

# Neoliberal Hegemony and the Post-Democratization of the Public Sphere. An analytical framework to evaluate the democratic quality of political discourse

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## *Hegemonía Neoliberal y la Post-Democratización de la Esfera Pública: marco de análisis para evaluar la calidad del discurso democrático*

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### **Abstract**

The paper offers an analytical framework to evaluate the democratic quality of public discourses in Western democracies and discusses the consequences of a post-democratization of the public sphere. Referring to Colin Crouch, Jacques Rancière and Sheldon Wolin it argues that the gradual transformation of western democracies to “post-democracies” is marked by neoliberal hegemony, which strengthened the influence of economic elites and decreased the political power of the citizenry without being accompanied by institutional change. As it is argued in the paper, it also leads to a structural transformation of the public sphere. By analyzing these changes we can even test the post-democratic assumptions empirically and evaluate the impact of neoliberal hegemony on public discourse.

### **Resumen**

*El presente artículo ofrece un marco de análisis para evaluar la calidad democrática de los discursos públicos en las democracias occidentales y expone las consecuencias de la post-democratización de la Esfera Pública. Parte de los postulados de Colin Crouch, Jacques Rancière y Sheldon Wolin, y defiende que las transformaciones graduales de las democracias occidentales en “post-democracias” están marcadas por la hegemonía neoliberal, que refuerza la influencia de las élites económicas y limita el poder de la ciudadanía, sin que se acompañe de un cambio institucional visible. Se argumenta que tal proceso produce un cambio estructural en la esfera pública. Mediante el análisis de estos cambios resulta posible probar empíricamente las hipótesis post-democráticas y evaluar el impacto de la hegemonía neoliberal en el discurso público.*

### **Keywords**

Post-Democracy, Public Sphere, neoliberalism, hegemony

### **Palabras clave**

Post-democracia, Esfera Pública, neoliberalismo, hegemonía

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## 1. Introduction

**The critique** of the state of democracy has always been an important part of Political Science, especially of Political Theory, and each period seems to have had its favorite theory or theories of crisis<sup>53</sup>. In the 1960's William Kornhauser (2008) described the development of "mass societies" as a danger for modern democracy. In the 1970's Juergen Habermas (1975) and Claus Offe (1975) became influential, mainly among leftist scholars. Their writings on the "legitimacy crisis" were based on Critical Theory and focused on problems of modern capitalism ("Spaetkapitalismus"). At the same time, conservative thinkers started to fear new democratic challenges, which in their opinion were expected to result from "overload" and "un-governability" (e. g. King 1975; Crozier/Huntington/Watanuki 1975). Just a few years later, concerns about the challenges that social movements, other new forms of political participation, and changed attitudes towards politics and politicians emerged (e.g. Inglehart 1977; Verba/Nie/Kim 1978). And in the 1990's Robert Putnam (1995) warned of decreasing Social Capital.

So when in 2004 the British sociologist Colin Crouch claimed the rise of neoliberal hegemony and the establishment of a "post-democratic" society, many political scientists tended to perceive his concept as "just another trendy pre-fix debate" (Hennig 2010), lacking "empirical proof" (Richter 2006) and, much more important, relevance (Buchstein/Nullmeier 2006). However, Crouch's writings opened a lively debate on de-politicization and changing power relations in Western democracies, which led to a revival of Gramscian political thought on hegemony (Gramsci 2011; Laclau/Mouffe 1985) and of Foucault's analysis of the rise of neoliberalism (Foucault 2004a; 2004b).

"Post-democracy", reinforced by theoretical contributions of radical democratic authors like Jacques Rancière and Sheldon Wolin, developed to become one of the most influential discourses in contemporary political science. Since the collapse of Lehmann Brothers Inc., which led to the current financial and economic crisis, it seems to be widely accepted that Western democracies under the influence of neoliberalism in recent years have lost control over the economy – and therefore also suffered a loss of democratic quality (see e.g. Offe 2008; Streeck 2013).

