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Neoliberalism and the Context of Context

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Abstract:

Literature on broadcasting regulation in the UK often presents a narrative of decline, from an ethos of public service and citizenship to a neoliberal faith in market logic and the sovereign consumer that undermines the public sphere. Much of this discussion is weakened, however, by a lack of engagement with citizenship and consumption, and the reduction to unitary oppositions of what are actually protean distinctions. This weakness in the literature is particularly problematic when it comes to analysing contemporary changes unreflexively as 'neoliberal', because neoliberalism cannot be reduced to the passing of power from the state to the market, or to a simple process of privatisation or individualisation. Rather, neoliberalism involves the changing governmental relation *between* state and market, and *between* citizens and consumers. Consequently, engagement with theoretical debates on citizenship, consumption and neoliberalism will be recommended to provide a more sophisticated reading of broadcasting as a public sphere.

Keywords: Broadcasting, Citizenship, Consumption, Neoliberalism, Public Sphere

Introduction

Contemporary media studies tends to approach broadcasting through the theoretical lens of the public sphere, and to present the regulation of broadcasting in the UK as a history of decline, from an ethos of public service that established the conditions and supported the aims of the public sphere, to a neoliberal faith in market logic that undermines those conditions and is detrimental to those aims. Concomitant with this shift from a public to a private perspective is a corresponding shift in the way in which the public are perceived, from citizens to consumers, where the former are assumed to be the active members of a political community and the latter the self-interested individuals of civil society. Much of this discussion is weakened, however, by a lack of careful consideration of the meanings and implications of the concepts themselves, reducing what are actually protean distinctions between contentious concepts to unitary oppositions of commonsensical terms. Particular readings of the citizen-consumer or public-private dichotomy also reflect deeper theoretical assumptions or ideological commitments that can have normative implications for the arguments they are drawn on to support (Weintraub, 1997). This weakness in the dominant literature is particularly problematic when it comes to analysing contemporary changes unreflexively as 'neoliberal', because neoliberalism cannot be reduced to the passing of power from the state to the market, or to a simple process of privatisation or individualisation. Rather, neoliberalism involves the changing governmental relation *between* state and market, and the modification of the differences *between* citizens and consumers in civil society (Foucault, 2010).

Taking this claim as its starting point, this article will attempt to clarify the ambiguity of the key concepts of debate on media regulation, advocating the need for the complexification of

distinctions rather than their simplification. It will argue that a protean appreciation of the dichotomy is generally superior to the unitary reading given by media studies scholars, as it can help explain the ways in which public and private interests, and citizen and consumer identities, have been reconfigured over time. More specifically, it will argue that it is all the more necessary in the contemporary era of neoliberalism, as it is precisely the meanings of the terms and the relation between them that is undergoing reconfiguration, rather than simply a case of a shift in emphasis from one to the other. It will not, however, argue for an embrace of consumption and commercialisation as some form of new citizenship, or ignore the threat from state and corporate power, nor the influence of powerful private interests. Less critical of the dominant approach itself than of those who have critiqued it more dismissively, this article nevertheless argues for future analyses to engage more closely with the literature on citizenship, consumption and neoliberalism, and to reframe critical approaches within a perspective more amenable to theoretical complexity and nuance, if accounts of regulatory and discursive change are to convince more than the already converted.

The article is structured in three parts. Beginning with an account of recent work on broadcasting regulation, the contemporary concern with neoliberalism, citizens, consumers and the public sphere will be situated within a tradition of critiques made since the 1980s. Developments in citizenship and consumption studies that offer a substantive critique of the traditional dichotomy drawn upon in broadcasting literature will then be looked at more closely. Finally, recent critiques of the term 'neoliberalism' will be drawn on to offer not only a more informed use of that particular term, but also a still more comprehensive account of the protean distinction between citizens and consumers, and to ultimately recommend a more thorough and convincing application of all these terms to accounts of broadcasting regulation and the public sphere.

Citizens and Consumers in Broadcasting Regulation

Through a series of publications (ultimately 2012), Peter Lunt and Sonia Livingstone have demonstrated the ways in which the UK's New Labour government (1997-2010) and Ofcom, the media and communications regulator (established in 2003), have framed the public interest in terms of citizen and consumer interests. More recently, the contemporary Conservative-led coalition government's distrust of 'unelected quangos' has reminded us of Ofcom's status as an independent media regulator, the embodiment, according to Lunt and Livingstone, of New Labour's social democratic response to changes, brought about by economic and technological convergence, in the 'relations of power and legitimacy in representative liberal democracies' (2012: 20). But despite the ostensible freedom from both state and market, and the splitting of citizen and consumer interests, Ofcom's 'uneasy compromise between free market and state intervention approaches' (2012: 20, 35), or 'social democratic and neoliberal perspectives' (2012: 19, 192), has meant an inconsistent approach to distinguishing between the two. While the regulator's work on broadcasting, for instance, has over time redressed its balance between citizen and consumer interests (2012: 113), its rationale to promote media literacy has varied between a technocratic motivation to deregulate and a democratic project to reduce the digital divide (2012: 140). For Ofcom, however, these two approaches are 'not so different' after all, and 'can, in fact, be captured in a wider economic framework'. Seeing itself as primarily an economic regulator, and interpreting as such a fundamental ambiguity in the Communications White Paper 2000 and

