John P. O'Regan

THIS RISKY ORDER OF DISCOURSE: THE NORMATIVITY DEBATE IN CRITICAL DISCOURSE STUDIES

On December 2, 1970, Foucault embarked on his inaugural lecture at the Collège de France with a note of anxiety and warning. He said, 'I should not like to have to enter this risky order of discourse, I should not like to be involved in its peremptoriness and decisiveness' (Foucault, 1981 [1970]: 51). The theme of his lecture was the workings of power and discourse in the construction of subjects within 'systems of exclusion.' Foucault identifies these as including systems of prohibition, of division, and of opposition 'between true and false' (p. 54). It is systems of exclusion that make possible the construction of ritualised orders of discourse, and which determine 'both the particular properties and the stipulated roles of the speaking subjects' (p.62). Foucault's 1970 lecture on the order of discourse is probably, thanks in large part to the work of Fairclough (1989, 1992), the key theoretical, as well as historical, point of departure for what we now know as critical discourse studies. Of course, Fairclough constructed his order of discourse in quite different ways to Foucault's, drawing as he did on the work of a range of alternative thinkers such as Marx, Gramsci and Althusser within a tradition from which Foucault, after 1968, had become intellectually estranged. In a much quoted passage, Fairclough had to 'put Foucault's perspective to work' (Fairclough, 1992: 38), and by so doing Fairclough was able to construct for critical discourse studies a normative agenda which for much of its extent is largely at odds with the non-normative parameters and purposes of Foucault's thought (see Foucault, 1982, 2001; Habermas, 1987; Miller 1994; Chouliaraki and Fairclough, 1999). Where Foucault's main objective was 'to create a history of the different modes by which, in our culture, human beings are made subjects,' (Foucault, 1982: 208), Fairclough's interest, and the long term concern of a great deal of work in critical discourse studies, has been how subjects might be emancipated from those same modalities (see McKenna, 2004).

I like to think that it is Foucault's awareness of the vertiginous drop into non-normativity that lies before him which leads him to express the anxieties that he feels, although this is perhaps to give his words a weight they did not intend. Normativity and its abandonment is a risky business

nonetheless, for the well-rehearsed and oft-repeated reason that it leaves you vulnerable to what are seen as the paralysing effects of relativist inertia and political quietism, neither of which Foucault was particularly good at himself, despite what he wrote (and said) about truth (see Foucault, 1982, 1984, 2001; Miller, 1994). But if the abandonment of normativity is risky, so is its retention, if for an entirely different reason. This is that in the act of insisting on the need to hold on to normativity you leave yourself vulnerable to the accusation that what you really desire is the colonisation of truth itself – a Nietzschean will to power. Nietzsche sums this up as 'a kind of lust to rule [which] would like to compel all other drives to accept it as a norm' (Nietzsche, 1968: 267). To appreciate the kernel of Nietzsche's view his words need to be stripped of their aphoristic shell, but if this is done, then what he is saying is that the claim to normativity is an *unwitting* will to domination because it cannot help but have totalising tendencies. In other words, to claim that one has grounds for claiming the truth is simultaneously to claim that this truth may be used as a foundational principle in the organisation of social relations, and therefore that all other perspectives can be measured against it for the extent to which they are true or false, right or wrong. The will to truth is thus a colonising discourse, it colonises the discursive terrain according to its own perception of truth, based as it is on the apparent obviousness of its own moral correctness. It is for this reason that Fairclough (1995: 19) is able to state that 'an important emancipatory political objective [in critical discourse analysis] is to maximise the conditions for judgements of truth to be compared and evaluated on their merits,' and therefore to be able to prefer one over another. It was to avoid the consequences of a discourse which obliges you to make judgemental claims about truth that thinkers like Nietzsche, Adorno, Foucault and Derrida rejected normative positions.

It is in the agonistic terrain between relativist and foundational perspectives that the debate about normativity in critical discourse studies must be engaged. In these circumstances it is difficult to reconcile Chouliaraki and Fairclough's (1999: 32) claim that they are 'working within a post-structuralist perspective, but without adopting either post-structuralist reductions of the whole of social life to discourse, or post-structuralist judgemental relativism.' There is an acceptance of non-normativity in their position, but only up to a point, and apparently only epistemically – 'epistemic relativism must be accepted' (p. 8). How this acceptance is not also judgementally relative is less clear, and yet the aporia which it highlights goes right to the heart of the debate

about normativity. This debate has been effectively articulated in recent issues of this journal (Luke 2004, 2005; Rymes, 2005), as well as in a modified form in earlier editions (McKenna, 2004; Rajagopalan, 2004). Of these, only Rajagopalan opts for an openly poststructuralist position. He says that 'it is not the pursuit of truth that researchers should be aiming at, but coming to grips with … the genealogy of specific regimes of truth that are securely ensconced.' This observation on Rajagopalan is perhaps unfair to Rymes et al, who also wish to question how we 'know we are on the right side' (p. 195), but having stated this they then call for the reconstruction of what seems to be a normative philosophy of the subject, one which Nietzsche, Adorno, Foucault, Derrida and indeed Habermas have done so much to debunk (Nietzsche, 1968; Adorno, 1973; Foucault, 1982; Derrida, 1976; Habermas, 1987). The approach of Rymes et al involves '[a]nalysing the narratives in the lifeworld … and deconstructing the different discourses present in these narratives' so as to develop 'critical meta-awareness' (p. 197). It also includes the normative possibility of 'demystifying the social construction of reality' (p. 197). Their intervention thus leads back to the dilemma of Chouliaraki and Fairclough, of rejecting some types of normativity while appearing to accept others – a kind of metaphysical letting go with one hand, while grabbing on again with the other.