So on the one hand, the consequences of the economic and financial crisis show the potential relevance and importance of the critique that Crouch, Rancière and Wolin articulated long before the first bank's breakdown. On the other hand, some of the claims made in the discourse on post-democracy are considered

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<sup>53</sup> For a short overview see Kaase/Newton (2002: 17ff).

controversial. Most importantly, the assertion that a neoliberal hegemony has been established in Western democracies from the 1970's on, made by Crouch, Wolin and Rancière and supported by a range of authors such as Wendy Brown (2003, 2006), Chantal Mouffe (1993, 2007), and David Harvey (2007), has not yet been convincingly proven. Up to now, only certain possible *consequences* of neoliberal attitudes have been identified, such as processes of privatization, deregulation and the growing number of politically disenfranchised citizens (see e.g. Crouch 2004, 2011). Also the war in Iraq (see Wolin 2008; Brown 2006) can be interpreted as a neoliberal project, which mainly served the interest of influential economic actors (e.g. oil companies). But the *hegemony itself*, that is constituted by complex changes in the way people think, communicate, and evaluate their lives up to now has not been analyzed in an all-encompassing manner.

Therefore it is not surprising, that a number of critics still doubt the existence of a neoliberal hegemony in the Gramscian or Foucauldian sense, and refuse to acknowledge that neoliberalism is the main cause of today's democratic crises (see e. g. Joerke 2010; Wilke 2003). They argue that the guarantee of civil rights, like freedom of speech, as well as the multiplicity of information sources available in the digital age, let the establishment of any hegemony appear as a highly unrealistic – if not impossible – development. Also they doubt the empirical validity of the post-democratic diagnosis and believe that Crouch's, Rancière's and Wolin's thinking is driven by a romantic and unrealistic perspective on democratic processes after the Second World war. They don't share the opinion that democratic quality was substantively higher in the 1950's, 1960's and 1970's than it is today (see e.g. Richter 2006; Joerke 2010; Hennig 2010).

Against this background, the following paper offers a new analytical framework to discuss and analyze neoliberal hegemony. It argues that neoliberal hegemony in contemporary democracies must go along with certain changes in the structure of political discourses and makes a proposal of how to empirically analyze whether neoliberal thinking has become hegemonic in the past 40 years. Therefore, it first gives a short overview of the main aspects of post-democratic crisis theory (section 2). Building on these findings, it argues in section 3 why the hegemony of neoliberal thinking in democratic states necessarily has to influence public discourses in certain, characteristic ways. Therefore, by analyzing whether or not a structural change of the public discourse – similar to the changes Habermas (1991) described for the late 19<sup>th</sup> century – has taken place, we can evaluate the impact of neoliberalism on contemporary societies. Based on these elaborations an analytical framework is developed, which further explains the characteristics of a well-functioning *democratic*, in contrast to a *post-democratic*, public sphere and that enables us to empirically analyze processes of post-democratization from a

new perspective. At the end of the paper (section 4) some concluding remarks discuss the practical challenges of the presented analytical framework and the relevance of further research on post-democracy.

## 2. “Post-Democracy” and Neoliberal Hegemony

### 2.1 Colin Crouch: The post-democratization of liberal democracies

Without any doubt, since he first published his well-known essay “Post-Democracy” in 2004, in which he criticizes the huge and growing influence of economic interests on political decision-making, *Colin Crouch* is the most famous spokesman of the discourse on neoliberal hegemony. Even though he was not the first one to use the term post-democracy (Jacques Rancière already spoke of post-democracy in a lecture in 1992), his work initiated the debate on the state of modern democracies.

In “Post-Democracy” (2004), Crouch describes four main developments, which have been transforming formerly democratic systems into post-democratic ones since the 1970’s. (1) While democratic institutions formally stay intact, they *de facto* have been losing influence on the political decision-making process, which is more and more strongly dominated by a small number of (mostly economic) elites. (2) A “degeneration of political parties” has been taking place, which is turning political parties into “mere vote catching apparatus”, unable to develop meaningful agendas and mainly steered by information from opinion research. (3) The media do not fulfill their democratic functions sufficiently anymore; as well as the parties they have been victims of marketization and today focus on profit orientation instead of on political information and education. (4) Finally, Crouch criticizes the citizen’s passiveness and political disenchantment.

Crouch identifies the rise of neoliberal thinking to a hegemonic paradigm as the ultimate cause of these post-democratic developments. The neoliberal ideology that has been politically influential in Europe since the election of Margaret Thatcher as Prime Minister in the UK, paved the way for the mentioned developments, which significantly diminished the democratic quality of contemporary Western democracies<sup>54</sup>.

<sup>54</sup> Thatcher enforced political reforms, which were strongly oriented towards economic wealth and interests – and that substantially decreased as well the unemployment rate as inflation in Great Britain. Her account was so successful that even leftist or social-democratic governments in different countries (e.g. president Clinton in the U.S. or Gerhard Schroeder in Germany) later adopted similar measures and so directly supported the rise of neoliberal hegemony (see Streeck 2013).

