

BOOK REVIEW

NICO CARPENTIER, THE DISCURSIVE-MATERIAL KNOT: CYPRUS IN CONFLICT AND COMMUNITY MEDIA PARTICIPATION

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'Discourse' is one of a number of central concepts in the social sciences and humanities whose meaning remains polyvalent. It has origins in several different traditions, and its development in recent decades has gone in a number of varying directions, resulting in several what we might loosely call 'schools'. One such school has come to be called Discourse Theory (DT), a not fully satisfactory name for the tradition associated with Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe. In some circles it is referred to as the Essex School of discourse analysis (also not a very useful label) since Laclau fostered a number of scholars at that university. DT is commonly understood as a post-Marxist and post-structural enterprise, with roots in the work of Foucault; its key text is Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) landmark volume, first published in 1985. This is a rich yet challenging volume; grasping its logics and then being able to apply it in an analytic way has always been a challenge.

Background and fundamentals

For a number of years Nico Carpentier has been probably the most forceful exponent in media studies of DT, striving not just to make it accessible, but also demonstrating its utility for research, not least in the field of media and communication. In his new book he again helps the reader understand DT, but even more importantly – and this is his aim – he further develops its theoretical and methodological horizons, to yield a new research orientation, one with ontological as well as epistemological dimensions. He calls this orientation discourse-material analysis (DMA). Whether or not this should be seen as a 'school' or not is not something with which he concerns himself much. Rather, what he is offering is an integrated way to do qualitative social- and media research that maintains some obvious linkages to familiar approaches, yet offers a number of new elements. The innovations are intended to embody some advantages and avoid some of the problems of more traditional approaches. He further demonstrates what DMA can accomplish by applying it in a multi-dimensional study of the conflict between the Greek and Turkish communities on Cyprus. The many fields of knowledge from which he draws, and the extensive literature that he cites in his discussion, are impressive.

If all this sounds ambitious, I can confirm that it is. However, though it is a demanding book in some ways, I would underscore that it is quite reader-friendly: Carpentier has an admirable capacity to express difficult thoughts in a lucid manner. He has good pedagogic instincts, and those who have struggled with the Laclau and Mouffe text could well wish that it had been Carpentier who had written it. In his own book at hand, while Carpentier's voice in the text is on the one hand magisterial in its rendering of the DT tradition and the launching of DMA, it is also modest and self-reflective about its own position as a situated intellectual, observer and interpreter. This signals a strong awareness of the contingencies of his own perceptions, a position solidly in keeping with the precepts of DT and DMA; he does in fact practice what he preaches.

Such self-awareness becomes especially evident where he discusses the history of the Cyprus Problem; he acknowledges the difficulty of not only sorting through a literature on the topic that is very extensive, but also in many cases quite partisan. The two groups and their respective motherlands have, unsurprisingly, rather differing (nationalist) interpretations of the island's past and present, especially about what the current Turkish occupation means. Not being an expert on that topic I can only say that Carpentier's rendering strikes me as one that has made every effort to be balanced and fair.

Discourse theory: a retrospective

Carpentier's project in part is to further develop DT to arrive at DMA. Some remarks about the intellectual history of DT at this point may be in order (I'll get to DMA shortly). Initially, DT gained much attention via the debates within Marxian theory that flared up soon after its publication (Geras 1987 is central text in that context); it was billed as 'post-Marxist' (not 'anti-Marxist'), as well as 'post-Structuralist'. These labels helped shape its reception and the ensuing debates around it. For those on the Left who could see the dilemmas that confronted even revisionist Marxian theory – not least in regard to the question of ideology (to which I return below) – DT seemed to offer a new and useful direction, one critical in its disposition, informed by newer theoretical trajectories (e.g. Foucault) and applicable across the entire range of social relations, not only class struggle.

While DT is no Sunday picnic, Carpentier summary rendering puts it well within the grasp of the serious reader. In its first decade and a half or so, readers had to struggle with the Laclau and Mouffe text as best they could. Eventually a helpfully secondary literature emerged, some from the new generation of scholars specifically trained in this tradition (e.g. Smith 1998; Stavrakakis 1999), while others clarified DT by linking it and comparing it to other currents of discourse analysis (e.g. Jørgensen and Phillips 2002).

Gradually, applications of DT in the social and political realm began to appear from the young generation of DT scholars; this also helped illuminate its logics (see Torfing 1999; Howarth 2000; Glynos and Howarth 2007; Howarth, Norval & Stavrakakis 2000). And more recently, Carpentier and his colleagues had begun to explore and promote the potential for DT for the fields of media and cultural studies, (Carpentier and De Cleen 2007; Carpentier and Spinog 2008), with other efforts following thereafter (e.g. Dahlberg and Phelan 2011). Today we are at the point at which DT is gaining some familiarity among media researchers, but remains a minority interest – to the detriment of the field, I would add.

