INTRODUCTION

Critical social research draws upon the resources of social science to address the most pressing social problems of the day: those aspects of the structure, organization and functioning of human societies that cause suffering, injustice, danger, inequality, insecurity, and self-doubt. It has long been an assumption of critical social science that these dysfunctions are products of human invention and can therefore be changed through human intervention. It is a central concern and responsibility of critical social research to show the contingency of existing social arrangements: to expose to scrutiny claims of inevitability, claims that the way things are is the way they have to be. The critical objective is not only to identify and analyze the roots of social problems, but also to discern feasible ways of alleviating or resolving them.

Of course critical social scientists can claim no special expertise in curing social ills, but we can certainly reflect on what the problems are and how they might be resolved. Such findings will ideally have resonance for, and be taken up by, other social forces which may be able to change social life for the better. Also, critical researchers do not stand outside social life. We are a part of it, and our critical reflections are also properly seen as critical self-reflections on our own positions, motivations, and actions.

The identification of the most pressing problems of the day is itself problematic and contentious, as is their formulation as proper objects of social research. But there would be widespread agreement that in contemporary social life they include:

- the effects on people’s lives of the international restructuring of economies on the basis of “marketization” prescripts and the imposition of the requisites for “global capitalism” on countries in central and eastern Europe, Latin America, and elsewhere
- the need to help people negotiate changing conceptions of gender identities and relationships and achieve social justice in matters of gender and sexuality
- the conflicts people experience because of unequal and unjust power relationships between those who speak different languages and dialects and identify with different cultural traditions
- the need to help people educate themselves for critical local and global citizenship, free from the political biases of official textbooks and school curricula
• unjust social relations based on arbitrary categories of age and racist classifications (indigenous, immigrant, and “foreign”) that support and are supported by oppressive attitudes and practices

• insecurities over national identities in an era of new transnational systems, such as the European Union; the global upsurge in migration and the movement of refugees; the emergence of new, aspiring, and renewed nation-states; the proliferation of organized violence within and between states; and the intrusion upon state policy organs by transnational institutions such as the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Trade Organization

• the need to adapt to the consequences of access (or lack thereof) to new means of global communication, and to the proliferation of ideas and cultural diversity entailed by our new media environments

Many critical social researchers are acutely and increasingly aware that such issues and problems are, to some significant degree, problems of discourse. One might argue that it has always been so: people not only act and organize in particular ways, they also represent their ways of acting and organizing, and produce imaginary projections of new or alternative ways, in particular discourses. People also organize and act through particular discourses: movements such as “total quality management”, religious, political, and economic fundamentalisms of all sorts; and the myriad “reform packages” put forward at every level of social organization are all discourses that specify ways of interacting.

These representations and discourses are therefore an irreducible part of ways of acting and organizing — discourses simultaneously sustain, legitimize, and change them. This becomes clearer as the reflexive character of human life continues to change, and contemporary social life is characterized by a continually enhanced reflexivity that amplifies the weight and power of discourse in social life. In a thoroughly mediated global environment — an environment that by definition cannot exist without its technologies of communication — the global production, exchange, and distribution of significant and socially transformative meanings further emphasizes an analytical emphasis on the role and function of discourse in social organization and change. We can also interpret (admittedly contentious) views of recent social change involving a shift towards an “information society” or a “knowledge society” as registering amongst other things the increasing reflexivity of social life, and more importantly for our purposes here, the increasingly discourse-led character of social change.

To return to the example of the transition towards “global capitalism,” many commentators have emphasized the salience of neo-liberal discourse — the “new global vernacular” according to Bourdieu and Wacquant (2001) and its “neo-evangelistic rhetoric” (Derrida, 1994) — as part of the armoury of the leading strategists of transition. Very often, the recontextualization of neo-liberalism in “transitional countries” or particular institutions (such as universities) is initially a matter of the appearance of new discourses which present new ways of seeing, acting and being, and which is only subsequently (if at all) enacted and inculcated in new ways of working and managing, new styles of leadership, and so forth. At the same time, recontextualization needs to be understood in terms of tensions between discontinuity and continuity, between the transformative capacity of innovative forces and new discourses, and the obduracy of existing structures, practices and habitus, and the
long-term historical processes which are discernible in particular areas and regions. In all cases understanding the role of discourse is essential, even while recognizing that it forms but one moment in more complex social processes.

