Critical discourse analysis of the 'war on terror' – Blairian discourse and philosophical framework

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Abstract: Suggestive of a much larger study, the present paper aims at briefly displaying a method of discourse analysis, at suggesting types of relationships between frameworks of analysis and the object of analysis to already known and introduced types of discourse, and at offering a sample of discourse analysis meant to call for new ways of interaction (between discourse and context), for new associations of concepts, contexts, approaches and frameworks of analysis. The stated objective of this endeavour is that of elaborating discursive methods that would have practical application in attempts to come up with solutions to otherwise challenging or crisis-triggering situations, thus transforming the study of discourse into a more useful tool of global change.

Key-words: CDA (Critical Discourse Analysis), 'War on Terror', Social Change, Framework

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA in what follows), as a version of textually oriented discourse analysis (TODA), comes naturally as one of the first choices in what concerns discourse analysis, especially socially or politically oriented discourse analysis. At a first contact with CDA, one realizes that the method one is presented with comes with a series of tools that submit discourse analysis to fields of interest other than strictly linguistically oriented and the sorts of relationships it establishes at the level of discourse analysis are meant to open up broader perspectives in the process of working for the understanding of the use of language, of the purpose of the diverse choices in the use of language. As a means of analysing discourse, critical discourse analysis has proved itself more than useful on a number of instances, with types of discourse for which no framework seemed to be the appropriate one (with social discourse, for instance, like sexist discourse, racist discourse, ethnic discourse, with medical discourse, management discourse, etc.). With political discourse as well, CDA proves to be the right framework within which analysis can produce answers.

Following the line established by sociolinguistics, CDA takes the social element to be one of the central factors of discourse analysis – in that the attitude, beliefs, mental representations, ideologies, cultural and historical background, societal systems, education (as part of a societal system), all these are to be found at the foundations of the (re)production of any discourse.

As far as the discourse of the 'war on terror' is concerned, we not only find it helpful, but necessary to resort to CDA in an attempt to decipher the multiple aspects the respective type of discourse involves and to better understand the social, political and cultural implications of a change-triggering and controversial type of discourse that has attracted the attention of numerous discourse analysts who have embarked upon extensive studies with respect to this type of discourse. Our aim is to refer to some of these studies by briefly dwelling upon an excerpt of one of Tony Blair's speeches related to the 'war on terror' within some philosophical guidelines brought forth in this paper by two major philosophers: Jürgen Habermas and Jacques Derrida. Our choice of philosophical perspective is only partly subjective. A major reason behind this choice is provided by the philosophers themselves who chose to elaborate upon the subject, thus creating a more than suitable frame for discussion. Also, it is fair to say that one other aspect that lead to the choice of this particular type of research analysis was, in fact, linked to the choice of the political figure in question. So, one aspect that was considered appealing, was the rhetorical style of Tony Blair which seemed to bring something new and different in the process of discourse production and delivery on the political scene. However, this research is not about the rhetorical style of Tony Blair1, but it is worth mentioning that his rhetorical style was also one of

the contributors to his transformation into one of the major political figures on the political world scene. Blair displayed a rhetoric that was not what we would call a 'constant' rhetoric, but rather one that varied according to the situations in which he found himself and the circumstances in which he had to hold a certain speech (Fairclough, 2000). Furthermore, his strong character and personality is not only imprinted in his language, but also in his manner of behaviour:

Blair's rhetorical style is not purely a matter of language. It is a matter of his total bodily performance, of which what he says is just a part. It is a matter of how he sounds, how he looks, the shifting expressions on his face, the way he moves his head and other parts of his body. While it is highly important to try to capture this total bodily performance, it is very elusive, difficult to describe, and particularly difficult to describe in print. (Fairclough, 2000: 97)

What could be reasoned out is that, although politicians' speeches are usually the result of several minds combined in their ideas to construct a type of discourse that appeals to the public, we are sometimes confronted with characters\(^2\) who show extremely personal styles. When speaking in public as a PM, Blair seemed deeply convinced of what he was saying, his strong assertions were accompanied by persuasive power, and even passion. His was a style that did sell, at the beginning of his political career, and had an impact in terms of political attitude. His shifting from 'softness' to 'toughness', from a liberal attitude to an authoritative style, has been the subject of several debates and analyses and it is fair to say that the climax of this reeling between attitudes came along with the events of September 11 and the position adopted towards them and towards America's decision to declare 'war against terrorism'. Below, there is an excerpt from one of his speeches following the attacks:

When we act to bring to account those that committed the atrocities of September 11, we do so, not out of bloodlust. We do so because it is just. We do not act against Islam. The true followers of Islam are our brothers and sisters in this struggle. Bin Laden is no more obedient to the proper teaching of the Koran than those Crusaders of the 12\(^{th}\) century who pillaged and murdered, represented the teaching of the Gospel.

[…]

So I believe this is a fight from freedom. And I want to make it a fight for justice too. Justice not only to punish the guilty. But justice to bring those same values of democracy and freedom to people round the world.

