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Chapter 2

Critiquing "Neoliberalism": Three Interrogations and a Defense

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[Pre-publication version]

Looked at broadly, we can identify two distinct discourses about neoliberalism[i] in communication and media studies and elsewhere. The first deploys the term to enact a familiar critical narrative, where neoliberalism signifies a social order dominated by the logic of the market. This narrative has been given different inflections in communication and media research. Neoliberalism has functioned as a descriptive and explanatory category in analyses of topics such as infotainment (Thussu, 2007), media ownership (Herman & McChesney, 1997), multiculturalism (Lentin & Titley, 2011), reality television (Ouellette & Hay, 2008), political marketing (Savigny, 2008), intellectual property rights (Hesmondhalgh, 2008), and the cultural politics of voice (Couldry, 2010). Others have examined the communicative dynamics of "free market" regimes without explicitly deploying the term "neoliberalism" (Aune, 2001). More generally, the role of media and communication practices in the ideological constitution of neoliberalism is taken for granted in the wider literature (see Birch & Mykhnenko, 2010; Harvey, 2005).

Yet, the authority of neoliberalism as a critical signifier has been interrogated by a second discourse. This critique has sometimes been made by those distancing themselves from critical research traditions, in some cases defending their work against the charge of ideological complicity with neoliberalism. However, frustration with the open-ended scope of the term has also been articulated by those who retain a clear commitment to interrogating what might

otherwise be named as neoliberal norms. For example, one author analyzed in this essay, Lawrence Grossberg, argues that a fixation on neoliberalism and neoliberalization can impede critical analysis. As he observes in an interview with Cho (2008):

> Too often, the context is just described in terms of the dialectic between the global and the local or in terms of the neoliberalization of just about everything, a particularly unhelpful phrase, whether it is understood economically or governmentally. These are too glib and too easy. We need to find better ways of talking about regional, transnational, or even global contexts. Perhaps we should be looking at all of them but surely we have to figure out how to map the interconnections, the articulations. (p. 107)

This chapter examines three articulations of the second discourse in communication, media, and cultural analysis. I ask: what is justified, and what is problematic, about the claim that appeals to neoliberalism often produce little more than a formulaic mode of critique? I argue that skepticism about how the term is used is in one respect justified. As in other fields, neoliberalism is too often invoked as a "summary label", a "metaphor for the ideological air we all (must) breathe" (Peck, 2010, p. xii). At the same time, I argue that it would be a mistake to discard the concept; rather, we need to interrogate its formulaic iteration, yet try to operationalize it in a more critically illuminating way. I conclude by briefly outlining a theoretical and methodological rationale for recuperating the concept.

The Critique of Critique

Skepticism about the term "neoliberalism" is contextualized by a more general turn in social and political theory interrogating the condition of critique. Much that is performed in the name of critique has simply "run out steam," Latour (2004) suggests, "like those mechanical toys that

endlessly make the same gesture when everything else has changed around them" (p. 225). He blames a popularization of critique and "quick readings" of critical social theory for normalizing a post–9/11 conspiracy theory culture: an "absurd deformation" of the weapons of social critique that—in a reproach of his own earlier work—"are our weapons nonetheless" (p. 230). Ranciere (2009) offers his own "critique of critique," though he retains a much sharper focus on the political constitution of the social order (p. 25). Interrogating the condescending nature of a critical posture that "demystifies" on behalf of the apparently mystified, he argues much critique betrays an authentic critical tradition because it assumes a depoliticized and ironized form "entirely disconnected from [a] horizon of emancipation" (p. 32). Billig (2003) discusses the paradoxes resulting from the institutional success of critical identities in the academy. A default critical hostility toward marketized discourses can obscure how the critical has become something of a brand label in its own right; a marketing strategy blind to its own participation in the cultures it interrogates.

