NEO-LIBERALISM –
A DISCOURSE-ANALYTICAL PERSPECTIVE

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RESUMO: O objetivo deste artigo é discutir, sob a perspectiva analítico-discursiva, uma questão proeminente recente na Romênia: 'o ato de marcar' – marcar produtos, mas também o presidente, o país. Vejo o 'ato de marcar' como um conceito e processo neoliberal quintessencial no sentido de que ele se afina com o que podemos chamar de objetivo utópico do neoliberalismo: todas as transações sociais devem ser transações comerciais. Isso implica que qualquer área da vida social pode em princípio ser reconstituída em termos de entidades, processos, relações e identidades de mercado. Neste artigo, focalizo a eleição presidencial e o ato de marcar comercialmente Bãsescu para a sua campanha presidencial como o candidato majoritário para Bucareste 2000-2004. Mostro como o ato de marcar concentra-se em identificar características centrais da pessoa a ser marcada, como também na avaliação rigorosa daquilo que os 'clientes' desejam. Focalizo um aspecto do estilo de Bãsescu e procuro ver como ele atravessa fronteiras que convencionalmente separam o campo da política do campo do espetáculo popular e campo da propaganda comercial do

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campo da vida cotidiana, mediante um hibridismo que articula um amplo espectro de recursos comunicativos (gêneros, discursos, estilos, tons ou 'chaves') para além daquele convencionalmente localizado na política romena. Concluo que o ato de marcar políticos e a re-contextualização e operacionalização do ato político de marcar podem ser vistos como parte de uma desideologização e personalização da política que é associada com o 'enquadre' neoliberal, mas dentro de um estado político-econômico complexo e contraditório.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: neoliberalismo, perspectiva analítico-discursiva, ato de marcar.

ABSTRACT: The aim of this paper is to discuss from a discourse-analytical perspective a current prominent issue in Romania: 'branding'– the branding of products, but also of the President, of the country. I see branding as a quintessentially neo-liberal concept and process in the sense it accords with what we might call neo-liberalism's utopian goal: all social transactions should be market transactions. This implies that any area of a social life can in principle be reconstituted in terms of the entities, processes, relations and identities of markets. My focus is this article is on the presidential election, and the branding of Bãsescu for his presidential campaign as the mayoral candidate for Bucharest 2000-2004. I show how branding centres upon identifying core features of the person being branded, as well careful assessment of what the 'customers' want. I focus on one aspect of Bãsescu's style: how it cuts across boundaries which conventionally separate the fields of politics from the fields of popular entertainment and commercial advertising and from everyday life, through a hibridity which articulates together a wider range of communicative resources (genres, discourses, styles, tones or 'keys') than are conventionally found in Romanian politics. I conclude that the branding of politicians and the recontextualization and operationalization of political branding can be seen as part of a de-ideologization and personalization of politics which is associated with the neo-liberal 'fix', but within a complex and contradictory political-economic situation.

I began writing on neo-liberalism from a discourse-analytical point of view about fifteen years ago, though initially without using the term – for instance in a paper I published in a book on 'enterprise culture' in 1991 (Keat & Abercrombie 1991). The origins of the neo-liberal project at governmental level are Anglo-American, and associated in particular with the Reagan and Thatcher administrations, and there was quite a lot of academic research on it in Britain at that time.

In dealing with neo-liberalism we are dealing centrally with questions of discourse. For instance, the 'Thatcher revolution' in Britain was initially a *strategy* for reversing the country's long-term economic decline, a problem which politicians had been grappling with for decades. Like any such strategy, it included particular narratives about the past and the present linked to imaginaries and predictions of, and prescriptions for, the future. And these narratives drew upon particular discourses to represent and imagine aspects of British economic and social life in particular ways. Only later, when Thatcher's neo-liberal strategy had become dominant, or hegemonic, first in the Conservative Party and then in British politics and government, did the narratives and discourses begin to be operationalized, 'put into practice' as one might say, in more general social changes. And then only partially: a dispute in the academic literature on how revolutionary Thatcherism was turns on whether the focus is on the strategy – the discourse - or on its implementation (Hay 1999).

There is nothing particularly exceptional in my claim that in dealing with neo-liberalism we are dealing with questions of discourse. Pierre Bourdieu for instance forcefully argued that the international dominance which neo-liberalism has achieved is in large part the dominance of a discourse (Bourdieu 1998, Bourdieu & Wacquant 2001). What discourse analysis can specifically contribute is first a theoretical clarification of relations between discourse and other aspects and elements of social life, including the process of what I just called 'operationalizing' discourses, including the effectivity of discourses in constructing and reconstructing social life, and second methods for actually analyzing discourse, and so moving beyond rather vague or superficial declarations of the importance of discourse to being specific about how and why it is important.

My objective in this paper is to discuss from a discourse-analytical perspective what is currently a rather prominent issue in Romania: 'branding' - the branding of products of course, but also of the President, of the country. In order to do so, I shall need first to sketch out some theoretical and methodological features of my approach. I see branding as a quintessentially neo-liberal concept and process in the sense that it accords with what we might call neo-liberalism's utopian goal: all social transactions should be market transactions. This implies that any area of social life can in principle be reconstituted in terms of the entities, processes, relations and identities of markets. Persons and countries, for instance, can become products, and as with products generally on contemporary markets, the brand is if anything more important than the commodity. In referring to neo-liberalism's 'utopian goal', I am alluding to the paradox and irony that others (eg Gray 1998) have noted: in contrast with classical liberalism, neo-liberalism is not a principled anti-utopianism, its antipathy to socialism and communism goes along with projecting its own market utopia.

Cultural political economy

Where to begin? I think it is fruitful to begin by locating our concerns with discourse within a broad theoretical perspective on economic and social change, and I see recent versions of a 'new' or 'cultural' political economy as especially helpful. Political economy differs from classical economics in asserting that there are non-economic conditions for economies and economic change (Polanyi 1944, Sayer 1995). 'Cultural' political economy claims that these conditions are not only political but also cultural, and include discourse: the 'cultural turn' is also a turn to discourse. The versions of cultural political economy I draw upon incorporate the 'regulation theory' view that a socio-economic order is constituted through a particular set of relations – a 'fix' – between a particular form of economy in the narrow sense and a particular form of governance (a 'regime of accumulation' and 'a mode of regulation'), but add that the 'fix' also includes cultural and discursive elements. The key point with respect to socio-economic change is this: it is a matter of change in relations between institutions, and between institutions and the 'lifeworld', which ties economy, governance and culture together in new

ways. As I have already indicated, we need to also bring in strategies: in times of crisis or instability, different social groups develop different and often competing strategies for a new 'fix'.

