

Book Review

Ruth Wodak (2015) *The Politics of Fear: What Right-wing Populist Discourses Mean* London, Sage, £23.99

Introduction: I would urge practitioners to engage with Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). Shaw & Crowther (2017: 42) maintain that CDA ‘can be really useful tool if adapted and applied by practitioners working with a variety of different groups in communities.’ They point out that ‘CDA has its roots in the development of theory about how language and power connect through ‘textual’ messages to shape our thinking and behaviour, often without our conscious awareness.’ The purpose of CDA is to bring to our consciousness the ‘textual’ mechanisms that position us, divide us, encourage us to look for scapegoats, and behave as unwitting capillaries of power for the ‘Oppressor’. I would encourage practitioners, therefore, to engage with this important book, especially given the rise of the far right in Europe and its re-emergence in the US.

Conjuncture: Wodak (p189) describes the demographics of German supporters of the new right-wing populist party in Germany established in spring 2014, Alternative für Deutschland or AfD, by pointing out that they include citizens who feel left behind and ignored by the political establishment, who fear for their jobs and, most importantly, fear a loss of ‘real’ German identity. Disturbingly, AfD secured third place in the September 2017 German elections, having won 13% of the vote, marking it the first time in almost six decades that an openly nationalist party entered the Bundestag. Alarming, the AfD propulsion into parliament just four years into its existence gives the country its first far-right force on the German national stage since 1961, and a faction with the most substantial presence of right-wing extremists since the Nazi era. This rightward trajectory sinisterly becoming manifest in recent German elections is replicated by the FPÖ in Austria, Trump-style right-wing populists in the elections in the Czech Republic, and the mobilisation of tens of thousands of right-wing nationalists in Poland, all in late 2017. Wodak’s work could not be more pertinent.

Clarity: Wodak (pxi) is quick to clarify that charismatic leaders and aggressive rhetoric are important factors in defining right-wing populism. Indeed, for a long time right-wing populist parties were primarily identified with, and recognised by, their ‘rhetoric, argumentation schemes and aggressive debate mode.’ These factors, Wodak argues, do not suffice in defining the complex phenomenon of right-wing populism. With, I feel, intellectual courage Wodak (xi) persuasively contends that it is the contents, that is, the ideologies and beliefs, the proposals and imageries conveyed by such rhetoric, that have to be observed, analysed and understood; only in conjunction do they provide insights into the many facets of right-wing populism on the rise.’ Wodak’s text therefore successfully explores the meanings ‘constructed by form and content, to be understood and explained via many layers of contextual knowledge – historical, socio-political, intertextual and interdiscursive, as well as situative.’

Application of Wodak’s CDA tools: Wodak throughout employs a popular, comprehensible style of writing while still doing justice to the requirements of systematic linguistic analysis. I outline a couple of her CDA tools:

Calculated ambivalence: Wodak’s writing introduces CDA tools such as ‘calculated ambivalence’ which perhaps explains the Prime Minister Theresa May’s decision to wear a gigantic Frida Kahlo bracelet to her crucial Conservative Party conference speech in October 2017. The irony of the Prime Minister endorsing the radical Communist painter, Kahlo, who was close to the Soviet revolutionary Leon Trotsky, was highlighted in the press but not made clear as to why. Most importantly for Wodak (p66), ‘the calculated ambivalence that serves to address multiple and contradictory audiences simultaneously, and provocative statements which colonize the agenda of our daily news programmes’ have to be considered in systematic detail. In this way, the strategy of calculated ambivalence relates to the Orwellian notion of ‘double think’; that is, creating assumed associations between contradictory meanings.’ In a more sinister and disturbing European context, Wodak (p.37) highlights that ‘identity politics form a core of right-wing populist politics: founding

myths become revitalised to legitimise the myth of a ‘pure people’ who belong to a clearly defined nation state’. She gives the examples of the Hungarian Jobbik who yearns for the past of the Hungarian Empire, and the Ukrainian Svoboda and related ‘groupuscules’ of Neo-Nazis for the lost power they briefly held during the Nazi era and the ‘Third Reich’. Wodak maintains that a ‘new narrative of the past is formulated which addresses different parts of the electorate, former collaborators and their sympathisers, as well as anti-fascists, all at the same time, and thus employs a strategy of calculated ambivalence in embracing both fascist symbols as well as nationalist Ukrainian ones’.

Anything goes: Throughout the text, Wodak draws attention to how effectively the right wing dominates the media across Europe. She (p9) refers to Italian politician Silvio Berlusconi who established a new kind of populism which focused on the media’s total control via ownership and censorship. She labels this form of populism Berlusconiisation. This relationship between the press and the rise of right-wing populism is the key, for Wodak, to its success. She draws attention to the notion of the ‘Haiderization of Europe’, pointing out that in Austria on 3 October 1999, the Freedom Party (FPÖ) won 27.2 per cent of the votes, after running an election campaign centred on blatant and explicit racist slogans against foreigners. During the campaign, the Social Democratic Party (SPÖ) as well as the People’s Party (ÖVP) (both forming a grand coalition government up to October 1999) seemed paralysed. The headline of the tabloid *Neue Kronenzeitung* (Austria’s most popular newspaper, and in terms of readership in relation to the population, the most widely read newspaper in the world) already celebrated Haider’s ‘March into the Chancellery’ four days ahead of the actual election.’ The underlying purpose of such top-down media interventions is to construct fear and to constantly ‘frame’ the agenda with their key recent topos of Brexit in the UK and migration in Europe throughout. In order to reinforce such views, the media orientates towards scandalous incidents to enable appearances of right wing populist politicians, by highlighting their ever more outrageous utterances and behaviours.

Conclusion: Wodak (p188) believes that we, as educators, should not fall into the demagogic and political trap of right-wing populism. This entails setting ‘alternative frames and agendas, endorsing and also disseminating alternative concepts, such as equality, diversity and solidarity.’ Since the publication of this book, the popular and grassroots strategic approaches around Bernie Sanders and ‘We are the 99%’ in the USA, ‘Momentum’ supporting Jeremy Corbyn in England and the Scottish Independence Convention are all calling for ‘Restorative Narratives’ in the sense that George Monbiot (2017) is currently demanding. All of them, along with Wodak, are urging us to support the ‘Stories of Ordinary People’ in order to construct a positive imagery of solidarity and inclusiveness - a narrative similar to the ‘Spirit of 45’ that does not fall into the trap of a politics of fear and envy. As Wodak (p189) puts it, our task is to ‘reformulate values such as equality, justice, democracy, education, multilingualism, diversity and solidarity – all of which are fundamental European values as stated in the Copenhagen Declaration of 1973 ... in ways attuned to the necessities of the 21st Century.’

References

- Monbiot, George (2017) *Out of the Wreckage, A New Politics for an Age of Crisis*
London, Verso
- Shaw, Mae & Crowther, Jim (2017) *Community Engagement: A Critical Guide for Practitioners*
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