This chapter ultimately affirms the value of critique and, in particular, the value of critiquing something called "neoliberalism." My work remains centered on neoliberalism as an object of critical communication and media studies, from a theoretical perspective indebted to Laclau and Bourdieu (Phelan, 2011). At the same time, I want to recognize how the critique of neoliberalism can be banal and predictable. Clive Barnett (2005) puts the point provocatively when he characterizes neoliberalism as a "consolation term" that facilitates the ritual enactment of a rote critical identity. Barnett's critique is one of three positions evaluated in this chapter resonating with the interdisciplinary field of media, communication, and cultural studies. The others are the critiques of Flew, Cunningham, and the already mentioned Grossberg.[ii] Instead of dismissing those who question the value of the term or, worse, simply denouncing them as

neoliberal collaborators, I want to explore what future critical theoretical work in communication and media studies can productively learn from these critiques.

The chapter follows a two-pronged analytical approach: I attempt to understand the internal logic of each position, while simultaneously interrogating some presuppositions and blind spots. My approach is loosely informed by Glynos and Howarth (2007). They commend a mode of critical interpretivist analysis that passes through agents' self-interpretations of social practices, but that also asks: What makes a particular interpretation possible? How is neoliberalism constituted and presupposed as a discursive object? What other objects are implicated in rendering neoliberalism a problematic object? My objective is to recognize some problems in the critique of neoliberalism but to also insist on its enduring importance as an object of productive critique.

Defending Creative Industries

Terry Flew questions the value of the concept of neoliberalism in a number of articles, including one coauthored with Stuart Cunningham. Both are members of the Creative Industries faculty at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT). The establishment of the faculty in the early 2000s saw the parallel disestablishment of the University's arts faculty, and the subsequent closure of its School of Humanities and Human Services (Bahnisch, 2007). QUT's articulation of a creative industries identity has sometimes been the target of scathing critiques for its perceived capitulation to neoliberalized norms and renunciation of a critical scholarly ethos (see McGuigan, 2006). Not surprisingly, a defense of the concept of the creative industries explicitly features in Flew and Cunningham's discussion of neoliberalism.

Flew voices concerns about the concept of neoliberalism in his review of Des Freedman's (2008) book, *The Politics of Media Policy*. Flew (2008) is not dismissive of the book, describing it as a "valuable contribution to . . . [the] international literature on comparative media policies" (p. 127). However, he interrogates Freedman's reliance on neoliberalism as an "omnibus term," a "single organizing prism" for mapping the relationship between media policy regimes in the "two quite different countries" of the United Kingdom and United States (p. 128). "All roads . . . seem to point towards the implementation of some or other form of neoliberal policy," Flew concludes, so that "even when policies would appear to be quite different, they are in fact quite the same, all explicable under the rubric of variants of neoliberalism" (p. 128).

Flew (2009) refines his critique in an essay reflecting on "the rise of *cultural economy* [italics in original] as a key organizing concept over the 2000s" (p. 1). Maintaining that "the development of neoliberalism as a meta-concept in critical theory constitutes a substantive barrier to more sustained engagement between cultural studies and economics" (p. 1), Flew's argument against the critique of neoliberalism rests on three interlinked propositions. First, he criticizes researchers for propagating "one-dimensional caricatures" (p. 5) of economics, which reduce the political and methodological heterogeneity of economics to the tenets of neoclassical economics and rational choice theory. Second, this fosters a view of economics as an "ideology" that serves dominant economic and class interests "through the mystification of social reality" (p. 5). Third, these two assumptions converge in appeals to the "all-pervasive term" neoliberalism that disparages, among other targets, "creative industries discourse" (p. 5). Flew specifically interrogates a neo-Marxist analysis that frames the popularization of Chicago School economics, the rise of Thatcher and Reagan, and the articulation of a Third Way political identity as linear developments in the emergence of neoliberalism as a ruling-class ideology. Against this

narrative, Flew suggests Foucault's (2008) analysis of ordoliberalism—the neoliberalism of the post-war West German state—illustrates a vision of a "social market economy" quite different from neo-Marxists' conception of neoliberalism through a strong "opposition between the state and the market" (2009, p. 6). Foucault's governmentality approach "may provide more focus on what neoliberalism actually is, rather than it becoming a category prone to analytical hyperinflation" (p. 6).