## 2.2 Jacques Rancière: Post-Democracy as neoliberal de-politicization

The French political philosopher *Jacques Rancière* (e.g. 2003: 1, 1999: 107) perceives neoliberalism as a hegemonic ideology that has been harming democracy in Western states, even though his conception of democracy is in some respects quite different from Crouch's. Being a radical democratic theorist, equality is the starting point as well as the aim of Rancière's political thinking. One of his basic assumptions is that democracy is not much more than a society's permanent struggle to achieve equality, and therefore so called "democratic" institutions are not the distinctive feature of democratically organized political communities. Instead, the disagreement between people who perceive themselves as equal for him is the main characteristic of democracy. A society where no disagreements become visible for Rancière is an "apolitical" and therefore necessarily undemocratic one.

So, political institutions on the one hand mirror the democratic struggle for equality (e.g. the guarantee of basic rights, the establishment of courts), on the other hand they tend to solve disagreements or even to hinder conflicts from emerging. Therefore they always are accompanied by a tendency to depoliticize. To mark this tendency, Rancière describes the institutional part of modern democracies – often critically – as "the police" while "politics" or the "political" are marked by conflict and disagreement, and seen positively. Rancière (2001) explains: "The police says that there is nothing to see on a road, that there is nothing to do but move along. It asserts that the space of circulating is nothing other than the space of circulation. Politics, in contrast, consists in transforming this space of 'moving-along' into a space for the appearance of a subject: i.e., the people, the workers, the citizens: It consists in refiguring the space, of what there is to do there, what is to be seen or named therein." The *political*, not the *police* in Rancière's sense allows people to act as equal subjects in the democratic process<sup>55</sup>. For him, democracy is a permanent and endless process of emancipation that goes along with conflict and disagreement that neither can nor should be resolved.

*Post-democratization* in this understanding is a process of de-politicization, which goes beyond the "usual" tendency of the police to oppress conflicts within the citizenry. Neoliberal hegemony has been creating a new form of de-politicization by supporting the increasing influence of economics on all spheres of life, especially on the political one. "Postdemocracy is the government practice and conceptual legitimization of a democracy after the demos, a

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<sup>55</sup> So his political thinking turns explicitly against institutional as well as consensus-oriented understandings of democratic politics such as Habermas' deliberative theory.

democracy that has eliminated the appearance, miscount, and dispute of the people and is thereby reducible to the sole interplay of state mechanisms and combination of social energies and interests. Postdemocracy is not a democracy that has found the truth of institutional forms in the interplay of social energies. It is an identifying mode, among institutional mechanisms and the allocation of the society's appropriate parts and shares, for making the subject and democracy's own specific action disappear" (Rancière 1999: 102).

So post-democracy here is perceived as a political practice that reduces plurality in the political sphere and therefore stands in opposition to Rancière's normative ideal of politics. Processes of post-democratization may appear in many shapes, but they always diminish what Rancière calls "the political".

Evidence for post-democratization is arguably witnessed in Western democracies on a daily basis: e.g. there are numerous statements of politicians who deny the contingency of political decision-making and therefore turn down disagreement or conflict (for example Thatcher's famous term "there is no alternative" (the so called TINA-rhetoric), which she used more than once to denounce alternative policies as out of question and to emphasize the relevance of economic wealth). Rancière also criticizes the rising influence of experts on politics: in his opinion, politics dominated by experts fundamentally undermines the idea of equality. A third example is the downsizing of the state: the post-democratic longing for a minimal state mirrors the idea of politics as a government technique and contradicts the political as a permanent struggle and unsolvable dispute.

### 2.3 Sheldon Wolin: Post-Democracy and inverted totalitarianism

The third important theorist of post-democracy is the political scientist *Sheldon Wolin*. In many respects his idea of democracy corresponds to Rancière's. Wolin, like Rancière, criticizes neoliberalism and values "political moments", when the existing order is taken into question, as "truly" democratic moments, and he is afraid of a post-democratic constellation where hardly any political moments occur anymore. Also as in Rancière's understanding, for Wolin democracy is not guaranteed by the establishment of certain institutions, like free elections, equal political rights or freedom of the press. It rather is *fugitive*, what means it appears only in short political moments and then disappears again. It does not have a pre-given or stable shape – it is build on change and on the non-predictable interaction of people

Referring to Tocqueville, Wolin states that democracies have an inherent tendency to degenerate: "What is crucial [...] is the virtual disappearance of the culture of participation and its replacement by a culture of privatism, isolation

and, what Tocqueville could not have foreseen, consumerism” (Wolin 2001: 570). Talking about post-democracy, he believes that at the end of the 20th century, in addition to the decline of democratic values within the citizenry, neoliberalism appeared and “set the norm for all practices concerned with significant stake of power, wealth or status” (Wolin 2004: 564).

