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Book Review:
The Discourse of Politics in Action. Politics as Usual by Ruth Wodak.
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The Discourse of Politics in Action. Politics as Usual is yet another thought provoking and elegant book by Ruth Wodak, a famous representative of critical discourse analysis (CDA). Being a prolific researcher and author, Ruth Wodak has been addressing a wide variety of topics such as discursive (re)production of racial discrimination, xenophobia and anti-Semitism, communication aspects of gender relations, the construction of organization and policies through discourse, the discursive representations of migration and migrants, nationalist discourse and rhetoric, populist politics – to name a few. This time her research focuses on a finely formulated problem of the discrepancy between public perceptions and actual practices of everyday politics in contemporary western democracies. The structural, temporal, cognitive and other limitations of doing politics by politicians as real people are situated within the wider context of discussions on democratic deficit.

The book *The Discourse of Politics in Action. Politics as Usual* consists of six chapters, the content is evenly divided between the discussion of theoretical and methodological issues and three case studies of everyday life of politicians – both real and fictional ones.

In the first chapter "Doing Politics" Ruth Wodak lays the theoretical grounds of the book by introducing the problem of performative character of doing politics as well as fictionalization of politics in the media. Doing politics is presented through a six-dimensional model that includes 1) staging or performing politics on the "front stage", 2) everyday life of politicians (the "backstage"); 3) the impact of the personality of individual politicians of their performance; 4) the mass production of politics and politicians (e.g. advisers, spin etc.); 5) recontextualization of everyday politics in media fiction; 6) participation in politics (power, gatekeeping, legitimacy etc.) (p. 24). The attention of the author is centered on the dimensions 2, 4 and 5, in example she poses the question about the impact of the everyday practices of politicians (affected by the processes of professionalization of politics) as well as the fictionalization of politics in media on the democratic process. Wodak masterfully integrates several theoretical approaches, including Pierre Bourdieu's, in order to set the key categories for the analysis such as performance, community of practice and identity. In a way, this chapter makes a good illustration of the thesis that critical discourse analysis is a problem oriented approach: a social problem that is discursively constructed or maintained is chosen as a focal point of the research project, while the theories and categories of analysis are selected freely, integrated and adjusted to the problem (cf. Fairclough 2000).

In chapter two "The (Ir)rationality of Politics" Wodak suggests to view politics through the lens of Discourse-Historical Approach in CDA. Some aspects of the methodological framework of the approach are presented (p. 41) in the form already known from earlier Wodak's work (cf. Reisigl and Wodak 2001: 38). The link between the field of (political) action, discursive or communicative genre and discourse topics is emphasized. This framework is enriched by the figure (p. 44) presenting the relations between discursive strategies (i.e. nomination, predication, perspectivisation, argumentation and mitigation) and *topoi* on the one hand, and social and political context on the other. Moreover, Wodak suggests to include presuppositions as a category of analysis following the insights from an Erving Goffman's article (1983). Last but not least she calls for the use of ethnographic methods in discourse analytical research, since only extensive field work allows researcher entering the practices of the "backstage". In this chapter the presentation of methodology is not an end in itself, the author formulates her research problem more precisely and accentuates power and knowledge management as a crucial aspect of doing politics.

