Book Review

Public Relations, Activism, and Social Change: Speaking Up

Kristin Demetrious
Routledge, New York, 2013
180 pages, $140–$150, hardcover only

Reviewed by Jim Macnamara, University of Technology Sydney

PR – friend of the State; enemy of activists and the people!

Academics are not supposed to go out on a limb and generalise – at least not without ‘scientific’ proof – but I am prepared to do so in this case by saying that this is a book that every public relations scholar should read. While Demetrious’ book is ostensibly about activism, its critical analysis unpacks fundamental issues about public relations that are timely and relevant to the discipline as a whole.

Demetrious acknowledges that ‘there are many politically benign and responsible forms of public relations that perform socially legitimate and constructive activities (2013, p. 5). But she points out that dominant PR theory and practice in contemporary society are grounded in the rational instrumental reasoning of post-Enlightenment Modernism, capitalism, liberal pluralism, and functionalism. While Jim Grunig strenuously argues that his views are not functionalist and social theorists point out that there are not many hard-core positivists left today (Bell, 2010, p. 25), PR is explicitly framed in the dominant paradigm as a management function and,
as such, is inevitably organisation-centric. Despite claims of two-way communication, dialogue, symmetry, and relationships, PR primarily does the bidding of organisations, particularly big business and big government. This type of PR, Demetrious says, ‘transmogrifies the “citizen” into the “consumer”’ (p. 10).

Demetrious points out that as long as PR is conceptualised and theorised this way, there will be ‘antagonism between public relations and civil society’ (p. 25). PR ‘collides with key tenets of citizenship’ (p. 27), she argues.

Demetrious approaches PR through an analysis of activism. But she cleverly uses activism not only as an area of focus in itself, but as a collective case study to tease out aspects of contemporary Western PR theory that warrant critical attention, as a number of others have argued (e.g. Edwards, Daymon, Fawkes, L’Etang, McKie, Moloney, and Pieczka, who Demetrious acknowledges). For example, PR theory has long set out to and prided itself on ‘managing’ issues and activist campaigns are typically seen in PR as ‘issues’ that need to be managed (e.g. Grunig, 1992, p. 503). In fact, as Demetrious points out, the Institute for Public Relations (IPR) in the US has endorsed a book by Denise Deegan (2001) titled Managing Activism in which the author discusses how to counter an ‘activist attack’. It is fairly clear where PR stands in civil society.

Demetrious’s critical analysis will no doubt upset Excellence theory aficionados, particularly when she says ‘public relations is positioned as the instrument of expansionist capitalism’ (p. 45). PRASC, as I abbreviate the book title, will also upset North American sensitivities in its citing of Marx and Engels as one theoretical lens for examining causes of conflict in society. But this book should not be dismissed as a Leftist critique. Demetrious goes on to apply a number of theoretical frameworks in examining PR. This is a well-argued and very well theorised book, framing its arguments within social theory including the eminent work of Émile Durkheim, Habermas’s democratic political theory and communicative action theory, Anthony Giddens’ views on late Modernity, elements of citizenship theory and communitarianism, and particularly Ulrich Beck’s work on risk society and individualisation. It is pleasing to see PR scholars step outside disciplinary silos and sub-disciplinary ghettos to engage with social and political theory in an informed way.

In her latest work Demetrious also has commendably avoided the shrillness that characterises some critical analysis and adopted a measured, well-argued approach. Also, she has moved beyond mere criticism and embraced Marx’s admonition to philosophers that, while philosophy has ‘interpreted the world in various ways, the point is to change
it’ (Marx, 1845, p. xi). Demetrious calls for abandonment of the name and approaches of public relations and their replacement with another grouping of more open communication practices that she calls public communication. On that point she will get no argument from me, given that my university adopted the term in 2007 to include advertising, public relations, organisational and political communication and my title is Professor of Public Communication.

However, Demetrious goes on to argue that the point is more than a name change, calling for recognition and inclusion of new types of publics including ‘marginalised’, ‘scarcity society’, ‘reflexive’ and ‘digital’ publics in place of the ‘functionalist and liberal pluralist idea of ‘publics’” (pp. 148–149). More fundamentally, Demetrious seeks a ‘disarticulating [of] communicative practice from institutional sites like public relations’, which predominantly represent government and large corporations and exclude many interests in society (p. 130), to open up public communication to a wide range of voices and access points. She sees hope in Beck’s notions of ‘new centres of action’ and a multiplicity of entry points into political debate evolving in individualised society (Beck & Willms, 2004) and the power of emancipatory politics (Giddens, 1991) – new social and political structures that PR mostly ignores, or opposes.

Demetrious’ book also touches on another subject close to my heart and my current research interests when she picks up and supports Coombs and Holladay’s (2007) admonition that ‘public relations practitioners must listen and utilize two-way communication to be ethical (as cited in Demetrious, 2013, p, 12) [italics added]. However, she does not elaborate on how large-scale listening by organisations might be accomplished given the practical issues of resources and time and the risks of cacophony and diversity thwarting consensus.

If any criticism can be levelled at this book it is that praxis does not go far enough. For example, while PR practitioners can work with and for activists (i.e., employed by activist organisations), how does public relations embrace activism within government and large corporations? Neither Demetrious critique nor Holtzhausen’s (2007) call for practitioners to act as organisational activists explains how this might be accomplished inside the culture and systems of neoliberal governments and capitalist corporations. Mind you that is a big question.

PS: Routledge, we need a paperback for wider distribution.
References


