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**Exploring Neoliberal Social-Reproduction:
A Working Theoretical Framework**

Rodolfo Leyva

Kings College London

Abstract

This article proposes a working theoretical framework to explain and explore processes of neoliberal social reproduction. I focus on the interplay between neoliberal political-economic discourses and practices, contemporary Western media-culture, and individual agency. I make the case that research concerned with the hegemony of neoliberalism and its effects on culture and subjectivity needs to take an interdisciplinary approach that rejects the longstanding structure and agency dichotomy. To do so, I draw on a diverse set of socio-culture theoretical traditions, as well as concepts and arguments from academics not typically associated with social reproduction work. The article concludes by laying out what such an approach might look like.

Exploring Neoliberal Social-Reproduction: A Working Theoretical Framework

1. Introduction

Neoliberalism can be understood as a political-economic paradigm consisting of interrelated ideological, policy, and governmentality elements that call for the implementation of free-market logic and practices into all forms of human decision-making and organization (Braedly & Luxton, 2010). Neoliberal theorists claim that human beings are predominantly rational utility-maximizers that can best serve society when they are allowed to freely pursue their self-interests independent of regulatory agents like the state. Given these reductionist and deterministic ontological assumptions, neoliberal theorists argue that the state should reduce its scope and redefine its role vis-à-vis the market, as doing so will bring about national and global wealth, prosperity, and democracy (Plehwe et al, 2007). Over the last thirty years, neoliberalism has replaced Keynesian forms of capitalism to become the hegemonic paradigm that continues to influence the perspectives and policies of most of the world's governing elites, and in particular, those of the UK and the US -(the leading nation-states in promoting and enforcing neoliberal policies).¹ However, neoliberal policies have ushered in an era of concentrated wealth and power not seen since the 1920's, rampant corporate abuses, and have had mostly detrimental effects on the lives of the majority of working and middle-class peoples across Western and non-Western societies: as Chomsky (1999) and several other leading scholars argue, that much is not seriously in doubt (e.g., Ellwood, 2001; Harvey, 2005; Patel, 2010). Therefore, my concern in this paper is to attempt to explain and explore the various complicated ways in which this political-economic ideology and structure came to be supported, and continues to be maintained and reproduced by the majority populations.

To that end, and by focusing on the UK and US, with a specific emphasis on media-culture, this article will chronologically review some of the key arguments from the more prominent theoretical traditions, which can be used to explain the processes of 'social reproduction'. These processes of social reproduction can be defined an open-ended sense to mean, "all the mechanisms, processes, and practices by which multiple social hierarchies, divisions and relations of wealth, power, and influence are sustained and re-created over time"

¹ Keynesian capitalism refers to the post-war economic system that lasted from around 1950-1980. This form of capitalism contained heavy market regulations where the state took an active role in intervening in the economy in attempts to avoid or ameliorate the more negative effects of the volatile business cycles. Furthermore, a large welfare state was created to ensure a safety net for the poor and working-classes (Ellwood, 2001). For a fuller description and understanding of neoliberal theory, its intellectual history, and how it differs from previous forms of capitalism see Harvey (2005) or Plehwe et al., (2007).

(Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009, p. 86). This work can be loosely categorized as following three broad approaches.

1. The structuralist/political-economy approach, which analyses the symbiotic/reciprocal relationship between the state, the economy, and media-cultural institutions. In this paper, they will be represented by the classic Frankfurt School and the work of Louis Althusser.
2. The agency/cultural studies approach, which analyzes how individuals produce, decode, use, and interpret media culture, represented by the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies.
3. What Kenway & Bullen (2000), refer to as a, “both/and approach which is sensitive to the vertical dimensions of power and ideology and to the horizontal dimensions of contexts and everyday life” (p. 28). Examples of work in this tradition include some of the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Henry Giroux, and contemporary Frankfurt school theorist Douglas Kellner.

