

Mission Impossible?

Neoliberal Subjects and Empowerment

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My contribution today has two immediate contexts. First, in an ongoing multidisciplinary research project “The Power of Culture in Producing Common Sense (POWCULT)”, funded by the Academy of Finland (2007-2010), I have for some time now tried to comprehend the mechanisms of contemporary power in late-modern societies. Second, I have become loosely involved in a new green-red Finnish social movement that unites civil activists, politicians from social democratic, leftist and green parties, researchers and others who are against neo-liberalism. The movement uses for itself the title “Freedom to choose otherwise”. In both the POWCULT research project and in this emergent political movement, I have frequently wondered about the paradox of contemporary Finnish politics that can be formulated in the following way: If people in all opinion polls, at every turn, indicate that they support anti-neo-liberal objectives, why do they equally persistently, in elections, cast their votes for those who implement neo-liberal policies?

So: Where is the liberation in contemporary media culture? The traditional emancipation-oriented answer to this question would emphasize that dominant media are a vital part of an oppressive system because they are too close to the ruling powers. An advocate of this view might argue that commercial media are owned by capitalists and promote proprietors’ interests, whereas publicly owned media are controlled by the political system and tend to promote the interests of those wielding political power. According to this traditional view, in order to make space for liberation, media should be distanced from both economic and political rulers and brought closer to the people.

There are important initiatives based on such thinking in which people try to promote alternative, more democratic forms of media. Movements for civic or citizen journalism are noteworthy examples of such efforts. Today, however, I will not link the media’s complicity in the subjection of human beings to the fact that they are too close to the ruling powers. Instead, I want to point out that the media are part of the hegemonic order specifically because they are too close to the “people”.

Before you start pelting me with rotten eggs, let me clarify that by the term “people” I am not referring to those humans, flesh and blood, who live in today’s Nordic countries. On the contrary, I use the term “people” to refer to the *ideal constructions* that the dominant media produce by perpetually framing everything in terms of nationalities. By

looking at reality through the peepholes of Finnishness, Danishness, Icelandishness, Norwegianness or Swedishness, the Nordic media make themselves part of the “national-popular” project of neo-liberalism, where “us” is incessantly defined by representing ideas of what “we” should be like and who fits into this concept of “us”.

As such, the “people” – an ideal construction of the dominant media – has little to do with the traditional notions of “people” cherished by the nationalist movements of the 19th century or by the leftist movements of the 20th century. This is due not least to the fact that, in the Nordic countries, we can no longer find such authentic, uneducated and hence unspoilt “people” so treasured by these influential social and cultural movements of the past. For instance, in 2007, 65 percent of the Finnish population had completed upper secondary school, vocational school, polytechnic or a university education. Furthermore, among Finns aged 25 to 29 years, some 85 percent had this level of education (Statistics Finland 2008). The democratization of education has eroded traditional cultural hierarchies and hence rendered problematic national-romantic or leftist notions of the “people” as in any sense “authentic”.

In a situation where the vast majority of the population has received not only a basic education but also at least some further training, in media publicity the ideal “us” tends to be identified with the middle classes. These middle classes have, for their part, an inclination to perceive themselves as the vanguards of modernity. This ideal “us” consists of people who consider themselves to be broadminded, law-abiding and industrious citizens, who at the same time are also active but responsible consumers. This “us” refers to modern people who are committed to traditional virtues, but who also have “the capacity to be forward-looking, innovative and entrepreneurial” (Clarke and Fink 2008, 231).

The ideal neo-liberal citizens are moral, choice-making, self-directed and self-regulating subjects (Clarke 2005). The contemporary dominant media are complicit in producing such ideal subjects because they – the media, that is – form a huge decency machine that constructs the respectable mass it represents as the moral majority. Acting as a decency machine, both “serious” and “popular” media reproduce day in and day out the standard wisdom or common sense, namely, that which is taken for granted and within which the majority of people mostly make sense of their lives (cf. Williams 1977, 110).

The *modus operandi* of the dominant media in producing this hegemonic order is to create two groups: “us” and “them”. “Us” consists of active citizens capable of governing their lives by themselves, whereas “them” is built up of such populations that require interventions from the authorities in order to adapt to the prevailing order (cf. Dean 1999, 167). The production of the self-governing “us” and the governed “them” is achieved by decoding the empirical population – the population that is socio-demographically inevitably diverse – into an ideal, relatively uniform people, “us”, that does not include those who do not conform, “them”.

