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Resisting neoliberalism through political and social critique: The Guardian column of Polly Toynbee

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ABSTRACT

In this genre-based study I examined the discursive enactment of resistance to neoliberal ideology through the writing of Polly Toynbee in her regular commentary column in the Guardian newspaper. Using my *social genre/cognitive genre* model as the analytical framework (Bruce, 2008a), I examined a sample of 30 examples of Toynbee's column in terms of the knowledge elements of context, epistemology, writer stance, content structuring and cognitive genres (text types). I found that, Toynbee's challenge to neoliberalism is two-pronged, involving the use of key generic elements to communicate themes that broadly fall within the areas of critique of the neoliberal shrinking of the state and advocacy of policy alternatives to strengthen social democracy and help the disadvantaged. Concerned with the embedded nature of neoliberalism in the British national psyche, which is reinforced by the powerful media organs, Toynbee, through her column presents a forceful, vigorous challenge to this prevailing ideology, a challenge achieved through a complex, discourse-constructing task. That complexity is revealed by the genre analysis undertaken here.

1. Introduction

The concept of *hegemony*, as originally proposed by Gramsci (1971), suggests the capture and exercise of power by means other than direct domination, such as by the development and promotion within a society of a set of dominant ideas that override and dismiss opposing voices. Key elements of the exercise of hegemony are, therefore, discursive and semiotic. An example of discursively enacted hegemony can be seen in the set of neoliberal ideas used to frame the discussion of social, economic, educational and political issues within contemporary British society, beginning with Thatcher's Government in the 1980s and persisting into the present era (Levitas, 2005). So pervasive has been this particular hegemony that politicians from both the left and right continue to subscribe to, and enact its ideas (Bennett, 2013), while resistance has largely been left to intellectuals, trade unionists and certain journalists, such as the Guardian columnist, Polly Toynbee, whose writing is the object of the present study.

Specifically the study reported here examines the column of Polly Toynbee that appears regularly in the Guardian in which she comments on issues from a socialist perspective. Focusing particularly on her critique of neoliberalism, the study examines the

"what" and "how" of Toynbee's column. The "what" involves identifying the themes developed in her argumentation against neoliberal ideology as it manifests in public attitudes and government policies in the areas of politics, health, education, the economy and foreign affairs. The "how" is consideration of the discursive means that she employs to develop her viewpoint.

This section firstly defines the use of terms in this study: those of *text*, *discourse* and *ideology*. This is followed by a brief review of some central ideas of neoliberalism with reference to their influence in contemporary British society, and finally Toynbee's own ideological position is considered.

1.1. Terminology: Text, discourse and ideology

Text, Widdowson (2004: 69) states, is "the linguistic trace of a discourse process", or as Foucault (1984: 109) says, "what discourse is in its material reality as a thing pronounced or written". Thus, text here is taken to mean the words on the page, which may be a written document or the written transcription of a spoken monologue or dialogue, which Van Dijk (1998: 194) describes as the "accomplished or ongoing "product" of the communicative act, namely its written or auditory result as it is made socially available for recipients to interpret".

Also using a definition of Widdowson (2007: 7), discourse "is taken here to refer both to what a text producer means by a text and what a text means to the receiver". Van Dijk (1998: 194) adds that discourse involves a "specific *communicative* event … [involving]

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a number of social actors, typically in speaker/writer and hearer/reader roles in a specific setting (time, place and circumstances) and based on other context features". Discourse, therefore, refers to the social and cognitive operations that surround and give meaning to text or talk, which is created and processed within a specific context. In relation to the knowledge elements involved, Van Dijk (1997: 2) suggests that discourse has "three main dimensions (a) *language* use (b) *the communication of beliefs* (cognition), and (c) *interaction* in social situations". Enacting discourse, when either encoding a text (as a writer or speaker) or decoding a text (as a reader or listener), involves, at the very least, the application to the text of socially-constructed knowledge, personal strategies and interpretive frameworks along with a working knowledge of linguistic and/or other semiotic systems.