At the philosophical level, DT rests on an anti-essentialist ontology and an anti-foundationalist epistemology. It posits that all our knowledge, and the discursive modalities that it takes, is predicated on particular circumstances; indeed, no human practice or subjectivity exists outside the specific conditions that both make it possible and delimit it. DT's social constructionist position is that there is no foundation or essence – for knowledge, language, meaning, subjects, identities, or social phenomena. There are only possibilities, nothing is necessary; clearly the premise of *contingency* is fundamental here. We should note that within the logic of DT, science and research are also shaped by contingencies. Thus, there is no extra-discursive position from which we can ultimately ensure that we have the Truth.

Discourses as such are structures of relatively fixed meanings that arise as linguistic and material practices within particular contexts. Some discourses, in relation to others, gain *hegemonic* positions, that is, they afford preferred or dominant meanings. Here we have the pivotal point of politics, where prevailing discourses are challenged by alternative ones – again, always in the context of concrete societal circumstances. Since meaning is always to some extent shifting and contested, even hegemonic discourses can never be fully secure. Even if discourses – and society in general – are characterised by large degrees of inertia, they are in principle always open to challenges from counter-hegemonic discourses that arise with social antagonisms. An important point here is that people are addressed as political subjects via discourses, and the inevitability of discursive tensions and dislocations mean that political identities are often split ('overdetermined') – and subjects may thus strive to attain some sense of unity via various acts of identification, which usually involves unconscious processes (there is an element of psychoanalytic theory at work in DT).

While *discourse analysis* has become a familiar notion, DT refers to social and material practices; it can thus have both linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions, echoing an earlier notion that language use is also social action. DT posits that meaning arises via *articulation* – the positioning of signs, words and actions in relation to others; this is what gives them their sense. The key, definitive signs within a discourse are called *nodal points*. These are important for fixing the meanings within the discourse; we can think of them as the core concepts or vocabulary of a discourse. As Carpentier makes very clear, DT (and DMA), as a tool of analysis, belongs to the macro-textual tradition (discourse with a 'big D') that engages with broader societal meanings, rather than the micro ('small d') versions that focus more on specific linguistic attributes. DT thus is operative on the same terrain as the critique of ideology, to which I return below.

From DT to DMA

There is undeniably much to be gained by assuming a DT stance in one's analyses of society, politics and culture. Torfing (2005) specifies a number of 'value added' elements in DT's contributions, while at the same time noting some challenges it faces. These challenges include being able to solidly demonstrate DT's utility in empirical research, offering new insights through concrete, problem-driven studies, not least in social and political 'core areas' (i.e. beyond such 'soft' themes as gender, identity and social movements; though in my view what is 'soft' or 'hard' may not always be self-evident), and critically reflecting on – and developing – methods and research strategies. Carpentier does all this in his new book, while moving it towards his DMA. It should be added that behind both DT and DMA is a democratic valence: to seek ways to transform dangerous *antagonistic* conflicts into *agonistic* ones, to limit their potential for damage by creating circumstances that can defuse them and embodying them in a discursive pluralist democratic order.

In Laclau and Mouffe's (2001) foundational text there is a great deal of dense philosophical argument, including discussions that relate to the philosophy of science – an emphasis that may not always seem immediately urgent for those mainly concerned with doing meaningful critical research on the media. However, the case can be made that as a researcher one should know what lies behind the approaches and methods one uses, their philosophical anchoring. In the real world, for most researchers, I assume that the feeling is that their acquaintance with the philosophical foundations of what they do needs only to be 'good enough' – and that the character of this criterion varies greatly among researchers. Yet, embedded in Laclau and Mouffe's book is a methodological approach, one which can be elucidated, and which contains a number of distinctive key procedures and concepts. From these a very handy toolbox can be extracted – even if its utility may be impaired or limited precisely by insufficient understanding of its philosophical groundings.

For Laclau and Mouffe (2001), one of the big philosophical themes is the inseparability of the linguistic and non-linguistic. For Carpentier in his new book, the focus shifts somewhat: the central conceptual concern becomes that of the protean relationship between the discursive and the material, an emphasis that in my view is clearer and of greater utility. This relationship always involves (shifting) tensions and (varying) impact. Carpentier's concern here does not merely end up in a philosophical sandbox, but rather serves as a solid foundation for his methodological approach. Thus, the research strategy uses the conceptual dynamics between the discursive and the material as starting points for informing empirical analysis. By expounding on this 'knot', by examining its forms and contingencies in concrete situations, one begins to illuminate social realities not immediately visible.

