

Ruth Wodak: The Discourse of Politics in Action: Politics as Usual

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Politics and media have become intertwined in unprecedented ways in recent years. Well-known politicians are often treated as celebrities in the media with their private lives subjected to the same prurient scrutiny as rock stars or actors; fictionalized versions of political life such as *The West Wing* or *Yes Minister*¹ often generate more public interest than real-life politics. Alongside this “fictionalization of politics,” disenchantment with the democratic process has steadily increased in Europe and elsewhere. Recent elections to the 736-seat European Parliament, for example, generated the lowest turnout in its electoral history. In her powerful new book about the discourse of politics, Ruth Wodak uses an interdisciplinary theoretical framework to address some of these issues. She explores the discursive and social practices of members of the European Parliament (EP) and contrasts their everyday lives with sensationalized representations of politicians in the media. Her purpose in writing the book, which draws from 15 years of ethnographic, policy, and discourse analysis of EU institutions, is to “throw light on the discursive construction and representation of politics in action” (p. 23). She sees this demystification as potentially serving as a first step in reducing the so-called ‘democratic deficit’ in Europe.

In her first chapter, Wodak explains key theoretical constructs that guide her research. She uses Goffman (1959) to articulate how politicians construct and are constructed by *backstage* and *frontstage* identities. In other words, politicians need to transition frequently from a very carefully orchestrated use of setting, appearance, and discourse that realizes a particular dramatic and consistent effect in public

¹ *The West Wing* is an American television serial drama set in the White House. *Yes Minister*, a British show, is set in the office of a cabinet minister in Whitehall.

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appearances, to a backstage world where meetings, casual interactions, and problems demand use of a contradictory range of genres and conversational styles. In exploring these transitions, Wodak relies on Bourdieu's (1989) theory of professional *habitus*, Wenger's (e.g., Wenger et al. 2002) concept of *communities of practice*, and Foucault's (1981) notion of *power/knowledge* to articulate how politicians are socialized into their profession.

The second chapter is rather dense and might prove difficult to those without a background in discourse analysis. Wodak shows how discourse historical analysis (DHA) allows for an integration of macro-level analysis of political fields of action with micro-linguistic analysis of situated discursive acts. For example, analysis of presuppositions highlights the types of organizational, political, or professional knowledges exhibited in a text and how, in a Foucauldian way, they "are linked and connected to power relations in power-knowledge complexes in political organizations" (p. 45).

The third chapter presents Wodak's case study of European Members of Parliament (MEPs). It begins by outlining the socio-historical context of the EP and its powerful but constrained role in the European Union. It then discusses DHA findings from two rounds of interviews that Wodak and her team of researchers conducted with 14 MEPs in 1997 and 2003–2004. Her DHA analysis highlights very effectively the MEPs' identity construction in the texts: How they constructed and shifted among multiple national, transnational, and personal identities in negotiating the chaotic political arena in Brussels and Strasbourg and in conceptualizing their role as transnational MEPs representing national constituents.

The most accessible chapter in the book, Chapter 4, provides a description of a day in the life of Hans, a busy and successful MEP. The architecture of the EP building in Strasbourg with its massive network of corridors and floors and the heaps of papers MEPs have to constantly shuttle from Strasbourg to Brussels already demand Herculean efforts to stay afloat. Added to this pressure are the continual bureaucratic glitches in delivering papers to MEPs on time. For three days, one of the team researchers followed Hans into all parts of his professional life. Wodak provides an excellent comparative analysis of the shifts in rhythm, tone, identity and genre between Hans' interactions in official meetings and his looser and sometimes frenetic backstage conversations with his assistant and colleagues. What is slightly problematic on a methodological level, however, is Wodak's use of the term 'critical ethnography' for the short three-day period that the researchers spent with Hans. Ideally, the researchers would have spent an extended period of time with more than one MEP to see how they discursively negotiated their professional responsibilities.

The next chapter, which should prove interesting to fans of *The West Wing* show, explores fictionalized renditions of politicians in the media. Wodak mostly focuses her analysis on *The West Wing*, which provides viewers with an idealized backstage where political advisors, despite personal setbacks, are unified in working for the presidential agenda. Interactions with advisors also depict President Barnett as a humorous and brilliant politician who manages each situation without serious input from others. In Wodak's portrayal of Hans and the other MEPs, on the other hand, the advisors are invaluable in co-constructing or delivering the required knowledge needed to accomplish tasks in chaotic overscheduled days.

The final chapter concludes this important book by outlining why discourse historical analysis helps the field of political science and related fields to examine the situated practices of politicians in contextualized ways. Wodak states, “Such studies bridge the gap between macro-structurally oriented research and analyses which remain on the micro level” (p. 189). Her study certainly deconstructs and analyzes the discourse of politics in innovative and thought-provoking ways.

One caveat is that her analysis of the fictionalized media portrayals of politicians is not as developed as the finely tuned analysis of the MEPs. For example, it would have been more consistent with the DHA approach to have explored media renditions of European politicians rather than jumping to a different socio-political context in the United States. All in all, however, Wodak’s book will provide researchers, students, and political enthusiasts with a very rich study of frontstage and backstage politics.

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