Critical Discourse Studies

On the politics of remembering (or not)

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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

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Almost daily, the founding of museums or *lieux de mémoire*, of sites commemorating the past are reported, as is the staging of commemorative events which celebrate the end of wars, victories, the beginning of new eras or the creation of (trans)national states.[1] These events usually all have at least one particular function in common: they mark the end of a collectively perceived traumatic experience and signal that 'we' have moved on. In this way, *success stories* are discursively constructed and promoted in the public sphere, which usually serve to unify citizens and create hegemonic narratives of national identity which find their way into the media, schoolbooks, and so forth.[2] For example, in Chile

> [A] new Museum of Memory and Human Rights will open . . . next December [2009; the authors] to document the violations committed during the period of military rule, which lasted from 1973 to 1990. The Museum will be located in a 5,000-square-meter building in Santiago. On June 16, President Michelle Bachelet held a ceremony to thank the donors of the material to be exhibited. 'No one can deny, ignore, or minimize the tragedy of the violations of human rights in Chile. We are recovering our memory with the help of multiple vestiges and narrations, for everyone to read the past and reflect about the need of improving our coexistence,' said Bachelet.[3]

These events also serve to draw a line under agonistic struggles and conflicting interpretations. It seems as if only ONE past would exist, and ONE narrative which interprets it; or as quoted above, an officially acknowledged range of narratives (amongst many others which remain in the dark) are open to reflection. No further debates are deemed to be necessary.

This attitude also explains why radical challenges of hegemonic narratives sometimes entail massive debates and lead to huge conflicts in societies which have experienced traumatic events in their more recent past. One salient example was the two *Wehrmacht* exhibitions in Austria and Germany, 1995 and 2001, which both suddenly destroyed the myth of the 'innocent *Wehrmacht*' during Word War II (see Heer, Manoschek, Pollak, & Wodak 2008). The exhibitions provided ample evidence that the German *Wehrmacht* had been actively part of the deportation and extermination of Jews, Roma and homosexuals during National Socialism, not only as had been commonly stated, the 'evil men around Hitler or Hitler himself' (ibid.). As almost every family in Austria and Germany had been involved in the *Wehrmacht* (which had been a conscription army), uncles, brothers, fathers and grand fathers were suddenly asked by the younger generation what they had done during the war. After decades of silence, the traumatic pasts crept into the open, and war crimes could not be denied or tabooed any longer.

The many pasts, we claim, can never be entirely silenced; specific aspects, forgotten details, new information and new insights due to re/discovered information and historical sources trigger new debates. Moreover, current socio-political developments are influenced by the many pasts and frequently are only to be understood in their entirety if the range of narratives is taken into account – something Reinhart Koselleck has so rightly pointed to in his seminal

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book '*Vergangene Zukunft*' [*Futures Past*]: present and future are always influenced by the immediate past; indeed there is no present or future without taking the past into consideration (Koselleck 1972, 1984).[4]

Recently the elections for the European Parliament in June 2009 illustrated this claim well: the shift to the far right across almost all EU member states can be explained only very partially through global social and economic developments. The specificities have to be related to the histories and collective experiences in each member state. Thus, the seeming lack of collective memory when it comes to even recent authoritarian and illiberal political pasts demonstrates a continuing need for historic contextualisation of discourse.

In Britain, for example, the British National Party (BNP) attracted 943,598 votes (6.2% of the total), and achieved a sufficient percentage in two constituencies to elect two people as MEPs – the party leader and convicted Holocaust denier Nick Griffin for North West England (132,094; 8.0%), and veteran fascist and ex-member of the National Socialist Movement Andrew Brons for Yorkshire and the Humber (120,139; 9.8%). The election of Brons, in particular, indexes an unbroken ideological continuity between the contemporary BNP and open Nazism and Hitler-worship in the 1960s.

In Austria, on the other hand, the extreme right-wing populist party, FPÖ (the Austrian Freedom Party), attracted 12.7% and thus doubled their votes and MEPs (currently standing at two, one of them being Andreas Mölzer, the editor of the extreme right-wing newspaper *Zur Zeit*); the BZÖ (the second extreme right wing party in Austria) achieved 4.6% and thus failed the 5% benchmark.[5] The results from the last national election, in 2006, indicate that the FPÖ in combination with the BZÖ won almost 30% of the votes in some districts of Vienna due to their Islamophobic and antisemitic propaganda (Horaczek & Reiterer, 2009), drawing on century-old exclusionary, prejudicial sentiments which are easily recovered from collective memory and instrumentalised for political ends. In Hungary, the openly antisemitic and anti-Roma party *Jobbik*, which employs a paramilitary organisation dressed in black with emblems resembling the Nazi Swastika, attracted 14.77%; their salient slogan is '*Hungary First*', echoing slogans like '*Germany First*' ['*Deutschland Zuerst*'] or '*Austria First*' ['*Österreich Zuerst*'], all of which connote beliefs and ideologies about who is to be considered as a 'real Austrian, German or Hungarian', and who is not, based on traditional, latent and sometimes manifest, nativist and racist views (see Richardson & Wodak, this volume).

