Discourse analysis, particularly in its Foucauldian form, has become increasingly influential within organizational analysis in recent years as increasing disillusionment with mainstream theories and methodologies has encouraged a growing acceptance of constructivist epistemology. This ‘turn towards’ discourse analysis has been further reinforced by wider, contextual developments, such as the deepening impact of post-modern styles of thinking and their rediscovery of the crucial symbolic processes and practices through which ‘organization’ is constituted as a recognizable and legitimate cultural form. In a number of substantive research domains—such as organizational subjectivities and identities, organizational representation and communication, and organizational surveillance and control—Foucauldian discourse analysis has become an influential mode of theoretical interpretation and empirical investigation.

My purpose is to identify and evaluate what I see as the major limitations of Foucauldian discourse analysis as applied to the study of organizational practices and forms. I intend to suggest that there are inherent ontological, epistemological and theoretical weaknesses exhibited by the former and that these need to be ‘repaired’ by drawing on a number of core ideas from critical realism.

Limitations of Foucauldian Discourse Analysis

I intend to structure my critique of Foucauldian discourse analysis around five interrelated themes: constructivism, nominalism, determinism, localism and reductionism. Each of these, in my view, identifies major limitations and weaknesses of the Foucauldian approach to analysing organizational discourse. Subsequently, I will move on to outline how aspects of critical realism might be drawn on to provide a more incisive analysis of organizational discourse in comparison to that provided by Foucauldian analysis.

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1. Constructivism  Foucauldian discourse analysis, particularly as it has been practised in organizational analysis, is grounded in a radical ontological constructivism in which reality is literally ‘talked and texted’ into existence. It asserts that there is nothing outside discourse but more discourse; all reality, natural and social alike, is discursively contingent and fabricated. As a result, it tends to idealize meaning and to marginalize the non-semantic aspects of economic and political reality in that it is ontologically insensitive to material structuring and its constraining influence on social action. Discourses are assumed to take on an ‘object-constituting’ character in that they systematically determine the objects of which they speak and cannot be penetrated by any ‘discourse-independent’ realities of a social or natural kind. As Gergen puts it, radical constructivism asserts ‘whatever is, simply is’ (Gergen, 1994: 72). The relationship between discourses and that which they represent is entirely arbitrary—even, indeed particularly, in relation to the physical, biological and social properties which they denote as ‘significant’ entities that have to be recognized and acted upon and through in some ways rather than others.

2. Nominalism  Given the commitment to radical epistemological constructivism/relativism previously outlined, then Foucauldian discourse analysis must restrict itself to ‘nominalist’ forms of conceptualization and explanation. As constituent components of various discursive formations, explanatory concepts, models and theories are nothing more and nothing less than convenient ‘names’ or ‘fictions’ that represent the world in particular ways rather than others. These concepts exist and take on meaning only insofar as they are created and sustained through discourse (i.e. through ‘talk’ and ‘text’). Any form of interpretation or explanation is necessarily relative to and constrained by the discursive framework and context in which it originates and becomes reproduced as ‘knowledge’. Explanation is always framed and formed in the confluence of encounters and chances—even when it assumes some sort of temporary stabilization and formalization as an identifiable discursive formation with its own rules, practices and powers (e.g. the medicalization of madness from the late 18th/early 19th centuries onwards).

3. Determinism  Foucauldian analysis also downplays the role and significance of agency in the construction, reproduction and transformation of discursive formations. The intentions and actions of agents are subordinated to the conception of discourse as consisting of determinate sets of rules and practices which account for the functioning and transformation of bodies of knowledge and the disciplinary technologies they support. The functioning of discourses is treated as largely autonomous and independent of human agency. As Tim Newton has recently argued:
the problem is that Foucauldians have difficulty in explaining active agential subjects who manoeuvre and play with discourse and practice in the context of power relations which are often asymmetrical in character. Unless one attends to such ‘play’ and to the power asymmetries that often exist between managers and other workers, it will remain difficult to explain why excellence discourse may have more appeal to the former group than the latter. At the same time, the language adopted by the Foucauldians often encourages an image of passivity. (Newton, 1998: 428)

This ‘backdoor determinism’ can be explained in relation to the assumption that the production and reproduction of discursive formations has a logic of its own independent of the social action through which it is made possible. By denying any ontological or analytical differentiation between agency and structure, Foucauldian discourse analysis ends up with an explanatory theory that is unable to distinguish between what Denis Smith (1991) once called ‘open doors’ and ‘brick walls’ or to account for the complex points of intersection between agency and structure; they disappear from view to be replaced by a form of discursive determinism which ‘flattens’ and simplifies our social reality in such a manner that it is denuded of scale, continuity and durability.