The coincidence of a weak democracy and neoliberalism lead to a post-democratic constitution of the political sphere. Wolin here speaks of “inverted totalitarianism”: “While it is a system that aspires to totality, it is driven by an ideology of the cost-effective rather than of a ‘master race’ (*Herrenvolk*), by the material rather than the ‘ideal’” (Wolin 2004: 591). By comparing post-democracies to totalitarian regimes, Wolin tries to identify and contextualize characteristic features of the transformation process he believes to be occurring, and he wants to warn people of its possibly grave consequences: “An inversion is present when a system, such as democracy, produces a number of significant actions ordinarily associated with its antithesis” (Wolin 2008: 46). Such an inversion, in his opinion, is taking place regarding the citizen’s engagement and power resources in contemporary democracies.

No matter whether one likes or dislikes the parallels he draws between totalitarian states and negative developments in modern democracies, it is striking that Wolin’s conception of the democratic crisis is the only one which critically discusses the citizen’s role in the process of post-democratization. Totalitarianism is a buzzword, but Rancière and Crouch also do not expect post-democracy to resemble anarchy, but rather to resemble a regime type that is marked by limited freedom. Wolin also emphasizes, even more strongly than Rancière, the value of the public sphere for democracies. Without a lively public discourse, democracy is necessarily instable. Therefore, changes in the public sphere are of special relevance for democratic quality.

## 2.4 Post-democracy and neoliberal hegemony

So all three concepts of post-democracy developed in Political Theory are based on the notion that a neoliberal hegemony has been established in Western democracies at the end of the 20th century – even though neoliberalism is not exactly defined by Crouch, Rancière or Wolin<sup>56</sup>. Referring to England and Ward (2007) we can distinguish four *kinds* of use of the term neoliberalism in the Social Sciences: *Neoliberalism* as an ideological hegemonic project”; “Neoliberalism

<sup>56</sup> Crouch’s, Rancière’s and Wolin’s conceptions of post-democracy are by far the most influential ones in the discourse. An alternative conception was recently published by Ingolfur Bluehdorn (2013) who describes post-democracy as “simulative democracy” and believes processes of post-democratization to be hardly inevitable in post-modern societies.



as policy and program”; “Neoliberalism as state form”, and “Neoliberalism as governmentality”). In the discourse on post-democracy neoliberalism without any doubt is perceived primarily (but not exclusively) as an *ideology* and (referring to Foucault’s understanding) as a *governmentality* profoundly changing political decision-making processes, and standing in opposition to core democratic values – even though its hegemony does not necessarily lead to institutional change<sup>57</sup>. As Bob Jessop and others have shown, it contradicts democratic values not because it connects the linked spheres of economics and politics, but because it leads to a “capture” of political logic by economic logic. Values such as equality or justice (which are supposed to be as inherent to the political as economic logic), lose influence on political thinking, arguing and decision-making under a neoliberal hegemony<sup>58</sup>.

This constriction of the political is anti-democratic, because Crouch, Rancière and Wolin conceptualize democratic politics not as an institutional setting but as a *sphere of societal life* which cannot and should not be “managed” by applying fixed rules or in recourse to expert knowledge but which is based on conflict and interaction between equal people.

So neoliberalism is the starting point of processes of post-democratization and therefore also the cardinal point of this crisis theory. Nevertheless, none of the three authors has comprehensively explained what characterizes neoliberal hegemony, described its mode of operation, or tried to prove its existence. While they do try to justify their assumption of neoliberal hegemony by referring to certain developments that can be interpreted as consequences of ideological change (e.g. the people’s acceptance of growing inequality, policies that lead to privatization and deregulation), their work lacks a clear analytical perspective on neoliberalism as well as reference to data or studies that sufficiently prove the expected omnipresence of neoliberal logic. To fill in that blind spot, in the following article an analytical framework is presented. It is based on discourse analysis, and aims at investigating the marks neoliberalism has left on public communication.

<sup>57</sup> A different understanding of neoliberalism (and as well of liberalism) of course can be found in economics. Here neoliberalism usually is understood as a concept that challenges Keynesianism after the economic crisis in 1928 and was meant to offer a reformulated and revitalized liberal perspective of Adam Smith (see Hayek 1976; Walpen 2004). The first interpretation of neoliberalism as an ideology was formulated by Foucault and typically is used by social scientists and philosophers.

