

## FOREWORD

### Discourse Analysis and Critical Political Science

“The categories of perception, the schemata of classification, that is, essentially, the words, the names which construct social reality as much as they express it, are the stake *par excellence* of political struggle, which is a struggle to impose the legitimate principle of vision and division”.<sup>1</sup>

Politics necessarily involves struggle over the meaning of events, over how we categorise people, and over how we name and draw borders around places. Political leaders need to mobilise people behind their vision of how to divide people and space by providing answers to questions of who are “we”, where do we belong, and who are our friends and enemies. Discourse analysts seek to uncover the assumptions and processes underlying such visions of political reality. The discourse analyst asks questions about the authoritative knowledge that supports existing political relations, about how governing authorities categorise populations, and about the political consequences of particular forms of discourse. Thus, discourse analysis is part of the tradition of critical social science.

Many discourse analysts want to expose the irrationality of political conflicts as based on lies and distortions. For

example, Mitja Durnik and Marjeta Zupan’s article in this volume shows how political leaders on both sides mobilise their supporters through a discourse of conflict over the border between Croatia and Slovenia. Durnik and Zupan argue that this conflict could easily be resolved but politicians discursively perpetuate it to serve their short term electoral interests. Thus, their article puts forward a reasoned alternative to the border conflict discourse which they see as destructive and misleading.

While some analysts, such as Durnik and Zupan, oppose an irrational discourse with strong claims about the truth of the situation others avoid such claims. Stefan Ihrig analyses the stories told in Romania and Moldova about democracy and their democratic history. However, he does not present these stories as distorting a more accurate version of history. Rather, he is interested in comparing state text book narratives of past experience of democracy and considering the possible effects of these narratives on present democracy building efforts. He points out that while the text books discuss historical experiences of democracy as periods of normality they are short on specifics as to what exactly democracy or normality might be and argues that this lack of specifics provides students with few resources for critical thinking about problems of democracy.

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<sup>1</sup> Pierre Bourdieu. *In other worlds: Essays Towards a Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1990, 134.

Gavin Slade also analyses the narrative of a state and its relation to society through close analysis of Putin's *Millennium Manifesto*. Slade argues that Putin established a new unifying discourse on state society relations for Russia at the turn of the century. Through a close analysis of this significant text he shows how Putin has blended historic notions of 'the Russian idea' with liberal constructions of individual responsibility. He argues that the discursive efforts of Putin's regime contributed significantly to the strengthening of the Russian state. This article provides an excellent example of textual methods of discourse analysis in concert Migdal's theory of state and society as mutually constitutive.<sup>2</sup>

Moving beyond the level of individual state politics, Margus Valdre considers how a famous computer game naturalizes a particular vision of global security. Winning the game requires operating according to particular historical, economic and political 'laws'. Thus, the game subtly presents a particular view of how the world works and engages players in an enjoyable experience of operating according to these rules. Drawing upon the Althusser's concept of the 'interpellation' of subjects, which stresses the importance of bodily practices, Valdre suggests that computer games may be powerful mediums for political ideologies

because of their interactive nature. He questions the vision of security offered by this game given that winning requires global military and cultural domination.

Finally, Silva Kantareva's article does not use techniques of discourse analysis but certainly shares the critical agenda of the other articles in this issue. Kantareva critiques contemporary political analyses that discuss Belarus and Ukraine as part of the post-communist 'transition' or the 'fourth wave of democratisation'. She argues that since these countries lacked the structural pre-conditions necessary for democracy such labeling of developments has, at worst, obscured an authoritarian reality. Her article compares developments in Belarus and Ukraine offering an explanation of Ukraine's recent pro-democracy movements while remaining pessimistic about democratic prospects for Belarus.

Thus, all the articles in this edition reveal the importance of critical political analysis even if this may not lead us to optimistic conclusions. Discourse analysis in particular provides an important tool that enables analysts to expose and question our naturalized assumptions about political relations and realities. Such a critical stance toward political discourse forms an essential component of rigorous political science.

CAROL HARRINGTON

(Department of Political Science,  
Central European University)

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<sup>2</sup> Joel Migdal. *State in Society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001.