

Breaking Out and Breaking Down:

A discursive approach to international relations

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KAPIR Seminar

7 April 2010

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“I dream of a new age of curiosity. We have the technical means for it; the desire is there; the things to be known are infinite; the people who can employ themselves at this task exist. What are we suffering from? From too little: from channels that are too narrow, skimpy, quasi-monopolistic, insufficient. There is no point in adopting a protectionist attitude, to prevent "bad" information from invading and suffocating the "good". Rather we must multiply the paths and the possibility of comings and goings... Which doesn't mean, as is often feared, the homogenization and levelling from below. But on the contrary, the differentiation and simultaneity of different networks.”¹

- Foucault

International Relations theory has forever been a slave to the hegemonic schools of thought. These dominating theories have focused in upon the histories that give credence to their cause, while tossing aside information that might undermine their authority. This narrow practice has led International Relations (IR) down a road where it cannot fully account for why things take place, as complex phenomena puzzle the minds of traditional thinkers. It will not be until we can acknowledge the multidimensionality of causes that IR will begin to see the big picture.² Further development also calls for the removal of these hegemonic theories from their status as normative and all encompassing. Though I do tend to take a constructivist perspective when approaching IR I refuse to accept it as an authoritative theory, instead I use its method to explore my understanding of international actors and events. The aim of this paper is to show the dangers of accepting normative theories, because they fail to account for every possible variable, thus making assumptions about the rationale of actors based on the limits of their own discourse. Throughout this paper I emphasize the usefulness of discourse analysis in IR as a

means to acquire a more complete knowledge base for drawing conclusions about why and how nations use and express power in connection to the actions of other nations within the international system. This strategy also calls for a hermeneutical interpretation and need to understand the perspective of the other and to attempt to be critical of your own traditions, from which your thought is framed and thereby constrict your understanding. I will go about the challenge of making my argument persuasive by first taking a look at the theoretical background necessary to grasp the explanatory value in recognizing discursive formations. Then I will move on to discuss a controversial case study as evidence that traditional theories cannot account for nor comprehend the complexity of constructions at play. In conclusion I hope that I will have made clear the urgent need to re-evaluate normative approaches to international relations.

Discourse is a widely used term in the field of theory and has a myriad of interpretations, all differing on precisely how one develops a discursive formation. For the purposes of this paper I focus most heavily on the discontinuities between events, objects, periods, etc as a means to decipher how the discourses at play have come to be formed. It is from these disunities (surrounding a particular object) that we can begin to look at the regularities forming outside of the assumed discourse. In Foucault's words;

“Whenever one can describe, between a number of statements, such a system of dispersion, whenever, between objects, types of statements, concepts, or thematic choices, one can define a regularity (an order, correlation, positions, and functionings, transformations), we will say, for the sake of convenience, that we are dealing with a *discursive formation* -”³

Foucault goes on to explain,

“But let there be no misunderstanding: it is not the objects that remain constant, nor the domain that they form; it is not even their point of emergence of their mode of characterization; but the relation between the surfaces on which they appear, on which they can be delimited, on which they can be analyzed and specified.”⁴

This explication shows the importance placed on relations occurring between objects, concepts, etc rather than on the things themselves. This highlights the relevance placed on the contextual element of culture and history to explain how a discourse is formed amongst the relations not around 'objects'. It is through these relations that power emerges, dominates and propels a discourse. Though this essay will not look meticulously at power it will consider knowledge as a form of power from which everything is controlled.