Act 2003, Ofcom has seen fit to redefine public service and the market as non-conflicting subsets of the public interest (Dawes, 2007), and by conjoining the citizen and consumer as the ‘citizen-consumer’ – and latterly simply as ‘consumer’ – they have foregrounded competition as the primary instrument to further the interests of both (Lunt & Livingstone, 2012: 49).

The recognition of such a terminologically charged debate invites discursive analysis of media regulation texts, and Lunt and Livingstone's forays into this area are part of a wider trend to map the discursive terrain, particularly in relation to broadcasting, at national and international levels. These studies critique the policymaking preoccupation with ensuring an effective market and limiting government action to market and technical matters (Goodwin & Spittle, 2002), and reveal regulatory attempts to equate citizenship with consumption (Harrison & Woods, 2000, 2001; Harrison & Wessels, 2005), and the public interest with market objectives (Dawes, 2007; Naranen, 2002). Meanwhile, others have noted the rise of external and internal auditing and accountability cultures within broadcasting, and their role in reforming public service, redefining public interest, and recasting citizens as consumers (Born, 2003; Coppens & Saeys, 2006; McQuail, 2003). Such trends in broadcasting regulation are associated with a ‘neoliberal’ logic (Hesmondhalgh, 2005; S Harvey, 2006), where neoliberalism is seen as a free market ideology that serves powerful private interests, and that undermines both PSB and the public sphere (Leys, 2001).

But although these trends necessitate a critical counterbalance (Freedman, 2008: 23), and as *politically* useful and important as these studies are, they are weakened *theoretically* by their rudimentary readings of neoliberalism as an ideology, citizenship as a set of rights, and consumption as synonymous with consumerism. While arbitrary distinctions between citizens and consumers may actually obfuscate new spaces and practices of public connection (Couldry, 2004), they may also obstruct the diagnosis of emerging threats to the public sphere. Likewise, while the misrecognition of neoliberalism, as simply the undermining of citizenship by consumption, risks ignoring the ways in which neoliberal techniques can sometimes contribute towards citizenship and actually enable the public sphere, it also risks undermining the efficacy of the critical counterbalance itself. The linking of civic republicanism and liberalism, for example, to Ofcom’s expectations regarding the citizen and consumer interests, respectively (Lunt & Livingstone, 2012: 37), leads to a conceptual confusion that undermines attempts to make broader claims about the significance of media regulation to the public sphere. It confuses liberal and republican traditions, and assumes untenable distinctions between social democracy and neoliberalism, attributing a relative importance to citizenship that somehow rings hollow, and presenting Ofcom as a blend of neoliberal and republican approaches, rather than as the very embodiment of neoliberalism (Dawes, 2013b).

Such a reading is by no means without precedent, however, and contributes to an impressive body of literature that is now some 30 years old. Underlying this literature is an assumption of a dichotomy between broadcasting as a public service catering to the benefits of citizens, and broadcasting as a commercial market, in which the consumer is sovereign and individual choice is valued above all else (Garnham, 1983; Murdock, 1993, 1999; Scannell, 1990). Citizenship is here rooted in TH Marshall’s (1969) account of political, civil and social rights, to which are added an elaboration of cultural-informational rights to provide a rationale for the particular importance of broadcasting to democracy (Murdock, 1999). Such an approach also views broadcasting as an ideal type of public sphere (Garnham, 1986; Scannell, 1989), and interprets the history of its regulation, from public service to market, in the same mood of

decline as Habermas (1989) interpreted that of the bourgeois public sphere in its free press guise. Whether scholars are critical or not of the extent to which broadcasting has in practice conformed to the normative ideal, the trend in regulation since the late 1980s is deemed unanimously to have had a detrimental impact on the public sphere.

