



Fissures in the discourse-scape: Critique, rationality and validity in post-foundational approaches to CDS

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Abstract

This article explores one challenge facing critical discourse studies (CDS) in today's mediated world: the ontological and epistemological assumptions which prompt studies to analyse the construction of social orders (such as right-wing, racist or neoliberal orders) rather than the fissures and dislocations of these social orders. The former foregrounds stability, and the latter foregrounds instability. In this article, I first sketch postfoundational thinking, arguing that this thinking brings breakdown, disruption and instability to the centre of attention. Although postfoundational thought is most prominently associated with a particular set of thinkers (Nancy, Lefort, Laclau and Rancière), I also include approaches often omitted from current discussions (Lather, Haraway, Malabou and Sedgwick). Second, I consider three central concepts in CDS from a postfoundational perspective: critique, rationality and validity. Critique is conceptualised as a generative criticality which addresses unequal power relations through (fine-grained) analysis of hope-giving, reparative discourse which is oriented to well-being. Rationality is positioned as mobile, contingent, political and positioned, rather than universal and non-subjective. Validity is separated from understandings of objectivity and bias and associated instead with surprise and transgressive validities. Finally, two brief examples illustrate how postfoundational approaches to discourse have engaged with reframing social movements and democracy and rethinking what counts as the economy.

Keywords

Critical discourse analysis, democracy, economics, media discourse, positive discourse analysis, postfoundationalism, poststructuralism, social movements

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Introduction

As I write, in 2015, a YouTube video is doing the rounds in which the leader of a political party in the United Kingdom repeatedly answers a series of entirely different questions from a journalist with one single phrase, over and over again.¹ The single soundbite should have reached the public; the whole clip should not have. In 2014, public debate ensued over the ways in which ‘tech giants’ such as Facebook are playing an increasing role in shaping news values, with opaque algorithms selecting what counts as newsworthiness for users. The public debate on algorithmic selection and filtering – some say censorship – alongside the National Security Agency affair demonstrated a robust public awareness of the technologies and practices associated with knowledge production (Bell, 2014; Tufekci, 2014). In 2013, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag drew people to the streets and coordinated disparate actions; tweets and retweets rebutted the stories circulated by official sources and commercial news media (Stephen, 2015). Each of these examples illustrates how, in our increasingly mediated world, discursive dynamics are changing. The constructedness, dissonance and ideology of knowledge claims are arguably more immediately and reflexively visible to more people than they used to be (Latour, 2004).

What kind of intervention can a ‘postfoundational’ approach to critical discourse studies (CDS) make at this juncture? How does such an approach speak to the theoretical and conceptual challenges facing CDS today? This article responds to these questions in three steps. First, I outline my understanding of postfoundationalism. Second, I sketch what a postfoundational approach can mean for the concepts of critique, rationality and validity within CDS. Finally, I describe two examples of postfoundational analyses of discourse which explore settings beyond the more immediately visible news and social media: the linking of social movements and democracy in educational media and the rich language of economic diversity in community economies. Each of these steps will, given the length of this article, be fairly condensed.

In the past, there has been a somewhat tense relationship between CDS and the postfoundational approach to discourse theory often called the Essex School. Despite ontological–epistemological differences and differing levels of granularity in their analyses, however, both share an orientation to critical inquiry; both aim to show ‘the contingency of [complex] contexts, and a sense that discourse, its contexts of production and reception, and the human subjects producing and consuming text/talk, could be, and can be, different, with significantly differing results’ (Richardson et al., 2013: xviii). It is in this sense of productive integration that I would like to position the following intervention.

By turning to postfoundational thinking, this article picks up two trends in contemporary CDS: first, recent articles turning to particular aspects of postfoundational thinking (without necessarily using that term) to ground their ethical or empirical concerns (e.g. O’Halloran, 2014; Stibbe, 2014); second, a decade of studies oriented to ‘positive discourse analysis’, that is, to the analysis of resistance or solidarity discourses and moments of hope. As Bartlett (2012: 7) has argued, however, these studies are sometimes in danger of celebrating particular texts without contextualising them, that is, in danger of forgetting that ‘deconstructive *and* constructive activity are *both* required’ (Martin, 2004: 183, original emphasis). I will suggest here that postfoundational thought not only brings the fissured, fragmented, multivocal dynamics of contemporary discourse into

the foreground, but can also provide a (theoretical and practical) vocabulary for integrating 'generative' critique more firmly into the overall project of CDS.

