

DEMOCRACIES AT ODDS: OSTRACIZED PUBLIC VALUES AND VIABLE SOCIAL CONCERNS

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What, if any, might be the connection between attacking democratic public values in Western societies and the emergence of rapid mediation of celebration of violence against women especially, but not exclusively, in the social media? Democratic public values, and the notion of common good, have been waning and bid farewell to the distant past. While this in itself is nothing new, considering public values and public good as pathological remainders of earlier eras has, however, become ever more normative in the discourses of individualism and neo-liberal order (Giroux, 2011). While public values often become wrapped up by warnings of thought-control, relatively little attention is paid to any controlling power of individualism. The less thought-controlling aspects of individualisms are often marketed as an implicit byproduct of neo-liberal ideologies.

Media and communication technologies are obviously an ever more integral part of the push and pull of such ideological agendas on a global scale, and more often than not, with unexpected repercussions. On a global scale, the poor are reaching the rich. The old notion of widening economic inequalities *between* the nations has been thrown off in favor of widening inequalities *within* the nations. The nation-states have become closer across the world in terms of accumulation of wealth, while the disparities within the nations are growing (Goesling, 2001).

In the context of global capitalism, Western media have notably transformed from their age-old role of a protector of democratic communication to a rather unpredictable force in ways that urgently calls for new conceptualizations and explanations. Waning of politicizing common good in the nexus of the private and public has favored neoliberal individualisms, and opened up a vacuum for new concerns; social concerns. In the area of gender, for example, issues such as normalization of (domestic) violence are the bread and butter of particular groups of interest in the social media. In the past, (domestic) violence against women was extensively negotiated in public, and transformed from a private to a common concern. Could the process potentially become reversed? Could the hybrid forces of defining (domestic) violence as a social concern while simultaneously ostracizing public values result in the privatization of (domestic) violence once again? A meme¹ that featured longing for past eras when women could just be hit on the head, grabbed, and taken home with the help of a fist and a mallet was recently widely circulated in the social media. A joke or not, it paradoxically seems that there would be a heightened need for public values that, rather, become reduced to social concerns/interests instead. Politicizing such social concerns offers opportunities of participation for some groups, while it also poses risks and remarkably high stakes of engaged citizenship for others, as recent examples and understanding of misogynist outbursts reveal.

As it is, gender theoretical explanations have largely failed women. In the area of news journalism, the fact that gender bias must be amended and is far overdue, has been extensively debated. Since 1995, the *Global Media Monitoring Project* has documented an underrepresentation of women as subject of news on a global scale. Even though women's presence in the news has increased from 17 % in 1995 to 24 % in 2010, the news subjects and perspectives remain predominantly male (Macharia et al., 2010). In 2015, the

¹ I thank Andrew Towers for sharing this meme with me.

results remain the same: 24 % of women as subjects of news on a global scale. The online news world has not significantly changed the results (Macharia, 2015).

Critical mass theory (Steiner, 2012) has offered an inadequate solution to the marginalization of women in journalism. The theory suggests that women should form the critical mass, and outnumber men, in media organizations to function as ultimate change agents. Few women only in top positions preclude the possibility of women building up the kind of power base necessary for real change. And yet, when women do increase in numbers, fears of Pink Ghettos emerge. Having entered journalism, women often find themselves completing assignments such as soft news that are considered particularly suitable for women. Such practices offer meager opportunities for promotion, and as a result, women traditionally hit the notorious glass ceiling. Breaking such barriers in some areas of interest, such as journalism, has opened up opportunities for women. Ironically, however, this has been widely viewed as resulting in a relative loss of prestige of the feminized and hyper commercialized profession.

Views, such as these, however, fail to explain, first, the undeniable success of some female media professionals, and second, their hesitance to change the prevailing media cultures in ways that would be more favorable to women's interests at large (Steiner, 2012). Examples of media imagery escaping women's interests are far too many. Imagery glorifying the beauty of battered women (e.g. *Victim of Beauty*) may resist interpretation of women as pure objects of our gaze. And yet, interpretation of black-eyed women as liberated, individualized subjects of beauty does not do justice to such gender imagery either. The workings of contemporary media cultures may be difficult to understand outside of individualization and neoliberalist values (Giroux, 2011), but they are difficult to understand solely inside of neoliberalism either, and call for new theoretical explanations. New formations of gender need to be rethought and given meaning to beyond the dichotomies of objectification and neo-liberal individualism.

Public service broadcasting, mandated by a statutory framework, is in the key position to pursue diverse gender and ethnic media imagery and subject production processes to closer scrutiny in practice (van Dijck, 2002). Changing existing media routines needs to take place in ethically tenable ways and in recognition of democratic public values rather than as a mere response to a shifting buying power of diverse niche markets. Neoliberal regimes do acknowledge diversity, but not necessarily as a gateway to full citizenship, but rather, as an economic tactic profitable to the majority (Amaya, 2013). Any need to rethink gender in increasingly multiethnic societies, and to revive democratic public values and concerns, must be willed to existence by diverse publics. Anything less than that would surely be at odds with democratic public values as such.

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