The gradual translation into English of Habermas's work on the public sphere raised issues that had been largely neglected in the English-speaking world (Thompson, 1993: 173), which had until then favoured approaching the role of broadcasting within either the framework of the state/civil society dichotomy and the liberal theory of the free press (Garnham, 1986: 39-40), or a 'critical paradigm' (Hall, 1982; Scannell, 1989), which was dismissive of press freedom and the democratic potential of the mass media. Distinct from both the economy and the state, the public sphere defined a space between the two (Garnham, 1986: 41), which offered for the first time a viable democratic alternative to the free press, and a seemingly accurate description of PSB: hypothetically insulated from control by both the state and the market, and presupposing, it was alleged, a political rather than an economic audience (Garnham, 1986: 45-47). The appropriation of the public sphere concept subsequently formed part of the British left's defence of PSB against Thatcherite reforms (Garnham, 1986: 40) and successive waves of marketization (Hesmondhalgh, 2007), and armed proponents of PSB with the emancipatory and libertarian arguments they needed to challenge those of the marketeers (Collins, 1993: 246-247). Although there were also criticisms of PSB from the left (in terms of the BBC's paternalism), and praise for the democratic importance of commercial PSB (Garnham, 2003; Scannell, 1990), the association of a public service regulated environment with the public sphere established the prospect of an unregulated broadcasting market as a threat to democracy (Dahlgren, 2000: 13), and even writers more critical of PSB and some of the assumptions made by Habermas (Curran, 1991; Thompson, 1995) advocated a move away from both Marxist and free press approaches.

Consequently, the 'sufficient diversity of contending perspectives' (Gurevitch et al, 1982: 8) that existed at the beginning of the 1980s, albeit for the most part within a Marxist framework, would not last until the end of the decade, with the introduction of the public sphere concept quashing the 'lively and productive climate of (theoretical) debate' that had been predicted. Academic thinking on broadcasting is now grounded (albeit not uncritically) in the links between PSB, citizenship and the public sphere. Admittedly, increasing attention has been paid to questions about the culture-politics divide and the normative or empirical, universal or plural application of the public sphere concept (Born, 2006: 106; Fenton & Downey, 2003), as well as to political philosophical debates on democracy and difference (Born, 2006), and the contested nature of citizenship and the public interest, particularly in postcolonial societies (Wasserman, 2013; Wasserman & Jacobs, 2013). But despite such qualification and recognition of complexity, these questions tend to be incorporated into a recasting of citizenship and the public sphere along less universal, exclusive or rational lines, or into an updated account of either citizenship (Coleman, 2001; 2005) or the public sphere (Dahlberg, 2001; Dahlgren, 2005) in the context of technological changes.

There has recently, however, been an increasing weariness with the ubiquity of these terms of debate, and dissatisfaction with the level of engagement or appropriateness of their application to PSB (Flew, 2006; Jacka, 2003; Nolan, 2006). Unfortunately, these critiques tend to dismiss outright both the public sphere and PSB, without sufficient engagement with the relevant theoretical debates or adequate regard for an account of power. While they valuably turn attention to the positive aspects of contemporary neoliberalisation that 'may promote core social democratic values such as programme diversity and media pluralism'

(Flew, 2006: 298), they risk glossing over the ways in which neoliberalism has had an undeniably negative impact upon the public sphere. Less dismissive critiques have, on the other hand, provided exhaustive accounts of the many uses of the public service concept in broadcasting (Syvertsen, 1999), many of which have more to do with public utilities or passive audiences than with the public sphere, and questioned the extent to which there has really been a shift from a golden to a neoliberal age of media regulation (Hallin, 2008). Others have engaged more substantively with the ‘perilous strategy’ of tying the public sphere to PSB (Keane, 1995: 4), and the forcing of a normative concept such as the public sphere upon an abstract idealisation of PSB without an account of how such institutions actually operate (Sondergaard, 1999). Although the splitting of the public sphere from its association with both PSB and Habermasian normative criteria (Keane, 1991: 90, 155), and the recasting of press freedom in terms of freedom from both the state and the market (Dawes, 2013a, 2013c), have been proposed as alternatives, such ideas have met with a cool reception (Scannell, 1992) when applied to broadcasting because of their consequences for the public ownership of PSB.

The Habermasian inheritance (see also Habermas, 1992; 1996) that has informed this perspective has been misleadingly selective and particular, it is argued, as it remains unclear that there is ‘a *necessary* irreconcilability’ between the market and either PSB or the public sphere (Collins, 1993: 257-258). Certainly, Habermas demonstrates that the initial potential of the market to produce a public sphere is thwarted in the long-term by the rise of press barons, the manipulation of public opinion by private interests, and the reduction of the public to a mass of *consumers*, all consequences of a public sphere separated from the state but not sufficiently separate from the market. But he also demonstrates the negative impact of the welfare state on the public sphere. For despite making the private lives of the public more equal as a supplementary corrective to the destabilising effects of capitalism, the construction of the public as a passive *citizenry* of recipients of state aid, requiring state interference and thus compromising their freedom from the state (and the legitimacy of the liberal state as one which does not interfere in the private realm), broke down the public-private distinction between politics and economy, and undermined just as much as market processes the ability of citizens to form an active public and hold political power to account. The rise of spin and marketing discourse within politics and the subsequent manipulation of public opinion by the state have only exacerbated *both* these trends.