Postfoundational thinking

To briefly sketch the contours of postfoundational thinking, I focus here on two aspects which I have found particularly useful, contingency and breakdown, before considering the relationship between postfoundationalism and poststructuralism.

Contingency

As the name implies, postfoundational thinking questions the solidity and pervasiveness of 'foundations'. It operates on the assumption that 'metaphysical figures of foundation' (Marchart, 2007: 2) such as God, rationality, truth, universality, essence, objectivity, structure, capitalism, individualism or consensus are contingent. With 'the false hope of a firm foundation gone' (Goodman, 1978: 7), these groundings are seen as situated, political and contestable: the site of permanent political contestation (Butler and Scott, 1992).

This is not, I should emphasise, an *anti*-foundationalism which entirely erases all foundations. The task is to attend to the 'construction of foundations presupposed as self-evident' (Spivak, 1993: 153) and 'to interrogate what the theoretical move that establishes foundations *authorizes*, and what precisely it excludes or forecloses' (Butler, 1992: 7, original emphasis). Interrogating the ontological status of foundational notions does not mean that the ground is completely absent and that anything goes. Instead, if there is no universal foundation beyond power, nor any final socially or historically necessary ground, then the ground that is generally accepted at any given social, cultural, historical time and place must be defended (through material-discursive practices) and can be dislocated. Claims to ground society can be investigated for the exclusionary moves they make. New grounds can be laid, and analysts can trace the emergence of new groundings.

In this sense, a postfoundational perspective grapples with a productive tension. It sees what Lefort (1988) calls 'the dissolution of the markers of certainty' (p. 19) and thus the fissures in what had seemed to be a certain and fixed ground. At the same time, it sees a ground as necessary in order to communicate and act at all and thus the possibility (necessity) of constructing 'contingent foundations' (Butler, 1992). This in turn means resignifying, recontextualising, reframing concepts in ways that previously seemed illegitimate. For examples of how this has been done with 'democracy' and 'economy', see 'Postfoundational analyses of discourse', later.

Breakdown and dissonance

Postfoundational writing emphasises disagreement, negativity, antagonism, conflict or agonism in the constitution of the social rather than harmony, consensus-seeking or mutual understanding (e.g. Mouffe, 2005; Rancière, 1999; Žižek, 2000).² Donna Haraway draws on the notion of 'breakdown' to describe those moments when there is a 'glitch in the system' and things cannot be taken for granted anymore (Haraway, 2000:

115; cf. Haraway, 1991: 214). 'Breakdown provokes a space of possibility precisely because things don't work smoothly anymore' (Haraway, 2000: 115). With a similar orientation to possibility, Eagleton (2011), writing about the relevance of Marx today, notes that it is 'at the points where the logic of the present comes unstuck, runs into impasse and incoherence, that Marx, surprisingly enough, finds the outline of a transfigured future' (p. 77). The image of the future 'is the failure of the present' (Eagleton, 2011: 77). Malabou (2008) suggests plasticity as a new paradigm which can deal better with discontinuities than concepts of the trace or *différance* could. Plasticity refers, for Malabou, not only to flexibility (brain flexibility or neoliberal flexibility), but also to the destructive power of plastic explosives.

Laclau (1990) explores the contradictory effects of dislocation. It not only threatens established ways of being, it also gives rise to new identities and practices. He considers the well-known dislocatory effects of emerging capitalism on workers: the destruction of traditional communities, brutal factory conditions, low wages and insecure work. At the same time, workers responded to these conditions by breaking machines, organising unions and going on strike. They developed new skills and practices. Dislocation thus gives rise 'not only to negative consequences but also to new possibilities of historical action' (Laclau, 1990: 39). In moments of dislocation, new discourse emerges as a possible response to the crisis. (We could think here of Greece in early 2015 or France in late 2015.) Dislocation becomes the space of possibility for (progressive or repressive) change. Although many theorists discuss dislocation and rupture primarily in terms of grand and rare social changes, Rancière (2011: 10) argues that far more mundane and quotidian interruptions to the consensus also open spaces for experimentation.