Flew and Cunningham develop these arguments further in a more comprehensive defense of creative industries against the charge of neoliberal collusion. Here the critique of the concept of neoliberalism morphs into a sharper indictment of the analytical posture of critical identities. They cite Nonini's sarcastic observations about the utility and malleability of the term for "progressive scholars" who can at least "agree that whatever neoliberalism is, they don't like it" (cited in Flew & Cunningham, 2010, p. 119). Flew and Cunningham suggest "universalizing claims about neoliberalism may in fact rest upon a kind of Marxist functionalism, whereby an all-encompassing dominant ideology is developed to 'serve' capital in its latest phase, which is deemed to be global and flexible" (p. 120). Citing Chinese specifics, they highlight the problems with the concept of neoliberalism when "taken outside of the Anglo-American framework in which it originated" (p. 113). The contingency of the Chinese state's commitment to "private property rights, free markets, and free trade," the lack of "popular support for a neoliberal policy program," and the country's strong "developmental state" are listed as evidence of the limitations of reducing the complexity of the world to a single theoretical concept (pp. 119–120).

The different views of the critique of neoliberalism are evaluated as a whole later in the chapter. But bracketing out the question of how accurately they represent the arguments of Freedman and others, Flew and Cunningham identify a number of problems with neoliberalism's

use as a catch-all term, noted by others who affirm the value of the concept. Peck (2010) recognizes how neoliberalism can be articulated in a totalizing way that obscures the messiness and contradictions of different social formations. He also cautions against over-relying on a "big picture . . . story of neoliberalism" cast in "broad political-economic strokes" (p. xii), implicitly echoing Flew and Cunningham's apprehensions about the universalizing sweep of neo-Marxist arguments.

Nonetheless, Flew and Cunningham make a number of problematic assumptions that, in some cases, paradoxically reproduce dichotomies they are critiquing. They criticize neo-Marxist analyses of neoliberalism for presupposing a strong opposition between state and market. Yet they reproduce a similar opposition when they cite the developmental character of the Chinese state as an exception to neoliberalism, as if there were not examples of a developmental state logic in the embedding of neoliberalism in Western contexts.[iii] Their counterargument also obscures how neoliberalism has been a "political project of state-crafting" (Wacquant, 2012, p. 66) rather than one consistent with "official" free market doctrine. The narrow conception of neoliberalism as an economic ideology is reinforced by Flew's (2009) strong alignment of neoliberalism with economics, deemphasizing its significance as a political, social, and cultural project (Couldry, 2010; Brown, 2003).

Second, Flew is correct to identify differences between the social market vision of ordoliberalism and a stylized 1980s representation of neoliberalism as a market ideology antagonistic to the social and the state (see also Crouch, 2011), even if his reading of Foucault exaggerates and decontextualizes them.[iv] However, in suggesting ordoliberalism offers a more accurate account of what "neoliberalism actually is"—as if neoliberalism can be reduced to an essentialist form—Flew misrecognizes the contextually *articulated* nature of neoliberal identities

and appeals to a "myth of origin" that is hard to square with his citation of Foucault. The idea that there is a *real* neoliberalism, which renders other attributions of the concept inauthentic, is indicative of a general tendency to define the concept though abstract ideological blueprints and typologies, which are then taken to be the most authentic embodiments of neoliberalism. This approach denies what Brenner and Theodore (2002) describe as the ideological impurity of "actually existing neoliberalism," occluding how neoliberalized regimes are often—if not always—politically institutionalized in ways that deviate from abstract doctrinal prescriptions (see also Peck, 2010).