In other words, the liberal equation of the free press with the free market simultaneously enabled and undermined the public sphere by making the public free from the state but defenceless against the market, frustrating the extent to which they could act as citizens rather than as consumers. Similarly, in correcting the failure of press freedom, the liberal compromise of PSB enabled the public sphere by making the public free from the market and private interests (their own as well as those of powerful corporations), but simultaneously undermined it by reducing citizenship to a passive, top-down relationship between community and nation-state. As important as this type of citizenship may be as a corrective to press freedom’s merging of citizenship and consumption, the extent to which it can be equated with a *political* community and seen as more significant for the public sphere is dubious.

In contrast to the willingness to engage with theories of citizenship and the public sphere, however, there is a notable reluctance to engage with theoretical debates around consumption and neoliberalism. Consumption is held to be the opposite of citizenship, and suggestions to the contrary are treated with understandable suspicion by those wary of the application of free market rhetoric to broadcasting regulation. Similarly, despite rare acknowledgments that references to neoliberalism require greater nuance (Hesmondhalgh, 2005), or warnings that

the ‘intuitive’ focus on a big picture narrative of global neoliberal trends risks privileging similarities in privatisation and liberalisation over ‘diverging accents’ in their implementation (Parthasarathi, 2010), such accounts limit themselves to the ways in which neoliberalism is combined with other ideologies in policy and regulation, avoiding engagement with neoliberal literature itself or with critical theoretical debates on neoliberalism that aren’t limited to viewing it simply in ideological terms. Further, neoliberalism is widely seen as the process by which consumption and the market undermine citizenship and public service to the detriment of the public sphere. But as convincing (and convenient) as this is, it ignores the ways in which the relation between citizenship and consumption is reconfigured over time, and in which both liberalism and neoliberalism, understood as political-economic governmentalities, simultaneously enable and undermine the public sphere.

Taking such perspectives into account, this article argues for a qualification of the claim that there has been a shift from citizenship to consumption in broadcasting regulation, and for a reframing of the critique of neoliberal ideology within a governmental approach to both liberalism and neoliberalism (Foucault, 2009; 2010). Opting for a governmental rather than an ideological approach, and applying protean rather than unitary readings of the citizen-consumer dichotomy, avoids imposing normative assumptions upon actually existing neoliberalisms, revealing instead the identities, relations and practices of public communication that may actually be emerging (Chakravarty, 2004; 2007; Flew, 2006). In contrast to the dominant argument that there has been a shift from active citizenship to passive consumerism, therefore, an engagement with the literature on citizenship and consumption enables us to examine the extent to which early and late broadcasting have both been at times positive and negative forces for the liberal public sphere. Considering the ways in which liberalism’s reduction of press freedom to a free market in the 19th Century, as well as its reduction of citizenship to a public service relationship with the state for much of the 20th Century, both enabled and undermined the public sphere, closer engagement with neoliberal thought suggests that it too may simultaneously enable and undermine the public sphere, albeit in different ways, contrary to the dominant view that equates it simply with the *laissez-fairist* and consumerist erosion of the public sphere, more appropriate to a critique of liberal press freedom.

Citizenship and Consumption

The critical scholarship on broadcasting policy and regulation, outlined above, assumes an opposition between the *public* duties and ethics of citizenship on the one hand, and the *private* pleasures and aesthetics of consumption on the other, as well as a trajectory from the former to the latter, whereby contemporary society is characterised by the undermining of citizenship by consumption (cf. Bauman, 2000). This perspective is drawn upon to critique policy initiatives that seem to favour deregulation and individual choice over public service regulation and community, as well as an alternative scholarly perspective that suggests instead that consumption should be embraced as a new form of post-national citizenship. However, while constituting an important way of theorising the relationship between citizenship and consumption, and while performing an important role in warning citizens of the threat of commodification and corporate power, these terms of debate have become narrow and self-limiting, ignoring the growing body of literature on citizenship, consumption and, more

recently, the long-term and complex relationship between the two (Soper & Trentmann, 2008: 4; Stevenson, 2003: 127, 132).

While references to ‘citizen’ in the literature on broadcasting draw on the important work of TH Marshall, for instance, they ignore developments in citizenship studies that have more critically engaged with Marshall, and with citizenship more generally, to elaborate a more nuanced and complex account of ‘citizens’. Marshall had argued that the socio-economic rights encapsulated in the 20th Century welfare state were built on 19th Century political rights (such as the right to vote in a newly emerging parliamentary democracy), which were in turn additions to 18th Century civil and legal rights (such as the right to property). In elaborating his case for PSB, Murdock added his idea (anticipated by Parsons’ work on cultural rights and the university) of cultural-informational rights, which would be necessary to ensure that relevant information and arguments, as well as opportunities for representation and recognition, would be available to all citizens.