In today's globalised, mediatised and networked world, media usage data suggest that despite fears of users disappearing into filter bubbles where we only engage with opinions similar to our own, users are regularly accessing multiple, contradictory media sources (Holcomb et al., 2013). Social protest, disrupting any pretence of general consensus, is becoming visible across the globe. A postfoundational perspective on moments of dislocation, when things no longer work smoothly, invites CDS to (also) explore more directly those aspects of discourse which breach or fissure the dominant discourse leading to doubt about prevailing certainties. Where previously CDS has primarily focused on the stability of social orders, this perspective focuses on instability. It invites us to ask what is happening at those moments of breakdown, and how a given specific dislocation ties in to broader (social, political and cultural) issues. A postfoundational perspective thus adds a particular conceptual apparatus to the emerging body of work in CDS on disruption (see e.g. Jabbar, 2013; Krzyżanowski, 2010).

Postfoundational and/or poststructural

Several of the texts cited above are commonly referred to as poststructuralist (but see Angermüller, 2015). Why refer to postfoundational rather than poststructural thinking? Poststructuralism clearly refers to more than simply a troubling of structures and includes a more general orientation to deconstruction, the linguistic turn and the destabilisation of meaning. However, its labelling as the post of 'structuralism' foregrounds the critique of

structures and systems underlying human society or culture. It also orients in time to refer primarily to writers after structuralism.

The term 'postfoundational' draws attention to the post of 'foundations' as noted above, and it recuperates traditions of contingency and dissonance from a range of earlier (pre-structuralist) writers. Marchart (2007, 2010), in his theorising of postfoundational political thought, foregrounds a range of White, primarily French, males writing in the late 20th century (Nancy, Rancière, Laclau, Lefort, Badiou). To this, we can add several feminist thinkers (Butler, Haraway, Mouffe, Lather), postcolonial scholars (Said, Spivak, Dhawan) and other writers not usually referred to as poststructuralist.

For Cassirer's (1944) philosophy of culture, for instance, contradiction gives rise to human existence (p. 11). Although loath to relinquish the possibility of harmony in dissonance (p. 228), Cassirer finds it difficult to refute 'the thesis of the discontinuity and radical heterogeneity of human culture' (p. 222), a vocabulary which resonates strongly with more recent postfoundational writing. Similarly, Whitehead's ([1929] 1985) process-relational philosophy from the 1920s has been taken up as postfoundational in more recent speculative philosophy. Arguably, new materialism is the most controversial postfoundational thinking today, with its aim of destabilising the apparent commonsensical 'thereness' of matter. It thinks materiality in different ways, emphasising, for example, the agency of material-discursive practices; the vitality of matter; or bioethical, political, environmental and economic issues raised when humans are perceived to be 'thoroughly immersed within materiality's productive contingencies' (Coole and Frost, 2010: 7).

One way of taking the postfoundational project forward in CDS will be to grapple more closely than is possible in this article with particular texts or concepts within what I am broadly referring to as postfoundational thinking. One goal would be to see what (if any) novel insights arise from their epistemological and ontological premises in specific critical analyses of the socio-political dynamics of discourse.

Reconceptualising classic concepts in CDS

Several classic concepts in CDS can be reconceptualised through a postfoundational lens. Reisigl (2011) has engaged concisely with poststructuralist critiques of the concepts of 'truth', 'manipulation' and 'power' (p. 486). I have considered 'emancipation' and 'empowerment' elsewhere (Macgilchrist, 2013b). Thus, my attention here turns to three further concerns in CDS: 'critique', 'rationality' and 'validity'.