Neoliberalism-as-Hegemony *and* Neoliberalism-as-Governmentality

Although most clearly situated within the field of human geography, Clive Barnett explores the politics of culture and the role of media infrastructures in the constitution of public space (Barnett, 2003). His widely cited polemic (Barnett, 2005) against the critique of neoliberalism echoes Flew and Cunningham in a number of respects: He laments its use as a convenient catch-all term for a bundle of distinct processes; he questions the tendency to define neoliberalism through simplistic oppositions between state and market, individual and collective; and, most provocatively, he wonders if it functions as a consolation term for leftist academics engaging in revelatory interventions that are not half as revealing as they think. Nonetheless, Barnett's (2003) work affirms a critical sensibility, alert to the political conditions of public life. His skepticism about the reliance on neoliberalism as a "descriptive concept" and neoliberalization as an "explanatory concept" (Barnett, 2005, p. 8) is motivated by a concern that the possibility of radicalizing a liberal democratic inheritance can be obscured by critical discourses that disparage values like individualism and freedom as neoliberal proxies.

"There is no such thing as neoliberalism," Barnett (2005) insists; indeed, he assumes an ironic distance from the term by persistently citing it in scare quotes, performatively illustrating how the reified object called "neoliberalism" is partly made by critics themselves (p. 9). Contra Flew, he interrogates a trend (see Larner, 2003) toward reconciling a Marxist political economy analysis of neoliberalism with "post-structuralist ideas of discourse and governmentality derived from Foucault" (p. 7). Barnett argues Marxist and Foucauldian accounts of neoliberalism have been articulated together in a way that remains lodged in Marxist functionalist assumptions, but in a fashion that now communicates a reassuring sensitivity to difference and the openness of neoliberalism to diverse articulations (p. 7). Maintaining that the different ontological, epistemological, and normative assumptions of both theoretical traditions should not be elided, he claims Foucault's account of governmentality has been mainly "instrumentalized for the purposes of shoring up the holes in the Marxist narrative" (p. 8).

The appeal of Foucault as a theoretical supplement to Marx is twofold, Barnett suggests. First, conceptualizing neoliberalism as a dispersed, contextually articulated discourse is "understood instrumentality" as a synonym for a conception of ideology more alert to the role of language and ideas in the constitution of social reality. Second, the notion of governmentality helps explain how a macro-level shift to a market-driven political economy is articulated with mundane everyday practices. What is missing in this neat conjunction of top-down and quotidian perspectives, Barnett argues, is "a set of questions about various middle ranges of agency"—a conception of social relations irreducible to the instrumentalist effects of elite-driven neoliberal hegemony (p. 9). The result is a disabling narrative that presupposes simplistic binaries between state and market, and individual and collective, which enacts the ritualistic performance of a formulaic critique. Barnett even wonders if "we should try to do without the concept of

neoliberalism, because it might actually compound rather than aid in the task of figuring out how the world works and how it changes" (p. 10).

Barnett's critique of neoliberalism, as an object of analysis, is productive in at least two respects. First, he highlights how totalizing articulations of the concept are not simply a feature of Marxist analysis but also evident in research indebted to Foucault. What are obscured in such analyses for Barnett are satisfactory explanations of the institutional, agented, and rhetorical processes linking narratives of neoliberal hegemony and institutional cooption to "everyday routines" (p. 9). Both theoretical discourses are generically dependent on Althusserian notions of "hailing and interpellation" (p. 9) in explaining the social reproduction of neoliberalism, even if Foucauldian analysis comes with its own distinct rhetoric of biopolitics and disciplinary power. Both approaches reproduce a romantic antagonism pitching the forces of neoliberalism against the forces of resistance, foreclosing a more imaginative consideration of how neoliberalized cultures might be productively reconfigured and politicized.

Second, Barnett's criticism of how neoliberalism is represented as a singular and "coherent ideological project" with "clear unambiguous origins" is also useful. His citation of a scare-quoted "neoliberalism" highlights the limitations of mundane rhetorical formulations that construct neoliberalism as a singular "it" or thing-like entity with causal effects in its own right. Neoliberalism is construed as a "static type," the master signifier of a whole epoch, rather than a dynamic material-discursive construction(s), more structurally precarious than a grand narrative of neoliberal hegemony might suggest (Clarke, 2010, p. 340). Critical interventions can ironically reinforce a logic of neoliberal inevitability by obscuring the political contingency and contradictions of neoliberal regimes, failing to explore how the world could be otherwise (Clarke, 2008).