How does neo-liberalism fit in to this? Bourdieu in a series of popular and politically-oriented interventions (1998, 2001) has presented neo-liberalism as a political project or strategy oriented to removing obstacles to the full implementation of the new 'global economy'. We can see neo-liberalism as a strategy for a new 'fix', between a deregulated economy operating increasingly on a trans-national scale leading to intensified competition between companies, national economies and regional economies; a form of regulation and governance which redistributes the former powers of nation-states both 'upwards' towards trans-national entities and 'downwards' and one might saw 'sideways' towards sub-national entities which often include for instance business and NGOs as well government entities (such as what used to be called 'quangos' in the UK), and re-orientates the national state from regulating the national economy and supplying welfare support to creating conditions for competitiveness in the 'global economy' through changes in tariffs, taxation, education, and so forth; and cultural values and dispositions which foreground enterprise, self-reliance, individual choice, and so forth. One finds (eg in the Thatcher and Blair administrations in the UK) views of the new role of Government which include 'cultural governance', changing cultural values (such as Government advocacy of 'enterprise culture', Fairclough 1991). The IMF-World Bank structural adjustment package (the so-called 'Washington consensus') which has 'inspired the transition process' in CEE (Lavigne 1999) is an example of the neo-liberal strategy, including such measures as privatisation of state assets and curbing subsidies, and removing state restrictions and regulations on economic activity, trade and foreign investment.

But we need to make a distinction between neo-liberalism as a strategy – and, in a certain sense of the term, an ideology – and 'actually existing neo-liberalism', as Brenner & Theodore (2002) put it. One often gets the impression from advocates of the neo-liberal strategy – and this was true of the early years of 'transition' in CEE - that it is a sort of universally-applicable blueprint. But its realization and implementation is inevitably context-dependent, and as some economists put it 'path-dependent', subject to the different historical trajectories of different countries.

'Actually existing neo-liberalism' is consequently extremely diverse, and in many cases far from the predictions of neo-liberalism as a strategy.

Neo-liberalism and discourse

As I have already said, particular strategies include particular discourses and narratives (Jessop 2002). But questions of discourse arise not only with respect to the strategy, but also with respect to processes of contestation between strategies in the course of which one may achieve sufficient dominance or hegemony to be implemented, with respect to the dissemination of a hegemonic strategy and its recontextualization in new countries, social fields, institutions and organisations, and with respect to the implementation or 'operationalization' of a strategy in wider changes in social life.

Focusing on neo-liberal discourses, we can correspondingly investigate them in terms of one or more of the following broad issues:

- How and where did they emerge and develop?
- How and where did they achieve hegemonic status?
- How and where and how extensively have they been recontextualized?
- How and to what extent have they been operationalized?

The question of emergence points us for instance to the research centres and 'think-tanks' (such as the Adam Smith Institute, the Institute for Economic Affairs, the Centre for Policy Studies) and publications (eg those of Hayek and Milton Friedman) in which the neo-liberal project was nurtured, and to the emergence of new discourses and narratives from the articulation of elements of existing ones. The question of hegemony points us to confrontations between the new liberalism and for instance Keynsianism. The question of recontextualization points us to the structural and scalar dissemination of these discourses and narratives, their dissemination across boundaries between local, regional, national, macro-regional (eg the EU) and 'global' scales, their uptake by for instance political parties and governments and international agencies such as the IMF, their recontextualization in particular fields such as education, and their rearticulation with other discourses and narratives in the manifold sites of their recontextualization. The question of

operationalization is in a sense the crunch question – how these complex processes and changes in discourse impact upon social life. It points us to how and under what conditions discourses are *enacted* as new ways of acting and interacting and new social relationships, *inculcated* as new ways of being, new identities, and *materialized*, for instance in new ways of organizing time and space in institutions and organizations. Operationalization is conditional and contingent: it depends upon these discourses being appropriated within successful strategies *within* the contexts in which they are recontextualized (which shows that the four issues I have distinguished are not successive stages but 'moments'), it depends upon how resistant to change or open to change particular contexts are, and so forth. Operationalization is a dialectical process – it is a matter of ways of representing being transformed into and internalized within ways of acting and ways of being and material realities.

The relevance of questions of discourse throughout the neo-liberal project, both in the emergence and dissemination of strategies and in their implementation, becomes clearer when we recognize that it is not just a matter of *discourses*, but also of *genres* and *styles*. I use 'discourses' for particular and diverse ways of representing aspects of the world (eg different economic discourses, or different political discourses), 'genres' for different ways of acting and interacting communicatively and their associated social relations (eg 'interview' and 'meeting' are each a cluster of genres), and 'styles' for different ways of being or identities in their communicative (linguistic/semiotic) aspect (eg different leadership styles in business and politics). The central point is that the operationalization of neo-liberal discourses and specifically their enactment and inculcation are in part processes *within* discourse: neo-liberal discourses are in part enacted as changes in genres, and in part inculcated as changes in styles. For instance, where neo-liberal representations of the relationship between the state and the people, or between university teachers and students, or between medical staff and patients come to be operationalized, their enactment is likely to include changes in genre (eg in medical consultations) and their inculcation is likely to include changes in style (eg the styles of government officials, academics or doctors). Thus discourse-analytical research on neo-liberalism will include these three broad concerns:

- neo-liberal discourses and narratives
- dialectical relations between discourses, genres and styles
- dialectical relations between discourse and other elements of social life

It is time for a specific example which will illustrate a part of what I have been saying – neo-liberalism as a strategy which includes particular narratives which draw upon particular discourses, and their recontextualization in a particular field in a particular country. The example is an extract from a speech by Tony Blair to the Confederation of British Industry in 1998:

> *We all know this is a world of dramatic change. In technology; in trade; in media and communications; in the new global economy refashioning our industries and capital markets. In society; in family structure; in communities; in life styles.*
>
> *Add to this change that sweeps the world, the changes that Britain itself has seen in the 20th century - the end of Empire, the toil of two world wars, the reshaping of our business and employment with the decline of traditional industries - and it is easy to see why national renewal is so important. Talk of a modern Britain is not about disowning our past. We are proud of our history. This is simply a recognition of the challenge the modern world poses.*
>
> *The choice is: to let change overwhelm us, to resist it or equip ourselves to survive and prosper in it. The first leads to a fragmented society. The second is pointless and futile, trying to keep the clock from turning. The only way is surely to analyse the challenge of change and to meet it. When I talk of a third way - between the old-style intervention of the old left and the laissez-faire of the new right - I do not mean a soggy compromise in the middle. I mean avowing there is a role for Government, for teamwork and partnership. But it must be a role for today's world. Not about picking winners, state subsidies, heavy regulation; but about education, infrastructure, promoting investment,*

helping small business and entrepreneurs and fairness. To make Britain more competitive, better at generating wealth, but do it on a basis that serves the needs of the whole nation - one nation. This is a policy that is unashamedly long-termist. Competing on quality can't be done by Government alone. The whole nation must put its shoulder to the wheel.

Blair's narrative connects changes which have happened in Britain in the past, changes which happening in the world now, and the challenge and choice which Britain is faced with. The narrative is embedded within an argument: given the changes which have happened and are happening, this is what we must do. The past is narrated in terms of problematic changes in 20th century British history, a history 'we are proud of' but which also makes clear the case for 'national renewal', and of failed political policies ('the old-style intervention of the old left and the laissez-faire of the new right'). The present is narrated as 'dramatic change', 'change that sweeps the world', and the 'challenge' it poses, the need for 'national renewal', and the 'choice' we have. The future is imagined and prescribed in terms of a new role for Government, but in 'partnership' with 'the whole nation': making Britain 'more competitive', but 'on a basis that serves the needs of the whole nation'.

With respect to the discourses that are drawn upon, the changes in Britain are represented as what has happened to Britain (what Britain has 'seen') and not what Britain or British governments have done, the failed policies of the past are represented with an emphasis on those of the left, in terms of a discourse in which 'intervening', 'regulating' and 'subsidizing' are negatively valued actions on the part of Government (note also 'picking winners', I think a particularly British way of denigrating strategic state support for industries with competitive potential). The representation of change in the present has the following features:

- Processes of change do not have human, social agents – they are not represented for instance as the actions of governments or companies
- Agents in these processes are nominalized ('change' itself – it 'sweeps the world' and can 'overwhelm us') or non-human

entities ('the new global economy' which 'refashions' industries and capital markets; 'the modern world' which poses a 'challenge')

- • These processes are inexorable and cannot be resisted by human agents – resistance is 'futile', 'trying to keep the clock from turning'
- • These processes are represented metaphorically, most notably 'sweep the world'
- • These processes are by implication universal, or 'global'
- • Areas of change (trade, technology, media etc) are simply listed, without logical or causal connections between them (eg changes in technology cause economic changes)

The government of the future is represented as enabling ('promoting', 'helping') in contrast to 'regulating', and as acting to create conditions for 'competitiveness' on 'quality' ('education, infrastructure, promoting investment, helping small business and entrepreneurs') as well as 'fairness', rather than managing the economy. And government is represented as network rather than hierarchy: 'teamwork', 'partnership', also with an appropriation of 'one nation' Conservative discourse.

This is the political discourse of the 'Third Way', which is as I argued in my book on New Labour (Fairclough 2000) a particular recontextualization of the discourse of neo-liberalism within the British political field. Actually one might say it is the recontextualization of a recontextualization – the Third Way has commonly been seen as 'Thatcherism-plus', elements of the Thatcherite recontextualization of neo-liberal discourse articulated with elements of other discourses (including here as I have said that of 'one-nation Conservatism') which address social justice (blandly named here as 'fairness'). This is one response to criticisms of neo-liberalism. The central and contentious claim of the 'Third Way' is that apparent conflict between enterprise and social justice can be transcended – that policies which are good for one are also good for the other. The political discourse of the 'Third Way' is one discourse amongst others – for instance, some representations of current processes of change (which one finds for instance in academic literature and amongst opponents of globalisation in a neo-liberal form) attribute agency to governments, construe changes as contingent and reversible,

as uneven across parts of the world, and in terms of relations of causality.

The example is particular, situated, and partial in the sense that gives only a very limited illustration of the narratives and discourse of neo-liberalism. In the case of a strategy such as neo-liberalism, which has been so widely diffused, on so many different scales, and recontextualized in so many different countries, institutions and organisations, we are faced with a complex field of dispersal in narratives and discourses of the sort Foucault (1972) described, where as well as recognisable continuities we find considerable diversity, associated with the proliferation of contexts and circumstances.

Let us come back to Bourdieu. He argues (with his colleague Lois Wacquant) that neo-liberal discourse is a significant resource in the pursuit of neo-liberal strategy, pointing to the 'performative power' of the 'new planetary vulgate', its power to 'bring into being the very realities it describes', as well as its power to make a contingent set of policy choices appear to be a matter of inexorable and irreversible world change. I have commented on the construal of inexorable change in the Blair example. The concept of 'performative power' points to the dialectical processes of operationalization which I have discussed, but Bourdieu also identifies a slippage which is characteristic of neo-liberal narratives, between the present and future, what is narrated as fact and what is imagined, predicted or prescribed. One can see this I think in the example, at the beginning. Who is the 'we' ('we all know', 'our industries and capital markets')? It is an inclusive 'we', and it appears to be *all*-inclusive, but a moment's thought tells us that change in for instance technology is more 'dramatic' in some places than in others, and that the one process represented as a material process with an agent ('the new global economy') and an affected ('industries and capital markets') varies tremendously in character and intensity from place to place. Indeed, one might question the presupposition that there is a 'new global economy' on the grounds that the economic restructuring that is unquestionably taking place is not truly 'global'. A diverse and deeply uneven and unequal world is construed as if it were changing in a unitary way. A unitary world based as it is often said upon 'common values' is another part of the neo-liberal utopia, the same economic and social transformations are prescribed for all countries irrespective of circumstances, and a truly

global economy is part of the neo-liberal imaginary, but there is a characteristic slippage here between these imaginaries and prescriptions and the description of the world as it actually now is.

