

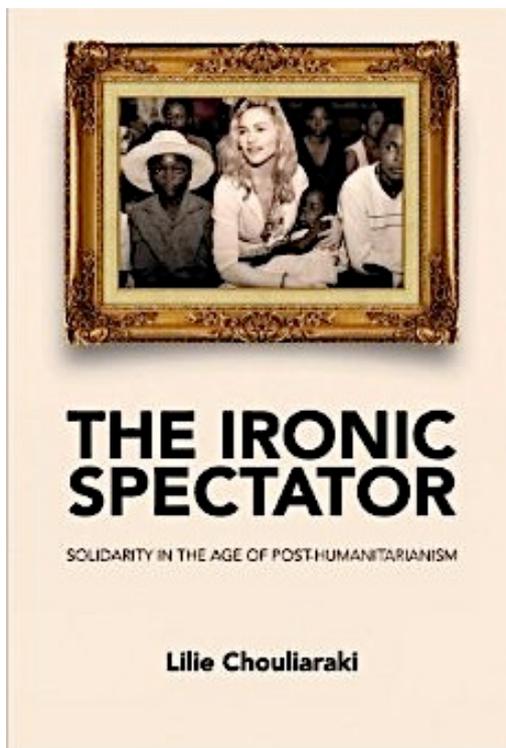
**BOOK REVIEW**

***The Ironic Spectator:  
Solidarity in the Age of Post-  
Humanitarianism***

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***The Ironic Spectator: Solidarity in the  
Age of Post-Humanitarianism. Lilie  
Chouliaraki. Polity Press. 2013***

Published in December 2012, Lillie Chouliaraki's *Ironic Spectator* is rapidly gaining a reputation as a curricular staple; a "must have" on academic reading lists across multiple disciplines. To date, Chouliaraki's work has garnered acclaim in media studies, international relations, sociology, semiotics, development studies, journalism, critical discourse and communication studies. It is easy to see why this book has received such accolades. Its arguments are thorough, yet concise, and Chouliaraki offers a comprehensive analytic framework by which to interrogate popular cultural phenomena - in this case celebrity, charity, and victimhood. In the *London School of Economics Review of Books*, journalist Suzanne Franks (2013) describes Chouliaraki as "a high priestess of the representation of suffering and how we engage with distant others." This claim does not appear to be overstated. Chouliaraki established herself as an authority on the subject with her 2006 *Spectatorship of Suffering*. The *Ironic Spectator* builds on ideas that she introduced in *Spectatorship* by delving into rhetorical problem spaces pertaining to the commodification of charitable sentiment via events such as Live Aid and Live 8 and through popular icons such as Angelina Jolie and Audrey Hepburn. Chouliaraki searches for alternative models of humanitarian aid based on re-imagining how we identify with suffering others who often differ from us culturally and ethnically. While numerous reviews have been written on the *Ironic Spectator*, none have broached the significance of Chouliaraki's work within the context of rhetorical theory, particularly with regard to issues of identification with cultural others (Burke, 1969: 19-55), and "rhetorical listening" to foster such identification - particularly with marginalized populations (Ratcliffe, 2005).

The *Ironic Spectator* considers what Chouliaraki refers to as a "spectacle of pity" perpetuated by the sensationalism characteristic of Western news media along with celebrity endorsement of charitable donations. Although spectacles of poverty-stricken "others" in the global South evoke pity (which in turn provokes donations), these provocative appeals are problematic in that they treat the symptoms of social injustice rather than its causes. Drawing on the scholarship of Hannah Arendt and Luc Boltanski, Chouliaraki writes: "Pity is a form of politics that relies on the spectacle of vulnerability so as to put forward the moral claim to common humanity, in salvation or revolution, as a cause for our action" (32). Here, Chouliaraki points out that often action taken after being exposed to pity-provoking representations of others suggests an ethos of solidarity - but this sense of solidarity is likely illusory. While pity may be motivational in the short term, Chouliaraki adopts Arendt's skepticism of it as a meaningful basis for political action. This is because pity can cause us to subordinate "the long-term concern

with establishing structures of justice to the urgent concern of doing something for those who suffer” (55).

