

Chapter 27

Discourse

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The notion of 'discourse', as developed in some contemporary approaches to political analysis, has its distant roots in what can be called the transcendental turn in modern philosophy – i.e. a type of analysis primarily addressed not to *facts* but to their *conditions of possibility*. The basic hypothesis of a discursive approach is that the very possibility of perception, thought and action depends on the structuration of a certain meaningful field which pre-exists any factual immediacy. A transcendental enquiry as an investigation of the conditions of possibility of experience started with Kant, for whom space, time and the categories of understanding constitute the *a priori* dimension in the constitution of phenomena. And in the early twentieth century Husserl's phenomenology strictly differentiated an intuition of facts from an intuition of essences, and asserted that the latter is constitutive of all 'givenness'. These classical transcendental approaches differ, however, in two crucial respects from contemporary theories of discourse. The first is that, while in a philosophy like Kant's the '*a priori*' constitutes a basic structure of the mind which transcends all historical variations, contemporary discourse theories are eminently historical and try to study discursive fields which experience temporal variations in spite of their transcendental role – i.e. that the line separating the 'empirical' and the 'transcendental' is an impure one, submitted to continuous displacements. A second differentiating feature is that the concept of 'discursive fields' in contemporary approaches depends on a notion of structure which has received the full impact of Saussurean and post-Saussurean linguistics.

Even within this very general characterization we must differentiate between those theories of discourse that are strongly related to transformations in the field of structural linguistics and those whose links to structural analysis are more distant and do not pass through an internal critique of the Saussurean notion of the sign. The first approach is represented by post-structuralism conceived in a broad sense, the second by the work of Michel Foucault and his school. We will treat successively these two trends and will later deal with the consequences of such developments for the conceptualization of politics.

Theories of Discourse

The linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure (1959), originally presented in three courses given in Geneva between 1906 and 1911, turn around the notion of the sign conceived as the relation between an acoustic image (the *signifier*) and a concept (the *signified*). According to Saussure there are two basic principles around which structural linguistics is organized. The first is that in language there are no positive terms, only differences. To understand the meaning of the term 'father' I have to understand the meaning of the terms 'mother', 'son', etc. This purely relational and differential character of linguistic identities means that language constitutes a *system* in which no element can be defined independently of the others. The second principle is that language is *form* and not *substance* – that is, that each element of the system is exclusively defined by the rules of its combinations and substitutions with the other elements. To use Saussure's analogy, if I substitute the wooden pieces in a chessboard with marbles or even pieces of paper, I can still play chess as far as the rules governing the movements of the pieces remain the same. In this entirely differential universe, dominated by purely formal rules, there is strict isomorphism: to each stream of sounds constituting a word corresponds one and only one concept. The order of the signifier and the order of the signified strictly overlap.

There were, however, for Saussure, strict limits to the possibility of developing a linguistic theory of discourse. From a Saussurean point of view discourse is any linguistic sequence more extended than the sentence. Now, in a Saussurean perspective a linguistics of discourse is impossible because a succession of sentences is only governed by the whims of the speaker and does not present any structural regularity graspable by a general theory. With this Cartesian assertion of the omnipotence of the subject, the very possibility of a linguistic theory of discourse was ruled out. On top of that, the Saussurean theory of the sign was ultimately inconsistent, for if language is form and not substance, and if there is a strict isomorphism between the order of the signifier and the order of the signified, the two orders become – from a formal point of view – indistinguishable from each other, and the duality of the linguistic sign cannot be maintained. At this point Saussure had to reintroduce surreptitiously the distinction between phonic and conceptual *substances*, with the result of tying even more closely structural analysis to the linguistic sign. Although he had vaguely announced the possibility of a semiology as a general science of signs in society, his dependence on linguistic *substances* made difficult this enlargement of the fields of application of structural principles.

It was only with the *glossematic school* of Copenhagen that these internal inconsistencies of Saussureanism were properly addressed. The result was the formulation of a second model of structural linguistics, which clearly advanced in the direction of an increasing formalism. Hjelmslev (1961; 1970) broke with Saussure's isomorphic conception of the relation between signifier and signified by subdividing both orders into units smaller than the sign:

phonologists . . . have brought to light linguistic units smaller than signs: the phonemes . . . (the sign *calf* is made up of the three phonemes *k/ae/* and *f/*). The same method applied to content allows the distinction, in the same sign, of at least three elements . . . or semes . . . bovine/male/young. Now it is clear that the semantic and the phonic units thus

located can be distinguished from the formal point of view: the combinatorial laws concerning the phonemes of a language and those applied to the semes cannot be shown to correspond to each other . . . (Ducrot and Todorov, 1980, p. 22)

The consequences of this trend towards formalism were far-reaching as far as a theory of discourse is concerned. The main ones are the following:

- 1 If the abstract system of formal rules governing the combination and substitution between elements is no longer necessarily attached to any particular substance, *any* signifying system in society – the alimentary code, furniture, fashion, etc. – can be described in terms of that system. This was the direction that semiology took from the 1960s, starting with the pioneering works of Roland Barthes (1967; 1968; 1972; see also Kristeva, 1969). In fact, there was an increasing realization that ‘discourse’ did not refer to a particular set of objects, but to a viewpoint from which it was possible to redescribe the totality of social life.
- 2 If formalism strictly applies, this means that the *substantial* differences between the linguistic and the non-linguistic have also to be dropped – in other terms, that the distinction between action and structure becomes a secondary distinction within the wider category of meaningful totalities. This point has been particularly stressed in Laclau and Mouffe (1985), and it brings discourse theory close to the conclusions reached by the work of the later Wittgenstein, i.e. the notion that ‘language games’ embrace both language and the actions in which it is woven (Wittgenstein, 1983, p. 5).
- 3 Finally, strict formalism made it also possible to overcome the other obstacle to the formulation of a linguistic theory of discourse: as far as all distinctions had to be considered as merely differential – i.e. as internal to the structure – the subject could no longer be conceived as *the source* of meaning but, instead, as just one more particular location within a meaningful totality. The ‘death of the subject’ was one of the battle cries of classical structuralism. The way in which the speaker put sentences together could no longer be conceived as the expression of the whims of an entirely autonomous subject but, rather, as largely determined by the way in which institutions are structured, by what is ‘sayable’ in some contexts, etc. The task of discourse analysis for classical structuralism was to uncover these basic regularities which govern the production of meaning in social life. This programme was carried out, from a technical point of view, by putting together the contributions of various disciplines such as the theory of argumentation, the theory of enunciation, speech-act theory, semantic and syntactic analysis, etc.

In recent years the structuralist tradition has experienced, from various quarters, a series of reformulations which have led to what can properly be called a post-structuralist moment. The common denominator of these revisions has been to put into question the notion of closed totality, which was the cornerstone of classical structuralism. (If identities are only differences within a discursive system, no identity can be fully constituted unless the system is a closed one.) The post-structuralist trend has been to experiment in the logic of subversion of discursive identities which follows from

the logical impossibility of constituting a closed system. The main currents within this trend are the following:

- 1 The reformulation of the logic of meaning in the later work of Roland Barthes (1974). While in his early semiological works Barthes believed in a strict differentiation between denotative and connotative meanings, he realized later that no strict differentiation between both can be established. This led to the notion of a *plural text*, whose signifiers cannot be permanently attached to particular signifieds.
- 2 A similar loosening of the relation between signifier and signified takes place in the psychoanalytic current inspired by Jacques Lacan (1977). Freudian theory, through its emphasis on the process of overdetermination (condensation and displacement), which intervenes in the constitution of all psychical formations, had already insisted in the impossibility of fixing meaning through a strict correlation between signifier and signified. This tendency is radicalized by Lacanian theory in what is called the *logic of the signifier*, i.e. the permanent slide of the signified under the signifier (the latter becoming the stable element).
- 3 Finally, the *deconstructionist* movement, initiated by Jacques Derrida (1976; also Gasché, 1986), attempts to show the elements of radical undecidability to be found in all structural arrangements (in a way not dissimilar to the Gödel's theorem) and how no structure of signification can find in itself the principle of its own closure. The latter requires, consequently, a dimension of force which has to operate from outside the structure.

An entirely different approach to a theory of what he calls 'discursive formations' is to be found in the work of Michel Foucault. While both structuralism and post-structuralism start from the logic of the sign and its subversion once the conditions of total closure do not obtain, Foucault's starting point is a second-level phenomenology trying to isolate the totalities within which any production of meaning takes place. Classical phenomenology had focused on the meaning of statements by bracketing their reference to any external reality. Foucault proceeds to a second bracketing by showing that meaning itself presupposes conditions of production which are not themselves reducible to meaning. This 'quasi-transcendental' move leads to the isolation of a stratum of phenomena which Foucault calls discourse. The central problem in his analysis is to determine what constitutes the unity and principle of coherence of a discursive formation. The minimal unit of any discourse is, for Foucault, the *statement* (*énoncé*). A statement cannot be considered as a proposition because the same proposition can involve two different statements (both I and a doctor can say that somebody has a cancer, but only the latter's proposition can be considered as a medical statement). It cannot be considered as an utterance either, because different utterances can involve the same statement. Finally, statements cannot be identified with speech-acts, given that the former are restricted by Foucault to what he calls 'serious speech-acts' – those that are not ordinary, everyday speech-acts, but are constituted through an authoritative or autonomous activity (like the medical discourse). But this is just to put the same problem in a different way: what constitutes the principle of unity of a particular discursive field or formation? For a while Foucault played with the idea of finding this principle of unity

