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Book review: 'The Routledge Handbook of Critical Public Relations' Routledge, 2016. Edited by Jacquie L'Etang, David McKie, Nancy Snow and Jordi Xifra

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Book Review

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'The Routledge Handbook of Critical Public Relations'
Routledge, 2016. Edited by Jacquie L'Etang, David McKie, Nancy Snow
and Jordi Xifra

At long last *Critical Public Relations* scholarship has emerged from the margins to coalesce in a comprehensive 'handbook', launched straight off the press at the recent 2015 Critical Public Relations conference in Edinburgh. This handbook is not an introduction to critical public relations, but rather builds and deepens existing scholarship. It is a substantial piece of work, extending and diversifying earlier work, which had its beginnings in Heath and Toth's (1992) *Rhetorical and Critical Approaches to Public Relations* and L'Etang and Pieczka's (1996) *Critical Perspectives in Public Relations*. This volume explores the many intersections between critical public relations and other disciplines, theoretical paradigms, and locations.

The warm relationships between those who have opened up this field are evident from the first chapter by Lee Edwards, which provides an historical overview of the emergence and development of critical thinking in the discipline. The editors have pulled together a remarkably diverse range of interdisciplinary research interests, presented across thirty-two chapters. The thirty-nine contributing authors hail from Europe, Scandinavia, the UK, Australasia, Singapore and the United States. Despite the variety of perspectives, themes and theoretical approaches they take up, the editors have successfully interweaved a number of recurring themes and challenges throughout the book.

The first section, *Origins and overviews*, lays out the central concerns and theoretical challenges for critical public relations scholarship. L'Etang argues that historical research in the field must be 'reflexive', pointing out that research into social movements and activism is not necessarily 'critical' if it ignores the paradigms at work within activist campaigns, the internal organizational politics at play, and the fluid relationships between public relations and social change. Several theoretical paradigms are put forward for analyzing public relations within social contexts. Curtin, Gaither and Ciszek expand on a 'cultural economic model', to analyse how public relations discourses at multiple levels articulate identities and social relations in production – consumption

processes. Fitch puts forward the value of a critical feminist analysis to show how gendered conceptualizations of the field continue to impact on women's working lives.

Several chapters reference Robert Heath's early rhetorical conceptualization of public relations, building on it to consider convergences between public relations and journalism. Ramsey argues that public relations may be more usefully conceived as a means to mobilize conflictual agendas within 'agonistic pluralism', rather than a tool for arriving at 'consensus'. Pieczka outlines how a 'dialogic model' of public relations has potential to inform more 'transformative' public relations practice, providing a forensic analysis of the notion of dialogue.

In the second section of the book, *Orientations and Reorientations*, authors argue for various definitions of 'critical' public relations and recurring themes of 'power', 'social change' and 'activism' are developed in various ways. Taken together, these chapters read as a rich, ongoing conversation. Falkheimer and Heide lament the functionalist and managerialist approaches which dominate public relations research, but also accuse critical scholarship of looking down upon practitioners and their perspectives from an 'ivory tower'. This tension between practice and scholarship is picked up elsewhere as well. Demetrious urges critical public relations scholars to bring together theory and practice in ways which actively help reverse the erosion of public trust. Johnston launches a critique on the public relations practitioners responsible for contemporary Australian political discourses and silences around asylum seekers, emphasizing the importance of scholarship which holds practitioners to account. Later in the book, Surma calls for an 'ethic of care' in constructions of the 'other' in public relations messaging of asylum seekers.

Throughout the book authors debate 'standpoints' which further critical public relations research. Motion and Leitch urge critical public relations scholars to 'take a stand' on issues such as public relations industry governance, calling for a 'manifesto' which has as its express goal the redistribution of power. Moloney and McKie on the other hand, caution us to remember that public relations as a technique is 'neutral'. They point out that 'activist PR' (with its subsets 'dissent' and 'protest'), can now claim parity with 'business PR' and can be seen in both capitalist and anti-capitalist activities. Echoing Bourne's earlier chapter which problematizes the colonizing attempts between PR, Marketing and Advertising, they urge public relations scholars to refrain from claiming PR as a ubiquitous practice which can be 'seen everywhere'.

The third section of the book *Perspectives from different locations* considers the workings of public relations in areas as diverse as news production, scientific discourse, humanitarian appeals, post-communist transitional government and nation branding. There are few connective themes throughout this section of the book, except perhaps the argument that more connections should be made between public relations and other disciplines. In one chapter Weaver argues that colleagues in media studies need to be increasingly reflexive and collaborative with public relations scholars in researching emergent, online news sharing processes. In another, Waymer and Heath lay out an interesting application of critical race relations theory to highlight how public relations processes can erase or reveal environmental risks sustained by particular communities.

In the final section, *Ways forward*, authors highlight how scholarship might capture broader dimensions of public relations histories, futures and theoretical positioning. Authors highlight ways in which new knowledge can be generated about the locations, organizational contexts, and ideological models out of which public relations has grown, and continues to grow. In their chapter, for example, Sheehan and Xifra use nation building examples to show how 'liberation' oriented historical research offers an alternative to US-centric paradigms.

Few contributions in this book link critical scholarship with pedagogical practice in public relations, and this struck me as something of a gap. Vardeman-Winter and Willis make some efforts towards addressing this topic in their chapters, although the links between critical public relations and pedagogies are left relatively unexplored.

This book is a 'must have' for anyone seriously interested in the project of furthering scholarship in the public relations discipline, building connections with contemporary issues in practice, and making a distinctive contribution to a serious research agenda. Critical Public Relations has made the long trek from the margins over the past thirty years, and has clearly arrived at an exciting new era where it occupies a vital space within the academe.