Critique

Summarising the debates in CDS about 'critique' in the early 2000s, Weiss and Wodak (2003) suggest that across CDS, 'critical' refers first to a radical critique of present social relations, of power hierarchies and imbalances; second, to a critique of other academic approaches which claim that their analyses are non-political, that is, which ignore or refuse to consider the connections between language and power; and third, to a critique of the way this avowedly non-political academic work actively participates in maintaining existing power relations (pp. 38–40). This categorisation resonates with Van Dijk's (1996) clear position, which has strongly influenced the understanding of criticality in

the field, that CDS 'should describe and explain how power abuse is enacted, reproduced or legitimised by the text and talk of dominant groups or institutions' (p. 84).

In Haraway's (2000) discussion of 'breakdown' noted earlier, it is linked to a 'generative criticality' and 'generative doubt' (p. 114). This is not the type of criticality which focuses primarily on power abuse or on exposing the flaws, absences and power imbalances in argumentation. Instead, it refers to a criticality which opens up and produces new meanings. 'We need', writes Haraway (1988), 'the power of modern critical theories of how meanings and bodies get made, not in order to deny meanings and bodies, but in order to build meanings and bodies that have a chance for life' (p. 580). Instead of the 'death of the subject', the point for Haraway is that new 'nonisomorphic subjects' are opened up that were previously not imaginable (p. 586). Latour (2004) suggests that today '[t]he critic is not the one who debunks, but the one who assembles' (p. 245). Similarly, Sedgwick (2003) is interested in moving from 'paranoid' critical practices of exposure and demystification to 'reparative' critical practices of hope, pleasure and queer reading.

Responding to critique from 'positive discourse analysis', scholars have emphasised that 'critique' in CDS is not (and was never) limited to 'negative critique' alone. Fairclough (2009), for instance, has described critical analysis as oriented both to analysing how unequal power relations are established and reproduced, and also to analysing 'the many ways in which the dominant logic and dynamic are tested, challenged and disrupted by people, and to identifying possibilities which these suggest for overcoming obstacles to addressing "wrongs" and improving well-being' (p. 163f). In addition, the discourse-historical approach (DHA) includes 'future-related, prospective critique' which aims to improve communication by, for example, developing guidelines for gender neutral language or reducing language barriers in institutions (Reisigl and Wodak, 2009). DHA has oriented to both the maintenance and the dismantling of the status quo (Wodak et al., 1999: 8).

This has significant implications for how CDS positions its critique. In 2004, Latour asked whether critique had run out of steam. Ten years and multiple techno-media-social-political transformations later, the question seems even more pressing. Sedgwick (2003) asks, 'How television-starved would someone have to be to find it shocking that ideologies contradict themselves, that simulacra don't have originals, or that gender representations are artificial?' (p. 141). By investigating how people, texts and practices are dislocating apparently dominant discourse, and shaping change, a generative critique assembles participants who are already actively and productively critical, who are shaping new language and new worlds. Bartlett (2012), for instance, traces bottom-up transformations to institutional discourse by Amerindian communities and individuals in Guyana. Stibbe (2014) refers to discourse (e.g. *haiku*) which reminds readers of the lively, budded, earthy natural world and the need for ethical care of our environment.

Analysing in this way entails seeking out examples of transformative discourse in order to critique the dominant *and* to build other worlds. Bartlett and Stibbe's texts are not, however, entirely 'positive' analyses. Instead, they embody the shifting and heterogeneous critical practices which move between negative (for want of a better word) and generative stances. In this sense, today's critic has a different role than she had in the 1970s or 1990s. The critic today 'is not the one who lifts the rugs from under the feet of

the naive believers, but the one who offers the participants arenas in which to gather' (Latour, 2004: 245).

Nevertheless, generative or reparative critical practices remain subordinate in the leading CDS approaches. The goal – visible in the structure of the Fairclough quote above and in recent publications – remains to *first* analyse dominant power structures, and *then* to investigate challenges to dominance. The latter half remains marginal. Undeniably, it is important to produce strong critiques of today's dominant social relations, abusive or exclusionary practices and dynamics of undesirable social change. I am not suggesting these be replaced by generative critique alone. Nor am I suggesting that every critical discourse analysis adds an obligatory page (or two minutes) of generative suggestions. What I am suggesting is that CDS become (more) open to generative approaches to critique, that these analyses are understood not as a positive appendix to CDS but as integral to the overall project of critically analysing discourse, and that post-foundational writing offers a theoretical vocabulary for doing this. I will also suggest that the emphasis on dominance may be related to the strong influence of critical theory in CDS, the attendant universal status of particular foundational notions and in turn an underlying foundationalism in much of contemporary CDS. To this end, the next section explores the potentially foundational notion of rationality.