Publications of Bourdieu and Wacquant are remarkable in highlighting the importance of discourse in neo-liberalism and the transformations of 'globalization' and the 'new global economy'. But their impact is somewhat lessened because they do not draw upon the analytical resources needed to show *how* the slippage between description and prediction or prescription is pervasively effected in contemporary policy and other texts, or *how* the contingent is textually construed as necessary**.** Their account of the 'new planetary vulgate' goes no further than a list of keywords.

Branding

I want to introduce the concept of 'branding' by drawing from two websites: the UK government's 'Businesslink' site (www.businesslink.gov.uk) and the 'Communications Toolkit' website of the ESRC, the UK education and social sciences research council (www.esrc.ac.uk/commsroolkit/). There's a link on the former to 'Branding: the basics':

Every business wants to be the **first choice** for customers. Building and managing a brand can play a significant part in making that happen.

Brands give potential customers a firm idea of what they're buying before they buy it, making the purchasing decision easier. And existing **customers trust strong brands** because they know exactly what to expect - and always get it.

If you want to build and manage a brand, you'll need to focus on what your customers want and how you can guarantee to deliver it. You'll also need to be consistent in your service and in every other point of contact customers have with you - for example, phone calls, letters, faxes etc.

First steps for creating a brand

Successful branding is about promoting your **strengths**. Start by thinking about what you're **good at** and what you **believe in** as a business. For example:

- particular skills - such as excellence in design

- high-quality customer service

- providing the best value for money in your marketplace

You need to be sure that you can always deliver your strengths, sometimes referred to as "**brand values**".

What customers want

You also need to match these brand values to your **customers' requirements**.

What **drives** your customers? What **makes them buy**? In most cases, it's not only about price or performance.

Ask **existing** customers what they like about doing business with you. And asking **potential** customers what they look for in their buying decisions can also give you useful information to help **develop** your business - and your brand.

If your brand values are in line with what existing and potential customers look for when they're buying, you've got the beginnings of a useful brand and you're ready to start building it.

But if they're not, you'll probably need to **reconsider** either the benefits you offer to your present customers or whether you're targeting the right people.

Building your brand

Once you've defined your brand values and your customers' needs you can start to build your brand by **consistently communicating** your brand values.

Remember that **every possible contact** you have with a customer or potential customer needs to reinforce your brand values.

Key areas to consider are:

- your business name

- names you give your products or services

- any slogan you use

- your logo

- the style and quality of your stationery

- product packaging

- your premises

- where and how you advertise

- how you and your employees dress

- how you and your employees behave

If all these are consistently in line with your brand values, your brand will be **strengthened**. But if all of them aren't in line, your brand - and your business - could be seriously damaged. A brand makes promises to customers and if they aren't fulfilled, your customers will be far less likely to buy again.

The ESRC website is a resource for research projects, especially those funded by ESRC, to help "you" to "communicate your research effectively and to achieve the maximum impact for your work".

Why communicate?

One of the ESRC's main objectives is to enhance the impact of research on policy and practice. The potential impact of good research is enormous and this is lost if it is not promoted as widely as possible.

Effective communication is the lifeblood of the ESRC's partnership with its research investments. It should also be the lifeblood of your work. Done well, it will raise the profile not only of your research, but also of the ESRC.

Why branding is important

The first use of a brand was just that - a mark of ownership on cattle. Later, trademarks were used to define individual products. The red triangle of BASS, the first trademark registered in England, was designed to help the illiterate drinker recognise Mr William Bass's Fine India Pale Ale from other inferior products available at the time.

A recent article in the Financial Times described a brand as something that 'exists in the collective mind of the consumer'. Wally Olins, a leading authority on branding, defines it as an organisation's 'personality'. Others have said that: 'The brand is the promise that you make to your customer'.

The ESRC's brand is a valuable asset. The ESRC wants to build recognition of its brand by creating a distinct, memorable and consistent identity.

Developing messages and branding

Any communication strategy needs to have succinct messages and clear branding. This is often anathema to researchers who feel their work is often not appropriate to be 'packaged' in such a way. But the principles of good communication are the same in the research world as elsewhere.

It may be difficult to develop 'key messages' at the beginning of a complex research project. But it is a useful discipline to consider whether there are over-arching messages that can be used while it is underway, or any specific messages for any particular parts of the project.

When developing key messages, you should avoid bland statements, overly complex statements, and having too many messages. A good benchmark is the 'Dog and Duck' test - if you explained your message to someone you had just met in a pub, would they understand what you meant? You can be succinct without 'dumbing down'. Remember that key audiences such as journalists and policymakers are overloaded with information and simply won't remember your messages if they are too complex. Many journalists find titles of the ESRC centres and programmes too long, for example.

It's useful to try out what your messages would look like in different formats - a media release, a report, a research briefing, a newspaper article, a website page. It's also useful to think in advance about stories, case studies and 'packages' of information that will bring your project to life for key audiences.

As well as developing messages, you need to think about your brand. The most visible expression of this is the logo.

But a brand is more than just a logo. It has been described in a private sector context as 'the promise that you make to your customer'. The perception of an organisation's brand can be divided into a set of key components:

• Its overall purpose: what's it there to do?

• The values that underpin it: what drives it to do the things it does?

• The key messages: what is it saying about what it can offer?

- Its delivery: does it give people what it promises?

- The behaviour of its staff: how does it treat customers, and its own people?

- The 'look and feel' of how it goes about its business.

Your brand should reflect the overall values and objectives of the communication strategy. This is more than just a question of your logo. For example, one publicly-funded organisation recently attracted negative publicity by launching its anti-poverty strategy in an expensive venue with elaborate food and drink. If your communication is aimed at CEOs in the business community, they may be unimpressed with a cheap, photocopied newsletter.The physical manifestation of your brand must be in line with your wider communication objectives.

