Valuing ‘voice’: Rethinking the ends of political, economic and social life in neoliberal context


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In the last decade, Nick Couldry has emerged as a prominent scholar in the field of media studies. His works examine the social consequences of media in public life and reveal the power relations within which media practices are embedded. Adopting a human-centred approach to media research, many of his works grapple with the question of how we can live together more meaningfully and sustainably with, and through, media. This guiding question is further explored in his latest book, where he places the sociological enquiry of media in the wider and deeper domains of political philosophy, social theory and economic thought.

In Why Voice Matters, Couldry asks: What are the social implications of neoliberalism in our capacity to speak and be heard, and, how can we imagine a different kind of politics where our voices count? Arguing that the problem with neoliberalism is that it reduces social, political and economic life to mere market functioning, Couldry urges readers to critically engage with this problem through an analytical framework that reaffirms narrative’s role in human experience. He sees the process of giving an account of oneself, or providing a narrative, as an essential dimension of what makes us human and argues that to deny one’s capacity for narrative, or to deny their potential for voice, is to deny that person’s basic dimension of human life. In this view, neoliberalism is a type of social economic and political organisation that denies or undermines voice.

Describing the last three decades as undergoing ‘social recession’ and asserting that neoliberal democracy is an ‘illusion’ and an ‘oxymoron’, Couldry critiques neoliberalism for reducing the purpose of life to market functioning. He further aims to explain the crisis of voice in societies that he calls ‘neoliberal democracies’—the UK and the USA—and to identify intellectual resources for conceiving an alternative democratic politics.

The book is structured into four main parts: an introduction to and definition of ‘voice’ and ‘neoliberalism’ (Chapter One); a critique of neoliberal conditions that impinge upon voice in economic, political and cultural realms (Chapters Two to Four); a critical review of existing resources that can help build a counter-rationality to neoliberalism (Chapters Five and Six); and a proposition for a post-neoliberal politics that values voice (Chapter Seven). Through arguments built systematically and meticulously across each part, Couldry achieves his aims effectively.
The range of literature from which Couldry draws inspiration to conceptualise democratic politics is spread across diverse philosophical strands, including economic liberalism and utilitarianism, critical theory and post-structuralism. They include the works of philosophers Paul Ricoeur, Judith Butler and Adriana Cavarero on the human experience of narrating; development economist Amartya Sen on the ends of economic life; and social and political theorist Axel Honneth on recognition and John Dewey’s notion of democracy based on social cooperation.

Much has been written on the problem of neoliberalism and its implications for public life. But what is significant about this book is that it explains concisely and cogently the different levels at which neoliberalism creates meaning—as a dominant reference point of economic order and as a set of metaphors, techniques and organisational principles that underpin social life. Couldry has two main objections to neoliberalism. Firstly, it places excessive value on market functioning as the highest priority for organising social life. For the author, the problem is not the market itself but that the market, which can adequately function without valuing voice, is positioned as the dominant principle of social practice. The second problem is neoliberalism’s operation as a hegemonic rationality that internalises the principles of the market as norms and values in daily social life. The author draws on Foucault’s account of origins of neoliberalism and more recent work by Boltanski and Chiapello on the ‘new spirit of capitalism’ to make acute observations that the market principle has become a reference point for not only government operations but also the entire social domain and its positioning of individuals, creating labour conditions that, in the name of ‘freedom’, demand intense commitment from the worker yet offer minimal security in return. The author provides compelling insights into how neoliberal values manifest in seemingly ‘positive’ values, such as ‘freedom’ and ‘flexibility’ but are, in fact, bound with ‘social costs’ (pp.16 & 76).

What is also important about this book, however, is that it does not settle at a despairing account of neoliberalism. Rather, Couldry seeks to envision what a politics after neoliberalism might look like, without making grand statements about a whole new socio-political order or a whole new alternative form of governance. He begins by analysing existing resources and attempts to build new meaning from within the current conditions.

