peck's *Construction of Neoliberal Reason* (2010), Angus Burgin's *The Great Persuasion: Reinventing free markets since the Depression* (2012), Daniel Stedman-Jones' *Masters of the Universe: Hayek, Friedman and the Birth of Neoliberal Politics*, and Will Davies' *The Limits of Neoliberalism* (2014). Philip Mirowski has been an important figure in bringing attention to the epistemological grounds and movement of neoliberal thought. The contributions in his edited volume with Dieher Plehwe, *The Road from Mont Pelerin: The Making of the Neoliberal Thought Collective* (2105 [2009]), explore how neoliberal ideas and policies were embedded in different national and cultural contexts. Mirowski's 2013 book *Never let a serious crisis go to waste: How neoliberalism survived the financial meltdown* examines how the authority of neoliberalism survived the 2007-2008 financial crisis, as does Colin Crouch's *The strange non-death of neoliberalism* (2011).

#### *Critical communication/media research on neoliberalism*

While much media and communication studies research tends to discuss neoliberalism in a broadstroke, perfunctory or dismissive way, rather than interrogate or engage with neoliberal ideas and the concept of neoliberalism itself, there are significant exceptions.

Des Freedman's account of media power, as both a material and relational property, leads him to develop a radical approach to the critique of neoliberalism in *The Contradictions of Media Power* (2014). Building on weaknesses in the liberal pluralist, cultural studies and political economic approaches, and insisting on the need to critique neoliberalism as a particular form of capitalism, the book offers a solid overview of the literature from an unabashedly Marxist perspective.



Sean Phelan's *Neoliberalism, Media and the Political* (2014) draws primarily on the discourse theory of Ernesto Laclau and the field theory of Pierre Bourdieu to examine how neoliberal logics are articulated and materialized in different mediated settings, including media coverage of politics in New Zealand, Irish austerity, neoliberal nationalism, the "climategate" scandal and the Leveson Inquiry in the UK press. Jen, Schneider, Steve Schwarze, Peter Bsumek, & Jennifer Peeples' recently published *Under Pressure: Coal Industry Rhetoric and Neoliberalism* (2016) conceptualizes neoliberalism from a rhetorical perspective, examining the neoliberalized character of the rhetorical strategies used by the US coal industry.

In a different vein, Tom O'Malley and Janet Jones's edited collection, *The Peacock Committee and UK Broadcasting Policy* (2009), brings together communication scholars and those involved in the decision-making process behind the Peacock Report – the 1986 report into the future financing of the BBC. Mixing historical and critical accounts of neo/liberal economic thinking on broadcasting policy, the book offers a rich and original account of the significance of neoliberal thought to contemporary debates in media regulation.

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