Knowing how to decipher a discourse is of course essential, but almost more important is to grasp what a discourse does and how it functions. The value of understanding discursive formations lies within the basis that discourse is, “a group of statements which provide a language for talking about – a way of representing the knowledge about – a particular topic at a particular historical moment... discourse is the production of knowledge through language.”⁵ Here it is important to acknowledge the difference between what one says and what one does, for the discourse is not based on a series of events, but rather the language used to describe those events.⁶ This is a pivotal point, because events are deconstructed differently based on the viewpoint of the receiver. Each receiver functions within their personal socially, culturally and historically contingent discourse which shapes their perceptions of language and thus influences their production of knowledge. At the same time a discourse produces knowledge it is also producing meaning and it is only through discourse that we are able to interpret, ergo knowledge and meaning are inconsistent across discourses.⁷ This implies that we are confined to the language of our own discourse and remain ignorant of its grip over our perceptions. If it is possible to acknowledge this limit of our own knowledge we would be better able to see what drives the relations occurring within competing discourses.

Both recognizing a discourse and discovering what it does are interesting endeavours,

but my argument exists in the useful application of these ideas to international relations theory. I suggest that through an approach such as, Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), IR could potentially develop as a more productive faculty. Like Foucault, who places an importance on the historical nature of discourse, CDA scholars also assert the same premise explaining that the context of extralinguistic components; history, culture, society, and ideology must be referenced for the discourse to be properly understood.⁸ Critical discourse analysis is defined by Norman Fairclough as:

“CDA is in my view as much theory as method – or rather, a theoretical perspective on language and more generally semiosis (including 'visual language', 'body language', and so on) as one element or 'moment' of the material social process, which gives rise to ways of analysing language or semiosis within broader analyses of the social process. Moreover, it is a theory or method which is in a dialogical relationship with other social theories and methods, which should engage with them in a 'transdisciplinary' rather than just an interdisciplinary way, meaning that the particular co-engagements on particular aspects of the social process may give rise to developments of theory and method which shift the boundaries between different theories and methods. Put differently, each should be open to the theoretical logics of others, open to 'internalizing' them in a way which can transform the relationship between them.”⁹

A good deal of information can be taken from the above quotation, but the greatest value I find is in the tactic of analysis itself. CDA allows for open discussion between and across disciplines which can provide a boundless frame of reference when considering any particular issue. In other words, “CDA, using the concepts of intertextuality and interdiscursivity, analyses relationships with other texts, and this is not pursued in other methods.”¹⁰ This analytical strategy incorporates the benefits of hermeneutical interpretations of meaning as it engages with the varying constructions of knowledge and meaning across discourses. The necessity of this sort of explication of discourse will become visible as I engage with the problems found in parochial theoretical analyses. Shedding light on alternative interpretive

methods of IR is the ultimate goal of this paper. As I feel restricting the discipline by championing the use of a hegemonic theory will cause analyses that fall short in explaining in full the web of relations amongst actors in the international system.

To show why theoretical discussions of discourse and analysis are pertinent to IR I will bring forth an example of an international issue that created confusion amongst IR scholars. The case study chosen for this task is the Falkland Island war of 1982, which was fought between the Argentineans and the British. The rationale for choosing this particular conflict lies in the fact that this war was largely unexpected and unexplained by the dominant theories of IR at the time and according to David Welch;

“By the light of current international relations theory, it simply should not have taken place. A Third World country with largely dated military equipment, a conscript army, and virtually no power-projection capability took on a technologically sophisticated, nuclear-armed great power with a modern blue water fleet and an experienced professional army over stakes of negligible strategic and material value.”¹¹

From this observation alone my argument to alter how IR perceives the motivations of state actors already becomes more salient. To understand the context of my argument I will provide a brief and basic account of the dispute before I delve into how discourse analysis can help in breaking down why this conflict occurred and was magnified to such a grand extent.