<sup>58</sup> Ideally, according to Crouch, Rancière and Wolin no hegemony exists in a truly democratic society – even though they realize that this ideal is counterfactual. Their assumptions suggest that they perceive Western de-mocracies in the 1960’s and 1970’s as less dominated by a single ideology than they are today. Neoliberalism in their opinion has become hegemonic, while 40 years ago different modes of rationality were competing more strongly in the political sphere.

### 3. Neoliberal hegemony and discourse analysis

#### 3.1 The indirect rule of neoliberal hegemony

As Antonio Gramsci explained in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, if an ideology becomes hegemonic, it influences the way people think, it changes their values and therefore also the ways in which they speak and act. Thereby a hegemonic world-view can become powerful without necessarily being linked to institutional change – it can rule indirectly by influencing the people’s minds and behavior.

In “Hegemony and Socialist Strategy” (1985), Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe developed an important post-structural reformulation of Gramsci’s theory of cultural hegemony. While Gramsci reconstructed the union of social forces that stabilized the capitalist status quo as a “historic bloc”, which (re-)produces the hegemony of the dominant class through a nexus of institutions, social relations, and ideas, Laclau and Mouffe focus on elements of Saussure’s theory of language. In this perspective, hegemony is a medium of power relations (wherein a subordinate collectivity performs social tasks that are culturally unnatural and also not beneficial to the members of this collectivity), based on interrelated discursive moments. Every articulation thereby creates a field of differences, it constructs exclusions and it illustrates equivalences. The logic of the political follows the logic of equivalence: it is based on demarcations between the included and the excluded (so it is necessarily antagonistic), and only when a discourse is able to assemble a large number of equivalences and continuously broadens its impact on society, it can become hegemonic. So Laclau and Mouffe see hegemony not as the imposition of a pre-given set of ideas but as “something that emerges from the political interaction of groups” (Worsham/Olson 1999: 2). It is not simply the domination by an elite, but instead a process of ongoing struggle that constitutes the social.

Summarized briefly, hegemony in the understanding of Mouffe and Laclau is a military, political, and economic relationship that occurs as an articulation within political discourse and it operates mainly through language and communication. The following considerations are based on this approach, and feature the role of communication in the public sphere for the analysis of neoliberal hegemony. They argue that post-democratization is indeed based on neoliberal hegemony, so it does not need institutional change to become powerful but mainly operates by changing discursive structures in contemporary societies. As it will be shown, neoliberal hegemony has even managed to establish processes of post-democratization in a particularly effective way. Appearing at a time when contemporary (liberal) democracy was at the height of its power and enjoyed broad support from people all over the world, it has been pretending to

be in accordance with democratic institutions and values and so managed to become influential (Brown 2011). But because this is a façade „even a well-chosen one, it should not hinder us from realizing that neoliberal hegemony“ has launched a frontal assault on the fundamentals of liberal democracy, displacing its basic principles – of constitutionalism, legal equality, political and civil liberty, political autonomy, and universal inclusion – with market criteria of cost/benefit ratios, efficiency, profitability, and efficacy” (Brown 2011: 45). By traveling under the sign of democracy, neoliberalism has become not only a highly powerful political rationality, but has also systematically reduced – measured by normative standards – the democratic quality of political processes. But how did it manage to do this?

Post-democratic theorists like Crouch, Rancière and Wolin have been right to point out how severe the *consequences* of neoliberal hegemony are – and how many indicators point to an ongoing process of post-democratization in Western democracies in the last 30 years. But they have not sufficiently analyzed the role of changing discourse structures. As we can learn from the work of Gramsci and Mouffe/Laclau, hegemonic constellations do not have to affect political institutions or decision-making processes, but gain power by changing political discourses. They affect – as Rancière describes it – the realm of the thinkable and speakable, they define *who* is allowed to make legitimate claims and *what* political changes can be demanded (Rancière 2008: 27ff.).

From this perspective, the establishment of a neoliberal hegemony must go along with a structural transformation of the public sphere. Similar to the changes Habermas described in “The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere” (1991), where he explains the evolution of public opinion and the effects of the development of mass media and mass democracy at the end of the 19th century on the structure of political discourse, a significant change of discourse quality must go along with processes of neoliberalization.

