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Discourse and the Materialist Conception of History: Critical Comments on Critical Discourse Analysis

Introduction

What place does the study and analysis of ‘discourse’ – that is, of the production and use of texts (spoken, written, etc) – have within the materialist conception of history? Can this conception take due account of the significance and role of ‘discursive’ phenomena in the processes of social change taking place today? These two questions form the main theme of this paper and will be addressed via a critique of ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’ (CDA), a current of academic thought offering an interpretation of the role of discourse which, I will argue, runs counter to the principles and methodology of historical analysis from a materialist perspective.

1 This paper is a revised version of Jones 1998. I would like to thank Norman Fairclough for his generous response to the earlier paper. I should stress that he bears absolutely no responsibility for the arguments presented here. I would also like to thank a number of colleagues and friends who have offered helpful criticism and/or encouragement at various stages in the writing of this paper: Martin Barker, Colin Barker, Keith Green, Karen Grainger, Chris Pawling, Sara Mills, Chik Collins, Andrew Brown. An earlier version (‘Discourse, Social Change and the Materialist Conception of History’) was also presented at the Conference of the International Society for Cultural Research and Activity Theory (ISCRAT) in Amsterdam, 2002. I am grateful to my fellow and sister co-presenters – Chik Collins, David Bakhurst, Katie Vann – for their help and comments and to those who attended for their reactions (both positive and negative).
There are a number of different approaches to CDA but, in this paper, I will concentrate on the version of CDA which has been developed over many years by the British scholar Norman Fairclough. While other scholars have taken issue with CDA aims and methodology from various angles, my exclusive concern here is the relationship between CDA as an approach to social change and historical materialism. I will begin with an outline of Fairclough’s CDA, identifying and discussing a number of issues which historical materialism has something to say about. This discussion will lead to a general critical evaluation of CDA and to some comments on the theme.

I should stress that the ideas presented below are not intended either as a definitive assessment of Fairclough’s CDA or as a definitive treatment of the theme. The paper, rather, is offered as a rather polemical invitation to further discussion and debate on the main theme and I hope that others with an interest in the theme, adherents as well as opponents of CDA, will contribute to the discussion.

**Critical Discourse Analysis: influences and commitments**

Norman Fairclough’s ‘critical’ approach to discourse is one member of a family of approaches known collectively as ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’. CDA looks upon language ‘as a form of social practice’ or as a ‘mode of action . . . as well as a mode of representation’, and the term ‘discourse’ refers to language conceptualised in this way.

CDA has an explicit political agenda. It is ‘engaged and committed’. It ‘intervenes on the side of dominated and oppressed groups and against dominating groups’ and ‘openly declares the emancipatory interests that motivate it’. This intervention revolves around the exposure of the ideological

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2 For a recent overview see Wodak and Meyer 2001.
4 Fairclough and Graham 2002 take the opposite approach to the one presented here, that is they look at some aspects of Marx’s work from a CDA perspective. I decided not to engage directly with this paper here since it merits a special response to itself. I refer to it again below.
5 Van Dijk 1993.
7 Fairclough 1989, p. 41.
8 Fairclough and Wodak 1997, p. 258.