But, as influential as Marshall’s social history has been, it makes some problematic assumptions that the uncritical appropriation of his account into broadcasting scholarship has perpetuated. Liberal accounts of citizenship, such as Marshall’s evolutionary and ethnocentric view of the attainment of these homogenous rights, tend to emphasise the institutional development of rights passed down to a passive citizenry by a sovereign state (Weintraub, 1997; Stevenson, 2003: 7), glossing over issues of social struggle and difference (beyond those of class), and neglecting a republican focus on the opportunities for citizens to actively participate in public life. Although Marshall’s account captures sufficiently the legal dimension of citizenship, it fails to distinguish between active and passive types of citizenship and so falls short of capturing the ethical dimension of civic virtue (Dagger, 2002: 153).

Further, the ambiguity in Marshall’s account of the relationship between citizenship and capitalism (Turner, 1993: 8), and between liberalism and socialism, necessitates a greater degree of critical engagement than that which is conventionally offered. In retrospect, his account of the ‘compromised formation’ (Hall, 2011) that was the British welfare state can be seen as a liberal defence of the ‘hyphenated society’, which simultaneously balanced the egalitarianism of parliamentary democracy with the class inequalities of the capitalist market (Turner, 1993: 15). As such, the development of the welfare state in Britain can be seen as the exemplar of a liberal strategy to incorporate the working class into the private market (Mann, 1987; Turner, 1990: 196). While Marxist critics have focused on Marshall’s legitimization of class inequality, supporting the welfare state as a supplement to the market rather than as a substitution, it is his emphasis on the link between welfare and citizenship that is more problematic for those concerned with the public sphere, because it relegates citizens to a passivity that precludes their participation in public life. For Habermas, of course, it was the construction of the passive citizen of the welfare state as much as the passive consumer of the free market that undermined the bourgeois public sphere.

Consequently, an account of citizenship as a set of practices has been developed as an alternative to Marshall’s account of citizenship as a set of rights. Arguing that different historical circumstances produce different forms of citizenship participation (Turner, 1990, 1993; also Mann, 1987), Turner has suggested two axes of four ideal types (below/above, public/private) of citizenship. The ways in which public and private space are structurally related, and whether citizenship is handed down from above or struggled for from below, will affect the extent to which citizenship is active or passive. Liberal citizenship, however, is inherently passive – requiring nothing more than membership of a given community – as well

as privatistic and materialistic – individuals being defined through private property, contract and the market (Schuck, 2002: 131-133). Republican citizenship, by contrast, requires more than membership of a given community (Weintraub, 1997: 13), and less privileging of the private individual. Rather, commitment to the common good over individual self-interests, and active participation in public life, are required. Such civic virtue and ‘publicity’, as well as an emphasis on self-government rather than individual freedom (Dagger, 2002: 146-149), are the cornerstones of republicanism, and constitute the kind of active citizenship necessary for a public sphere.

Since the emergence of citizenship studies in the 1990s, citizenship has been redefined and reconfigured in three more fundamental ways: in terms of extent (inclusion/exclusion), content (rights/obligations) and depth (thickness/thinness). Its modern liberal conception as a state-bestowed legal status has been challenged and broadened to more adequately include struggles for recognition and redistribution, and the flexible, differentiated nature of (cultural or cosmopolitan) citizenship beyond the nation-state and the political realm (Stevenson, 2003), while emphasis has increasingly been placed on citizenship as a non-linear and non-universal process of losing as well as claiming and expanding rights (Isin & Turner, 2002: 2-9).

Until recently, however, the literature on citizenship has shown little interest in consumption, maintaining the distinction between the individualised consumer in a ‘neoliberal world of markets’ and the citizen of the state, while the literature on consumption has likewise tended to leave implicit any connections to citizenship. But this divide between public-citizen and private-consumer ignores the complexity of consumer cultures and the role of consumption as an important source of political engagement, as well as local and global spheres of politics above and below the level of the nation-state (Soper & Trentmann, 2008: 1-2).

Terms like consumerism and consumer society have been recurrent characterisations of 20th Century society. Critiques have ranged from those concerned with the inferior qualities of mass produced commodities, disregard for labour, unnecessary waste or, more recently, environmental consequences, to those more preoccupied with the detrimental effect on character or withdrawal from the public and political realm (Schudson, 1998). The republican perspective and the Frankfurt School’s critique of the culture industry have proven to be the most influential traditions of critique, while in recent decades it is Zygmunt Bauman (2000) who has made the most significant contribution to the critique of consumption, in particular through his theory of individualisation in liquid modernity. In his narrative of the shift from the producer society of solid modernity to the consumer society of liquid modernity, flexibility replaces solidity as the ideal condition to be pursued in the negotiation between negative and positive freedoms (Bauman in Dawes, 2011: 132-136). The accompanying process of (enforced) individualisation divorces individual from collective freedoms, devolving to individuals powers previously assumed by the state (Bauman 2000; Gane 2012: 621). In Bauman’s Arendtian reading, the erosion of public institutions and civic virtue by private processes and the market (Warde, 2010: xxviii) constitutes the privatisation and depoliticisation of the public sphere.