We can identify some central precepts of branding from this material:

- Your brand should reflect your strengths, commitments and values – your 'brand values'
- Your brand is your promise to your customer – which implies it offers something the customer wants
- You should consistently communicate your brand values in what you do how you behave
- These 'principles of good communication' apply anywhere and everywhere – for commercial products (eg the magazine *Cosmopolitan*, Machin & Thornborrow 2003), for research, for presidents, for cities (Flowerdew 2004), for countries (Pride 2001)

'Brand' seems comparable to 'image', but there are certain lexico-grammatical differences between them.

(a) both 'brand' and 'image' can be head nouns in noun phrases modified with possessive nouns which represent the entity which possesses them – eg 'the ESRC's brand', 'the ESRC's image' (as well as clauses with verbs of possession eg 'the ESRC has a strong brand/image')

(b) but only 'brand' can appear as complement in equative clauses whose subject represents a branded entity – 'the ESRC is a

strong brand', but not 'the ESRC is a strong image' (note also, to anticipate an example I come to, 'the future of *Brand Romania*' ie 'Romania *as* a brand')

(c) 'brand' is a verb as well as a noun, 'image' is not – so one can 'build an image' or build a brand', but one can 'brand' but not 'image' a company, research project etc.

(d) these lexico-grammatical differences indicate that a brand can be what a company, research project, person or country *is*, as well as an attribute it *has;* so 'branding' a company etc can be interpreted as turning it into a brand, as well as giving it a brand

So 'brand' is more in tune with neo-liberalism than 'image' – anything and anyone can *have* an image, but anything and anyone can *be* a brand – can be reconstituted as an entity in a market.

In terms of the approach to discourse analysis I have sketched out above, 'branding' is a matter of stabilizing and 'managing' particular representations of a product, company, research project and so forth, constituting a particular discourse and associated narratives through articulating together in a particular way elements of existing discourses and narratives. Branding can be investigated as a part of the strategies of (social groups in) companies, organizations like ESRC, research projects etc in terms of the four issues I identified for CDA. I have already referred to the *emergence* of a brand as a discourse and associated narratives, and one can also investigate how such discourses and narratives compete for dominance in markets and become *hegemonic* in particular markets, how they are *recontextualized* in diverse activities and genres (in different 'formats', as the ESRC materials put it), and how they are *operationalized,* enacted in ways of acting and interacting and in genres, inculcated in ways of being and styles, and materialized in the design of locations and documentation. The ESRC material also suggests that 'branding' is a disciplinary process. The process of 'building a brand' may in some cases have a democratic element, involving extensive discussion and consultation within the entity concerned, but once the brand is established, everyone is obliged to adhere to it meticulously (eg the ESRC website includes stringent regulations on uses and abuses of the ESRC logo by researchers who are funded by ESRC), to consistently

act in accordance with it, and to identify with it (ie project public identities which harmonize with it). Originality is not encouraged.

Branding Romania

Let's begin with 'branding Romania'. An International Forum on this theme was held in Bucharest on 22 February 2005, organized by Bucharest Business Week. The issue of BBW for 14-20 February included an interview with Simon Anholt, one of the main international experts in branding countries. A few quotations:

> • "If Romania doesn't take control of its own brand, somebody else will"
> • Countries like companies "depend greatly on their image, and must manage" their brand "carefully. A strong national brand helps to attract investment, talent, consumers and tourists, and enhances the countries cultural and political influence. It's virtually impossible for countries to compete today without one."
> • "National brand is national identity made tangible, robust, communicable.. and functional".
> • "The brands of rich countries have evolved over centuries … Romania, like many developing countries, suffers from an image which is unfair, outdated, and constantly obstructs its political, economic and social aims".
> • "I hope to work with President Basescu, Prime Minister Nastase and the Romanian Government and its ministries and agencies to incorporate brand strategy into the planning and implementation of their policies. Together, I believe that we can create a popular, robust and accountable strategy for the future of Brand Romania which is realistic yet truly visionary".

BBW also refers to the Presidential election: 'Though the Presidential election is over, the face of one man remains on posters throughout the country under the headline "Sa Traiti Bine', evidence of a most successful branding campaign by GMP Advertising for Traian Bãsesu'. The GMP director who advised Basescu both in the mayoral campaigns in Bucharest and in the Presidential campaign is Felix Tataru. His view of 'Brand Romania' is that 'much effort should be focused at the beginning on

raising a strong image domestically among people, and only after accomplishing this, to bring that positive image abroad'.

George Bush is reported to have said in February 2005, in connection with his visit to Europe, that the USA had understood it could not 'spread freedom' alone. One might ask whether 'freedom' *can* be 'spread' at all – but that partly depends on what we mean by 'freedom'. And one might also, similarly, ask whether foreign experts on 'branding' can create national identities.

Branding Bãsecu

I want to focus on the Presidential election, and the branding of Bãsescu. Given that Bãsescu became the Democratic Alliance candidate just a couple of months before the election because of the withdrawal of Teodor Stolojan, a crucial basis for the presidential campaign was his success as mayoral candidate for Bucharest 2000-2004.

Tãtaru claimed in an interview in Academia Caþavencu Nr 50 14-20 December 2004 that Bãsescu was the first Romanian politician to be treated as a 'brand'. He spells out what that means:

> 'You should not create a false image, a mask, for politicians, invent things which are not their own. You should give a politician a coat which suits him, in which he feels good, which he likes wearing. Bãsescu's encounter with publicity, with us, was beneficial for both sides. We did not try to do things which were not him. …. Nãstase's campaign was very good but only strategically. From a creative point of view it was deplorable, it created a mask in which he did not feel at ease. This was obvious in the television debate. He was like a bad actor reciting a poem, and one written in a wooden language at that. His promises didn't have a drop of creativity. The man is a hunter, he is various things, let us exploit something in his way of being. Instead they were content to put a mask on him and this is why he lost.'