There is much to reflect on in Barnett's strong polemic. However, the coherence of his argument rests on several conceptual shortcuts and stylizations. Barnett aligns the Marxist account of neoliberalism with the concept of hegemony, with "neoliberalism-as-hegemony" as the master code for a singular ideological project determined by a top-down infrastructure of power. Barnett's theoretical understanding of hegemony is unclear. The abstract anticipates a discussion of plural "theories of hegemony" (p. 7). Yet, aside from cursory references to "Gramscian state theory" and "French regulation theory," his critique is directed toward a generic Marxist "political economy conceptualization of 'hegemony'" (p. 8), defined by a conflation of ruling-class power, functionalist and mechanical models of consent, the mystifying power of ideologies, the cooption of politics by the logic of capital, and the global diffusive power of a Western political architecture.

The irony is that Stuart Hall, one of the few analysts of neoliberalism cited favorably by Barnett, is also perhaps the best-known proponent of the concept of hegemony in communication and media studies. Not only did Hall play a key role in popularizing Gramsci's ideas in the 1970s, his work was also influenced by the post-Marxist account of hegemony developed by Laclau and Mouffe (2001) in the 1980s (see Morley & Chen, 1996). Barnett commends Hall's work on Thatcherite neoliberalism for its attentiveness to the social specificity and popular mood of the time, in contrast to "elite-focused analyses of state bureaucracies, policy networks and the like" (p. 10) in the recent neoliberalism literature.

I cite Hall simply to highlight how Barnett's critique is directed against a particular conceptual understanding of hegemony, built on stylized assumptions not easily transposed to other theoretical accounts. The point applies equally to Barnett's generic treatment of the concept of discourse. For instance, Ernesto Laclau (1990) would reject aligning the concept of hegemony

to a rigid Marxist economism and a priori privileging of class as the defining locus of political identification.[v] Laclau would also pluralize the political in a way that echoes Barnett's (2005) desire for "a bottom-up governmentality" (p. 10) to counter the top-down view of power attributed to the fusion of neoliberalism-as-hegemony and neoliberalism-as-governmentality.[vi] Qualifiers of this kind do not make for good polemic, of course, and some aspects of Barnett's critique (such as his criticism of abstract psychoanalytical accounts of subject formation) could be attributed more plausibly to Laclau. Nonetheless, Barnett's provocation needs to be understood as a critique of how particular concepts are articulated (including perhaps the concept of neoliberalism), rather than an indictment of the concept as such, as illustrated by his own valorization of the idea of a "bottom-up governmentality."

Letting Us off the Hook?

The final author I discuss, Lawrence Grossberg, articulates more of a broad-stroke and impressionistic critique of how neoliberalism is used, a frustration voiced as fragmentary observations in different publications (Cho, 2008; Grossberg, 2010). His overriding concern is how rote appeals to neoliberalism can foster a heavy-handed and prefabricated mode of critique rather than alertness to contextual specificity, emerging social phenomena, and a politics of becoming. Like Barnett, his target is the condition of critique itself, and the adequacy of the critical vocabulary of neoliberalism and neoliberalization in illuminating the challenges of the current historical conjuncture.

Grossberg's (2010) problem with the term is articulated as part of a more general dissatisfaction with the condition of cultural studies and the preprogrammed nature of some of its dominant concepts and terminologies. Appeals to neoliberalism are "lazy" (p. 2), as they work to

subsume diverse phenomena under a prefabricated critical analytic rather than opening up the "political-intellectual" (p. 2) work of cultural studies to the "empirical complexity of the real" (p. 4). The reduction of everything to the same and the given is contrasted with Grossberg's vision of a cultural studies "that reshapes itself in and attempts to respond to new conjunctures as problem-spaces" (p. 1), an articulation of "theory [that] is always in the service of the concrete" (p. 2).