But these normative critiques have been challenged by the shift from economic and psychological accounts of consumption to more socio-cultural accounts of actual practices. This sociology of consumption is more informed by empirical and historical research, and less adherent to mass culture theory’s negative evaluation of the consumer (Featherstone, 2007: 13). Consequently, we now have a more sophisticated understanding and nuanced sense of the

origins and development of consumer cultures around the world (Sassatelli, 2007; Trentmann, 2004; Warde, 2010), that resists simplistic periodization, and goes against the view of consumption as a late 20th century phenomenon that simply homogenises and erodes civic engagement. Historical research has revealed that the consumer has a longer history than advanced liberalism, sharing with citizenship its roots in rights and equity rather than individual choice. The fusion of multiple consumer identities into the universal subject of the sovereign consumer, it is argued, has been as long a process of social and political contestation as the history of citizenship, and the privatisation of the consumer reveals only its recent history (Trentmann, 2007: 151). In advocating a broader definition of consumption beyond status emulation or the materialist acquisition of goods by individuals, such as the suggestion that it comprises the ‘selection, purchase, use, maintenance, repair or disposal of any product or service’, (Campbell in Warde, 2010: xxiv-xxv, xxxii), or the elaboration of consumption as a process much larger than the market and essential for the forging of social relationships (Miller, 2012; Warde, 2010), there has also been a greater sensitivity to consumption that is ‘ordinary’ – inconspicuous consumption of social services and publicly provided goods as well as market products – and to the empowering potential of shopping. More recently, there has also been a growing interest in ethical consumption, whereby economic rationality is subordinated to ethical considerations (Nava in Stevenson, 2003: 134; Sassatelli, 2007).

In light of such research that exposes the ‘contradictory and multi-faceted workings of consumption’, and theoretical developments in the debate around cultures and politics of consumption, ideas such as consumerism and consumer society become of ‘diminishing analytical and conceptual usefulness’ (Trentmann, 2004: 376-380). A more tautological approach is required that acknowledges the full spectrum of forms of consumption, that doesn’t reduce consumer politics to resistance to consumerism (2004: 377), and that reformulates the economic dimension of consumption to account for its collective and active dimensions. Rather than assuming a competitive relation between citizenship and consumption, where the expansion of one necessitates the decline of the other (2004: 379), the ways in which they interact needs to be taken into account (Warde, 2010: xlii). Such an approach recognises that consumption expresses, functions and shapes citizenship (Jubas, 2007: 232; Trentmann, 2007: 154), and demonstrates that consumption is embedded within a larger universe of civic values that blends ideas of individualism with collective identities and social solidarities, and subsequently makes the distinction between citizen and consumer less evident (Trentmann, 2004: 379-382). This emerging notion of the ‘consumer-citizen’ redefines the citizen’s rights to be a consumer, and the consumer’s responsibilities to question the consequences, risks and costs of consumption (Featherstone, 2007: xvii), while its redrawn history, reaching back to at least the 19th Century, has varied in terms of its emphasis on individualism or collectivism, and on the role of the state and market (Jubas, 2007).

The mounting evidence of consumption as a political site for collective mobilisation, and the recognition of citizenship and consumption as omnipresent and overlapping categories, rather than successive ideal-types, are at odds with the conventional distinction between individual choice and political organisation, as well as the nostalgic narrative of the shift from traditional community and public space to neoliberalism and consumerised politics (Trentmann, 2004: 392-399). Closer engagement with theories of citizenship and consumption suggests, therefore, that a historical analysis of the ways in which citizens and consumers are configured over time would produce a theoretically more revealing account of broadcasting regulation (and its consequences for the public sphere), than an approach which simplistically

equates the public sphere with vague notions of citizenship and PSB, and distinguishes it from equally vague notions of consumption, the market and neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism: From Ideology to Governmentality

‘Neoliberalism’ has, however, been heretofore little more than a convenient bogeyman for commentators on the disempowerment of politics by economics, particularly in the context of market attacks on the welfare state (Gane, 2012: 613), and the privatisation of public services. Although some have recently acknowledged critiques of the term ‘neoliberalism’ – for instance, its ‘totalizing reach, eliding of other histories, and application to almost everything today’ (Allison & Piot, 2011: 5) – there remains an attachment to it as an umbrella term for otherwise complex processes. Despite acknowledging the term’s ubiquity, reductiveness and lack of geo-historical specificity, for instance, Stuart Hall nevertheless insists upon the political necessity of naming neoliberalism to give focus to its resistance, arguing that it has enough common features to warrant at least a provisional conceptual identity (Hall, 2011: 706).