in what he called an *episteme*: a basic outlook which unifies the intellectual production during a certain age. 'By *episteme* we mean . . . the total set of relations that unite, at a given period, the discursive practices that give rise to epistemological figures, sciences, and possibly formalized systems' (Foucault, 1972, p. 191). In this sense he tried to isolate the basic *epistemes* of the ages that he conventionally called the Renaissance, the Classical Age and Modernity (Foucault, 1973). The intellectual operation of uncovering these basic discursive strategies is what he called *archaeology*. But the main trend of his thought led him to the increasing realization that the heterogeneity of a discursive formation cannot be reduced to such a simple principle of unity. So, he concluded that the principle of unity of a discursive formation cannot be found in the reference to the same object, or in a common style in the production of statements, or in the constancy of the concepts, or in the reference to a common theme, but in what he called 'regularity in dispersion' – the constancy in the external relations between elements which do not obey any underlying or essential principle of structuration. However, if regularity in dispersion is the only principle of unity of a discursive formation, what remains open is the question of the frontiers between discursive formations, a question to which Foucault, at this stage, was unable to give any precise answer.

Discourse Theory and Politics

The main contributions of discourse theory to the field of politics have been linked so far to the conceptualization of power. The same broad division pointed out earlier applies here: we have, on the one hand, analysts whose theoretical roots are to be found in the post-structuralist theory of the sign and, on the other, those which are mainly linked to the reformulation of Foucault's intellectual project in his later work.

The first tendency can be found especially in the work of Laclau and Mouffe (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1990). Two aspects of the post-structuralist tradition have been important in their formulation of an approach to political power centred in the category of *hegemony*. The first is the notion of 'discourse' as a meaningful totality which transcends the distinction between the linguistic and the extra-linguistic. As we have seen, the impossibility of a closed totality unties the connection between signifier and signified. In that sense there is a proliferation of 'floating signifiers' in society, and political competition can be seen as attempts by rival political forces to partially fix those signifiers to particular signifying configurations. Discursive struggles about the ways of fixing the meaning of a signifier like 'democracy', for instance, are central to explaining the political semantics of our contemporary political world. This partial fixing of the relation between signifier and signified is what in these works is called 'hegemony'. The second aspect in which post-structuralism contributes to a theory of hegemony is closely connected with the first. As we have seen, deconstruction shows that the various possible connections between elements of the structure are, in their own terms, undecidable. As, however, one configuration rather than the other possible ones has been actualized, it follows: (1) that the actually existing configuration is essentially contingent: (2) that it cannot be explained by the structure itself but by a force which has to be partially external to the structure. This is the role of a hegemonic force. 'Hegemony' is a theory of the decisions taken in an undecidable terrain. The conclusion is, as

deconstruction shows, that as undecidability operates at the very ground of the social, objectivity and power become indistinguishable. It is in these terms that it has been asserted that power is the trace of contingency within the structure (Laclau, 1990). Laclau and Mouffe present a history of Marxism, from the Second International to Gramsci, as a progressive recognition of the contingent character of social links which had previously been considered as grounded in the necessary laws of History. This is what has extended always further the area of operativity of hegemonic links.

There has also been an important attempt by Slavoj Žižek (1989) to extend discourse theory to the field of political analysis through an approach which brings together Lacanian psychoanalysis, Hegelian philosophy and some trends in analytical philosophy, especially Saul Kripke's anti-descriptivism. The central aspect of Žižek's approach is his attempt to reintroduce the category of the subject without any kind of essentialist connotation. His 'subject' is not the substantial *cogito* of the philosophical tradition of modernity, but it is not either the dispersion of *subject positions* that structuralism had postulated. The subject is rather – following Lacan – the place of the *lack*, an empty place that various attempts at identification try to fill. Žižek shows the complexity involved in any process of *identification* (in the psychoanalytic sense) and attempts to explain on that basis the constitution of political identities.

The later work of Foucault (1979; 1980) was an attempt to deal with the difficulties to which his analysis of discursive formations had led. Foucault had defined the realm of discourse as just one object among others. Discourse related to the statement as one object of analysis sharply separated from the others: discursive regularities did not cut across the frontier between the linguistic and the non-linguistic. As a result, the presence of certain discursive configurations had to be explained in terms which for him were extra-discursive. This led to a new kind of approach, which he called *genealogy*. While archaeology *presupposed* the unity of a discursive field which could not appeal to any deeper principle of unification, genealogy tried to locate the elements entering a discursive configuration within the framework of a discontinuous history whose elements did not have any principle of teleological unity. The external character of the Foucauldian conception of power: power is ubiquitous because elements are discontinuous, and their being linked is nothing that we can explain out of the elements themselves. So, while post-structuralism and genealogy both deal with the question of discontinuity and its production out of unsutured identities, they approach discontinuity from two different angles: in the first case it is a question of extending the category of discourse to the point in which it embraces its radical other – i.e. it is a question of showing the working of a logic of *difference* which cuts across any distinction between the linguistic and the non-linguistic; in the second case it is a question of showing how linguistic regularities depend on putting together elements which can only be conceived in non-discursive terms.

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