Grossberg follows Barnett in criticizing Marxist and governmental articulations of the term (and the work of Clarke [2008, 2010] is an important reference for both authors). Both theoretical traditions invoke neoliberalism and neoliberalization in totalizing ways that reduce the particular and the novel to the terms of the already known (Grossberg, 2010, p. 141). Different discourses and practices are constructed as "equivalent and identical" (p. 132), all merely symptomatic of an a priori neoliberal logic rather than different contextual articulations whose relationships to each other necessitate open-ended analysis and exposition. Echoing Flew's concerns about the dismissive view of economics engendered in cultural critique, Grossberg argues that the unitary discourse of neoliberalism obscures both the contingency of economic practices and the need for more sophisticated conversations between cultural studies and heterogeneous economic identities.

Grossberg reaches a similar conclusion to Barnett, wondering if the project of critically understanding the world needs a term that "can be placed in front of almost anything" (2010, p. 141). Appealing to neoliberalism "lets us off the hook," he suggests, and "we would be better off without it unless its meaning is always specified and contextually located" (p. 141). Curiously, he underlines the incoherence of the term by casually observing in parenthesis: "It is a term—certainly not a concept" (p. 141).

Like Barnett's, Grossberg's intervention is a deliberatively provocative one—intended to unsettle the potentially complacent nature of work done under the sign of critique and imagine a mode of critical intervention that goes beyond stock-in-trade appeals and formulations. Nonetheless, he balks at declaring neoliberalism an entirely redundant term; rather, it can still enable useful conjunctural analysis so long as it is responsive to the particular empirical context. "Whatever it [neoliberalism] is," the focus has to be on the "question [of] how is it dis- and re-articulated to existing practices, projects and discourses, or onto specific—old and new configurations" rather than prefabricated explanations and discourses (2010, p. 141).

Grossberg's insistence that we focus on how particular contexts are neoliberalized, but not reducible to the descriptive category of neoliberalism, is well made. He anchors the claim in an affirmation of a "radically contextualist" cultural studies, which holds "that the identity, significance, and effects of any practice or event (including cultural practices and events) are defined only by the complex set of relations that surround, interpenetrate, and shape it, and make it what it is" (2010, p. 20). Radical contextuality is about more than simply exalting the "local" and "particular," Grossberg suggests, for that would occlude how the particular context is always situated within a multiplicity of contexts that "transcend particular sites and territories" (p. 28). A similar relational logic underpins his proposal for negotiating the inevitability of conceptual abstraction: "abstract or general categories" should be understood as "always contextual" and open to different articulations (p. 28).

Listing "commodification, racism, or colonization" (2010, p. 28) as examples of categories that transcend specific contexts, Grossberg omits the category of neoliberalization lest the rhetorical force of his critique be undermined. This is reinforced by his perfunctory dismissal of neoliberalism's conceptual status, seemingly rendering any talk of a generalized neoliberalism

incoherent. In denying neoliberalism conceptual status, Grossberg invokes a strong idea of concept that seems at odds with his commitment to a radical contextual appreciation of how concepts can be articulated differently. He seems, in effect, to be valorizing a notion of concept, somehow more real or accurate than how the idea of concept is articulated by others.

Grossberg's hyperbolic aversion to neoliberalism as a general concept is a product of the strong suspicion of the universal evident in his work. This takes the form of an antipathy to a universal neoliberal story recycled in essentialized ways from context to context, and a more general suspicion of analytical discourses that privilege a particular "founding concept" in "a purely theoretical or even ontological way" that then purports to explain "everything . . . everywhere" (2010, p. 19). Grossberg's suspicion of universality in this strong form is justified. However, his critique forecloses a different conception of the universal, one more consistent with his own ontological commitment to the universality of articulatory relations and radically contextual practices (see Glynos & Howarth, 2007; Laclau, 1990). Such an approach might enable a more nuanced analysis of the universalizing "equivalences" between different neoliberalized contexts, but without denying the specificity of each contextual articulation or leaving us with nothing but singular cases that bear no relation to each other. We can critique totalizing appeals to a singular neoliberalism without displacing how neoliberal logics do have totalizing effects that reduce, but do not eliminate, the differences between one context and another.

