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Book Review

The Press and Democratic Publics Beyond Habermas

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As online platforms have all but monopolized the sites and forms of public life, from electoral campaigning to shopping and from entertainment to news, *Deadline* and *Citizens of Scandal* find in the moral and political economy of the information that good old printed newspapers produce some crucial insights into the logics of mediated democratic publics—online or offline. Canonically speaking, printed media was a means to a Habermasian public sphere of reasoned, "rational" debate; examining how news production organizes claims and political demands and differentially (dis)connects publics from each other and from certain stakes, Samet and Freije show how printed media interpellates its publics by conjuring up the immanent truths of popular sovereignty, stratifying the voices that count as popular or sovereign. Both books focus on Latin America, where journalistic denunciation and testimonials' long history as artefacts of truth-telling and political action have traditionally had a more complex relationship with the makeup of the public sphere.

Deadline follows Samet's fieldwork among Caracas crime reporters, spanning the Chávez and Maduro administrations and the political polarization of Venezuelan news production. Examining the relationship between populism and the journalistic ethics of "denunciation," Samet argues the media create the condition of possibility for populist mobilization. Populism is a political

logic of Manichean struggles, he claims, following Laclau, rooted in the exact same foundational myth as democracy, that is, popular sovereignty (10–11). The "People" is the absent presence of both democracy and popular sovereignty; in other words, the elusive, defining referent that needs to constantly be conjured up. In the case of populism, the "People" emerge when individual, disparate grievances are articulated into larger demands, speaking and standing for each other and passing for evidence of a collective whose enemy has wronged it. Most studies of populism argue populism's defining feature is a leader who does the "articulating." Samet disagrees, arguing this articulation can be done by others, namely the press.

This is a bold, original theoretical claim, developed expertly and convincingly. Following reporters' work around individual crime scenes, morgues, police stations and ministerial declarations, Samet shows how they, their witnesses and their readers, deploy socioeconomic, historical, and political associations (63–69) to link murders, dispossession, partisan allegiances, and policing practices into a chain of demands for justice, infrastructure, jobs, safety whose organising rationale is victimhood (101, 160–166). "Denuncias," broadly speaking, news-cum-journalistic-exposés in the spirit of Zola's *J'accuse*, integrate these demands presented before the tribunal of the people and on behalf of the people. The public sphere emerges as victimhood becomes a politically productive claim. Editors, readers, and relatives of the deceased contribute to determining which victims entered this public sphere and how (71). This works not through "objective" debate and the circulation of narrowly understood "facts," but through the sorting of bodies by the affective and symbolic truths of popular sovereignty which demands redress—Venezuelans, as a people, are all potential victims (118).

Samet's success stems in part from an intelligent and generous reading of Laclau and structuralist classics. In an exceptionally refined analysis of the murder of a photographer during anti-Chávez protests (89–110), Samet shows how the immanent, eternal "people" and the organic, mortal residents converge through the identification of a common enemy. This process is contingent, even contradictory—indeed, *both* Chavistas and their opponents claimed the photographer as their own victim at the hands of the other side. In fact, time and again *Deadline* shows how journalists from ideologically opposed media collaborate, how partisan tactics reallocate funds and allegiances from one "side" to the other, and how similar in style and content both Chavismo and its opposition often were. Samet's originality is to resist the interpretive tendency to

inventory contradictions to "show" how fluid and flexible experience is, showing instead through these tensions that the politics of antagonism have nothing to do with ideological consistency. This is not because populism is "irrational," but because the structuration of oppositions was never about a mechanistic or deterministic sorting of sameness and difference to begin with. The entire point of this political ontology was always that things—bodies, funds, ideas—come to stand for other things they may well have no organic or consistent relation to, like crime victims turned into the charismatic vessel for a people that has been wronged. Rendered in beautiful, sharp and immensely accessible prose, this outstanding ethnography is anthropological theorizing done in a way that once seemed long gone. It is probably one of the most insightful studies of populism across social sciences in recent times. It will interest readers in political and economic anthropology broadly defined and would be a perfect addition to course reading lists.

From a historical perspective, based on interviews with journalists, politicians and other key actors as well as access to public and private archives, *Citizens of Scandal* examines how media, and in particular the printed press, shaped political processes in Mexico, where the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) ruled for almost three quarters of the twentieth century. Freije's main argument is that the opening of the public sphere that the press effected in Mexico did not follow Habermas' teleological and normative path of expanding "rationale," ever-more-inclusive democracy, but was instead at every step fraught with negotiations with popular cultures, intellectual elite agendas and partisan scheming (7–10). Indeed, the press mediated and reproduced highly stratified gendered, racial, spatial, and socioeconomically-specific kinds of access to a public sphere unlike Habermas' flat and protean publics (202).

Each chapter focuses on one or two political scandals and the role journalists played in their revelation, narration, outright construction, or dissemination. Oriented towards a duty to reveal, persuade and witness rather than merely inform or discuss, the political economy of the scandal press was greatly determined by whether its journalists depended economically on their trade or on other sources of wealth; on their political, social and cultural capital; and their institutional and geographic position with respect to Mexico City (some regions did not even have their own reporters and imported news from the capital). These combinations were never linear. Freije shows how the narration of revelations about governmental abuses in the henequen (*sisal*) industry in Yucatan as a scandal required careful approaches to the revolution of the 1960s

(23), towing the line from persuasion to subversion (46) as journalists decided unilaterally which elements the public needed to know about and what for. In that particular case, one of the scandal's leading journalists, highly educated and a member of the local elite, had to leave his position and the region afterwards due to political pressure.

The logics of the scandal are an equally interesting device to understand how the expanding public sphere incorporated popular sectors, their truth registers and logics of retelling, from gossip to testimonials, as shown in the case of the forced sterilisation panic (65–70). These sectors entered the public sphere as sites of uneducated, irrational, and gendered fervour, consolidating the marginalisation of their concern through mocking comic strips and the exasperated tone of university-educated journalists. From the 1970s onwards, Freije argues, partisan elites turned to the press to denounce each other before the reading public. Scandals became a top-down vehicle for influencing public opinion (80). Soon after, the logics of the scandal would be upended again: from the enlightened journalist teaching the people about abuses committed against them to a bottom-up formulation of claims for the public sphere, as cross-class residents sought the attention of journalists to denounce and secure redress and justice (107–112), in a move reminiscent of Samet's fieldwork. If these publics were never equalized at the level of any form of capital, they did colonize new spaces through yet another form of scandal centred on the immediacy of the experience and the celebration of the self-empowered citizen, as shown in the case of informal garment workers who turned to the production of their own news bulletin, outright bypassing professional journalists (157). If the narrative styles of history as a discipline do not always lend themselves to anthropological readings, Freije's richly documented argument and critical theory orientation will readily contribute to anthropologies of media and information, as well as political anthropology and political economy, both in their broadest senses.

The greatest takeaway from both *Deadline* and *Citizens of Scandal* for an anthropology of our times may well be that there was never much reason to believe that the media's multiplication of venues, voices, and registers would bring about an inclusive, horizontal public arena. Both arguments will travel easily beyond their Latin American context, especially as we recognize information was never about the linear addition of "objective" "facts" where "deviations" thereof would be evident, unwelcome, or anything other than the stuff of *actual* public spheres, shaping who gets to inhabit them and what kinds of claims they can make on others and on that public sphere to begin with.