Branding centres upon identifying core features of the entity – in this case person – being branded, as well careful assessment of what the 'customers' want. Tãtaru explains how ideas for the campaign were picked up from and developed out of Bãsescu's own behaviour and speeches. By contrast, Nãstase's political consultant Bogdan Teodorescu seems to confirm Tataru's view that they 'put a mask on' Nãstase, arguing (in an interview in Dilema Veche 10-16 December 2004) that any presidential candidate needs to stick to an established model for the Romanian president which is accepted by the majority (the poor, those who are dependent upon state benefits):

> 'The model of the President of the Romanians was built and imposed by Ion Iliescu, there are certain rules and certain paradigms which the majority of the population accept.'

The Iliescu model is that of a president who is 'popular and involved', involved that is in the lives and problems of the majority. One can see this model in Nãstase's campaign in for instance the many images of him 'meeting the people'.

The idea of 'branding' political leaders is already well-established in western Europe and north America (Newman 1999, Wernick 1991). Tãtaru's account of the process of branding is for instance quite similar to the advice of Philip Gould, publicity consultant to Tony Blair in the UK, about the branding of Blair:

> 'Tony Blair should not be what he is not. This will not work and will be counterproductive. He should not try to avoid the problem of youth by behaving with excessive gravitas. Nor try to avoid looking soft by behaving with excessive aggression. What he must do is build on his strengths, and build an identity as a politician that is of a piece with the political positions he adopts. He must be a complete, coherent politician who always rings true' (Gould 1998: 211).

With respect to Gould's precept of 'building an identity as a politician that is of a piece with the political positions he adopts', Bãsescu's main platform was the corruption and clientelism of the Social Democratic government, and the values of clean politics he advocated were one might say operationalized in his political style, and the impression he seems to have given many people of being open, honest and sincere.

Given that political branding is well-established in other countries and that the branding of Bãsescu is an innovation in Romanian politics, we can look at the campaign in terms of the recontextualization and operationalization of the discourse of (political) branding. I want to focus on one aspect of Bãsescu's style: how it cuts across boundaries which conventionally separate the field of politics from the fields of popular entertainment and commercial advertising and from everyday life, through a hybridity which articulates together a wider range of communicative resources (genres, discourses, styles, tones or 'keys') than are conventionally found in (according to my informants) Romanian politics. I think one can see this in the Bucharest campaign literature (for instance, in the famous symbolization of Bãsescu as an *ardei*, a hot red pepper, using techniques of commercial advertising), in the campaign literature for the parliamentary and presidential elections (eg the slogan 'sa traiti bine' and Bãsescu saluting, which are a playful allusion to his career as a naval captain), and on his website (where for instance Bãsescu is a character in computer games. But I want to focus on a section of the final TV debate between Nãstase and Bãsescu just before the second round of the presidential election (December 8 2004).

1 Bãsescu: No, Mr Nãstase, we both have a big problem, on my word of
2 honour, let's discuss it honestly.

3 Nãstase: Just one?

4 Bãsescu: No, we have more, but we have one which can explain why there is
5 so much passivity in the population. I don't know why it's occurred to me to
6 say this …

7 Nãstase: But you agree with the decision we have taken?

8 Bãsescu: But I think that in an electoral race it can be good to say something
9 like this. I was discussing it with colleagues at the beginning of the campaign.
10 What kind of curse is there on this people that in the end it comes to a choice
11 between two former communists? Between Adrian Nãstase and Bãsescu. In

12 fifteen years, not one has appeared who comes from the world that was not
13 touched by the vices of communism, who has not been affected by anything.
14 What curse is this? And on my word of honour, I felt sorry about it. Then I kept
15 looking at myself, sometimes I was looking at myself in the mirror, and I say,
16 "Hey, Bãsescu old son, do you have respect for the Romanian people?" I was
17 asking myself. I say: "I do." "Have you made a mockery of the Romanian
18 people?" I don't have the feeling that I ever did that. I think that if we think in
19 these terms this discussion should have been – should not have taken place.
20 Maybe now was the time when another type of candidate than the two of us
21 should have presented themselves before the Romanians. It's true that I did
22 not live off political work, but I was a party member. But the big drama is not
23 that I was a party member…

24 Nãstase: I did not live off party work either.

25 Bãsescu: No, you just supported Ceauºescu for no reason, just so there
26 wouldn't be any opposition.

27 Nãstase: If you want us to start talking about this..

28 Bãsescu: No, I don't want to talk about it.

29 Nãstase: ...about who you were supporting when you were in Anvers, if you
30 want we can talk about these details.

31 Bãsescu: We can talk about it. In Anvers I was serving my country.

32 Nãstase: You mentioned a problem that we have. Let's see what the
33 problem is.

34 Bãsescu: Yes we have a problem. Do you know what the big problem is?

35 Nãstase: The mirror.

36 Bãsescu: No, this was just a question I was asking myself. But the big
37 problem that we two have is not just that we were both party members.
38 Maybe after all it's not such a shameful evil thing to be a party member in a
39 communist state. This is the state was like at the time. The drama is that we
40 can't stay with the same mentalities 15 years after communism in Romania.
41 And you convince me every day that you are not capable of understanding
42 that these institutions have to function by themselves.

43 Nãstase: If you will allow me, I will tell you that my big disappointment as far
44 as you are concerned is that you have not understood after so many years
45 that rules must be obeyed.

46 Bãsescu: The rule is that the institutions should function, not that you should

47 push Dan Nica forward to say "It's not true!"

48 Nãstase: The rule would have been not to create a scandal through a press
49 conference…

50 Bãsescu: The elegant rule.

51 Nãstase: You should have respected the institution, you should have tried to
52 find out what the situation was, to come up with proof – you didn't bring any
53 kind of proof…

54 Bãsescu: Yes I did, and you will have some surprises over the next few days.

55 Nãstase: Maybe. Fine.

56 Bãsescu: You will find out that you also had fraud in the computer system…

57 Nãstase: Wouldn't it have been better first to have the proof and then to start
58 talking?

59 Bãsescu: It did have it, but what was your first reaction? "It's not true!" Rather
60 than saying "let the institutions do their job".