In this sense, nations are not just “imagined communities”, as they were famously characterized by Benedict Anderson (2006), but also “political imaginaries” (Clarke and Fink 2008, 228). In other words, “nations” and “people” are ideal constructions. To use Partha Chatterjee’s (2004, 36) terms for peoples and populations, the heterogeneous “social” that contains everyone is translated in the media into the homogeneous “national”, consisting only of those who respond to the ideal definitions of “usness”.

To put it differently, a system of differences – the population – is decoded into an imaginary unity – the people (cf. Clarke and Fink 2008, 234). In the dominant media, the discrepancy between the homogeneous national self-image and the heterogeneous social reality is then swept under the carpet by reviewing everything from the point of view of this ideal “us”.

Let me add that this “us” is not only exclusive in the sense that it depends on excluding part of the population outside the “people”. As a matter of fact, this “us” can be in a hegemonic position only by virtue of being inclusive. In other words this “us” must incessantly try to incorporate various formerly “foreign” elements into its own domain. Hence there is an ongoing project for translating new social and cultural elements among the population into the language of “us”, thereby domesticating them and linking or articulating them into “usness”. A relatively recent example of this is how the first Finnish Eurovision song contest winner *Lordi*, who was certainly nowhere near mainstream notions of Finnishness, was grafted into the national imageries in 2006. In this way, the “us” can retain its dominant position as a result of its incessant incorporation of emergent socio-cultural elements (cf. Williams 1980, 38-39).

Stressing the processes of incorporation, however, is not the same as saying that the political system or the dominant media publicity represents the population and its characteristics in all their diversity. Nowadays there is lot of talk about how media publicity has been colonized not only by celebrities, but also by ordinary people. It is said that each of us is now entitled to our 15 minutes of fame. But when pondering whether or not this is true, we must also take into consideration that even in cases where ordinary Joe’s and Jane’s have become more prominent on the agenda of various media, this does not necessarily mean that they themselves can determine how they are framed in the media. Not everyone present in the media is there as an object of desire or as something everyone is expected to identify with.

Perhaps this constant dividing of the population into sheep and goats in the dominant media publicity is what makes it too easy for cheap populists to claim that they represent the so-called “forgotten people”. The whole concept of “forgotten people” may well be possible only because the empirical lower classes so seldom, if ever, appear in quality media publicity except in a negative light, as examples of all that must be avoided at any cost. Consequently, demoted populists can rest “on claims that the voice of the people is typically excluded or repressed by the dominant institutional forms of politics and social life” (Clarke et al. 2007, 11).

In highlighting the respectable middle-class “us” and repressing the not-so-well-off “them”, the media function in much the same way as the prevalent direction of politics during the past two or three decades. Again taking Finland as an example, the real income of all population groups has increased over the past 40 years, but, as is well known, those with the highest incomes have increased their share of this whole faster than anyone else has. When differences in income are discussed, however, it is seldom noted that, on top of the rich becoming filthy rich, middle-income people have become considerably wealthier than have low-income people (see Statistics Finland 2009). In other words, the relatively well-off are better off than before, whereas the not particularly well-off are relatively worse off than they used to be.

Let me add in passing that the division between “us” and “them” I have outlined here resembles the ideas concerning the so-called “the two-thirds, one-third society”

(Therborn 1989), where two thirds of the population are relatively well-off, while one third are either engaged in de-skilled part-time work or form a new “underclass” of the unemployed and unemployable.

As noted, the dominant media are the key arena for the erection of the cultural order corresponding to these growing differences between various population groups. In contemporary Nordic societies, publicness is the space where people imagine who they are, who they ought to be and who they want to be. “People”, “decency” and “usness”, which are incessantly defined in the media, are pillars of the cultural order that occupy the hegemonic position in these societies.

Just as people imagine themselves belonging to a national community, they also think of themselves as certain kinds of persons who live in certain kinds of societies. Members of the modern middle classes can, then, conceive of themselves as law-abiding and hard-working. They can feel “named, incentivized and rewarded” as they are “offered forms of choice and voice, garlanded with varieties of tax credits, and blessed with [...] ‘relative autonomy’” (Clarke 2005, 458). These middle-class people have the right to choose – as long as they choose correctly.

