

POLITICAL DISCOURSES, PRACTICAL ARGUMENTS AND THE GLOBAL ECONOMIC CRISIS

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Abstract

In their *Political Discourse Analysis. A Method for Advanced Students* (London, New York: Routledge, 2012), Isabela and Norman Fairclough propose a method of discourse analysis grounded in the practice of argument reconstruction and evaluation.

Keywords: political discourse analysis, practical arguments, crisis discourses.

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Political Discourse Analysis. A Method for Advanced Students is a book aimed at various academic communities. It presents a well-articulated approach to carrying out political discourse analysis, and while doing so it offers illuminating discussions of the way British public debates around responses to the economic crisis unfolded. Given its double scope, both methodological and substantive, students of political communication, of language, rhetoric and argumentation, media studies but also political economy will all find it a useful read.

Political discourse, the authors propose, ought primarily be understood as deliberation meant to weigh the merits of various choices we face about courses of action, or, as they put it, as practical reasoning providing arguments for action. Hence, their approach to political discourse analysis is rooted in the analysis of arguments.

The introduction sets out the authors' approach to analyzing political discourses as practical arguments, based on an Aristotelian understanding of politics as deliberation leading to action. In this view, the various subjective elements of the current crisis, the narratives and ideologies struggling to impose themselves, are all parts of argumentations proposing courses of action. Beside setting out the theoretical and methodological implications stemming from the understanding of politics as deliberation, the introduction also makes a strongly normative point concerning the nature and role of public debate. Experts in economics and finances failed to predict the crisis that unfolded, and failed to take into account the unpredictable nature of future. Their „bounded rationality“, locked into very complex, but ultimately closed models, or, as the authors put it, „the proven tendency of experts to get things catastrophically wrong“ (p. 5-6), should therefore be counterweighed by public deliberation and systematic public criticism of proposed actions and consequences.

The chapters that follow set out the structure of practical arguments as essentially arguments about how to respond to problems and deliberating over alternative courses of action. This conception of political discourse has the merit of distinguishing it from other forms of discourse. When engaging into political discourse, agents essentially deliberate, monologically or dialogically, on courses of action appropriate given their values, concerns and circumstances. Thus, practical reasoning involves values that agents strive to realize, goals or states of affairs when the values are realized, and natural, social, institutional circumstances, based on which claims for action can be formulated. When deliberating, agents consider and contrast goals and means of several such arguments.

In line with the normative concerns of the critical discourse analysis tradition, the authors also propose a method for evaluating these arguments, for examining the validity of premises and claims. The criteria for evaluation offered come from informal logic, pragma-dialectics and rhetoric, and refer to rational persuasiveness, to resolving disputes in reasonable critical discussion following argumentative norms of conduct, respectively to rhetorical effectiveness. When evaluating practical arguments, the authors claim, one should focus on criticizing the claims rather than the arguments, as the claims may be acceptable or not regardless of the goodness of the argument meant to support them. Hence the importance of counter-claims and of evaluating the consequences of particular claims in political deliberations. The analysis of language and representations is important insofar as in political discourse, „ways of representing the world enter as premises into reasoning about what we should do.“ (86-87.) This position leads to a somewhat cavalier treatment of rhetoric as a source of inappropriate representations of realities and argumentative positions, or even „dialectical failure“ (92.) Rhetoric appears as a source of persuasive tools which, in „public space dialogues“ viewed as „essentially argumentative“ (98.), bear the burden of proof, and can be tested by normative criticism.

A major strength of the book is that the authors present their model of analysis as a method that can be replicated by researchers working on various discursive

materials, from parliamentary to online debates or news media content. The method proposed, grounded in the practice of argument reconstruction and evaluation, is demonstrated by analyses of arguments put forward, among others, by Tony Blair, by budget reports of Chancellors of the Exchequer, by the Vice-Chairman of Goldman Sachs, the *Guardian* readers or MPs in the House of Commons. This list, however, already points to a major limitation in analyzing political discourses as argumentative and deliberative. Throughout this dense book, using British responses to the crisis as its illustrative material, there is no discussion of responses like the Occupy movements, although these also put a strong mark on British public discussions of the crisis. Such movements have long been known for not complying with the expectation of formulating clear, articulate and well-argued policy proposals, and could be better understood in terms of concerns, values, emotions or symbolic representations.

Representations have long been held central to political discourses, and the study of emotions has also been gaining increasing attention. The authors do not dispute the importance of these in politics. They rather claim that interests, values and representations function as premises of practical reasonings, the outcome of which is political action. In doing so, they offer a compelling argument for not losing sight of reasoned deliberation and, by critically evaluating arguments and claims, the normative ideal of deliberative democracy.