These three overarching approaches can be used to explain and describe different aspects of how the current neoliberal conjuncture came to be supported and reproduced by majority populations, and can be used to investigate the effects of neoliberalism at the macro and micro level. By drawing on all three approaches, this article will also propose a reformulated ‘both/and’ approach that considers specific political arguments that are often overlooked yet crucial to a more comprehensive understanding of neoliberal social reproduction.²

2. False Consciousness and Frankfurt School: The Relevance of Dead Germans

During the 1930’s a group of exiled German sociologists, psychologists, philosophers, and literary scholars collectively known as the Frankfurt School, fled to the United States. Disheartened by what they saw as a totalitarian nature of both German and US societies, members of the Frankfurt School sought to explain why the working classes of the industrialized West failed to, among other things, instigate a proletariat revolution. By combining the psychological insights of Sigmund Freud with the historical-materialist perspective of Karl Marx, the Frankfurt School developed and coined the term ‘critical theory’- a broad interdisciplinary cultural materialist approach that analyzes how macro-power

² This reformulated ‘both/and’ approach that I am referring to rejects the structure and agency dichotomy, and is informed by all of the schools and figures mentioned in the introduction to this paper, and in particular by the works of Douglas Kellner. However, I am also including within this approach, arguments, concepts, and lessons from the works of figures that are not typically associated with social-reproduction studies, such as Noam Chomsky, David Graeber, Edward Herman, and Jurgen Habermas, whose works largely inform my media-analysis and political-philosophical arguments that I will argue are largely absent from contemporary social reproduction and media-cultural theories and studies.

structures shape and mediate the cultural practices, experiences, and consciousness of individuals. What follows is a brief overview of some of the main arguments that are most relevant to contemporary Western society as presented by leading members of the classic Frankfurt School; Max Horkheimer, Theodor Adorno, and Herbert Marcuse, who explained US capitalist hegemony in terms of interrelated ideological, structural, and psychological factors.

In 1944, Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno published their seminal piece *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In the landmark chapter titled “The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception,” they argue that post-war US capitalism has in essence created a techno-bureaucratic Weberian ‘iron cage’ that attempts to trap individuals (particularly those of the middle- and working-classes) into perpetual cycles of alienating work and consumption. US popular culture, they argue, in the form of television shows, films, fashion, literature, art, and music, is for the most part industrialized and commodified state-corporate propaganda that promotes consumer capitalism and societal conformity, while simultaneously distracting the public from the source of their presumed economic hardships and alienating work. Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1993) open the chapter by arguing:

The sociological theory that the loss of the support of objectively established religion, the dissolution of the last remnants of pre-capitalism, together with technological and social differentiation or specialization, have led to cultural chaos is disproved every day; for culture now impresses the same stamp on everything. Films, radio and magazines make up a system which is uniform as a whole and in every part. Even the aesthetic activities of political opposites are one in their enthusiastic obedience to the rhythm of the iron system (p. 1).

Throughout the rest of the chapter Horkheimer and Adorno meticulously describe how market logic creates systemic rules that inflect cultural values, artifacts, and aesthetics to the needs of capitalism, thereby helping to turn critical individual citizens into a mass of intellectually passive consumers.³ Starting from the Marxist notion that ideological obfuscations are rooted in the material structures of capitalist production (Villa, 2008),

³ According the classic Frankfurt school, the commercialization of cultural aesthetics, forms, and values, also includes the co-opting of critical counter and subcultural artifacts. That is, the logic of the market, is an inclusive one that seeks to profit from all forms of culture. However, once co-opted for commercial interests, these critical and sometimes anti-capitalist cultural artifacts become depolitized and meaningless commodities that in no way challenge the capitalist establishment e.g., Che Guevarra T-shirts.

Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1993) argue that culture and media industries/corporations disseminate an array of ideological constructs that serve to reinforce the capitalist order/agenda and erode alternative political-economic possibilities. The formulaic Hollywood films, generic pop-music, and banal television shows, they argue, are saturated with affirming US state-capitalist ideals of rugged individualism, private property, financial success, meritocracy, and anti-communism. Audiences of these texts are therefore left with a rather narrow, distorted, corporatized, and conformist reality, where one should not resist or challenge the political-economic order since there exist equal opportunities for all to prosper from. As Villa (2008) argues, anyone that thinks that Horkheimer and Adorno exaggerate this claim, need only look at contemporary Western movies and television shows which continue to pronounce the explicit ‘American Dream’ thesis, that with enough hard work, persistence, and a little luck, absolutely anyone can become rich and famous regardless of their race, class, or gender. Access to success is perceived to be democratic (i.e., open to everyone), and therefore supersedes structural inequality. As Villa (2008) argues, “with one ideological catchphrase-endlessly recycled in TV and movie dramatizations of individuals who ‘overcome the odds’-the grounding myth of society is established. An entire landscape of structural inequality and injustices is banished from our horizon” (p. 154-155).⁴

