

BOOK REVIEW

Discourse analysis as social critique: discursive and non-discursive realities in critical social research, by Benno Herzog, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2016, 203 pp., \$99.99 (hardback), ISBN 978-1-137-56907-3

This book is part of a series on ‘postdisciplinarity in discourse’ which seeks to “deal with critical issues at the intersections between language and society” (<http://www.springer.com/series/14534>) and revisits traditional places of enquiries for critical discourse with a fresh stance. This publication arose from a larger research project on the place of immanent critique in contemporary social philosophy.

True to its Marxist inspiration the book is dedicated by its author “to all debased, enslaved, abandoned, despicable beings” (n.p.) and the plurality of these dedicatees is placed in axiological relationship to representations of the ‘despised’ through discourse. The title responds to Fairclough’s (2003) call for social relevance as it places the investigation of ‘realities’ at the centre of its enquiry. This is reflected in the structure of the book itself: 3 clearly delineated chapters of a totemic 66-page span each – Theoretical Approaches to Critique, Analytical Tools, and Practical Examples. The overall structure therefore offers a continuum between theory and practice with a sway towards evaluation of reality on the ground.

The introduction situates the approach of the book between the tradition of ‘immanent critique’ which evaluates both theoretical principles and objects of studies and the empirical approaches put forward by Foucault (1981, 2002), the “toolbox” which is the focus of Chapter 2. It also provides a clear synopsis of the contents of the 3 chapters.

The theoretical introduction to Chapter 1 starts by engaging the reader with a series of questions which destabilise some of the assumptions behind disruptive critical approaches and this sets the tone of the book. The theoretical chapter moves methodically in this way through

an examination of 'critique' in Marxist and post-Marxist theories to an appraisal of 'social critique' in Hegelian philosophy and chartering of the norms used to substantiate criticism of society from the 19th to the 21st century. In a series of cogent steps this leads to the contribution of 'immanent critique' for the search of socially accepted norms, drawing attention to merely 'corrective' forms and more deeply transformative 'transcending' forms. A large part of the chapter is devoted to the intellectual development of social critique by three generations of the Frankfurt School in the 1920s, 1960s and early twenty-first century. In order to address the "sociological deficit" of these philosophical considerations initially identified by Habermas (1984, 1987) and later developed by Honneth (1995) as 'recognition theory', the author neatly positions the potential of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA is in own turn the object of critique in respect of 'normative stance' with the acknowledgement of perpetual movement as "norms themselves change through critique" (p. 59): the reasoning for the contribution of 'immanent critique' to analyse social structure and social suffering has gone full circle.

Chapter 2 turns to 'analytical tools' to address the "empirical deficit" of 'immanent critique'. This is also a chapter dominated by theoretical considerations: the limitations of post-structuralist approaches to discourse analysis (with particular indebtedness to Foucault) are debated in particular in relation to what is not discursively discussed. Terms such as 'actions' and 'practices' are also interrogated to identify as much what is included in analyses as what is left out. The author picks out telling examples to illustrate the points made: the non-place of housework in national economy, the social reading of the snatching of a handbag. As in the previous chapter, 'immanent critique' loops the loop: discourse analysis offers a good toolbox but needs to crank up to a higher gear as it "must not only compare claims with (symbolic and material) reality but also reveal the (symbolic and material) obstacles that prevent these claims from becoming reality" (p. 114). There is assembly work required in that

task which the author introduces with a series of metaphors before turning to practical applications.

In Chapter 3 the author shows consideration not only for the need to have practical examples “to show cases of silent and silenced suffering” (p. 135) but also for readers who are less experienced in abstract reasoning. It starts by positioning his analytical approach as “a holistic perspective on several elements of social reality” (p. 134). What is meant by this is illustrated by 3 carefully argued examples at societal level in verbal discourses - meritocracy, migration practices, the debate about same-sex marriage – and 3 situated discourses in aesthetic productions: PhD comics, the Sacrifice of Isaac by Caravaggio, the *Metamorphosis* by Kafka. Each follows a series of steps moving from principles to material expression and wider philosophical and sociological implications. In the case of meritocracy for example, it starts by showing how ‘merit’ is generally presented in Western societies to legitimise the distribution of wealth. It then considers how this is predicated on the philosophical positioning on ‘merit’ with probing questions on the entitlement based on natural characteristics (the ‘materiality of discourse’) and self-ownership. What the ‘toolkit’ manages to put together in this specific example is “the clear line from discourses about merit to the material effect of distribution” (p. 143). In the section on aesthetic production, the example of the comic recognises the struggle of the genre for recognition and the ambiguous legitimacy of humour in rational critique. All these examples draw from philosophical and theoretical debates and are laced with metaphors and practical examples to bind theory and practice.

In the conclusion the author acknowledges the ambition of the task as “there is no easy way to perform social critique” (p. 195). The book does not shy from difficulty in two major ways: first in the attempt to bridge normative theories in social and political philosophy and claims of objectivity in discursive research. Second in the way it allows its language to talk to its readers by putting across highly abstract concepts with clarifying examples. References to

philosophical concepts and key authors are interspersed with illustrations which bring to life the abstraction of these concepts. Let us take an example early on in the chapter: introduction to philosopher Harry Frankfurt's conceptual point that "to be effective, social critique must be able to give a second-order reason that we want a critique" (p. 4) is followed by the author's personal illustration of what that could mean for an individual in the form of an internal battle between the wish to eat a piece of meat ('first-order volition') and that of being an animal-friendly non-meat eater ('second-order volition'). The tone is lively, personal (with the regular use of first and second personal pronouns) and the reader is regularly challenged, as for instance, to follow on the previous example, when we are asked: "Are we not persons as described by Harry Frankfurt?" (p. 5). The author also clearly tries to disambiguate terms and notions which may be difficult to grasp for contemporary readers but does not hide his role as interpreter ("I think that we can easily translate this term for the needs of twenty-first science with..." p. 8). The reader thus feels involved in the questioning and probing of key texts and methodologies in the search for better and more time-relevant ways to be critical.

References

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