

Review:

John Cromby

David Howarth (2000). Discourse. Buckingham UK: Open University Press, 166 pages, Paperback (ISBN 0-335-20070-2) £12.99, Hardcover (ISBN 0-335-20071-0) £45.00

Key words:
structuralism,
poststructuralism,
realism, relativism,
agency,
subjectivity

Abstract: HOWARTH's book is an accessible, readable and concise overview of theories of and approaches to discourse in the human and social sciences, focusing upon LACLAU and MOUFFE's discourse theory approach. The roots of this approach are described in structuralist and post-structuralist theories including the work of SAUSSURE, LEVI-STRAUSS, DERRIDA and FOUCAULT, as well as the MARXism of ALTHUSSER, GRAMSCI and PECHEUX. The book is mostly even-handed and the author takes great care to make his material accessible. However, critical realist alternatives to poststructuralism receive little attention and issues of agency and subjectivity remain problematic. These issues are part of the wider debate between realism and relativism, the intransigence of which is somewhat downplayed in this book. Nevertheless, HOWARTH has produced a valuable resource which should be welcomed by teachers and students in this field.

Table of Contents

- [1. Overview: Theories of Discourse](#)
- [2. Critical Realism, Subjectivity and Agency](#)
- [3. Realism, Relativism and the Embodied Subject](#)

[References](#)

[Author](#)

[Citation](#)

1. Overview: Theories of Discourse

This book is an accessible, readable, and concise overview of the topic of discourse in the social sciences. Its primary focus is on political and sociological deployments of discourse theory, with only passing mention of relevant developments within psychology. The converse, that psychology might significantly contribute to studies of discourse in sociology and politics, is also largely excluded. Throughout, the author is at pains to present balanced accounts of the various notions of and approaches to discourse which he discusses, carefully directing the reader towards principal objections and criticisms. [1]

Consistent with its own theoretical preference and philosophical predilections, "Discourse" is a partial account that privileges and argues for LACLAU and MOUFFE's (e.g. 1985, 1987) discourse theory approach. The argument commences with an outline of SAUSSURIAN structuralist linguistics and their shortcomings, joined with an account of LEVI-STRAUSS's studies of society as an ensemble of complex symbolic orders. This account of the flaws in structuralism paves the way for an exposition of DERRIDA's post-structuralism.

HOWARTH not only explains key features of DERRIDA's work succinctly, but also summarises criticisms of the extension of DERRIDA's approach beyond the confines of philosophy and linguistics. [2]

HOWARTH goes on to discuss FOUCAULT's work at some length, focusing first on his earlier archaeological approach wherein discourses are constitutive of their objects. He succinctly summarises FOUCAULT's notion of discourse as consisting of four elements: objects, places of speaking (i.e. positions), concepts within the discourse, and the themes and theories they cultivate. The various rules of discursive formation which FOUCAULT specified are detailed, and the major consequences of the archaeological mode of analysis are described. HOWARTH then describes FOUCAULT's later genealogical approach, describing how this both supersedes and contains the archaeological approach within his broader perspectival-historical "method of problematisation". For example, in "Discipline and Punish," the constitution of the "soul" and the production of "docile bodies" through practices including the discursive is described, but this constitutes only one aspect of FOUCAULT's wider analysis of the "disciplinary society." HOWARTH describes the differences between FOUCAULT's two approaches, stressing how the genealogical FOUCAULT is an engaged critic rather than a spectator; describing how issues of truth and meaning reappear in the genealogy; and emphasising how genealogy encounters the interaction of discourse with the non-discursive. A summary of critiques and issues is then given where it is asserted that FOUCAULT's strength is his "refusal to concede to a totalising and all-encompassing power rooted in the overarching logics of commodification or rationalisation, as do other 'critical theories'" (HOWARTH 2001, p.82). This is a relatively unusual view since many critics of FOUCAULT argue precisely the opposite: FOUCAULT's view of power is so all-encompassing that it leaves no space for resistance, change and the desire for a better world (e.g. CALLINICOS, 1989). [3]

HOWARTH also presents a succinct account of the MARXIST theory of ideology and its problems, highlighting the work of ALTHUSSER and PECHEUX and favouring GRAMSCI's notion of hegemonic discourse. These various discussions act as the foundations of the book's overall goal, which is to present and argue for an outline of LACLAU and MOUFFE's discourse theory and its application in empirical contexts. [4]