According to Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1993), while the ideological dissemination of the culture industries is meant to be manipulative and serve ruling class interests, the individuals that run these industries are guided by structural imperatives not by malice or necessarily conspiratorial coordination.⁵ That is, corporations are structurally designed to behave in an instrumental rationalist pursuit of perceived self-interests that require constant economic growth and the elimination of the competition. The corporate structure thus exerts a metaphysical level of agency that guides the behavior of the individuals that run it to actions that will ensure its survival amongst competing interests, and secure its owner’s profits. Cultural-media corporations, argue Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1993), are no different, and are embedded with these same economic structural drives that lead to monopolistic behaviors (e.g., the merging of Warner Brothers with Time Inc. to create Time Warner), interlocking directorates with other business corporations, and the dissemination of

⁴ For example, the following UK and US popular tv shows serve as pointed examples that support Villa’s (2008) argument: *X-Factor*, *Big Brother*, *The Dragons’ Den*, *The Apprentice*, *Joe Millionaire*, *Survivor*, *I love Money*, *Survival of the Riches*, *Who Wants To Be A Millionaire*.

⁵ Culture industries, like other modern corporations, are legally structured in such a way that their managers have to uphold practices that promote the interests of their respective corporations and their shareholders ahead of competing interests. In practice this translates into decisions made by corporate executives that have and continue to lead to mass lay offs, and to a disregard for regulations concerning securities fraud, human rights, worker safety, public health, and or environmental standards (see Achbar et al., 2003; Patel, 2010).

self-serving ideologies. The subsequent and highly influential theses of Mill's (1956) *The Power Elite*, and Herman & Chomsky's (1988) *Manufacturing Consent*, tease out and further empirically validate different aspects of this argument,⁶ but like Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1993), Mills (1956) and Herman and Chomsky (1988), essentially argue that mass media-cultural corporations monopolize and/or become interlocked with other private and state institutions, all of which are structurally driven and designed to spread ideological messages that consequently endorse, legitimate, and promote the interests of the ruling classes who happen to own most of society.⁷

Furthermore, Horkheimer and Adorno (1944/1994) also argue that culture industries work on a psychological dimension to target individuals at the unconscious level. Herbert Marcuse (1964) further developed this Freudian inspired aspect of critical theory, and argues that media-culture industries prey on the individual's libidinal psychological drives in order to elicit consumerist and conformist behaviors. The omnipresent and subliminal advertising produced and spread by profit-oriented media-cultural industries is designed to incite desire in audiences for any number of manufactured wants and needs.⁸ These manipulative and highly psychologically developed advertisements thus attempt to socialize individuals into consumptive modes that, Marcuse (1964) argues, can trap people in perpetual cycles of arousal, desire, consumption, and frustration. Marcuse (1964) terms these perpetual traps of consumption 'repressive desublimation'— a social-psychological process promoted by late capitalist societies and internalized by their members. Capitalist societies implicitly and explicitly encourage their members to give in to their unconscious and repressed libidinal desires, but only through socially sanctioned consumerist practices, e.g., through the consumption and fetishization of commodities like clothing, pornography, sports cars, or violent video games that once purchased and used, fail to fully deliver satisfaction and gratification. This leaves consumers perpetually frustrated and requires that they constantly

⁶ Mills (1956) analyzes the concentration of power in the US, demonstrating that the control of the major executive, economic, and military branches lies within a handful of interlocking elite families and individuals. Herman & Chomsky (1988) argue that the corporate news media in the US effectively act as a propaganda arm for the state and US Pentagon that serves to protect, justify, and legitimate the interests of society's elite. These same arguments apply to all contemporary capitalist societies controlled by a now transnational capitalist class (see Sklair, 2000).

⁷ Note: Despite the fact that contemporary mass media on occasion disseminate critical messages, and probably more so now than during the time of the classic Frankfurt theorists, (e.g., Mark Achbar's (2003) *The Corporation*, Michael Moore's (2009) *Capitalism A Love Story*, Adam Curtis' (2007) *The Trap: What Happened To Our Dreams Of Freedom*), the corporate monopolization of media-cultural industries and communications technologies continues to this day, further narrowing the range of ideological messages that are spread to now global audiences (Herman & McChesney, 2001).