Announcements of neoliberal trends in broadcasting regulation and elsewhere tend to refer understandably to David Harvey’s seminal contribution (2007), but they demonstrate unfortunately little critical engagement with Harvey’s approach, and limited awareness of the wider array of perspectives on neoliberalism. Both Hall and Harvey reduce neoliberalism to an ideological and hegemonic project (Hall, 2011: 728) to disembed capital from the constraints of Keynesian interventionism (D Harvey, 2007: 11), and to oversee ‘the shift of power and wealth back to the already rich and powerful’ (Hall, 2011: 721; D Harvey, 2007: 42). While these aims and consequences are certainly discernible, however, it seems misleading to associate them with neoliberalism while selectively ignoring other contemporary trends and other facets of neoliberal thought (Gane, 2012: 613). Although Harvey does distinguish between neoliberalism as a utopian and as a political project, for instance, he argues that the fundamental contradictions between them result in the discarding of principles in favour of the restoration of power to economic elites (D Harvey, 2007: 19-21). But this avoids engagement with theoretical debates on the role of the state and the market within (neo)liberalism, as well as contextual differences between examples of neoliberalisation in action, and, consequently, the relation between the theory and practice of neoliberalism.

Further, in privileging certain aspects of these complex processes, such as privatisation and the shift from citizen to consumer, such approaches continue to ignore the ongoing reconfiguration of citizenship and consumption, and the ‘novel subjectivities and sovereignties that are emerging under its sign’, as the derisive treatment of Ofcom’s citizen-consumer demonstrates. They also ignore its ‘less-dominant features and less-known origins’ (Allison & Piot, 2011: 5), such as the ordoliberal aim to bridge the gap between unfettered capitalism and state control (Peck, 2010: 60), the Washington Consensus’s lack of consensus on the issue of state provision of education and healthcare (Collier, 2012: 192), and the neoliberal critique of the influence of private interests in determining the rationale behind state monopoly in broadcasting (Coase, 1947).

In contrast, governmental approaches (Collier, 2011) and recent contributions towards a critical history and sociology of neoliberalism (Jones, 2012; Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009; Peck, 2010) deal not only with the contradictory ways in which these elements combine with other policies, and the contextual differences in their application from one country to another, but with the history of liberal and neoliberal thought, and an engagement with the political-economic debates within liberalism and neoliberalism. This literature suggests a longer and more detailed history than tends to be assumed, and provides a corrective to accounts of neoliberalism framed in terms of *laissez-faire* or individualisation, reminding us that as well as 'roll-back' processes (Peck, 2010) such as deregulation, privatisation and the withdrawal of the state (D Harvey, 2007: 3), neoliberalism also involves new forms of 'roll-out' regulation and intervention, such as the selective empowerment of non-state service providers, and management by audit and devolved governance (Peck, 2010: 23; Gane, 2012: 629). It also turns our attention to a more nuanced appreciation of the changing role of the state and the market, and warns against fetishising neoliberalism as an ideology or class project, representing it as a caricature of liberalism (Mirowski & Plehwe, 2009: 433), or reducing it to (neoclassical) economics (2009: 421), when it should instead be seen as a multidisciplinary concern with theories and practices of the state (2009: 427) and market. Engagement with the history of neoliberal thought demonstrates how flawed dominant assumptions are (2009: 434), allowing us instead to see it as a vision of the 'good society', within which *laissez-faire*, deregulation and the shrinking state are far from necessities; rather, the fundamental concern is to reregulate society, marketise government and redefine the state's role as active producer and guarantor of a stable market society (2009: 434-436).

In light of the above histories, and the publication in full and translation into English of Foucault's lectures of 1978-1980 on the history of liberalism (2009) and neoliberalism (2010) – to which these histories are to various extents indebted – it would be remiss not to reconsider how neoliberalism has affected broadcasting in the UK.

Foucault's lectures highlight that, whereas liberalism insisted on a distinction between state and politics on the one hand, and market and economy on the other, defining a free space as private within an already given political society, and defining government subsequently in terms of its self-limitation (Foucault, 2010: 20), neoliberalism considers how the exercise of political power can be modelled on the principles of the already given market economy, abandoning the necessity of distinguishing between politics and economy, or between citizens and consumers. While liberalism was concerned with the public-private distinctions between *what* and *when* government could and couldn't touch, neoliberalism transcends the distinction between public and private, and concerns itself with *how* government is to touch the previously untouchable (2010: 133). The state/market distinction is broken down in neoliberal thought: the market is no longer a system of exchange between equals, whereby the absence of state intervention ensures that prices are generated by *naturally* occurring competition, but a mechanism whereby the spread of competition throughout an already unequal society is dependent upon active state guidance. *Homo oeconomicus* is no longer seen as a man of exchange and consumption, but of competition and enterprise (2010: 147), governable as both a subject of rights and as an economic actor (2010: 270; 290), and regulated as simultaneously citizen and consumer.