Recuperating Neoliberalism as an Object of Critique

I examined three articulations of a discourse questioning the usefulness of the concept of neoliberalism in communication, media, and cultural studies. All three critiques are, in some

respects, perfectly justified. Flew is right to suggest neoliberalism often functions as an "omnibus term." Barnett is right to maintain that appeals to a reified neoliberalism can simplify the analysis of social change. And Grossberg is right to argue that the category can "let us off the hook" and cultivate a formulaic reliance on a generic neoliberal story.

Yet the most obvious comeback is that similar arguments have been made by others who continue to privilege neoliberalism as an object of critique. Peck (2010) recognizes the inadequacy of a sweeping grand narrative in understanding the variegated trajectories of neoliberal reason. Wacquant (2012) notes the reductive tendencies in both Marxist and governmentality accounts. And Crouch (2011) critiques the limits of a commonplace state–free market binary for defining neoliberalism, because it obscures the corporatized and anticompetitive tendencies of neoliberal regimes and the state's internalization of neoliberal logics.

In response to our critics, we might therefore suggest the problem with the concept of neoliberalism is not with the category as such; rather, as with all categories, the problem is with how the category is *articulated*. The category is too often articulated in a way that does too much analytic work on its own, obscures the specificity and paradoxes of different social formations, or remains lodged in a denunciatory mode of critique that, as Clarke (2010) observes, becomes so "fascinated [with] tracing the dominant" it ends up simply "confirm[ing] its dominance" (p. 340).

The critique of the critique of neoliberalism does not offer a convincing case for discarding the category from our critical vocabulary (as if categories are easily discarded). If we purge it on the grounds that it signifies a unitary object that is not really a unitary object, well,

then, we might have to discard a whole lot of other categories too: society, economy, culture, media, capitalism, and so on.

At the same time, the critique should not be dismissed because it highlights problems with how the term is articulated as a loose signifier for everything and nothing. Let me end by quickly describing how future work on neoliberalism could respond productively to our critics.

The concept of neoliberalism offers a particular way of critically naming the social, more likely to be used by critics of neoliberalism than any putative neoliberals themselves. The name gives analytical and narrative shape to myriad social changes and processes that cannot be pinned down to a single empirical horizon or referent. Barnett is, therefore, right: "There is no such thing as neoliberalism," *if* by that we mean a unitary object with an unambiguous real-world referent or constitutive status (see also Castree, 2006). We might describe it instead as an "impossible object" that "only exists . . . as an effort to construct that impossible object" (Laclau & Mouffe, 2001, p. 112).[vii] The name takes on the analytically necessary, yet also "impossible," task of describing and explaining social changes that are irreducible to discrete empirical objects or subjects, or abstract doctrinal prescriptions. Questions like *what is* neoliberalism, *where* is it located and *how* is it articulated are inherently contestable. In suggesting problems with the term, my argument is not to suggest there is a "correct" way of using it somehow missed by others.

Constructing neoliberalism *as if it were* a unitary object has an obvious polemical and political value. It helps us identify ideological features of particular social formations and highlight similarities between one formation and another. Moreover, if we want to talk about neoliberalism at all (write articles and books about it), we cannot but sometimes speak of it in simplifying and abstract ways. However attentive we are to particular contextual articulations, analyzing neoliberalism necessarily entails a labor of conceptual abstraction.

Nonetheless, as critical analysts of neoliberalism, we should be wary of over-relying on abstract discourses or, as Grossberg suggests, letting our political commitments override our empirical analysis. Identifying social objects and practices as neoliberal can engender a form of "aspect blindness" (Wittgenstein, 1973, p. 213), where other ways of naming the social disappear from view. Empirical phenomena labeled "neoliberal" are too often cursorily disparaged rather than deemed worthy of additional analysis and scrutiny. One defensive response to our critics would be to suggest that no one has argued neoliberalism exists in a monolithic form, and their critical target is therefore a straw man. Yet, while few would explicitly argue that there *is* a singular neoliberalism, the category is routinely rendered as such in banal rhetorical formulations that represent the "impossible" object as a fully present structure or agent with the totalizing power to cause, make, determine, and act on a variety of social objects and practices. Reified discourses of this kind often leave us with little more than a new telling of a familiar neoliberal story rather than productively illuminating the immanent political logics of neoliberalized formations.