⁸ Contemporary corporations continue to spend billions of dollars on highly developed psychological advertising methods that incite consumerist behaviors. In fact, they continue to fund research in search of the elusive 'buy button'— a hypothetical cognitive reflex that when triggered by specific commercial media will completely override individual autonomy (Rowan, 2008).

consume more and more items to fulfill their repressed desires.⁹ According to Marcuse (1964), this simultaneously creates a condition that incapacitates critical thought and creates the illusion of material well-being, individual originality, and freedom. Hence, Marcuse (1964) notes that rather than resisting state-corporate rule, Western populations, and in particular Western working-classes, are instead manipulated by the hypnotic powers of mass media, and washed in a state of ‘euphoric unhappiness’, mistakenly conflating the freedom to choose between products in the market, with genuine and substantive freedom (e.g., positive freedom). Meanwhile, the environmental impact or structural inequalities that lie behind the production and consumption of those goods and services should at best be an afterthought.¹⁰

Overall, the major insights from classic ‘critical theory’ that I have discussed, so far are that media-cultural corporations operate on an ideological, structural, and psychological level to inculcate the public with a false consciousness; creating a state of consumer cultural hegemony where even counter-cultures critical of capitalism are co-opted for commercial interests. By distracting the public [with a variety of mostly manufactured/false needs and mundane entertainment] from the source of their economic hardships, the ruling elite maintains power and domination over an otherwise aloof, apathetic, and complicit mass that is mostly accepting of, or comfortable with the status-quo.¹¹ While there is certainly much to contest in these arguments, and in particular the seeming lack of individual agency, classic critical theory lays a solid foundation for future research that takes seriously questions of social-psychology, subjectivity, power, and ideology.

3. The Birmingham School of Cultural Studies

But what of resistance to capitalism? How can progressive social change occur given the totality of corporate control as described by classic critical theory? Around the 1960’s-70’s, in reaction to what was viewed as elitist and overtly pessimistic social theory, the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies rejected the more totalizing claims of the earlier Frankfurt School. Leading members, including Richard Hoggart, Stuart Hall, Dick Hebdige,

⁹ If toned down from their more overt psychosexual connotations, and used in a more open-ended sense to describe psychological needs that consumption fulfills (which may or may not be sexual), Marcuse’s (1964) repressive desublimation concept, is a useful, and arguably empirically verifiable concept that can help to explain the unconscious and habitualized consumerist practices that help to maintain and reproduce neoliberalism.

¹⁰ Neoliberalism as a practiced political-economic system depends on a culture of uncritical consumerism where the exploitive nighttime production of commodities is hidden from, or ignored by, Western consumers.

¹¹ While overtly deterministic, the basic lessons from classic ‘critical theory’ cannot be ignored. Modern media and communications technology is more concentrated into the hands of powerful multi-national corporations and reaches more people than ever in history (Herman & McChesney, 2001). The ‘magic bullet’ hypothesis of media effects on audiences has been thoroughly debunked, but to believe that media has no effect whatsoever on individual subjectivity is equally as naïve. A middle-ground exists in the media effects literature that acknowledges that while not totalizing, media play an important role in influencing audience opinion and behavior.

and Paul Willis, argued that far from being merely passive and manipulated cultural dupes, consumers of popular media-culture were active agents that often demonstrated resistance to capitalist hegemony. The classic Birmingham School was influenced by Antonio Gramsci's (1971) concept of hegemony which views culture as a continuously contested terrain, rather than a fixed or determined/determinizing structural entity. Whilst classic 'critical theory' can be read as an open and shut case (i.e., capitalism has created a totalizing hegemonic culture which has trapped, or will trap us all into its instrumentalist grasp), Birmingham theorists were skeptical of such deterministic outlooks, and more interested in examining instances of counter-hegemony. They sought to document how ordinary individuals themselves resisted, interpreted, reformulated, and used popular media-culture. Indeed, Western capitalist societies were never as homogenized and 'massified' as the classic Frankfurt theorists claimed them to be (Kellner, 1998), and in fact contained a number of subtypes, subcultures, and critical public-spheres that had not been co-opted by commercial interests. It was thus up to the classic Birmingham School to salvage the Marxist normative political agenda, and in particular, the working-class consciousness that the Frankfurters had all but abandoned.