“Discourse” is now well established as a category in social theory and research, and much contemporary social research includes some form of discourse analysis. Yet there is also a widespread suspicion of discourse analysis amongst social scientists, a perception that it is often vague and ill-defined, supported by the manifold definitions of discourse in social theory (for example in Foucault as opposed to Habermas), in different national academic traditions (for example Germany as opposed to Britain and the USA), as well as in various areas of language study (for example pragmatics, textlinguistics, as well as discourse analysis itself). Many social research papers identify discourses in whatever material they are analyzing without giving much indication of what particular features characterize a particular discourse and help us to recognize its presence, or the grounds for claiming that there are different discourses, or for distinguishing three rather than, say, five discourses in a given context. Another cause for suspicion is the assumption, correct in a few instances but incorrect for most critical discourse analysis, that discourse analysts reduce the whole of social life to discourse, leaving no space for analysis of the material world or social structures (for examples of more integrative approaches to discourse, see Fairclough, 2003; Lemke, 1995; Scollon & Scollon, 2003).

However, this situation seems to be changing. Our own experience in working with social scientists is that people in many fields are no longer satisfied with referring loosely to discourse and discourses; they are looking for resources to analyze their research material and data more systematically and in more detail from a discourse perspective. In many cases, although they are daunted by detailed textual (especially linguistic) analysis, social researchers can see the rationale for it in their research. Researchers are turning to more developed frameworks for discourse analysis, including critical discourse analysis, as well as conversation analysis and discursive psychology. At the same time, many younger researchers feel they are working on their own in these directions, having published materials to guide them, but without teachers and supervisors who are able to give them help that is geared to the particular nature and problems of their research. Discourse analysis is increasingly being seen in the social sciences as a tool (Fairclough, 2003; Titscher, Meyer, Wodak & Vetter, 2000; Wodak & Meyer, 2001, 2003).

We can discern here the emergence of a field of critical discourse studies which draws upon but goes beyond established enclaves of specialized work on discourse, such as critical discourse analysis, attracting scholars from a considerable range of disciplines in the social sciences and the humanities who are beginning to develop new syntheses between discourse analysis and a variety of theoretical and methodological perspectives.1 There is currently no journal that fully reflects this increasing convergence across disciplines. Many researchers find that their work does not fit into existing journals because of the constraints the latter place on appropriate papers for submission. Critical Discourse Studies responds to the need for a journal open to the disciplinary, theoretical and methodological diversity of this emergent field and welcomes a wide range of contributions, including papers which focus on matters of theory and theory construction as well as analytical papers.
At the same time, while it is not a part of the remit of this journal to seek to unify the field around a single set of theoretical and methodological principles, Critical Discourse Studies aims to be a journal which is not simply open to diversity, but seeks to stimulate dialogue between disciplines, theories, and methodologies that may lead at least to greater clarity and consensus on which key issues divide the field, and to provide more focused debate on these issues. The journal will seek to stimulate this dialogue via a regular section devoted to debates, encouraging such debates in contributed articles as well as in book reviews, and through the peer review process.

The development of a field of critical discourse studies, characterized as it is by a remarkable degree of interdisciplinarity, gives rise to a wide range of issues which we hope this journal will be able to address. We identify a number of them here, though we by no means intend this to be an exhaustive or definitive list.

1. A basic division within critical discourse studies is between those who see discourse analysis as including detailed analysis of samples of actually occurring text and talk and those who do not. Actually, we suspect that this division is beginning to erode with the convergence across disciplines we have referred to above. But it still remains a substantial division. Analysis includes, for instance, linguistic analysis of various sorts (lexical, grammatical, semantic analysis); pragmatic analysis; forms of conversation and interaction analysis; analysis of narrative and argumentation; and the many approaches to thematic analysis. These different types of analysis vary in the extent to which they attend to details of structure and organization and wording of texts or talk. We can formulate the issue as follows: is it reasonable to claim to be doing discourse analysis without analyzing actual text or talk in at least moderate detail?

2. There is a great deal of conceptual confusion around the term “discourse.” The term is used in a variety of different senses, including as an abstract noun to refer to what we might call the semiotic, one element or moment of the social, more concretely as a count noun to refer to particular discourses (for instance according to social field, ideology, social function, or topic, for example political discourse, feminist discourse, discourses of social welfare, management discourse, and so on), and most concretely to refer to particular instances of, especially, spoken interaction. There are also different theoretical, academic and cultural traditions which may push discourse (especially in the first two senses) in different directions — towards questions of knowledge in the case of Foucault, for instance. How can we avoid talking at cross-purposes in the field of critical discourse studies or, more positively, how can we promote a more specific awareness of the potential problems of talking at cross-purposes, and anticipate them?

