

Society's 'new normal'? The role of discourse in surveillance and silencing of dissent during and post Covid-19

Abstract

Within the historical materialist tradition, communication is principally understood to occur in concrete social contexts which are continually shifting in real socio-historical environments. Such a view of language and communication enables for an examination of media narratives in fast changing political landscapes surrounding the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular the manner in which normalisation of the discourses of surveillance takes place in the time of the health crisis. In examining surveillance practices and silencing of dissent in capitalism, we point to the dangers of a newly emergent narrative of the 'new normal' which threatens a violation of human rights and civil liberties.

1.0 Introduction

The central aim of the article is to bring to the fore a number of socio-historical and political arguments that question a capitalist structure of society, which assumes an array of oppressive and discriminatory practices on populations across the world. In the time of an unprecedented loss of life through the spread of the Covid-19 disease, the impact of such crises disproportionately affects our society divided by class, mired in racism, scapegoating of migrant and other 'undesirable' communities. Significantly, the current public health crisis has been used by some governments to silence dissent, introduce extraordinary surveillance measures under the pre-text of the 'new normal', and consequently fortify and strengthen their power. We further suggest that language use and principally media narratives in such social situations, and in particular in fast changing political landscapes, play a vital role in how such discourse might be understood and accepted by populations. A supplementary question is related to the ways in which normalising much of the surveillance discourse in the public sphere might assist governments to change legislation and states' constitutional and legal powers with less public resistance than what would be considered 'normal' times. These discussions and examinations of the political and the social cannot be achieved without at least a brief assessment of the history of pandemics and their consequences. We argue for a historical materialist method of such an analysis in the form of history writing based on the theoretical underpinnings of Lev Vygotsky, a Marxist psychologist, instrumental in the development of the cultural-historical psychology which places the development of human consciousness at the centre of the theoretical argument. We thus position the role of language, and discourse, as inextricably and dialectically connected with concrete historical and social events. We further use this opportunity to give primacy to such an approach to other discourse frameworks that have attracted great attention in the recent decades within research on language and communication, namely Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). In the next section we thus start with the relationship between language on the one hand, and context and history on the other, and through it outline in some detail our theoretical position. Section 3.1 focuses on the relevant historical events that help us contextualise our argument, whilst in section 3.2 we explore a number of resurgent surveillance practices and examples of silencing dissent in the context of Covid-19 pandemic. The consequences of the narrative of the 'new normal' are discussed in section 4. We offer concluding remarks in section 5.

2.0 Theoretical underpinnings: Language, Context and History

Linguistic frameworks so far developed that engage with the role of discourse in processes of social and political change, methodologically sit outside of a concrete understanding of the interconnected circumstances in and through which such discourses might arise. This manner of thinking seems characteristic of the practitioners of Critical Discourse Analysis - CDA (cf. Fairclough 1992, 2001), who attempt to connect linguistics to ‘the social’ but fail to recognise that discourse itself is an activity in a particular moment in the generative process of social life of particular communities in particular times and places. The linguistic methods used by CDA thus prevent us from understanding the political and ideological significance of particular communicative practices and processes. Let us briefly explore the reasons why, partly through a short précis of the development of discourse studies.

Discourse analysis has become a diverse area of study which subsumes a variety of approaches in a number of disciplines. Various surveys make a binary distinction between “critical” and “non-critical” approaches, where the former not only describe discursive practices (typically a characteristics of the latter) but also examine how “discourse is shaped by relations of power and ideologies, and the constructive effects [it] has upon social identities, social relations and systems of knowledge and belief” (Fairclough 1992: 12). Of course, this distinction is not absolute by any means. CDA is a sociolinguistic approach that incorporates a number of practices which investigate discourse from a perspective of the social but they differ in theory, method and the type of issues critical language researchers focus on (Fairclough 2001b). In what follows we allude to potential difficulties with the difference in practice.

The complexities associated with different traditions within CDA further point to differences in how we understand and define *discourse* within this approach. *Discourse* has been commonly used to include “meaning-making as an element of the social process” (Fairclough 2012: 11). It can also be associated with a particular social field of practice (e.g. political discourse); or it can represent a particular social perspective constructed around an aspect of the world we might be grappling with, such as the topic of this paper. Fairclough (2012: 11) further points out that the first, most abstract sense, could be equated to *semiosis* and as such discourse is understood as being concerned with various “semiotic modalities, of which language is only one [...]. [O]thers are visual images and “body language”. These elements of the social process are *dialectically* related to each other, in other words, they are different but not *discrete* (i.e. fully separate): “each one ‘internalises’ the other without being reducible to them” (Harvey 1996, cited in Fairclough 2012: 11; see also Fairclough 2001a: 123).

Fairclough (2001b: 232) pays particular attention to social order and the way social practices constitute it. This order can be examined by assessing a particular social ordering of relationships (through different discourse, genre and style) or it can be viewed through “dominance” where “some ways of making meaning are dominant or mainstream, some are marginal, oppositional or ‘alternative’” (2001b: 232). A political concept of *hegemony* appears to play a significant role in Fairclough’s *dialectical theory of discourse*, which is not as explicitly applied in other forms of critical practices within CDA. That there are concerns with the philosophical positioning of this aspect of CDA, as understood by Marxist thinkers, is another element of contention amongst those who take issue with the method of CDA. Fairclough (1992: 92) characterises hegemony both as leadership and domination within political, social, cultural and ideological realms of society. This conception of hegemony, he argues, is in line with the dialectical view of the relationship between “discursive structures”

and “events” (Fairclough 1992: 93). So, on the one hand *order of discourse* in itself is hegemonic in nature as it can contribute to the changes in meaning in relation to *dominance*. On the other hand, how social actors articulate or rearticulate orders of discourse and consequently change those in relation to *dominance* is an essential aspect of hegemonic struggle. Then, relatedly, “production, distribution and consumption (including interpretation) of texts”, which constitute discursive practice, are all aspects of hegemonic struggle because they contribute to the changes of the existing order of discourse as well as impacting on existing social and power relations (Fairclough 1992: 93). Arguably, we could understand some aspects of the normalisation of the discourse of surveillance (in other words changes in the meaning in relation to consumption of media narratives) as order of discourse as understood by Fairclough. Section 3.2 offers some examples.