Classic texts like Willis' (1977) *Learning To Labour*, and Hall's (1980) *Encoding/Decoding*, argued that institutional and media socialization are not as totalizing as classic critical theory implies. Willis' (1977) detailed ethnography of a group of working-class lads showed that institutional socialization can be resisted and ignored. Rather than conforming to school rules, and blindly accepting the myth that financial success followed from academic merit, Willis' participants were well aware that their chances for upward mobility were hindered by their ascribed social positioning. Thus rather than conforming to school rules and values that they believed would not benefit them anyway, they displayed an array of anti-school behaviors preferring instead to develop customs that would prepare them for their future working-class jobs. Hall (1980) focused his work on media interpretation, and argued that while hegemonic ideology is inscribed as the 'preferred reading' in most media-cultural texts, all readers do not automatically adopt such a reading. The social positioning and historical contexts of individual readers/consumers of media-cultural texts may lead them to adopt different stances from the intended meaning. These can range from accepting, negotiating between, or completely opposing the inscribed intended messages. These and other classic Birmingham works demonstrated the importance and significance of focusing the gaze of cultural studies onto the micro and contextual level to better investigate how exactly individuals living within capitalist societies interpret and live out the norms and values that they are bombarded with, and how they can resist and reformulate them.

Despite their differences from and criticisms of the Frankfurt School, as Kellner (1998) argues, the Birmingham School's version of critical theory can arguably be seen as a complementary addition to classic critical theory. That is, what the Frankfurt theorists overlooked, i.e. the in-depth investigation of media readership at the individual level, can be remedied by applying Birmingham approaches to contemporary social-reproduction research that takes an overtly structural approach. The fact remains that despite all of the instances of counter-hegemony documented by the Birmingham School, neoliberal discourses have won the war of position. Purely macro or purely micro approaches concerned to explain the current neoliberal conjecture will simply not suffice. In the next section, I discuss approaches that attempt to surpass this 'either/or' dilemma.

4. Beyond Consciousness and the French Turn

In the 1970's a number of influential French social theorists developed theoretical approaches to the study of capitalist social-reproduction. Of particular note are Louis Althusser and Pierre Bourdieu, whom like the classic Frankfurt and Birmingham Schools, were also concerned with how capitalist social arrangements reproduced themselves, and constructed nuanced understandings of ideology and socialization. Hegemonic ideology as employed by the Frankfurt and Birmingham Schools conceived of ideology as something that is imposed from above by dominant socio-cultural institutions to obscure an otherwise objective class reality. Individuals are theorized to consciously consent to the dominant order, no matter how stratified or unjust, because they cannot conceive of alternatives to the capitalist system, or because they believe that upward class mobility is possible, i.e. they are the victims of false consciousness. Althusser (1971) maintains this classic Marxist conception of ideology as relevant and operating in 'the last instance', but also draws on Gramsci's (1971) arguments that ideology is not separate from the practical activities of life. Althusser (1971) then adds a second interpretation that invites us to think of 'ideology' as something that works at a fundamentally more unconscious level, helping to shape our mundane everyday individual actions like paying rent, buying food, or depositing a check, all of which further cements the capitalist order and hides the levels of coercion, violence, and inequality that occur in the sphere of private property and commodity production. In undertaking these actions, we do not consciously or falsely consent to capitalism, but rather behave in a habitualized and ritualized way that helps us navigate our way through our everyday lives. As Althusser (1971) explains:

To take another example, when we recognize somebody of our (previous) acquaintance in the street, we show him that we have recognized him (and have

recognized that he has recognized us) by saying to him 'Hello, my friend', and shaking his hand (a material ritual practice of ideological recognition in everyday life) (p. 31).