Luke (2005), in contrast, takes an 'overtly normative' position, one which is 'historical materialist … and committed to an agenda of redistributive social and economic justice' (p. 200). McKenna (2004) too, but from the perspective of an overview of the field, notes how critical discourse studies 'investigates how discourse constructs and maintains the relations of power in society [and] has a political teleology to reduce inequality' (p. 15). He also warns that if critical discourse studies is 'to remain true to its stated aims of dealing with real world issues of injustice, suffering, and inequality, it must not do so from the safe eyrie of increasingly abstract theory' (p. 27); point taken. But even so, I remain disconcerted. The crucial question for all these perspectives is 'why bother?' Why bother with the reconstruction of a 'normative social agenda' (Luke)? Why bother with reducing inequality and suffering (McKenna, Fairclough, Wodak, Kress, everybody)? Why bother with 'corrective action' (Rajagopalan)? And why bother to 'take a stand' (Rymes et al) if the aporia between relativism and foundationalism in the abstract theory of critical discourse studies is not theoretically answered in some way? In other words, how without falling into the trap of the philosophy of consciousness and the will to power

are we supposed to be able to distinguish between preferable objectives and outcomes? It seems to me that to put the emphasis on the need to deal with real world problems and issues, or to rely on the apparent obviousness of judgemental truth and the ethical 'rightness' of certain moral positions are a collective 'blind' which sidesteps at its peril the philosophical problem of how we construct a discourse ethics which is not premised on being able to recognise unequivocally the difference between good and bad, right and wrong, true and false. To turn Habermas's critique of Foucault on its head, only with the introduction of some transcendental notion of truth could critical discourse studies claim to be able to isolate these differences (see Habermas, 1987: 284). If, as Luke (2005: 200) rightly points out, there is no need 'to demonstrate yet again that everything is constructed by and through discourse,' then how we put the critical into critical discourse studies from a position 'within discourse' is a question that has still to be answered, because it cannot be answered in normative 'without discourse' terms. It is also not sufficient to study and document which discourses 'make a difference, how, in what ways, and for whom' (p. 200) because we need to be able to know how we decide what differences to support, and for whom; and therefore also what differences to oppose. Let me be clear about this, I am not saying that I disagree with the agendas which Luke, McKenna, Rajagopalan, Fairclough and others put forward for doing critical work. On the contrary, I fully support them. My problem is how we are supposed to *know* on theoretical grounds that our perspective is the 'correct' one. This is not at all clear, and Luke's (2005) suggestion that it is simply a matter of 'professing one's reading position – out front and subject to scrutiny of all kinds' (p. 200) does not do the trick, although I wish it did. Self-reflexivity only works if it includes the admission at the start that one's situated perspective precludes the possibility of making judgements of truth, but I suspect that for some, and I do not necessarily mean Luke, this may be to concede too much.

We are thus left with the not inconsiderable problem of how critical discourse studies can ground its critical practice. How do we find our way out of this aporia? This is where the Derridean concept of responsibility seems valuable (Derrida, 2003). Since judgemental truths are caught up in the metaphysical complicity of a signed universe which cannot be critiqued without recourse to the sign itself (Derrida, 1978), that is, without recourse to the concept which is also the object of the critique, the motivation and rationale for critique has to be derived from *within* a system of signs in which ethical concepts are not dependent upon a-discursive transcendentals –

a transcendental signified. For this reason, the discourse ethics of Derrida posits that we have an infinite responsibility to the Other, for without this responsibility 'you would not have moral and political problems, and everything that follows from this' (cited in Critchley, 1999: 108). In other words, it is through responsibility, rather than through the foundationalist presuppositions of normative perspectives, that the discursive terrain remains ethically 'open' and that questions of non-normative ethical judgement become possible, and indeed necessary. Without responsibility, the hope which is carried in the possibility of the Other that, for example, things might be different one day, as well as the praxis which such hope implies, would be denied. By focusing on our responsibility to the Other, and therefore on our responsibility to openness in opposition to closure, the point is to determine, not whether different truths are good or bad, but whether putting a particular discourse or set of discourses into practice might lead to a silencing of 'open' alternatives, and therefore also a turning away from the Other. That these alternatives should be open makes it possible for critical discourse studies theoretically to locate itself in opposition to discourses which are associated with the closure of knowledge, such as fascism, neo-liberalism, and religious fundamentalism, and to exercise *reflexive* support for the alternative discourses which they would seek to efface, such as democratic pluralism, social egalitarianism, and theistic secularism, not because we know it is right to do so, but because we know that not to do so would be an act of irresponsibility.

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