The concept of hegemony could thus help us to do three things: analyse the social practice within which the discourse belongs; enable us to use it as a model or a way in which we analyse discourse that itself is an instance of hegemonic struggle, and thirdly it can help us facilitate a way in which we can pursue various struggles through language (Timotijevic 2016). The question however remains whether the methods and ideological variations of Critical Discourse Analysis assist us in showing that discourse is an integral element of the real historical development of events and practices, and that it also helps us uncover the indicators for such a development, including important moments of change. In the next section we argue that analysis of discourse can be most successfully conducted using the cultural-historical tradition of history writing.

2.1 Analysis of discourse as a form of history writing

In the previous section we sketched out some of the central elements within the tradition of critical language research and specifically Critical Discourse Analysis, namely to illustrate ways in which the method of CDA has developed towards linking the tools of linguistics and discourse analysis to a critical theory of power and ideology. Our hesitation is with CDA’s engagement, or a lack thereof, with the question of *history and context*, as reflected in the concerns by, arguably one of the key figures in the creation of critical language school, Fowler (1996). An issue Fowler was grappling with early on centred around a contradiction that was developing in critical language research, where, on the one hand practitioners were, rightly, placing great emphasis on the role of *context*; and on the other there was an assumption by practitioners that (ideological) context was somehow assumed, and shared, by the audiences. Consequently, notwithstanding the importance of the role of linguistics in this respect, linguistic analysis of discourse was likely to “provide some privilege of access to the interpretation of text” (Fowler 1996: 9-10). Instead, Fowler argued, what is needed to “understand the text” is to “bring to it relevant experience of discourse and context”; thus, “[l]inguistic description” would then take place “at a later stage, as a means of getting some purchase on the significances that one has heuristically assigned to the text” (1996: 9). Collins and Jones (2006: 52) purport to similar concerns with the method in CDA: the role of discourse (or the significance of linguistic analysis) in processes of social and political change cannot be undertaken “outside of a concrete understanding of the interconnected circumstances in and through which [discourse] arises”. The procedure of CDA in this respect appears problematic as it attempts to make claims about the interrelationship between aspects of sentence structure and the alleged ideological orientation of a relevant section of discourse. It follows that we can somehow draw reliable conclusions about the events in question, and about the consequences of those events, from linguistic descriptions of the sentences.

The last point brings us back to the concern we alluded to above, centred around the ideological orientation of the practitioner often assumed as shared by those engaging with it. It is not our intention to challenge at length the ideological orientation of CDA practitioners, since we, broadly, support a general direction of travel. The point however is that an *interpretation* of a text is rather more informed by a practitioner's ideological position and view of the context in question than by their knowledge of *grammar*, bringing therefore into question the methodological rigour of CDA. As Jones (2007) and Jones & Collins (2006: 28) observe, what appear to be the same or similar meanings of words or word phrases in one text, or different texts, may not be how the reader of those texts may conceive of those meanings. Thus the processes of understanding word/utterance meaning rest on an interpretation of what we know and how we assess relevant facts and circumstances, what we can find out, what has been said about a particular topic on given occasions by different persons.

To attempt to assist with inconsistencies both in relation to ideological underpinnings of CDA and methods for analyses of text, and thus supply further theoretical rigour, we propose a perspective found in the cultural-historical and activity theory tradition. Such tradition is rooted in Soviet psychology, mainly reflected in the writings of Vygotsky, and other historical figures of the time. Vygotsky is indeed mostly regarded as a psychologist, although his work has recently been largely reinvigorated in educational and pedagogic research, as well as within studies on language and communication. One of the key contributions of Vygotsky's work (mainly obscured, and banned throughout the Stalinist era) is his account of the development of human consciousness (Vygotsky 1934/1986; 1934/1987; Collins 2000). The particular tradition is rooted in historical materialism which sees language as humans' *concrete* "practical consciousness" Marx and Engels (1845: 51), only able to exist if socially organised individuals engage and communicate through the use of *sign* (Voloshinov 1929). Thus, utterances, and discourse, are concrete manifestations of language use. They are spoken by living subjects, located within a specific social and historical perspective, and are interactive in a sense that they are responses to others' utterances. Communication understood in this way reveals the various processes of change, shifts and developments "without which language would have no history to speak of" (Collins 2000: 44). Utterances are accordingly spoken by "living subjects" in concrete social contexts (Collins 1996: 74), and at the same time represent verbal interaction between interlocutors in continually shifting real socio-historical conditions (Timotijevic 2018: 195).