3. Often, what goes under the name of “discourse analysis” isolates features of text and talk from social issues and contexts, and from the social theory and research that purports to address these. We think it is a reasonable tenet of a critical approach to discourse studies that the analysis of text and talk are never an end in themselves; that discourse (in the most abstract sense) is an inherently relational term for one moment of the social which has no existence except through its relation to other terms (be they, according to the particular social theory, institution, habitus, materiality, and so forth); and that discourse analysis
is therefore social analysis with a focus on the moment of discourse. Even if this account does not attract consensus, and we naturally anticipate much debate on the matter, one can expect contributions to Critical Discourse Studies to address these relations and the social theory and research that inform them.

4. The perception of many who have come to critical discourse studies from a background in linguistics or language study is that it is common for social scientists doing discourse analysis to see discourse (in the abstract sense) solely in terms of representation, effectively reducing discourse to (particular) discourses. Yet discourse in the abstract sense also crucially subsumes the category of genre, as well as (depending on one’s analytical perspective) other categories such as style, voice, or register. In what ways are such omissions significant for the capacity of discourse analysis fully to address social processes and social change in their discourse dimensions? For instance, do not changes in organizational forms and procedures entail changes in genres; does not the spatial extension of social relations and power implied by globalization entail a proliferation of genres for doing action at a distance? We cannot ignore analysis of genres as an integral level of discourse analysis.

5. As a medium for the social construction of meaning, discourse is never solely linguistic. It operates conjointly with vocal and visual elements (depiction, gesture, graphics, typography), in the context of meaning-laden architectures, with the semiotics of action itself, and with music or other extra-linguistic auditory signs. Its form is constrained by the media through which it moves. It deploys not only acoustic and orthographic signs, but interacts with our meaningful ways of deploying a wide variety of material artifacts within complex cultural contexts. How should we extend critical discourse studies to provide useful accounts of new communication technologies, and the increasingly important multimodal hybrid texts and hypertexts produced in these media? How should we integrate conceptions of discourse with research on, for example, the semiotics of toys or the reflexive sociology and the critical geography of meaningful social practices (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992; Latour, 1996; Scollon & Scollon, 2003; Thrift, 1996)?

Various forms of critique can be distinguished in the analysis of discourse: ideological critique, rhetorical critique (often focused on manipulation) and what we call “strategic critique” (Fairclough, 2003). Whereas ideological critique focuses on the effects of discourse on social structures of power, and rhetorical critique on persuasion in individual texts or talk, strategic critique focuses on how discourse figures within the strategies pursued by groups of social agents to change societies in particular directions. We believe that strategic critique assumes a certain primacy in periods of major social change and restructuring such as the one we are going through now – which is not to say that one should ignore important continuities when focusing upon change. Strategic critique also gives a practical anchorage to the normative or positive dimension of critique: rather than proposing principles for more practically adequate or morally just ways of using language which are purely theoretical and utopian in the worst sense, we can formulate such principles on the basis of an analysis of the strategic capacities, and actual strategies, of groups of social agents in real contexts of change. For instance, principles for democratic forms
of deliberative social dialogue in the public sphere can be formulated in ways which mirror the achievements and the capabilities of real groups of social agents, rather than some “ideal speech situation” (Habermas, 1984). If we can give an ironic twist to the pervasive management term, formulated in accordance with “best practice.”

We have tried to avoid an overly rigid specification of appropriate contributions to the journal so as to be open to original approaches. But it will be clear that we are particularly favourably inclined towards papers which address such issues and differences in the field of critical discourse studies as those outlined above, including papers which address the issues and complexities involved in integrating detailed analysis of text and talk into social research, and make links between analysis of texts and issues in social theory. At the same time, we recognize that there should be space in the journal for papers whose concerns are mainly theoretical. Above all, we hope to publish work that contributes not only to intellectual understanding but also to projects and agendas for social justice.

Note

1 We cannot offer a definitive list of disciplines and areas of study where this statement applies, but it would include all of the following: communication studies, sociology, business studies, social psychology, social geography, new media research, education, critical literacy, multimodal analysis, political science, anthropology, linguistics, legal studies, interaction design studies, advertising, literary studies, political economy, theatre studies, applied ethics, philosophy, social work, health studies, social epistemology, journalism, environmental studies, media and cultural studies, and studies of science and technology (see, for instance, the membership list of the CDA-based LNC group at http://www.cddc.vt.edu/host/lnc/).

References