The Falkland Islands, or Las Malvinas¹² are a large set of barely inhabitable islands off the southern coast of Argentina, in fact the population at the time of conflict was only 1,800.*¹³ Historically these islands first belonged to the Spanish colonial empire, but when the Spaniards relinquished their colonial power in Latin America the Argentineans believed they inherited the rights to the islands. The British came to be in control of the islands in 1833 after evicting the newly settled Argentinean population and their government, because the British did

not accept Argentina's inherited claim to the islands. This event in 1833 was a catalyst to all ownership conflicts in the proceeding years. Particularly, the war of 1982, as the people of Argentina wanted to see the island's sovereignty restored before the sesquicentennial of their capture in 1833.¹⁴ There have been a variety of negotiations and conflicts surrounding the islands, but as the years wore on and the British Empire diminished the British became less concerned with controlling the title to the islands. Unfortunately, the British strongly supported the right to self determination of the islands' inhabitants, who were overwhelmingly British and associated strongly with their British customs and held allegiance to the Crown.¹⁵ However, the British pushed the islands' inhabitants to favour Argentina throughout the 1970s, encouraging the islanders to create stronger bonds with the mainland a few hundred kilometres from their shores rather than with England who was literally a world away. Hence the Argentine confusion and anger over why the British wouldn't simply hand over the title of the islands since they clearly exhibited signs of disinterest over the matter. Argentina never relented in their pursuit to regain control of the islands as it was always high on their political priority list. This territorial dispute has never truly been about the Falklands themselves, but rather about self-interests and views of justice of the two states involved, both viewpoints are completely reliant on their individual social and historical constructions.

The April 1982 invasion was small and originally only meant to last a week as the Argentines believed the British would surrender the islands over without causing any fuss. What follows is a timeline of important events that occurred throughout the War of 1982 to provide a better picture of why this conflict had political scientists puzzled.¹⁶

20 December 1981:	Unauthorized Argentine “nationalist” scrap-metal merchant ship lands on South Georgia, protested formally by the British in early January 1982.
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9 February 1982:	Margaret Thatcher retires HMS Endurance (due to budget cuts), the British Navy vessel guarding the Falklands and Argentina sees this as a sign of relinquishing control.
25 February 1982:	Sovereignty talks in New York do not go well as Britain continues to refuse to cede sovereignty – Argentina asserts the right to 'employ other means'.
3 March – 29 March 1982:	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> British take steps to militarily secure the South Atlantic as more confusion ensues over scrap-metal ship and its activities on the Southern islands. Argentina vows to protect scrap-metal merchants as they reassert their claim to Las Malvinas and make definitive plans for an invasion (named Operation Rosario).
2 April 1982:	Argentine forces invade despite international pressure to focus on diplomatic efforts.
3 April 1982:	UN Security Council demands immediate Argentine withdrawal from the Islands, Argentina refuses and increases military presence throughout the South Atlantic.
7 April – 29 April 1982:	Haig peace mission approved by US government and negotiations commence between the two nations. Neither side will cede to the other's requests as Britain prepares its military for war. 22 April, British task forces arrives in Falkland Waters.
30 April – 13 June 1982:	Fighting commences by air and sea, both sides suffer damages. Peru becomes involved in peace talk, while also aiding the Argentineans militarily as the British dominate the battle field.
14 June 1982:	Argentine forces fly white flags and Argentina officially surrenders.
17 June 1982:	Argentina's dictator and instigator, Galtieri, resigns.
4 November 1982:	By autumn the mess of the war had been cleaned up, forces were fully withdrawn and the status quo had been moderately reinstated. The UN General Assembly calls for a peaceful solution to the sovereignty dispute. Nothing had been accomplished.

The above timeline is a basic description of events, though a more in depth analysis would detail the intensity of the desires of both sides to maintain their firmly held positions, through diplomacy and battle, over the issue. Though the chain of events seems similar to any other war, the puzzle lies within why this chain of events occurred.