British sociologist Beverley Skeggs writes about this drawing of boundaries between the modern middle classes and their others in her *Class, Self, Culture* (2004, 94) as follows:

The working-classes are being spoken of in many different ways: as underclass, as white blockage to modernity and global prosperity, as irresponsible selves to blame for structural inequality, as passive non-market competitors, as lacking in agency and culture, whilst the middle-classes are represented as the vanguard of the modern, as a national identity and a cultural resource. In this symbolic identification and evaluation we see class divisions being made.

Skeggs refers here to Pierre Bourdieu (1986, 6), who famously remarked: “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier.” What is at stake in the relation between the middle and lower classes is not, however, just what people like and favour. Equally important is what they dislike and reject. According to Bourdieu (ibid., 56): “In matters of taste, more than anywhere else, any determination is negation; and tastes are no doubt first and foremost distastes, disgust provoked by horror or visceral intolerance (“sick-making”) of the taste of others”.

Such, then, is the ideological effect of the tabloid press or reality television: When those who identify with “us” are horrified by all the tastelessness they are seduced or compelled to witness, they at the same time use all this vulgarity as the building materials of their middle-class selves. In other words, they realize who they are by recognizing who they are not: “Whatever or whoever we are, we definitely are not like that!”

From this perspective, popular publicity is a focal arena for setting norms for oneself and for others. It is a scene of the constant definition of right and wrong, normal and deviant, desirable and reprehensible. As such, it is a venue where two figures that were earlier thought to be separate from each other are intertwined with each other. These figures are the “citizen” and the “consumer”.

“Citizen” has long referred to a responsible and rational figure who moves in areas of cultural, social and economic life, whereas “consumer” has been seen as an inhabitant of the marketplace. Splitting the modern subject in half, into the “citizen” and the “con-
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mer”, reflects the liberal political imaginary where *homo politicus* and *homo æconomicus* co-exist, occupying different areas or domains of social life (Clarke et al. 2007, 3).

Both the citizen as a political construct and the consumer as an economic construct are key figures in the liberal social imagery of Western capitalist democracies (ibid., 2). The former is a public, the latter a private figure. The citizen is “an egalitarian figure, lodged in a republican imaginary of liberty, equality and solidarity” with horizontal relationships to other citizens and vertical relationships to the state that evoke bonds of mutual obligation. By contrast, “the consumer is located in economic relationships”, “engaged in economic transactions in the marketplace” and “exchanging money for commodified goods and services” (ibid.).

To use Foucauldian terms, the citizen is a farsighted “subject of right” or “*homo juridicus*”, whereas the consumer is an egoistic “subject of interest” or “*homo æconomicus*” (Foucault 2008, 252- 253, 274). As *homo æconomicus*, this subject is, to quote Michel Foucault, “an entrepreneur, an entrepreneur of himself” (ibid., 226), who nevertheless is in need of “a political and moral framework” (ibid., 243) so that society will not totally collapse. Indeed, even our late-modern societies are in need of some kind of order, constrained or internalized, so as not to break down due to alienation and anomie (cf. Eagleton 2000, 70).

Now these two, the citizen and the consumer, create a new hybrid: the “citizen-consumer”. The term “citizen-consumer” was first deployed by New Labour in an administrative document in 1998 (Clarke 2007, 161-162). It was connected to New Labour’s aim to transform “citizens from passive recipients of state assistance into active self-sustaining individuals” (Clarke 2005, 448). In the governmental parlance, the term normally refers to an idea of people being “experts of their own condition” and “co-producers” of services (ibid., 172), highlighting “choice” in such areas as education, social and health care. The concept of “citizen-consumer” indicates “the potential spread of market-based experiences, expectations, practices and relationships to the public realm” (Clarke et al. 2007, 4). Here, however, I want to expand the area the term covers and propose it as a means to refer to such neo-liberal subjectivity, where the two sides of middle-class modern subjects, responsible citizenship and hedonistic consumerism, are articulated to each other.