Similarly, for Vygotsky, grasping a phenomenon of *socio-cultural and historical* means grasping social phenomena *concretely*, "in their 'internal relations' to other phenomena in a developing system" (Collins and Jones 2006: 53). This idea applies to consciousness as a whole and also to the *internal* dynamics of consciousness itself. Thus, understanding consciousness is understanding not only how human mental functions operate but also what the inter-relations are between those functions, such as speech, memory, perception and so on (Collins 2000). In order to grasp the constitution of consciousness, we need to understand that is it intrinsically linked to the *social* and the *historical* means, language being the key instrument in that process which connects individuals to the world, other people and to themselves. Collins and Jones (2006: 53) argue that discourse is produced "*in and through* the 'logic of evolving activity'", which then gives relevance to the study of social change (our emphasis). This perspective thus suggests that an engagement with discourse starts from a form of *history writing* in order to firstly examine how it evolves as a product of the real historical development that considers significant moments of social change, be that within communities or other social structures. This engagement enables then an analysis of

discourse in the new light by examining how particular uses of language were generated from “within, and out of” particular historical developments (Collins and Jones 2006: 53).

We therefore propose to apply the above methodological principle to the analysis of the recently emerging narratives of surveillance practices consequent upon the current pandemic, noting however that we do not claim to have determined a specific methodological approach; rather we propose a historical materialist analysis of socio- historical conditions following Vygotsky, in an attempt to produce a more substantial account of a pattern of sociohistorical developments which in turn can help account for discursive processes in language use.

In what follows we seek to show this method in practice by offering an analytical account of an emerging discourse and practices of mainly digital surveillance and attempts to silence dissent consequent upon the Covid-19 pandemic crises.

3.0 Brief history of pandemics and current context

In order to grasp the way in which history and social context concretely influence and shape states’ responses to the current pandemic, including the reasons for growing surveillance and other forms of draconian measures introduced by various governments to exert varied levels of control on populations, a brief history of past epidemics and responses within a capitalist system should provide useful insights. Although not a central topic of this paper, the historical context will expose other forms of oppression, in particular racism, xenophobia and transphobia.

3.1 A brief history of pandemics and causes

Arguably, it is tempting to treat pandemics as ‘natural’ phenomena, present in as early as hunter-gatherer societies. People would at times be exposed to infectious diseases from other animals or the environment; inevitably some would succumb to a particular virus, others would develop immunity. In sketching a brief development of human societies and therefore an increase in pandemics’ outbreaks, we argue that there is nothing ‘natural’ about those diseases, including Covid-19: rather, they take place and are consequent upon social, political and economic contexts, which also contribute to mutation of viruses, ways in which they change hosts and impact living organisms (cf. Choonara 2020). We also briefly explore how the narratives of origins of viruses influence political discourses shared across the world’s governments.

With the Neolithic Revolution some 10,000 years ago, we see a development of agricultural societies and with it population growth. Accumulation of human waste, coupled with domestication of livestock now living in close proximity to people, were conditions ripe for the development and spread of pathogens. Dehner (2012) adds that war, immigration and trade were further contributing factors to the spread of disease. Choonara (2020) offers a number of examples where trade, war or conquest led to the exposure to various diseases. One example is the spread of smallpox through the Roman Empire in 165AD which led to a 15-year epidemic killing, it is estimated, a third of the population. Common is the example of Bubonic plague, spread through merchant ships via black rats between the year 541 and 767, in the Mediterranean region, reducing the population by tens of millions. In his 2007 work, Sherman suggests that one of the causes of this plague could be climate change which precipitated an explosion of the rats’ population, pushing them out of their natural habitat and

into a great proximity with people, a stark reminder of the consequences of human-generated climate change today (2007: 73-74). The infamous Black Plague that swept Europe from 1346, with regular bubonic plague outbreaks until late 17th century, is another example of extended shipping and trading networks, as well as an increase in population density, lack of sanitation and rat-infested streets.

Colonisation is another mechanism of oppression where we can find evidence that the rise in pandemics stems from social, political and economic contexts of a particular time in history. The Black Plague spread from Europe to the Americas with devastating effects exacerbated by the brutality of colonial empire-building. McNeill (1976) reports a wipe-out of approximately 90 per cent of the population of Mexico in the half century from 1568, largely from smallpox, along with mumps and measles. Seventeen and eighteen centuries Europe were also times plagued by smallpox causing 400,000 deaths annually (Sherman 2007: 56; Choonara 2020). In this context, Harrison (2016) examines the preoccupation with the role of human transmission of cholera and yellow fever by the imperial powers, in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Whilst the “Victorian ‘Age of Pandemics’ was unprecedented” because it affected all inhabited continents, many contemporaries still did not admit that populations were dealing with “pandemics”, thus with diseases of a highly contagious nature (Harrison 2016: 131). Further, many British historians, including medical professionals of the time, tended to support a “localised” view of disease, predominantly for commercial and geopolitical reasons, citing local phenomena such as particular places and climates as reasons for outbreaks and spreads of disease, notwithstanding racist connotations associated with colonised populations living on those lands. At the other end of the spectrum, French authorities favoured the “communicability of diseases” explanation and consequently the need for quarantine, partly, Harrison suggests, to “disrupt British interests” (2016: 130-132). Further, colonisation of India by the British Empire, and consequent movement of people and goods contributed to the spread of cholera, which had been prevalent in India for centuries. It was further spread to Russia and China, and then to the Mediterranean by the British Troops (Choonara 2020).