Against an excessive use of the reified category of neoliberalism, it might be more productive to speak of neoliberal and neoliberalized logics that are always contextually articulated with other political, social, and fantasmatic logics. Glynos and Howarth (2007) describe "*the logic of a practice [as] the rules or grammar of the practice,* as well as *the conditions which make the practice both possible and vulnerable* [italics in original]" (p. 136). To conceptualize neoliberalism as a series of constitutive logics, dialectically articulated with other logics, underscores the limits of reducing our analysis of social life to the convenient nominalization "neoliberalism". It might also heighten our alertness to how the logic of "things"

could be articulated as other than neoliberal, as a counter to the kind of fatalism that often permeates critical discourses (Clarke, 2008).

Yet we also need to go beyond a still relatively abstract analysis of neoliberal "logics." We need to formulate an analysis of neoliberalism that "keeps agents and agency in sight" (Peck, 2010, p. xi) and, as Barnett suggests, encourages productive forms of midlevel theorizing to bridge the gap between the two dominant accounts of neoliberalism. This point is particularly important in a communication and media studies context given the role of the media in mythically connecting the quotidian experiences of everyday social life to a macro-level infrastructure of power (Couldry, 2003). Bringing the concept of neoliberalism "to earth" (Peck, 2010, p. xi) might enable us to better understand how neoliberalized logics are produced by social institutions and agents that do not see themselves as neoliberal. It might also help us develop a critical theory that does more than condemn a sedimented social infrastructure for being neoliberal, perhaps enabling a mode of critical analysis that can both oppose *and* reckon with the given.

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[i] For consistency's sake, all hyphenated versions of the term "neoliberalism" have been changed in this chapter.

[ii] One perspective not considered here is a Marxist critique of the term. For example, Garland and Harper (2012) suggest we should be critiquing "capitalism," not the politically obfuscating term "neoliberalism."

[iii] One example is the Irish case. See Ging, Cronin, and Kirby (2009).

[iv] Flew downplays at least two elements noted by Foucault (2008): the need for some affirmative conception of the German state after the collapse of the Third Reich, and the character of the ordoliberal state as a "radically economic state" (p. 86).

[v] Laclau and Laclau and Mouffe's critique of a Marxist conception of class and economy was never meant as a disavowal of the politics of economy and class, as their critics sometimes imply. Critiquing how we talk about economy and class should not mean we stop talking about them.

[vi] Barnett (2006) might contest my claim that Laclau and Mouffe offer a poststructuralist conception of hegemony sufficiently different to the one assumed in his critique. In a debate with Thomassen (2005), Barnett (2006) cites Laclau and Mouffe's work as an example of a general poststructuralist tendency to construct rigid dichotomies between the world of the contingent and the possible and the world of the given and the inherited: "What is given is aligned against what is possible, so that the given is understood as what needs to be negated or transcended by unleashing the suppressed potential of what is possible" (p. 640). Barnett contrasts this binary logic with Jacques Derrida's valorization of a patient mode of analysis that pauses "before deciding that all inherited modes of life should be wholly re-made" (p. 64) and "reck[ons] with the given." What Barnett misses in this critique of a generic poststructuralism is how this Derridean sensibility *is* evident in Laclau's work. Consider, for instance, the following Laclau (1990) quote: "The construction of an alternative project is *based on* the ground created by [capitalist] transformations, not on *opposition* [italics in original] to them" (pp. 55–56).

[vii] Here I directly transpose Laclau and Mouffe's conception of society as an impossible object, implying any discursive articulation of society will always fail to capture the totality of the relations and processes potentially attributable to society.