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Book Review

Blaming the Victim: How Global Journalism Fails Those in Poverty. By Jairo Lugo-Ocando. London, UK: Pluto Press, 2015. viii+212 pp. (paperback) ISBN 978-0-7453-3441-7. US List \$34.00.

Poverty is a persistent subject of news coverage. Whether as abject victims of disasters like Hurricane Katrina, as beneficiaries of charity, or as the focus of social policy debates, the poor are recurring characters in journalism's day-to-day narrative. More often than not, though, news media representations of the poor distort or obscure the structural causes of economic deprivation and promote elements of the dominant, neoliberal ideology. A number of scholars have studied how news coverage of poverty has contributed to public hostility to welfare programs, such as the now dismantled Aid to Families with Dependent Children (see, for instance, Gilens 1999). However, there has been a dearth of scholarly attention to how the dominant ideological motifs running through news coverage of poverty in advanced capitalist countries also shape the international news media's representations of the poor in the Global South. In *Blaming the Victim: How Global Journalism Fails Those in Poverty*, Jairo Lugo-Ocando takes up the ambitious task of analyzing those common themes and of dissecting the institutional and political economic structures that influence how the news media cover poverty around the world.

Lugo-Ocando begins the book by noting that poverty itself is a “social construction” and a “contested political concept in the media” which carries with it implicit explanations and ideological presuppositions (18). Merely counting who is and is not poor involves politicized decisions. The US, for instance, defines poverty in relation to a specific dollar amount—adopted in 1964 and then adjusted

for inflation—that supposedly represents an absolute minimum below which individuals or families cannot meet their basic needs (for food, housing, medical care, transportation, etc.). The European Union defines as poor any household earning 60 percent or less of the national average household income.

Lugo-Ocando then surveys the overarching patterns evident in reporting on poverty. The most obvious of these is that rising economic inequality, the driving force behind mass poverty in both advanced industrial and developing nations, was largely ignored by the news media until the 2008 financial crisis (16). Another key pattern is that most news stories about poverty depend heavily on sources that are “white, male and from elite institutions” while marginalizing the voices of those in poverty or at risk of becoming so (27). This is especially true of reporting about poverty outside Europe and the U.S. News about deprivation in Latin America or Africa often fails to include “a single source from the affected country itself” and “the whole story is articulated through the voices of Westerners” (62). Moreover, the poor (whether from the Global South or from advanced industrial countries) tend to be depicted in the news as “passive,” “self-marginalized,” and “self-excluded”—as unable to help themselves without charitable assistance from the affluent (29). In the final analysis, the global news media frame those in economic need as “other,” as radically different from and inferior to the rest of society, and this view of the indigent, Lugo-Ocando contends, is a direct product of the journalistic cultivation of detachment that is part and parcel of the commercial news media’s commitment to “objectivity.”

As a former journalist and news editor, Lugo-Ocando underscores the role of newsroom culture and institutional structures in perpetuating journalism’s skewed picture of poverty. In his chapter, “Poverty Ideas in the Newsroom,” he explores how Social Darwinism and the distinction between the “deserving” and “underserving” poor became popular with journalists in the early part of the 20th century. He then shows how the notion that (capitalist) growth would solve the problem of want in the Global South became an accepted article of faith among reporters in the Cold War era.

Lugo-Ocando’s first three chapters establish poverty as a social construction that is misrepresented by the global news media’s reporting corps. He supports his broader argument about the news media’s treatment of poverty with chapters that each explore specific case studies that help illuminate journalism’s approach to the issue.

One of these chapters focuses on coverage of poverty in Africa. In it, Lugo-Ocando shows how the news media commonly represent Africa as “hopeless” (85). Press reports also obfuscate poverty’s structural causes by linking the continent’s problems to “corruption” rather than the legacy of colonialism. Significantly, his content analysis of reporting on Nigeria in major British newspapers from 2003 to 2007 revealed that two-thirds of the sources consulted in the reporting were

non-African and that the overwhelming focus of much of the coverage was on local government graft and waste. Such coverage, he persuasively argues, presents Africa as “in need of patronising guidance by the West” (102).

Another case study focuses on “the role of [photojournalistic] images in mediating poverty as a socially constructed reality” (105). Reviewing the representations of the indigent that permeate visual news media, Lugo-Ocando points out that such images tend to adopt the same “charitable but uncritical tone” common to print journalism. Indeed, the poor most frequently appear in news imagery as passive victims or needy recipients of aid rather than as agents. Moreover, in such images, “poverty is also feminised and infantilized, reinforcing cultural stereotypes of vulnerability and passivity and ultimately the need for intervention” (108). Lugo-Ocando also examines some salutary alternatives to the standard photojournalistic treatment of poverty including AmericanPoverty.org, a project of the In Our Own Backyard photographers’ collective.

Perhaps the strongest chapter in the book is Chapter 6, “Spinning Poverty.” In it, Lugo-Ocando examines the role of Western non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in shaping coverage of poverty in the developing world. He shows how NGO public relations campaigns seek not only to raise awareness or to fundraise for their charitable activities but also to provide “power and influence to the bureaucracies that deploy them” (128). Because of cuts by news organizations in the number of correspondents and bureaus located in places like Somalia and Brazil, NGO communication operations are often a major source of information about poverty in developing countries. As a result, “poverty is managed like any other topic, by spin doctors, who deliver both media attention and tone, while media becomes more and more embedded in supporting organizations’ narratives, subsequently embracing their discourses on poverty in their own news” (132). Not surprisingly, the campaigns carried out by NGOs around poverty tend to emulate corporate public relations practices, and, like corporate PR efforts, they often rely on celebrities to attract media attention. They also focus only on “alleviation efforts and aid” because too much emphasis on the structural causes of economic inequality would alienate potential Western donors. Ultimately, Lugo-Ocando contends, the NGOs’ “anti-poverty propaganda tends to reinforce current trends on reporting poverty rather than helping to create an alternative matrix to foster critical thinking and action” (144).

The penultimate chapter of the book, “The Emergence of Alternative Voices,” briefly examines the degree to which publicly subsidized news agencies based in the Global South, such as Al-Jazeera, Inter-Press Service and Telesur, are able to break with the standard formulas used by commercial news outlets. Lugo-Ocando found evidence that, for instance, IPS reports on poverty incorporate the voices of the poor themselves more often than more mainstream news accounts (158). Moreover, he found evidence that Al-Jazeera tended to cover the issue of poverty

more frequently than other news networks (160). Though he does not uncritically celebrate either IPS or Al-Jazeera, Lugo-Ocando does laud them for opening up a space in which “alternative narratives about exclusion” can be articulated (162).

Overall, Jairo Lugo-Ocando’s *Blaming the Victim* is a cogent indictment of the news media’s coverage of poverty around the globe and of the ideological agendas that coverage serves. While in some of the earlier chapters I found myself craving more concrete illustrations of the kind of reporting Lugo-Ocando criticizes, the final half of the book—where he discusses the role of NGO propaganda in setting the news agenda and the “photojournalism” of poverty—was well supported with data and details and powerfully argued. The book should be read by everyone interested in way the media deal with issues of economic inequality and injustice.

References

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