LACLAU and MOUFFE's discourse theory is post-MARXIST as well as post-structuralist. Like LEVI-STRAUSS they draw an analogy between linguistic and social systems, but attempt to avoid discursive reductionism by explicitly stating that systems of social relations are not just linguistic or cognitive, but consist of various practices which share an ordering whereby they create both meaning and the potential for social transformation. Discourses are part of these social systems but do not wholly encompass them; there is always a "surplus of meaning," which means that

"while discourses attempt to impose order and necessity on a field of meaning, the ultimate contingency of meaning precludes this possibility from being actualised ...

discourses are relational entities whose identities depend on their differentiation from other discourses, they are themselves dependent and vulnerable to those meanings that are necessarily excluded" (HOWARTH 2001, p.103). [5]

In this way, LACLAU and MOUFFE hope to overcome MARXism's problematic determinism by positing a field of meanings which is rooted in the social, but never wholly fixed or closed. Consequently, the dominance of any discourse always presupposes other discursive possibilities against which the dominant voice is counterposed and defined. A dynamic, open-ended notion of society emerges where equilibrium is unstable and transformation, of whatever kind, is always possible. LACLAU and MOUFFE also make a distinction between the physical existence of extra-discursive objects and their meaning for us as humans, arguing that whilst material objects indeed exist they only gain meaning through their constitution as objects in discourse. They challenge any sharp distinction between word and world, emphasising the ways in which social practice imbues materiality with meaning and simultaneously highlighting the material dimensions of discourses as socially-shared resources which structure and enable human activity. In this way, they strive to overcome the implicit idealism of many discursive analyses. HOWARTH then describes the deployment of LACLAU & MOUFFE's theory in relation to a range of conceptual issues and debates and illustrates its strengths by describing its use in numerous empirical studies. [6]

HOWARTH's book is clear and succinct and his approach is, for the most part, even-handed. Consequently, this book could be a useful resource for students taking courses in politics, sociology or cultural studies who wish to explore the various notions of discourse prevalent in these disciplines. There are, however, two specific issues of concern, both of which are related to a wider, general issue. [7]

2. Critical Realism, Subjectivity and Agency

The first issue of concern is that comparatively little attention is given to critical realist alternatives to the more relativistic approach of LACLAU and MOUFFE. HOWARTH suggests that critics of LACLAU and MOUFFE have mistakenly focused their attacks on the ontical (in HEIDEGGER's terminology) rather than the ontological level. He makes a fairly convincing case for the view that discourse theory is not simply relativist and is able to incorporate elements of materiality. Nevertheless, the issue of whether critical realism provides a better way of addressing the vexed and vexatious relationship between discourse and materiality is not adequately considered. It is not that critical realism is never mentioned, rather that its status as probably the most coherent alternative to the poststructuralist approach outlined here is not thoroughly addressed. Whilst this de-emphasis makes the poststructuralist leanings of discourse theory appear more coherent, it somewhat unbalances the discussion of alternatives and criticisms. [8]

Second, at least from the perspective of psychology, the issues of agency and subjectivity remain somewhat problematic. Post-structuralist theories de-centre

and subvert the subject, minimising the contribution of persons to the production of meaning. Whilst they produce a coherent and internally consistent critique, they do not presage any new understanding of how subjectivity and agency should be theorised. LACAN is typically deployed for this purpose (HOWARTH cites LACAN, albeit only briefly), but there are numerous problems with LACAN's work, including its inaccessibility and the implicit nature/culture binary (within the "mirror stage" which forms the LACANian subject) which could itself be deconstructed. Poststructuralist critiques have yielded useful insights and, as elements within constructionist psychologies, have produced valuable challenges to the Cartesian subject of the mainstream. Nevertheless, the shortcomings of a wholly discursive approach to the embodiment of subjectivity have recently been highlighted (e.g. BAYER & SHOTTER, 1999). At a meta-level of academic ordering, agency/structure dualism means that sociology and politics typically do not adequately theorise subjectivity, whilst psychology typically fails to adequately theorise the social. The focus on discourse creates the potential to transcend this dualism by adopting the same unit of analysis (the discourse) in the study of both mental and social life. Nonetheless, to realise this potential, discourse theory needs an appropriate notion of the embodied discursive subject. Such a notion of the subject needs to include the body as a mediator of social life and materiality with its own resistances, predilections, capacities and limits. In common with many poststructuralist approaches, however, discourse theory seems to leave little space for embodied subjectivity, for the body as body. Instead, the body is, on the one hand, a metaphor, trope or symbol and, on the other hand, a surface for the inscription of social forces, experience, discourse. We need to go beyond this abraded, fleshless, ephemeral person to a view of the subject prey to physiological, anatomical and hormonal influences which act back upon the subjectivity they support, and also—through feedback generated within the brain/body system—may enter into the very core of subjectivity and agency (see DAMASIO, 1994). Theorising the subject this way leads to snares of Cartesian Dualism, biological determinism, essentialism and reductionism, and so these are difficult, unresolved issues. Consequently, it would be unreasonable to expect HOWARTH to offer a solution; nonetheless, some clearer statement that the problem exists might have been useful. [9]