4. Localism  Power lies at the core of Foucauldian discourse analysis—but in such a way that it reflects a focus on ‘localized’ disciplinary processes and relations to the virtual exclusion of institutionalized power. Foucauldians are strongly committed to an ‘ascending’ rather than ‘descending’ conception of power in which ‘discourses are treated as tactical elements or blocks operating in a field of force relations; different and contradictory discourses can, and do, exist within the same disciplinary strategy’ (Ranson, 1997). Dominant or ‘official’ discourses are often appropriated and reversed by marginalized social groups in such a way that they challenge the established ‘power/knowledge’ interests that the former legitimate (e.g. the way in which the discourse of homosexuality began to speak on its own behalf from the late 19th century onwards in such a way that the legitimacy of ‘gay’ identities and rights came to be acknowledged—thus homosexuals could achieve a tactical advantage through the re-appropriation of the same concepts and theories mobilized by the established medicosexual regime that defined homosexuality as a biological and social pathology in the first place). But this conception of purely ascending power concedes far too much to the structurally dominant forms of power that constructed homosexuality as a socially deviant/pathological category in the first place. Thus, Foucauldian discourse analysis is largely restricted to a tactical and localized view of power, as constituted and expressed through situationally specific ‘negotiated orders’, which seriously underestimates the structural reality of more permanent and hierarchical power relations. It finds it very difficult, if not impossible, to deal with institutionalized stabilities and continuities in power relations because it cannot get at the higher levels of social
organization in which micro-level processes and practices are embedded. As Layder expresses this view: ‘although disciplinary power targets the body, it does so under the auspices of a structured organizational context and this begs the question of how, and to what extent, it is related to other aspects of social organisation’ (Layder, 1997: 158).

5. Reductionism Foucauldian discourse analysis exhibits a marked tendency to reduce ideologies, and the study of ideologies, to discourse and discourse analysis respectively (van Dijk, 1998). It tends to marginalize the importance of the political and cultural processes through which dominant ideologies are constituted, expressed and reproduced by social practices other than those of ‘talk’ and ‘text’ (e.g. racist and sexist ideologies communicated and legitimated through non-discursive forms of discrimination such as rituals of physical and spatial exclusion practised in both caste-based and class-based societies). Although discourse is often crucial to the expression and reproduction of ideologies, it is neither a necessary nor sufficient ‘medium’ or ‘mechanism’ of ideological reproduction (van Dijk, 1998). Ideological socialization takes place primarily through discourse, but it cannot be isolated from the wider socio-political and historical context in which it is located and takes on generalized relevance as an institutionalized source of social meaning and control. Weber’s concept of domination or Gramsci’s notion of hegemony cannot be reduced to tactical manoeuvres within localized networks of linguistic and material practices which carry little or no wider ideological weight without a highly significant loss of explanatory potential and political significance.

If this assessment has some validity, then the radical social constructivism on which Foucauldian discourse analysis rests can be seen to deny itself the very opportunity and resources to understand and explain the generative properties that make social practices and forms—such as discursive formations—what they are and equip them to do what they do. This is a very complex and difficult task to achieve, but there is absolutely no chance whatsoever of bringing it off if discourse analysis remains wedded to an ontology in which discourse is treated as nothing more than a social construction and an epistemology that cannot recognize, much less incorporate, its non-discursive conditions and qualities.

Realist Discourse Analysis

This leads me to the second part of my ‘discourse’. What would a realist approach to the analysis of organizational discourse look like and how would it improve upon Foucauldian discourse analysis?