61 Nãstase: If you had said concretely that in this or that locality these things
62 happened…

63 Bãsescu: Adrian, Mr Nãstase.

64 Nãstase: but when, Mr Bãsescu, you say that at national level everything is
65 a fraud it seems to me that…

66 Bãsescu: There were major frauds…..

67 Nãstase:..and a lack of respect for the tens of thousands of people who
68 worked ….

69 Bãsescu: I respect them, but those who did their job badly, I have no reason
70 to thank them.

71 Nãstase: You had your people who sat in the polling stations.

72 Bãsescu: Look, let's not get into …

73 Moderator: Let's move on.

74 Bãsescu: Let's not get into the question of the voting slip, because you
75 will see that it was modified especially to enable fraud…

76 Moderator: I suggest we should move on.

- The first point to make about this extract is that such moments of direct conflict and argument in the debate are always sparked off by Bãsescu. It is Bãsescu who takes the fight to Nãstase, not the other way round. Having said that, when they do occur Nãstase defends his corner quite effectively.

- The second point is that Bãsescu, having made a bid for an extended turn at the beginning of this extract by announcing that the two of them have a 'big problem', very effectively plays out his control of the floor by narrating his discussion with colleagues at the beginning of the campaign (lines 8-13), then his discussion with himself in the mirror (lines 13-16), then announcing the big problem ('big drama') again and thus indicating that he has still not reached the main point (20), then after the exchange with Nãstase about their activities as communists (lines 21-28) returning to the 'big problem' in response to Nãstase's prompt (line 29), playing it out further by stating what is *not* the big problem (lines 32-35), then finally stating what it is (lines 35-37), and that the big problem ('drama') is not after all theirs but just Nãstase's –his incapacity to understand that institutions have to function by themselves ie without interference or manipulation. Nãstase is very effectively put on the defensive, though he does defend himself pretty well, in fact he counter-attacks.

- The third point picks up on what I said earlier about the range of communicative resources, and in this case specifically genres, that Bãsescu draws upon. There is no point in the debate where Nãstase produces narrative recounts of the sort we have here – Bãsescu's recount of conversations he had with colleagues, and with himself in the mirror. Drawing on what we can generally identify as narratives of personal experience to make an argumentative point is very common in conversational argument, but not a conventional part of public political argument. This is one of many points where Bãsescu comes across as an authentic personality, an ordinary person like the rest of us, by drawing upon the communicative resources of colloquial conversation – as well as a man who is honest

enough to have doubts about himself, and to 'confess' them in a public context such as this (which also gives him the moral high ground at this point in the debate).

- A similar point can be made more specifically about lines 14-15. The Romanian here is: "Mã, tu ai respect pentru poporul român, Bãsescule?" which was translated as "Hey, Bãsescu old son, do you have respect for the Romanian people?" There are two markedly colloquial features in the Romanian: the interjection 'mã', which is stigmatized in Romanian education as impolite, and the colloquial vocative 'Bãsescule', with the vocative suffix 'le'.

- The representation of choice between two former communists as a curse on the people is of interest in terms of the discourse – this evokes a popular fatalistic discourse which is (I am told) widespread amongst less educated Romanians.

- Another point is that Bãsescu initiates a shift from the formal and polite second personal plural (which would be expected in this sort of exchange) to the informal second person singular (from 'voi' to 'tu') in line 23 (though of course the English translation does not show this), which Nãstase goes along with until the point where (line 57) Bãsescu begins to address him by his first name ('Adrian') but then corrects back to 'Mr Nãstase', when Nãstase (line 58) shifts back to the second person plural form.

- What I have said above about the image Bãsescu gives of being an authentic and sincere person, a personality, an ordinary person, is in large part a matter of his delivery, the paralinguistic features of his talk, and his body language.

- For instance he commonly gives the impression of searching for words, and this is conveyed by a combination of pausing and body language – an example is in line 36, where he pauses after 'The drama is' ('Drama este cã' in the Romanian) purses his lips, and looks down at his lectern.

- Such cases are important in giving the sense that Bãsescu is speaking spontaneously, rather than merely reproducing prepared material as Nãstase was perceived as doing.

- Another example of the importance of body language is in line 15, in Bãsescu's recount of his conversation with himself. What appear in the transcript as 'I do' ('Am' in Romanian) is actually a combination of body language and speech: he looks up to his right, begins nodding, and then while still nodding says 'Am', at the same time extending his left lower arm into an open-handed gesture.
- Nãstase's body language is much more constrained.
- A final point about the debate. One aspect of the construction of Bãsescu as a straight and honest man is that he omits to do what has generally been regarded as essential for any serious presidential candidate – he is not depicted in churches, and he does not kiss icons. Nãstase by contrast, in a biographical video inserted within the debate, is shown in several churches and kissing several icons, as was President Iliescu. Nãstase also challenged Bãsescu about his controversial claim that one can worship god without either churches or priests.

The wide range of communicative resources which Bãsescu draws upon, going beyond conventional limits of political language and drawing in particular upon communicative resources from colloquial interaction, facilitates the central operation of political branding – 'building on the strengths' of the politician, producing a selective condensation of what is distinctive about him as a person.

The recontextualization and operationalization of the discourse of branding can be seen on one level as a form of cultural globalization – the globalization of new and successful forms of political identity as political image and brand through the mediatization of politics and the application of techniques from marketing and public relations. What worked for New Labour in Britain in 1997 (and before that for instance for Reagan and Clinton in the USA) worked also for Bãsescu in Romania in 2004.

But I don't think we should just see this as the recontextualization of a single cultural 'item'. In a programme on Realitatea TV after the debate, 'Ultima rundã', the two candidates were awarded points out of 10 for their performance in the debate by a panel consisting of a theatre director, a psychologist, a political analyst and a specialist in images. Bãsescu was awarded 8.5, Nãstase 6. Marks were awarded for: scenic presence,

attitude, discourse, and charisma and style. Comments included: Nãstase's 'gestures' showed 'insecurity', his 'discourse' was 'very complicated' and 'monotonous', whereas B 'tone' was 'very direct'. Nãstase was 'reserved' and 'had a presence centred upon himself', whereas B was 'cooperative'. B was more 'dynamic', 'flexible', 'emphatic' and 'simple', and less 'distant'. One panellist said about B: 'It seems to me that the fact that he said 'I don't know' made him, personalized him as, everybody's friend'. The political analyst criticized Nãstase for not knowing who built the Bucuresti-Pitesti motorway.