Rationality

An open question in CDS, asked by both critics and advocates, is how scholars justify taking a particular political, ethical or moral stance. At the risk of drastically oversimplifying their complex and sophisticated arguments, I turn now to the use of 'rationality' in two recent CDS texts on criticality. I will suggest that postfoundational thinking enables us to tweak the understanding of rationality, to make it easier – not more difficult – to take a particular stance.³

In *Critical Discourse Studies*, Zhang et al. (2011) consider the practice of criticality in Anglophone and Chinese writings. They argue that criticality, understood as 'mak[ing] rational and moral judgements', is a universal human ability (Zhang et al., 2011: 104). From Habermas, they take 'the universal evidence that human speakers always raise validity claims in situated discourse' and that under certain conditions, one of which is that only rational arguments count, these claims can be criticised (Zhang et al., 2011: 103).

Forchtner (2011) elaborates how the DHA's political and moral stance can be theoretically justified through its roots in the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, in particular, Habermas' work (p. 2). Forchtner (2011) writes that the 'DHA bases its critique on a foundational notion of emancipation' (p. 2). In my reading of the text, 'emancipation' is not, however, presented as a foundational notion. It is presented as a contested term, open in how it can be filled with specific content, that is, which political or moral stance the analyst will take. Later, while exploring how this stance can be justified, Forchtner does introduce a foundational-universal notion: 'rationality'.

Central to the theoretical justification of the DHA's moral stance is Habermas' understanding of 'rationality not in terms of the capacity of a monologically working mind, i.e. self-reflection, but as a property of intersubjectivity where validity claims can be raised

and refuted freely' (Forchtner, 2011: 6). Rationality is dialogical. On the one hand, heavily metaphorical texts which can seem particularly coherent and suggestive are 'tendentially non-rational' (Forchtner, 2011: 10) since they make a transparent exchange of arguments difficult. 'Rational' texts, on the other hand, raise 'validity claims which can be critically questioned in an open, inclusive way' (Forchtner, 2011: 10). Through engaging more explicitly with Habermas' work, Forchtner (2011) argues, the DHA can ground its political stance 'rationally, i.e. not only in terms of subjective preferences' (p. 11). Similarly, the value of Habermas over critical rationalism is that the former provides a foundation for critique through a 'justification of rationality' which reconstructs the 'universal intuitive knowledge shared by every competent speaker', whereas the latter 'rests ultimately in a subjective and irrational act of faith in reason' (Forchtner and Tominc, 2012: 35). Subjectivity appears as less rational than rationality.⁴

Yet (and I write this from a position of great sympathy for DHA and Habermasian thought), rationality as a universal, non-subjective notion is one of the central concepts that has been heavily critiqued as shaping the hidden violences of a secular, liberal humanism as modernity and the Enlightenment marched across the world. The intersubjectivity noted above seems to remain 'a simple reciprocal capability of taking into account the other's reasoning' (validity claims) rather than, for instance, an assumption of uncertainty and undecidability (Žižek, 1993: 75f). It thus remains within the logic of a universal rationality which is entangled with colonial discourse (the Other as non-rational) and the status of women (as the irrational Other of rational Man). 'Rationalists crown the victors by calling them "rational" and deprecate the losers by branding them "irrational"' (Latour, 1989: 105). The universal concept of rationality has been deconstructed as intimately entangled in the particular power relations it wishes to critique (Gergen, 1999; Latour, 1993; Quijano, 2010). There are two issues here, relevant to both Zhang et al. and Forchtner. First, the *particular* foundational notion of rationality can be linked to exclusionary traditions. Second, the *universality* of foundationality itself suggests the necessity of final certainties and removes foundations from power relations.