He strongly emphasizes the 'non-hierarchical' interdependent relationship between the material and the discursive, a relationship that is "restless and contingent, sometimes incessantly changing shapes and sometimes deeply sedimented" (p. 4). Carpentier is quick to warn that we should not be misled by the metaphor of 'the knot': what he is portraying is a relationship of constant dynamic tension, not something that can be untied, unraveled or cut through. Yet "the ontology of the discursive-material knot operates at all levels of the social" (p. 4); it is always with us, in all macro- and micro- contexts. In any given concrete situation, the discursive-material tension takes the form of specific 'assemblages', fixed, shifting and/or flowing combinations of discursive and material dimensions.

The particular understanding of the 'material' that Carpentier brings to bear in this book is one that he has developed over the years, animated by a large number of specific intellectual currents. He traces these currents in detailed discussions in Chapter One. To just suggestively name a few: he draws upon Laclau and Mouffe, of course, and Lacan's notion of the Real, but also on the field of 'new materialism' that strives to reconceptualize the material in the light of cultural theory (Dolphijn and van der Tuin 2012; Rahman and Witz 2003). Carpentier criticizes post-humanist tendencies (e.g. Barad 2007), yet he makes use of actor-network theory – ANT (Latour 2005). However, he strongly insists that discourse must be seen as a human activity – a position that disqualifies artificial intelligence from the realm of discourse, (which many readers may find reassuring). Deleuze and Guattari (1987) are mobilized for their concepts of organizations, machines and humans as "proto-machines", Butler (1990) on the body, and Massey (2005) on spaciality.

Carpentier of course does not just dump each ingredient into the pot; each one is critically weighed, and he extracts what he sees as potentially useful. Towards the end of the chapter he pulls together the discussion on the material with that of discourse. These two components provide one axis of analysis; two other components, agency and structure, provide another. He organizes these two axes with their four components into a helpful overarching model (p. 67) of the discourse-material knot.

Overview of the oeuvre

As a simplified starting point for grasping Carpentier's project and contribution, we might think of DMA as a highly sophisticated way of developing an integrated approach that inherently pulls together the dimensions of text and context, with 'text' understood in very broad terms, and context understood as encompassing both textual and material dimensions. It is this latter thought, the relationship between discursive and material dimensions, that drives forward the key theme in the book, one that Carpentier metaphorically calls a 'knot'. This figure of speech highlights their entanglement, how they are intertwined and impact on each other. Yet they can never be fully disentangled, nor can they be simply cut through, as with the famous Gordian variant. On the other hand, it is precisely by examining the dynamic relationship between the two, which always varies from one

set of circumstances to another, that DMA can help illuminate and understand social realities and processes of communication.

The text starts off with 'The Introduction of a Triptych'. In referring to these traditional paintings or carvings consisting of three panels, each with a degree of stand-alone quality but hinged together create a unified whole, Carpentier defines from the outset the character of this volume (indeed, the clever front cover image alerts us to this as well). The book is comprised of three integrated 'platforms'. Chapter One, comprising the first platform, is entitled 'Reconciling the Discursive and the Material—A *Knotted Theoretical Framework*'. It is devoted to extensive theoretical development and clarification. Carpentier states that "The production of high theory in itself is of crucial importance, even if it does not immediately serve empirical research" (p.2). One might counter that the production of *useful* theory is important, whether it is high or low, but regardless, it becomes quickly apparent that Carpentier has every intention of linking his theoretical efforts with empirical research. This first platform in fact is keenly preparatory for that which follows. It takes us through a number of central concepts, such as discourse/the discursive, the material, agency and structure, and concludes with a discussion on the importance of sensitizing concepts.

Chapter Two, 'Participation, Community Media, and Conflict Transformation', contains the second platform. Here he carries further the work from his major book on participation (Carpentier 2011). The title of the chapter is accurate: we get discussions on the three themes specified, but the presentation is developmental: it brings in and integrates a number of the perspectives from the first platform. Further, it explores the outer reaches of the concepts, and weaves them together with other notions such as alterity, civil society, rhizome, antagonism and agonism. What we end up with can be understood as an updated conceptual and methodological kit that allows the author to approach the complicated realities of the Cyprus situation and in particular the community media to be analysed: the Cyprus Community Media Centre (CCMC) and its community web radio station, MYCradio.