Examining situations in which celebrities use their cultural capital to raise money for a cause, Chouliaraki presents fresh interpretations of why so much of this fundraising is morally and ethically questionable. In doing so, she explains how millennial models of charity are more ironic than authentically humanitarian in that they focus on benefits accrued by the giver - thus humanizing and empowering the Western subject rather than the suffering “distant other”. For instance, both Angelina Jolie and Audrey Hepburn are problematic figures albeit in different ways: Hepburn’s charity represents sufferers in ways that often objectify them, yet the sufferers are the focal point of the images offered for public consumption. By contrast, Jolie’s charity casts Jolie herself as the focus of media coverage and audiences are asked to identify with Jolie’s feelings rather than with the suffering around her. Jolie’s advocacy marks a “shift” in “the relationship between humanitarianism and politics” in that it displaces “the relationship between spectator and sufferer onto a ‘confessional’ relationship between celebrity and his or her publics” (98). Moreover, although these charities such as Jolie’s raise money for the poor, they do not question the genesis of poverty itself, and therefore leave oppressive political structures and ideologies unchallenged. As such, Chouliaraki strives to draw our attention to forms of solidarity that emulate corporatization and commercialization and to question how the media portrays human need. Discourses generated by spectacular examples of giving only serve to reify the binaries between the rich and the poor in that the poor become dehumanized objects of pity, while the rich (ironically) become powerful subjects whose putative humanitarianism is extolled.

Chouliaraki calls for us to be more aware of how we relate to distant others and to consider ways in which we can genuinely identify with them. Similarly, Krista Ratcliffe calls for “conscious identification” with others: “Such conscious identifications are important because they may provide grounds for revising identifications troubled by history, uneven power dynamics, and ignorance; as such they may foster cross cultural communication (...)” (Ratcliffe, 2005: 19). Certainly, the relationship between the global North and the global South can be characterized as one suffering from “uneven power dynamics” that remain unacknowledged from the perspective of a charity-drive. It is this power dynamic that allows the fallacy of the Western savior to flourish. Ratcliffe’s work emphasizes that “rhetorical listening turns hearing (a reception process) into invention (a production process), thus (...) inviting rhetorical listening into the time-honoured tradition of rhetorical invention” (Ratcliffe, 2005: 46). The process of “rhetorical listening” and subsequent invention is evident in the *Ironic Spectator*.

Chouliaraki's analyses of spectacular charity events reflect a process of rhetorical listening and noticing problematic social identifications as being symptomatic of larger social ills. In models of charity characterized by pity and irony, identification with the distant other is rendered unnecessary and there is no sense of working "with" the sufferer as much as working "on" him. The sufferer's voice is rarely (if ever) heard.

In an opening chapter entitled "Spectatorship and Solidarity," Chouliaraki discusses the intricacies of "instrumentalization" that is, the economic aspect of how humanitarian aid is both theorized and put into practice: "Grounded on the working hypothesis that the communication of solidarity cannot but participate in this broader process of instrumentalization (...) my aim is to address the question of *how* instrumentalization came to be enacted through a range of key practices of humanitarian communication and (...) which implications this instrumentalization bears on the dispositions of solidarity that become available in our public culture" (9). In other words, Chouliaraki challenges the belief that the impetus for humanitarian aid is based on an expression of shared humanity. How is it that we came to believe that it was? And what have been the implications of the "grand narratives" we have told ourselves regarding our relationship with impoverished "others"? Chouliaraki scrapes away a much publicized veneer of celebratory giving to reveal other cultural narratives at work; another complex of discourses that do not necessarily support the notion of solidarity.

In addition to this critique, Chouliaraki also acknowledges that the courses of charitable action available to us within a post-humanitarian neoliberal culture are determined by the culture itself, thus circumscribing how we respond to calls for help. Instead of separating the cultural realms of private emotion and commodity exchange, posthumanitarianism blends the two, thus creating a philanthropic climate that commodifies sentiment (7). With this in mind, Chouliaraki examines how cultural constructions of solidarity and foreign aid have changed over the past generation as well as how these constructions affect the ways that we react to appeals. Further, Chouliaraki describes the role of celebrities in expressing and enacting these changes, and the way that news coverage seeks to create authentic images of suffering for an increasingly skeptical public. Chouliaraki argues that "taking action" against poverty is now framed as an individual prerogative rather than a collective endeavor to commit to thoroughly resolving a particular social issue. She also considers ways in which solidarity has come to be driven not by conviction but by choice. Solidarity is no longer a vision, but a lifestyle. Audiences are encouraged to express solidarity through their purchases. They buy into a pre-packaged worldview that presents celebrities as saviors. These corporatized versions of solidarity fuel an ironic paradox: despite all the