And I mean: freedom, not only in the narrow sense of personal liberty but in the broader sense of each individual having the economic and social freedom to develop their potential to the full. That is what community means, founded on the equal worth of all. The starving, the wretched, the dispossessed, the ignorant, those living in want and squalor form the deserts of Northern Africa to the slums of Gaza, to the mountain ranges of Afghanistan: they too are our cause.

This is a moment to seize. The Kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us. […] (Speech on terrorism, October 2, 2001)

Blair unfolds the pursuit of some actions that seem to be part of a larger plan to bring freedom to the whole world, if possible. As daring and noble a task as it may sound, Blair announces it as if it were the normal course of events to be dealt with by the Prime Minister of Great Britain. The fact that he feels the need to specify that the reason to go after those responsible for the attacks of September 11 is not driven by 'bloodlust' but by a spirit of justice, is in a way worrying. If the word was chosen – like so many others from the discourse of the 'war on terror' – out of a need to draw a connection in people's minds between the atrocities and the measures that now need to be taken and that have to come up, in a way, to the same standards as those of the acts of the terrorists as an only solution to counteract them equally, then we may include it in what will later be referred to as the legitimizing vocabulary of the 'war on terror'. It is worrying because it is not expected from a


And the word is not randomly chosen, so as to draw a parallel between the part played by politicians when in power, just like characters in a play.
political leader of the 21st century to still find it necessary to specify that the reasons behind martial measures do not rest on human feelings set off on the spur of the moment (such as 'revenge', 'hatred', 'intolerance', or 'bloodlust'), but on the spirit of justice (which would normally be assumed by anyone in the actual circumstances). The same observation is valid with the affirmation of not having the intention to 'act against Islam', in an age and civilization that proud themselves with the spirit of tolerance. Like Habermas said, when interviewed by Giovanna Borradori shortly after the September 11 attacks, and when asked how he sees the relationship between his concept of 'universalism' and tolerance, and, whether or not, it would be better to replace the rather 'paternalistic' term (in Borradori's opinion) 'tolerance' with the concept of 'hospitality' or 'friendship', today 'we encounter this paradox in the concept of 'militant democracy': no freedom for the enemies of freedom.' And he adds: 'Within a democratic community whose citizens reciprocally grant one another equal rights, no room is left for an authority allowed to one-sidedly determine the boundaries of what is to be tolerated. On the basis of the citizens' equal rights and reciprocal respect for each other, nobody possesses the privilege of setting the boundaries of tolerance from the viewpoint of their own preferences and value-orientations.' (Habermas 2003: 41) The fact that Blair believes it to be 'a fight for freedom' and wants 'to make it a fight for justice too', puts him in that position of an authority that gets to call what is to be tolerated and what is not. It is suitable now to make a reference to the shift from 'soft power' to 'hard power' that Fairclough was referring to in his study on Language and Globalization, which he describes as a 'gradual shift' in US military and security strategy and then in that of the UK, and 'as a change in the 'nexus' of strategies and discourses which globalism is a part of, and in that sense a further inflection in the trajectory of globalism itself.' (Fairclough 2006: 141). This shift from 'soft' power to 'hard' power is reflected in decision making but also in discourse. In this case, examples like the one above, along with others (terms like 'forces of evil', 'evil doers', 'axis of evil', 'the acts of the fanatics', 'the fight between good and evil', etc., are part of a class of terms and concepts used in the strategy to legitimize and account for political decisions and actions) are part of a 'hard' discourse adopted by the two political leaders directly involved in what was going to develop into the 'war on terror', American President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, in an attempt to appeal to universal values in order to construct a 'morally' legitimizing discourse in 'universalistic' terms that would justify their actions.

For Habermas, discourses inspired by the idea that 'the reflexive overstepping of the boundaries of tolerance within a 'militant democracy' is due to the universalistic nature of the legal and moral foundation of a liberal order' distinguish themselves by two essential features: on the one hand, 'the universalistic discourses of law and morality can be abused as a particularly insidious form of legitimation since particular interests can hide behind the glimmering façade of reasonable universality', and, on the other hand, 'the peculiar self-reference that makes it the vehicle for self-correcting learning processes.' (Habermas 2003: 42). Derrida, on the other hand, in the same book by Borradori, identifies tolerance, first of all, as 'a form of charity', and he applies that to the relationship adopted in this case towards Muslims and Islam, arguing that tolerance is 'always on the side of the 'reason of the strongest', where 'might is right'; it is a supplementary mark of sovereignty, the good face of sovereignty, which says to the other from its elevated position, I am letting you be, you are not insufferable, I am leaving you a place in my home, but do not forget that this is my home...' (Derrida 2003: 127). Though he sees the recurrent declaration of 'not fighting against Islam' as necessary and preferable to the alternative, he does not wholly agree with the word 'tolerance' and the discourse around it, precisely because of this aspect of superiority that it implies:

In the United States, everything is done so as not to identify the enemy as the religious foreigner, the Muslim (and this clearly better than the alternative, no matter the motivations). It is said over and over: 'We are not fighting Islam; the three monotheistic religions have always taught tolerance.' We know, of course, that this is largely inaccurate, but little matter, it's certainly better than the contrary. These official declarations of tolerance also obey a strategy: there are many, indeed more and more, Muslims in America and in Europe; it is thus necessary to reassure them, to gain assurance of their support, to dissociate them from 'terrorism', to divide the enemy camp. Fair enough, that's part of fighting the good fight. Though I clearly prefer shows of tolerance to

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shows of intolerance, I nonetheless have certain reservations about the word 'tolerance' and the discourse it organizes. It is a discourse with religious roots; it is most often used on the side of those with power, always as a kind of condescending concession . . . (Derrida 2003: 127)

The last sentences of Blair's aforementioned speech comes also as an instance of 'hard' power in discourse, there is an authoritarian attitude with regard to what has to be done: 'This is a moment to seize. The Kaleidoscope has been shaken. The pieces are in flux. Soon they will settle again. Before they do, let us re-order this world around us.' At the same time, it is fair to say that these lines are part of a metaphor whose use and meaning is rather loose and abstract. While 'This is a moment to seize' denotes his strong assertion of intentions and definitely a particular instance of 'hard power' implied by the use and the connotations of the verb 'to seize' (not allowing anything else to happen other than that), his choice for the word 'Kaleidoscope' is somehow difficult to pinpoint. Whether he chose it as a reference to the whole world ('the whole world has been shaken'), and this is probably the likeliest case, or as a reference to the way light is reflected on the world (if we think of what the kaleidoscope really represents), we must, in any case, observe the authority with which he announces the state in which the world is now and what will happen to it in the future, what 'they' will undertake to do: 'let us re-order this world around us'. Notice also the use of 'will' in 'they will settle again' as denoting more of a volition from his part, than a foreknowledge of what will actually happen.

This short instance of critical analysis on a fragment of Blarian discourse is meant to offer a glimpse of the way in which CDA can successfully unveil a number of discursive strategies meant to legitimize political actions on high levels of involvement. A study on Blarian discourse, and, by extension, on politically-involved social changes-triggering discourse, has the role to submit to analysis not merely words, phrases, syntax and semantics, but social, political and cultural changes and world development as a result of 'words'. Our position is, nevertheless, that of author/analyst trying to search for answers with the sole weapons of a philologist: words. The reason it is worth embarking upon a critical analysis of Blair's discourse of the 'war on terror' is because of the world-wide controversy and divided public opinion on the September 11 attacks and the whole range of events they gave birth to on the international social and political scene, and because Blair's evolution on the political scene depended a lot on the decisions and actions he took in relation to those events.

In constructing the object of research, theoretical, methodological and analytical resources have to be taken into account. The theoretical background is offered by the public discourse and dialogue that the events of September 11 gave birth to, and their relation to the evolution of democratic values in society. It is what inspired an object of research in terms of concepts of discourse and questions related to the way in which discourse contributes to the interaction between the speaker and the listeners/readers (in our case). As for the analytical framework, the study draws upon notions of discourse borrowed from Foucault and Habermas and developed within CDA by Fairclough (1989, 1992, 1997), Wodak (2000, 2001), van Dijk (1997), Howarth and Stavrakakis (2000), Barker and Galasiński (2001), etc. Fairclough's CDA perspective represents, in fact, a starting point in giving voice to the research's questions, as a constant concern with the idea of social explanation and Fairclough's critical methodology is considered, within the lines of 'social change', suitable and helpful in creating the object of research. What we try to suggest is a model of discourse analysis in terms of CDA that explains the concern with social aspects as triggers for or effects of the adoption and assumption of a certain type of public discourse.

The role of the philosophical perspective and framework is meant to bring forth the importance of context in critical discourse analysis. Since, only if all factors representing context are taken into consideration when processing the information presented in speech, can one be able to get an objective grasp of the essence of that discourse. That is why the relevance of discourse resides really in the relevance of the context. Just as we may speak of 'local' and 'global' structures of discourse, we may speak of 'local' and 'global' structures of context (van Dijk: 1996). By discussing context, the philosophers we chose to use as landmarks in establishing a framework for discussion manage to create a broad, open space of interpretation which, even though potentially more confusing, is nevertheless rewarding in the number of possible interpretations and understandings it opens up.

Just as we can speak of a dialectical relationship between discourse and context, we may try to trace, develop and promote dialectical relationships between types of discourse and frameworks of analysis (as types of context); as these frameworks enclose not only the context but the multiple perspectives, the actors, the analysts and the recipients of the type of discourse under analysis, and this can particularly help and pinpoint to various understandings of social, political and cultural changes,
to possibilities of research, to creative and imaginative studies, and particularly, and more importantly, to developing solutions to crisis situations.

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