In contrast to the traditional view of neoliberalism as the protection of class interests, or the decline of state powers and the passing down of responsibilities from the state to the individual, therefore, such an account helps us to understand it more accurately as a reconfiguration of the relation between state and market (and between citizens and

consumers), running now from the market to the state, whereby the market structures, intervenes in and marketises the state (Gane, 2012: 611-614). Neoliberalism is then both a market economy without *laissez-faire*, and an active state policy without state intervention (Foucault, 2010: 131-132). It is the general regulation of society by the market within which the state plays a new proactive role (2010: 145), not only occasionally through direct intervention for the benefit of social citizens – as with PSB and the welfare state – but permanently through indirect regulation to ensure competition as the key regulatory mechanism of society (Gane, forthcoming). No longer the liberal principle of government's self-limitation (with the associated principles of individual liberty and press freedom in the private realm), the neoliberal market, independently regulated to cater for the interests of both citizens and consumers, is a permanent economic tribunal confronting government, measuring and assessing each of its activities according to the law of the market (Foucault, 2010: 247-248); undermining, certainly, but also enabling the public sphere in novel ways.

Reframing the political-economic, and often partisan, approach to neoliberalism as an ideology or economic doctrine within a wider theoretical framework that views neoliberalism instead as a form of governmentality, enables an understanding of this 'reasoned way of governing best' (2010: 2). Consequently, critical analysis of broadcasting regulation and policy can concern itself more with the modelling of contemporary political power on market principles (2010: 131), and with the ways in which objects such as the state, market, citizen and consumer are re-formed and re-rationalised over time, rather than limiting itself to teasing out their ideological manipulation (2010: 3). Such a genealogical approach to the history of broadcasting and to the 'reconfiguration' (Collier, 2009) of citizens and consumers, would also enable a more nuanced understanding of the distinctions between classical liberalism and neoliberalism, which, in turn, is invaluable for a rereading of debates on public sphere theory and their application in media studies literature to debates on the role of broadcasting.

Conclusion

One can of course appreciate the political motivation for distinguishing between public service and market approaches to broadcasting regulation, as well as the association of this distinction with that between citizenship and consumption. Likewise, the mapping of these distinctions onto debates about the public sphere and the critique of neoliberal ideology certainly *seem* commonsensical enough. But as a theoretical framework it is weakened by reductive readings of the relation between citizenship and consumption, by a selective reading of public sphere theory, and by a dismissal of more nuanced engagements with neoliberalism. Critical accounts that decry attacks on the welfare state or PSB, while politically necessary, neglect a fuller theoretical appreciation of the ways in which neoliberalism reconfigures citizenship *and* consumption, as well as state and market, and recasts the role of the market in legitimating public opinion and the state. This is not to argue for a dismissal of citizenship and the public sphere as normative benchmarks, or for a move towards a more relativist approach to describing media transformation, but for a qualification of certain assumptions, claims and distinctions, and for a more theoretically robust engagement with wider theories, to support an analysis of media change and the ways in which a regulator's approach to either citizen or consumer interests can enable or undermine the public sphere.

Supplementary to the critique of Ofcom's rhetorical balance between citizen and consumer interests, the extent to which the balance struck at any point contributes to the public sphere needs to be *more* critically assessed; which raises the possibility of faulting some public service initiatives for their blurring of the public-private dichotomy and the passive citizenry they presuppose, or praising market perspectives for the prospects of politicisation they make possible, albeit under the guise of the consumer.

While this author sympathises with elements of the critique of the 'social democratic' approach to PSB in terms of citizenship and the public sphere, and shares the sceptics' interest in governmental alternatives to understanding broadcasting regulation and neoliberalism, it is hoped that this article demonstrates the richness and complexity of theoretical debate on citizenship, consumption and the public sphere, which a truly critical engagement with that on neoliberalism actually makes even more necessary, rather than the need to dispense with such concepts.

Although the critical approach remains pertinent (perhaps more so than ever), engaging with the wider literatures on citizenship, consumption and neoliberalism, and reframing the critical approach within a view of neoliberalism as a political-economic governmentality, allows a theoretically more nuanced critique of historical changes to the regulation of broadcasting, a more sophisticated reading of governments' and regulators' negotiation of the discursive terrain, and a reappraisal of the contradictorily positive and negative contributions of press freedom and PSB approaches, as well as Ofcom's own distinctive approach, to the public sphere. And as well as addressing the concerns of those tired with the usual terms of debate without having to jettison them, such a project could also contribute to a more convincing political critique of corporate power, private interests and market influence, and to an elaboration of a public sphere more efficacious for its critical acknowledgment of both the contradictions of PSB as well as the complexity of neoliberal thought.

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