Here I move to discuss the problems surrounding political interpretations of why this war happened. Many scholars of the Western tradition, such as Lawrence Freedman, believed that this was a war of diversion, and thus developed the diversion hypothesis.¹⁷ The diversion hypothesis states that the Argentine officials were motivated by self-interest and the pursuit of political power, using the Falkland invasion to garner political support for their oppressive regime. Essentially it was believed in the West that the dictator, Leopoldo Galtieri, was using a 'rally around the flag' technique to distract from the failing economy amongst the other various disasters occurring within the country.¹⁸ This diversion hypothesis can also be applied to the British choice to respond with force, as the popularity of Margaret Thatcher's Conservative government at home was dwindling. Though this realpolitik explanation is merely correlational and consequently produced another hypothesis attempting to explain the escalation of war. Welch highlights that some believed these misperceptions of intention caused misjudgments in the foreign policy prescriptions of the nations involved, including actors like the United States who haphazardly offered diplomatic negotiators.¹⁹ This brings us to, the 'escalation theory of war' as outlined originally by Kenneth Waltz, which could very well prove useful, as "This action-reaction process in time can lead to situations in which statesman deliberately provoke a war or lose control over events and eventually find themselves propelled into a war. In effect, one thing leads to another until war is the consequence of the interplay of foreign policies."²⁰

Looking back through the historical context of this conflict this hypothesis seems plausible, yet it is still lacking the answer to why the war happened, sadly it only accounts for how. While there were many misunderstandings occurring throughout the conflict, they cannot account for the motivations behind why the war occurred. Welch develops his own hypothesis called the 'justice motive', which takes into account the motivations of state actors based on a perception of justice. This theory attempts to explain why the conflict materialized by digging at the roots of motivation and asserting that both nations were driven by commitments to their ideas of morality, ethics and justice. Discussing the Falklands, he argues, "This basic conflict between competing conceptions of legitimate entitlement was the overwhelming factor conditioning the outbreak of war."²¹ Though this concept of competing entitlement is one important aspect, it does not fully clarify the reasons for war as he assumes both nations were ultimately only concerned with justice. It also lacks to account for the considerations made by the British government concerning how handing over the Falkands *fait accompli* to Argentina would look to Hong Kong and Gibraltar, two other colonies the Empire was clamouring to hold onto.²²

From the above discussion of the various attempts made by political theorists to classify this war in terms of dominant IR discourse simply shows the waning ability of realism and rationalism to properly explain international relations. What all of these theories lack is the ability to view the Falkland Islands, not as one discourse, but instead as two. From my earlier consideration of discursive formations I explained how a discourse comes to be formed and by simply analyzing the historical context of the Falkland Islands dispute it is clear that the ideational unity of the object, the islands, is not enough to form a cohesive discourse. What needed to be done in this situation was to conduct an investigation past the mere centrality of the object to see the divisions within the context. It is at this point where Critical Discourse

Analysis (CDA) presents itself as a valuable mechanism for understanding. However, this paper will not endeavour into the individual discourse analyses necessary to fully explain the Falkland Islands dispute – as that is a cumbersome task. Rather, I will explore how discourse analysis could have been helpful in comprehending the complexity of the dispute while discussing the worth in critically analyzing alternative approaches to IR.

Using discourse analysis to comprehend the Falklands war would have shown that the islands were merely an object at the centre of “a complex group of relations”²³ with “radical breaks, ruptures, and discontinuities between one period and another, between one discursive formation and another.”²⁴ This method would have allowed for the exposure of these relations and discursive formations aiding in the production of a more complete knowledge about the issue. By understanding how meaning and knowledge were being produced by the British and Argentineans, negotiators might have been better able to relay the motivations and intentions of both state actors. Essentially the 'meaning' of the Falklands represents a discontinuity between discourses across cultures. The lack of ability to understand this discontinuity created knowledge that misperceived the intentions of the 'other'. CDA allows for the recognition and development of all contextual factors at play within any given discourse. The analytical tools used to explain the Falklands war did not engage with multiple contextual factors, instead they focused in on one seemingly plausible factor and matched the major theory most appropriate. The ignorance of the interplay of multiple factors led to tunnel vision and the inability to grasp a well rounded interpretation of the conflict at hand.