ostensive “giving”, the poor stay poor and the rich keep getting richer. Much of this paradox is due to how we rhetorically construct ourselves as givers as well as an unwillingness to engage with the geopolitics that contribute to the suffering of distant others. Ultimately, Chouliaraki embarks upon this project in order to formulate “a politically and morally productive proposal for solidarity” (68). Since the two models generally used to generate a sense of solidarity (typically characterized by pity and irony) may be doing more harm than good, Chouliaraki introduces “an alternative proposal of solidarity as ‘agonism’”(68).

Thus, the final section of the *Ironic Spectator* is comprised of Chouliaraki’s own theoretical attempt to salvage humanitarianism from the grip of narcissism and to offer a new model of humanitarian aid inspired by Arendt’s scholarship on meaningful public engagement. This section is worth focusing on as it will likely influence future scholarship on how charity is conceptualized and help us to move into operating within more effective, inclusive and less racially marked models of humanitarian aid. The stance that Chouliaraki offers towards the end of the *Ironic Spectator* is one that avoids discourses of pity or irony: “I propose an account that goes beyond pity and irony in order to argue for a solidarity of agonism - a solidarity that no longer focuses exclusively on our own feelings about the sufferers’ pain but on creating what Arendt calls ‘a common shared world’ wherein collective action to change the conditions of suffering may become both thinkable and possible in the west” (173). In short, we need to persuade people to act upon a sense of solidarity by identifying with distant others directly, rather than through a celebrity, a social event or a fantasy of our ideal selves. The models of aid that Chouliaraki analyzes tend to consist of Westerners persuading other Westerners to donate. In this sense, no real identification with an “other” is made - and this is part of the problem; the reason that distant others are so quickly objectified and dehumanized. In order to foster the identification necessary to resolve problems, we need to be able to imagine ourselves occupying the subject position of the other (Burke, 1969: 19-55). According to Chouliaraki, this identification can be interpreted as what Arendt refers to as “imaginative judgment” (188). In this model, the imagination is tempered by judgment in order to identify productively with the sufferer.

To this end, Chouliaraki proposes a foundation for conceiving of “solidarity as agonism.” A “solidarity of agonism” includes theatricality and the dramatization of suffering to provoke empathy. Indeed, the “theatricality of the humanitarian” is one of the main concerns of Chouliaraki’s book. When she refers to theatricality as such, Chouliaraki describes the “ceremonial politics of rock concerts (...) as a site of moral education” (109). But this “moral education” does not provoke empathy as much as it aspires to an empathic ideal. Chouliaraki therefore suggests doing away with

aspirational models of empathy that often devolve into a sentimentality that dehumanizes the sufferer and offers a narcissistic representation of an ostensive Western savior. The stance of agonist solidarity promotes the notion of agency on the part of the sufferer and also demands that we consider not simply the immediate cause of the suffering but the larger structures of social injustice that may have led to those circumstances. The solidarity of agonism aims to ensure that the “vulnerable other” remain humanized and that her voice is heard. As Chouliaraki puts it: “The voicing of standpoints (claims to public interest), rather than self expressions (claims to private morality), is (...) crucial to a solidarity of agonism” (194).

By doing this intellectual work, considering existing theatrical models of charity, and speculating on possibilities for future models of foreign aid, Chouliaraki provides a new lens through which to examine the “posthumanitarian” condition. Further, she addresses a wide range of theoretical strands and disciplinary backgrounds in order to support her conceptualization. Finally, Chouliaraki considers how her theories could be operationalized and offers models of judgment - ways to interrogate the ethos of charity drives - that are highly visible in the public sphere. Ultimately she asks us to be self-aware rather than self-absorbed, and to be guided by practicality rather than sentimentality.

## **Works Cited**

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