There are, of course, many other aspects which we have to neglect due to space restrictions. However, this special issue presents some salient examples of how the specific past impinges on the present and on future visions in a huge range of societies, in Europe and beyond.

Our collection opens with one of the more theoretically and methodologically challenging articles of the issue. Here, Michael Pickering and Emily Keightley examine the concept of trauma, arguing that its current treatment in memory studies is too expansive, loose and indiscriminate. In particular they take issue with an assumption, prevalent in memory studies, that there is a connection between individual victims' experiences, and understanding, of terrifying and traumatic events and 'how collectively tragic events are represented (or not) in communications media or in acts of public remembrance'. Contrary to such expansive accounts, they argue 'the characteristic symptom of trauma [. . .] remains the *individual* subject's inability to remember the past in a relatively coherent manner' (our emphasis). How, then, can such events be made 'story-able'? And is the concept 'trauma' of any analytic use when considering the collective suffering of a nation, a society, a religious or ethnic community? They offer a detailed examination of two interviewees recalling an experience involving painful memories – one where such memories have become narratable and one where they have not – and conclude by arguing that discourse analysts need to attend to both the sayable and the not-said in any assessment of 'the extent to which painful memories have become integrated into successfully told stories'.

The said and the unsaid are clearly also issues for mediated discourse on past injustices. With this in mind, Richardson and Wodak trace the histories of nativist jobs discourse in the UK and Austria in order to contextualise and more fully elucidate its use in contemporary political debates. Even the recent past may not be merely sanitised in political discourse but ignored completely, in a rhetorical manoeuvre that renders the already ambivalent meanings of nativist jobs discourse less knowable. Richardson and Wodak's historical deconstruction of loaded terms and slogans via the Discourse-Historical Approach combined with semantic history, illustrates that in both investigated countries nativist job rhetoric stems from antisemitic, nationalistic and fascist ideologies from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, though implemented in significantly different ways due to Colonialism, on the one hand, and National Socialism, on the other. They suggest that, in spite of the salient historical differences, nativist ideologies across the EU and Europe appear to be converging.

Antisemitism is also examined in David Kaposi's article, as constructed in Gershom Scholem's letter to Hannah Arendt, written in the wake of the Eichmann trial. Kaposi first critically discusses the rather careless ways that this most famous exchange of letters has been approached and examined in scholarly literature: as a virtual family quarrel. This depiction, he argues, rests on dangerous and dubious misconceptions of Scholem's letter which, in contrast, he characterises as 'a piece of seriously problematic moral and political literature'. Through a close analysis, unsparing in its detail and erudition, Kaposi demonstrates that Scholem portrays Arendt as a Jewish antisemite: a person who *is* Jewish but by her acts has, in effect, forsaken this position. Consequently, he argues, 'Any vaguely liberal person must address rather than evade the ultimate ground upon which Scholem's accusation and genealogy was based: once a Jew, always and exclusively a Jew'. The closing sections of his article discuss the wider political implications of the letter and the resulting relationships implicitly constructed between Judaism, the Jewish people and liberalism.

The second half of the issue examines what we could broadly label collective memory, and the (sometimes conflicting) demands for justice and reconciliation that can follow widespread social injustices and human rights abuse. The first of these articles, written by Mariana Achugar, analyses the Uruguayan military's discursive construction of the historic period of military dictatorship, and the ways that these attempt to explain and justify its progressive wresting of power from the democratically elected government. Her critical discourse analysis concentrates on lexico-grammatical choices (focusing on transitivity and evaluation of social actors) in six communiqués produced between 1973 and 1978 by the authorised voice of the military, read in conjunction with two 'organic laws of the military that stipulate its purpose for being'. Clearly the military's steady encroachment into political and state apparatuses are deviant actions. And so to justify these actions – and also its new political identity – Achugar shows how the military constructed a narrative that rationalised 'their new role as sole political actors in charge of the nation and their disregard for the Constitution and the country's laws *in the name of liberty and democracy*' (our emphasis). That is, they position themselves as a lawful state apparatus responding to an unlawful social context that is extreme and chaotic – an explanation that 'enables them to ignore the contradictions between their actions and the legitimate role and conduct mandated by democratic norms'.