Althusser (1971) notes that this level of unconscious habituation is ingrained into social subjects through exposure to what he termed as 'ideological state apparatuses' like the family, the media, and the education system, that inculcate individuals into the practices and ideas of those systems. An individual is said to be 'ideologically interpellated' when he/she enacts the thoughts, behaviors, and ascribed roles that have been unconsciously internalized from exposure to these ideological state apparatuses. When individuals do not conform to the roles, statuses, ideals, and expectations of dominant ideological state apparatuses, repressive state apparatuses like the police and the military step in to ensure conformity. However, Althusser (1971) also argues that there are multiple breaks, contradictions, and points of contestation between different ideological state apparatuses and repressive state apparatuses that leave room for agency, critical distance, and resistance. For example, individuals that refuse to join repressive state forces because they come from religious and pacifist backgrounds, or conscientious soldiers that refuse to take up arms, signify a clear contradiction between the interests and ideology of the state and the ideology of individuals who refuse to enact or enforce them. Ideological interpellation operates as a near totalizing socialization process but it is never fully totalized and always contested by the complexities and variances of multiple social systems and sub-systems that teach and expose individuals to any number of different, and in some cases conflicting, ideologies. This allows for individual agency, as subjects are thus free to negotiate and choose between the ideologies and practices to which they have been exposed. Interpellation is therefore a context sensitive theory of socialization that allows social researchers to account for and to contextualize the different types and levels of socialization that a single individual may exhibit, and to hypothesize and document which type of socialization may be more dominant than others.

Pierre Bourdieu developed very similar arguments to Althusser's interpellation/socialization concepts but was less concerned with ideology and more focused on describing and investigating the everyday habits and unconscious behaviors of individuals that make up and reproduce society. Bourdieu's (1977) 'habitus' is a term used to describe the sum of an individual's cognitive dispositions, tastes, habits, and acquired schemes of thought, perception, and actions that result from interaction with autonomous structured social spaces like schools, courts, and work. In occupying various social spaces or 'fields', an individual internalizes any number of unique dispositions that enable him/her to learn, follow, and modify the rules of those spaces. Therefore, for Bourdieu, submission to and reproduction of

the dominant order is a matter of habitus, not consent, as individuals are so unconsciously/cognitively ingrained with everyday structural and cultural practices that they may view them as natural and common sense, and as such, are also unable to recognize how those practices may reproduce social inequalities (Burawoy, 2008). Thus, the enforcement of the dominant order is not reliant on overt and repressive state forces, but is rather a more subtle and mostly symbolic process enforced through what Bourdieu (1990) calls, “symbolic violence, a gentle violence, imperceptible and invisible even to its victims, exerted for the most part through the purely symbolic channels of communication and cognition (more precisely, misrecognition), recognition, or even feeling” (p. 1-2). While Bourdieu’s theories in many ways resemble the structural socialization theories of the classic Frankfurt school and Louis Althusser, the nuance in Bourdieu’s theories is that they help to erase the problematic distinction between structure and agency, and unite them as a simultaneous and reciprocal social process (Gewirtz & Cribb, 2009). In engaging in everyday practices and beliefs, people in effect reproduce social structures, “in a system of circular relations which unite structure and practices” (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977, p. 203). Hence, habitus is simultaneously structure and agency.

To be certain, however, Althusser and Bourdieu’s theories are even more pessimistic about the prospect of social change than the Frankfurters ever were. In a nutshell, their theories seem to suggest that capitalist socialization is so cognitively ingrained into the psyche of individuals living in capitalist societies that social change is essentially a moot point. If this is the case, that is, if individuals are dominated at an unconscious and symbolic level that they are unable to recognize, then there is no need to theorize beyond the false consciousness premises of classic critical theory, as either way stratified capitalist social relations will continue to reproduce themselves. However, and for the sake of a more comprehensive epistemology, I argue that both of these concepts, i.e. false consciousness and symbolic domination, are two sides of the same hegemonic coin, that deserve equal investigation, and that can be used to describe and explain different aspects of how neoliberalism comes to be supported and reproduced by majority populations. Therefore, in order to move beyond this proverbial *cul de sac* in social reproduction theory, it is sufficient to argue that dominant and contemporary social institutions and structures work to interpellate individuals into a hegemonic ideological/discursive set of rules, customs, values, and cognitive dispositions, i.e. into a neoliberal consumerist habitus. It is then up to the social scientist to empirically investigate how far, if at all, hegemonic ideology/symbolic domination has been internalized, negotiated, rejected, and/or contested by individuals living in capitalist societies.