Habermas defines the public sphere as the sphere of private people who join together to form a “public”. In the history of modern societies, he distinguishes two changes of the public sphere that gravely influenced its nature and political relevance and potential. While in monarchical and feudal societies no distinction between state and society or between public and private was made, in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, when bourgeois liberal constitutional orders were constituted, the first transformation of the public sphere took place. Now a clear distinction between the public and private realms was made. Within the private realm, there was a bourgeois public sphere for rational-critical political debate of societal elites. This first transformation was mainly caused by the rise of early non-industrial capitalism and by the philosophical articulation of political liberalism. It

was driven by political as well as by economic developments and the so-called “bourgeois public” sphere flourished within the early laissez-faire, pre-industrial capitalist order of liberalism.

Habermas identifies a second structural transformation of the public sphere in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when a new constellation of social, political, and philosophical developments developed. It was mainly based on industrialization. The result of the second structural transformation of the public sphere was the rise of mass societies in the twentieth century where the demarcations between the public and the private as well as between state and society became more and more blurred. The “bourgeois public sphere” was transformed into the “modern public sphere” that mirrored a world marked by increasing re-integration and entwining of state and society. This shift, according to Habermas, led to the commercialization of the public sphere, mainly through the rise of mass media and consumer culture. So according to him, already the second transformation of the public sphere worked against rational-critical debate and therefore can be seen as a development that, even though more people became involved in political thinking, harmed the democratic quality of political discourses. A strengthening of deliberative democracy, as he later develops in his “Theory of communicative action” (1987) and in “Between Facts and Norms” (1996), can help to overcome the deficits of the modern public.

Updating this line of thinking, neoliberal hegemony can be perceived as a process of social and political change that led to a third structural change of the political public, and further weakens the democratic potential of public reasoning. Of course, this structural change is marked by very different characteristics to the ones Habermas identified as signifiers for the erosion of the bourgeois public sphere and the rise of the modern public century before. The assumption that economic developments play a vital role in the evolution of any public sphere is still true today. However, the transformation of the public sphere nowadays has not been caused by the introduction of capitalist modes of production, but by the rise of neoliberal hegemony even in states that for a long time were dominated by social democratic ideals (see Crouch 2011: 162ff.).

So, following Crouch, Rancière and Wolin, we have to conceptualize the ideal of a democratic public sphere indifferent terms than Habermas did, but we can expect changes induced by neoliberal hegemony that lead to a structural transformation of the public sphere. Instead of following the guidelines of deliberative democratic theory, the ideal of a democratic public sphere in the discourse on post-democracy is closely related to the radical democratic

terminology of Laclau and Mouffe, and also offers some similarity to republican political thinking<sup>59</sup>. For theorists of post-democracy, a well-working public sphere is not primarily marked by the share of arguments in a public discourse or by the existence of free media, but by more complex characteristics, like openness for different group of actors, openness for a multiplicity of arguments, and a comparatively rational way of reconstructing political discourse.

### 3.2 Analytical Perspectives

A post-democratization of the public sphere goes along with changes located on three dimensions: (1) The criteria of *equality* of different group of actors; (2) their *openness* to different matters; and (3) *discourse rationality*. According to Bernhard Peters (2007) these three dimensions determine the democratic quality of public discourse on the structural level. His approach complements far more well-known analyses of democratic quality, like e.g. the “freedomhouse index” or the more up to date “democracy barometer” (Buehlmann et al. 2012) that focus on institutional analysis. Without any doubt, criteria like “rule of law” and “existence of free and fair elections” are important indicators to evaluate whether or not a state is democratic but such institutional analyses are still not able to track changes caused by neoliberal hegemony. Regarding the post-democratic assumption of a decline of democratic quality neither freedom house nor the democracy barometer can be supposed to provide sufficient indicators to measure the level of neoliberal hegemony and post-democratization, because they do not cover changes that don’t affect institutions. To identify and measure such changes we need discourse analysis.

Similar problems apply to studies that focus on the state and quality of the media system, as processes of concentration and re-organization in the media can be perceived as a consequence of marketization and neoliberalism, but neoliberal hegemony does not necessarily go along with such developments (and can these days also be the result of digitalization etc.).

Instead we can state the following: If neoliberalism has become hegemonic, this development has to be mirrored in the public discourse, namely on the three dimensions of equality, openness and discourse rationality. As the following will explain, neoliberal hegemony is supposed not only to have an elitist impact on the public discourse, but also tend to deny contingency, and to lead to certain changes in the argumentative structure of public discourses.