The issue closes with two articles on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, arguably the most well-known Government-initiated reconciliation process. In the first, Annelies Verdoolaege examines the hearings of the Human Rights Violations Committee, focusing in particular on the discursive construction of personal and national reconciliation, and the roles that they are assumed to play in 'a peaceful and unified future for South Africa'. She discusses how this 'reconciliation discourse': was worked up collectively between commissioners and victims; that it was frequently framed and prefigured by questions and testimony; that the TRC

commissioners guided the victims' testimony and 'sometimes urged the victims to speak out in favour of reconciliation'; and that the terms reconciliation and forgiveness were repeated and emphasised by commissioners as 'the only way to build a new South African society'. These interpersonal aspects of the testimonies not only meant that victims found it difficult to ask for vengeance or retaliation, but also that the issue of compensation or redress was also sidelined. Nevertheless, Verdoolaege concludes by arguing that the TRC had a positive and a far-reaching influence on South African society, contributing to the process of nation building through helping establish a vocabulary of peace, giving a voice to previously silenced victims of apartheid, and through demonstrating a community desire to live together peacefully.

Aletta Norval would perhaps agree with these conclusions, up to a point. Taking the political demands of South African victim support group Khulumani as her focus, her article takes up Verdoolaege's acknowledgement that the TRC *started* 'what needs to be an ongoing process on many levels and in many areas of life'. While not wanting to underplay the lasting contributions of the TRC – including 'the fostering of democratic subjectivity [...] a provocation to open and democratic debate [...] as well as reflection on the character of justice, truth and the role of memory' – Norval focuses our attention back on the unfinished business of the TRC and the continuing political struggle for justice. Approaching the relation between reconciliation and redress (as articulated in the discourse of the Khulumani Support Group) from a post-structuralist point of view, Norval discusses certain 'failures of the South African government to live up to their promises and commitments on reparation for victims of gross human rights abuses under apartheid'. In acknowledging these failures, the Khulumani Support Group stress that 'Reconciliation does have a price'; that in order for all communities to 'receive equal treatment and equal access to opportunities [...] a more just economic system' is required, amongst other things, not only an opportunity for previously silenced individuals to have their voice heard – as necessary as this unquestionably was.

Notes on contributors

Ruth Wodak is Distinguished Professor of Discourse Studies at Lancaster University (and affiliated to the University of Vienna). Besides various other prizes, she was awarded the Wittgenstein Prize for Elite Researchers in 1996. Her research interests focus on (critical) discourse studies; gender studies; language and/in politics; identity politics; prejudice, racism, and discrimination; and on ethnographic methods of linguistic field work. She is member of the editorial board of a range of linguistic journals and co-editor of the journals *Discourse and Society*, *Critical Discourse Studies* and *Language and Politics*, and of the book series Discourse Approaches to Politics, Society and Culture (DAPSAC). Recent book publications include *The discourse of politics in action – politics as usual* (2009); *Ist Österreich ein 'deutsches' Land?* (with R. de Cillia, 2006); *Migration, identity and belonging* (with G. Delanty, P. Jones, 2008); and *The discursive construction of history. Remembering the Wehrmacht's war of annihilation* (with H. Heer, W. Manoschek, A. Pollak, 2008). For more information on on-going research projects and recent publications see http://www.ling.lancs.ac.uk/profiles/265.

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Notes

1. For example, Achugar (2008); Billig (1995); De Cillia and Wodak (2009); Ensink and Sauer (2003); Heer et al. (2008); Judt (2007); Martin and Wodak (2003); Pelinka (2007); Verdoolaege (2008); Wodak and Auer (2009).
2. Anthonissen and Blommaert (2006); Wodak, De Cillia, Reisigl, and Liebhart (2009).
3. 'El espacio que reivindicará memoria del Chile torturado', *La Nación* (retrieved July 10, 2009, from http://www.lanacion.cl/prontus_noticias_v2/site/artic/20090616/pags/20090616234244.html); 'Chile's Rights Museum to honor dirty war victims', *Associated Press* (retrieved July 10, 2009, from http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/31408107/)
4. See also Stråth and Wodak (2009).
5. The Austrian result was interestingly influenced by the 17.7% of a 'one-man show', of Hans Peter Martin (HPM), a populist, EU-sceptic but anti-fascist who was heavily supported by the Austrian tabloid *Neue Kronenzeitung*. It is possible that the far-right would have attracted more protest votes if HPM would not have stood for election.

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