Citizen-consumers are not governed only from “above” or “outside” but also and rather from “inside”. Mediatization, the increasing role of media in people’s ideals and practices, brings sites of governance from outside of the subjects inside them. If Michel Foucault spoke of *panopticon*, where the few control the many, Thomas Mathiesen (1997), Zygmunt Bauman (2001) and others have more recently underlined that in modernity the mass media set the many to watch over the few. This *synopticon* is not, however, just between the many and the few, but also between the many and the many, meaning that each and everyone oversees not only everyone else but also him-/herself. By this constant surveillance of others and oneself, individuals incessantly set limits not only on others but also on themselves.

For those in the hegemonic position, this can only be good news, as their views and values in this way manage to permeate the guts of “us” and become a more or less integral part of what “we” feel we are. In this way, the dominant media of today not only constitute a decency machine, but also a huge apparatus for producing and reproducing various forms of selfhood. A fundamental aspect of the identity construction of

this middle-class “us” is that people thus interpellated distinguish themselves from the lower classes, those backward obstacles to modernity and global prosperity who lack in responsibility, culture or working capacity.

The distinction between “us” and “them” entails both the consumer and the citizen halves of the citizen-consumers. As hedonistic consumers with mature tastes and quality lifestyles, “us” can identify themselves with modernity and upward mobility. As responsible citizens, the very same “us” can see themselves as parts of a national whole who, even though they are undeniably pleasure-seeking consumers, do not think only of instant gratification of their desires, but are also capable of thinking of their own long-term interests as well as the interests of society as a whole.

Where does this, then, take us in relation to empowerment? What has empowerment to do with these neo-liberal subjects, the “us” of citizen-consumers? And how about “them”, those not too well-off who may especially be in need of all kinds of empowerment?

I’m afraid that there’s no good news for either, “us” or “them”. As far as “us” are concerned, the views I have outlined imply that activating and empowering “citizen-consumers” may well represent a new form of subjection. I have no time to develop the argument here, but only quote what the principal character Mother Courage interjects in Bertolt Brecht’s *Mother Courage and her children* (ca. 1940): “Let’s you and me go fishing, said the angler to the worm.”

In other words, the hegemonic system is able to persuade the decent “us” to work in the interests of those in power by portraying the interests of the few to be the interests of the many. From this perspective, empowerment can be seen as a technology of citizenship, “a strategy or technique for the transformation of subjectivity from powerlessness to active citizenship” (Dean 1999, 67). When these active consumer-citizens, “us”, are busy differentiating themselves from “them”, they have neither the time nor inclination to stop to ponder how free they ultimately are.

Needless to say, this active citizenship must then be bound to certain limits. As noted, active citizens and consumers have the right to choose – as long as they choose correctly. Perhaps this “us”, then, lives in a concentration camp with the word “Freedom” written over the gate.

But how about “them” and their empowerment? When we in cultural and media studies speak of empowerment, don’t we normally mainly have in mind the variously underprivileged people? The story may be largely forgotten, but notions of empowerment were first elaborated in the 1960s among leftists in the US who wanted to generate political resistance (Cruikshank 1999, 68). The whole notion of empowerment, however, ever since its coinage, has been a battleground between leftists and neo-liberals, the latter seeing it as means of producing “rational economic and entrepreneurial actors” (ibid.). To neo-liberals, empowerment, as a technology of citizenship, could be seen, as Barbara Cruikshank (ibid., 69) points out, as “the means by which government works *through* rather than *against* the subjectivities of citizens”. According to Cruikshank (ibid., 72), the will to empower is “neither clearly liberatory nor clearly repressive; rather, it is typical of the liberal arts of conduct and the political rationality of the welfare state”.

There remains, then, empowerment and empowerment. Perhaps this is why we as researchers should not take for granted that all the empowerment we are so fond of is automatically opposed to the structures and tendential forces of hegemonic social formations. As Lawrence Grossberg (1997, 197) has pointed out in relation to popular

readings of cultural texts or popular consumption, not even “all ‘negotiated’ readings or uses of a text are oppositional, or even resistant”. This is why cultural or media scholars should not, according to Grossberg, “construct the everyday as if it were absolutely autonomous, and its practices as if they were always forms of empowerment, resistance and intervention”. For Grossberg, this would simply answer too many questions ahead of time. He underlines that “[e]mpowerment by a single practice is, after all, never total, never available to everyone, never manifested in exactly the same way, and moreover, its success is never guaranteed”.

