Book review

Couldry, N. and Hepp, A. 2016. *The mediated construction of reality*. Cambridge: Polity Press. 256 pp.

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There are both advantages and disadvantages to books that are long in the making (which, as Couldry and Hepp acknowledge, was the case with the *The mediated construction of reality*). On the one hand, the book provides an impressive overview of the major work addressing the relationship between media and the social in the last decades of the 20th and the first decades of the 21st century. On the other, some of the arguments cannot help but feel slightly overstated at times.

The book takes its cue (and title) from Berger and Luckmann's *Social construction of reality*, published in 1966. The gist of their argument was relatively simple: People's ideas about the world they inhabit are socially defined. This was not a particularly radical proposition to make: Differences between realists, representationalists, nominalists, etc. had been the staple of philosophical debates throughout the 20th century (and, some would argue, from Antiquity); cultural anthropologists (particularly in the US) had already laid ground for the friction between cultural relativism and universalism that will continue to inform politics well into the 21st. What made Berger and Luckmann's volume into a classic was posing this question as one of sociology of *knowledge*. Rather than entering the slippery ontological terrain of what really is and is not "out there", their argument was carefully grounded in the language of social representations. Given the ('vexatious', as Margaret Archer, 1995, might have put it) fact of society, how could people's experience of reality be anything *other* than socially mediated?

The terrain that Couldry and Hepp enter, however, is markedly different. Today, there is hardly anyone who *does not* believe reality is socially constructed. More importantly, there is hardly anyone who does not believe that the media play a substantial role in the process. Everyday hermeneutics of suspicion, as Felski (2015) notes, guides everything from conspiracy theories to the way we think and talk about Donald Trump's activity on Twitter. The challenge for social theory may be more in trying to conceptualise *how* this happens, than in asserting that, given the (vexatious?) fact that what we today think of as society is permeated by the media, reality could not be anything *but* mediated.

The mediated construction of reality begins by identifying the contemporary transformation of the social as a process of deep mediatization, where media have not only permeated the world but also, and more importantly, the ways in which we (as humans) have access to, perceive, and make sense of that world. This leads Couldry and Hepp to develop a materialist phenomenology, a hermeneutical approach that seeks to redescribe some of the key concepts in social theory (self, collectivity, space, state, time) as parts of the ‘media manifold’. While this is a timely and comprehensive analysis, what gets lost between the centrality of the media in the construction of social reality and descriptions of the mediated nature of that reality, is exactly the work of the ‘social’. For instance, there is relatively little on how social relationships, in particular relations of power, constitute the media: While asserting the importance of algorithms for everything ranging from the concept of self to spatial and temporal configurations, Couldry and Hepp for the most part remain satisfied to invoke the names of global corporations (Google, Facebook) as sources of these algorithms.

This seems particularly important given that Couldry and Hepp chose Elias’ concept of figurations instead of, for instance, Actor-Network Theory, in order to highlight the processual aspect of the construction of reality. Global corporations have been there for some time – what has changed about them? How do people who work *for* (which is, ultimately, all of us) and *in* these corporations (code-writers, data analysts, etc.) think about their labor? How do differences in knowledge about, and access to, these platforms relate to other forms of inequality? Similarly, it is by now commonplace to assert that family relations are being profoundly transformed by technologies such as mobile phones, or platforms such as Skype. But what about how gender contributes to differences in access to, and use of, these services? There is something to be gleaned from looking not only at how media structure social relations, but also how social relations – some of them more durable than the iPhone 6 – structure different ways in which we interact with the media.

In other words, while Couldry and Hepp offer a very solid case for the *mediated* construction of social reality, their account of *social* construction of mediated reality remains somewhat wanting. This, however, is less a shortcoming of the book as such, and more an effect of the broader context in which academic knowledge is created today. ‘Disruptive’ events – from the launch of a new app to a surprise result of an election or referendum – are increasingly reframed as calls for ‘new’ social theory. In this sense, the book serves as a reminder that theories developed in a different period of time, such as Luckmann and Berger’s social constructionism, or Elias’ figuration, can provide useful frameworks for thinking about the present.

Particularly for newcomers to social theory, *The mediated construction of reality* provides an excellent overview of the ways in which discussions have evolved in parallel with the development of technologies that they aimed to theorize. At the same time, it also warrants bearing in mind the implicit lesson of its predecessor, *The social construction of reality*: The form in which reality appears to us is fundamentally bound by what we are taught to expect. Social reality may be mediated by the media, but it is not exhausted by the media; keeping this distinction in mind is all the more important as it becomes more difficult to discern the boundaries of both.

References

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