

## Introduction special issue Marx & discourse

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## INTRODUCTION



# Introduction special issue Marx & discourse

This year marks the 200th birthday of Karl Marx, one of the most influential thinkers of the social sciences and humanities. We take this anniversary as an opportunity to explore the various relations between Marx(ism) and Discourse Studies. From its beginnings, particularly in France, discourse analysis and theory have been heavily influenced by Marxist analyses of the social. Simultaneously, over the course of the past few decades, discourse theories and analyses have helped shape contemporary Marxism and provided much needed critiques of orthodox Marxist economism and Marxism's neglect of phenomena traditionally counted as belonging the 'superstructure'. This Special Issue was born out of the desire to collectively reflect on these relations and discuss the relevance of Marxian concepts and ideas for Discourse Studies today.

From the French tradition of discourse analysis associated with figures such as Althusser, Pêcheux or Foucault, to the more Habermasian approaches to discourse, to the Essex School's discourse theory, to cultural political-economic approaches and the diverse field of Critical Discourse Studies – all were, in different ways, influenced by Marxism and its concepts.

Marx and Marxism study and critique social relations of domination and exploitation, ideology and power, social reproduction, and transformation in the context of capitalist modes of production. Many of Marx's central categories – such as his notion of the reproduction of social relations, the concept of capital, the importance of conditions of production and the economy, or the concept of ideology – were often the point of departure for discourse analysts and theorists. Thus, Marxism is not only a social theory to complement discourse analyses; the notion of discourse has changed the way we perceive and understand Marxian categories today. Furthermore, emancipatory politics and the struggle for something better than the conditions of late capitalism we find ourselves in, have been a veritable concern for many discourse scholars around the world since the inception of Discourse Studies.

The field of Discourse Studies today can hardly be described as a purely Marxist project. Discourse analysis in the broadest sense scrutinizes semiotic material that is appropriated and processed through practices embedded in specific contexts. In many ways, contemporary discourse theory and analysis are concerned with how discursive processes (re)produce the material conditions of existence within which they operate. Taking its departure in the 1960s, research decidedly concerned with discourse(s) and the production of meaning has now become an integral part of the academic landscape. It brings together approaches from linguistics, sociology, political sciences, gender studies, cultural studies, and many others. They reach from micro-analytical camps that analyze discourse as a set of situated practices and processes, to socio-historical and macro-sociological strands, which are more interested in the (re)production of large scale social phenomena. Within this multitude of approaches, decidedly and explicitly Marxist approaches are certainly not hegemonic. It is, however, our contention that Marx and Marxism are still of great importance to Discourse Studies.

It is thus no surprise that this is not the first collection of articles on topics explicitly related to (post-)Marxism and Marxian concepts published in CDS. In 2008, *Critical Discourse Studies* published an issue on *Class and Discourse*. While not all contributions made reference to Marx or had a decidedly Marxist approach to class, the special issue put the role of social class – one of the key concepts of Marxism – back on the map and aimed at reinvigorating class analysis (cf. Machin & Richardson, 2008, p. 286) within Discourse Studies and beyond. Six years later, the themed section in Vol. 11 titled *Post-Marxist discourse theory and critical political economy* focused on the relation between post-Marxist discourse theory in the tradition of Laclau and Mouffe and political economy. It sought to delineate ‘what discourse theory might offer to an analysis of “the economy” and “capitalism”’ (Phelan & Dahlberg, 2014, p. 255). A similar concern can be found in David Howarth’s contribution in the present special issue, which concerns itself with the relation between Marx and the Essex school of discourse theory.

There is an obvious, and to say the very least, unfortunate overrepresentation of male academics in this special issue as the vast majority of the contributors and most of the authors cited in the contributions are white men. The reasons for this are multiple and listing our efforts to prevent this overrepresentation would likely seem as a cheap justification for this circumstance. We believe that it is our obligation as critical (discourse) scholars to (self-)reflect on this widespread problem and attempt to counter it. In Marxist terms, this includes critiquing the material social conditions and their reproduction within and outside academia leading to the underrepresentation of women in many areas of academic knowledge production.