Early 1900s, Harrison continues, see advances in the field of medicine and infectious diseases, and with some recognition of the role of human transition, in particular in the cases of cholera and yellow fever. Thus greater agreement amongst states is noted on the need to regulate the movement of both humans and animals. Many states developed their own quarantine measures but often as a “pretext for intervention by imperial powers”, disrupting therefore commercial trade and commerce (2016: 132). Despite numerous examples of exploitation of colonised nations during pandemics, research further illustrates that early 20th century developing economies, led specifically by economic imperatives, were increasingly open to application of alternative preventative measures to that of quarantine, such as fumigation of ships and standardisation of the measures on an international scale in order to reduce damage to trade (cf. Harrison 2016; Huber 2013).

Another significant moment of social change, brought on predominantly by further industrialisation and exploitation of workers, can be illustrated by Britain’s economic and technological advances through the 19th century, which left workers living in squalid conditions, overcrowded, poorly ventilated and generally poor neighbourhoods of industrial hubs such as the English North, and cities like Manchester. These conditions resulted in the outbreak of cholera, about which Engels wrote on at least two occasions:

When the epidemic was approaching, a universal terror seized the bourgeoisie of the city. People remembered the unwholesome dwellings of the poor, and trembled before the certainty that each of these slums would become a centre of the plague, whence it would spread desolation in all directions through the houses of the propertied class.

(1993[1845]: 75)

Modern natural science has proved that the so-called 'bad districts', in which the workers are crowded together, are the breeding places of all those epidemics which from time to time afflict our towns. Cholera, typhus, typhoid fever, smallpox and other ravaging diseases...the capitalist order of society reproduces again and again the evils to be remedied.

(1998[1872]: 337-338)

The conditions Engels described in the 19th century can today be found in countries like Palestine, Yemen, Brazil, Iran and others, where continuous displacement of peoples, modern day war-fare and thus colonisation, accelerated urbanisation and consequent formation of slums, have led to scarce medical resources, poor health systems and in some instances disease outbreaks.¹

The emergence of pandemics remains a significant threat in the contemporary world, as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to press upon us a necessity to reassess the changing nature of our societies. Much research on pandemics in recent decades draws our attention towards the issues associated with contemporary agricultural systems and livestock industrial complexes as spaces that generate viruses (cf. Davis 2006). We however suggest that a development and expansion of agricultural industry are a result of a broader expansion of commodity production and consequently a disruption of ecosystems and climate change. Commonly known, but hidden from view, are capital investments in a form of land grabs of the remaining forests for the purposes of farming, creating therefore the appropriate conditions for emergence of disease (Choonara 2020). These socio-political and historical materialist conditions are central to our understanding of social change. A few examples help to illustrate the point. The 2013 Ebola outbreak was transmitted by bats, a population that was drawn out of its natural habitat because of the US, European and Chinese multinational corporations' expansion of oil palm plantations for food and shelter in the Guinea Savannah area, creating appropriate conditions for zoonosis (Wallace, et. al. 2015; Choonara 2020). Secondly, the H5N1 and H1N1 strains of influenza resulted in mortality rates comparable to seasonal flu, however both should have been viewed as alarming signals to governments and health organisations of the dangers generated through large-scale industrial operations, poorly regulated yet expanded farming practices of mixing different kinds of animals, as well as resulting in expansion of wet markets (cf. Dehner 2012; Wallace 2009).

The two types of corona viruses that emerged in 2003 (SARS) and in 2012 (MERS) also appear to suggest the issues associated with a destruction of eco-systems and an intensified mixing of the urban and the rural activities, indicating their increasing interdependence in the rapidly developing economies (Wallace 2009; Choonara 2020). In the case of MERS, the

¹ Flecknoe et.al. offer important insights into the consequences of war on the spread of pandemics, focusing on the Great War as well as more recent conflicts in the latter part of the 20th and now the 21st century.

carrier appears to have been dromedary camels between bats and humans. Evidence indicates that Saudi Arabia has operated an intensive farming of camels, as well as trade in camels for racing and shows between Arab states, having consequently resulted in mixing of different strains of corona virus, leading thus to the outbreak (Choonara 2020).

A brief sketching out of the changes of social structures through centuries, largely accelerated by the development of the capitalist order and thusly persistent extrapolation of wealth largely from the colonised populations, have indicated the importance of history writing and historical-political analyses, which enable us to then examine how such events evolve as a product of the real historical development that considers significant moments of social change, either within communities or other social structures. Our examples have helped us to illustrate the impact of capitalist development and extraction of wealth, and later in the 20th and 21st centuries the implementation of the neoliberal project, and how these have contributed to the spread of disease. We have further illustrated the world infused with class division, racism, imperialist conflict and climate change as common elements that have for centuries been leading us towards the destruction of species, and our planet; and with it, as the current pandemic has sharply put into focus, cataclysmic mortality rates. In the next two sections we show the importance of this context to various governments' responses to the current crises.

3.2 Language and concrete action: surveillance practices and silencing dissent in the context of Covid-19 pandemic

In the brief analysis above, we have noted the consequences of mass capitalist expansion of rich states related to disease outbreaks. For those states, pandemics have therefore been regarded as threats to the stability of their wealth. However, a range of additional, complex threats, particularly during and since the WWII, became more explicit, often related to issues of security and risk, and thus described through the “language of risk”, reflecting a range of growing uncertainties: scientifically, economically and related to the future of the planet (Harrison 2016: 136). ‘Security’, Harrison (2016: 134) argues, is an elusive term used by the nation states to refer to a range of “global risks”, which includes risks of pandemics. Arguably, its ambiguous use, its subjective element understood differently by different states, over time and in different historical contexts, raises questions of the relationship between security and liberty and human rights (cf. Loader and Walker 2007; Harrison 2016). Within the realm of public health, security measures (such as quarantine arrangements) employed by states for purposes of ‘common good’ and collective responsibility for public health, have been used not only to keep disease at bay but for social control. Harrison (2016: 134) adds:

Even when it comes to secular action designed to defend the integrity and stability of nation states, the modern principle of security fails to encompass the numerous ways in which public health has been used as statecraft...Sanitary measures have also evolved from an exclusive focus on nation states to the policing of international networks – a process in which global and regional bodies have assumed increasing importance.