<sup>59</sup> For a discussion of republican, liberal and deliberative ideals of the public sphere see Habermas (1999).

Of course, changes on just three dimensions of the public discourse are not the only consequences of neoliberal hegemony. Neoliberalism also impacts on our lives in many ways that can be analyzed on different theoretical bases – e.g. with the help of theories of action (see e.g. Schimank/Volkman 2008). To focus the analysis on public discourses therefore can rightfully be seen as too narrow a perspective on processes of post-democratization. But it still seems worthwhile to add the perspective of discourse theory to the debate on post-democracy, because discourses *must* be affected by hegemony and offer – as the work of Foucault paradigmatically proves – a way of better understanding certain aspects of societal and political development. Regarding post-democratization the theory and methods of discourse analysis can be used to explain why citizens don't use their democratic rights to hinder parliaments from becoming “closed shops” mainly influenced by strong lobbies of economic interests.

Discourse-analysis also enables us to do quantitative as well as qualitative empirical studies, e.g. of mass-media coverage. Without any doubt such research goes far beyond what theorists like Wolin and Rancière had in mind when articulating their critiques<sup>60</sup>, and it is faced with severe limitations regarding the number of cases and the amount of data that can be included. Anyway, as the following elaborations shall clarify, discourse analysis is a reasonable tool to track at least one consequence of neoliberal hegemony - the decline of the political public.

To propose such an analytical view on post-democracy is not meant to deny the existence or relevance of other changes due to neoliberalism but it acknowledges the importance of a functioning political public for the democratic process, and offers a way of precisely tracking and comparing the influence of neoliberal thinking on contemporary societies. Therefore the following elaborates on which changes on the three dimensions of equality, openness and discourse rationality might be expected in case of a neoliberalization of the political public.

Changes in the first dimension of *equality* are perceived as being of normative relevance because the democratic ideal as depicted by Crouch, Rancière and Wolin is strongly oriented towards equality. Ideally, all citizens and groups of citizens in a democracy should be able to have the same influence on the public sphere and to get to present their opinions and interests to a broad political public. If a neoliberal hegemony has been established since the 1970's, we can expect two developments. First, there will be a change in the composition of the group of relevant actors in the public sphere. Economic elites will appear more

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**60** Especially Rancière (1999: 195f.) has explicitly criticized the dominant role of empirical research in today's social sciences.

often in the public while non-elites disappear. Second, the influence of actors who are characterized by a high socio-economic status on the political public will increase compared to the influence of other groups of actors. These changes in the personnel are due to the fact that neoliberalism favors the perspective of economic interests and attributes economic elites more credibility and relevance than to the representatives of other societal spheres. Even the voices of new social movements, which often criticize neoliberalism and globalization, are according to the post-democratic assumptions only (and more and more) rarely heard in the public. Compared to the statements of economic interests they are expected to play a minor role in political discourses.

On the second dimension the political public's *openness* for different matters changes. Here we take a look at the relevance of different political topics, standpoints and logics underlying certain political interests and actions in the public sphere. If a neoliberalization of public discourses is taking place, according to the expectations of Crouch, Wolin and Rancière, the relative influence of economic topics and perspectives here is expected to rise. This leads to two further expected aspects of structural change: The percentage of economic topics in the political coverage as a whole rises; and non-economic topics are framed more often in economic terms than they used to be. The third dimension focuses on the level of *discourse rationality*. Rationality here does not only refer primarily to Habermas' sense of discourse ethics, but also to other indicators to measure the argumentative structure and quality of a political discourse. On the one hand, post-democratic theorists expect an increasing number of statements in the political discourse that deny the contingency of politics (like the so called TINA-rhetoric that Margaret Thatcher used prominently does) or which state that certain questions can or should not be decided on politically. They also expect that conflicts, which in the opinion of Crouch, Wolin and Rancière (and of course also in the perception of Mouffe/Laclau) necessarily exist in modern societies, become less visible in the public discourse because within processes of post-democratization and neoliberalization it is often pretended that consensus on political problems is not only possible but also exists. Therefore we expect three changes on this dimension due to processes of neoliberalization. First, the contingency of the political is denied more and more often in political discourse, and instead political decisions are presented as either right or wrong. Second, it is more and more often stated in political discourse that certain problems should not or cannot be solved politically, because they can be better addressed by private actors or the markets. Third, conflicts become less visible in the political process. Instead of conflict, the possibility or existence of consensus is more often articulated in public debates – even though not only theorists like Wolin and Rancière but also

many contemporary liberal thinkers deny that in free, democratic society such a situation is a realistic scenario for political action.