5. Some Political Considerations

In this section I would like to consider a political argument that I feel is sorely missing from contemporary media-cultural theories concerned with social reproduction. In addition to disseminating consumer ideologies, contemporary media-cultural oligopolies, monopolies, and conglomerates also disseminate the ideology that free-market capitalism and republican forms of democracy are the only viable political-economic arrangements. Thus, media-cultural corporations help to perpetuate the hegemony of neoliberalism by circumventing criticism of it on at least two levels. At the first level (as the classic Frankfurt school correctly argued nearly 70 years ago), they bombard audiences with neoliberal discourses and practices. Such discourses stress self-interestedness, competition, greed, and an overall uncritical culture of hyper-consumerism. This hyper-consumer culture stretches to the extent that even political and civic participation is conflated with consumerist practices like voting pre-selected heavily marketed candidates into power, or other acts of what can be termed as politics from a distance, e.g. digital petitions, donations to NGOs, or ethical consumption. As Chomsky (2002) argues:

The people in the public relations industry aren't there for the fun of it. They're doing work. They're trying to instill the right values. In fact, they have a conception of what democracy ought to be: It ought to be a system in which the specialized class is trained to work in the service of the masters, the people who own the society. The rest of the population ought to be deprived of any form of organization, because organization just causes trouble. They ought to be sitting alone in front of the TV and having drilled into their heads the message, which says, the only value in life is to have more commodities or live like that rich middle class family you're watching and to have nice values like harmony and Americanism. That's all there is in life (p. 22).

At the second level, if the first level of inculcation is not achieved, and individuals become critical of the established order, then in constantly promoting the idea that there is no alternative to the established political-economic order, and in reducing political discourse to images, sound-bytes, catchphrases, vacuous slogans, and personalities, media-cultural corporations help to stymie the political-economic imagination of the public. This is not to argue that corporate media is uncritical, but rather that the field of criticism is narrowed and bordered by the opposing views of elite interests and dominant groups (Herman & Chomsky, 1988). Western mainstream media debates over major issues like war and education, financial, or welfare reform, are framed and inflected by state-corporate interests that often obscure non-elite criticisms and minority voices (Chomsky, 2002). This can create a sort of political

dissonance, where even individuals who are critical of the status quo, do little to challenge it, as they are presented with few if any viable alternatives. Hence, their inaction serves to sustain the system by not directly challenging it.

However, political-economic alternatives are not non-existent. Millions of individual activists and organizations both in Western and non-Western countries continue, in some cases in the face of outright violent state-corporate repression, to actively struggle against neoliberal hegemony. For example, Klein (2000) and Graeber (2004) point to several anarchist and anti-globalization groups from all over the world that are not only fiercely anti-neoliberal, but that are also made up of dedicated practitioners of alternative political-economic systems based on altruism, generosity, cooperation, and direct/participatory forms of democracy. Other alternative and recent political developments include the elections and popular support for several South American Left-leaning Presidents who are staunchly opposed to the neoliberal Washington Consensus.

Even if one does not agree with these or other non-elite alternatives and criticisms, their erosion from or demonization by mainstream mass media (Herman & Chomsky, 1988), has a potentially debilitating effect on our political imagination, and on our abilities to conceive of an alternative to the dominant neoliberal model. As Habermas (1991) and McChesney & Nichols (2009) argue, our democratic public spheres continue to be co-opted, cheapened, and stripped of substance by media conglomerates, all while the lively, diverse, open, and free presses that informed generations of radical democratic activism throughout the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries continue to disappear, be bought out, or worse still, turned into manufacturers of ridiculous infotainment that celebrates the opulence of the rich and famous. Independent non-corporate media that report non-elite interests and voices, are marginalized, constantly under-funded, and often have to compete with the highly developed and far reaching spin of state departments and their corporate media conveyor belts (Goodman & Goodman, 2007). It cannot be stressed enough that the range of ideological messages that publics are exposed to via a seemingly three-dimensional mass media is becoming narrower and narrower. As Kellner (1998a) in the US context argues, “giant media conglomerates are producing a new world culture that is in fact a rather shallow reflection of the American Way of Life” (p. 11).