Similarly, the language of risk associated with the assessment of pandemic threats has been ambiguous and has changed from earlier times to its use over the last few decades. Harrison (2016) reports uses of terms such as ‘threats’, ‘dangers’ or ‘menaces’ up to the time of the WWI, with the language of ‘risk’ being introduced after the Great War, encompassing other forms of risk, increasingly in order to serve other political objectives. Whilst pandemic

prevention was the overriding aim, the main purpose of risk assessments and interventions thereafter was to protect the interests of states. Harrison's (2016: 135) example centres around the complexities of refugee relief activities in Eastern Europe and the Balkans, as well as the Middle East, after WWI, where 'public health' is primarily viewed through the prism of political and economic consequences for the imperialist states.

The changes in discourse and uses of the language of risk could perhaps be best exemplified within the narrative of "medical intelligence" (Harrison 2016: 135), itself a loaded term with a plethora of insinuations and implications. During and since the WWII (including the most recent imperialist wars in the Middle East), occupying states have conducted detailed risk assessments and intelligence gathering of both occupied territories and newly liberated countries for a multiple of purposes: protection of military personnel, operational planning in combat missions, social stability, as well as surveillance of ideologically 'problematic' regimes of the communist states, with a view to mitigating the threats from disease. Harrison further suggests that pandemics also posed threats to homeland security. He uses HIV/AIDS as an illustration of a range of issues prevalent at the time, in particular a declaration of the US National Intelligence Council of 2001 that listed HIV/AIDS as a "direct threat to the interests of US citizens, especially in countries in which the US had important economic and strategic interests" (2016: 136). Ironically, this doctrine originated in the work of the British intelligence services (2016: 136). Further, the narrative which developed in the media, largely as a reflection of the view of political elites and often far right and religious fundamentalist groups, was that of ruthless homophobia and persecution of homosexuals in particular, initially through homophobic language by the state and the media, which gave legitimacy to concrete acts of violence and persecution, including imprisonment.

An outbreak of SARS is noteworthy in this context as it emerged in the wake of the 2001 terrorist attacks, and was thus mired in the discourse and rhetoric of the 'war on terror'. Although SARS was comparatively a 'mild' outbreak, uncertainties around its behaviour and therefore spread, created anxieties amongst the capitalist elites that the global economy would be destabilised. Perhaps unsurprisingly therefore the narrative around protection of borders and nations' sovereignty became dominant at the time, placing blame on, predominantly Middle-Eastern states with whom the West had already been waging imperialist wars, as culprits in not only sponsoring terrorism but also spread of infectious disease (cf. Fidler 2004). This narrative, Harrison (2016) writes, resulted in quarantine and isolation actions, violations of which met severe punishments in a number of countries. Harrison argues that those draconian measures were consequent upon fear instilled in poorer countries, economically inferior to the likes of the US and Western Europe, in the face of possible "censure and the loss of business and investment" (2016: 138). That the political context and associated narratives of such fear exemplified here can have devastating consequences in practice, can also be seen in the racism that penetrated the social and economic contexts of many African countries during the recent Ebola outbreak: discouragement of travel to those countries, ban on business developments and diplomatic travel. Ferrell and Agarwal (2018) write:

...[D]uring the Ebola epidemic in 2014, many countries responded by shutting down borders and banning flights to Sierra Leone, Guinea and Liberia in attempts to 'quarantine' the outbreak. Later studies demonstrated that these flight bans were not only ineffective in controlling the spread of disease, but, at times, kept vital

humanitarian assistance from reaching the epidemic, effectively providing conditions for the outbreak to grow...²

Both in the case of HIV/AIDS and SARS exemplified above, following Vygotsky (1934/1986), we see *socio-cultural and historical* elements at play in concrete social change, and consequently the development of human consciousness shaped by political narratives and events: marginalisation of particular communities that posed alleged threats, development of homophobic discourse, discourse of fear which forces concrete draconian measures on populations, and so on. Thus, one of the ways to grasp the constitution of consciousness is to understand that it is intrinsically linked to the *social* and the *historical* means, where particular discourse and narrative patterns (i.e. language) are the key instruments in that process which connect individuals to the world, other people and to themselves.