But, a reader may ask, how else to adopt a standpoint for critique? Much has been written about this question from a postfoundational perspective (e.g. Butler, 2001). Here, I wish to point briefly to Haraway (1988), who writes heavily metaphorical texts and who aims to simultaneously have an account of the radical historical contingency of knowledge claims and meaning-making *as well as* 'a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of a "real" world' (p. 579). She sees this as paradoxical, contradictory and necessary.

Haraway (1988) reframes 'rationality' as emerging from positioned knowledge practices: 'politics and ethics ground struggles for and contests over what may count as rational knowledge' (p. 587). Rationality cannot be a grounding for taking on a political stance since a political stance is already necessary to argue that something is rational. In this sense, rational knowledge becomes an engaged, positioned, power-sensitive interpretation (Haraway, 1988: 590). Rationality is subjective in the sense that the subject is multiply positioned, situated and embedded in technoscientific, cultural, social, political and ethical spaces. The central point in my reading here is that postfoundational thought does not, as critics sometimes suggest, advocate irrationality. Instead, it reframes how rationality can be understood: it is no longer a universal, uncontestable concept, but a particular, political, contingent – and still useful – concept.

In this sense, there comes a point when the standpoint for my critique cannot be further grounded in theory. Rorty (1989) can be useful here (although not always), when he writes that ‘there is no answer to the question “Why not be cruel?” – no noncircular theoretical backup for the belief that cruelty is horrible’ (p. xv). What we can do, instead of seeking theoretical backup, is to describe and redescribe our ‘matters of concern’ (Latour, 2004), mustering more and more allies in our arguments (as I am attempting to do in this article), without appealing to a grounding outside politics and ethics. Gibson-Graham (1996) introduces the key coordinates orienting critical practices regarding economic experimentation as

collective actions [which] are taken to transform difficult or dire (or merely distasteful) situations by enhancing well-being, instituting different (class) relations of surplus appropriation and distribution, promoting community and environmental sustainability, recognizing and building on economic interdependence, and adopting an ethic of care of the other. (p. xxxvii)

Without recourse to a grounding universal position, this extract develops a vocabulary for describing a stance and critique which goes beyond the ‘sappy, aestheticizing, defensive, anti-intellectual, or reactionary’ vocabulary which has long been associated with generative moves and may have kept analysts from embracing a generative criticality (Sedgwick, 2003: 150).

Validity

My third concept, ‘validity’, picks up methodological developments as digital corpora have become more widespread. I suggest that a postfoundational vocabulary could prove useful to highlight or account for the value of corpus analysis for CDS, precisely because it does not involve negating the validity of other, more qualitative, case-based CDS approaches.

Most writing on corpus analysis in CDS includes a justification in terms of ‘improv[ing] the objectivity’ of empirical analysis (Baker, 2012: 247); ‘reduc[ing] researcher bias’ (Mautner, 2009: 123); and producing more robust, representative and valid findings (cf. Macgilchrist, 2013a). Responding to a similar understanding of validity, other approaches in CDS still engage (somewhat apologetically) with the classic post-positivist critiques that CDS ‘cherry-picks’ its texts, extracts or arguments in a ‘biased’, unprincipled way, thus inhibiting the validity of analyses.

There is a long discussion in CDS of analysis being ‘biased – and proud of it’ (Van Dijk, 2001: 96). Since, as Wodak (2014, personal communication) pointed out in response to an earlier version of this article, the notion of ‘bias’ does imply the possibility of someone somewhere analysing from an unbiased position, I will speak here about ‘standpoint’ instead to emphasise that we are always already operating from particular situated, mobile, complex, contradictory locations.

For postfoundational thinkers, the traditional understanding of ‘validity’ (as objective, neutral, less biased, etc.) is nothing to agonise over. This understanding of validity is one of those foundational figures which are contingent, political and contestable and which have come to dominate a particular understanding of science or research. Drawing on the

comment by Butler noted earlier, the question is: What does this concept of ‘validity’ *authorise*, and what does it exclude or foreclose? ‘Validity’ can be the power to delineate between ‘science’ and ‘not-science’. It polices the boundaries and enacts an exclusionary function (Lather, 1993, 2014).