Chapters three and four are the case studies of the workings of the European Union institutions. In chapter three the author focuses on the construction of "European identities". She briefly presents the history of the emergence of the European Parliament (EP), including references to myth and identity narratives that were systematically invoked in the process, and draws a scheme of national composition of the EP as well as the role of EP in European decision making processes (pp. 68-69). In this very chapter she refers to pioneering studies of the French political anthropologist Marc Abélès (1992), who conducted research in European institutions, and made a documentary entitled *La tribu exotique* (i.e. the exotic tribe) about European parliamentarians. With the help of the ethnographic work of others as well as on the basis of her own field research Ruth Wodak reconstructs the EP as a physical and material space with its own temporal and organizational routines and limitations. Thus she de-mystifies it and shows it as a concrete setting for "doing politics". She then presents the findings concerning the identities of the Members of European Parliament (MEPs) based on her research (28 interviews with 14 MEPs). She focuses on their articulations of the role they assign to themselves, their views of Europe writ large and the EP as an institution working alongside national parliaments as well as their narratives of being European, i.e. the meanings attached by the MEPs to Europeanness. All these aspects of their identity are analyzed by discourse analytical tools. Wodak comes to the conclusion that MEPs represent a rather wide variety of identities, which is functional to the way the EP works. This variation in identities is viewed as an outcome of the multiplicity of communities of practice the MEPs are involved in. Being a convincing picture of the formation of identities of politicians in the processes of multiple communicative acts designed for and competed within different audiences, this chapter also raises two further questions. Both of them are methodological. First, can binding conclusions be drawn on the basis interviews with a relatively little number of MEPs? Second, how can the effects of the reflexivity of the research subjects be dealt with, i.e. how can the researcher actually link the everyday practices of doing politics of MEPs with their statements on their identity.

To an extent chapter four entitled "One Day in the Life of an MEP" addresses the latter question by presenting an ethnographic study of everyday life of a politician. At the same time, it has to be noted that the term "ethnography" is used somewhat freely by Ruth Wodak in order to refer to short (several weeks long) and rather ordered (e.g. by interviews schedules) stays in the field; some social anthropologists

insist that only longer stays in the field can be termed ethnography proper, since only longer stays allow eliciting hidden or unexpected aspects and various "backstages" of the practices studied (cf. Hann 2000). In this chapter Wodak concentrates on the ways in which an Austrian MEP attempts to reconcile the pressures stemming from the need to follow up on many issues, time limitations and mobility requirements, on the one hand, with the necessity to professionally and effectively perform on the front stage, on the other. She emphases the structural limitations put on an MEPs work (such a loads of paper to be processed) and gives a detailed analysis of an MEP and his assistant discursive strategies (e.g. strategies of positive self- and negative other-presentation, *topoi*, interruptions, comments, professional vocabulary and the like). By following a MEP from morning till evening through a briefing with an assistant, committee meetings, lunch and a lecture, Ruth Wodak aims at depoliticizing politics, i.e. she tries to demonstrate the complexity of the political environment and the numerous challenges politicians have to deal with both at front stage and backstage of doing politics. At the same time in some of the concluding remarks of the chapter the author calls for the legitimization and acceptance of professional/bureaucratic politics on the grounds of 1) their complexity and 2) similarity to other organizational practices such as corporate practices (pp. 154-155). On the one hand, this call is understandable if it has been intended as a remedy to overcome the dissatisfaction with political sphere that negatively influences participation in contemporary democracies and is an impediment to democratic politics. On the other hand, however, this call backgrounds numerous negative practices that constitute the backstage of doing politics at both national and European level. Moreover, it underestimates the power dimension of the political field which distinguishes it quite significantly from economic field or field of cultural production. Therefore, it appears that these disclaimers need to have been made more explicitly by the author to her call for the legitimation of politics on the basis of their complexity and "business as usual" quality.

In the fifth chapter the author turns from real to fictional politics and offers a detailed analysis of the discursive and narrative strategies used in the political drama series *The West Wing*, in which White House staff and the President of the United States himself are the core characters. In this chapter Wodak pays particular attention to the fact that "boundaries between politics and specific aspects of popular culture are blurred and transcended" (p. 157). She chooses the TV series since it is not focused on crises and catastrophes solely, but allows viewers to follow everyday life of fictional politicians. Wodak aims at comparing the everyday routines she has traced during her research in EP with the fictional political routines of *The West Wing*. The popularity of the series and the fact that its producers often reacted to current problems such as terrorist attacks on World Trade Centre on September 11, 2001, solidify her opinion that media representations of politics are used to set an ideal type of doing politics and create a myth of good politics and politicians. The author turns to Vladimir Propp's (1968) structural analysis of a folk tale and its later applications to the analysis of Western movies by Willy Wright (1977) for insights. She demonstrates that that fictional politicians act according to the schemata set for literary heroes. The main function of the series is thus to establish order and demonstrate that the good win and the evil ones are punished. At the same time the series producers address the actual problems and in that way aim at setting the modes of behavior, e.g. the need for tolerance and avoidance of hasty generalizations on the basis of one's ethnicity or religion after 9/11 attacks (pp. 180-183). Thus the series has an ambiguous role in social and political life of the citizens/viewers: 1) it is involved in the process of fictionalization of politics, i.e.

