



The Mediated Representation of the Super-Rich
Secrecy, Wealth Taxation and the Tensions of Neoliberal
Capitalism

av

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Abstract

This thesis examines how the wealthiest apex of the capitalist class, a segment commonly referred to as ‘the super-rich’, is represented in Swedish legacy newspapers. As decades of neoliberal reforms have paved the way for increasing wealth concentration at the very top, the super-rich has emerged as both a material and discursive phenomenon. The news media provides an influential site for studying meaning-making around the super-rich in the context of the underlying tensions of the neoliberal capitalist social order. Combining Nancy Fraser’s theory of normative contradictions with a critical political economy approach to the media, this thesis explores mediated representations of the super-rich as sites of ideological struggle between ideals of market justice and social justice. The thesis conducts an in-depth Critical Discourse Analysis to uncover what discourses Swedish newspapers – both in contemporary and historical settings – draw upon when representing the super-rich. The thesis consists of three case studies, each zooming in on different dimensions of the super-rich. The findings suggest that, while the feature reporting on the super-rich is not without its ambivalences, the critique is largely limited to questioning the morality of individual billionaires or business models, not billionaire wealth in itself. The thesis also shows how the secrecy surrounding the super-rich, hailed as a key part of the reproduction of economic inequality, can be mobilized by the tabloid media to intensify the ‘wealth porn’ genre rather than questioning inequalities per se. It also argues that the long-term coverage of the Swedish wealth tax in the liberal/conservative press between 1969 and 2007 delegitimated the tax as an immoral and irrational anomaly in a globalized world, paving the way for the social acceptance of large individual fortunes. As such, the thesis provides a comprehensive account of how the news media operates to incorporate the super-rich into the justice narratives of neoliberal capitalism, thus serving to mitigate the tensions of the social order.

Keywords: The super-rich, capitalism, neoliberalism, wealth inequality, critical discourse analysis, ideology, media, secrecy, wealth taxation