Marx is influential for many fields and topics he once worked on. He was important due to his methodological contributions, and due to his theoretical framework of the analysis of capitalism. This is reflected in the different contributions of this special issue. Marx has not only provided a critical attitude in the field of Discourse Studies from its very beginnings, he is furthermore still the most important theorist of social class, power, and their relation as a constitutive modality for social relations. The relation between discourse and critique is not understandable without a reflection on the interrelationship between discourse and power. Additionally, the influence of Marx for discourse researchers is strong for both scholars that see themselves in a Marxist tradition as well as those who clearly distance themselves from positions held by Marx. What is more, reading this issue, the attentive reader will notice that the contributors use Marxian notions in a variety of ways: what ‘Marxist’, ‘materialist’, ‘political economy’, and so on denote is conceptualized quite differently by authors coming from different disciplinary and intellectual traditions. Therefore, we asked the authors to be transparent about their understanding of the Marxist heritage and we want to advise the reader to pay attention to the concrete use of each concept and to not take for granted any concept in the field of Marx and Discourse Studies.

The articles of the Special Issue ‘Marx and Discourse Studies’ take these discussions as starting point to elaborate, work out and discuss how Marx’ ideas impact different traditions and paradigms of discourse analysis. Whereas some of them take a critical distance to Marx, most of the contributions show the deep and complex influences which are still relevant.

The first article by **Bob Jessop and Ngai-Ling Sum** takes the different periods, facets and writings of Marx’ and Engels’s work as a starting point to show how complex and encompassing these influences are. The role of language for the formation and transformation of capitalist societies was already central in Marx’s analysis. Taking illustrations from *The German Ideology*, *The Eighteenth Brumaire* and *Capital* the authors show how these writings anticipated critical discourse and argumentation analysis as well as the Cultural Political Economy project.

**Johannes Beetz** and **Veit Schwab's** contribution emphasizes the importance of the Marxian concepts of conditions of production and relations of production in Discourse Studies. They argue that central aspects of the *reproduction* of relations of production can be conceptualized as *discursive* phenomena and, furthermore, that discourse itself is produced in and under certain material conditions, which should make them a central concern for Discourse Studies. After delineating the concepts of relations and conditions of production in Marx(ism), the role of these concepts in early (French) discourse analysis and contemporary Discourse Studies are discussed.

Following Rossi-Landi's Marxist theory, **Giorgio Borelli** develops the project of a materialist theory of language and society. In contrast to CDA, materialist semiotics focuses on the different levels of Marx' theory of society in terms of different semiotic layers. The contribution argues for a complex reflexive semiotics of society that investigates the ideological as well as the material levels in capitalist modes of production as semiotic processes.

The next article by **Jens Maesse** investigates the impact of Marx and Marxism on the social studies of the economy. It shows how discourse studies have changed the analytical focus on the Marxist analysis of markets, firms, businesses, economic governance and the political economy in general. To put these discursive aspects as innovative perspectives in place, Maesse argues for a discursive Marxism that makes the integration of Foucauldian ideas into a Marxian framework possible.

The way poststructuralism is influenced by Marx and Marxism is discussed by **David Howarth**. Whereas the Poststructuralist Discourse Theory project goes on distance to Marx with respect to a determinism that Howarth and other poststructuralists find in his work, the paper shows, on the other hand, many similarities and parallels to Marx. For example, the historical materialism as basis for every social relation, the idea of class struggle and the critical attitude is shared by both, poststructuralism as well as Marxism.

The contribution by **David Block** asserts the importance of political economy in Critical Discourse Studies for analyzing material as well as discursive class warfare. With the examples of anti-union discourses in Britain and the anti-eviction movement in Spain he shows the relation between both types of class warfare. For Block, it seems possible for the capitalist class to win material class warfare without succeeding (at least in the first instance) in the discursive warfare.

**Benno Herzog's** contribution on ideology is treating a classical problem of Marxism and an important field of discourse studies. By sticking closely to Marx's writings he asks what the original contribution of Marx can teach discourse analysts 150 years later about the character and the effect of ideologies. He explores the possibilities of criticizing ideologies by showing their falsity and asks about the relation between material reality and ideology.

In the last text of this special issue **Angermuller** draws on Marx's theory of practice that has effects behind the back of the participants. He shows how discourses produce positioning dynamics that confer value to some specific actors. Value as produced in social relations is then exemplified in the case of populist provocations and in academic positioning practices. These valuing practices of people (in addition to valuing things) produce and reproduce material and symbolic hierarchies.

This special issue contributes to the ongoing debates on discourse, ideology, and political economy in and beyond the field of Discourse Studies from the perspective of the *Discourse, Ideology, and Political Economy (DIPE)* Research Group. The group aims to deepen, extend and prolong the ongoing debate in the field of Discourse Studies on ideology, power and political-economic issues in order to contribute to a strand of research that sees itself as part of a decidedly Marxist and critical theoretical tradition.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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