Hyland (2009) suggests that approaches to analysing discourse vary on a cline ranging from textual approaches, where discourses are investigated by close examination of the texts that they relate to, such as by means of genre analysis, corpus analysis or multimodal analysis, through to approaches that are less concerned with the analysis of texts than with the larger physical and social contexts within which language use takes place. In relation to these two broad approaches to the analysis of discourse, Gee (2011: 36) proposes "the term Discourse with a capital "D" to refer the analysis of social contexts" and "discourse with a little "d" to mean language in use or stretches of oral or written language in use ("texts")'. While not ignoring language use in texts, placing the central focus of discourse analysis more on the context of language use appears to be a tendency among those working in critical discourse analysis and sociolinguistics. However, Van Dijk cautions that the term discourse does not itself equate to an institutionalized mode of thinking or an ideology:

Sometimes "discourse is used in a more generic sense … for instance, when we speak of 'medical discourse", "political discourse", or indeed of "racist discourse"…. Although it is often used in that way, we do not *understand* by "discourse" a philosophy, ideology, social movement or social system, as in the phrases "the discourse of liberalism" or "the discourse of modernity", unless we actually refer to collections of talk and text. (2008: 104)

Similarly Alvesson and Karreman (2000: 1145), when considering different approaches to discourse analysis, caution against "inclinations to "jump over" language use in a social context and make broader statements about discourse at an aggregate level (Grand or mega-Discourse)", and suggest that the label of discourse, when used at this level may be more usefully substituted by a term such as *ideology*. Therefore, following their approach and that of Van Dijk (2008), when referring to the set of ideas that characterize neoliberalism, the term ideology will be used here rather than discourse. Ideology here refers to a set of related, value-laden ideas used by a certain group to achieve certain political and social purposes. This largely accords with the definition of Thompson (1990: 73) who defines ideology as "the ways in which meaning is mobilized in the service of dominant individuals or groups" although it must be emphasised that ideology is discursively enacted through text and talk.

In examining any discursive enactment of ideology through text, the challenge that faces the analyst is to ensure that his/her research is based on an adequate and comprehensive operationalization of all of the aspects of the particular discursive and textual knowledge and social practices involved as Wess and Wodak (2003: 7) state "the complex interrelations between discourse and society cannot be analysed adequately unless linguistic and sociological approaches are combined". For example, in analysing the elements of discourse that relate to the artefact of a written text, as undertaken in this study, the operationalization needs to acknowledge that the text writer and reader draw upon personalized knowledge and strategies that may potentially include: content knowledge related to the larger societal context and domain of the text; knowledge of the immediate, communicative context including the social or interactional setting (such as the positioning of a writer in relation to his/her audience); abstract procedural or organizational knowledge (often relating to more general rhetorical purpose) and systemic linguistic knowledge. In the approach employed here, this operationalization is attempted by using a genre-based approach, specifically the social genre/cognitive genre model that I have previously proposed (Bruce, 2008a). The details of this model are explained when introducing the methodology of the study. A genre-based approach is considered appropriate for this study since the sample of 30 texts all perform the same overall function of commentary, they are created under the same constraints and appear within the same publication.

1.2. Neoliberal ideology

In examining the use of the term neoliberalism in a wide range of scholarly and research articles, Boas and Gans-Morse (2009) note three broad tendencies in its definition, each of which focuses in some way on the centrality of the free market proposed by economic theorists such as Hayek (1978) and Friedman and Friedman (1962). The core idea of neoliberalism is the economic freedom and autonomy of the individual. According to Harvey (2005: 25), the neoliberal view is that "individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade", and that "human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade" (2005: 2). In order to advance the economic freedom of individuals, neoliberalism tends to oppose forms of social solidarity that constrain its exercise, such as trade unions, professional associations, social housing and socialized medicine, in fact any type of institution or regulation seen as somehow impinging on the right individuals to exercise their individual economic freedom and autonomy.

Because social solidarity can involve forms of centralized planning and government regulation, these too can be seen as opposing individual freedom, therefore, small government and minimal regulation and planning are seen as essential to the existence of this type of individual freedom. As Polanyi (1957: 256) states, "planning and control are … attacked as a denial of freedom". In Britain, an example of a significant reduction in government control was the so-called *big bang* involving the deregulation of financial markets in 1986. Another significant reduction in government control of the financial area was the deregulation of the banking sector by the incoming Labour government in 1997.

A consequence of the neoliberal, economic view of individual freedom, as Harvey (2005: 33) notes, is "the financialization of everything … a deepened hold of finance overall on other areas of the economy, as well as over the state apparatus". Financialization is defined by Epstein (2005: 3) as "the increasing role of financial motives, financial markets, financial actors and financial institutions in the operation of the domestic and international economies". Examples of financialization include the sale of social housing, the privatization of socialized medicine and the performance of regulatory functions by private companies on behalf of the state. As Clarke (2004: 35) expresses it: "the economic calculus of neo-liberalism expels that which cannot be counted – but it seeks to bring more and more of human activity within the economic calculus. Most things – even those previously decommodified or uncommodified-can be brought to market".

While it is usual to see neoliberalism largely as an imposed, top-down political ideology centred on issues relating economic control and the role of markets, the social geographer Barnett