What strikes me is that there is nothing here about policies, or indeed politics in the conventional sense. The comments are interesting for what they reveal about a particular view of the values against which politicians should be judged – being accessible, being open and honest, being engaging and entertaining. Ramonet (1999:134-5) discusses the 'personalisation' of politics:

> Political life becomes a clash of men (or women), corporeal, filmable, rather than a clash of ideas…. [The political leader is judged not] on his analysis of the situation or on his action [but on whether] he is 'found convincing'. It is in effect the person himself who is being judged, his character, his facility, and not his politics. In this respect, there is no difference between a 'political' programme and a prime-time show on a Saturday evening. In both cases spectators judge the performance in terms of lies/truthfulness.

The 'personalisation of politics' is connected with the relative demise of a national political system based upon struggle between different political ideologies, and the weakening of clear ideological differences between the mainstream political left and political right (or perhaps the centre-left and centre-right). 'New Labour' in Britain is a good example of this, and illustrates the relevance of neo-liberalism: mainstream parties of left and right have accepted central tenets of the neo-liberal project, and the policy differences between them have correspondingly become relatively minor. Differences of political ideology and differences of policy in the Romanian election were relatively small and not salient issues in the campaign. The

main platform of the DA Alliance and Bãsescu was corruption, the main platform of the Social democrats and Nãstase was their claim to a successful record (achieving NATO membership, advancing EU membership, economic growth, improvements in pensions etc) and to the competence to carry this forward. There was for instance a difference on the issue of rates of taxation, but both parties aimed to reduce personal and corporate taxation, and the Social Democrats do not seem to have been opposed in principle to a single tax rate, the argument rather was that 16% was too low. In these circumstances, competition between political parties would seem to be based more on perceptions of competence, trustworthiness and honesty, and political image and credibility of leaders, including whether they are likely to actually do what they say they will do.

In these circumstances, branding becomes an attractive strategy – but let us come back to recontextualization. The category of recontextualization suggests attention to how discourses are appropriated within the strategies and circumstances of the recontextualizing context, and the conditions under which they may be operationalized. One aspect of the Romanian political context for the 2004 election is that whereas the Social Democrats had an established and quasi-automatic constituency especially among older and less educated rural voters, the DA Alliance did not. The freshness, originality, humour and playfulness which the branding of Bãsescu highlighted may have contributed in his apparently successful mobilization of young urban voters, which seems to have been one factor in his victory (though I should add that another was that he received most of the votes which were cast in the second round from PRM supporters).

Let me come back to political economy, and neo-liberalism as a strategy for a new 'fix'. The strategy for 'transition' which has been advanced by entities including the IMF and World Bank, the EU and various national governments envisages the new 'fix' I described - a deregulated and privatized economy and a, reduced, 'enabling' state in something like Blair's sense. This strategy has been criticized – by Zamfir (2004) for example – for reducing the regulatory powers of the state and so contributing to the chaotic character of 'transition' especially in its earlier stages, which is very clear in Romania. As for instance Mrs Thatcher understood perfectly well, a strong regulatory state is necessary

for such major transformations to work effectively. Zamfir (2004) argues that the result was a divided economy: an emergent market economy in the 'normal' sense, and a privatized 'economie de prada', a predatory economy, whose returns came from milking an unregulated state sector, tax evasion, and other forms of fraud; and a state was complicit with the 'economie de prada'. Thus the neo-liberal 'fix' cannot be said to have been implemented so far in Romania, though maybe things are beginning to move in that direction.

The transformation of politics which I have described from competition between political ideologies to a sort of beauty contest is one aspect of the neo-liberal 'fix', in that the reduced role of the state removes those parts of its activities – direct control of national economies, extensive welfare provision – which were the main focus of ideological differences. Romania can be seen, as Chiribucã (2004: 246) puts it, as an 'amalgam of structural elements and cultural components specific to traditionalism, modernity, and postmodernity'. The branding of politicians is I think in these terms 'postmodern', though I prefer not to use that term. So the recontextualization and operationalization of political branding can be seen as part of a de-ideologization and personalisation of politics which is associated with the neo-liberal 'fix', but within a complex and contradictory political-economic situation.

So: the fight for the presidency seems to have hung in part on a competition between images: Bãsescu the unconventional breath of fresh air, honest and authentic and willing to use the powers of the presidency to clean up Romania; Nãstase the competent, experienced and urbane professional politician with a good record and good international standing. Bãsescu's advantage in this context seems to have arisen in part from a successful process of branding which created an image through a selective foregrounding of real features and qualities of his personality, in a context where many people were looking for a politician they could trust, and who came across as a decent person, rather than for a specific policy programme. In Philip Gould's words, perhaps Bãsescu 'rang true', especially perhaps for 'undecided' voters and potential non-voters, whereas Nãstase did not.

Conclusion

I want to conclude by referring to my experience in Higher Education in Britain at the height of the 'Thatcher revolution' in the 1980s. I think a common response on the part of academics to the 'marketisation' of Higher Education was a sense of being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea – between an 'ivory tower' past which was indefensible, and a marketized future which was unspeakable. Mrs Thatcher's famous 'TINA' ('There is no alternative') rang ominously true for many. There were attempts to develop an alternative strategy, alternative narratives and discourses – to turn for instance demands for 'relevance' in the direction of relevance to the problems and needs of people in all walks of life, not just business and government, and to link this with a strategy for internal 'democracy' - democratising academic departments, relations between academics and university managers, relations between academics and students. But these attempts were in the end virtually obliterated by the juggernaut of Thatcherism.

It strikes me that this sense of being caught between the devil and the deep blue sea is not unfamiliar in Romania and other post-communist countries. Perhaps many people understandably prefer a branded Băsescu to a scripted Năstase, but is the choice between a suspect political system and the manipulative arts of marketing really the best we (British or Romanians) have? If I may venture an opinion, there is an absence not only in Romania but also in Britain and other countries of an active and effective participatory democracy, in which as Zamfir (2004) argues there is an ongoing dialogue on strategic options, based upon an analysis of the needs and interests of various sections of the population, in which the population gives up being simply spectators, and becomes actively involved. To bring it closer to home, so to speak, Zamfir also advocates a new 'constructive science', in which academics contribute to projecting and evaluating possible societies.

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