The third platform rests on two chapters: Chapter Three ('The Cyprus Conflict'), which offers a brief political history of that troubled island, and what we might deem to be the payoff Chapter Four: 'CCMC as a Participatory and Agonistic Assemblage'. Here Carpentier presents the empirical project and discusses his findings, linking them together with his theoretic and methodological framework.

Reflections

This is an impressively rich and in many ways ground-breaking volume. It pushes forward the boundaries of our field in terms of theory and methods, while at the same time demonstrating an obvious social relevance via its concrete empirical-historical study of a particular political conflict in Europe that has been ongoing for decades, namely Cyprus. Moreover, the analysis evokes and explicitly mobilizes a number of contemporary themes at the heart of the dilemmas facing democratic societies today. In all this, media are the privileged objects of inquiry, while the analysis adroitly situates them in layers of contexts that in turn illuminate them in ways well beyond what routine research can accomplish.

Theory, methods and the real world

Denis McQuail (2000) once wrote in one of his textbooks that theory is not just sets of formal propositions, something to be 'tested', but also comprises "any systematic set of ideas that can help make sense of a phenomenon, guide action, or predict a consequence" (p.7). This is a very constructive view and has helped encourage a broader understanding of theory within media research. Yet rarely has theory within our field been so explicitly and robustly developed in the course of one volume. Nico Carpentier has emerged within media studies as a scholar generally skilled in developing and utilizing theory in the context of concrete empirical research, and as a leading proponent of Discourse Theory more specifically.

What he makes abundantly clear in this book is theory's central role precisely in making sense of phenomena; how, as he says, it 'sensitizes' us to empirical data – what to select, where to look for it. Implicit here is also that all variants of simplistic 'naïve empiricism' are inadequate. At the same time, he is adamant that theory must not 'colonize' the data; there must a 'dialogue' between them. What he further demonstrates is the inseparability of theory and methods: how the latter emerges in an interplay with the former Discourse Theory per se still remains a minority perspective within today's media research, but the real significance in this regard for the reader is not whether one chooses to adopt this particular tradition or not, but rather the

outstanding intellectual handicraft that Carpentier demonstrates in 'doing' theory.

This is particularly visible in his key motif of the discursive-materialist knot – a metaphor that at first glance may seem abstract but proves to be a very pedagogic device throughout the book. He shows us that theory, as a dimension of research, is not only decisive for our work, but is also something that we can and should engage in. We should at times try to move beyond simply adapting ready-made theory off the shelf and instead engage with it as an object of intellectual struggle; this is part of job as researchers. This process, as he demonstrates, invites us – indeed forces us – to reflect on our premises and assumptions; his example also shows us how to systematically proceed.

The extensive theoretical-methodological scene-setting has its payoff in the analyses in the latter part of the book. Even his historical contextualization of the Cyprus conflict becomes something much more than just another chronological narrative: it is angled in a way that enhances our understanding of the dynamics at work, while at the same time connecting with the theoretical horizons. The core empirical study of community media organizations and their actors is compelling; Carpentier situates it in the context of the overall conflict, as well as in the particular political atmosphere created by the mainstream media. He highlights the various interests and constellations of power at work. The key themes of nationalism and identities – ethnic and religious – and the media's role in sustaining/altering them are neatly elucidated. Overall, he underscores the democratic challenges of participation and of transforming the situation from open conflict (antagonism) to democratic deliberation (agonism) – here following up and further developing key themes from his previous major book (Carpentier 2011).

The Cyprus conflict involves an amalgam of national, ethnic, religious and linguistic conflict, as described by Carpentier via his prismatic rendering of various lines of antagonisms. Against this historical background and the ongoing conflict, his empirical project of analysing the role of community media (the Cyprus Community Media Centre) and its radio station, MYCYradio. Building on his own earlier work and recent work of other scholars on community media, he provides an impressive set of theoretical and empirical perspectives. In particular – which is apparently uncommon in this literature – Carpentier focuses much of his research on the producers, their procedures and not least the audiences for the radio programming, elements for which Downing (2018) strongly praises Carpentier in his recent review of this book.

Discussion

As should be abundantly clear from the above, Nico Carpentier's new volume is truly an outstanding contribution to our field (I'm opportunistically claiming it here for media studies, but obviously its utility extends into many disciplines). It not only offers new knowledge, but invites, guides and prods us as researchers to use what he has developed and apply it in our own efforts to gain knowledge of the social world. In the course of reading it, a few questions arose which I felt would be interesting to discuss with him – not surprising given the scope of the book. For the sake of practicality, I've narrowed these questions down to four.

One book – or two?