3. Realism, Relativism and the Embodied Subject

These specific questions lead on to a general issue of which these questions are fragments: the debate between realism and anti-realism or relativism that has accompanied the spread of poststructuralist ideas across the human and social sciences. Whilst HOWARTH is always careful to reference opposing points of view, he has—in the interest of providing a coherent argument for his favoured approach—somewhat downplayed the intransigence and significance of this debate, providing an air of closure which is perhaps a little premature. His optimistic view of FOUCAULT's notion of power and resistance, quoted earlier, seems to exemplify this tendency. FOUCAULT's understanding that power is productive of subjectivity is indeed valuable, but it remains difficult to understand how a subjectivity forged purely through power could ever bite the hand that made it and fight back. Again, once subjectivity is not just discursive but also

embodied within and of an actual flesh and blood body, other influences can enter the analytic equation. Not only would such a subject have, quite literally, a "ground" from which to experience the disjunctures, contradictions and inconsistencies of the hegemonic discursive field which co-constituted her subjectivity, but also the possibility that "meanings" may be conditioned by perceptual mechanisms, hormonal fluctuations, neurotransmitter exchanges or suchlike would also arise. Such processes are not immediately and exclusively social, although they communicate, register, process and transform social activity: they are mechanisms that mediate, within the body/brain system, the meanings that constitute subjectivity. On this view, meaning is the outcome of a play of difference in an undecidable, open-ended system of signification and also the product of an organic, socially-shaped machinery of embodied (ir)rationality. Consequently, relativism loses some of its rhetorical force and the debate with realism remains more pertinent than this book might suggest. [10]

This said, HOWARTH did not set out to resolve these difficult issues and his book should not be criticised for failing to do so. Despite its partisan approach this book is a useful guide to the field of discourse studies and comes highly recommended as a teaching aid or study guide to anyone teaching or studying in this field. [11]

References

- Bayer, Betty & Shoter, John (Eds.) (1999). *Reconstructing the psychological subject: bodies, practices, technologies*. London: Sage.
- Callinicos, Alex (1989). *Against Postmodernism: a Marxist critique*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Damasio, Antonio (1994). *Descartes' Error: emotion, reason and the human brain*. London: Paladin.
- Laclau, Ernesto & Mouffe, Chantal (1985). *Hegemony and socialist strategy*. London: Verso.
- Laclau, Ernesto & Mouffe, Chantal (1987). Post-Marxism without apologies. *New Left Review*, 166, 19-106.

Author

[John CROMBY](#) is a lecturer in Psychology in the Department of Human Sciences, Loughborough University England. Previously he worked as a researcher in medical settings. His research interests include social constructionist and critical psychologies, their application in applied settings, and possible overlaps between constructionism and current developments in neuroscience.

Contact:

Dr. John Cromby

Department of Human Sciences
Loughborough University
Loughborough Leicestershire
LE11 3TU, England

Phone: 44 (0) 1509 223 000

E-mail: J.Cromby@lboro.ac.uk

Citation

Cromby, John (2002). Review: David Howarth (2000). Discourse [11 paragraphs]. *Forum Qualitative Sozialforschung / Forum: Qualitative Social Research*, 3(2), Art. 6, <http://nbn-resolving.de/urn:nbn:de:0114-fqs020263>.

Revised 2/2007