

**PR and governmentality : exploring the relationship  
between PR and Neoliberalism**

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# PR & GOVERNMENTALITY

EXPLORING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN PR AND NEOLIBERALISM

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# Introduction

- “People know what they do; frequently they know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does.” (Foucault, *Madness & Civilization*)
- In 2014 top 250 PR firms in the world reported £6.6BILLION in fee income (Holmes report)
- “Money is better than poverty, if only for financial reasons.” (Woody Allen)

# Objectives

- Explore the relationship between PR and neoliberalism
- Sketch out the utility of some of Foucault's ideas in understanding that relationship
- Offer some tentative propositions about how research in this area might be developed

# Neoliberalism

- Critical stance to a 'restructured global form of capitalism' (Fairclough)
- Minimal state; centrality of market; risk; individual responsibility; differences and inequalities seen as result of personal choices
- Critique (1) as ideology/hegemonic discourse (2) as economic/political 'reality'

# Neoliberalism and PR

- Neoliberalism & PR emerge at same moment & growth of PR mirrors growth of neoliberalism
- Lippmann Colloquium held in France in 1938
- PR's role in transition to a neoliberal society

# Foucault

- Toolbox metaphor (Motion & Leitch 2007)
- Discontinuities
- Rejection of: state centric analyses; history as progress; aspects of present having singular origins; that things have an 'essence'; 'general' theory; that 'objective' truth/knowledge can be separated from power
- Multiple modes of subjectification



# Governmentality

- Government 'beyond the state'
- 'Conduct of conduct'
- 'To structure the possible field of actions of others'
- PR as *Governmental technology*
- "We must distinguish the relationships of power as strategic games between liberties – strategic games that result in the fact that some people try to determine the conduct of others – and the states of domination, which are what we ordinarily call power. And, between the two, between the games of power and the states of domination, you have governmental technologies" (Foucault 1988, p. 19).
- "A complex of practical mechanisms, procedures, instruments and calculations through which authorities seek to guide and shape the conduct and decisions of others to achieve specific objectives" (Lemke)



# Genealogy

- Defining PR!
- PR is like sex....
- “The central issue, then, is not to determine whether one says yes or no to sex (*PR*), whether one formulates prohibitions or permissions; but to account for the fact that it is spoken about, to discover who does the speaking, the positions and viewpoints from which they speak, the institutions which prompt people to speak about it and which store and distribute the things which are said. What is at issue, briefly, is the overall discursive fact, the way in which sex (*PR*) is put into discourse”. (Foucault, History of Sexuality Volume 1)

# Foucault, neoliberalism and PR

- Simultaneous emergence and growth of PR and neoliberalism
- What underlying rationalities are manifested in PR as a Governmental technology?

# Some tentative propositions

- PR's emergence and growth closely mirrors that of neoliberalism
- Conceptualising PR as a 'technology of government' may be productive
- PR is a manifestation of a modern form of P/K that foregrounds its persuasive strategies and tactics
- A genealogy of 'public relations' is due which 'problematizes' PR
- *What is PR's role in facilitating 'state' and capital to influence the (individual and collective) behaviour of given populations to pre-given ends, without it being construed as such* (at a time when distrust of state/Govt, capital/business and corporate media at an all time low)
- Focus less on what PR *is* and more on what it *does*
- The overarching concern is to explore PR's role in the operation of power
- ***Comments and feedback extremely welcome!***

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# Neoliberalism and PR

- “Those among whom neoliberalism became the dominant tendency now constitute a global class that includes - alongside older echelons - the world’s leading industrialists and businesspeople, CEOs of the great corporate firms, the new transnational, trans-ethnic speculators, directors of large financial institutions, hedge-fund operators, venture capitalists, as well as the senior executives who manage the system and have a major stake in its success. ***We must add, too, the key but subaltern archipelago of consultants, marketing experts, public relations people, lawyers, creative accountants and tax-avoidance experts whose fortunes are tied to its success.*** No doubt the huge privileges and immunities won by this formation explain why they seem so morally denuded, impervious to any sense of a wider community or responsibility for their actions, and completely lacking in any understanding of how ordinary people live. Their resistance to reform has been obdurate, their greed brazen. ***They reward themselves extravagantly, while insisting that ‘we are all in this together’, and that their real purpose is ‘serving customers’ and ‘corporate responsibility’, not protecting their own interests.***” (Stuart Hall, After neoliberalism: analysing the present, 2013, *my emphasis*)

# Appendices – Holmes Report (2015)

2015	2014	Agency	HQ	Fee Income 2014 (\$)	Fee Income 2013 (\$)	Staff	Growth (USD)	Growth(Con stant Currency)	
1	1	Edelman	USA	812,300,000	746,672,274	5500	8.8%	8.8%	
2	2	Weber Shandwick	USA	800,000,000	697,468,500		14.7%	14.7%	
3	3	FleishmanHillard	USA	580,000,000	554,190,000		4.7%	4.7%	
4	5	Ketchum	USA	515,000,000	490,000,000		5.1%	5.1%	
5	4	MSLGroup	France	490,000,000	520,000,000	3055	-5.8%	-5.8%	
6	6	Burson-Marsteller	USA	477,000,000	454,500,000		5.0%	5.0%	
7	7	Hill+Knowlton Strategies	USA	380,000,000	386,100,000		-1.6%	-1.6%	
8	8	Ogilvy PR	USA	303,000,000	297,000,000		2.0%	2.0%	
9	11	Golin	USA	213,500,000	196,000,000		8.9%	8.9%	
10	10	Havas PR	France	211,000,000	209,000,000		1.0%	1.0%	
11	9	Brunswick	UK	210,000,000	210,000,000		0.0%	0.0%	
18	15	Grayling	UK	109,740,000	130,310,000		-15.5%	-9.8%	