The postfoundational move here is to reframe central concepts such as ‘objectivity’ and ‘validity’. Haraway is perhaps most well known for her resignification of ‘objectivity’ as always already being from a partial perspective. Following Haraway’s (1988) logic, corpus analysis is fascinating for CDS in a digital world because, among other things, it ‘makes room for surprises and ironies at the heart of all knowledge production’ (p. 594). In relation to validity, attention turns to more relational, socially situated or performative ways of deciding what makes ‘good’ research. Are the findings, for instance, useful or surprising? Does the research participate in collective action for change? For Lather (2014), for instance, validity is a relational practice, not a set of epistemic concepts. She delineates a set of ‘transgressive’ validities: ironic validity, paralogic validity, rhizomatic validity and voluptuous validity (see Lather, 1993).

My point here is not to advocate any one of these validities, but to suggest more generally that postfoundational work offers an alternative to the practice in CDS of attempting to minimise the effect of a political standpoint on analysis. Instead of combating accusations that a political standpoint has been adopted, a postfoundational approach agrees wholeheartedly with the accusers and sees precisely this as a valid way of doing research.

Postfoundational analyses of discourse

This section very briefly sketches two analyses of discourse from a postfoundational perspective, pointing, in particular, to their style of generative critique. Both also aim to pay close attention – in different ways – to ‘text and talk’ in a way which has been the hallmark of powerful CDS.

History teaching and radical democracy

The first example explores shifting accounts of social movements and radical democracy in school history textbooks (Macgilchrist, 2015; Macgilchrist and Van Praet, 2013). The backdrop to this analysis is the observation that since the 1960s, high-school textbooks in Germany have associated the worker and soldier council movement of 1918–1919 with violence and ‘anti-democratic thinking’; the councils are generally presented in a negative light through association with a Soviet threat. Alternative interpretations of these councils as, for instance, ‘socialist democracy’ have not been included. There is generally, as in most other countries today, not much teaching of social movement history in mainstream history curricula.

In this ethnographic and discourse analytical case study of the production of a particular history textbook in Germany, we observed a breakdown in the normally smooth production process. In one meeting, the textbook authors argue quite vehemently with one another about how to represent the council movement. They describe the councils as aiming for a ‘different kind of democracy’ (Macgilchrist, 2015: 202). Comparing the

draft manuscript discussed at the meeting with the published textbook itself, the councils are subtly 'de-dramatised'. For example, instead of 'a worker and soldier council, led by USPD [Independent Social Democratic Party of Germany] and Spartakus leaders', the published book writes only 'a worker and soldier council'; instead of the manuscript's 'Soviet style socialism', the publication writes 'council system socialism'; instead of 'sailors and marines mutinied' (manuscript), 'the sailors decided to disobey' (publication). The actions are dissociated from their traditional description as Soviet, violent and anti-democratic and revalorised as moderate and thoughtful (Macgilchrist and Van Praet, 2013: 641).

The analysis linked this very specific text and talk to broader contemporary shifts towards more diverse understandings of democracy, including the rethinking of the 'idea of communism' in flamboyant cultural theory, the recent proliferation of historians' writing about forms of radical democracy and a number of popular academic books on various kinds of socialism. In this sense, the analysis assembles various disparate contemporary discourse movements which are imagining democracy as participatory, social and conflictual in times when the 'democracy' of 'the West' is an increasingly unstable value.

Economic discourse and postcapitalism

The work of J.K. Gibson-Graham has critiqued capitalist dominance by 'documenting the radical heterogeneity of both capitalist and noncapitalist economic practices and proposing a "more-than-capitalist" economy' (Gibson-Graham, 2014: 81; cf. Gibson-Graham, 2006; Gibson-Graham et al., 2013). This Marxist, feminist, postfoundational critique of much discourse on capitalism (including Marxist discourse) suggests that by representing capitalism as unified, singular and total, this discourse participates in making transformation seem impossible – or only possible through total systemic change. The 'fantasy of wholeness' in discourse on capitalism 'operates to obscure diversity and disunity in the economy and society alike' (Gibson-Graham, 1996: 260). Overall, Gibson-Graham (1996) aims

to help create the discursive conditions under which socialist or other noncapitalist construction becomes a 'realistic' present activity rather than a ludicrous or utopian future goal. To achieve this I must smash Capitalism and see it in a thousand pieces. I must make its unity a fantasy, visible as a denial of diversity and change. (p. 263f)