In a number of the above examples common patterns have emerged related to the ways in which state sponsored surveillance techniques have been justified under the pretext of the ‘common good’ of the nation states and the protection of public health from disease. Neither this narrative, nor the rationale for surveillance and monitoring, is new: governments around the world have for many decades used the language of ‘protecting the nation’, ‘protecting our borders’, and ‘protecting public good’, to justify various war practices during their imperialist endeavours, most recently in the Middle East. Further, in the UK, surveillance and intelligence-gathering to obtain alleged ‘domestic extremist’ data on protest movements and activists is collected and stored without the knowledge of the people monitored, subsequent to a number of successful appeals by the Metropolitan Police to the Supreme Court in the past decade, making such activities lawful, despite many legal representatives providing evidence in court that such surveillance activities (of people who are not even suspected of criminal activity) violate privacy rights under Article 8 of the Human Rights Act.³

Vital to the propagation of these types of narrative are the media: a central mouthpiece for the state apparatus pertinent to the capitalist structures of society. Thus, the emergent crisis of the Covid-19 outbreak places the role of media narratives back in conversation with the field of surveillance practices. Before turning to surveillance issues pertinent to the current pandemic outbreak, we briefly explore the dynamics of the news media. Mass media, be it newspapers, social media, mass media institutions, continue to perform a role of socially significant actors. In line with our insertion above, Barnard-Wills (2011: 551) argues that the media continues to be the dominant means of ideological production, producing representations of the social world and helping “to establish and maintain the hegemony of specific social groups by producing and promulgating social myths and imaginaries”. Drawing on Monahan (2010) and Torfing (2003), Barnard-Wills (2011: 550-552) asks us to also consider media discourse as a means of resistance and a source for “counterhegemonic struggle”. Whilst media (re)produces and sustains hegemonic representations of surveillance, this, he argues, is not always the full or the accurate picture since media reporting itself reinterprets and rearticulates discourses of surveillance, having drawn them from other discursive sources. Noteworthy are the assertions by Street (2001) and Altheide (1995) who suggest that public’s trust in the (mainstream) media narratives and consequent social impact are highly dependent on the availability and exposure to alternative narratives, as well as social context and social

² <http://harvardpublichealthreview.org/ferrell/>

³ <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/ng-interactive/2018/oct/15/uk-political-groups-spied-on-undercover-police-list>
<http://www.stopwar.org.uk/index.php/usa-war-on-terror/997...>
<https://www.theguardian.com/uk/2009/mar/06/police-surveillance-protesters-journalists-climate-kingsnorth>

interaction. We find similar thinking in Vygotsky. Central to the ability and opportunities to challenge dominant media narratives largely rest on our understanding of communication as a means to reveal the various processes of change, shifts and developments in concrete social contexts where communicative interaction between interlocutors takes place in continually shifting real socio-historical conditions. Seeing production of discourse through the logic of involving activity enables us to consider alternative narratives (to those controlled by states) and analyse discourse in the new light from a historical materialist position, examining thus how particular uses of language were generated from within, and out of particular historical developments.

Some of those challenges have forced many, modern, governments, judiciary, and researchers in the fields of communication, media, social science and surveillance, to re-examine the tensions between surveillance and transparency. In the ensuing paragraphs we offer some reflections on the issue, particularly pertinent in the developing narrative that surveillance is a “price worth paying” in beating Covid-19.⁴ We do so from the viewpoint that in modern states the broadly shared experience of being watched has been normalised – in other words, “the public have internalised the surveillance gaze of the state” (Brucato 2015: 42; cf. Foucault 1979; Marx 2006). There exists an abundance of views on the concept of transparency, which can be found both in the historical and ideological origins of the term, and practice. Researchers have suggested that the concept is tightly connected to a “degraded form of democracy and harbours widely maligned presumptions about information, knowledge, and their connection to political action” (cf. Brucato 2015: 39). Transparency appears to also be connected with some standard of moral regulation that holds individuals or different groups to account. Surveillance adds “strategic watching” normally regulated and approved by those in charge of regulatory schemes, and mostly performed by those in position of far greater power, such as the police surveillance units, than those being watched. In politics, transparency largely serves to at least give a perception of accountability: political organisations, its officials and government policies are (or should be) visible in order to be held to account (Brucato 2015). Since the Covid-19 pandemic, we have seen that most modern states have adopted similar daily practices of news reporting and press conferences, through which, using illustratively the words of the British Prime Minister’s pledge to the country, [the government] would act with “maximum possible transparency” in sharing with the British people the government’s approach to the pandemic and its economic consequences.⁵ The British Financial Times in the same article, presumably to offer a ‘balanced’ analysis, accuses the Prime Minister of “empty sloganeering” that also dominated his post-Brexit referendum election campaign (‘get Brexit done’). The latter won him the election. In the same breath the paper’s editorial invites the readership to consider the benefits and drawbacks of cautionary views about the benefits of transparency taken by both Conservative and Labour governments in modern times. Perhaps more revealing from these lines is the issue of an increased “neoliberalisation of political transparency” (Brucato 2015: 43) of reformist governments of various political orientations, predominantly focused on wealth expansion of the minority. Birchall (2011b) and Brucato (2015) tell us that reassertion of transparency appears when trust in governments is diminishing (perhaps illustrative of the need for the intervention of the kind shown by the example of the speech by the British PM). In contemporary times, the neoliberalisation of all aspects of our lives ensures that we have private oversight of state of affairs, and as consumers we exert our power through consumer

⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/24/surveillance-a-price-worth-paying-to-beat-coronavirus-says-blair-thinktank>