The reader is confronted from the start by the breadth of ambition in the volume, with its three-part structure. Carpentier clearly explains the logic of the triptych; this strikes me as solid at the intellectual level. But I wonder from a publishing point of view if the author or his editor ever considered making two books out of this long text, one dealing with theory and methods of DMA, the other briefly summarizing these horizons and applying them to the Cyprus case study. I raise the question because I sense that the book will attract two audiences that may overlap somewhat, but are largely distinct. One of them is primarily interested in philosophy, theory (including the theme of participation) and to some extent methods, the other in Cyprus and just enough theory and methods to understand how the research was done. Thus, from a publisher's market perspective, there seems to have been solid grounds for considering doing two books. Why was this option rejected?

An essential ontology?

Laclau and Mouffe (2001) argue strongly that human action has both linguistic and non-linguistic dimensions, and Carpentier follows this logic in his assertion of the inseparable and dynamic relationship between the material and the discursive. In fact,

it is the presumed reality of this 'knot' on which he builds his entire perspective. My question is simply one of the status of this premise: it is merely an axiom, a premise that he invites us to share, or is it a full-blown ontological claim at the level of metaphysics? In either case, how does it square with the anti-essentialist stance of both DT and DMA?

Structure/agency: alternatives?

In his discussion of the classic tension between structure and agency in social theory, Carpentier leans strongly towards Giddens' notion of structuration as a way of conceptualizing the dynamic between the two. While there is much merit in Giddens' approach, I also note that his theorizing generally involves an implicit or even explicit notion of the subject that is transparent to his/her own self. In other words, it is a subject for whom there is no unconscious at work, no psychic mechanisms of repression, denial, fear and so forth; the subject has full access to his/her own subjectivity (a dimension that Laclau finds important). It seems that this would introduce a potential weakness in DT and DMA analyses, where hegemonic and anti-hegemonic discourses are in tension, trying to position the subject in different ways. As an alternative way to show how structure and agency become intertwined, Bourdieu's conception of habitus might allow more possibility for unconscious psychological processes. Any thoughts on this?

Where does this leave the tradition of ideology critique?

Carpentier's project pivots around the concept discourse, not ideology. Yet it is perhaps inevitable that the notion of ideology enters into his discussion, given the critical approach that both terms embody. Both concepts point to aspects or qualities of communication that have significance for power relations. There are of course many versions of the critique of ideology that elucidate how communication and meaning serve to maintain/legitimate normatively problematic power relations (often emphasizing processes of subjectivity). Yet most of these versions of ideology and various definitions of 'discourse' need not per se be in competition: the dynamics of ideology can be – and have been – successfully analysed using various tools based on conceptions of discourse.

Yet this critical version of ideology (along with related notions like false consciousness) nose-dived considerably with the crisis of Marxism that gradually began to emerge in the 1970s. How is it possible, sceptics asked, to define and defend a privileged position that passes judgment on truth and falsehood, indicates who is a victim of 'misrecognition', when we understand that all knowing is socially situated and contingent? Of course, it was precisely these (and other) issues that led Laclau and Mouffe (2001) to take their controversial 'post-Marxist' steps in the first place.

During the 1990s, critical discourse analysis (CDA) arose as a sort of implicit successor to ideology critique. Today, CDA carries on under its own banner and can accomplish a great deal in this regard – and Carpentier sees it generally as an ally of DMA, even if there are notable differences between them. At the same time there have been efforts to salvage and/or reconstruct the notion of ideology (e.g. Thompson 1990; Downey 2008), calls for its revival (Downey, Titley, Toynbee 2014), as well as counterpoints that argue we should once and for all abandon the term and find other ways to conceptualize the media's implication in the maintenance and reproduction of power (Corner 2016). Phelan (2016), for his part in these debates, points us directly to Laclau as the best way to deal with the questions. On p. 5 Carpentier invokes Laclau's definition of discourse to point to "a macro-textual usage of the discourse concept...which treats discourse as a concept related to (but not synonymous with) ideology (as will be explained more in Platform 1)". But that discussion is very brief, and we never get a full treatment of this theme.

So, even if this exceeds the ambitions of this already highly ambitious book – and I feel I almost risk appearing ungrateful and greedy in asking! – I would invite Nico Carpentier to elaborate just a bit more on the relationship between the tradition of ideology critique and that of DMA. Should we see DMA as a 'solution' to the nagging problems that cling to the ideology concept (e.g. the truth vs. falsehood conundrum), or is there still some validity – seen from DMA – in continuing to use the ideology concept? Laclau (2005) has his own take on this, but I am eager to hear what Nico Carpentier has to say.

(Nico Carpentier will provide an answer to this review in the next issue of *Conjunctions*)

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