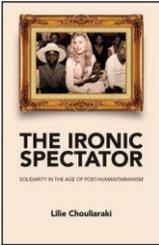


Reviews



The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism. By Lillie Chouliaraki. Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2013. 248 pp. ISBN 9780745642116.

Will irony come to be known as the lens through which we examine our move into a postmodern humanitarian age? In *The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the Age of Post-Humanitarianism*, Lillie Chouliaraki makes the case that we are observing “a historical turning point” (p. 2) in the story of solidarity in the West. With delicate precision, Chouliaraki builds on her ground-breaking 2006 work, *The Spectatorship of Suffering*, to deconstruct a historical shift from ethical empathy to the rise of an ironic form of solidarity that is all about the self, rather than real engagement with the suffering of distant others. She joins the ranks of a number of leading scholars who are observing a growing narcissism in the West, which is contributing to a crisis in public communication (Dahlgren, 2009; Putnam, 2000). She is particularly disturbed by contemporary international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and their minimalist ethics; these INGOs emphasize lifestyle and choice in favour of conviction and vision. For Chouliaraki, we are witnessing the rise of the “ironic spectator” of distant suffering, focusing more on celebrity culture and a neoliberal model of corporate aspiration than on a cosmopolitan approach to humanitarianism and global ethics.

This intelligently written book draws on an impressive literature review to develop a rich tapestry of theoretical concepts and paradoxes from an array of disciplines. In seven chapters, Chouliaraki constructs a considered theoretical conceptualization of our current understanding of humanitarianism; she also provides us with empirical evidence of four current practices in the humanitarian community: appeals, concerts, celebrity, and news.

In Chapter One, she traces the historical shifts in humanitarian campaigning, focusing on the benefits donors and volunteers receive when they support a cause. She highlights how different processes of sociology, philosophy, and politics intersect to mark the shift in communicative practice: the marketization of development, the technologization of communication, and the end of grand narratives in public discourse. Chouliaraki has a clear commitment to Adam Smith’s concept of empathy as a means to achieve engagement with distant others, rejecting Hannah Arendt’s view of reflective judgment. However, Chouliaraki claims the middle ground by arguing the need for balance and moderation in order to assess how we can continue to move toward a more ethical relationship with distant suffering.

Chapter Two focuses on how the theatrical stage for humanitarian communication creates a viable space—which she calls the “humanitarian imaginary”—for Western populations to engage with non-Western sufferers in an open and transformative way. Built on the writings of Martha Nussbaum, Aristotle, and Smith, she constructs a space in which people can imagine a life different from their own. Rejecting leading members of the Frankfurt School as pessimistic, Chouliaraki builds a relationship between the concept of the theatrical and the concept of media theory, establishing a kind of ecosystem of different yet complementary media practices (Couldry, 2012). Putting these theoretical constructions into practice, the subsequent four chapters illustrate empirically that the humanitarian imaginary does not exist solely in our understanding of media; rather, it is part of a wider and all-encompassing society that has witnessed significant changes over the past 40 years. Employing empirical examples of international celebrities, such as Bono and Angelina Jolie, and well-known campaigns like “Find your Feeling” and the Live 8 concerts, she brings her theoretical perspective to life in a tangible manner. The empirical illustrations leave the reader with little doubt that even the most self-aware and committed citizen is still, in some fashion, an “ironic spectator” of the suffering and the causes they choose to observe and champion.

It is difficult to challenge Chouliaraki’s latest book, but the conclusion can leave the reader feeling less than satisfied. While the book speaks to the dream of a new model of cosmopolitanism and agnostic engagement, it does not outline how we should alter the current state. It also leaves the reader wondering how our social, educational, media, and political institutions should be held accountable for the current state of narcissism in our society, and how they should change their focus as it relates to the suffering of others. Although Chouliaraki’s book is not a normative piece of research, it is highly optimistic in its praise for the effectiveness of cosmopolitanism as a counterpoint to the failings of neoliberalism. From a structural point of view, there is a modicum of repetition with the empirical examples and her theoretical claims throughout the book. In addition, her lack of evidence about the extent of the crisis creates a minor conundrum in assessing the validity of her claims—specifically about whether the breakdown of citizenship is occurring as dramatically as suggested. However, Chouliaraki is quite clear about her empirical approach, and reinforces it throughout the book, and it would be unfair to critique her for its absence. She also offers examples of best practices—celebrating local activists, an Amnesty International campaign, and the Guardian’s “Katine” project—as a way of considering how to counter current forms of neoliberal practice. Moreover, it can also be argued that repetition is necessary to reinforce her argument, theoretical perspective, and empirical research, and to demonstrate confidence in the underpinnings of the work.

The *Ironic Spectator* is perceptive and makes a weighty contribution to the academic literature on media, humanitarianism, and solidarity. Chouliaraki urgently calls on the West to stop looking at itself in the mirror and reconstitute itself as a global citizenry, responding to suffering in a cosmopolitan fashion. What is particularly impressive about her contribution to the discussion is that it is multidisciplinary and offers an approach to examine suffering in a theatre closer to home. Is it possible to apply her construction to the vulnerable in our own communities? Can we view our witness-

ing of near or proximal suffering in the same ironic fashion as she contends we do with distant suffering? Does this offer Western democracies an opportunity to use theatricality to reimagine the current state of consumerism and rampant individualism with a more moral and ethical political construction? Will irony become the lens through which we mark the passing into a postmodern age? Chouliaraki offers us the hopeful prospect that we can still change—with a positive and civic-minded approach—the way in which we relate to both near and distant suffering.

References

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