Three further changes can be expected with reference to the conceptions of Crouch and Wolin. For them public discussions are the more ideal the more rational they are (which means the more arguments are uttered in them, and the less emotional, personalized and scandalized they are)<sup>61</sup>. First, the number of arguments stated in public discourses declines in the process of post-democratization. Second, instead of rational discourses, more one-sided articulations can be found in cases of neoliberal hegemony. In particular the share of economic arguments rises in the course of post-democratization processes, because this perspective is dominant in times of neoliberal hegemony. Finally, Crouch and Wolin argue that characteristics of tabloidization can be observed more and more often in the media coverage as a sign of neoliberalization.

By testing these expectations empirically, we can find out whether and to which degree a neoliberal hegemony, in the way it is described in the discourse on post-democracy, has established itself in the political public since the 1970's. From the perspective of a radical democratic and equality-oriented understanding of democracy, this approach enables us to determine the discursive quality of political discourses, and in combination with institutional indicators it could be the basis for an all-encompassing instrument to evaluate the democratic quality of contemporary media discourse.

## 4. Conclusion: Neoliberal hegemony – an actual threat to Western democracies?

**In this paper** it has been argued why neoliberal hegemony might lead to an erosion of democratic (discourse) quality in Western political systems – and therefore is a fundamental part of the post-democratic critique authors like Colin Crouch, Jacques Rancière and Sheldon Wolin have uttered regarding the state of democracy at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The paper also presents an analytical approach that relates post-democratic hypotheses to discourse structures, which helps us not only to understand the post-democratic developments in a more all-encompassing manner, but it is also able to explain how neoliberal hegemony provokes a new form of democratic decline that is taking

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**61** Rancière, whose conception of equality forbids him to set standards on discourse quality than cannot be fulfilled similarly by all members of a political society, would not articulate these last three assumptions. Instead, he explicitly perceives all kinds of political communication (also emotional and non-argumentative ones) as of equal democratic value (Rancière 2009).



place without institutional change. So it builds on the notion that if a neoliberal hegemony has been established in the past 40 years, such a structural change would have had to appear in the political public.

This approach leads us to a research framework that offers not only a new theoretical perspective on neoliberal hegemony and post-democratization, but also proposes an innovative way to enhance the empirical relevance of the discourse on post-democracy, and to test its main assumption: the post-democratic developments that have been characteristic for Western democracies over the past 40 years were caused by the establishment of a neoliberal hegemony, which erodes fundamental democratic principles in, amongst other things, the public discourse and therefore threatens the democratic quality of these states without provoking institutional change.

The framework instructs the empirical investigation of the extent to which, and over what time-span, neoliberal hegemony has changed the democratic quality of contemporary Western societies. Referring to the assumptions of scholars, who have been closely analyzing neoliberalism (e. g. Brown 2003, 2006, 2011; Harvey 2007; Foucault 2004a, b; England/Ward 2007) we can expect the process of neoliberalization to have started in the early 1970's. Its gradual development went on until the beginning of the financial crisis in 2008 – though potentially (as Colin Crouch claims in his book “The strange non-death of neoliberalism” (2011)) neoliberal hegemony has persisted even over the last five years.

But to gain the necessary data to test the post-democratic assumptions in an all-encompassing manner, a demanding discourse analysis will have to be designed that analyses changes on the three dimensions equality, openness and discourse rationality over a time-span of forty years. Even if one limits such a study on rather small samples and only small number of media-sources, the project will have to be analyzing a huge sample of coverage and is therefore quite ambitious. But given the relevance of a functioning public sphere in contemporary democratic societies, the effort of performing this kind of research seems to be worthwhile. Also, semi-automatic text-mining tools seem to be a promising and innovative way to gain such data – even though they also will have to be adapted closely to fulfill the needs of the presented analytical framework<sup>62</sup>.

The analytical design presented in this paper is meant as a first step to do such empirical work. Hopefully, a close empirical examination will follow soon. Because only if we investigate theory *and* practice of neoliberal hegemony will we be able to determine the relevance of the analyses of theorists like Crouch, Rancière

<sup>62</sup> For a short description of the state of research see Miner et al. (2012: 53ff.), for elaborations on the semi-automatic analysis of neoliberalism see Wiedemann et al. (2013).

and Wolin. Also further research on post-democracy will help us to proof (or refute) the existence of today's democratic crisis, to evaluate its severity – and, when indicated, to find a way out of it.

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