With a more informed position regarding the contextual elements of competing discourses, actors involved could have been more sensitive to each other's constructed ideas. For example, if Britain understood the Argentine invasion through the eyes of the Argentine

officials, they would have understood that it was not a provocation of war, but rather a proclamation that they wanted diplomatic negotiations to end and their claim to the islands to be taken seriously once and for all. The British would have also understood that the Argentines assumed no military response would occur for it was their belief that Britain was in favour of decolonization and would relinquish the islands without any bloodshed. This example proves the earlier point of knowledge and meaning being produced within a single discourse and not being shared between them. With the advent of CDA, understanding these different productions of knowledge could give more power to actors and experts involved to better mediate disagreements. This type of analysis does not lead to any hypotheses that are 'right' or 'wrong' (thus limiting the scope of investigation), because these concepts are transient across time and discourses. It can assert what is known at a particular point in time, but the beauty of critical analysis allows for knowledge to change as contextual elements transform creating an ongoing comprehension of the issue instead of being limited by grand theories that advocate an unalterable viewpoint.

Essentially I am championing a hermeneutical approach to discourse analysis²⁵, as the value of the interplay of interpretations can only lead to an increased awareness of the many contextual elements at play within any given discourse. By liberating ourselves from the confines of our own discourse and interpretations we can seek a greater understanding of the interpretations of other's. Competing perspectives can never be resolved unless multiple perspectives can be acknowledged by all parties. This appreciation of differing perspectives could decrease the misperceptions assumed by the 'escalation theory of war'²⁶ by bringing to light the reasons behind them. If perhaps the British better understood Argentina and vice versa the Falklands war might never of occurred and an alternative method of conflict resolution

could have been developed to satisfy the desires of the actors involved.

Faircough writes;

"The complexities of modern societies in our fast changing world, where space and time seem to collapse, can only be grasped by a model of multicausal, mutual influences between different groups of persons within a specific society and relationships between different societies. The great challenges, nowadays, is to explain the contradictions and tensions which occur between nation states and supranational entities on many levels."²⁷

By considering this viewpoint it broadens our appreciation for the idea that each international situation should be considered as distinct and requiring its own specific analysis, rather than assuming each situation fits neatly into the dominant discursive theory. Though each actor may be participating within the same international system that does not imply that they are all working within the same discourse. Each actor has specific attributes that influence their opinions and decisions. Thus, these must be considered so as to prevent miscalculations and misunderstandings when approaching international relations. This is why CDA proves to be an effective tool for IR as understanding the reality that a multitude of discourses are colliding within the international system could lead to an increased level of consciousness amongst nations.

More knowledge about an opponent, or rather more knowledge shared between opponents could lead to a better functioning international system with productive negotiations and settlements rather than escalating conflicts. Sharing knowledge produced by the competing discourses, could also lead to agreements on power sharing rather than perpetuating power struggles that are prevalent in IR today. Negotiations would be more informed and nations could foster an increased capacity for discussion. Instead of being threatened by one another, they could feel more at ease with their extended knowledge of the 'other's' true motivations and intentions. By approaching IR from this type of perspective it could reduce the appearance of

'action-reaction wars' and 'hegemonic wars' that emerge due to a lack of cross-national understanding and thirst for hegemonic power.²⁸

Fundamentally, throughout this paper I have argued that knowledge must always be questioned and reexamined from an analytical discursive perspective. I have laid out the importance of understanding discursive formations, discourse analysis and a hermeneutical approach to knowledge. I have also warned against the uncertainty of normative approaches, because to believe we can strive for any sort of normativity in IR is narrow minded. It is my belief that in order to fully comprehend IR we must rid ourselves of normative theories as they limit scope and prevent open understanding of differences between the motivations of state actors. We must appreciate the presence and persistence of theories in our analysis, but not take any theory as absolute, for there are always exceptions and making assumptions reduces the visibility of the intersubjective meanings at play. Recognizing the interplay of discursive meanings can provide the insight necessary for a better functioning international system as we could distinctly expose the power relations at work. These processes would allow for the removal of the restraints on IR theory as it encourages interdisciplinary exchanges, freeing IR from its lack of contextual considerations. In conclusion a broadened approach to international relations could only result with a positive effect on knowledge, power and understanding creating the conditions for a more inclusive international system.

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