‘Voice’ here is proposed as the most effective analytic response to the problem of neoliberalism, as, in Couldry’s view, it can disrupt the market principle of neoliberalism and encourage envisaging a different kind of democratic politics based on social cooperation. Couldry is careful to clarify that ‘voice’ refers neither to consumer voice nor representative politics, and he dispels any naïve claims that simply ‘having voice’ suffices. Instead, he appeals to two basic conceptions of voice: voice as a process and voice as a value. Whereas voice as a process refers to the human capacity to give an account of oneself and one’s place in the world, voice as a value is recognising that voice matters. Valuing voice, then, involves discriminating in favour of ways of organising human life that value voice in practice, and discriminating against frameworks of social, economic and political organisation that deny or undermine voice (p. 2). In other words, it is simply not
enough that there are more voices if they do not count. Indeed, the author emphasises this point throughout the book. For example, he explains the shortcomings of the UK’s political system—‘a system that provides formal voice for its citizens but fails so markedly to listen’ (p. 50). He also challenges the narrow readings of digitally networked communications that misread the phenomenon of ‘more voices’ circulating via new media as ‘more voices being heard’ and shortsightedly equate mediated visibility with recognition (p. 82). Voice is discussed in greater depth in relation to the role that the act of narrating plays in human experience (Chapter Five: Philosophies of Voice), and in reference to the ways in which class, labour, gender, race, sexuality and age shape human narratives (Chapter Six: Sociologies of Voice).

The degree of precision Couldry exercises in articulating what it means to value voice and what a post-neoliberal democratic politics might look like is noteworthy. He grounds the concept of ‘voice’ in wider debates regarding the purpose of economic and political life and searches for perspectives that value voice. On the purpose of economic life, he selects the notion of ‘freedom’ proposed by Amartya Sen, whose works have radically transformed the practices and languages of international development since the 1990s. On the purpose of political practice, he draws on the notion of ‘recognition’ developed by Axel Honneth, whose works are informed by John Dewey’s idea of democracy based on social cooperation. The fact that these works derive from considerably different traditions (liberalism and utilitarianism on the one hand, and the Frankfurt School tradition of critical theory on the other) does not raise any issue for Couldry. Rather, he suggests this highlights the strength of ‘voice’ as a resilient and adaptable concept that can cut across different schools of thought. In brief, the author demonstrates the compatibility of ‘voice’ with Sen’s notion of ‘freedom’ and Honneth’s notion of ‘recognition’ by arguing that both notions assume as fundamental conditions, firstly, ‘the narrative act of giving reasons about our …possible lives’ and secondly, recognition of others as having that capability (pp. 105–6).

Couldry provides a compelling and seamless argument for post-neoliberal democratic politics. But his book is still subject to a dilemma between principle and practice, which all works that propose a conception of a better social life encounter. It is all very well to imagine and articulate a social life that values voice, but how might this be applied in the everyday practices of power and negotiation? How can this book contribute meaningfully beyond a more robust theoretical debate on neoliberalism and democracy? One of its strengths, arguably, is its adaptability to inform actual practices that have direct impact on programs aiming to equip people with the capacity to speak and be heard. For example, digital ethnographer Jo Tacchi, whose work informs monitoring and evaluation processes of Communication for Development (C4D) initiatives, has adopted this notion of voice as both process and value in her work on potential role of Information Communication Technology for Development (ICT4D) (Tacchi 2011). This is just one example of many potential useful applications of this book.

More broadly, the book sets a moral agenda for the field of media and communications research. It frames media debates (whether on representation,
production, consumption, producers, journalists, celebrities, audiences, users, consumers, citizens, newspapers, radio, television, Internet, mobile phones or social media) within the problems of power in wider political, economic and social contexts. It calls for a critical enquiry of media that cuts deep into core social problems and imagines a social life that can sustain the meaningful human experience of narrating our lives and recognising the narrative experience in others.

For some media researchers, this book may provide little depth to the discussions of media more generally, particularly in Chapter Four: Media and the Amplification of Neoliberal Values, where the author intentionally engages with only two dimensions of the media—reality TV as a site where neoliberal values are reinforced, and mainstream media and its relationship with the ‘big P politics’. Some readers may also find the amount of attention paid to the critical possibilities of new forms of digital networked communications inadequate or unconvincing. This is unsurprising for those who are familiar with the author’s general inclination to ‘decentre’ media research—that is, to shift attention away from media itself and to study the social consequences of media by embedding its critical enquiry in other domains (Couldry 2006).

This is a thought-provoking and engaging book and is highly recommended to researchers in the fields of political and economic philosophy, sociology, anthropology, gender studies, and race and ethnicity. The theoretical orientation of the book is equally relevant to practitioners in the fields of policy and industrial research, particularly in sectors such as C4D and community development on local, national, regional and transnational scales.

References