producing the idealized representations of politics that cannot be matched by real politicians in their everyday conduct, and thus its functioning in popular culture leads to the disappointment with politics and cynicism among citizens/viewers; 2) it can serve as a forum for discussions concerning the variety of attitudes to politics, politicians and policies and thus be instrumental in addressing some of the important societal problems such as racist prejudice.

The final chapter "Order or Disorder – Fiction or Reality? The Implications of 'Power and Knowledge Management' on 'Politics as Usual'" is designed as a synthetic conclusion to the book. The author binds her empirical analysis with the core problem that has been set at the beginning of the book: the discrepancies and "missing links" between the public perceptions of politics and the everyday practices of doing politics. On an analytical plane this problem is replicated as a gap between the macro-analysis of institutional and decision making processes and micro analysis of concrete political events and individual politicians. In the sixth chapter Ruth Wodak draws a conclusion that political order is being created out of daily fragmentation and multiple routines by practices of knowledge management; those who share common agenda form alliances, those who do not are excluded (p. 200). The importance of discursive practices and prevalence of intersubjective discourses over individual efforts of meaning making and position attainment is emphasized. She also concludes that media representations of politics contribute to the fictionalization of politics and politization of fiction, thus the vicious circle of the problem of the dissatisfaction and distrust to real life politics is not aided. The contribution of discourse analysis to solving this problem according to Wodak lies in its de-mystifying function: discourse analysis allows to see the complexity of political processes more clearly and this clear vision could be the first step in departing from cynical approach to politics.

The book is a valuable contribution to the analysis of everyday political routines. Its subject matter borders political anthropology, thus the use of ethnographic methodology comes as no surprise. From the perspective of critical discourse analysis the task of demystifying or disenchanting politics while at the same time not oversimplifying or scandalizing it is of utmost importance. Ruth Wodak has managed to make a variety of theories and concepts work towards unraveling the routines of "politics as usual". At the same time – as the author mentions herself (p. 194) – the interdisciplinarity that manifests itself in the use of categories and theories from different disciplines is potentially laden with the risk of superficiality. Although the book itself is far from being superficial, its reception may well be: many readers of the book will have far less knowledge of some concepts and categories that were briefly introduced by the author and not explained thoroughly and placed in the context of their emergence. This may result in some misconceptions since the meaning of many theoretical concepts stem from their relation to other concepts within the same theory. Or else, some concepts are very complex – e.g. the concepts of myth or power – and have various interpretations, thus without sufficient explanation they can rather complicate the understanding instead of facilitating it. This problem accompanies discourse analysts in most of their endeavors. Another problem that is not fully solved by the proposals of the author in chapter two and six is of methodological nature, yet it has important critical consequences. The access of a researcher to the realms of politics where actors are actually openly pursuing their partisan or private interest (e.g. the secret meetings, the party committees where observers are not allowed, nepotism ridden practices of the politicians, relations with business and interest groups outside of legally acceptable settings etc.) is very limited if not impossible. Therefore the research results presented in chapters three

and four cannot be seen as fully representative of "politics as usual", and can only be applied to some political practices. For the further research one might be interested in incorporating these shadow practices and thus searching for the new methods through which they can be grasped. A separate and fascinating research could also be undertaken by trying to compare Western European and North American "politics as usual" with doing politics in South Asia or Africa, or by comparing democratic and non-democratic "politics as usual". In comparative research much attention would have to be paid not only to the difference of political, social and cultural systems but also to the linguistic diversity.

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Citation