⁵ <https://www.ft.com/content/554ee015-883a-4053-a697-74680218589a>

action as well as the ballot box. Birchall (2011b: 65, cited in Brucato 2015: 43) suggests that this represents a “neoliberal ethos of governance” through promoting “individualism, entrepreneurship, voluntary forms of regulation and formalised types of accountability”. In the consumer-led society, and increasingly lowered consumer costs of electronics, the availability of those new forms of “technologies of surveillance” means that we can be both “objects and agents of intelligence (Birchall 2011a: 11). Yesil (2011: 285, cited in Brucato 2015: 45) call this a “viewer society” where individuals are both under surveillance by government agencies, corporations and state institutions, and are surveillers themselves, as they watch and scrutinise events through mass media and television. However, whilst social media and other forms of new technologies appear to have opened up information sharing and thus allegedly liberated an abundance of information from traditional political-economic filters (Brucato 2015), it must be emphasised that mainstream media as the key organ of the state, continues to legitimise state power, whilst in its narration appears as if it is holding it to account so that in the readers’ consciousness at least it reports a seemingly balanced view of events in question. Articles in the British Financial Times and the Guardian (footnotes 5 and 4, respectively) are illustrative of the preservation of such traditional media reporting. What is crucial in the two articles, and we argue can be generalised out to the majority of mainstream press, is the important role such ostensibly balanced reporting plays in situations when, in the case of new draconian surveillance measures being introduced to combat Covid-19, such news items are neutralised, yet impact on one’s consciousness. In time, and with persistent narrative techniques, such discourse is normalised; it is arguably only a matter of time before changes in people’s social consciousness enable governments to take concrete action with little public dissent.

This context leads us to some repeated patterns in the wake of the current pandemic, and enables us to discuss a sharp turn towards normalising the discourse of surveillance practices that have already been implemented, or are likely to be part of the ‘new normal’ as governments press upon the messages of the need for the new measures to protect public health. It should be noted that the growth in surveillance techniques in recent weeks should not be seen as a feature of only authoritarian governments. The UK based Guardian newspaper has reported that at least twenty-five countries have been developing a range of mobile tracking devices, in particular applications which can record and centrally store personal information. In addition to the methods developed as part of ‘contact tracing’, other measures have also been employed in order to enforce social isolation regimes and in a number of cases, stricter lockdown measures and curfews. The mechanisms used have been networks such as CCTV equipped with facial recognition technology, permission schemes for leaving homes and going outside, as well as drones.⁶

One of the key questions arising from the current narratives centres around the language of ‘freedom of choice’ in the neoliberal context we alluded to above, compared to that of a loss of civil liberties consequent upon an introduction of a tracking system via a particular mobile application. China is one of the first countries that has made instalments of ‘health application’ mandatory. Reports have come from Moscow of the deployment of 100,000 surveillance cameras and other forms of recognition technology to enforce self-isolation measures (see footnote 6). The Russian authorities have reportedly pressurised mainstream media outlets and social media users to control the narrative of the outbreak, as numbers of

⁶ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/14/growth-in-surveillance-may-be-hard-to-scale-back-after-coronavirus-pandemic-experts-say>

infections continue to rise. In Israel, a country with already well-established, controversial surveillance techniques, a series of emergency measures have been passed, which include authorisation of an unprecedented electronic surveillance of citizens, including measures to postpone or slowdown outstanding court hearings, affecting a conduct of a corruption trial of its own care-taker prime minister Netanyahu. We have seen in previous sections that additional political and social factors contribute in more devastating ways to the pandemic crises of this kind in countries affected by war, displacement of people, poor healthcare systems, and the like. For the Palestinian population that has already been facing displacement and takeover of its land for decades, living daily under a range of draconian and surveillance measures, the additional authoritarian practices introduced under the guise of Covid-19 outbreak could rapidly worsen the treatment of Palestinian people and violate human rights.

Actions by the Hungarian government have attracted particular attention in international media. Many have written that the most recent measures related to Covid-19, which reflect racist and xenophobic practices and give absolute power without an end date to its leader Viktor Orbán, are a “warning to the world”.⁷ Those measures are a direct violation of freedom of protest and assembly, silencing dissent in most draconian ways so far adopted by one of the member states of the European Union. Additionally, the bill allows the state to imprison journalists, medical practitioners and legal professional if it deemed that they distorted facts about the pandemic and consequently spread ‘fake news’. Such policing of free speech extends further to the full control of the media discourses, unless the reporting primarily focuses on official government narrative. We have noted in several places that racist discourse has played a significant part in explaining away disease outbreaks. Hungary’s problems with both islamophobia and racism, as well as the stigmatisation and oppression of the Roma population, have been further highlighted with the outbreak of Covid-19. The racist campaign began when two Iranian medical students were tested positive for Covid-19 (footnote 7), providing the Hungarian authorities with more opportunities to further advance anti-migrant discourse.

In one of the countries of the Balkan Peninsula, Serbia, soldiers have patrolled the streets with fingers on machine gun triggers. An open-ended state of emergency was declared on 15th March, a 12-hour police-enforced curfew imposed (which over time extended to entire weekends) and people over 65 have been prevented from leaving their households. A human rights chief of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe stated that states of emergency “must include a time limit and parliamentary oversight”, neither of which took place in Serbia.⁸

Current media reporting in the UK press is preparing its population for voluntary installation of a contact tracing application. Its daily press conferences increasingly discuss the benefits of such contact tracing and encourage people, once available, to download it, promoting a narrative of confidence in the British public, presumably in hope that it would comply. In the previous sections of the article we addressed the interrelationship that often exists between compliance with surveillance techniques and that of transparency, and therefore public trust in the accountability of governments in the employment of surveillance measures, in particular in the time of health crises. Currently the UK government is testing a new narrative of a ‘surveillance price worth paying’ as the route through the current crises (footnote 4). In

⁷ <https://www.counterfire.org/articles/analysis/21115-shock-and-awe-orban-s-corona-dictatorship-in-hungary>

⁸ <https://nypost.com/2020/03/31/coronavirus-being-used-as-a-way-to-silent-dissent-across-the-globe/?fbclid=IwAR2gJwO644jxL8GrWyiVyZQiDipj-cwfl5t5Da8c6Oz0RDmWEOrIqgXBzbA>

the weeks ahead we watch closely whether shifts in public's consciousness result in the acceptance of the new surveillance technology, and whether still the government's own narrative leads the nation away from optional participation in movement monitoring and data collection of individuals, and towards a more draconian surveillance approach. The Australian government has already released an application, reportedly downloaded by more than a million Australians. The privacy concerns remain, and protections have not yet been introduced into legislation.⁹ It is unclear what legal and human rights protections are available to more than a million Australians who had downloaded the software.