I thus argue that contemporary research on media effects and audience responses must take into account and investigate how mass media influences or shapes the political ideologies, practices, knowledge, and imaginations of audiences. While much of the literature I have discussed focuses on and hypothesizes how media influences economic and cultural

behaviors and ideologies, there is very little work that studies how mass media helps to frame political-philosophical discourses and practices. Much of the literature that describes media effect on politics, focuses mostly on how mass media shapes public opinion on policies and politicians, but completely overlooks how mass media helps to define what ‘democracy’ entails. It is seemingly taken for granted that, for instance, most people of Western inhabitation know about the many variations of democratic philosophy, and have an a priori preference for republican/consumer strands of it, even though they tend to concentrate power in the hands of representatives of mostly elite backgrounds, or in the hands of those that mostly serve elite interests. I suspect, however, that most from neoliberal societies know as much about democratic philosophy and its broad canon, as they know about neoliberal theory, i.e. very little. Although this is only a personal insight at this point, contemporary media-cultural and social reproduction research has lagged on this very crucial hegemonic aspect of neoliberal societies. That is, the study of how non-elite everyday people, e.g. people of working and middle-class backgrounds, conceive of, interpret, and reproduce democratic institutions (of whatever strand), is often relegated to fringe historical or anthropological accounts (e.g., Graeber, 2004; Thompson, 1967; Zinn, 2003). A both/and approach to the study of neoliberal social-reproduction should thus also investigate and document how non-elite everyday Western inhabitants constitute, practice, and reproduce politics and political institutions, and how mass media helps to shape and inform those discourses and practices. The investigation and documentation of the contribution mass media makes to framing the political-philosophical discourses and practices of everyday people can help to inform what Henry Giroux terms a ‘critical media pedagogy’ that is aimed at fostering non-elitist forms of democracy, e.g. participatory or consensus democracy. In this respect, I would like to conclude on a note that Giroux (2001) had strongly argued: rather than simply indulging in textualist or audience studies of how people manipulate popular culture for personal enjoyment, cultural studies needs to see the importance of pedagogy and continue its commitment to social justice and radical democratic transformation.¹²

6. Towards A Reformulated Both/And Approach

Thus far, I have reviewed the last seventy years of some of the more prominent social reproduction/media-cultural theories as they apply to Western capitalist societies. All of them have useful concepts and arguments that can be synthesized to create the kind of more

¹² There is a popular strand of cultural studies known as “cultural populism” that mostly ignores the manipulative effects of socio-cultural structures, in favor of narratives that valorize the sovereignty of consumers who are seen as impermeable to structural manipulation and influence (see Babe, 2009, or McGuigan, 2000).

holistic approach needed to theorize, study, and research the multi-faceted, insidious, and surreptitious processes and mechanisms that now maintain neoliberal political-economic organization. While perhaps overtly ambitious, I believe that in order to paint a more detailed and holistic picture, research concerned with capitalist/neoliberal social-reproduction/cultural production must take the following into consideration:

1. While it is undoubtedly important, as the contributors to the classic Birmingham school, Pierre Bourdieu, and others have argued, to examine the everyday contexts, social positioning, and cultural practices of individuals, it is important to acknowledge that, and to document how, existing power structures create self-serving ideological obfuscations meant to distract, manipulate, and interpellate the public into neoliberal discourses and practices.
2. It is important to couple any critique of neoliberal culture and political economy with a normative political-economic agenda – in part by investigating and documenting genuinely counter-hegemonic political-economic movements and groups, and by studying the history and habitus of individuals from those movements and groups.
3. It is important to analyze and research how far and in what ways the public sphere is being contaminated and inflected by neoliberal interests, and to investigate how corporate mass media might influence the political-philosophical perspectives, ideological frameworks, and practices of audiences.
4. As Giroux (2001) argues, socio-cultural studies should also be part of a wider media and political critical pedagogy aimed at promoting social justice, and fostering more inclusive and participatory forms of democracy.

Overall, a both/and approach to the research and investigation of neoliberal social reproduction should thus incorporate the study of macro power structures and ideology, the micro-processes and contexts of everyday life, cultural and textual analysis, political-philosophical critique, social-psychological depth-approaches to audiences and effects, and argue for a normative political stance against the encroaching and detrimental consequences of neoliberalism. This may perhaps be an impossible task, but given that neoliberal policies and practices can be held responsible for the continuing destruction of the natural environment, the increasing concentrations of wealth and power into fewer and fewer hands, and the current social upheavals all over the world (Chomsky, 1999; Ellwood, 2001; Graeber, 2004; Patel, 2010), it is nonetheless an urgent task.

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