There are a number of general points which need to be made in relation to these two questions. First, critical realism starts from an ontology which identifies ‘structures’ and the mechanisms through which they are generated as being fundamental to the constitution of our natural and social reality. This is in direct contrast to a constructivist ontology which
tends to reduce everything to flows and the constant state of movement and flux which they generate and reproduce (Harvey, 1998). Second, critical realism ‘raises the explanatory stakes on structure’ in that it argues that ‘by reducing everything to flows, we refuse to contemplate the construction of those “permanences” that can give order to social being and direction to becoming’ (Harvey, 1998: 347). In this respect, it maintains that Foucauldian discourse analysis cannot begin to understand, much less explain, how our material and social constructions, such as discourses, are constrained and facilitated by the relatively stable and intransigent properties of the very materials and agents through which they are constituted. From a realist perspective, discourses are the objective effects and ontological referents of relatively stable material resources and durable social relations which bring them into existence, through the medium of agency, as constituent features of social reality. Third, realism asserts that the relationship between a discourse and that which it represents is not arbitrary in relation to, and independent of, its anchoring in an extant set of material and social conditions. The discourses which assemble, represent and perform or enact institutional structures—such as markets, classes and organizations—locate and constrain actors within a matrix of social relations and linguistic rules denoting who they are and what they can do (e.g. landlords and tenants in the housing market). Of course, actors will strive to, and succeed in, re-interpreting and re-negotiating these discourses in such a way that they become subject to all sorts of tactical and strategic re-appropriations, reversals and re-directions. But critical realism insists that this occurs within a pre-existing structure of material, social and discursive relations which simply cannot be ignored or re-defined out of existence (as social constructions open to infinite reconstruction) because it will significantly constrain and shape the trajectories and outcomes of such a rebuilding process.

Foucauldian discourse analysis stresses the representational role of discourse, while realism emphasizes its performative aspects. For exponents of the latter, it is what a discourse does, rather than what it represents and how it represents it, which is the central explanatory issue. In this way, critical realism shifts the direction of discourse analysis away from a single-stranded focus on the symbolic representation and communication of ‘constructed worlds’ towards a much broader concern within the political economy of discursive formation and its long-term institutional effects.

Consequently, from a realist perspective discourses become generative mechanisms or structures which can only be known through their contingent effects within particular socio-historical contexts. How discourses ‘work’ can only be known by ‘going beneath their surface (observable) appearances and delving into their inner (hidden) workings (Pawson and Tilley, 1997: 65). Thus, it is the performative potential of a
discourse—that is, its inherent capacity to re-shape human agency and the structural patterns that it generates, reproduces and elaborates—as mediated by and through the contextually specific contingencies within which it operates, which is fundamental to a realist analysis of organizational discourse. Discourses—such as the quantitatively based discourses of financial audit, quality control and risk management—are now seen as the generative mechanisms through which new regulatory regimes ‘carried’ out by rising expert groups—such as accountants, engineers and scientists—become established and legitimated in modern societies. What they represent is less important than what they do in facilitating a structural re-ordering of pre-existing institutional structures in favour of social groups who benefit from the upward mobility which such innovative regulatory regimes facilitate—if it is taken advantage of by social actors in the appropriate manner.

Conclusion

I wish to conclude with a quote from David Harvey’s recent book *Justice, Nature and the Geography of Difference* (1998: 85) in which he argues that the current fixation with language and discourse can lead to a situation in which a

... materialist understanding of the past is all too often sacrificed on the altar of an idealized reading of discourse and its influence. What then gets lost is the centrality of the questions: How are texts and interpretations used within the interactions of institutions? How do they generate and participate in the relations of power and ordering? ... serious losses of understanding arise when it [that is, language/discourse] occupies a hegemonic and determinate place.

Harvey’s questions, I suggest, can only be answered by moving beyond a Foucauldian analysis of organizational discourse in order to embrace the, very different, ontological and epistemological precepts on which critical realism is based. Once this move is achieved, we can begin to develop a materialist understanding of the development and performance of discursive formations within the institutionalized orderings of power and control of which they are a constituent and vital element.

References