4.0 The 'new normal'

Before any sight of Covid-19, in 2016, Harrison wrote of the dangers of the 'language of risk' and its practical application: that of increased use of surveillance and containment practices in order to create a 'global immune system' with a purpose of detecting and tracking new viruses. The question remains thus far about the manner and kind of data collection from populations, including surveillance techniques that may become more regular features in our daily lives. Relatedly, Harrison (2016: 140) points to (un)intended consequence of normalising pandemics as risk phenomena, normalising therefore the surveillance techniques deployed to track outbreaks, under the guise of public good and protection. Amnesty International have reported that states of emergency are allowed under international human rights law but have warned that restrictive measures should not become a 'new normal' (footnote 8). Privacy activists have cautioned that implementations of draconian surveillance techniques set a dangerous precedent that would be difficult to remove once the pandemic is over (footnote 4).

Scientists, academics, human rights lawyers and a number of advocacy groups have already alerted governments that the unprecedented global surge in primarily digital surveillance measures would enable unwarranted discrimination and surveillance, altering the relationship between individuals and the state. As we have observed in the previous section, such relationships still vary and are largely dependent on states' regimes and levels of monitoring and surveillance of populations.

In summary, the pandemic illustrates the complex interaction between political judgement, ideological orientations of governments and medical expert advice. Language matters therefore at a time of national emergency, especially when it serves as public discourse that influences the level of public confidence in the state in unprecedented times. It is therefore pertinent upon language researchers to examine emergent discourses in order to raise public awareness of the complexity of the issue that is upon us. Political, social and discourse scrutiny must be encouraged and applied. Evidence to date points to real difficulties in dismantling both the technical and the legal structures after the pandemic, unless such structures and practices include safeguards in place, from their insinuation, that protect our democratic rights and freedoms, including those of peaceful assembly and protest. The risks thus of the expansion of state intrusion on individuals and communities (in particular marginalised communities we alluded to in several places in the article), and endurance of that intrusion beyond the pandemic crisis, are disproportionately high.

⁹ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-australia-52433340>

5.0 Conclusion

Critical reactions that have so far emerged in response to the measures employed to suppress the spread of Covid-19 have been right to challenge governments around the world on how best to achieve this in a capitalist society, ensuring that those are not top-down approaches adopted by the majority of governments so far. A socialist response to the crisis should accept the epidemiologists' advice on how to slow or reverse the spread, however, it must actively continue to challenge the emerging narrative which normalises extensions of surveillance techniques in the context of the 'abnormal' times we are living in, and thus making the traditional debates about confronting security threats that sacrifice the values of freedom, democracy and human rights, redundant. Those governments that see an opportunity in this crisis as a free reign to consider a number of interventions that would cross the line, are making Covid-19 an ideology, which would enable politicians to introduce such draconian measures into their political programmes and eventually legislation, as some examples above have already shown. We have also illustrated attempts to silent dissent and democratic right to protest, ensuring that their prohibition is also written into law. In the world of continuous imperialist conflict, catastrophic climate change and class division, it is pertinent upon us to challenge such measures through both language and action.

Finally, as alluded to in a few places throughout the article, there is an immediate need to challenge racist (as well as homophobic and transphobic) discourse which has a long history in the times of epidemics, often portrayed as the fault of 'alien outsiders'. Through a few examples, we have seen that the blame is not only placed on the migrant population, but the measures employed to contain disease have favoured the privileged in society. It is no coincidence that many diseases are named after the place of supposed origin, such as 'Spanish', 'Hong Kong', 'Russian' flu/epidemic. The current outbreak is no exception; it was named the 'Chinese' virus by the President of the United States.¹⁰ Viktor Orbán, Hungary's radical right leader, blamed Iranian migrants for spreading Covid-19.¹¹ A surge in looking for a vaccine, or a 'cure' of sorts, for Covid-19, has exposed continuous homophobia in the United States, explained away by fears that the blood of homosexual males who have survived the virus may be infected with HIV/AIDS, and thus unsuitable for collection of antibodies.¹²

Decades' long and extensive research on pandemics, including the emergent studies on Covid-19, suggest strongly that this is not the last major pandemic to threaten our lives, nor the deadliest. As academics and activists, we must employ all available tools to challenge the capitalist structures of societies, which have so many times through centuries of history and events, warned us that the clock is ticking for our planet and all its species.

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¹⁰ <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/trump-coronavirus-china-defend-racist-attacks-chineseamericans-white-house-latest-death-toll-a9409636.html>

¹¹ <https://www.france24.com/en/20200313-hungary-s-pm-orban-blames-foreign-students-migration-for-coronavirus-spread>

¹² <https://www.channel4.com/news/rules-on-gay-people-donating-blood-should-be-relaxed-us-talk-show-host-andy-cohen>

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Society's 'new normal'? The role of discourse in surveillance and silencing of dissent during and post Covid-19

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