After a short section smashing the dominant discourse into pieces, Gibson-Graham spent a longer section making visible the diversity, change and disunity which breaks up today's apparently unified capitalist economy: housework and family care, slave labour, in-kind payments (e.g. lunch for helping the neighbour to repair his roof), voluntary labour and reciprocal labour (e.g. swapping grocery shopping for driving lessons). Community economies take centre stage, for example cooperatively owned enterprises organised around solidarity principles, including flat pay scales; trade networks designed to support the livelihoods of producers and sustainable environmental practices such as solar power initiatives in Australia; and individuals combining paid and unpaid labour

to survive well in terms of material, occupational, social, community and physical well-being. These forms of labour question the impression that capitalism is inescapable today. This kind of inventory is ‘a first step toward imagining and enacting economic heterotopias – community economies in which well-being is produced directly’ (Gibson-Graham, 2014: 81).

Gibson-Graham’s (2006) work also constructed a rich ‘language of economic diversity’ (p. 53), including movements, experiments, transformations, diverse economy, meshwork, ethical economic experiments, new enactments of the economy, community economies, emerging materialities, community economy assemblages and solidarity economy. In this sense, Gibson-Graham’s analysis reframes ‘economy’. It assembles participants who are already actively and productively shaping new economic language and worlds by imagining and enacting a vast array of diverse economic activities oriented to key (political, ethical, environmental, social) concerns of community economies.

Concluding thoughts

I have pointed in this article to contingency and breakdown as two premises of postfoundationalism which enable a rethinking of key concepts in CDS: critique, rationality and validity. Two brief examples illustrated how postfoundational analysis has spoken to issues such as revalorising social movements and radical democracy and reframing economics. This kind of analysis could, of course, be enabled by a range of theories. And the discourse may be only a tiny fissure in a fairly hegemonic configuration. The purchase of postfoundational thinking, in my reading, is that it can (1) orient analysis more immediately to generative, ambivalent, reparative critical practices; (2) free analysis from the foundationalism arguably associated with critical theory’s justification for taking a particular moral or political stance, thus enabling analysts to simply (although it is no simple matter) state the coordinates of their standpoints; and (3) move CDS on from post-positivist debates about objectivity and bias, in order to embrace surprise, irony and transgressive validities.

The need to attend to how dominant discourse is being challenged and new worlds are being created has been voiced within CDS. Undeniably, social exclusions and discriminations continue to be widespread. At the same time, new demands are being made on discourse studies: protest movements and new political practices are dislocating long-held common sense about how politics work; more people are simultaneously accessing multiple, contradictory news stories, making the constructedness and ideology of particular knowledge claims more immediately visible.

At this juncture, postfoundational thought offers one (conceptually rich) way in which the breakdowns, dislocations and (progressive) social change in which people across the globe are engaging today can explicitly formulate critique of present power imbalances and inequality *through* ‘considering hope-giving, on-the-ground practices’ which are ‘oriented to equality and heterogeneous well-being’ (Haraway, 1997: 95).

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Notes

1. The YouTube clip is available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jITggc0uBA8> (accessed 30 April 2015).
2. Rendering postfoundational thinking perhaps, for some observers, a particularly ‘Western’, ‘global North’ or ‘minority world’ approach to discourse (Xu, 2014).
3. Note that when I refer to rationality here, I am referring to the presupposition of rationality *undergirding an analysis*, not rationality or rationalisation as an *object of analysis* (for the latter, see e.g. Krzyżanowski, 2014; Van Leeuwen, 2007).
4. This is not to imply that Forchtner (or Zhang et al. or indeed Habermas) takes the ideal speech situation (ISS; publicness, sincerity, inclusivity and absence of coercion) as a condition to be realised in the future. Forchtner (2011) clearly positions the ISS as an idealising assumption of communication; ‘a counterfactually anticipated, pragmatically necessary presupposition of every meaningful interaction’ (p. 7).

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