Grossberg (*ibid.*) acknowledges that “[t]he recognition that there is a politics operating within everyday life is an important advance, which further enables us to talk about the complex effects of cultural practices in multiple domains”. This insight as such, however, is not enough, because after discerning these everyday micro-politics, we have to ask about their relations and effects on the various workings of power, macro level included.

Wendy Brown (1995, 22-23) makes a similar point when she observes that “empowerment” sometimes “registers the possibility of generating one’s capacities, one’s “self-esteem,” one’s life course, without capitulating to constraints by particular regimes of power”. “Indeed”, Brown (*ibid.*, 23) remarks, “the possibility that one can “feel empowered” without being so forms an important element of legitimacy for the antidemocratic dimensions of liberalism”. Is it not the case that, as consumers especially, we often have strong feelings of empowerment that, on closer inspection, do not actually increase our ability to direct our own lives?

Such views as Grossberg’s or Brown’s call for a more careful analysis of empowerment. The two especially stress the need to link analyses on the micro level to those on the meso and macro levels. There may be and certainly are all kinds of “empowering” practices we as researchers are able to detect and celebrate. There are, however, no guarantees that such empowering practices will not be incorporated into the dominant culture. Sometimes the dominant culture can even count on the attractiveness of such empowering practices when launching new products, just as, for instance, those studying “girl power” (e.g. Miles 1998, 123) or cosmetics advertising (Lazar 2006) have shown. “Empowerment” may form the basis of truly alternative or even oppositional practices that effectively go beyond the limits of dominant definitions of the good and just life. This cannot, however, be assumed beforehand, but must always be demonstrated in a concrete analysis of empowering practices in their specific historical contexts.

It is time to sum up these contemplations. Where, then, is liberation in contemporary media culture? In light of what I have said, liberation does not necessarily reside in agency or empowerment *per se*, as increasing control over one’s life, as desirable as it might as such be, is not necessarily equivalent to emancipation. When researchers discuss empowerment, the focus is too often on individual or small group agency. When we think of liberation or emancipation, however, the focus should be not only on these micro or meso level activities, but also on the level of majorities.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines emancipation as “the action or process of setting free or delivering from [...] restraints imposed by superior physical force or legal obligation” or “delivering from intellectual, moral, or spiritual fetters”. Subjugated individuals or small-scale groups may well achieve some at least temporary emancipation without major changes in the power structures of their societies, but their empowerment cannot be guaranteed without some more general emancipation of the majority.

As long as this does not happen, the agency of “citizen-consumers” may well advance the interests of the neo-liberal regimes. Not even openly resistant activities are safe from the regime, as they, too, may be incorporated into the workings of the system. Isn’t capitalism, ultimately, the most flexible and adaptive economical and political system in human history thus far? Doesn’t it constantly dissolve barriers, deconstruct oppositions and pitch diverse life-forms together (Eagleton 1996, 61)?

I have no magic formula to blow the current regime to bits. I do not, however, want to give up on searching for a cure to our maladies. One of the most urgent tasks in the Nordic countries is to do something to stop the expansion of populist xenophobia. Interestingly enough, fear of strangers seems to be most common among those who do not seem to fit into the modern “us”. The “us”, instead, have little to fear in the face of immigration. It is easy to be tolerant and preach tolerance to others if one meets immigrants mostly in the media or while picking up exotic spices from ethnic shops.

Instead of relying on the traditional enlightenment of the educated and hoping for the best, I propose an alternative strategy. If those who feel excluded from the decent middle-class “us” could find their experiences and conceptions aired in equal measure with those already blessed in policy decisions and in the media, they would not necessarily need to feel threatened or discriminated against. If the dominant policies and prevailing media representations did not blame these human beings, if they were not seen predominantly as backward people in need of general enlightenment, if the official society and dominant media discussed their genuine concerns and the actual contradictions that may accompany the multiculturalization of Nordic societies, then cheap populism could possibly be kept from acting in the name of these people.

In media culture, this would require abolishing the model of viewing everything from the viewpoint of the decent middle-class “us”. Instead of a media of an ideal “nation” we should have a media of the actual “population”. Generating such media is also one of the challenges for researchers who seek to contribute to liberation in contemporary media culture.

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